

THE MOSLEM IDEA OF 'ILM (KNOWLEDGE)

(Illustrated by Al Ghazali's Experience)

TRADITION reflects the importance of this subject by the number of references to it. A peculiarity about them is that many are connected with the name of Ali bin Abu Talib just as traditions on the subject of asceticism collect around the name of Jesus. (And those of great exaggeration about the name of Abu Huraira.) There is not a treatise on knowledge that does not have a section on its excellency. What the tone of this praise is, appears from the following extract from Ghazali. "God, Exalted, said 'God bears witness that there is no god but He, and the angels and the possessed of knowledge, standing up for justice' (3:16). Behold how the Exalted begins with Himself and then mentions the angels and lastly the people of knowledge. What an honor and excellence and glory and superiority! And God said 'God will raise up all you who believe, as well as those who are given knowledge' (58:12). Ibn Abbas, may God be pleased with him, said 'The learned are raised above believers by 700 grades and between each two grades there is a distance of 500 years.' * * * Said he upon whom be the prayers and peace of God, 'The learned are the heirs of the prophets' and it is well known that there is no rank above that of the prophets and no honor above the honor of inheriting that rank. * * * And he said 'The learned believer is better than a worshipper of seventy years' standing.' * * * It was also said 'O apostle of God, what works are the best? He said, The knowledge of God Exalted' (Ihya, p. 5). And the messenger of God said 'The seeking of knowledge is a duty' and 'Seek knowledge though it be in China' (!)" (Ihya, Vol. I, p. 12).

All are agreed that knowledge is an essential duty (*faradh 'ain*) but when the question is asked what this knowledge is, there are, as Ghazali says, more than twenty different answers. The Scholastics say that their science furnishes the knowledge that is necessary, for by it is known the Unity and Being of God and His attributes. The lawyers urge the claims of theirs, because by it is known the religious duties and the lawful and the unlawful. The Commentators and Traditionalists say it is the knowledge of the Koran and Tradition for by these all knowledge is determined and finally the Sufis prefer their claims. Now what all these parties are speaking of has nothing to do with a mere acquaintance with the doctrines and practices of religion which enables one to confess and perform what is necessary. It is, of course, incumbent on the beginner to learn what he must confess to do, and Moslems, especially, the learned, must give the needful instruction in order that the beginner may share fully in Islam. But knowledge of this kind, received by "imitation and hearing" (*taklid wa sama'*) has no virtue in it, and has no reward attached to it. One who remains in this condition is called a *mukallid*, imitator. *Taklid* is defined as "an expression for the following of one by another in a word or a deed, accepting its truth without examination or thought as to proof, as if this follower made the word or deed of the other a chain (*kilada*) about his neck" (Freytag Lex. s. v.). Such a one is not a knower whose praise is in all the books, in fact the question is very much discussed whether he is a Moslem at all. "Then they (the Lawyers and the Scholastics) differ among themselves on two points. One is as to the nature of the knowledge which is the basis of faith. Some say it is a well-formed body of belief whether it be by imitation or an apprehension based on proof. The more common opinion is that of those who judge one who accepts his faith by imitation to be a Moslem. Opposed to these are those who hold that knowledge is only such when founded on the reasoning of deductive argument. The second point is whether knowledge (*'ilm*), recognized

in the definition of faith, is a knowing of what some of the Scholastics said, viz., a knowing of God and His attributes in a full and complete manner, or whether, according to the general belief—come into being after men differed greatly and had called each other infidels for differing—it is knowing all that is acknowledged as being a necessary part of the religion of Mohammed. In this acceptation of the term knowing, it is not a part of the definition of faith whether one believes that God is 'knowing' by knowledge or by Himself, or whether he is seen or not seen." (Nisaburi, Vol. p. 139.)

