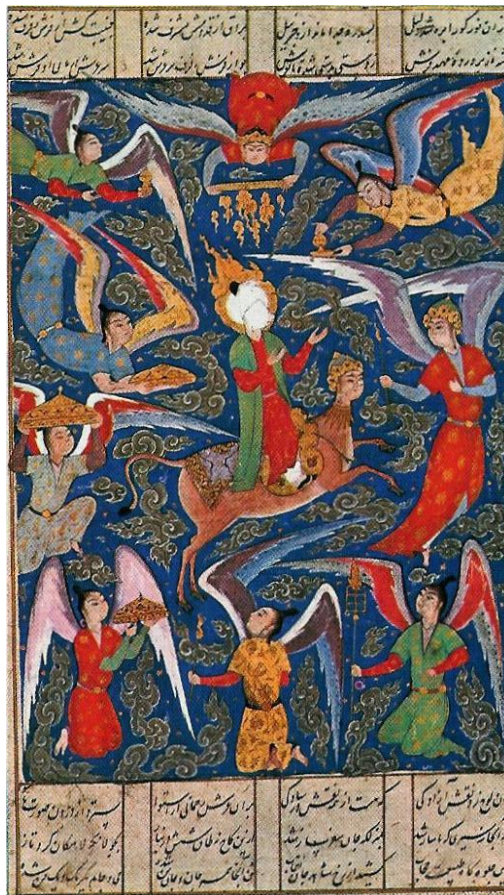


KUN Masters Interreligieuze Spiritualiteit

SPIRITUALITEIT EN ISLAM (MASP1303)

Final Assignment

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: The Reality of Inspiration



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God is the Light of the heavens and the earth;
the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp
the lamp in a glass,
the glass as it were a glittering star
kindled from a Blessed Tree,
an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West
whose oil wellnigh would shine, even if no fire touched it;
Light upon Light;
God guides to His Light whom He will.
And God strikes similitudes for men,
and God has knowledge of everything.

Qur'an Surat-an-Nur (24):35

Illustration on front page:

The Prophet Mohammed's Ascent to Heaven. Iran, 16th Century c.e. Manuscript. Seattle, Art Museum.

Source: Lévêque, Jean-Jacques & Nicole Ménant, 1968. *De islamitische en Indische schilderkunst*. Utrecht: Het Spectrum, page 39. Mohammed's ascent symbolizes the Sufi's mystical path (Waines, 2001:142).

Qur'anic text on this page: interpretation of Arberry (1951).

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1. Introduction

This paper is the final assignment for the course "Spirituality of Islam" which is part of the Masters course of "Interreligious Spirituality" at the University of Nijmegen. The instruction for this assignment was as follows: "Choose one Sufi personality and describe his/her historical background briefly. Then select a text delivered by that person (or recorded by one of his/her followers). Analyse this text in relation to a theme from the Sufi tradition, or from the Qur'an, or from the Christian tradition".

The personality I selected was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali¹, whose text, *The Reality of Inspiration*², was discussed in class. One reason for selection was that I was moved by his dramatic search for truth which Karen Armstrong described so well³. Secondly, he was the one who made explicit the relation between reason - the instrument of philosophers like himself in his early days - and spirituality (or "inspiration") which he so intensely sought to grasp. With his works he laid an epistemological foundation under Sufism so that it became acceptable in the Muslim world, and his influence reached far beyond that. The third, more personal motive for my choice was that I hoped that his example would give me more insight in how to treat spirituality in general. Standing in the spiritual tradition and at the same time reflecting on it, maintaining the 'academic perspective' without breaking the bonds, is also a challenge for us students of spirituality - Muslim, Christian, and other - today.

So here we come to the selected Sufi theme: **Inspiration**. I am interested in the workings of inspiration because it is in line with the over-all purpose of my study, namely to research the spiritual and religious motives that *inspire* human beings in their dealings with forests and nature in this world. Forests and nature - the object of my profession over the last 23 years - will not be discussed here⁴, but exploring what al-Ghazali has to say on inspiration might help to enlighten the first part of my question. For this purpose, the paper is structured as follows: 1) General biography, including a summary of his philosophical work; 2) Al-Ghazali's contribution to Sufism including his views on world and man; 3) Discussion of *The Reality of Inspiration*; 4) Discussion of *The Niche for Lights*⁵ to see where it bears on the theme of inspiration; 5) Conclusion from these texts on al-Ghazali's views on inspiration and discussion in the light of some other texts from the course.

