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Al-Ghazālī and the Progress of Islamic Thought

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AL-GHAZĀLĪ WAS PROBABLY THE single greatest theological mind in Islam. His works are known and studied by Muslim thinkers of all traditions, and his name is familiar to nearly all Muslims, whether they know his teachings or not. While this is generally not the case outside Islam, his writings were known to Thomas Aquinas, with whom he is often compared because of the breadth of his contribution to his religion, and he is the one Muslim mentioned in Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*,¹ while translations of his works not infrequently appear on booksellers' shelves.

Until 1973 I was among those who had never heard about al-Ghazālī. I had lived for two years among Muslims in Sudan, and been mildly intrigued by their faith. So, when I went up to Cambridge to study theology and saw options on Islam, I decided to take them. The lecture course on theological thinking in the early Islamic centuries attracted me most. It covered the first attempts to understand the Qurʾān in light of the rational thinking that was flowing into the Islamic world through translations from Greek in the late eighth and ninth centuries, and after them al-Ghazālī. John Bowker spoke about this figure with a hint of lyricism, and particularly about his

1. Russell, *History*, 444 (cited in Bowker, *Religious Imagination*, 196).

Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn (“The revival of the sciences of religion”), his masterly *summa* on the branches of religious belief and observance in Islam, and on the inextricable relationship between outer acceptance and inner conviction that there must be between them for faith to be lively. In one lecture, he remarked without looking up from his notes, that this treasure of theology and spirituality was only accessible in Arabic (parts are now available in translation, and they are the ones that appear on booksellers’ shelves); and then he spoke words to the effect that, for anyone who was serious, this should not cause a problem. That remark fired me to find out more. There followed doctoral research at Lancaster, where John Bowker had moved as professor; and then a decade later I began at Birmingham, where I now teach the thought of the early theologians of Islam. I owe John Bowker an immense debt, and I gratefully acknowledge his continuing influences on my approaches to Islam.

Any study of the crucial early centuries of Islam must give prominence to Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī. Born in 1058, he lived more than four hundred years after the Prophet Muḥammad, a period of time in which the community first founded in Mecca and Medina had expanded Islamic rule over a vast empire that stretched from Spain to Afghanistan. Over this period as well, the implications of the Qur’ān, the revelation he claimed was sent to him directly from God, had been unfolded into elaborate systems of legal and theological thought. It had not been a simple history, by any means. The Islamic Empire, which in its first two centuries had remained more or less unified, had increasingly divided into semiautonomous regional powers, and the position of the caliph in Baghdad had declined from executive ruler to powerless figurehead under the control of warlords and palace officials. While the caliph was widely acknowledged as a symbol of unity by al-Ghazālī’s time, he was liable to lose his throne and his life if he did not follow the ruling of those around him.

In a similar way, the teachings of the Qur’ān had taken minds in many different directions, raising disagreement and dissension. Some Muslims maintained that the immediate meaning of the text must be adhered to above all else: speculation on difficult passages was to be resisted, and problems caused by such incidental difficulties as the anthropomorphic depictions of God that were found in it should be accepted as indications of a mode of existence into which human minds were not to inquire.

Such groups of conservative thinkers often looked back to the ninth century scholar Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), whose resistance to more radical developments had earned him a whipping and imprisonment. The main group opposing him, who did more than any other to cause dissension, though not always intentionally, were known as the Mu’tazila, “seceders”

because their supposed founder had withdrawn from a circle of scholars when he found he disagreed with them. They regarded themselves as defenders of the supreme transcendence of God and of the justice of his actions, and they championed the use of reason in interpreting the Qurʾān and drawing out the possibilities implicit in its teachings. Thus, with regard to the anthropomorphisms, such as God's hand being outstretched or his being seated on his throne, they insisted that these could not be taken literally because they risked similarity between God and human beings and must therefore be interpreted metaphorically: God's "hand" was his grace, and his "being seated" on his throne denoted his supreme power. More than this, they inferred from their definition of the absolute oneness of God that the Qurʾān could not be eternal because it would then be a second eternal entity alongside God. This made the Scripture less of an absolute authority for theological minds to contend with or for rulers to have to obey. In fact, the caliph of the day made it official policy that anyone seeking public office must affirm the createdness of the Qurʾān. It was Ibn Ḥanbal's disagreement with this principle that earned him his punishments.

