

The Dialogical Construction of the Muslim Self: A Reading of the Life and Work of Shaykh Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī

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Abstract

This paper examines the life and work of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1917–1996), an Egyptian reformist scholar, locating his intellectual output within the framework of the broader socio-political context in which he came into being and emphasising both the psychological and social aspects that have impacted upon the formation of his identity. The theoretical framework of this study relies upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogical discourse and approaches identity formation as a process of ‘ideological becoming.’ The paper examines al-Ghazālī’s formative period, outlining his upbringing and thereafter traces his intellectual mentorship in the formal educational environment that subsequently moulded him into a prolific scholar and energetic social activist. Al-Ghazālī’s intellectual bent is then interrogated and light is cast upon his salafi reform agenda. The paper concludes by assessing al-Ghazālī’s impact upon Muslim society, emphasising his influence upon an entire generation of Islamist scholars and activists and argues that he has played an essential role

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in shaping the modern social imaginary; a concept that has been elaborated upon by the philosopher Charles Taylor and upon which this study draws.

Introduction

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (b. 1917) died in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on 9 March 1996. He collapsed at the podium while delivering a lecture on Islam and the West, at a conference deliberating over Samuel Huntington's now infamous 'clash of civilisations' thesis.² His death was mourned throughout the Muslim world and beyond. An obituary in *The New York Times*³ bore strong testament to the far-reaching impact of al-Ghazālī's ideas and activism.

Al-Ghazālī lived an eventful life, regularly suffering censure, blacklisting, imprisonment and exile. He was a person of prodigious energy and intellect, and left behind a written legacy that included over seventy books,⁴ ranging from erudite commentaries on the teachings of Islam and their application in the modern world to spiritual works encouraging personal conviction and practice.

Having held teaching posts in universities in Mecca, Qatar and Algeria, al-Ghazālī was also a devoted public intellectual, preaching in mosques, appearing on radio and television, engaging in open debates and, toward the end of his life, even finding time to write two weekly newspaper columns in separate publications. He inspired an entire

2 Huntington's thesis was originally argued in an article of the same title in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in the summer issue of 1993 and was subsequently expanded upon and published as a book; see Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996).

3 Douglas Jehl, "Mohammed al-Ghazali, 78, An Egyptian Cleric and Scholar," *The New York Times*, 14 March, 1996.

4 Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī states that al-Ghazālī wrote more than sixty books, while Jehl (op. cit.) claims that he wrote over ninety books. However, approximately seventy is the figure provided by al-Ghazālī himself. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' is owed a debt of gratitude for this figure (personal correspondence), which was stated to him by al-Ghazālī himself in an interview. For further details see Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī kamā 'Araftuhu: Riḥlat Niṣf Qarn* (al-Mansūrah: Dār al-Wafā, 1997), 60. For an extensive bibliography of al-Ghazālī's work, see Faṭḥī Malkāwī (ed.), *al-'Aṭā' al-Fikrī li'l Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī* (Amman: al-Ma'had al-'Ālamī li'l-Fikr al-Islāmī, 1996), 228-260.

generation of scholars and activists and when death came knocking, it found him engrossed in the singular pursuit he had dedicated his entire life to: serving the cause of Islam.

While his legacy unquestionably attests to the fact that he was a man of unique genius, al-Ghazālī was also the product of a specific context. He was born into a world in which the vestiges of the Ottoman Empire were just about to be effaced and where a triumphant Europe majestically straddled conquered Arab and Muslim lands with shackles firmly in hand. Although al-Ghazālī's coming into being cannot be separated from his social context, the impact of his immediate environment is nonetheless incapable of accounting fully for the development of his identity. This paper will therefore consider both the psychological and social factors that have contributed to the construction of his moral self.

The Dialogical Construction of the Self

When examining al-Ghazālī's legacy, one is immediately struck by two abiding impressions: not only was his identity strongly rooted in religious conviction, but he was also someone driven by a powerful sense of mission. He was a person, to borrow a phrase from the philosopher Charles Taylor, who existed "inescapably in a space of ethical questions."⁵ Understanding the construction of al-Ghazālī's moral self is therefore essential in order to gain an understanding of his life and work.

Charles Taylor has convincingly argued that the dominance of Cartesian epistemology in the modern period has impeded our understanding of selfhood and identity.⁶ According to Taylor, modern human beings have developed practices of "radical reflexivity" that have resulted in our perspectives being dominated by subjective experience.⁷ This view of the subject has made deep inroads into social science and

5 Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn - Philosophy, Science, Culture*, eds. D. R. Hiley, J. F. Bohman and R. Shusterman. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 305.

6 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self - The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 143-158. For a critical reading of Taylor's own understanding of epistemology, see: Herbert L. Dreyfus, "Taylor's (Anti-) Epistemology," in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 52-83.

7 Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," 304.

has bred various forms of methodological individualism that stand in the way of a richer and more adequate understanding of the human self as it relates to the variety of human culture and knowledge. In a phrase, the modern self has predominantly been viewed as a centre of “monological consciousness.”⁸

As Mark Tappan shows, most of the theoretical and empirical work conducted on the moral self has been conducted from an explicitly “psychological” perspective, which “grants analytic primacy to isolated individual mental functioning, and thus views identity simply as a characteristic of individuals and identity development largely as a function of internal cognitive processes.”⁹ This approach, Tappan hastens to add, fails to appreciate and acknowledge the roles that social, relational, and discursive processes play in the formulation of moral identity. For Taylor, these cognitive processes, or representations as he calls them, cannot be the primary locus of understanding and “they are just islands in the sea of our unformulated practical grasp on the world.”¹⁰ He therefore urges us to recognise that our understanding resides first of all in our practices and that comprehending this necessarily involves attributing an inescapable role to the background,¹¹ the context within which we find ourselves.

Tappan cautions that there is also a risk involved in going too far the other way, or arguing for the view adopted by radical social constructionists; that is, toward an exclusively ‘social’ account of self and identity that denies the existence of any kind of personal agency or authenticity.¹² As such, locating the self exclusively in the social domain is undoubtedly just as deficient as insisting upon its strictly psychological provenance.

This essay will trace the development of al-Ghazālī’s moral self and its impact upon his socio-political milieu and it will argue, along with Taylor and Tappan, that “the moral self is situated neither psychologically nor

8 *Ibid*, 307.