Those of ordinary attainments, then, and such are the great mass, just barely have standing in the community and what they have is by the grace of the learned. One might say that what is taught about the ranking of men in the next world (and this is a large part of eschatology) centres around this pre-eminence of the possessors of knowledge. For, beginning at the trial in the grave, or rather with the soul's first excursion to the several regions between death and burial, to the last scene, when all have their places assigned, the learned take precedence. They are at the head of those entering the Garden, next to the prophets—and the poor *mukallid* comes a great way after them. These may enter without suffering, if they have known all the requirements of doctrine and practice and have faithfully observed them. Practically, this is a supposition contrary to fact, when we listen to what the traditionalists, and then the lawyers and then the theologians have to say. Ghazali's attitude to the common believer is different from that of these masters of learning. He takes up their defence and he does it in a way that seems to give them full rights within the community. As his teaching here is the accepted belief of a large part of the Moslem world and especially since it is the basis of the ethico-religious instruction of the Sufis, we must dwell on it more fully. Ghazali divides the knowledge that concerns the hereafter into two kinds, knowledge of performance (*'ilm al mu'āmalah*) and knowledge of discovery (*'ilm al mukashafah*), or, practical knowledge and unveiling knowl-

edge. The distinction is fundamental in the Ghazalian system and we will try to make it clear. His practical knowledge covers all that is necessary to know for confession and performance. It is not practical as distinguished from doctrinal, for doctrine too must be known, since a man must perform the duties of confession of the articles of belief. But as being practical and not theoretical, it does not include the reasoning of deduction and the co-ordination of proofs. It includes, naturally, the knowledge of the correct performance of the distinctive duties of prayer, fasting, etc., and in addition, the knowledge of the faults and vices, which disfigure character, and how to uproot them, plus the virtues that must be cultivated. In short, this knowledge includes all that is necessary for correct living in thought and word and deed. The other is something quite different. Its name is derived from the great Sufi word *kashf*, meaning uncovering, unveiling, revealing. It is not concerned with the things of this world; its objects are the realities (perhaps better, reality) of the world of spirits, as God, the angels and the Preserved Tablet (in which are the eternal prototypes of all things). As we saw, the soul of man is so made as to be able to come into direct contact with that other world. When it does, it has attained to reality and that is *kashf*. It is the teaching and the hope of the Sufi that by means of ascetic practices and abstraction, he may attain to this unveiling, so that he may know God, though it be but momentarily and once in a lifetime. This knowing is described by Sufis in many ways. It is the secret (*sirr*), the light, inward light, faith, light of faith. It does not come by study and learning, and what its contents are must not be recorded in books. The prophets only spoke of it darkly and figuratively and, as Ghazali says, since the learned are heirs of the prophets, they also may not spread it before the common crowd. These two kinds of knowledge are most intimately connected. The practical is the first and essential means of attaining to the other; this other, when obtained, is the rationale and the proof of the

first. The one is the property and the duty of all, the other comes to him whose soul is so created as to attain to it and to whom God grants the mercy of attaining it. The one who is thus favored, knows by the soul's native power of spiritual insight; the other knows by a process of learning and by means of the regular functions of the mind. This latter does not look for proof, because it needs not if, indeed, it could. The proofs are in the unveilings of the mystic rapture which underwrite and guarantee the soundness of the knowledge of performance. It is a wonderfully conceived system this, which at once supplies certainty, and assurance, and order in the hierarchy of believers. And yet, after all, it is only the old distinction of learned and imitator in another dress. The learned now is the Sufi with his mystical experience from whom the common mass humbly receive the crumbs of knowledge. One does not have to read far in the *Ihya*, to see that Ghazali never got beyond the universal attitude. The constantly recurring phrases are "but for those who have true insight" and "ye cannot bear it now."

Because guidance is what is offered, knowledge is really all that it calls forth. As between it and faith, this latter is only the correct way of knowing. Hence discussions about faith naturally turn into those of knowledge. For the same reason, there exists this distinction of learned and imitator and the assumed superiority of the one over the other. This claim of superiority on the part of the learned looks to us like intellectual snobbery. (There is plenty of that, to be sure.) But the distinction at the basis of that attitude is something that belongs to the very structure of the religion. "This people that know not the law is accursed," sounds harsh to us and suggests over-weaning pride. In Islam it expresses an actual fact, universally recognized. How thoroughly Ghazali apprehended knowledge as the fundamental Moslem virtue, is shown by his method in the *Ihya*. He wrote that book in order to stem the tide of immorality consequent on the skepticism of his time. He called it the "Revival of the

