al-Ghazālī (Algazel)

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Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī

(c. 1058 – December 19, 1111 CE)

Latinized Name: Algazel

Honorific Title: Ḥujjat al-Islām (The Proof of Islam)

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī was a preeminent Persian polymath, jurist, theologian, philosopher, and mystic of the Islamic Golden Age. Widely regarded as one of the most prominent and influential figures in Islamic history, he is celebrated for successfully bridging orthodox Sunni theology with Sufi mysticism, reshaping the trajectory of Islamic thought for centuries to come.

Early Life and Education

Al-Ghazālī was born around 1058 CE in Ṭūs, a city in the Khurasan region of the Seljuk Empire (present-day Iran). His father, a humble spinner of wool (the root of the surname al-Ghazālī), died when he was young, leaving him and his brother, Aḥmad, in the care of a Sufi friend. Demonstrating exceptional intellectual promise, al-Ghazālī pursued his early education in Ṭūs and Jurjan before traveling to Nishapur, the intellectual capital of Khurasan. There, he studied under the renowned Ashʿari theologian and Shafiʿi jurist Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī, mastering Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), logic, and philosophy.

Academic Zenith in Baghdad

Following the death of his mentor in 1085, al-Ghazālī joined the court of the powerful Seljuk vizier Niẓām al-Mulk. Recognizing his brilliance, Niẓām al-Mulk appointed him in 1091 as the chief professor at the prestigious Niẓāmiyya madrasa in Baghdad, the foremost center of Islamic learning at the time. Al-Ghazālī’s lectures drew massive crowds, and he enjoyed immense prestige, serving as a close advisor to the political and religious elite while engaging in rigorous debates with philosophers, theologians, and scholars of other sects.

Spiritual Crisis and Sufi Transformation

At the height of his worldly success, around 1095 CE, al-Ghazālī experienced a profound psychological and spiritual crisis. He began to doubt the sincerity of his academic motives, questioning whether his pursuit of knowledge was driven by a desire for divine truth or merely by pride and social status. This

existential turmoil, which he later described in his famous autobiography Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal (Deliverance from Error), led to a physical and psychosomatic illness that rendered him unable to teach.

Abandoning his lucrative post and public life, he left Baghdad under the guise of a pilgrimage to Mecca. For the next decade, he wandered as a wandering Sufi ascetic, traveling to Damascus, Jerusalem, and Hebron, and spending time in seclusion, prayer, and spiritual purification. This period marked a decisive shift in his thought: he came to believe that true knowledge of God could not be attained through rational discourse alone, but required direct, experiential, mystical insight (ma'rifah).

Later Life and Death

In 1106, al-Ghazālī was persuaded to return to teaching at the Niẓāmiyya in Nishapur to counter the spread of heterodox ideas. However, his return to academia was brief. By 1110, he retired permanently to his hometown of Ṭūs, where he founded a khanqah (Sufi lodge) adjacent to his home. He spent his final years in quiet contemplation, teaching Sufism to a small circle of devoted students and dedicating himself to writing. He died on December 19, 1111 CE, and was buried in Ṭūs. His tomb remains a site of reverence to this day.

Major Works

Al-Ghazālī was a remarkably prolific writer, producing over 70 works spanning theology, philosophy, law, and spirituality. His most significant texts include:

Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn (The Revival of the Religious Sciences): His magnum opus, a monumental multi-volume work that systematically integrates Islamic law, theology, and Sufi ethics into a comprehensive guide for spiritual and practical life.

Tahāfut al-Falāsifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers): A landmark critique of Neoplatonic Islamic philosophy (particularly the works of Avicenna and Al-Farabi), in which he argued that certain philosophical claims about the eternity of the world and God’s knowledge of particulars contradicted Islamic doctrine.

Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal (Deliverance from Error): An influential intellectual autobiography detailing his spiritual crisis and his journey through skepticism, theology, philosophy, and finally, Sufism.

Kīmiyā-yi Saʿādat (The Alchemy of Happiness): A Persian condensation of the Iḥyāʾ, written to make his spiritual teachings accessible to a broader, non-Arabic-speaking audience.

Legacy and Influence

Al-Ghazālī’s impact on Islamic thought is unparalleled. He is credited with legitimizing Sufism within the fold of orthodox Sunni Islam, ensuring its survival and integration into mainstream religious

practice. His critique in the Tahāfut fundamentally altered the course of Islamic philosophy, shifting the focus away from metaphysical speculation and toward theology and mysticism (though his arguments were later famously challenged by Ibn Rushd/Averroes in The Incoherence of the Incoherence).

Beyond the Islamic world, Latin translations of his works in the Middle Ages influenced medieval Christian scholastic thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas. Today, al-Ghazālī is universally recognized not only as a foundational figure in Islamic intellectual history but also as one of the greatest spiritual masters and philosophical minds of the medieval world.

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