9 Mark B. Tappan, “Authoring a Moral Self: A Dialogical Perspective,” *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 12, 1999, 117.

10 Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” 308.

11 *Ibid*, 309.

12 Tappan, “Authoring a Moral Self,” 118.

socially, but *dialogically* – as a function of the linguistically mediated exchanges between persons and the social world that are the hallmark of lived human experience.”¹³ As Taylor puts it: “the self neither pre-exists all conversation, as in the old monological view; nor does it arise from the introjection of the interlocutor; but it arises within conversation, because this kind of dialogical action by its very nature marks a place for the new locuter who is being inducted into it.”¹⁴ In developing a dialogical perspective of the self, both Taylor and Tappan are deeply indebted to the groundbreaking work of the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁵

As Tappan explains, Bakhtin’s psychology is premised on the assumption that the ‘authorship’ of the narratives one tells about one’s life is always a function of both the self and other: “The stories that self-as-author produces thus do not arise *ex nihilo* from a single, solitary mind, spoken by a single, monotonic voice. Instead such stories emerge from a *dialogic relation* that must be the primary unit of analysis.”¹⁶

Before we are able to cast light upon the life and work of al-Ghazālī by applying a deeper analysis of the dialogic relations that have contributed to the construction - or authoring - of his moral self, we need to turn to Bakhtin and explore with him the process of ideological becoming. For Bakhtin, ideological becoming is in essence the process whereby one selectively assimilates the words, language, and forms of discourse of others with whom one is in dialogue.¹⁷ In his conceptual formulation, language is not taken as a system of abstract grammatical categories; rather, language is conceived as ideologically saturated: “as a world view,

13 *Ibid.*

14 Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” 312.

15 There has been a steady output of works on Bakhtin since the 1980s and some of the most important include: Tzveten Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*. Translated by W. Godzich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990); Graham Pechey, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Word in the World* (London: Routledge, 2007). For a good primer that includes excerpts from Bakhtin’s works, see: Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An introductory reader* (London: Routledge, 1995).

16 Tappan, “Authoring a Moral Self,” 118.

17 *Ibid.*, 123.

even as a concrete opinion, ensuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life.”¹⁸ Therefore, adopting another’s words entails far more than simple regurgitation, and from this perspective:

The tendency to assimilate others’ discourse takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual’s ideological becoming, in the most fundamental sense. Another’s discourse performs here no longer as information, direction, rules, models and so forth – but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behaviour; it performs here as *authoritative discourse*, and an *internally persuasive discourse*.¹⁹

Bakhtin explains the distinction between these two forms of discourse by reflecting on the two basic modes by which another’s words are appropriated and transmitted, namely “reciting by heart” and “retelling in one’s own words.”²⁰ The “recitation by heart” of another’s words necessarily indicates that these words function as authoritative discourse and demand to be recognised as such, because as Bakhtin explains, authority is already fused to it: “It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us, rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance.”²¹ As Tappan explains, authoritative discourse is distanced and cannot be changed, altered or doubted and has unquestioned authority.²² Bakhtin states this as follows:

The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the

18 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Social Heteroglossia,” in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, ed. P. Morris (London: Arnold, 1994), 74.

19 *Ibid*, 78.

20 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist. Translated by C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 341.

21 *Ibid*, 342-3.

22 Tappan, “Authoring a Moral Self,” 121.

fathers [of adults and of teachers, etc.]. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. Its language is a special language. It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain.²³

Bakhtin's second mode of discourse, *internally persuasive discourse*, is far less sublime but no less important. As Tappan explains, when another's words are "retold in one's own words," they become internally persuasive, which is a form of discourse that is much more open, flexible and dynamic than authoritative discourse, but one that is internalised, becoming one's own – or as close to one's own as is ever possible.²⁴ Bakhtin explains:

Internally persuasive discourse – as opposed to one that is externally authoritative – is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with "one's own word." In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values.²⁵

23 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 342.

24 Tappan, "Authoring a Moral Self," 121.

25 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 345-6.

In essence, Bakhtin's notion of ideological becoming – or what Tappan prefers to call identity development – entails gradually coming to authorise and claim authority for one's own voice while remaining in constant dialogue with other voices.²⁶ As Bakhtin explains:

Consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one's own and another's discourse, between one's own and another's thought, is activated rather late in development. When thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those congeries of discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch us.²⁷

In summary, this essay has been arguing thus far that the development of the moral self is driven by the experience of dialogue, in the Bakhtinian sense, and that one's identity is manifest through a process of ideological becoming. This essay will now attempt to examine the life and work of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī in the light of the theoretical considerations outlined above. It seems only logical, therefore, to begin by describing 'the world of alien discourses' into which al-Ghazālī came into being, into which his consciousness was fated to awaken.

The Socio-Political Context at the time of al-Ghazālī's Birth²⁸

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī was born at a time when the Ottoman Empire was breathing its last breath. The decline of the Empire had a tremendous impact on Islam and the Muslim world. For the Arab peoples who lived within its domains, its dismemberment not only marked the end of

26 Tappan, "Authoring a Moral Self," 122.

27 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 348.

28 For a detailed account of the history of the region see William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994). This section draws on Cleveland's study.

an Empire, but also the end of a political, social and religious order that had shaped their patterns of public behaviour for four hundred years.²⁹ Reform-minded intellectuals rose to the double challenge of reconciling their inherited traditions with the challenges of the modern world: they had to engage in an internal dialogue with their own rich past to draw upon the essential elements that had defined them, while simultaneously engaging in an external cross-cultural dialogue to understand and confront the challenges of a new and different reality inspired exclusively by the West.³⁰ Islamism and Arabism emerged as the dominant intellectual trends in the region; the latter was influenced by Western nationalist discourse while the former searched for the seeds of a political community within the framework of the broader congregation of the Muslim faithful. In the transformation initiated by this deep introspection, the role that the *‘ulamā* (religious scholars) had played within the state bureaucracy was subverted.