The Mu'tazila's systematic application of rational categories of thinking to the Qurʾān incurred the accusation that such interpreters were effectively subordinating God's revelation to human reason. Indeed, their approach did lead in the direction of independent speculation into the nature of the world, free from the constraints of revealed truth. In this they resembled the philosophers, who form what may be regarded as a third stream in early Islamic religious thought. These scholars took the thinking of the ancient world, in the developed and often harmonized forms in which they found it, as their starting point; and from the ninth century onwards leading exponents established elaborate systems involving cosmological schemes and hierarchies of transcendent beings in which pure reason was dominant and the true vocation of the human was to align the innate rational faculty with the Intellects that governed the movements of the heavenly spheres, and so to aspire to connect with the ultimate Source from which all being emanated. True followers of truth would succeed in this endeavour by honing their rational faculties so that these could be activated all the more readily by the heavenly Intellects.

In this system there was no need for knowledge of a revealed kind, and so for Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), the greatest of the Islamic philosophers in the era before al-Ghazālī, the figure of the prophet, while he was a unique individual in that "he hears the speech of God, exalted be he, and sees his angels that have been transferred for him into a form he sees,"² was directed

2. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics*, 359.

towards providing teachings of an essentially legislative kind: “He must lay down laws about men’s affairs by the permission of God, exalted be he, by his command, inspiration, and ‘the descent of the Holy Spirit’ on him.”³ It was not the function of a prophet to divulge anything about God apart from the fact of his existence, because this is something beyond the ability of ordinary people, and it could lead them into confusion and disputes: “[The people’s] complaints and doubts will multiply, making it difficult for a human to control them. For it is not for everyone that [the acquisition] of divine wisdom is facilitated.”⁴

This kind of speculative activity established a divide between revelation and rational reflection, relegating the Qur’an and other revealed books to the sphere of morals and ethics, and to the use of the common people, for whom the stories and examples in them would provide the most accessible form of truth, while the pursuit of pure rational discernment would remain the province of the few who possessed the necessary intellectual gifts.

By the eleventh century, these streams of thought in Islam were at such odds that they appeared virtually to offer distinct ways of comprehending the nature of the world and the activity of God within it. More than anything, the position of the Qur’an and its teachings were threatened by the apparent supremacy of independent human reason, which the philosophers claimed could be informed and directed by the transcendent Intellects, and ultimately God himself, without need for revealed teachings. The situation was complicated further by yet another strand within Islam, the mystics, who sought personal experience of transcendent reality through elaborate forms of mental and physical preparation, and the ultimate goal of passing into annihilation in complete communion with the One. This was essentially a world-denying pursuit that attached little importance to the external religious observances that were laid down in the religious law that was derived from the Qur’an.

This was in effect the religious world of Islam into which al-Ghazālī was born in 1058. He remained in his native Tūs (in present-day northern Iran) as a student until his early twenties, when he went to Nishāpūr to learn from one of the leading scholars of the time. He excelled, and when his teacher died in 1085, al-Ghazālī took his place. But his brilliance was mentioned more widely, and in 1091 he was called to Baghdad and installed as professor in the university that the ruling vizier had newly established. Here he wrote some of his greatest works, though he also experienced a growing spiritual crisis. He had set himself to discover what could be known with

3. *Ibid.*, 365.