2. General biography of al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid Ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad al-Tusi al-Shafi'i al-Ghazali was one of the greatest thinkers of Islam; he also influenced Jewish and Christian thinkers, even Aquinas. He was born in Tus⁶ in Khorasan⁷, a region of Iran⁸, in 1058 c.e. and he died in Tus in 1111⁹ or in Baghdad in 1128¹⁰. It appears that his father died when he was still young, but nevertheless he got the opportunity to study in Nishapur and Baghdad. He studied law at the al-Shafi'i school and theology with the famous Asharite theologian al-Juwayni. In 1091, he was appointed as a professor of theology at the Nizamiyah *madrasa* (University) in Baghdad, which had recently been founded by vizier Nizam al-Mulk and soon became one of the most reputed institutions of learning. Al-Ghazali's task was to defend the Sunnite doctrines against the Shi'ite Isma'ilites. He did this with a restless zeal, always digging deeper to find the truth. His fame spread fast.

¹ I presented his biography and teaching in class during the course, on 1 October 2003.

² http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/AG_DFE/reality_of_inspiration.htm. The text was read in the 5th lecture of the course. It is part of the Deliverance from Errors (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/1100ghazali-truth.html>).

³ Armstrong, 1995.

⁴ An exploration of Islamic views on ecology was already the subject of another assignment which I wrote for the course Introduction to Islam (2001).

⁵ <http://muslim-canada.org/niche1.html>

⁶ Waines, 2001:125.

⁷ http://ismaili.net/mirrors/57_sina/ghazali.htm

⁸ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/1100ghazali-truth.html>

⁹ Waines, 2001:125; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/1100ghazali-truth.html>

¹⁰ http://ismaili.net/mirrors/57_sina/ghazali.htm

He was a prolific writer and wrote some of his major works on philosophy in the four years after his appointment.

Al-Ghazali has been an authority in theology and philosophy as well as in Sufism to this day. In his days, Greek philosophy including Neoplatonism had become popular among a number of his fellow Muslim philosophers and this led to conflict with several Islamic teachings. On the other end of the spiritual-intellectual spectre of his days, Sufism had developed into such excesses as to abandoning basic Islamic duties of praying or fasting. Al-Ghazali sought to correct both these trends. As for philosophy, he accepted the authority of reason in mathematics, exact sciences, ethics and politics but he rejected the view - held by earlier Muslim philosophers, e.g. al-Farabi and Ibn Sina - that reason could be applied to comprehend the absolute and the infinite, in other words, metaphysics. One of his major works, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* deals with this theme. In this book he argues that those philosophers could not deliver their claims and that even some of their assertions represented mere heresy and unbelief. Later, in the 12th century c.e., Ibn Rushd would write a counter-critique in his book *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, but this did not undo al-Ghazali's influence¹¹.

However, if God could not be found by reason, how then could He be found? Al-Ghazali became desperate in his search for a strong and true belief in God and he fell into a severe clinical depression; he could not eat nor even speak any more. For a while he became a total sceptic, both towards religion and to any knowledge at all. Then he turned to mysticism and subsequently experienced the 'terrors of mind', particularly fearing Judgement Day. This happened in 1095; later that year he left his position, his family, and became an ascetic, a Sufi. There he found what he sought. He visited Jerusalem, Damascus and Mecca but afterwards he lived mostly in Tus. He returned to teaching in 1105, first at the Nizamayya *madrassa* in Naisabur, and then soon again in Tus. There he was in charge of a *madrassa* and a monastery¹². We know all this through his book *'The Deliverance from Error'*¹³, a thematic 'autobiography' he wrote at the end of his life.

