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Discussion

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## GHAZALI'S EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: MYTHS AND REALITIES

Fareeda Ibad<sup>1</sup>

Abu Hamid bin Muhammad al-Ghazali was a famous scholastic philosopher who is considered as one of the most influential thinkers in Islamic history. As observed by Iqbal, he contributed greatly to the last stage of Islamic civilization which is termed as the age of experience, the first two being the age of faith where the Prophet (PBUH) guided the Muslims, the second being the age of reason where attempts were made to rationalize ultimate reality and understanding of religion through the Quran and Sunnah. Thus, belief in the truth of Islam followed its rationalization, and finally the experience of the truth of Islam. This is the contribution of Ghazali where he proved the reality of truth cannot be rationalized. Although Ghazali is considered as the most important Sunni theologian and holds a dominant position in the history of Muslim philosophy, he is not without controversy. Some have considered him to be responsible for the downturn in Islamic civilization, while others credit him for the revival of the sciences.

To study the contribution of Ghazali to Islamic thinking, it is important to realize that he was a multifaceted personality who contributed to the study of philosophy, theology, mysticism, jurisprudence and education. This paper will attempt to throw some light on these aspects; however, the main focus will be on his philosophy and views on education and teaching.

It is important at this point to open a window into Ghazali the man and his evolution to the position he holds today among the

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1- Department of Communications, Institute of Business Management (IoBM) Karachi, Pakistan.

predominant figures in Muslim thought. According to Ghazali himself as quoted from *Al-Munqidah min al-Dalal* (p.81), "The thirst for grasping the real meaning of things, was indeed my habit and want from my early years and in the prime of my life. It was an instinctive, natural disposition placed in my makeup by Allah Most High, not something due to my own choosing and contriving. As a result, the fetters of servile conformism fell away from me, and inherited beliefs lost their hold on me, when I was quite young." This makes evident the fact that he was a seeker of the truth about reality and the "light of Allah" led him to become free from skepticism and reestablish his trust in reason. This he achieved through mystical practices and renouncing of the world for several years of his life believing that Sufism would show him the road to truth.

### **Ghazali's Perspectives**

In order to understand Ghazali it is imperative to know the historical context in which he lived. He lived in a post-golden age context where the exact sciences were on the decline and the Islamic state was spread far and wide and threatened with disintegration due to power struggles between the Sultan and Caliph in which the Governor was the real power and the latter possessed only dignitary functions (Ibn Kathir as cited in Abu Sway, 1996). Abu Sway (1996), further states that Islamic civilization lost sight of its legacy and source of power leading many Islamic public figures preferring a life of asceticism and seclusion which lead to the mystical path.

Apart from the historical context, it is important to know that Ghazali was a prolific encyclopedic trained in jurisprudence in the Shaf'i school ascribing to Ash'arite traditions of Islam. His contribution to Islam was in his writings on politics, Sufism and position papers on science and philosophy. What is key to Ghazali is that he ascribed all knowledge to God which he termed as eternal while accidental knowledge he said was the result of reason and the understanding of the self. Such knowledge according to Ghazali, results from its

perception and thinking about the cognizable (Al-Mankhul, pp.44-45, as cited in Hitu, 1970).

### **Ghazali's Views on Philosophy**

According to Ghazali (as cited in Nofal, 2000) the universe comprises the transient world of matter and the hereafter, which is the eternal world. The transient world is a temporal world subject to the Will of God. It is He who rules, controls and guides it by directly and continuously interpositioning. This is the essence of Ghazali's philosophy where he rejects causality as maintained by the Greek philosophers. Ghazali maintains that Sufism is the route to revealed truths through seeking the light of God since philosophy leads to skepticism. Asceticism and the mystical experience is the way to achieving certainty when the mystic is in a state of ecstasy and reaches God. As far as philosophy is concerned, Ghazali had mixed views. He taught philosophy and used Aristotelian logic and philosophical arguments to deny the views of Avicenna and Al-Farabi who subscribed to the view that the world is eternal and causation of God's essence leads to the arising of the First Intellect and other beings (Macdonald, 1899). These views lead to the understanding that God is the center and the world is coeternal and coexistent with Him. This concept of universal causality is refuted by Ghazali because according to him God is the highest Being and the only influential Will and Creator of the world which needs God for a cause to exist. Ghazali denies the connection between a cause and effect existing independently to God's will. He states that it is a human habit to assume connections between events occurring in a series which in reality are only in appearance. He also refuted the Avicennian belief that the Will of God is a necessary act because God is simple. In fact, Ghazali attributes to God 'actions done in a free manner devoid of plurality to His essence. God's knowledge is eternal and unchanging contradictory to Al-Farabi and Avicenna's belief that man's soul is immortal through knowledge and the attainment of abiding spiritual phenomena. Ghazali's perspective here is derived from the Quran

which says that the body is important in human functions in the earthly life, but will be resurrected when God will call for the second creation. Thus, Ghazali subscribes to God's oneness and that He creates man and his action; however, man is accountable for his actions. Ghazali explains that man is made up of body and soul of which the body is the mechanism by which the soul enables man to know God when he practices religion whereby he becomes closer to God (Frank, 1992).