The relationship between the political authority and the *‘ulamā* class had been a tense one from the time of the establishment of the first Islamic dynasty under the Umayyads (661–750), when the separation between the two first became apparent.³¹ After the rule of the first four caliphs after the Prophet Muḥammad (known to the Sunnis as the rightly-guided Caliphs), the ‘official’ Islam of the state became more concerned with legitimising the status quo than with ensuring the preservation of the fundamental tenets of the religion. With the onset of dynastic Islam, the *‘ulamā* class generally distanced itself from the politics of the state and claimed for itself the responsibility of being the preservers of the religion. These piety-minded representatives, as they were referred to by Marshall G. S. Hodgson, made their greatest contribution in the safeguarding of Islamic doctrine and the development of Islamic substantive law (*fiqh*).³²

29 *Ibid*, 157.

30 Roxanne L. Euben, “Contingent Borders, Syncretic Perspectives: Globalization, Political Theory and Islamizing Knowledge,” *International Studies Review*, 4, 1, 2002, 246.

31 For one of the best accounts of the provenance and development of the tense relationship between the political authority and the *‘ulamā* class see ‘Alī Ūmlīl, *al-Sulṭah al-Thaqāfiyyah wa al-Sulṭah al-Siyāsiyyah* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1996).

32 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vol. 1, 238.

Nevertheless, the state often needed the support of the *‘ulamā* to extend its legitimacy over society. The scholars were thus co-opted into the bureaucracy, holding posts as qadis (judges), teachers, muftis (jurisconsults), guardians of religious endowments, market inspectors and scribes.³³ In spite of this, there was always a segment within the *‘ulamā* class that refused to be co-opted and that chose to maintain a critical posture vis-à-vis the state. This gave them the freedom to speak in defence of their religious convictions, free from any compulsion to defend practices or teachings endorsed by the ruling authorities. In Bakhtinian terms, this posture emphasises that, for such people, religious precepts were far more authoritative than the discourse of political power.

Although such individuals were often persecuted by the state for their rulings and for their refusal to be co-opted, they remained important dissenting voices and while they may not have been very influential in their immediate environment, they left significant legacies that served to sustain those who followed in their footsteps.³⁴ As a result, there was always some inspiration for reform-minded scholars seeking to challenge the status quo over the centuries. The ideas of such dissident *‘ulamā* formed the fabric of a reformist tradition that remained intact throughout Islamic history, even if it was not always in ascension.

The rise of the bureaucratized Islamic empires of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries resulted in the incorporation of a large section of the *‘ulamā* class into the state machinery.³⁵ Although this granted these *ulamā* a certain degree of influence, they were also adversely affected by the sweeping transformation brought about by the nineteenth century *Tanzimat* (lit. reorganisation) reforms that embodied the Ottoman Empire's attempt to modernise. Modern education, modern court systems based on foreign legal procedures and laws, and modern economic practices

33 Suha Taji-Farouki & Basheer M. Nafi (eds.), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 6.

34 These individuals, by way of example, included great scholars such as Mālik ibn Anas and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, the eponymous founders of two of the major schools of Sunni jurisprudence. Both men suffered persecution at the hands of the political authorities.

35 Taji-Farouki & Nafi, *Islamic Thought*, 6.

all contributed to the traditional *'ulamā* losing much of their economic and cultural capital. Individuals educated in modern institutions and influenced by new ideas began impacting upon society, displacing the traditionally trained scholars of religion.³⁶ With the onset of modernity, the traditional Islam of the old *'ulamā* class thus had to bear the twin burdens of coping with a rapidly changing world transforming before its very eyes and the loss of the central authority that gave it its legitimacy and strength. The discourse of modernity thus enters Islamic history at this point as an authoritative voice that poses a strong challenge not only to Islamic discourse, but to religious discourse in general.

The onset of modernity marked the emergence of a modern Muslim intelligentsia not exclusively dominated and influenced by the *'ulamā* class but influenced also by the Islamic reformist tradition and by Western modernity. Nevertheless, being deeply rooted in Arab and Muslim society and culture, many Islamic intellectuals self-consciously rejected Western imperialism and its accompanying secular baggage.³⁷ This was obviously not a universal trend and some Arab intellectuals³⁸ chose to break with their Arab and Islamic roots, calling for the embracing of Western modernity and secularism. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī thus opened his eyes

36 *Ibid*, 6-7.

37 These individuals included Ṭahir al-Jazā'iri (1852-1920) and Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Qāsimī (1866-1924) in Damascus, Maḥmūd Shākīr al-Ālūsī (1857-1924) in Baghdad, al-Bashīr Sifar (d. 1937), 'Abd al-'Azīz ath-Tha'ālibī (1875-1944) and Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭāhīr ibn 'Āshūr (1879-1973) in Tunis, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd ibn Bādīs (1889-1940), aṭ-Ṭayyib al-'Aqabī (1888-1962) and Muḥammad al-Bashīr al-Ibrāhīmī (1889-1965), the *New Ottomans* in Istanbul, the *Muhammadden Association* in Indonesia, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Nā'inī (1860-1936) in Iran, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Siddiq Ḥasan Khan (d. 1888), Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914) and the *Nadwatul 'Ulamā* in India; they all were preoccupied with protecting Islam and Islamic identity in its confrontation with the onslaught of modernisation by reconciling the new with the inherited and by reforming the Islamic heritage and liberating it from the shackles of blind imitation. However, the most famous of them all were Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897), Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935). For more details see: Bashīr M. Nāfi', *al-Islāmiyyūn* (Beirut: Dār al-'Arabiyya li'l-'Ulūm, 2010), 19-33.

38 Such individuals included Farah Antun, Salamah Musa, Jurji Zaydan, Constantine Zurayk and Taha Husayn. For further insight into these and similar-minded thinkers see: Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 245-340.

to a world in the grip of a painful transformation. Reflecting on the state of the *Umma* (Muslim community) in his autobiography, much later, he poetically captures the mood of those times:

None of us asks why in such a time or place; this is pre-ordained and we have no choice in the matter. What drew my attention is that I came into this world at a stumbling point in Islam's history, during depressing days when the English were occupying Egypt, just as they had occupied other vast expanses of Islam's wounded lands.³⁹

As will be shown in this essay, al-Ghazālī was from a very early age placed into conversation with the *authoritative discourse* of the Islamic reformist tradition. His formative education consisted primarily of rote learning that focused on the memorisation of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet of Islam. Tappan draws our attention to the fact that moral language is socio-culturally situated,⁴⁰ so it is only natural that the moral discourse to which al-Ghazālī was predominantly exposed, focused on the teachings of Islam. However, this *authoritative discourse* was not only entrenched by direct engagement with the textual tradition, but also by the process of intellectual mentorship. Against this background, the voice of authority extended to that of al-Ghazālī's father, who initially set him on the path of Islamic learning, and to those of his reform-minded teachers, who moulded the bright young boy into a dynamic scholar and activist.