4. *Ibid.*, 366.

absolute certainty, and his inability to reach an end in his search prompted him suddenly to abandon his position when one day he found he could not deliver his lecture: “God put a lock on my tongue so that I was impeded from public teaching. I struggled with myself to teach for a single day . . . but my tongue would not utter a single word.”⁵

He gave up his post and took to a life of wandering: to Damascus, Mecca, and maybe further afield. After ten years he returned to Nishāpūr and then back to Ṭūs, where he died in 1111. In these latter years, he wrote the *lhyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, in which he combined the insights he had attained in his years of wandering together with the solid teachings of the Qur’ān to produce the classic that is still read widely by Muslims. These and other details are known thanks to a schematised autobiography that he wrote towards the end of his life, *Al-munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*Deliverance from Error*), in which he explains that the solution to his existential and intellectual quandaries was to cease searching for solutions that could be reached intellectually, but to seek solutions by actually “tasting” what God is like through mystical experience. In this abandonment of the purely mental struggle of what can be grasped by the mind for the fuller experience of truth that can be absorbed by the whole person lies the crux of al-Ghazālī’s life, and in many important respects the crux of Islam. Too far in one direction and the faith tips over into an entirely intellectual quest for propositional truth; too far in another and it becomes an obscurantist defense of scripture as a symbol rather than a comprehensible and dynamic source of guidance for real life; and too far in another and it descends into a sequence of experiences of the Other that have little relation to any doctrinal framework that can be built on the Qur’ān. Al-Ghazālī chose to follow the way of the mystics, subject to the constraints of the framework of communal observances and duties set by the Qur’ān. It is this that he presents in the *lhyā’*, and in doing this he lays aside, or appears to, the possibility of intellectual speculative endeavour. However, while he seeks to give the faith a new “life” that is informed and fed by scriptural teaching, he risks diverting it from intellectual discovery and the exploration of new possibilities of reality and the belief that is fashioned in light of them. He himself could never be accused of turning away from the excitement of new discoveries, though the alternative he favours could be interpreted as deterring Muslims from thinking outside the boundaries established by the traditional interpretations of the Qur’ān, and warning them to keep on the more obvious pathways of knowledge. The risk inherent in what he did and the possibilities that were raised in it are illustrated

5. Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance*, 79. See Bowker, *Religious Imagination*, 193.

vividly in his intellectual encounter with philosophy, and the philosophers' spirited response.

In the period when al-Ghazālī was still professor in Baghdad, he was engaged in what he called the search for “the certain,” making a deep study of the works of Islamic philosophers—especially the leading exponents, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037). The outcome was a work on the discipline of philosophy in Islam: *Maqāsid al-falāsifa* (*The Intentions of the Philosophers*), followed by a searching critique of their discipline, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, which, alongside the *lḥyā' ‘ulūm al-dīn*, is his most influential work. Its title is often translated as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, though it can equally mean their collapse or breakdown. With it, al-Ghazālī was indicating from the outset the seriousness of his purpose, which was to demonstrate the groundlessness and error of key elements in the philosophers' enterprise.

The *Tahāfut* is frequently praised for the clarity of its approach. Al-Ghazālī divides it into twenty chapters, presenting in each what he regards as a key philosophical teaching and then refuting it. Of these twenty, three have usually been regarded as fundamental, because they contradict (or appear to contradict) traditional Islamic teachings based on the Qurʾān, and threaten to lead anyone who accepts them into error.⁶ They thus expose the philosophers who promote them to the accusation of misguiding fellow Muslims. But al-Ghazālī is careful in his procedure, for rather than attempting to overcome his opponents with the bare authority of scripture or arguments based in tradition, which they could easily deny or reply to with verses favorable to their position, he counters their teachings by analysing them according to the philosophers' own methods and demonstrating their unsoundness and shakiness in their own terms. He upholds traditional Islam by showing that alternatives are unviable.