3. Al-Ghazali and Sufism

Al-Ghazali had always been suspicious towards the excesses the Sufis displayed in his days. Yet through his crisis he came to the realisation that genuine Sufism would be the path for him to find the absolute truth. A little excursion into the Arabic language helps to enlighten this path: according to the English scholar John Bowker, the Arabic word for 'existence' (*wujud*) is derived from the root *wajada*, 'he found'. The literal meaning of *wujud* is therefore 'that what can be found'. This means that Arabic philosophers do not have to prove God's existence by identifying Him as an object of knowledge, but only by proving He can be found. The absolute proof of God's *wujud* could only be delivered to the faithful when he would meet God in his afterlife, but the claims of mystics that they had met Him already in this life had to be taken seriously. The Sufis in any case argued that they really had experienced Him; they used the term *wajd* ('countenance', 'aspect'¹⁴) for their ecstatic contact with God¹⁵.

Al-Ghazali formulated a mystic doctrine that would be acceptable for the Muslim establishment who had so far viewed Sufism with distrust. He went back to the old belief in an archetypal realm beyond this earthly world of sensory observations: the latter, he said, was an inferior replica of the 'world of Platonic intelligences', which was the spiritual world mentioned in the Qur'an and the Hebrew and Christian Bible. Since God had printed His divine image in man's soul, man belonged to both worlds. In his mystical

¹¹ Michael E. Marmura on <http://ssips.binghamton.edu/pubs/al-ghazzali.htm>; Waines, 2001:128

¹² <http://lexicorient.com/e.o/ghazzali.htm>

¹³ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/1100ghazali-truth.html>

¹⁴ Mishkat (<http://muslim-canada.org/niche1.html>) part 6. A commentator on the Mishkat (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/mishkat/msh14.htm>) points out the ambiguity of the term saying it denotes, on the one hand, the interrelatedness, and therefore the createdness and thus realness of all things while on the other hand, it refers to the non-existent nature of things before the unique Existence of God (*Wajh Allah*). This convenient combination of two divergent concepts into one word helped al-Ghazali to accommodate both orthodox creationism and the pantheism cherished by his fellow Sufis of his days.

¹⁵ Armstrong, 1995:215. Note also the later doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being) posed by Ibn al-'Arabi (Waines, 2001:152; 6th lecture of the course).

treatise, *Mishkat al-Anwar* (the Niche for Lights)¹⁶, al-Ghazali interprets the Qur'anic Light Verse (24:35)¹⁷. The Light refers to God as well as to other sources of light: the lamp, the star. Human reason, too, possesses the ability to shine. Not only it enables us to observe other objects, but just as God Himself it can also transcend time and space. It is therefore part of the same reality as the spiritual world. However, al-Ghazali stresses that this declaration should not be taken literally as with 'reason' he meant more than a cerebral and analytical ability. These things could only be discussed in symbolic language belonging to the domain of creative imagination.

According to al-Ghazali, there are some who possess a 'prophetic mind', i.e. a mystical talent of a higher standing than reason: intuitive, receptive qualities which enable the mystic to acquire the highest form of knowledge unattainable for anyone else. This mystical knowledge is the deep realisation that only the Creator exists or has eternal existence. The one who realises this sees his own ego gradually fading away and himself being absorbed in God. Those with lesser talents have to be satisfied with the world of symbols to understand God's existence. For them, al-Ghazali developed a method enabling Muslims to realise God's presence in even the smallest details of day-to-day life.

Al-Ghazali's teachings left a lasting imprint on Islam. Never again would Muslims take up the quick assumption that God were a being just as any other and that His existence could be proved scientifically or rationally. From then on, Islamic philosophy would be intrinsically linked with spirituality and with a mystic discussion about God.