To sum up Ghazali's views on philosophy, it may be said that Ghazali did not believe in a connection between cause and effect because cause and effect are a result of habit. God is the Creator and He causes everything and gives existence to everything. Ghazali accepts spiritual knowledge and God's vision which sends knowledge in three stages, namely, the stage of faith in which information is accepted by reason and the senses as was the case of the Prophet's (pbuh) telling his followers something; the second stage where one sees things through reason and the use of his faculties; and finally, the stage of knowledge where one not only sees but also feels so it is essentially knowledge through reason. All these three stages are subject to God's Will and not governed by the laws of science which claim that knowledge comes through the senses and reason which relate only to the temporal world. True knowledge is through revelation and inspiration derived from the mystical experience and the study of the Quran. These are the sources of true happiness (Nofal, 2000).

### **Ghazali's Views on Education**

Ghazali is the most influential educator of Islam and has influenced modern educational thought based on an integration of the philosophical, the legal and the mystical that Islam proposes. It resembles the philosophy of Plato wherein he used personal experiences to base his conclusions. These experiences are based on the sixth sense which is the path to truth. According to Ghazali, Divine revelation stands above reason but is given to prophets and a chosen few. Even reason has limitations for humans denying them absolute

truth. Thus, the commandments must be obeyed in the form of religious obligations. Ghazali's educational views are derived from his research and religious philosophy. Like Plato and Aristotle he compared the human mind to a clean slate which can be transformed by the teacher over time. In this process knowledge is important since it brings respect, worldly position and closeness with God. Ghazali categorized knowledge into four kinds. First, there is prophetic knowledge whereby prophets bring the word of God to humans so they may purify themselves. Then there are rulers, philosophers and preachers who use their authority to legislate, rule and guide society; who benefit the masses, and those who fulfill the religious needs of society and thereby improve life and gain desirable ethics. Such knowledge is further categorized into useful knowledge which comprises compulsory knowledge which is obligatory for all Muslims and optional knowledge based on the will of the individual regarding worldly aspects and religious aspects. Then, there is useless knowledge which has deleterious effects such as magic, or is based on chance (Sultan, 2011).

It can be said that schools in the form of study circles were established during the time of the Prophet (pbuh) and the four Caliphs where prominent companions of the Prophet (pbuh) enlightened the attendees about his sayings. Ghazali's *Ihya Ulum al Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) was a significant contribution to the development of Islamic educational philosophy and future writers only commented on this work (Behardin, 1994).

Ghazali based his views on education on Islamic ideology which terms education as useful benefiting both the student and society. Education builds the character of the individual and allows for a distinction between good and evil so that the individual can follow the path of good and avoid evil. Ghazali raises the question of whether human instinct is based on good or evil. His response was in the light of the Quran and the Hadith whereby he propounded that good and evil are neither physical nor instinctual and humans can

metamorphose by education and training. Rousseau and Herbart expressed these views in their philosophies of education as well. Ghazali himself derived his theories from Aristotle where he distinguishes among the perfect and imperfect creations; the former being the sun, moon etc., whereas the latter being the seed of a tree which has the ability to become a tree. Ghazali places humans in the category of imperfect since they may become perfect under suitable conditions by developing a good character based on good deeds. He says there are four ways of overcoming shortcomings. First, the perfect teacher who has spiritual vision to analyze shortcomings in others; second, close friends who help one overcome shortcomings; third, our enemies who show us our defects; and lastly, self analysis through which we identify our own faults (Sultan, 2011). Ghazali's educational philosophy includes the idea of purification of the heart and following of the Shariah. Although being metaphysical, Ghazali's educational views are completely realistic and practical.

#### **Ghazali's Views on the Curriculum**

Coming to aspects of the curriculum, Ghazali was a strong critic and opponent of the curriculum of his time of which he questioned the subject matter. He was of the view that worldly education was sidelined and emphasis was on religious education. This he considered to be a ground for differences among scholars and teachers which lead to conflicts. Furthermore, choice of subjects was left to the teachers who decided according to their own interests. This resulted in no uniformity in the curriculum of the day. Character building was ignored in the curriculum, thus human development was ignored.

