

# Ghazali

*& The Pursuit of Happiness*

The Prime Minister has launched a survey to measure British people's well-being. Nobel prize winner Joseph Stiglitz has recommended nations measure emotional prosperity, rather than economic prosperity as a true indicator of people's happiness. In these austere times emel marks the anniversary of a man known as the alchemist of happiness.

Words *Tam Hussain*

Nine hundred years after the death of Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, we find ourselves in a conundrum. We live in a world fraught with bloodshed, economic strife, and social disintegration. We live in an abundance of material wealth side by side with abject poverty – often in the same country, the same city; we are technologically advanced but emotionally infantile – often within the same person; our desire for more scorches the Earth, and in the process we hasten our own termination. Our soul flutters uncomfortably as it searches for satisfaction – often in transient forms that only succeed in heaping greater misery. We confuse ugliness with beauty; have difficulty discerning between right and wrong; eschew justice in the pursuit of pragmatism. In such circumstance, can anyone provide an antidote to our modern world?

Understandably, it is difficult to see how a medieval scholar born in a small town in Tus, Eastern Iran in 1058 can come to our assistance. Ghazali's world was very different from ours where Abbasid caliphs contended with Fatimid caliphs and real power lay with the sultans. True, the period witnessed the giant intellects of Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Omar Khayyam, and many others. For sure, their discourse was different from ours: they argued about Aristotle and practiced medicine based on the four humours, whilst we argue about the philosophy of Richard Branson and clone sheep. Whilst one can easily see Ghazali's contribution to medieval Islamic civilization, it is more difficult to do so with modernity. Ghazali's

father determined that his son should dedicate himself to the service of Islam, and though orphaned at an early age young Ghazali's keen intellect ensured that he studied in the best institutions of Islamic jurisprudence. By 1077, he had studied under giants such as the theologian and jurist Al-Juwayni. By 1091, he was lecturing at the prestigious Nizamiyya in Baghdad to hundreds of students, and by the end of his career he had authored over seventy works. But why should Ghazali offer something to the modern world? Because in his writings, especially his autobiography *The Deliverance from Error* we get an insight into the nature of man.

In 1092 Ghazali was at the peak of his career, a celebrated professor in the most prestigious university in the world, resplendent in material comfort, courted by the great and the good, and surrounded by a loving family. What more could he want? Yet he felt that something was missing; a nagging doubt that had its roots in his student days when he was grappling with theological issues about the nature of Truth. Fearlessly, Ghazali chose to follow his quest. And so, between 1091 and 1095 he devoured works of philosophy in order to answer his doubts and emerged as an authority on the subject, writing some of history's most influential books on philosophy, including *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and *The Aims of the Philosophers*. So accomplished were these works that his critics accused him of bolstering the cause of his opponents by articulating better their own arguments. However, though he had intellectually refuted their philosophy, his



## Ghazali's journey

■ **1058** Born in Tus

■ **1070** Travelled with his brother to Gurgan to enrol in a madrassah

■ **1080** Went to Nishapur and became a student of Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni

■ **1085** Travelled to Baghdad to visit Nizam al-Mulk, the minister of the Seljuk rulers

■ **1091** Appointed by Nizam al-Mulk as head of the Nizamiyyah College of Baghdad, and accepted as the highest-ranking orthodox 'doctor' of the Islamic community in the area

■ **1095** Went through a spiritual crisis, disposed of his wealth, became a Sufi and left Baghdad

■ **1095-8** Travelled around Damascus, Jerusalem, Madinah and performed Hajj in Makkah

■ **1095** Wrote 'The Incoherence of the Philosophers'

■ **1098** Settled in Tus, spending the next few years in seclusion

■ **1106** Lectured for a short period at the Nizamiyyah College of Nishapur

■ **1107** Returned back to Tus

■ **1107-11** Wrote 'The Revival of the Religious Sciences'

■ **1111** Died at the age of 53

Previous page and below: stills from the film, 'The Alchemist of Happiness' directed by Abdul Latif Ovidio Salazar

heart was not wholly satisfied with the answers and he experienced his first existential crisis. Just like Descartes five centuries later, he became so deeply skeptical that he questioned absolutely everything. How could he be certain that Islam was true? In fact, how could he expect anything to be true? How could he trust his own senses? "One looks at the stars," he says, "and it is the size of a gold coin. But then astronomical evidence proves that it is greater in magnitude than the Earth." Perhaps three really is more than ten, he speculated. With great candour, he admits that his doubts would have continued had God not restored his faith in reason.

