ceives the sensible world. There is a whole set of terms used in Islamic epistemology to describe this direct perception of the inner reality of things: *dhawq, ishrāq, mukāshafah, baṣīrah, naẓar, badīhah, ḥads* and *firāsah*[42], terms which all imply the knower's direct experience of the things known.

The application of the methodology of *ta'wīl* to the understanding of the natural world may help to reveal its divine roots. In this knowledge of the "divine roots" of physical things, are to be found the real answers to questions posed by modern science concerning the origin of the world of multiplicity.

Our whole discussion in this chapter may appear to some as too philosophical and mystical. However, we strongly believe that all the points we have raised are very much relevant to Islamic methodology of science. This methodology has to be deeply rooted in the revealed Book of Islam and in the spiritual tradition which issues forth from that revelation. In fact, it had been formulated and applied in history with remarkable success. This legacy is inherited by us today, although many Muslims are ignorant of it. It is not a mere historical coincidence that so many Muslim scientists were either practicing Sufis or intellectually attached to the Sufi perspective, as Professor Nasr's works have clearly demonstrated.

There is indeed a profound conceptual relationship between the inner dimensions of Islam, the depth and breadth of Muslim scientific minds, and sciences of nature that were cultivated in Islamic civilization. To revive Islamic science in the modern world requires that we once again pay due heed to that intimate link.

42. Nasr, "Intellect and Intuition . . .," pp. 36-37.



# CHAPTER 3

# The Place of Doubt in Islamic Epistemology : Al-Ghazzālī's Philosophical Experience

Authentic works attributed to Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī (450/1058–505/1111) are numerous, and they deal with a vast range of subjects. But the specific work of his which has given rise to many commentaries by scholars upon the problem of doubt in his philosophical system is *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*[1] (Deliverence from Error).

This autobiographical work, written about five years before al-Ghazzālī's death and most probably after his return to teaching at the Maimūnah Niẓāmiyyah College at Naishapur in Dhu'l-qa'dah 499/July 1106, following a long period of retirement to a life of self-discipline and ascetic practices, has

1. The title of the book occurs in two readings. One is *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl wa'l-muṣṣih 'an al-aḥwāl* (What Saves from Error and Manifests the States of the Soul); the other is *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl wa'l-Muwaṣṣil (or: al-Mūṣil) ilā dhi'l-'Izza wa'l-Jalāl* (What Saves from Error and Unites with the Possessor of Power and Glory).

For an annotated English translation of this work, based upon the earliest available manuscript, as well as translations of a number of al-Ghazzālī's other works that are specifically mentioned in the *Munqidh*, see R. Joseph McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al-Ghazzālī's al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazzālī* (Boston, 1980). For references to translations of the *Munqidh* into various languages, see p. xxv.

been variously compared by some present-day scholars with the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, with Newman's *Grammar of Assent* in its intellectual subtlety and as an *apologia pro vita sua*, and also with Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* in its puritanical sense[2]. More important, from the point of view of our present discussion, is the fact that this work has often been cited to support the contention that the method of *doubt* is something central to al-Ghazzālī's epistemology and system of thought, and that, in this question, al-Ghazzālī therefore anticipated Descartes (1596-1650)[3]. In fact, a number of comparative studies have been made concerning the place and function of *doubt* in the philosophies of the two thinkers.

Our aim in this chapter is to discuss the meaning and significance of *doubt* in the life and thought of al-Ghazzālī, not as an anticipation of the method of doubt or the sceptical attitude of modern western philosophy, but as an integral element of the epistemology of Islamic intellectual tradition to which al-Ghazzālī properly belongs. We will seek to analyze the nature, function and spirit of the Ghazzalian doubt. In discussing the above question, we are mindful of two important factors. One is the specific intellectual , religious, and spiritual climate prevailing in the Islamic world during the time of al-Ghazzālī, which no doubt constitutes the main external contributory factor to the generation of doubt in the early phase of his intellectual life. The other concerns the whole set of opportunities which Islam ever places at the disposal of man in his quest for certainty, and what we know of al-Ghazzālī's life tells us that he was very much exposed to these opportunities. Further, the spirit of the Ghazzalian doubt can best be understood when viewed in the context of the true purpose for which *al-Munqidh* has been written, and also in the light of his later works.