Muḥammad al-Ghazālī: The Early Years⁴¹

Muḥammad al-Ghazālī Aḥmad aṣ-Ṣaqā was born on 22 September, 1917 in the village of Naklā al-'Inab in the Egyptian province of Buḥayrah,

39 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, "Qiṣṣat Ḥayāt," *Majalla Islāmiyya al-Ma'rifa*, 7, 1996, 155.

40 Tappan, "Moral functioning as mediated action," *Journal of Moral Education*, 35, 1, 2006, 8.

41 The best account of al-Ghazālī's life is his autobiography. An early version was published in 1996: Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, "Qiṣṣat Ḥayāt" *Majalla Islāmiyya al-Ma'rifa*, 7, 1996, 155-224. A later version appeared as: Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Mudhakkirāt al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī* (al-Jazā'ir: Dār al-Rashād, 2006). A brief account of al-Ghazālī's early life and upbringing appears on the following website: www.alghazaly.org. For useful biographical details see also 'Abdallah

into a well-known family of traders who were devout Muslims. His father, Aḥmad aṣ-Ṣaqā, was a *ḥāfiẓ al-Qurʾān* (i.e. a person who had memorised the Qurʾan) and was regarded as a pious man with Sufi leanings. He named his son Muḥammad al-Ghazālī in the hope that he would follow in the footsteps of the great twelfth century reformer, Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). “Al-Ghazālī” is not the family surname as many people erroneously believe, but an aspirational appendage to the baby Muḥammad’s first name. He would nonetheless attain fame as Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, prompting his student and long-time friend, Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, to comment that the father’s hopes had not been in vain as the twentieth century al-Ghazālī carried the spirit of the twelfth century al-Ghazālī.⁴²

Al-Ghazālī’s primary education entailed memorising the Qurʾan, just as his father had done, and he completed the memorisation of the entire scripture by the age of ten. This was the beginning of a permanent and strong attachment to the Qurʾan. He later recalled that he would regularly practice its recitation: as he strolled through the streets of his village, during his daily prayers, before he slept and in periods of solitude. He even remembered reading it from memory in its entirety during his incarceration. The Qurʾan was to have a formative influence upon the young al-Ghazālī, being a faithful companion in the solitude of his early years and a wellspring of inspiration and guidance in later life.

After completing the memorisation of the Qurʾan, the boy was enrolled at the Alexandria Religious Institute for primary and secondary education. In order to enable him to continue his studies, al-Ghazālī’s father was forced to move to Alexandria with him. He therefore sold the little shop in the village, by which the family earned its living, and bought a bookstore in Alexandria. The bookstore sold stationery, translated novels, school books, academic books, works of poetry and classical religious texts and played an extremely important role in the cultural

al-ʿAqīl, “al-Dāʿiyya al-Mujaddid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī,” *Al-Mujtamaʿ*, 1296, 21, 4, 1998, 46-48; Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*; ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm ʿUways, *al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī - Tārīkhuhu wa-Juhūduhu wa-Ārāʾuhu* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2000). This section draws on all these sources.

⁴² Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 186.

enrichment of the boy. The young al-Ghazālī was a voracious reader, and his father encouraged him, guiding his reading by choosing appropriate titles for him. Much later on, al-Ghazālī fondly recalled this formative period and paid tribute to his father, who was “the hero of this phase [...] who sold all of his possessions to enable his son to gain an education that enabled him to serve Islam.”⁴³

Al-Ghazālī left for Cairo in 1937, after having completed his primary and secondary education in Alexandria, registering as a student at the College of Religious Sciences at the al-Azhar University, one of the oldest centres of learning in the Islamic World. He completed his undergraduate studies in 1941, but continued studying, specialising in *al-Irshād wa ad-Da‘wah* (Islamic Guidance and Propagation), and receiving a Master’s degree in 1943. He also married while a student at al-Azhar, and was blessed with nine children over the coming years.

Al-Ghazālī’s Intellectual Mentors

The movement of intellectual inquiry that sought to rediscover the intellectual principles of Islam and to explain their application to the changing world of the twentieth century was most powerfully represented in Egypt by the reformist Shaykh of al-Azhar, Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), and his Syrian student Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935).⁴⁴ Both men had been deeply influenced by the pan-Islamist activism and thought of Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839-1897), who had left an indelible impression upon a significant portion of the Islamic world, especially the Middle East, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Shaykh al-Ghazālī acknowledged the impact of al-Afghānī, ‘Abduh and Riḍā on his thought, and regarded himself as a student of the *al-Manār*⁴⁶ school of ‘Abduh and Riḍā.⁴⁷ Speaking about the three men in an interview in March 1995, al-Ghazālī explained his abiding attachment to them even though he himself was at an advanced stage in his intellectual career:

43 Ghazālī, *Mudhakkirāt*, 238.

44 Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 113-124.

45 *Ibid.*, 118.

46 Named after the influential *al-Manār* Journal established by Riḍā.

47 Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 258.

What I like most about Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī is his revolutionary fervour against authoritarianism (*istibdād*) and about Muḥammad ‘Abduh is his deep comprehension of the wisdom of Islam and his espousal of a conscious Muslim intelligentsia, and about Rashīd Riḍā is his combination of the teachings of the classical Salafiyya of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and the modern rational Salafiyya of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh.⁴⁸

Al-Ghazālī was also directly influenced by some of his reform-minded teachers at al-Azhar. A thematic study of the Qur’an undertaken by Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abdallāh Drāz (1894-1958)⁴⁹ left a deep impression on al-Ghazālī⁵⁰ and he would later produce his own thematic study of the Holy Book.⁵¹ He was taught Qur’anic sciences by Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Zarqānī⁵² and the science of Qur’anic interpretation (*Tafsīr*) by Shaykh al-Azhar Maḥmūd Shaltūt (1893-1963),⁵³ another towering figure in twentieth century reformist thought.⁵⁴

However, it was Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949), founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*),⁵⁵ who literally changed al-Ghazālī’s life. The Brotherhood was founded in Isma’iliyya in 1928 and

48 Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 430, fn. 1.