One would expect that once his predicament was resolved he would return to his old life. Instead, during a period of deep political turmoil, he experienced a second crisis right in the middle of a lecture. His students stared incomprehensibly as their professor was unable to utter a single word. He was dumbstruck for two months. His physicians said that there was nothing wrong with him. The truth was that the professor had just realised he had been working for nothing but the furtherance of his career. He could feel the stench of hypocrisy in his approach to religion. He had tried everything except the way of the Sufis. Ghazali was familiar with their ways; after all he had in his boyhood a Sufi tutor, and his own brother Ahmad was one. But sometimes their practices seemed to offend Ghazali's religious sensibilities that he had as a jurist. Nevertheless, the Sufis claimed to have 'tasted' religious truth and he wanted to experience that too.



Consequently, he immersed himself in their books, read the works of Al-Muhasibi, Bistami, Al-Junayd and others, and noted that these saintly personalities had more to offer his heart than the jurists, philosophers, the esoterics and the theologians of his age. So, in 1095 when Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade on the fields of Clermont, Ghazali ventured out on his own spiritual journey. For 10 years he worked in menial jobs; he sat with

the ascetics of Damascus, performed his pilgrimage, visited Jerusalem, Khalil (Hebron), the Hijaz and Egypt in search of the ultimate reality. He only returned to public life in 1105 but soon retired to the city of his birth Tus, devoting his time to writing and training his disciples. It was during these last years that he composed his magnum opus The Revival of the Religious Sciences. He passed away peacefully in 1111 having realised that the truth can be found within oneself.

Apart from his existential crisis, what exactly does he have to offer modern man? Irrespective of one's beliefs, Ghazali shows that essentially the human condition remains unchanged and is perennially afflicted with the same problems. Instead of despairing at the human condition like many modern writers (eg. Kafka), Ghazali offers a way out. His life is not only a testament to an unswerving determination to achieve honesty within oneself but also, if one is willing to walk a little further, that the alchemy for the ills of the world does not lie in its apparent glitter but in the state of our hearts. His Revival of the Religious Sciences is a careful distillation of an ocean of learning and wisdom that systematically incorpo-

rates all aspects of devotional practices in order to gain proximity to God. Ghazali makes it a condition that the inner dimensions vis-à-vis the heart cannot accept Divine Grace if the laws of God are not obeyed in one's outward conduct. Only after outward obedience can one proceed to remove the diseases of the heart that lead to its perdition. Therefore lust, envy, hypocrisy, pride, conceit are amongst other pernicious traits that must be replaced by virtuous ones. Only repentance, patience, abstinence, the plentiful remembrance of death and utter sincerity can prepare the heart to receive Divine Grace. And should one be fortunate enough to achieve this, then the path is open for love and friendship with God. Though few of us may ever reach this sublime position, at least a degree of inner peace and harmony can be gained - perhaps enough for our modern predicament.

It is hardly surprising then that Ghazali was given, in his very lifetime, the honorific title Hujjatul Islam, the Proof of Islam, as recognition of his contribution to Islamic civilization. The title is certainly deserved for he was a true polymath who brought clarity and certainty. His interests were not only confined to the fields of spirituality, jurisprudence, and philosophy but also to political theory, logic, theology, pedagogy, psychology and even the genre of autobiography. Ghazali then, should be seen as a versatile thinker who had the uncanny ability to be many things to many people. When he composed the Revival, he was acutely aware that there existed Sufi devotional practices that were unacceptable to jurists, theologians, and philosophers. Having mastered the sciences he framed

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Sufi devotion within Islamic law, and thus became a benchmark for sober spiritual endeavour for both scholarly and lay Muslims alike. Because of this and his diverse interests, he influenced personalities with many different approaches to Islam. His works were discussed by jurists such as Ibn Taymiyyah, sociologists like Ibn Khaldun, and by Sufis such as Imam al-Haddad and by revivalists like Shah Waliullah in India and Hassan Al-Banna in Egypt. In

fact, in the modern period Ghazali could be said to have had a direct impact on the founders of the Deoband School and the Muslim Brotherhood. Both men looked to his teachings to take their people out of social and political stagnation. In the West too, we find him appropriated in the guise of Algazel the philosopher, who influenced the works of Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Maimonides, and Roger Bacon. His idea that reason can be inconsistent with religious truth became a cornerstone of Christian theology. Echoes of his thought are also found in Spinoza, Pascal, Pierre Bayle, Montaigne, Hume and most notably Descartes. The skepticism of Descartes seems suspiciously similar to the annotated copy of The Deliverance from Error which the Frenchman kept on his bookshelf.

Ghazali then is a figure intrinsically linked to the intellectual awakening of the West. This multi-faceted aspect of Ghazali's influence has led historians such as Montgomery Watt and Anne Marie Schimmel to declare him the most significant Muslim thinker since the Prophet Muhammad, and so such thinkers still have much to offer us as we today try and find peace and happiness in our lives. ●



# What Ghazali means to me

“Ghazali’s book, the Revival of the Religious Sciences, continues to function as a Rough Guide to the inward landscape of the heart.”



