13473 - Who was al-Ghazzaali?

the question

Could you shed some light on who Imam al Ghazzali was?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Al-Ghazzaali was Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Toosi, who was known as al-Ghazzaali. He was born in Toos in 450 AH. His father used to spin wool and sell it in his shop in Toos.

The life of al-Ghazzaali needs to be discussed at length because he went through a number of stages. He indulged in philosophy, then he recanted and rejected that. After that he indulged in what is known as ‘ilm al-kalaam (Islamic philosophy) and gained a sound grasp of its basic principles; then he rejected that after it became clear to him that it was corrupt and filled with contradictions. He was focusing on ‘ilm al-kalaam during the period when he refuted philosophy, and at that time he was given the title of Hujjat al-Islam, after he had refuted the arguments of the philosophers. Then he recanted ‘ilm al-kalaam and turned away from it. He followed the path of the Baatiniyyah (esotericists) and learned their knowledge, but then he rejected that and showed the beliefs of the Baatiniyyah to be false, and exposed the manner in which they tamper with the texts and rulings. Then he followed the path of Sufism. These are the four stages that al-Ghazzaali went through. Shaykh Abu ‘Umar ibn al-Salaah (may Allaah have mercy on him) spoke well of him when he said: “A lot has been said about Abu Haamid and a lot has been narrated from him. As for these books – meaning al-Ghazzaali’s books which contradict the truth – no attention should be paid to them. As for the man himself, we should keep quiet about him, and refer his case to Allaah.” See Abu Haamid al-Ghazzaali wa’l-Tasawwuf by ‘Abd al-Rahmaan Dimashqiyyah.

No fair-minded person would deny the rare level of intelligence, ingenuity and cleverness that Abu

Haamid al-Ghazzaali attained. Al-Dhahabi said of him: “Al-Ghazzaali, the imaam and shaykh, the prominent scholar, Hujjat al-Islam, the wonder of his time, Zayn al-Deem Abu Haamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Toosi al-Shaafa’i al-Ghazzaali, the author of many books and one possessed of utter intelligence. He studied fiqh in his own town, then he moved to Nisapur in the company of a group of students. He stayed with the Imaam al-Haramayn and gained a deep knowledge of fiqh within a short period. He became well-versed in ‘ilm al-kalaam and debate, until he became the best of debaters…” (Siyar A’laam al-Nubala’, part 9, p. 323)

You will find that even though Abu Haamid al-Ghazzaali had such a deep knowledge of fiqh, Sufism, ‘ilm al-kalaam, usool al-fiqh, etc., and even though he was such an ascetic and devoted worshipper, and had such a good intention and vast knowledge of Islamic sciences, he still had an inclination towards philosophy. But his philosophy emerged in the form of Sufism and was expressed through Islamic ideas. Hence the Muslim scholars, including his closest companion Abu Bakr ibn al-‘Arabi, refuted his ideas. Abu Bakr ibn al-‘Arabi said: Our shaykh Abu Haamid went deep into philosophy, then he wanted to come out of it but he was unable to. There were narrated from him opinions which sound like the Baatini way of speaking, and that may be verified by looking in al-Ghazzaali’s books. See Majmoo’ al-Fataawa, part 4, p. 66.

Even though al-Ghazzaali was very advanced in knowledge, he had little knowledge of hadeeth and its sciences, and he could not distinguish between sound ahaadeeth and weak ones. Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “If we assume that someone narrated the view of the salaf but what he narrated is far removed from what the view of the salaf actually is, then he has little knowledge of the view of the salaf, such as Abu’l-Ma’aali, Abu Haamid al-Ghazzaali, Ibn al-Khateeb and the like, who did not have enough knowledge of hadeeth to qualify them as ordinary scholars of hadeeth, let alone as prominent scholars in that field. For none of these people had any knowledge of al-Bukhaari and Muslim and their ahaadeeth, apart from what they heard, which is similar to the situation of the ordinary Muslim, who cannot distinguish between a hadeeth which is regarded as saheeh and mutawaatir according to the scholars of hadeeth, and a hadeeth which is fabricated and false. Their books bear witness to that, for they contain strange things and most of these scholars of ‘ilm al-kalaam and Sufis who have drifted

away from the path of the salaf admit that, either at the time of death or before death. There are many such well-known stories. This Abu Haamid al-Ghazzaali, despite his brilliance, his devotion to Allaah, his knowledge of kalaam and philosophy, his asceticism and spiritual practices and his Sufism, ended up in a state of confusion and resorted to the path of those who claim to find out things through dreams and spiritual methods. (Majmoo' al-Fataawa, part 4, p. 71).