49 See Muhammad. A. Drāz (2001), *The Qur’an: An Eternal Challenge*. Translated by Adil Salahi (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2001).

50 Qaraḍāwī, *Al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 110.

51 This specific work has appeared in English in an abridged and full text edition. See Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Journey Through the Qur’an: The Content and Contexts of the Surahs (Abridged Translation of al-Tafsīr al-Mawdu’i li-suwar al-Qur’an al-Karīm)*. Abridged by Abdal Haqq Bewley and translated by Aisha Bewley (London: Dar al-Taqwa, 1996); Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (2000), *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur’an*. Translated by Ashur A. Shamis (Herndon, Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000).

52 Al-Zarqānī is the author of *Manāhij al-‘Irḑān fi ‘Ulūm al-Qur’an*, an influential modern study on the sciences of the Qur’an that has become a standard reference text on the subject.

53 For a detailed study of Shaltūt in English, see Kate Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

54 Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 30.

55 For detailed studies on the Brotherhood see Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998).

grew dramatically in the 1930s.⁵⁶ By the end of the decade, it had five hundred branches throughout Egypt and a membership numbering tens of thousands. The programme of the Brotherhood was a mixture of the traditional and the innovative. It was traditional in that al-Bannā believed that the social and political regeneration of Egypt was intimately tied to the restoration of Islam as a guiding force in national life. Consequently, he called for the reimplementation of the Sharia, arguing that the ills from which Egypt suffered could be traced to the replacement of Qur’anic principles by secular legal and political institutions.

Al-Bannā’s insistence on the restoration of the Sharia did not imply a simplistic return to the past. As with Muḥammad ‘Abduh before him, al-Bannā sought to find a way for Muslims to take advantage of the technological advances of the twentieth century without feeling that they were compromising their commitment to Islamic values. He argued that the Sharia was originally formulated to meet a specific set of historical circumstances and was thus a product of informed human reasoning. In his view, the restored Sharia would be subject to interpretation and would hence be fully compatible with the needs of modern society.⁵⁷ Although al-Bannā’s political proposals lacked specificity, they were still characterised by a powerful vision in which he called for an Islamic order rather than an Islamic state that – precisely because of its Islamic basis – would ensure social justice, economic well-being, and political harmony.

It is therefore not surprising that social justice, economic well-being and political harmony later also emerged as major themes in the writings of al-Ghazālī. It was, however, the deep understanding of the morality of Islam that immediately attracted the young al-Ghazālī to al-Bannā. Al-Ghazālī himself relates his first encounter with the man who would become his role model:

[My first encounter with him] was during my student days at the Alexandria Institute. I had the habit of frequenting

56 The brief outline on the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Bannā hereunder is extracted from Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 187.

57 For a succinct account of his major ideas, see Ḥasan al-Bannā, *Majmū‘a Rasā’il al-Imām ash-Shahīd Ḥasan al-Bannā* (Cairo: Dār ad-Da’wah, 2008).

the ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Hurmuz Masjid, where I would revise my lessons. One day, a young man that I did not know stood up and spoke a few words of advice to the people, explaining the prophetic statement: “Be conscious of Allah wherever you may be and follow a bad deed with one that is good, to wipe it out, and engage people by displaying good character.”⁵⁸ His words were extremely moving and went straight to the heart. From that very moment, I strengthened my relationship with him and my activities in the field of Islamic service continued with this great man until he was martyred in 1949.⁵⁹

Al-Ghazālī became a regular contributor to the *Majallat al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (the Journal of the Muslim Brothers), which had been founded by al-Bannā. His writings left a deep impression on his many readers as well as on al-Bannā himself.⁶⁰ After his graduation in 1943, al-Ghazālī held several posts in mosques entailing preaching and administrative duties, but he remained seized with the plight of the Muslims. From this point onward, he began earnestly to apply his mind and to write about the challenges facing Muslim society. However, the beginning of his intellectual career as a writer and thinker is linked to the appearance of his first book, *Islam and the Economic Condition*,⁶¹ in 1947.⁶²

In terms of his ideological becoming, the appearance of his first book marks an important rite of passage: al-Ghazālī no longer ‘ventriloquates’⁶³ the *authoritative discourse*, which he had by now internalised, appropriated and made his own. As Tappan explains,⁶⁴ there are two primary dimensions to the process of appropriation. The first is *mastery*, which entails

58 *Musnad Aḥmad*, ḥadīth no. 20392.

59 For more details, see www.alghazaly.com.

60 ‘Aqīl, “ad-Dā‘iyah al-Mujaddid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī,” 48.

61 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Islām wa’l-Awdā’ al-Iqtisādīyya* (Cairo: Dār aṣ-Ṣaḥwa, 1987, 7th ed.).

62 Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 223.

63 Mark B. Tappan, “Domination, subordination and the dialogical self: Identity development and the politics of ‘ideological becoming,’” *Culture and Psychology*, 11, 2005, 54.

64 Tappan, “Moral functioning as mediated action,” 5.

developing the skill to use a particular cultural tool with a relatively high degree of facility. In al-Ghazālī's case, the process of mastery involved many years of education and mentorship as outlined above. He was therefore now ready to take *ownership*, which is the second dimension of the internalisation of the *authoritative discourse*, and this entails taking a given mediational means and making it one's own.⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī's words now represented an *internally persuasive discourse* and he was now able to claim authority for his own voice while remaining in constant dialogue with other voices, as Bakhtin explains.⁶⁶

Al-Ghazālī's Intellectual Output

Al-Ghazālī's work concentrated on three overlapping spheres within which he constantly shifted and which are reflected in all of his writings. First, he showed tremendous concern with the Muslim context; that is, the conditions within which Muslims found themselves. He therefore assessed the challenges that Muslims face due to their socio-economic conditions, their intellectual underdevelopment and their political subjugation. As a result, some of his earlier books bore titles such as *Islam and the Economic Condition*⁶⁷ and *Islam and Socialist Methodologies*.⁶⁸

Al-Ghazālī's second area of focus also relates to the Muslim context, but is more specifically concerned with the role of Islam in society. This category of writing not only engages the problems that Muslims face but also seeks solutions within an Islamic frame of reference. Most of al-Ghazālī's writings in this regard were influenced by his political activism. In December 1948 the Muslim Brotherhood was banned by Egyptian authorities, its possessions were confiscated and many of its members were subsequently imprisoned, including al-Ghazālī. When he was released from prison in 1949 he published *Islam and Political Authoritarianism*.⁶⁹ After his disillusionment with Nasser's Free Officers' revolution in 1952

65 *Ibid.*

66 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 348.