Sciences of Religion" and what he offers for the ills of his time is—*knowledge*. (It is well to remember that all the keywords in Arabic used in connection with this subject, such as knowledge, learning, science, instruction, knowing, etc., are different forms of the radical *álama*, to know.) That which he offered was not the kind that he valued for himself, still it was knowledge and since, on his own showing, it did not or could not convince, he salted it amply with the threat of the Fire. That he succeeded as well as he did, was due, in part, to his own great personality. The other reason for his success was that the course which he followed was so entirely in accord with the teachings and the spirit of the religion. And finally, that he accomplished so much as he did, was due to the fact that, whereas, he recognized the central place of knowledge, he rejected the merely intellectual kinds of the Traditionalists, Lawyers, etc., and made the mystic experience of the Sufi the ground of reality in religion. In its last analysis this experience is also *knowing*, but compared with the lifeless thing of the others, it had in itself at least a measure of vitality in that it recognized the claims of man's emotional nature. Ghazali went through an experience, which has been called conversion, before he reached this position. An examination of that experience may perhaps enable us to understand the entire subject better.

The comparison is sometimes made between him and St. Augustine. We do not think this holds as to the character of their soul experiences, but externally the resemblances are striking. The lives of both marked a turning-point in the history of their respective faiths, the experiences of both are an epitome of the life which their religions produce, and in both cases their personal experiences determined the doctrinal developments of the succeeding centuries. When Ghazali lived (1058-1111) Islam had attained its full growth and the theological sciences were completed. It was now possible for men to examine the whole structure. Whether such examination was the cause of the current skepticism cannot be said. At any rate, the cycle of development

seemed about to end in an unbelief that threatened both religion and morality. Ghazali had been thoroughly educated and he was master of the theological and philosophical learning of his day. A fact as to his early education is to be noted, viz., that he and his brother were brought up by a Sufi to whom the father had entrusted them. At the age of thirty-three he became the head of a theological school at Bagdad where he soon enjoyed the greatest popularity, including the favor of the court. But before very long, doubt laid hold of him and so thorough was his skepticism that his whole theological structure went down like a house of cards. According to his own statement in his Confessions, he lost faith in everything. "Such thoughts as these threatened to shake my reason and I sought to find an escape from them. But how? In order to disentangle the knot of this difficulty, a proof was necessary. Now a proof must be based on primary assumptions, and it was precisely these of which I was in doubt. This unhappy state lasted about two months, during which I was not, it is true, explicitly or by profession, but morally and essentially a thorough-going skeptic." (Claud Field, *Confessions of Al Ghazali*; p. 18.)

There is nothing said here or anywhere else, as to what led him to question the foundations which proved to be so insecure. We may say quite confidently that the starting-point of his struggles was not a conviction of sin. Nothing of such nature is suggested in the Confessions. As he himself states, his skepticism had not led him into either irreligion or immorality. That which threatened to shake his reason was not the torture of a guilty conscience, nor the fear of threatening doom. What he sought after was not the peace of mind that comes from the knowledge of forgiveness of sins, but the security of the mind that rests on primary assumptions of reason. Perhaps what started his doubts, was the increasing immorality of his day which he was unable to stem by means of the learning of the schools. One would say probably it was that, judging by his subsequent efforts to win the people back to religious life.

He himself had belonged to the extreme Scholastics whose claim was that they could prove everything by their method of logic. Ghazali declares himself free from them and from all dependence on knowledge based on reasoning. "God at last deigned to heal me of this mental malady: my mind recovered sanity and equilibrium. The primary assumptions of reason recovered with me all their stringency and force. I owed my deliverance, not to a concatenation of proofs and arguments, but to the light which God caused to penetrate into my heart—the light which illuminates the threshold of all knowledge. To suppose that certitude can be only based upon formal arguments is to limit the boundless mercy of God." (P. 19, op. cit.)