4. Al-Ghazali's views in *The Reality of Inspiration*

*The Reality of Inspiration, its Importance for the Human Race*¹⁸ is part of *The Deliverance from Error* (see Section 2). Here, al-Ghazali stresses the importance of inspiration as a form of knowledge of an equal or even higher standing than reason. He does this, first, by describing man's development from child to man: newly born, he knows nothing; in his childhood he is only informed by his senses; after his seventh year he can experience impressions of a higher level, and after that his reason begins to work. But there is a still higher level, namely that of inspiration which can only be perceived by higher faculties. Denying its existence because it cannot be known by reason is proof of ignorance, just as a blind man would not know or understand colours. Secondly, al-Ghazali refers to dreaming: there, too, we perceive the invisible world although our senses are suspended. And that there are things beyond sensory perceptions is something reason should admit, because intellectual concepts, too, reach far beyond the sensory realm. So there he finds evidence that we can experience inspiration. To further possible doubters, al-Ghazali affirms that inspiration is a positively existing phenomenon just as real as knowledge of medical science and astronomy is real. Such knowledge exists although it comes from beyond experience or reason¹⁹. It belongs to the "domain of prophetic miracles" unattainable by reason. He also affirms that inspiration can manifest itself in persons, but only in those who are in a state of ecstatic transport (such as practising Sufis). He sees these persons following a gradual path of initiation and having "a degree of certitude and conviction" that cannot be attained by reason but is strongly present nevertheless.

This certitude is necessary to discriminate true inspiration from falseness, e.g. in a particular prophet. In addition, the Qur'an and traditions should be studied and their salutary effect should be "verified in experience a thousand times" to realize the truth of inspiration. Al-Ghazali warns against confusing true inspiration with "magic or falsehood", and gives some practical hints on this point. Interestingly, he stresses the importance of what we would designate as 'separating the message from the messenger': it is the facts that count and not the displayers of those facts or their eloquence or flair.

¹⁶ <http://muslim-canada.org/niche1.html>

¹⁷ this verse was read in the 2nd lecture in this course.

¹⁸ see Footnote 2

¹⁹ Al-Ghazali's statement that we know of rare astronomical occurrences because of God's grace and not from reason does not seem very convincing to a Western reader: don't we derive most of our knowledge of those occurrences from calculations and hence, from reason? However, perhaps the classical Arabic way of studying these sciences involved intuition as well as mathematics.

This logic is the best al-Ghazali can offer to the non-initiated reader. Experience cannot be fully described in words; one has to become a Sufi to learn the rest, "to see the truth and, so to speak, to handle it". The Sufi mystical path enabled him to find the higher truth which could not be found by philosophical and scientific approaches.

5. Inspiration in the *Niche for Lights (Mishkat-al-Anwar)*

In *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazali mentions "the light which proceeds from the *Central Radiance of Inspiration*" illuminating the "repose and movement, exterior and interior" of the Sufis. It seems therefore that he considers inspiration to be equal to light. If so, does his *Niche for Lights* (see section 3) throw additional light on the subject? 'Inspiration' as such does not occur in the *Niche*, but 'light' is expanded on in depth. Starting from the Qur'anic verse about the lamp in the glass²⁰, al-Ghazali distinguishes three different meanings of light: 1) light as a phenomenon as seen by the eye; 2) light as intelligence (or 'reason' as it was termed in Section 3 above), which sees farther than the eye; and 3) God as the ultimate form of light. With his exterior eye, man can see the empirical world, the world of sense; with his interior eye (intelligence), man can reach into the world beyond, the World of the Realm Celestial, but only after "*this earth to him be changed into that which is not earth, and likewise the heavens*"²¹, an initiatory shattering of his worldview as the first step on the mystical path.

This World of the Realm Celestial (*alias* the "world of cause") is the residence of the Prophets, the angels and the Qur'an who dwell in the immediate presence of God. All of them represent even so many shining Lamps Supernal which cast their light upon many Lamps Terrestrial (phenomena) in our World of Sense. All light ultimately emanates from God's radiance. God is thus "the Final Fountain-head who is Light in and by Himself", in other words, the ultimate Inspirator (my term).

No wonder that the goal of the mystical pilgrim is to get into touch with this Inspiration, to achieve unity with God. This leads to various escalating stages of ecstasis, ending in a stage in which "even the extinction of the soul's extinction is reached" and one is completely immersed in God. One could ask whether this ultimate stage represents a complete identity with God ("the wine *is* the wine-glass") or only a unification with God ("the wine is *as though* it were the wine-glass"). Al-Ghazali solves this argument by saying that 'identity' belongs to the "language of metaphor", and 'unification' to the "language of reality", but that in fact, the former argument ('identity') is true.