67 Ghazālī, *Al-Islām wa'l-Awdā' al-Iqtisādiyya*.

68 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Islām wa'l-Manāhij al-Ishtirākīyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1960). For more details, see Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 11-14.

69 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Islām wa'l-Istibdād al-Siyāsī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1984, 3rd ed.).

– which al-Ghazālī had fervently supported – he wrote a series of books that explored what Islam had to offer to society. These included titles such as *The Struggle of Religion*⁷⁰ and *Islam and the Red Onslaught*,⁷¹ the latter being a critique of Communism.⁷²

The titles mentioned above should not be taken to suggest that al-Ghazālī had cast exclusive blame on external factors, for the poor state in which Muslims found themselves. Indeed, the third trope in his thought is exclusively concerned with Muslim self-critique. In his reading of Islamic intellectual history, the Muslim political elites and the ‘*ulamā*’ that support them, came in for the harshest criticism.⁷³ Al-Ghazālī believed that after the collapse of the rightly-guided Caliphate, Islam manifested in two opposing trends: the first was what he calls “official Islam,” which was the preserve of the political elite and which failed to come to grips with the essence of Islam, being merely concerned with protecting the status quo. In contrast, “Islam of the masses” was the expression of the majority, which made it a viable social and religious force.

Al-Ghazālī believed that Islam has survived because of the masses, who were in need of the type of intelligentsia who would be able to create a new consciousness. Al-Ghazālī contributed to fulfilling such a role in Egypt during Anwar Sadat’s rule. He took the initiative, with strong voluntary support from the public, to revitalise the ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ Mosque after neglect had left it in a poor state: this was the first mosque ever to be built in Egypt and its largest. The Friday prayer in this mosque, which was led by al-Ghazālī and followed by hundreds of thousands of Cairenes, was transformed into a weekly event that reflected the depth of the Islamic revivalist movement of the 1970s.⁷⁴

Al-Ghazālī further believed that this new consciousness could only be initiated after a process of self-critique.⁷⁵ In this regard, he felt that the most dangerous phenomenon facing Islam was corrupt religiosity, and

70 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Kifāh Dīn* (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 1991, 5th ed.).

71 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Islām fī wajh az-Zahf al-Aḥmar* (Cairo: al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī, 1976).

72 For more details, see Qaradāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 47.

73 Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 228-229.

74 Nāfi’, *al-Islāmiyyūn*, 107-108.

75 Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 230.

he believed that the only way to remedy deviant religious practice was to engage the intellectual and spiritual blemishes that caused this calamity. As such, many of his books battled against these practices, whether institutional or popular.⁷⁶ In *Within the Boundaries of Islam*,⁷⁷ al-Ghazālī addressed both institutional and popular practices which, he believed, needed to be revisited. In this book, al-Ghazālī addresses a central characteristic of Islamic thought: the constant process of deviation and correction that it is continually subjected to. The specific focus of this study is the subject of *bid'a*; heretical innovation in matters related to religious practice.⁷⁸ His book is therefore part of the genre of correction in contemporary Islamic revivalist thought.⁷⁹

It should now be manifestly clear that al-Ghazālī's ideological becoming had developed well beyond the boundaries of his own moral growth and that his personal conviction was imbued with a sense of mission, which he consciously proclaimed, seeing himself as a caller to Islam (*dā'iya Islāmī*).⁸⁰ This emphasises the polyphonic nature of dialogical discourse. It comes as no surprise that al-Ghazālī's thought and practice would become a very influential dialogical nodal point, serving to initiate others into their own

76 Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 58.

77 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Within the Boundaries of Islam - A Study on Bid'ah*. Translated and Introduced by Aslam Farouk-Alli (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2010). This book is a translation of: Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Laysa min al-Islām* (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 1991).

78 Two important articles provide an excellent review of writings on *bid'a* in the classical period: Vardit Rispler, "Toward a New Understanding of the Term *Bid'a*," *Der Islam*, 68, 2 1991, 320-328; Maribel Fierro, "The treatises against innovations (*kutub al-bida'*)," *Der Islam* 69, 2, 1992, 204-246. In addition to these articles, three recent unpublished theses also explore the subject from interesting contemporary perspectives: Ahmed Haris, *Innovation and Tradition in Islam: A Study on Bid'ah as an Interpretation of the Religion in the Indonesian Experience* (Temple University: PhD Thesis, 1998); Asep. S. Jahar, *Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi's Reformulation of the Concept of Bid'a: A Study of his I'tisam* (McGill University: M.A. Thesis, 1999); Raquel M. Ukeles, *Innovation or Deviation: Exploring the Boundaries of Islamic Devotional Law* (Harvard University: PhD Thesis, 2006).

79 For an interesting reflection on *Ijtihād* and *Bid'a* as central concepts in the process of continuity and change in Islamic thought, see Umar F. Abd-Allah, "Creativity, Innovation and Heresy in Islam," in *Voices of Islam (Volume 5): Voices of Change*, ed. Omid Safi (Westport, Connecticut; London: Praeger, 2007), 15. Abd-Allah calls for an authentic and sophisticated understanding of *Bid'a* as a control mechanism and *Ijtihād* as an inducement for creativity.

80 For more details see: Ghazālī, "Qiṣṣat Ḥayāt," 197.

processes of ideological becoming. Before exploring the implications of this, the core characteristics of his thought or intellectual project will be briefly outlined. Like all other aspects of his life and work, it is also a product that has been created in ‘conversation,’ and in this specific case, a very heated one.

Al-Ghazālī’s Salafi Reform Agenda⁸¹

Al-Ghazālī’s intellectual project is founded upon five core elements, or central pivots:⁸²

1. The Qur’an is the primary source of Guidance.
2. The *Sunna* (Prophetic practice) is the secondary source and serves to clarify the Qur’anic message.
3. Lessons need to be drawn from human history in general and from Islamic history specifically.
4. The Islamic activist has to be well-versed in human cultural behaviours and practices, both general and religious, in order to develop an understanding of one’s context.
5. The activist has to be in touch with existential reality, of both Muslims and non-Muslims, local and international, to be able to develop an understanding of events.