2. See M. 'Umaruddin, *The Ethical Philosophy of al-Ghazzālī* (Lahore, 1977), p. 286, note 2 to chap. IV; also, Wensinck, *La Pensée de Ghazzali*, p. 111.
3. See M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan & Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), p. 102; M. Saeed Sheikh, "Al-Ghazzali: Metaphysics" in M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 587-588; Sami M. Najm, "The Place and Function of Doubt in the Philosophies of Descartes and al-Ghazzālī"; and also W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī* (Chicago 1982), p. 12.





In *al-Munqidh*, al-Ghazzālī informs us of how in the prime of his life he was inflicted with a mysterious malady of the soul, which lasted for nearly two months during which time he "was a sceptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine"[4]. He was a student in his early twenties at the Niẓāmiyyah College in Naishapur when he suffered from this disease of scepticism.

What is the nature of this Ghazzalian doubt? Al-Ghazzālī tells us that his doubt has been generated in the course of his quest for certainty, that is, for knowledge of the reality of things "as they really are" *(ḥaqā'iq al-umūr)*[5]. This knowledge of the reality of things "as they really are" is what al-Ghazzālī calls *al-'ilm al-yaqīn*, a sure and certain knowledge which he defines as "that in which the thing known is made so manifest that no doubt clings to it, nor is it accompanied by the possibility of error and deception, nor can the mind even suppose such a possibility"[6]. Something ought to be said here about this inner quest of al-Ghazzālī, because it is very much relevant to the theme of our present discussion. In fact, the meaning of this quest should never be lost sight of if we want to understand correctly the nature and significance of the Ghazzalian doubt.

In Islam, the quest for *ḥaqā'iq al-umūr* originated with the famous prayer of the Prophet, in which he asked God to show him "things as they really are". This prayer of the Prophet is essentially the prayer of the gnostic inasmuch as it refers to a supra-rational or inner reality of things. And for this reason, the Sufis have been the most faithful and consistent of the believers in echoing this prayer of the Prophet. The famous

4. McCarthy, *op.cit.*, p.66.
5. Al-Ghazzālī, *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, p. 11. The text cited here is the one published together with its French translation by Farid Jabre, *Erreur et Deliverance* (Beirut, 1969).
6. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Sufi, Jāmī (d. 1492), had this prayer beautifully expanded, capturing in an eloquent manner the very spirit of the gnostic's inner quest:

> O God, deliver us from preoccupation with worldly vanities, and show us the nature of things "as they really are". Remove from our eyes the veil of ignorance, and show us things as they really are. Show us not non-existence as existent, nor cast the veil of non-existence over the beauty of existence. Make this phenomenal world the mirror to reflect the manifestation of Thy beauty, not a veil to separate and repel us from Thee. Cause these unreal phenomena of the Universe to be for us the sources of knowledge and insight, not the causes of ignorance and blindness. Our alienation and severance from Thy beauty all proceed from ourselves. Deliver us from ourselves, and accord to us intimate knowledge of Thee[7].

Al-Ghazzālī's quest for certainty, as he has defined it, is none other than this quest of the gnostic. Initially, however, it was a purely intellectual quest. There were both internal and external forces at work in fueling that quest to the point of generating a period of intense doubt in the youthful life of al-Ghazzālī. Internally, by his own admission, his natural intellectual disposition has always been to grasp the real meaning of things. As for external forces, we have already referred to the most important of these, namely, the various intellectual, religious and spiritual currents of al-Ghazzālī's times, all of which must have engaged his highly reflective and contemplative mind. It is quite clear from the *Munqidh* that these various currents were of great concern to him.