## Nourishment for barren hearts

**Abdal Hakim Murad**  
Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Cambridge University

We live in an age of material obesity and spiritual starvation. Every possible treat for the body and the ego is within our easy reach; and yet for an increasing number of people, the world seems a forlorn and aimless place. Maximal indulgence seems to go hand in hand with depression, anxiety, and disrupted relationships with spouses, parents, and children.

Imam al-Ghazali spoke of religion as *nayl al-sa'ada*, the achievement of happiness. The goal is hardly out of date; in fact, it represents

the timeless and universal human quest - and an entirely legitimate one. Yet our modern lifestyle tends to emphasise a fulfilment of the surface. We go for a facial, or decompress at the gym, or the spa, or the eco-resort; and then we return to our hectic workplaces in a culture which tends to assume that abundant goods and services supply the peace of mind which, in earlier times, was provided by trust in God.

That's a silly way to spend one's few decades on earth. Every civilization has been uneasily aware of the tension between the senses and the spirit. The Roman Empire experienced the clash between the toga-clad pagan elite, with their worldly philosophy discussed over

banqueting tables, and the Jewish and Christian minorities which tried to focus on higher things. The Buddha was a prince who gave up the perks which were his birthright, in order to search for enlightenment. And the Last Prophet, upon whom be blessings and peace, challenged the dull capitalism of his city's tribal elite, risking everything for the sake of a just order in society which would mirror the calmness of the believer's heart.

So nothing at all has changed. In the brushed-steel canyons of Canary Wharf there can be no stillness, and hence no inward joy, unless we look above, to see if the heavens are still visible. We need to turn around: metanoia, *teshuvah*, *tawba*,

and break the idol of the ego which squats like a devil in the *mihrab* of our lives.

Imam al-Ghazali dedicated his life, and risked everything, for this same quest. He remembered the fact of death, and the transience and even bitterness of status and material abundance, and took the road into the desert, searching for happiness. By God's grace he found it. His book, the Revival of the Religious Sciences, continues to function as a Rough Guide to the inward landscape of the heart. Since it first left his desk, nobody has opened it without being, at the very least, shaken by the realisation of how much time we waste, and what treasures can be found at our journey's end.



## Ghazali for the children

**Aisha Gray Henry**  
Publisher, Fons Vitae

In 1967, I came across Imam al-Ghazali's spiritual autobiography, *Munqidh min al-Dalal*, in the New York Public Library on 5th Avenue. My thoughts as I turned the last page were, "So! Islam is true." Were it not for "the faith and practice" of this spiritual giant among men, I would not have driven with my husband across North Africa in search of men of learning and knowledge, nor studied 10 years at Al Azhar nor helped found The Islamic Texts Society (ITS) in 1980 in Cambridge, UK. From our small premises on Green Street came the first of the Ghazali volumes - T.J. Winter's translation of *Death and What Comes After*. And now, thirty years later, as I fast approach 70 years of age, I have been graced to discover why I was in fact born. Each of us is given a gift to deliver, and it would appear that mine is the *Ihya* for children.

After returning to Kentucky in 1990 to care for my dying parents, Fons Vitae was born in 1997. Over the years we have added to the Ghazali treasures in the English language; *Deliverance From Error*, *Marvels of the Heart*, *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, as well as Ghazali's *Path to Sufism*. Not long ago, we were approached by the Medina Institute of Baltimore who had commissioned Muhtar Holland to translate the 40 books of the *Ihya*. These would complement the ITS volumes which have extensive notes and introductory material. This would also mean that I myself would be able to read the entire *Ihya* before dying.

Fons Vitae has come in on this project as publisher of the four volumes, the first of which we hope to be ready in autumn 2011. But then, the great realisation and inspiration occurred. My granddaughters, aged five and nine, needed to begin their spiritual lives in a solid fashion. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf and I discussed this urgency for our children with tears in our eyes. With his encouragement and help, and with a number of fine women and mothers who have joined this effort, we are hoping that Volume 1 of the *Ihya* for 12 year olds, followed by a version for five to six year olds will be available also by the autumn.

For me, I have found my life's work and joy and meaning. As I select passages that are suitable for children, and then attempt to understand them well enough to express them in an engaging manner, I am finding that I am also speaking most profoundly and clearly to myself. May God give me days enough to complete this gift to my fellow families and their children. Perhaps, after some generations, the children in today's Muslim and secular world will be more attracted to the spiritual dimension of their faith.

“As I approach 70 years of age, I have discovered my gift to deliver: *Ihya* for children.”