These five elements might be described as a Salafi orientation,⁸³ a label

81 This section draws primarily on: Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*; ‘Uways, *al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī*; Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 223-255. Abu-Rabi’ undoubtedly presents the best account of al-Ghazālī’s thought available in English, devoting two full chapters to his work. For a narrower focus on specific aspects of al-Ghazālī’s work, see Maḥfūz ‘Azzām, *al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī: Šuwar min Ḥayāt Mujāhid ‘Azīm: Dirāsa Ḥawl al-‘Aqīda al-Islāmiyya fī Fiqh al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī* (Cairo: Dār aṣ-Šaḥwa, 1992), which examines the place of Islamic doctrine in al-Ghazālī’s thought. See also Muḥammad Waqī’ Allāh, “Malāmiḥ al-Fikr al-Siyāsī li’l-Shaykh al-Ghazālī,” *Majalla Islāmiyya al-Ma’rifā*, 7, 1996, which examines his political thought. Nūr al-Dīn I’zīz, *al-Wasāṭiyya wa’l-’tidāl fī al-Manhaj ad-Da’wi ‘inda al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2010), examines al-Ghazālī’s methodology of balance and moderation in his approach towards inviting people to Islam.

82 Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 79-80.

83 The Arabic word *salaf* literally means predecessor and the term *salafī* generally connotes an atavistic posture, where one looks back to the precedents of the earlier generation for guidance and inspiration.

to which al-Ghazālī was not averse. He, in fact, embraced the term Salafi readily but also clarified what he understood by it. For al-Ghazālī, the Salafiyya was an intellectual and emotional leaning that was linked to the best generation and had a deeply ingrained fidelity to the Qur'an and prophetic tradition. For him, the Salafi activist should muster the material and intellectual efforts of Muslims in the service of God's guidance, without any bias towards colour or ethnicity.⁸⁴ For such an activist, the principles of the Islamic faith as embodied in the Qur'an and prophetic traditions take precedence over all other values.⁸⁵ In Bakhtinian terms, one can argue that Salafism is a trend within Islamic thought that consciously recognises the primacy of authoritative discourse.

It must, however, be acknowledged that the term Salafi is not without controversy in the current political climate, as it is now intimately associated with the term *Wahhabi* in the popular imagination. This attitude is prevalent in both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. In the latter, Salafi and Wahhabi are terms that are used interchangeably to describe the most extremist trends within the Islamist camp, often labelled as *Salafi Jihadists*. Within the Muslim community, the discourse on Salafiyya and Wahhabiyya is more nuanced but the tendency to use the terms synonymously is, nevertheless, still prevalent. Al-Ghazālī's self-proclaimed affiliation to the Salafi school is all the more interesting when one considers his vociferous opposition and notorious clashes with scholars who associate themselves with the teachings of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1793), the eponym of the Wahhabi school.⁸⁶ It is therefore necessary briefly to point out two major trends within

84 Qaraḍāwī, *al-Shaykh al-Ghazālī*, 82.

85 For more details on his salafi orientation, see Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *'Aqidat al-Muslim*, (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1997).

86 These clashes are documented in scores of articles and several books by al-Ghazālī, starting in the early 1970s and culminating in a major onslaught in Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya bayna ahl al-Fiqh wa ahl al-Ḥadīth* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1989). Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 108-132, provides a useful English summary of this debate; al-Ghazālī's full study is now also available in English, see Muḥammad al-Ghazali, *The Sunna of the Prophet - the People of Fiqh versus the People of Hadith*. Translated by Aisha Bewley (London: Dar Al Taqwa, 2009).

the Salafi school: the literalist *ahl al-Ḥadīth* trend and the more dynamic *Ijtihādī* trend, which favoured creative intellectual exertion.

Basheer Nafi points out that it is not easy to determine the exact historical moment that gave birth to the term Salafi, but its conception can be traced back to the beginnings of the ninth century, with the emergence of the *ahl al-Sunna*, the doctrinal school established by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (780-855) that re-emphasised the importance of the Prophetic tradition. The revival of this trend in the fourteenth century by the Hanbali reformer Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) marked a clear departure from the Ash'ari school of thought, which was deeply steeped in dialectic theology.⁸⁷

Although Ibn Taymiyya was a central link in the development of the Salafi School, it was only in the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century that one can see the emergence of a self-conscious Salafi ideology.⁸⁸ This was preceded by renewed interest in the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya in the two holy sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where scholars such as Ibrāhīm ibn Ḥasan al-Kūrānī (1616-1689) and Muḥammad Ḥayāh al-Sindī (d. 1750) played important roles in spreading his teachings.⁸⁹ Al-Sindī

87 Bashīr M. Nāfi', "al-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qarāḍāwī: al-Islāhiyya al-Jadīda fī Ṭawr Jadīd," *Unpublished Manuscript* (n.d.), 7-10.

88 For insight into the rise of Salafi Thought in nineteenth century Damascus, see: Itzchak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafīyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001). For insight into the work and ideas of two important scholars who played a role in the Salafi revival in this period see: Basheer M. Nafi, "Abu al-Thana' al-Alusi: An Alim, Ottoman Mufti, and Exegete of the Qur'an," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 34, 3, 2002, 465-494; Basheer M. Nafi, "Salafism Revived: Nu'mān al-Alūsī and the Trial of the Two Aḥmads," *Die Welt des Islams*, 49, 2009, 49-97.

89 For further elaboration on the life and works of these two important scholars see: Basheer. M. Nafi, "Tasawwuf and Reform in Pre-Modern Islamic Culture: In Search of Ibrahim al-Kurani," *Die Welt des Islams*, 42, 3, 2002, 307-355; Basheer M. Nafi, "The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and its Challenge to Traditional Islam," in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, eds. S. Taji-Farouki and B. M. Nafi (London: I. B Tauris, 2004), 28-60; John O. Voll, "Muḥammad Hayya al-Sindi and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab: An Analysis of an Intellectual Group in Eighteenth Century Medina," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 38, 1, 1974, 32-39; Basheer M. Nafi, "A Teacher of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb: Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindī and the Revival of *Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth's* Methodology," *Islamic Law and Society*, 13, 2, 2006, 239-241.

created renewed interest in the methodology of the scholars of Hadith and also made a strong impression upon a young student from Najd by the name of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1793) who, in turn, became the pole-bearer for this methodology in the Arabian Peninsula.⁹⁰

By the late nineteenth century, Salafi thought split into two major trends: the first upholding the methodology of the *ahl al-Ḥadīth* and the second being representative of a reformist methodology that was far more dynamic. The latter was rooted in four principles: the promotion of *Tawḥīd* (monotheism); reliance upon the Qur’an and Sunnah; emphasising the role of the intellect; and the renewal of *Ijtihād* (creative intellectual exertion). Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī was a proponent of the latter reformist trend.