In fact, al-Ghazzālī traced the genesis of his famous doubt to these currents. He was struck by the diversity of religions and creeds, and by the fact that the followers of each religion

7. Jāmī, *Lawā'ih, A Treatise On Sufism*, trans. E.H. Whinfield and M.M. Kazvini, (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1914), p.2.





cling stubbornly to their inherited beliefs. One consequence of his critical reflection upon this religious phenomenon was that he began to question uncritically inherited religious beliefs *(taqlīdāt)*. But living as he was in an age in which the idea of Transcendence was very much a living reality in the souls of men, the problem of diversity of religions did not lead al-Ghazzālī to the kind of relativism that is rampant in modern times as a response to the same problem[8]. On the contrary, it was to lead him to the search for the inner reality of human nature, that is, man's primordial nature *(fiṭrah)*, which on the earthly plane becomes the receptacle for the multiplicity of religious forms and expressions.

Contrary to the view held by some modern interpreters of his thought, al-Ghazzālī was not against *taqlīd* as such. He never advocated at any time for its total abandonment. In fact, he considered it necessary for the simple believers whose minds are free of the kind of intellectual curiousity one finds in philosophers and scientists, and who are therefore content to accept things based on the authority of the experts. Al-Ghazzālī's criticism of *taqlīd* must be seen in the context of his quest for the highest level of certainty, a quest which, in fact, though not in principle, is the concern, not of the majority, but of the few like him. From the point of view of this quest, *taqlīd* is certainly a great impediment to its realization. Consequently, al-Ghazzālī let himself loose from the bonds of *taqlīd (rābiṭat al-taqlīd)*.

Here, one needs to make a clear distinction between *taqlīd*, which is a particular manner of acquiring ideas, and *taqlīdāt*, which are the ideas themselves. This distinction is somehow seldom noted by many students of Ghazzalian thought. Al-Ghazzālī's rejection of *taqlīd* for himself stemmed from his methodological criticism of its inherent limitations, while in accepting it for the simple-minded he was simply affirming an

8. For a profound critique of the modern interpretation of the meaning of diversity of religions, see F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (Middlesex: Perennial Book, 1978), chap. 1.

important aspect of the subjective reality of the human order, namely, that individual human beings differ from one another in intellectual capability. The unreliability of *taqlīd* stems from the fact that it is susceptible to lending itself to both true and false *taqlīdāt*. The solution to the problem of false *taqlīdāt*, however, is not sought through the complete eradication of *taqlīd*, which is practically impossible, but through addressing oneself to the question of the truth or falsity of the *taqlīdāt* themselves. Thus, in the *Munqidh*, al-Ghazzālī tells us how, after reflecting upon the problem of *taqlīd*, he sought to sift out these *taqlīdāt*, to discern those that are true from those that are false[9]. A lot of his intellectual efforts were indeed devoted to this task.

For al-Ghazzālī, the positive function of *taqlīd*, namely, the acceptance of truths based on authority, is to be protected by those who have been entrusted with true knowledge, who constitute the legitimate authority to interpret and clarify knowledge about religious and spiritual matters. As it pertains to knowledge, another aspect of the reality of the human order affirmed by al-Ghazzālī is that there are degrees or levels of knowledge and, consequently, of knowers. This view has its basis in the Quranic verse which al-Ghazzālī quoted: "God raises in degrees those of you who believe and those to whom knowledge is given"[10]. In Islamic theory of knowledge, there is a hierarchy of intellectual and spiritual authorities culminating in the Holy Prophet, and ultimately God Himself. Faith *(īmān)*, which is a level of knowledge, says al-Ghazzālī, is the favorable acceptance *(ḥusn al-ẓann)*[11] of knowledge based on hearsay and experience of others, of which the most reliable is that of the Prophet.