# "If you want to be free of all affliction and suffering, hold fast to God, and turn wholly to Him."



## Gratitude for the gifts

**Zarina Nalla**  
Co-founder of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies in Malaysia

I was introduced to the books and writings of Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, may Allah be pleased with him, at different phases of my life. During my teenage years, when I questioned almost everything, I found a translated copy of the *Ihya Ulumuddin* (Revival of the Religious Sciences) at our local mosque. I clearly remember the impact the book had on me. Its content was presented in a very comprehensible manner; each subject was supported by logic, and was firmly rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions.

I marveled at the simple way the book was organised. Volume 1 began with a Chapter on Knowledge, followed by Belief, Cleanliness

and the Acts of Worship. Imam Ghazali rejects blind faith and establishes early on that Knowledge is the basis of our Belief and all things we do.

The books quickly became my first reference point whenever I needed guidance and clarification. I have not yet read all four volumes of the *Ihya* - I must make this as one of my New Year resolutions!

During early adulthood, when the responsibilities and realities of life began to weigh on me, a close friend gave me Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Happiness*. Although it is known as the summarised version of his *Ihya*, the book gave me self-knowledge and taught me how to appreciate the beautiful moments that come my way. Ghazali wrote, "In God there is no sorrow or suffering or affliction. If you want to be free of all affliction and suffering, hold fast to God, and turn wholly to Him, and to no one else. Indeed, all your suffering comes from this: that you do not turn toward God and no one else."

Now, in the third phase of my life, I am reading the translation of *Ayyuhal Walad*. As a mother of two young children, I was naturally attracted to the title of the book. In it, I found gems of advice and reminders for myself. Sometimes we falter, forget and question fate.

We are in constant need of guidance. The Imam says, "To completely trust in God is to be like a child who knows deeply that even if he does not call for the mother, the mother is totally aware of his condition and is looking after him." This is invaluable advice that I will share with my children.



## Becoming what we know

**Jeremy Henzell-Thomas**  
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When I reflect on what I have personally learned from the towering figure of Ghazali, I invariably turn to the wisdom distilled in his great dictum that "tasting (*dhawq*) is the way to certitude (*yaqin*)". Those who taste, know. Tasting, direct experience of truth, goes beyond what he called the "conventional learning of the age," formal religious knowledge without the 'fla-

voir' imparted through inner perception. The connection between wisdom and direct experience is of course enshrined in the English word 'sapience', wisdom, from Latin *sapere*, 'to taste' and by extension, 'to discriminate', 'to know'.

This realisation was the fruit of Ghazali's own restless and intense spiritual journey and the conscious development and self-questioning it entailed at every stage. The Qur'an guides us to the starting point of that journey: in surah Al Mu'minun, the Prophet Noah urges his people to worship God alone, and to become conscious of Him; but the 'great ones' among his people label him as a madman, for they have never heard anything like Noah's message from their "forebears of old." (23:23-25) Muhammad Asad notes that this "implies a condemnation of all blind *taqlid*, unthinking acceptance of religious doctrines or assertions not unequivocally supported by divine revelation, the explicit teachings of a prophet, or the evidence of unprejudiced reason."

Ghazali himself tells us of the moment when this *taqlid*, the protective ignorance instilled in him through conditioned thinking, unquestioning acceptance of authority and blind credulity "shattered like glass." Thereafter, his own devel-

opment followed a path of unceasing struggle towards ever-expanding awareness, and ultimately a higher form of cognition not only far beyond the shackles of *taqlid*, but also beyond the limitations of knowledge derived from study, scholasticism, and intellectualism alone. He described this knowledge as "something as specific as if one had actually touched an object." In this sense, what it unveils actually transcends even the "evidence of unprejudiced reason," for it is centred in the knowing and seeing Heart, the seat of insight and spiritual intelligence. Rumi

calls this the "Intellect of intellect" or the "kernel," in contrast to the intellect, which is "only the husk."

And I have learned too from this great exemplar a most important lesson: higher perception and awareness cannot be divorced from ethics and excellence of character, for Ghazali himself resolutely struggled with his "commanding self" to overcome egoism (notably his desire for applause and approbation), curb his passions, clear his soul, and complete his character. In every sense, we must strive to become what we know. ●

# "Higher perception and awareness cannot be divorced from ethics and excellence of character."

## EXCLUSIVE COMPETITION

emel will be celebrating 900 years of Ghazali throughout 2011. For your chance to win\* one of five copies of Abdul Latif Salazar's *'The Alchemist of Happiness'*, answer the following question:

What year did Ghazali write *'The Incoherence of the Philosophers'*?

Send in your answers by email to [info@emel.com](mailto:info@emel.com), with 'Ghazali competition' in the subject line.

\*UK Subscribers only. Closing date, 10th January 2011