Ghazali proposed that the curriculum should have obligatory as well as optional knowledge. The obligatory being religious education, while the optional could include subjects like agriculture, textile and industrial education and also subjects like hair dressing and tailoring. These he felt should be selected according to the interest of the learners. It may be derived from these views that Ghazali was

progressive in his views regarding education. Apart from these subjects, Ghazali also emphasized the teaching of philosophy and logic (Nakosteen, 2003). According to Nofal (2000), Ghazali divided the educational curriculum in two clear levels. At the elementary level of the curriculum religious learning was emphasized where a study of the Quran and the basics of religion were taught along with the skills of reading and writing, grammar, arithmetic, character building, narration and some poetry. These were a part of obligatory sciences as were literature and linguistics. The optional sciences were taught at the higher level based on the inclination of the student. These were categorized into revealed sciences and non-revealed sciences. The revealed sciences included teaching of the Quran, the Sunnah, the Hadith and ijma; in addition, fiqh and ethics, reading tafsir, annals and genealogy, and linguistics and grammar. The non-revealed sciences comprised mathematics, history, medicines and poetry. Regarding selection of the curriculum, Ghazali was of the view that subject selection should be following a utilitarian view, that is, that society and the student would benefit from this study. In the light of this, the study of religion was of supreme importance since it pertained to knowledge of God and the hereafter, whereas the other subjects related to the transient world, their study were of secondary importance.

Ghazali considered these subjects on the basis of the kind of knowledge that could be derived from them. First of all, there is knowledge of God, His attributes, laws, His creation and wisdom, and the knowledge of the hereafter; second to that is discreditable knowledge which includes astrology, the supernatural and magic. Finally, knowledge that is worthwhile to some extent, such as linguistics, grammar, fiqh, tafsir, and the hadith. Of all these Ghazali suggests that their study should be as follows: the study of the Quran, Sunnah and tafsir, followed by ethics and the sources of fiqh.

### **Ghazali's Views on Teaching**

Ghazali considered humans to be deficient; however, he identified four ways in which these deficiencies could be overcome. The foremost was the perfect teacher who according to Ghazali possessed spiritual insight along with knowledge which gave the ability to analyze others' deficiencies. Thus, the position of teachers stands elevated in Ghazali's scheme of education. As regards the teaching methods and techniques, he stressed that they should be based on principles of psychology. This approach was followed by subsequent educators and is the foundation of the concepts of Pestolozzi and Herbart (Dodd, 2007).

Like his Greek predecessors, Ghazali believed that teaching should be knowledge and experience based. These would help to determine what knowledge and ability the student possessed and what were his inclinations and aptitude. The teacher would motivate students on the basis of this knowledge so that the educational process could be furthered. Ghazali was against teaching pure theory or concepts. He was of the view that concepts should be taught with the help of examples and relevant experiences in order to be meaningful and effective for the learners. Ghazali was also of the view that when teaching students, the teacher should start with simple concepts and then move on to difficult ones. In this way students would be motivated since their learning would not pose any obstacles for them. This concept is also ingrained in the education philosophies of Western educators (Nakosteen, 2003).

Another important aspect of Ghazali's view on education and teaching is the need for planning. For effective teaching, the teacher must plan keeping in mind the abilities of students and exclude concepts which are above the mental level of the students. Here it must be mentioned that Ghazali emphasized that the subjects taught should be both knowledge based and skill based. This would make learning functional and relevant and discourage rote learning. This



method would promote proficiency learning enabling the student to connect concepts and knowledge and convert them into conscious practice.

Considering attitudes in the process of teaching and learning, Ghazali disapproved of the use of force and corporal punishment. He believed that the teacher was a father figure and should teach with love and affection, otherwise students would develop bad habits. Even more important for the teacher was to be a guide and inculcate good qualities of morality, honesty, pleasant manners, etc. Hypocrisy should be shunned by teachers so the students could live in the Islamic society with all its virtues and be socialized accordingly. Ghazali was deeply concerned with the moral development of society and believed that education was a vehicle for its promotion; however, he did not neglect the practical and economic part of education since that knowledge would enable students to earn their livelihood.