There has been objection from certain modernist circles that the idea of admissibility of *taqlīd* for one group of people and its prohibition for another is socially unacceptable and even dangerous, for it can lead to the crystallization of a caste

9. Al-Ghazzālī, *Munqidh* . . ., p. 11.
10. *The Quran*, Chapter LVIII (The Woman who Pleads), Verse 11. See McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p.96.
11. Al-Ghazzālī, *Munqidh*, p.40.





system, which is against the very spirit of Islam. What has been said above is actually already sufficient to render this objection invalid. Nevertheless, we like to quote here the rebuttal of a scholar who has bemoaned the banishment of the Islamic idea of hierarchy of knowledge and of authorities at the hands of the modernists:

> "In respect of the human order in society, we do not in the least mean by 'hierarchy' that semblance of it wherein oppression and exploitation and domination are legitimized as if they were an established principle ordained by God . . . The fact that hierarchical disorders have prevailed in human society does not mean that hierarchy in the human order is not valid, for there is, in point of fact, *legitimate* hierarchy in the order of creation, and this is the Divine Order pervading all Creation and manifesting the occurrence of justice"[12].

It is this idea of the hierarchy of knowledge and of being which is central to al-Ghazzālī's epistemology and system of thought, and he himself would be the last person to say that such an idea implies the legitimization of a social caste system in Islam.

To sum up our discussion of al-Ghazzālī's methodological criticism of *taqlīd*, we can say that he was dissatisfied with it because it could not quench his intense intellectual thirst. It was obvious to him at that young age that *taqlīd* is an avenue to both truth and error, but as to what is true and what is false there was an open sea of debate around him, which disturbed him profoundly. It led him to contemplate upon one of the most central questions in philosophy, namely, the question of what true knowledge is, and this marked the beginning of an intensification of his intellectual doubt.

Besides the problem of the diversity of religions and creeds, in which a major issue was *taqlīd*, there was another, and more

12. al-Attas, S.M.N., *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978), p.101.

important, religious and spiritual current which contributed to the genesis of his doubt and which deeply affected his mind. This he mentioned as the existence of numerous schools of thought *(madhāhib)* and groups *(firaq)* within the Community of Islam itself, each with its own methods of understanding and affirming the truth and each claiming that it alone is saved. Al-Ghazzālī comments in the *Munqidh* that in this state of affairs of the Community, which he likens to "a deep sea in which most men founder and from which few only are saved", one finds the fulfilment of the famous promise of the Prophet: "My Community will split into seventy-odd sects, of which one will be saved".

The above religious climate was not peculiar to the times of al-Ghazzālī alone. A few centuries earlier, al-Ḥarīth b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī (165/781-243-837)[13], another famous Sufi, whose writings exercised a great influence on al-Ghazzālī, lamented the similar pitiful state of affairs into which the Islamic community has fallen. In fact, the autobiographical character of the *Munqidh* may have been modeled on the introduction to al-Muḥāsibī's work, *Kitāb al-wasāyā (or al-nasā'ih)*, which is also autobiographical in character[14].

The following extract from this work reveals striking similarities to certain passages in the *Munqidh*, and gives some indication as to the kind of religious climate prevailing during the time of al-Muḥāsibī:

> It has come to pass in our days, that this community is divided into seventy and more sects: of these, one only is the way of salvation, and for the rest, God knows best concerning them. Now I have not ceased, not so much as one moment of my life, to consider well the differences into which the community has fallen, and

13. On the life and teaching of this early Sufi figure, see Margaret Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad: A Study of the Life and Teaching of Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī* (London, 1935).
14. See A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Unwin Paperback, 1979), p.47.





> to search after the clear way and the true path, whereunto I have searched both theory and practice, and looked, for guidance on the road to the world to come, to the directing of the theologians. Moreover, I have studied much of the doctrine of Almighty God, with the interpretation of the lawyers, and reflected upon the various conditions of the community, and considered its diverse doctrines and sayings. Of all this I understood as much as was appointed for me to understand: *and I saw that their divergence was as it were a deep sea, wherein many had been drowned, and but a small band escaped therefrom; and I saw every party of them asserting that salvation was to be found in following them, and that he would perish who opposed them . . .*[15]

It is interesting to note that, although al-Ghazzālī's autobiographical work is more dramatic and eloquent than that of al-Muḥāsibī, both men were led into an almost similar kind of intellectual crisis through similar external circumstances. Both sought the light of certainty and that knowledge which guarantees salvation, and they found that light in Sufism. In the process, they accomplished a philosophical as well as a sociological analysis of knowledge, the details of which remain to be studied. But having said this much, we may add that al-Ghazzālī's philosophical discussion of *doubt (shakk)* and certainty *(yaqīn)* can still claim originality in more ways than one.