The three major teachings of the philosophers attacked by al-Ghazālī are the eternity of the world, God's knowledge of particulars, and survival after death. Concerning the first, for the philosophers the world must be eternal because God would otherwise have had to create it at a particular moment, requiring him to undergo a change from not creating to creating. This would subject him to a cause that was external to his being, which is impossible for God. The problem for traditional Islamic thinking is that this teaching appears to contradict the Qurʾān and it also posits the existence of eternal entities in addition to God. Al-Ghazālī replies that the philosophers cannot provide any cogent proof for their proposition, and there is therefore no reason to accept what they say rather than an alternative, such as that

6. Al-Ghazālī himself later summarised these very briefly in *Deliverance*, 66.

God may have eternally willed the existence of the world but only brought it into actual existence at a particular stage.

Concerning the second teaching, the philosophers argue that knowledge changes the knower, which for God is impossible. Since he is pure intellect, his knowledge is of universal principles not of individual phenomena, and his awareness of particular events (Ibn Sīnā gives the example of a solar eclipse) is through the concatenation of causes that bring them about rather than through the actual changing events themselves. Al-Ghazālī rejects this as pure guesswork, arguing that the philosophers have merely set up theoretical principles and forced God to conform. There is no reason to follow what they say.

Concerning the third teaching, for the philosophers the human body, as the material shell of the soul, disintegrates at death, and what survives is the soul with the intellect of the person. This has been influenced and activated by the heavenly Intellects, and it therefore continues eternally in conjunction with them. Al-Ghazālī rejects this as even more of a supposition than the previous one. He argues that there is no reason to postulate the existence of heavenly Intellects, and no evidence to support these teachings about this form of survival after death. Therefore, there is no more cogent reason to accept what the philosophers say than to believe what the Qurʾān teaches.

On the surface, al-Ghazālī's contention against the philosophers is that they have no sound basis for the suppositions they present as logically necessary facts. Their only authorities are their Greek predecessors, who have no greater stature than any other thinker; and their theories may only be accepted after thorough testing. But beneath this framework of argument, al-Ghazālī is seeking to discover what cannot be denied by reason, and his conclusion is that while the enterprise of philosophy may possibly be of use, or at least cause no harm, the conclusions to which the philosophers have come are both unfounded and potentially injurious. Thus, while philosophy as such may add to the sum of human knowledge in some respects, it is nevertheless dangerous because it takes the unsuspecting into realms where they could find themselves denying religious teachings.

This narrow distinction between what philosophy is and what the philosophers have done was not always appreciated. In fact, al-Ghazālī's attack on philosophy was popularly regarded as putting an end to it as a respectable Islamic activity. But his *Tahāfut* was potentially much more threatening to intellectual inquiry, because it could be taken to assert that, not only was the Qurʾān the main authority in matters of knowledge and understanding, but that any teaching that appeared to contradict its evident message or to venture outside it was wicked. To less subtle minds than al-Ghazālī's, his

arguments strengthened the notion that the Qurʾān is not only the source of knowledge but is also its sum and safeguard, beyond which there was no need to look. This both threatened independent inquiry and made the Qurʾān the necessary centre of what legitimate inquiry could be.

The dangers arising from al-Ghazālī's cautionary demolition of philosophy in Islam did not escape a mind that was at least the equal of his own, and in some respects superior. This belonged to Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad ibn Rushd, a polymath whose single greatest achievement was to distinguish the true thought of Aristotle from the accretions of Neoplatonism with which it had become encrusted over the centuries. He was born in Spain in 1126, not long after al-Ghazālī died at the other end of the Islamic world, and he was soon recognized for his exceptional abilities in law and medicine as well as in philosophy. He came to know al-Ghazālī's criticisms, and he rebutted them with superlative skill in a work whose title indicates his attitude towards them, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, revealing the inconclusiveness of the theologian's refutation of philosophy that many thought had finished it off.

Ibn Rushd's work is as clear in its layout as al-Ghazālī's: he systematically presents the twenty objections of his opponent and carefully shows the misunderstandings in them, as well as some of the shortcomings of the earlier philosophers whom al-Ghazālī has refuted, and he explains how al-Ghazālī has not done justice to the true nature of the philosophical enterprise.