The main reason for al-Ghazālī’s clash with upholders of the *ahl al-Ḥadīth* trend, represented in his time by the Wahhabi school, was that they took the prophetic sayings as the main source for their vision of Islam, extracting a literalist understanding that ignored the rich critical jurisprudential methodology of Islam, which had developed in response to the contextual challenges encountered by Muslims throughout the ages. Therefore, al-Ghazālī points out that:

Scholars who study the *Sunna* have laid down five preconditions for the acceptability of hadiths of the Prophet: three concerning the *isnad* (chain of transmission) and two the text itself:

- The *isnad* must be comprised of transmitters with good memories who are precise in respect of what they hear and then report it accurately.
- As well as having an intelligent grasp of the text, they must also have unimpeachable morals and a conscience which fears Allah and refrains from any temptation to adulterate it.

90 For more on the Wahhabi mission in the Arabian Peninsula (later Saudi Arabia) see: David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Madawi al-Rashid, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

- These two qualities must be applied to every one of those who make up the chain of transmitters. If any chain is lacking in one transmitter or one of the men in the chain is unsure, then the *hadith* is less than sound.

When the *isnad* has been found to be acceptable on this basis, then we examine the text transmitted by it, i.e. the text of the *hadith* itself.

- It must not be aberrant
- It must not have a fault which renders it unacceptable. Aberration arises when the text concerned contradicts a reliable transmission from a more reliable transmitter. When those with expertise see such an impairing fault in the *hadith*, that moves them to reject it.⁹¹

Al-Ghazālī consequently emphasised the importance of critiquing the import of the prophetic sayings and not simply limiting critique to the chain of narrators, thereby presenting a vision of Islam firmly rooted in what he identified as its doctrinal teachings and moral objectives.⁹²

Al-Ghazālī's Legacy – From the Dialogic Imagination to the Social Imaginary

Shaykh al-Ghazālī's legacy remains extremely relevant at the contemporary juncture of Islamic intellectual development, and his Salafi reformist agenda still inspires Islamists all over the world. While some scholars prematurely pronounced the failure of political Islam,⁹³ developments in many Muslim countries, in fact, suggest otherwise. The introduction of democratic practices and representative political systems of governance has given the upper hand to Islamists, many of whom have been fundamentally influenced by the writings and activism of al-Ghazālī.

91 Ghazali, *The Sunna of the Prophet*, 9-10.

92 Nāfi', "al-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī," 14.

93 In this regard, see, for example: Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* which passes rather premature judgement on the demise of political Islam. For a more sober, historically grounded assessment, which argues that political Islam is still very much in the ascendance, see Nāfi', *al-Islāmiyyūn*.

This is true especially in Egypt, a leading country in the Middle East and North Africa bloc. This only serves to further emphasise the relevance of al-Ghazālī's thought and work.⁹⁴

Earlier on, Bakhtin reminded us that once a person begins to claim authority for one's own voice, ideological development becomes an intense struggle for hegemony among various ideological points of view.⁹⁵ In addition to emphasising the polyphonic nature of dialogical discourse (as pointed out earlier), this struggle also expands the circle of interlocution and more powerful voices, such as al-Ghazālī's, begin influencing others.⁹⁶ This essay has tried to show how this process has manifested in al-Ghazālī's life and work. However, in order to grasp a deeper sense of what this implies, we have to shift our theoretical gaze away from Mikhail Bakhtin and towards Charles Taylor, whose work on the modern social imaginary may be useful in measuring the importance of al-Ghazālī's legacy.

Taylor has argued that dominant ideologies such as Western modernity, are inseparable from a certain kind of social imaginary. Simply put, a given social imaginary is not a set of ideas. Rather, it is an expression of how ordinary people imagine their social surroundings; one that is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Most importantly, the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy possible.⁹⁷ As Taylor explains, it often happens that what starts off as theories held by only a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society. On the basis of this insight into the social

94 For an interesting study on the 'New Islamists' that also emphasises the importance of al-Ghazālī's work, see Raymond W. Baker, *Islam Without Fear: Egypt and the New Islamists* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2003).

95 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 345-6.

96 An interesting study that explores emerging intellectual trends in the Arab world that have arisen through such engagement is: Michaëlle L. Browsers, *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Browsers places al-Ghazālī in the very influential 'moderate' or 'centrist' Islamist camp. For more details see Chapter 2, "A more inclusive Islamism?" and chapter 3, "Framing cross-ideological alliance."

97 Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23-4.

imaginary, Taylor goes on to explain the displacement of religion in the public sphere in Western societies.⁹⁸

Importantly, Taylor also emphasises that non-Western cultures have modernised in their own way and therefore, they cannot be understood by a general theory that has only the Western case in mind.⁹⁹ This bears direct relevance upon this exploration of the life and work of al-Ghazālī. It should be clear from his legacy, in fact, that al-Ghazālī, in common with other Islamists of his generation, has played an important role in the resurgence of Islam in the public sphere. It remains however to be seen whether his legacy will be able to sustain the emergence of an Islamist social imaginary.¹⁰⁰ What is quite clear at this specific juncture is that al-Ghazālī has undoubtedly influenced not only the intellectual elite, but also large constituencies within Muslim society. Whether his work will come to represent a common understanding with common practices and a widely held sense of legitimacy is yet to be seen.

98 *Ibid*, 187.

99 *Ibid*, 1.

100 For a discussion of modernist and Islamist paradigms and how they relate to the social imaginary in some detail in: Aslam Farouk-Alli, "When Words Collide? Islam and Modernity – Alternative Paradigms, Contrasting Authentic Ideals," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS)*, 27, 2 2010, 50-68.