Having discussed the main factors which contributed to the generation of the Ghazzalian doubt, and to his formulation of the fundamental idea of "true knowledge" we now proceed to investigate into the philosophical meaning and significance of this doubt. We have seen earlier how al-Ghazzālī defined the kind of certain and infallible knowledge *(al-'ilm al-yaqīn)* which he was seeking. It is that knowledge which is completely

15. *Ibid*, pp.47-48, italics mine. Compare the italics portion with McCarthy, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

free from any error or doubt, and with which the heart finds complete satisfaction. Is such a kind of certainty or certitude possible? It is significant that al-Ghazzālī never explicitly posed that question. But, armed with the above criteria of certainty, he proceeded immediately to scrutinize the whole state of his knowledge. He found himself "devoid of any knowledge answering the previous description except in the case of sense-data *(ḥissiyyāt)* and the self-evident truths *(ḍarūriyyāt)*[16]." He then set out to induce doubt *(tashkīk)* against his sense-data to determine whether they could withstand his test of infallibility and indubitability. The outcome of this effort, in which reason *('aql)* appeared as judge over the claims of the senses to certitude, was that his reliance on sense-data proved no longer tenable. The charge of falsity leveled by reason against sense-perceptions could not be rebutted by the senses.

With his reliance on sense-data shattered, al-Ghazzālī sought refuge in the certainty of rational data which "belong to the category of primary truths, such as our asserting that 'Ten is more than three', and 'One and the same thing cannot be simultaneously affirmed and denied', and 'One and the same thing cannot be incipient and eternal, existent and non-existent, necessary and impossible'"[17]. However, this refuge in the rational data *('aqliyyāt)* too was not safe from elements of doubt. This time, doubt crept in through an objection, made on behalf of sense-data, against the claims of reason to certitude.

As explained in the *Munqidh*, these claims of reason are not refuted in the same way reason itself has earlier refuted the claims of the senses. They are merely subjected to doubt by means of analogical argumentations. Still, it is a doubt which reason proves unable to dispel in an incontrovertible manner. Reason is reminded of the possibility of another judge superior to itself, which if it were to reveal itself would "give the lie to

16. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
17. *Ibid*, p.65.





the judgments of reason, just as the reason-judge revealed itself and gave the lie to the judgments of sense"[18]. The mere fact of the non- appearance of this other judge does not prove the impossibility of its existence.

This inner debate within the soul of al-Ghazzālī turned for the worse when its suggestion of the possibility of another kind of perception beyond reason was reinforced by various kinds of evidences and argumentations. First of all, an appeal was made to reason to exercise the principle of analogy to the phenomena of dreaming. Through this principle, reason would have realized that the relation of this suggested supra-rational state to our waking state, when the senses and reason are fully functional, is like the relation of the latter to our dreaming state. If our waking state judges our imaginings and beliefs in the dreaming state to be groundless, the supra-rational state likewise judges our rational beliefs.

This argumentation appears as if al-Ghazzālī, himself one of the most respected jurists, was addressing the jurists and other proponents of reason, who were well-versed with the principle of analogy. We are not suggesting here that these targeted groups were in al-Ghazzālī's mind at the time he was experiencing this inner debate. His indirect reference to them could well have surfaced at the time of his writing the *Munqidh* inasmuch as this work was written with a view of impressing upon the rationalists that Islamic epistemology affirms supra-rational perceptions as the real key to knowledge. Thus, al-Ghazzālī reproaches the rationalists in the *Munqidh*: "Therefore, whoever thinks that the unveiling of truth depends on precisely formulated proofs has indeed straitened the broad mercy of God"[19].