Ibn Rushd's spirited defense of philosophy in his great rejoinder is expressed just as vividly in a rather shorter work, *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayn al-sharī'a wa-l-ḥikma min al-itṭiṣāl* (*The Book of Distinction of Discourse, and the Determination of the Connection between Religious Law and Philosophy*), known as *Faṣl al-maqāl: The Decisive Treatise*.⁷ This dates from the same time as *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*; and it complements it, in that while the much longer work is a detailed reply to al-Ghazālī's objections to the logical coherence of philosophy in Islam, this is a reply to the assumptions in al-Ghazālī's arguments that philosophy is un-Islamic in nature. Ibn Rushd contends that this judgement is based on a misperception of what philosophy is, and equally upon a narrow understanding of Islam. His defense is worth examining in detail because it seeks to preserve within the Qurʾānic framework a dimension of exploration that al-Ghazālī's arguments tend to exclude. Ibn Rushd has al-Ghazālī very much in mind as he writes, though his reply takes the debate onto a different level from mere reply to

7. Averroes, *On the Harmony*. See Leaman, *Averroes and His Philosophy*, 144–60.

the various points made by his opponent by drawing attention to the wider implications of the differences between the two positions.

Ibn Rushd begins by establishing that the pursuit of philosophy is not only permitted by the Qurʾān, but is actually required by it. At the outset he argues that if philosophy “is nothing more than study of existing beings and reflection on them as indications of the Artisan . . . and if the [religious] Law has encouraged and urged reflection on beings, then it is clear that what this name [viz. philosophy] signifies is either obligatory or recommended by the Law.”⁸ He supports this by quoting a number of verses that explicitly enjoin this “reflection on beings.” Among them is this: “Have they not studied the kingdom of the heavens and earth, and whatever things God has created?” (Q 7:185). Here he concisely demonstrates that the purpose of philosophy, just like theology, is to show that the world is evidence for the existence and character of its Maker. None of the Muʿtazila or any other theologian could disagree.

He goes on to argue that, in order for philosophers to perform this task, they must be trained in the proper methods, and also that they would be remiss to neglect what predecessors had discovered. In this way, he justifies the use of specialized methods and techniques—and also study of Aristotle and other masters from before the era of Islam:

It is evident that the study of the books of the ancients is obligatory by Law, since their aim and purpose in their books is just the purpose to which the Law has urged us, and that whoever forbids the study of them to anyone who is fit to study them . . . is blocking people from the door by which the Law summons them to the knowledge of God.⁹

Here he is suggesting that suitably qualified individuals should legitimately be allowed to pursue unfettered exploration into natural phenomena, because this will bring them to a knowledge of God that is analogous to what can be found through the study of the Qurʾān. Furthermore, it would be wrong to prevent this, both because the Qurʾān itself recommends it and because God is behind phenomena in the world as their “Artisan” and is discernible through them, just as he is discernible through the study of the Qurʾān. The importance of this point becomes evident as the argument progresses.

In the second major stage of his argument in *Faṣl al-maqāl*, Ibn Rushd develops the implications of his initial point more fully. He begins with the principle, “Truth does not oppose truth but accords with it and bears

8. Averroes, *On the Harmony*, 44.

9. *Ibid.*, 48.

witness to it.”¹⁰ Thus, he continues, if there appears to be a conflict between knowledge that is reached by philosophical investigation and the Qurʾān, the solution will be to interpret the Qurʾān allegorically:

Whenever a statement in Scripture conflicts in its apparent meaning with a conclusion of demonstration, if Scripture is considered carefully, and the rest of its contents searched page by page, there will invariably be found among the expressions of Scripture something which in its apparent meaning bears witness to that allegorical interpretation or comes close to bearing witness.¹¹

