I. Introduction

The early ninth century witnessed under the ‘Abbasid Caliphs an intensification of the grand transmission and translation movement from Greek into Arabic of a vast corpus of ancient texts in science and philosophy. Five principal strands in thinking were evolving in that intellectual context, with connections and distinctions between them:

1. Specialist branches in mathematics, medicine, and the exact and natural sciences.
2. Philosophy (falsafa) and logic as inspired by Aristotelian and Platonist ancient legacies.
3. Mysticism that focuses on spiritual exercises, solitary contemplation, visitation of shrines and pilgrimage.
4. Theology as embodied in the schools of kalām (Mu’tazilī and Ash’arī) that use logic and discursive reasoning in defending the articles of faith.
5. The schools of fiqh (jurisprudence) and the various forms of religious scholarship in the interpretation of the Qu’ran, Hadith, and law.

II. Al-Ghazālī’s Life

- Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī was born in Tūs in Iran in 1058 CE.
- He was a highly influential Muslim jurist, theologian, mystic, and reformist thinker.
- He followed Shāfi’ī jurisprudence (fiqh) and Ash’arī theology (kalām).
• Al-Ghazālī was appointed to a prestigious chair in the Niẓāmiyya academy of Baghdad in 1091 CE, lecturing on jurisprudence and theology.
• He struggled with skepticism and faced a spiritual crisis in 1095 CE, which resulted in his renunciation of his career, in leaving his family, and in turning away from his wealth. He departed from Baghdad in wanderings and pilgrimage that took him to Damascus, Jerusalem, Medina and Mecca.
• He returned in 1096 CE to his family in Ṭūs, and followed a life of asceticism until 1106 CE when he resumed teaching in the Niẓāmiyya system.
• He died in his hometown Ṭūs in 1111 CE.

III. Al-Ghazālī’s Works [A selection from over 72 voluminous treatises]:

(1094 CE) Maqāṣid al-falāsifa (Aims of the Philosophers)
(1095 CE) Tahāfut al-falāsifa (Incoherence of the Philosophers)
(1095 CE) Miʿyār al-ʿilm fīʿl-manṭiq (Measure of Science in Logic)
(1097 CE) Iḥyāʿ ʿulūm al-dīn (Revival of the Religious Sciences)
(1108 CE) al-Munqidh min al-dalāl (Deliverance from Error)

IV. Overview of al-Ghazālī’s Thought & Experience

• In his quest for grasping the principles of reality, al-Ghazālī doubted the veridical conditions of sense-perception and became even skeptical about reason itself.
• He believed that God cured him from this doubt and restored his confidence in the trustworthy character of the “necessary truths”.
• He studied the various doctrines that were dominant in his age, and he arrived at the conclusion that mysticism and the Sufi way offered the purest and soundest path to truth in accordance with Islam.
• He distinguished his objectives from those of the theologians (al-mutakallimūn) who only aimed at defending traditional orthodoxy against its opponents.
• He attacked the philosophers and believed that they were irreligious and affected by the defect of unbelief.
• He rejected the traditions of authoritative instruction as embodied by what he referred to as: “al-Bāṭiniyya” (the Ismāʿīlī expression of the Shi‘ī traditions), who believed in the infallibility of the Imam.

V. The way (ṭarīqa) of mysticism

• Al-Ghazālī argued that the mystic way includes both intellectual belief and practical activity that aim at “immediate experience, by ecstasy and moral change”. This necessitates a God-fearing way of life and a withdrawal from vain desire and from being caught in worldly attachments.
• Mysticism represented for him some of the properties of Prophetic revelation.
• He believed that the way of mysticism requires purification of the heart from what is other than the recollection of God, in view of seeking to be in God’s nearness.
Regarding the reporting of sayings about the unfathomable visions and experiences in mysticism, it is better that one need not say more than: “Of the things I do not remember, what was ‘was!’ Think it good. Do not ask an account of it!”

VI. Transcending Theology

- Al-Ghazālī adopted the Ash’arī theological position in thinking about God’s essence (dhāt) and attributes (ṣifāt) by maintaining that they were “not identical, but not different” (God’s attributes such as knowledge, life, will, hearing, seeing and speech, are included in God's essence and are co-eternal with it). He differed in this from the Mu’tazilī position that reduced the attributes to the essence.
- Al-Ghazālī’s physical theory was rooted in the theologians’ appeal to atomism against the Aristotelian physics of the philosophers. The universe admits a void in which atoms (miniscule indivisible particles) adhere and segregate to form aggregates of things not because of their own essential nature, but due to accidents external to them that fulfill God’s Will.
- Al-Ghazālī’s quest for truth ultimately transcended the aims of theology that only sought to preserve the creed of traditional orthodoxy (as received from the Prophetic source) or to simply defend it against the deviations of heretics by way of systematic argument.

VII. Refuting Philosophy

- Al-Ghazālī aimed at refuting the Platonist and Aristotelian legacies of prominent figures in Islamic intellectual history, such as al-Fārābī (10th century philosopher) and Ibn Sinā (Avicenna; 11th century philosopher), whilst also partly founding his theoretical knowledge on their systematic methods of demonstration and proof.
- Al-Ghazālī was impressed by the exactness of logic and mathematics, and he believed that they do not deny religious matters or affirm them. However, he warned about the drawbacks of narrowly associating them only with philosophy.
- He raised objections on certain claims in the natural sciences, like the belief in the existence of a necessary connection between causes and effects; in order that he also gives explanations of the occurrence of miracles, while partly relying on atomism as his physical theory.
- He pointed out twenty points of incoherence in metaphysics, three of which he considered to be cases of heresy, namely:
  
  (1) The philosophers’ belief in the eternity of the world based on a deterministic conception of creation by way of emanation, which is determined through God’s nature as Creator.
  (2) The philosophers’ claim that God does not know particulars, since this implies change in God’s essence, and that God only knows by way of universals.
  (3) The philosophers’ denial of bodily resurrection in the Day of Judgment.
VIII. Posthumous Receptions of al-Ghazālī’s Legacy

- Nearly a century later after al-Ghazālī, the philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes; 12th century philosopher) endeavored to resist the prevalent trend of undermining philosophy in the Islamic milieu by refuting Al-Ghazālī’s Tahāfut al-falāsifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers) in his Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence) and in a less technical mode through his Faṣl al-maqāl (The Decisive Treatise).
- Based on al-Ghazālī’s legacy many elements of the philosophical modes of reasoning were absorbed within the folds of later expressions of theology (kalām), and mysticism became tolerated within the mainstream Islamic religious traditions.
- Al-Ghazālī continued to be radically faulted in Ismā’īlī literature due to his attacks on their tradition.
- Al-Ghazālī was also critiqued by the 14th century Hanbali scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, on the account that in his mystic ways he did not follow the Sunna and the example of the righteous companions of the Prophet (al-ṣaḥāba and al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ).

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N.B
The contents of this document are simplified and adapted to meet the needs of the CVSP205