Next to confront reason in support of the possibility of a supra-rational state was the presence of a group of people called the Sufis, who claimed that they had actually experienced that state. They alleged that during their experience of these supra-

18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid*, p.66.

rational states, they saw phenomena which are not in accord with the normal data of reason. Finally, the last piece of evidence brought to the attention of reason is the prophetic saying, "Men are asleep: then after they die they awake", and the Quranic verse "Thou was heedless of this; now have We removed thy veil, and sharp is thy sight this day"[20]. Both the ḥadīth and the Quranic verse quoted refer to man's state after death, and reason is told that, may be, this is the state in question.

All these objections to the claim of reason to have the final say to truth could not be refuted satisfactorily by reason. The mysterious malady of al-Ghazzālī's soul, which lasted for nearly two months, is none other than this inner tussle or tension between its rational faculty and another faculty which mounts an appeal to the former, through the senses, to accept its existence and the possibility of those experiences that have been associated with its various powers, such as those claimed by the Sufis. This other faculty, which is supra-rational and supra-logical, is the intuitive faculty which, at this particular stage of al-Ghazzālī's intellectual life, had not yet developed beyond the mere ability to theorize and acknowledge the possibility of supra-rational experiences. Later, during a period of intense spiritual life, he claimed to have been invested with higher powers of the faculty, which disclosed to him innumerable mysteries of the spiritual world[21]. These powers al-Ghazzālī termed *kashf* (direct vision) and *dhawq* (translated as *fruitional experience* by McCarthy, and *immediate experience* by Watt)[22].

The gradational movement from sense-data to rational data presented no serious difficulty, but the first direct encounter between his rational and intuitive experiences proved to be a painful one for al-Ghazzālī. His two-month period of being

20. *The Quran*, Chapter L (*Qaf*), Verse 22.
21. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p.94.
22. *Ibid*, p.95; Watt, *op. cit.*, p.62. On the various terms used in Islamic thought for intuition, and on the question of the relationship between intellect and intuition in the Islamic perspective, see Nasr, "Intellect and Intuition. . ."





"sceptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine" was the period of having to endure intense doubts about the reliability of his rational faculty in the face of certain assertive manifestations of the intuitive faculty. His problem was one of finding the rightful place for each of the human faculties of knowing within the total scheme of knowledge, and, in particular, of establishing the right relationship between reason and intuition, as this latter term is traditionally understood.

Thus, when he was cured of this sickness, not through rational arguments or logical proofs but through the effect of a light *(nūr)* which God cast into his breast, his intellectual equilibrium was restored, and he once again accepted the reliability of rational data of the category of *ḍarūriyyāt*. However, in this newfound intellectual equilibrium, reason no longer occupied the dominant position it used to have. In al-Ghazzālī's own words, that light which God cast into his breast is the key to most knowledge[23].

We do not agree with the view of certain scholars that the method of doubt is something central to al-Ghazzālī's epistemology and system of thought. The *Munqidh* does not support the view that al-Ghazzālī was advocating systematic doubt as an instrument in the investigation of truth[24]. And there is nothing to be found in it, which is comparable to Descartes' assertion that "it is necessary once in one's life to doubt of all things, so far as this is possible"[25]. This brings us to the question of the true nature of al-Ghazzālī's first personal crisis.

McCarthy describes al-Ghazzālī's crisis of scepticism as an epistemological crisis, which is of the intellect alone, in contrast to his second personal crisis which is a crisis of conscience, and of the spirit[26]. Father Poggi, whose *Un Classico della Spiritualita Musulmana* is considered by McCarthy to be one of the finest studies on al-Ghazzālī and the *Munqidh*, does not

23. Al-Ghazzālī, *Munqidh*. . ., p. 13.
24. This view is discussed in Sami M. Najm, *op. cit.*
25. Descartes, *Principles*, pt. 1, 1 in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, (New York, 1955).
26. McCarthy, *op. cit*, p.xxix.

consider the youthful scepticism of al-Ghazzālī as real but purely a *methodical* one[27]. Another celebrated Italian Orientalist, Guiseppe Furlani, also agrees that the doubt of al-Ghazzālī is not that of a sceptic, but rather of a critic of knowledge[28].