This procedure may seem strange or arbitrary because it appears to subordinate the meaning of the Qurʾān to a hermeneutic that is external to it and also determined by human reason. One might expect that it should be the other way round, as al-Ghazālī suggests throughout the *Tahāfut*, because human reason is fallible while the Qurʾān is not. But Ibn Rushd has a good explanation for laying down this procedure, arising from what he sees as the purpose and aim of the Qurʾān. He argues that it was revealed for all people—hence, for those with diverse natural capacities and differing innate dispositions, and also in order to attract those with the ability to interpret its different teachings in ways that reconcile its apparent differences. His point is that the Qurʾān, with some verses that are clear in meaning and others that are less obvious, as it itself declares (Q 3:7), purposely draws people into exploring the different levels of its meanings according to the degree that their different abilities allow them. He backs up what he says by referring to the wide variety of disagreements over doctrine that have been witnessed in Islam since its inception and the practical impossibility of reaching complete unanimity, implying that differences have been willed by God, and that these are to be encouraged because different minds at different times and places must inevitably discern the truth of Islam in different ways.

Ibn Rushd illustrates what he means by briefly discussing the three accusations that al-Ghazālī had levelled against philosophers in *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, thereby taking the argument right back to its origin. Al-Ghazālī appeared to show once and for all that philosophers tended towards presenting guesses as certainties and contradicting religious truths. But Ibn Rushd challenges the apparent finality of what his opponent had claimed by making the point that, because there have always been among Muslims diverse interpretations of the Qurʾān, and that the Qurʾān itself calls for

10. *Ibid.*, 50.

11. *Ibid.*, 51.

different ways of interpreting it, no one can condemn another who bases his views on a legitimate interpretation of the text.

Of course, this begs the question of what a legitimate interpretation is, and Ibn Rushd discusses this crucial matter. But before he does, he rather pointedly takes issue with al-Ghazālī's three main accusations.¹² On the first, the question of God's knowledge of particulars, he argues that the philosophers contend that God's knowledge is not like that of humans: "Our knowledge of [particulars] is an effect of the object known, originated when it comes into existence and changing when it changes; whereas glorious God's knowledge of existence is the opposite of this; it is the cause of the object known, which is existent being."¹³ He not only corrects al-Ghazālī's misunderstanding, but also implies that the theologian has reduced God's knowledge to the same restricted mode as human knowledge.

On the second accusation, the eternity of the world, Ibn Rushd postulates a third logical form of being between what is created from something else in time by another being, and what is uncreated and "not preceded by time." This third form is "that which is not made from anything and not preceded by time, but which is brought into existence by something. This is the world as a whole."¹⁴ This being so, the world resembles both what is generated (the theologians' position), and what is not (the philosophers' position), with the consequence that the opposing positions are not as different as they may appear, so that al-Ghazālī's accusation is not appropriate.

Ibn Rushd underlines his point that al-Ghazālī is rash in condemning the philosophers' argument about the preeternity of the world by quoting verses of the Qur'ān that suggest there were entities existent before God created. The verse "It is he who created the heaven and the earth in six days, and his throne was on the water" (Q 11:7), points to the throne and the water as being in existence before the world was created, and also to time (the six days) preceding the created heavens and earth. This bold move shows how confident Ibn Rushd is about the correctness of his position.

He pursues this further by arguing that some verses in the Qur'ān must be taken literally, while others must be taken figuratively by those who are qualified to do so, though not by those who do not have the right qualifications. The implication of what he contends is that the derivation of meaning from scripture is a much more complicated matter than simply reading the text as it stands, and further that different people with their various talents and acquired skills can legitimately find different meanings in the text. The

12. He replies to these at much greater length in *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*.

13. Averroes, *On the Harmony*, 54.

14. *Ibid.*, 55–56.