6. Conclusion and discussion

It appears from al-Ghazali's writings that inspiration is a two-way movement: God 'eradiates' His inspiration to man, who, if qualified, is in turn inspired to take the mystic path to God. The movement ends there, with the total immersion of the soul in God (*fana*). We have seen that in later Sufi mysticism this ultimate goal has been expanded upon in the Sufi love poetry, extolling the total unification with the beloved as a metaphor of this state²². But the mystic does not remain in the state of *fana*' forever; he has to return to his normal life. What happens then? Does he feel inspired to apply his faculties for the good of the world? Is there anything in Sufism - at least classical Sufism - comparable to the Bodhisattva concept in Buddhism²³, or the *via transformativa* in modern Christianity²⁴ where the mystic, after having reached the ultimate state of enlightenment or transport, returns to the world and dedicates himself to its service?

Al-Junayd in his *Kitab al Fana* says that in the state of *fana*', physical and spiritual perceptions are completely removed by God, but "when God brings the spirit back to its normal state, he re-establishes it

²⁰ S. 24:35, Light

²¹ quotation from the Qur'an (S. 14:48, Ibrahim). <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/mishkat/msh12.htm>

²² e.g., Layla's fire by al-Farid (Homerin, 1994:5-7); and Rumi's love poem no. 5 (Rumi, 1961:11).

²³ Harvey, 2000:121-124; translated to more practical spheres in contemporary social and environmental Buddhist movements (Jones, 1989:169-170).

²⁴ e.g. in Matthew Fox's *Creation Spirituality* where he adds the *via transformativa* as a fourth, socially oriented path to Plotinus' classical three-fold mystical journey (Leemker, 2002:138-141).

and gives it back to its own nature. Thus the experience with God and from God is hidden, the soul grieves (..), its anguish for what it has lost continues in its conscious existence and present reality. (..) The soul was satisfied and now thirsts anew"²⁵. He continues to say that those who persevere in their striving for *fana'* - a selected few - are gifted by God with special faculties, "a quality which persists after true *Fana'*" He does not elaborate on the nature of that quality, but it clearly refers to the mystic's capacities in his strife for God, not to capacities to cope with earthly life. Waines writes that after having reached *fana'*, Sufis "could now continue their journey in Allah, that is, subsisting (*baqa'*) in him rather than striving for him as before. 'Hence, writes al-Hujwiri, all one's actions are referred to Allah, not to one's self'"²⁶.

What actions in practice? Waines notices the Sufis' general devotionality expressed in good works²⁷, which they shared with Muslim traditionalists. He does not say whether these 'good works' were the result of mystical inspiration; maybe more contemporary Sufism has expanded this point. As for classical Sufism, all we know is that some schools (e.g., the Chishtiyyah) practised stern asceticism - though it never turned into complete world-denial - while other schools (such as the Shadhiliyyah) maintained a more world-oriented lifestyle²⁸. The Sufis' 'this-worldliness' is also expressed in the beautiful cosmology and nature mysticism developed by Ibn al-'Arabi²⁹ and others. To mention one feature, al-'Arabi saw the names of God reflected in all things in nature. This view, although criticised by some as being pantheistic, has persevered till today, especially among the Shadhiliyyah³⁰. It also resounds in the first of Rumi's Spiritual Poems about the reed flute: the playing of the flute symbolizing man breathed to life by God's breath - as the music expresses the flute's longing for its origin, man's awakened soul longs for his Inspirator³¹. And so we are back at *in-spiration* again, here applied in the literal sense of the word, and represented by this beautiful metaphor from Sufi spirituality.

²⁵ Abdel-Kader, 1962:155-156

²⁶ Waines, 2001:142, quoting from al-Ghazali's *Book of Fear and Hope*.

²⁷ Waines, 2001:144

²⁸ Waines, 2001:149-150

²⁹ Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom* Chapter Six on <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/Abewley/fut6/html>

³⁰ 6th Course lecture; Waines, 2001:153

³¹ Exhibition "De weg naar Schoonheid en Geluk; de mystiek van Islam", *Wereldmuseum Rotterdam*, till Sept 2004.

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