He also said: Hence, even though Abu Haamid refuted the philosophers and classed them as kaafirs, and expressed veneration of Prophethood [as opposed to philosophy], etc., and even though some of what he says is true and good, and indeed of great benefit, nevertheless some of his writings contain philosophical material and matters where he followed the corrupt principles of philosophy that contradict Prophethood and even contradict sound common sense. Hence a group of scholars from Khurasaan, Iraq and the Maghreb criticized him, such as his friend Abu Ishaaq al-Margheenaani, Abu'l-Wafa' ibn 'Aqeel, al-Qushayri, al-Tartooshi, Ibn Rushd, al-Maaziri and a group of earlier scholars. This was even mentioned by Shaykh Abu 'Amr ibn al-Salaah in his book Tabaqaat Ashaab al-Shaafa'i, and was confirmed by Shaykh Abu Zakariya al-Nawawi, who said in his book: "Chapter explaining some important things for which Imaam al-Ghazzaali was denounced in his books which were unacceptable to the scholars of his madhhab and others, namely his odd statements such as what he said in Muqaddimat al-Mantiq at the beginning of al-Mustasfa: 'This is the introduction to all knowledge, and whoever does not learn this, his knowledge cannot be trusted at all.'"

Shaykh Abu 'Amr said: "I heard Shaykh al-'Imaad ibn Yoonus narrating from Yoosuf al-Dimashqi, the teacher of al-Nizaamiyyah in Baghdad, who was one of the famous deans of the school, that he used to denounce these words and say, "Abu Bakr and 'Umar and So-and-so and So-and-so…" meaning that these great leaders had a great deal of certainty and faith even though they had no knowledge of this Muqaddimah and of any of the ideas contained in it." (al-'Aqeedah al-Isfahaaniyyah, part 1, p. 169).

Al-Dhahabi narrated in his book Siyar A'laam al-Nubala' that Muhammad ibn al-Waleed al-Tartooshi said in a letter which he sent to Ibn Muzaffar: As for what you mentioned about Abu

Haamid, I have seen him and spoken to him, and I think that he is a man of great knowledge, he is intelligent and capable, and has been studying all of his life, spending most of his time in study, but then he drifted away from the path of the scholars and entered the crowd of worshippers. Then he became a Sufi and forsook knowledge and its people, then he got involved with “inspiration”, those who claim to have spiritual knowledge, and the insinuating whispers of the Shaytaan. Then he mixed that with the views of the philosophers and the symbolic phrases of al-Hallaaj, and he started to criticize the fuqaha’ and the scholars of ‘ilm al-kalaam. He almost went astray from the religion altogether. When he wrote al-Ihya’ [i.e., Ihya’ ‘Uloom al-Deen], he started to speak of the inspiration and symbolic words of the Sufis, although he was not qualified to do that and had no deep knowledge of such matters. Hence he failed, and filled his book with fabricated reports.

I (al-Dhahabi) say: as for al-Ihya’, it contains many false ahaadeeth, and it contains much that is good. I wish that it did not contain etiquette, rituals and asceticism that are in accordance with the ways of the philosophers and deviant Sufis. We ask Allaah for beneficial knowledge. Do you know what is beneficial knowledge? It is that which Allaah revealed in the Qur’aan, which was explained by the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) in word and deed, and the type of knowledge which we are not forbidden to acquire. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Whoever turns away from my Sunnah does not belong to me.” So, my brother, you must ponder the words of Allaah and persist in studying al-Saheehayn, Sunan al-Nasaa’i, Riyaadh al-Nawawi and al-Adhkaar by al-Nawawi, then you will succeed and prosper.

Beware of the opinions of the philosophers, the practice of spiritual exercises, the starvation of monks, and the nonsense talk of those who stay alone for long periods in their monasteries. All goodness is to be found in following the pure and tolerant way of the haneefs. And seek the help of Allaah. O Allaah, guide us to Your straight path.

Al-Maaziri praised Abu Haamid with regard to fiqh, and said that he had more knowledge of fiqh than of usool al-fiqh (the basic principles of fiqh). With regard to ‘ilm al-kalaam which is usool al-deen, he wrote books in this field, but he did not have deep knowledge of it. I realized that he was lacking in experience in this field, because he studied the branches of philosophy before he

studied usool al-fiqh, so philosophy made him audacious in criticizing ideas and attacking facts, because philosophy goes along with one's train of thought, without any shar'i guidelines.