Qurʾān cannot be regarded as a map with its teachings fully configured to anticipate all requirements and eventualities, but it is more an array of basic possibilities that provides guidelines for aspirant explorers who must use it inductively (though appropriately) to find the meaning that is best suited to their purposes. It provides a series of congruent explanations and not a readily accessible single interpretation of reality that precludes exploration outside the boundaries it has apparently set.

On the third of al-Ghazālī's condemnations of the philosophers, that their teachings about the afterlife run counter to the Qurʾān, Ibn Rushd takes the same position as on the other two accusations: that there is nothing so unequivocal about this in the Qurʾān that an accusation of unbelief about any particular position would be justified. But this only holds for interpretations of verses that are agreed among qualified philosophers. The general population will not have the knowledge to understand the allegorical interpretations of scripture that lead to agreement with the insights of philosophy on this matter; so, these should be kept away from the uninitiated, whom it would be wrong to expose to matters too recondite for them to appreciate, and that might lead them into unbelief.¹⁵

It has become clear by this point at the end of the second stage of *Faṣl al-maqāl* that Ibn Rushd is far from being cowed by al-Ghazālī's accusations against philosophy, but that he places the whole issue in a different context from his opponent. For the earlier theologian, the Qurʾān sets the framework within which intellectual discourse is to be set, but for the Andalusī philosopher it is the starting point and informing inspiration for exploration, though with the condition that this should be an activity open only to the appropriately qualified. For ordinary people who could easily get lost in error, it should not be permitted.

Clearly, the nature of the Qurʾān and the correct way of interpreting it are central to Ibn Rushd's disagreement with al-Ghazālī. He focuses on these in the third and last stage of this short essay, and he begins by explaining that the primary purpose of the Qurʾān "is simply to teach true knowledge and right practice." These are the essentials of belief: as he says, knowledge is knowledge of God, and of happiness and misery in the life to come, while right practice "consists in performing the acts which bring happiness and avoiding the acts which bring misery."¹⁶ (In a short digression that may be intended as a piece of mild sarcasm, Ibn Rushd explains al-Ghazālī's *lḥyāʾ ulūm al-dīn* as a book that is centred on the two forms of right practice, which are acts of the body and acts of the soul, because people had aban-

15. Ibid., 60–61.

16. Ibid., 63.

done the latter. In this way, he implies that the theologian was mainly concerned with the practical implementation of the literal injunctions of the sacred law rather than probing into the deeper consequences of its inner ramifications. This may be important for the masses, but hardly comparable with probing into the profound questions raised by the nature of reality, which was the province of philosophy.) However, the Qurʾān admits different kinds of interpretation, and when it comes to allegory, only certain people should be allowed to practise this: “the duty of the masses is to take [the sacred texts] in their apparent meaning . . . since their natural capacity does not allow for more than that.”¹⁷

Ibn Rushd has already made the point that the allegorical meaning of scripture should be shielded from the general population of Muslims. Here he explains that the reason is that this form of allegorical interpretation comprises “rejection of the apparent meaning and affirmation of the allegorical one,”¹⁸ which, in the mind of someone who cannot go beyond the immediate meaning, can lead to unbelief as they relinquish the one meaning without being able to apprehend the other. The Qurʾān actually supports this: “And they will ask you about the Spirit. Say: ‘The Spirit is by the command of my Lord; you have been given only a little knowledge’” (Q 17:85). He develops his point further in the remainder of the work by showing how different sects within Islam have caused divisions through their efforts to ally ordinary people to their allegorical interpretations, and by insisting that while the meaning of the text that is available to ordinary people is sufficient for their needs, the deeper meaning is equally authentic and must also be investigated.

A remark Ibn Rushd makes in this third stage of his argument is revealing with regard to the personal approach to the Qurʾān that he himself favours. He says, “Since the primary purpose of scripture is to take care of the majority (without neglecting the elite), the prevailing methods of expression in religion are the common methods by which the majority comes to form concepts and judgements.”¹⁹ It is the aside that in the translation appears within brackets that is significant here because it suggests that, while the mass of ordinary people (including the theologians, who content themselves with drawing inferences from the immediate meaning of the text) should remain loyal to exegesis of the most obvious teachings in the Qurʾān, there are others who can be challenged and inspired by its sometimes indirect references. Ibn Rushd has alluded to this hidden layer of significance

17. *Ibid.*, 65.