What was the path which he trod, the goal at which he arrived and the outcome of his experience, are indicated in the following extracts. "The researches to which I have devoted myself, the path which I had traversed in studying religious and speculative branches of knowledge, had given me a firm faith in three things—God, Inspiration and the Last Judgment. These three fundamental articles of belief were confirmed in me, not merely by definite arguments, but by a chain of causes, circumstances, and proofs which it is impossible to recount. I saw that one can only hope for salvation by devotion and the conquest of the passions, a procedure which presupposes renouncement and detachment from the world of falsehood, in order to turn towards eternity and meditation on God. I saw that the only condition of success was to sacrifice honor and riches and to sever the ties and attachments of worldly life." (P. 42, op. cit.) After struggling a time against the call of the life of a Sufi, during which time he lost interest in everything and he seemed to be smitten by some secret malady, he finally yielded. "Finally, conscious of my weakness and the prostration of my soul, I took refuge in God as a man at the end of himself and without resources. 'He who hears the wretched when they cry' (K. 27:63) deigned to hear me; He made easy to me the sacrifice of honors, wealth and family. I gave out pub-

licly that I intended to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, while I secretly resolved to go to Syria, not wishing that the Caliph (May God magnify him) or my friends should know my intention of settling in that country. I made all kinds of clever excuses for leaving Bagdad with the fixed intention of not returning thither."

If these statements have enough autobiographical worth to found on them, in part, an exposition of a variety of religious experience, we may proceed with a measure of confidence. We repeat, this experience of Ghazali had nothing to do with a conviction of sin. One troubled by a burdened conscience does not crave for a proof of the reality of the Judgment! But the conviction of its reality may produce the fear of it. His experience began with a complete *skepsis* of all the primary assumptions of religion. In epitome, Islam had, in him, come to its natural impassé. Islam makes knowledge the centre of the religious life, and the knowledge which it offers is impossible of demonstration. Whether Ghazali consciously recognized the fact or not, he came to the ultimate human experience that man by searching cannot find out God. When his mind 'recovered sanity' the results of his re-conviction was the truth of God, inspiration and the last judgment. He does not tell us what the process of recovery was, except, in general terms, that God healed his malady. He is a little more definite when he says that it was "not merely by definite arguments (for such were always needed), but by a chain of causes, circumstances and proofs which it is impossible to record." Now we would like to know just what those "causes, circumstances and proofs" were. Still we need not really be in doubt as to their nature, and that they are comprehended in *kashf*, because in the finished system, the higher knowledge which guarantees the reality of the beliefs in question is his '*ilm muka-shafa*. How much of the *kashf* of the Sufi, in the way of the rhapsody of the *dhikr*, and veridical dreaming, and clairvoyance, was necessary to convince him, we need not inquire after. It is enough to know that it was *kashf*; and being of this nature Ghazali could not

relate the details of it, for the things of "unveiling" may not be spread before the eyes of all.

We have seen that Islam makes knowledge the centre of its religious life, and that the knowledge which it offers cannot satisfy the requirements of reason. Ghazali had tried it all and found that it lacked reality.

And yet knowledge he must have, or sink in the slough of skepticism. And here in the "revealing" of the Sufi it is offered! Not book-learning, or a science of this or that; not just a knowledge about things which themselves are in need of demonstration, but the demonstration itself! In truth, not so much knowledge, as a personal experience of God and of the spirit world! And so Islam is true, because, for him, it has at the centre of it this real knowledge.

If the Confessions are real biography, it was from this point that the struggle in his soul between the call of the world and its pleasures and the demands of Sufi renouncement ensued. It was now that he began to seek deliverance from the vanities of life. Having regained certainty in knowledge of the fundamental beliefs by the help of the mystic "way" naturally the call of that life would become insistent; and because of his childhood influence, that call would become imperative. Now if the significance of his "conversion" be sought merely in his denial of the world and accepting of life of renunciation and asceticism, there would be nothing more in his experience than in that of thousands of others who have followed the same call. The significance of Ghazali for Islam was that he made the mystical experience a new centre for its life and thereby furnished the knowledge which it itself craves but could not supply. What the religious value of that experience is, is not for us to determine. Mysticism is a very wide term and covers many phenomena; Sufism is this mysticism conditioned by Islam.

FREDERICK J. BARNY.

Maskat, Arabia.