As regards religious education, Ghazali proposed that it be introduced as early as possible through repetition, inculcation and memorization at the primary stage. Understanding and practice were for the secondary stage when the fundamentals of religion were firmly ingrained in the minds of students and conviction with clarification and practice would be effortless (Nofal, 2000). Finally, Ghazali did not ignore physical education and based his views on the axiom, 'sound mind in a sound body.' He believed children should wear loose fitting clothes and eat a good and simple diet. They should pursue healthy physical activities (Sultan, 2011).

### **Ghazali's Views on Scholars and Scholarship**

Ghazali's response to scholars was in response to the conditions of his time where scholars held the position of elites, a class to which he himself belonged having dabbled in politics and academic debates for the purpose of recognition and social position which lead to the acquisition of wealth. When he turned to Sufism he

gave up these worldly privileges and pursued the path to asceticism. In this divergence he adopted established Islamic views on the role of scholars who were considered the beneficiaries of prophets in their quest for the truth, embodying Islamic principles and knowledge attained and seeking to spread this knowledge to others so that society would exist as per Islamic values and norms, (Al-Munqidh min ad-Dalal sense that failure to impart the knowledge they possessed to others would lead to punishment rather than a place in the kingdom of heaven. Ghazali placed the religious sciences in a more eminent position than the temporal sciences since they revealed the truth, whereas the temporal sciences were related to worldly knowledge and transaction only.

Ghazali addresses the role of schools as twofold: that is, research for the truth, and imparting it to others. This makes evident the fact that Ghazali believed that teaching and learning were interlinked. Whoever learned must also teach; however, this is not possible across the board. Knowledge of the truth was for those who were worthy of it. Otherwise it could have a detrimental effect and lead to doubt regarding faith and reason. In this regard, Ghazali emphasized that scholars live a life of asceticism away from power and worldly gains to amend the corruption in society resulting from nepotism. Scholars, advised Ghazali, should not seek compensation from rulers. If they were forced to earn they could seek remuneration from public funds. Scholars were devoted to seeking knowledge through ascetic practices which was considered a form of worship, whereas teaching was a social responsibility. In this role teachers were required to possess certain traits such as higher education, spiritual ability, denial of worldly desires, commitment, moderation, and ethics which constituted a charter by which teachers could practice *Ihya' 'Ulum ad-Din*, Vol.1, p.48-51, *Mizan al-Amal*, p.98-104; *Fatihah al-'Ulum*, p.60-63).

Having expressed the role of scholars and teachers meaningfully Ghazali also specifies how students should spend their

time. He suggests a routine of prayer, meditation and study beginning with prayer, followed by instruction from teachers and self study ending with reading and praying. He also advises that students inculcate certain desirable attitudes such as purity of mind and heart, freedom from worldly desires, avoidance of controversy in their learning, respect for teachers, mastery over the basics of the religious sciences, selection of subjects which would elevate them spiritually, use of reason and seeking of proximity with God. These qualities reveal that Ghazali promoted Sufism in learning as the predominant objective.

### **Conclusion**

After examining the many facets of Ghazali's thoughts as embodied in his writings, it emerges first of all, that his views on philosophy, although complex and ambiguous at times, demonstrate that he was not against philosophy, rather he questioned the Hellenistic traditions of the Greek philosophers. These he felt had disastrous affects on the Islamic Ummah in that they created confusion. Ghazali felt that it was important to protect the unity of the Ummah. It must be noted, however, that putting an end to these traditions did not result in an end to philosophy. Ghazali favored philosophy that preserved the basic teachings of Islam and invigorated the traditions of theology. Ghazali combined philosophical concepts and Sufism to create a new dimension of Islamic mystical philosophy.

This effort resulted in the materialization of many eminent mystical thinkers in the Islamic world. In the Western boundaries of the Islamic Empire it reached its climax under Doctor Maximus Ibn Arbi while on the Eastern front it resulted in the fusion of Shiite ideas and non-Islamic mysticism in the form of the Ishraq School. Ghazali's contribution to philosophy can be thus summed: he was one who transformed philosophy as viewed by the Greeks, to an Islamic and mystical framework which indicated moral ethics as revealed in the Quran.

In the context of the sciences, Ghazali is not essentially opposed to them but his concern is the preservation of the Divine attributes of free-will and God's absolute authority. He believed that science should conform with the Shariah so that it could be practically applied and benefit society.

Finally, to reflect Ghazali on education, it may be said that his structure of education covers all aspects of scholarship, elaborating the objectives of teaching, how it is to be carried out and the conditions surrounding an enlightened system of education. He influenced Islamic thought on education for more than 800 years from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries including Western writers such as St. Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Rousseau, Herbart and a host of Muslim writers and scholars. His legacy of educational thought has roots in Western as well as contemporary Arab civilization.

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