18. *Ibid.*, 66.

19. *Ibid.*, 64.

within the text throughout *Faṣl al-maqāl*; and here he implies that it stands as the key to a form of inquiry that goes beyond the obvious interpretation to a form of interrogation that many of the uninitiated would find uncomfortable and un-Islamic.

This is the point over which Ibn Rushd fundamentally disagrees with al-Ghazālī. The theologian had effectively sought to put an end to philosophical inquiry because it was demonstrably un-Qurʾānic and potentially un-Islamic. In his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* he had strongly suggested that those with a philosophical bent were led away from Islam by the teachings of the ancient Greek masters, and they risked leading fellow Muslims astray with them. The consequence, whether he intended it or not, was that learning that could not be shown directly to reflect the Qurʾān was dangerous, and the implication that some might draw from his objections was that the Qurʾān alone was sufficient for knowledge of God and the forms of belief and conduct that could lead to felicity.

When inadequately understood, this attitude that clearly elevates revelation above human reason can threaten to rule out the exercise of reason completely. Curiously, it may seem, al-Ghazālī did not negate human spontaneity entirely but condoned it if it was channelled not through rational inquiry but through personal immersion in experiential faith. In *Al-munqidh min al-dalāl* he praises the way of the mystics in lavish terms: “I know with certainty that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way of God Most High; their mode of life is the best of all.”²⁰ For him this is orthodox because it remains within the obvious confines set by the Qurʾān and the model of prophethood, though not every Muslim would agree.

As he shows in this short sequence of arguments, Ibn Rushd advocates a way that is different from the way of the Ṣūfī though analogous to it. Just as the mystical adept must learn from the master, so the philosophical initiate must learn from his predecessors; the mystic acquires techniques that equip him to proceed along the way of experience; and the philosopher learns new methods that allow him to discern new meanings in the world. The Qurʾān is the mystic’s warrant for his ecstatic progression towards God; and, as Ibn Rushd shows clearly, here it is also the basis and guide for the philosopher’s abstract reflections about the One. Moreover, just as philosophers can commit religious excesses in their speculations, so mystics can exceed the bounds of religious propriety. Ibn Rushd’s contention is that in the right hands philosophy and rational exploration is as Islamic and as true to the Qurʾān as any other intellectual discipline in Islam; and it can actually glorify God more than others.

20. Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 81.

However, whereas al-Ghazālī found an audience that greeted his prescriptions with enthusiasm, Ibn Rushd was hardly heeded. *Faṣl al-maqāl* may, in fact, have contributed to his downfall; and after his death it was hardly read.²¹ But while, in its immediate terms, his response to al-Ghazālī and other detractors of philosophy was part of a distinctively medieval debate, its arguments contain a more wide-ranging significance. He provides justification in terms of the Qurʾān itself for a procedure of rational exploration that goes beyond the bounds set by orthodox Islam and that counters the narrowminded prohibition on exploration that appears to exceed these bounds. He affirms that the exercise of human reason is a gift from God, and he celebrates the ability of human ingenuity to discern unforeseen possibilities within the text of scripture. In essence, he shows how the Qurʾān anticipates and authenticates the whole range of knowledge that the human mind can attain, and thereby provides a way of relating the teachings that lie within its text to the ideas and intellectual needs of his own times, with neither the one being despised as irrelevant nor the other dismissed as ungodly. In many Muslim communities this need is as pressing today as it was when Ibn Rushd wrote. His wisdom is worth a fresh hearing.

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21. See Averroes, *On the Harmony*, 40–41 (editor's introduction).