A friend of his told me that he spent a lot of time studying Rasaa'il Ikhwaan al-Safa, which contains fifty-one essays. It was written by someone who has studied sharee'ah and philosophy, then had mixed the two. He was a man who was known as Ibn Seena, who filled the world with his books. He had a good knowledge of philosophy, which led him to try to refer all the basic principles of 'aqeedah to philosophy. He strove hard and achieved what others had failed to do. I have seen some of his books and I noticed that Abu Haamid quotes him a great deal when he speaks of philosophy. With regard to Sufi views, I do not know where he got them from, but I have seen that some of his companions mention the books of Ibn Seena and their contents, and he also mentioned the books of Abu Hayyaan al-Tawheedi. As far as I am concerned, he picked up his Sufi ideas from him. I was told that Abu Hayyaan wrote a huge book about these Sufi ideas, and al-Ihya' contains a lot of baseless ideas… then he said: In al-Ihya' he mentioned ideas that have no basis, such as starting with the index finger when cutting the nails because it is superior to the other fingers, as it is the finger used in tasbeeh; then moving on to the middle finger because it is to the right of the index finger, and ending with the thumb of the right hand. He narrated a report concerning that.

I (al-Dhahabi) say: this is a fabricated report. Abu'l-Faraj al-Jawzi said: Abu Haamid wrote al-Ihya' and filled it with fabricated ahaadeeth which he did not know were fabricated. He spoke of inspiration and deviated from the framework of fiqh. He said that what is meant by the stars, moon and sun that Ibraaheem saw was the barriers of light that keep a person from Allaah, not the things that are well known. This is like the words of the Baatiniyyah.

(Siyar A'laam al-Nubala', part 19, p. 340).

Then at the end of his life, al-Ghazzaali (may Allaah have mercy on him) came back to the belief of Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamaa'ah. He focused on the Qur'aan and Sunnah and condemned 'ilm al-kalaam and its proponents. He advised the ummah to come back to the Book of Allaah and the Sunnah of His Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), and to act in accordance

with them, as was the way of the Sahaabah (may Allaah be pleased with them and those who follow them in truth until the Day of Judgement). Shaykh al-Islam (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: After that he came back to the path of the scholars of hadeeth, and wrote Iljaam al-'Awwaam 'an 'Ilm al-Kalaam.

(Majmoo Fataawa, part 4, p. 72)

A glance at Iljaam al-'Awwaam 'an 'Ilm al-Kalaam will prove to us that he had indeed changed in many ways:

1 – In this book he advocated the belief of the salaf, and pointed out that the way of the salaf was the truth, and that whoever went against them was an innovator or follower of bid'ah.

2 – He emphatically denounced ta'weel (interpretation of the attributes of Allaah in a manner that differs from their apparent meaning). He advocated affirming the attributes of Allaah and not misinterpreting them in a manner that would lead to denying the attributes of Allaah.

3 – He emphatically denounced the scholars of 'ilm al-kalaam and described all their principles and standards as "reprehensible innovations" which had harmed a great number of people and created trouble for the Muslims. He said: "The harm caused to a great number of people is something that has been seen, witnessed and experienced. The evil that has resulted since 'ilm al-kalaam began has become widespread even though people at the time of the Sahaabah forbade that. This is also indicated by the fact that the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and the Sahaabah, by consensus, did not follow the way of the scholars of 'ilm al-kalaam when they produced arguments and evidence and analysis. That was not because they were incapable of doing so; if they had thought that was something good, they would have done it in the best manner, and they would have studied the matter hard, more than they did with regard to the division of the estate among the heirs (al-faraa'id)."

He also said: "The Sahaabah (may Allaah be pleased with them) needed to prove the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) to the Jews and Christians, but they did not add anything to the evidence of the Qur'aan; they did not resort to arguments or lay down

philosophical principles. That was because they knew that doing so would provoke trouble and cause confusion. Whoever is not convinced by the evidence of the Qur’aan will not be convinced by anything other than the sword, for there is no proof after the proof of Allaah.”

See Abu Haamid al-Ghazzaali wa’l-Tasawwuf.

These are a few of the comments that trustworthy scholars have made about al-Ghazzaali (may Allaah have mercy on him). Perhaps this is enough for those who wish to be guided. And Allaah is the Guide to the straight path.