We agree with the common view of these scholars that, at the time of his crisis, al-Ghazzālī was neither a philosophical nor a religious sceptic, and that the crisis was an epistemological or methodical one. The *Munqidh* provides ample evidence to support this view. Al-Ghazzālī was not a philosophical sceptic because he never contested the value of metaphysical certitude. He was always certain of the *de jure* certitude of truth. Thus, as we have earlier mentioned, he never questioned the possibility of knowledge of *ḥaqā'iq al-umūr*. His natural, intellectual disposition toward seeking that knowledge was, in a way, an affirmation of his personal conviction in the *de jure* certitude of truth.

According to Schuon, it is the agnostics and other relativists who sought to demonstrate the illusory character of the *de jure* certitude of truth by opposing to it the *de facto* certitude of error, as if the psychological phenomenon of false certitudes could prevent true certitudes from being what they are and from having all their effectiveness and as if the very existence of false certitudes did not prove in its own way the existence of true ones[29]. As for al-Ghazzālī, he never fell into the above philosophical temptation of the agnostics and relativists. His doubt was not of truth itself, but of modes of knowing and modes of accepting truth. But, since by truth, he meant here the inner reality of things, his quest for that reality also implied a quest for its corresponding mode of knowledge.

27. Vincenzo M. Poggi, *Un classico della Spiritualita Musulmana* (Rome: Libreria dell' Universita Gregoriana, 1967), p. 171.
28. Giuseppe Furlani, "Dr. J. Obermann, Der philos. und regligiose Subjektivismus Ghazalis," (Recensione) in *Revista trimestrale di studi filosoficie religiose*, vol.III, no.2, pp. 340-53. (Perugia, 1922). McCarthy in his above cited work provides an English translation of some excerpts from Furlani's above review, see pp. 388-390.
29. F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p.44.





His criticism of all modes of knowing that were then within his practical reach was motivated by a real theoretical awareness of the possibility of another mode of knowing, which the Sufis claim as theirs. In the case of al-Ghazzālī, this possibility must have agitated his mind right from the time it was first impressed upon him through his direct personal encounter with the way of the Sufis. We may recall here the early educational background of al-Ghazzālī. It was an education which was permeated by a strong influence of Sufism. His father, says al-Subkī, was a pious dervish who spent as much time as he could in the company of the Sufis[30].

The first teacher to whom his early education was entrusted was a pious Sufi friend of his. Studying together with him then was his younger brother, Aḥmad al-Ghazzālī (d. 1126) who, though less famous, later made his mark as a great Sufi whose disciples include 'Abd al-Qāhir Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 1168), the founder of the Suhrawardiyyah Order, and most probably, as believed by a number of scholars, al-Ghazzālī himself. As a student at Naishapur, one of the subjects he studied was Sufism. He also became a disciple to the Sufi, Abū 'Alī al-Faḍl ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Fārmadhī al-Ṭūsī, who was a pupil of al-Qushairī (d. 465/1074). Al-Ghazzālī learnt from al-Fārmadhī (d. 477/1084) the theory and practice of Sufism and, under the latter's guidance, even indulged in certain ascetic and spiritual practices.

He was increasingly attracted to the idea of a direct personal experience of God emphasized by the Sufis. However, he felt a bit disheartened when, in these early attempts at following the Sufi path, he failed to attain that stage where the mystics begin to receive pure inspiration from "high above"[31]. In the light of this background, there is a strong reason to believe that Sufism plays a central role in leading al-Ghazzālī to his

30. Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'iyyah al-kubrā* (Cairo, 1324/1906), vol. IV, p. 102, quoted in M. Saeed Sheikh, *op. cit.*, pp. 582-283.
31. Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, English translation by de Slane, (Paris, 1842-1871), vol. II, p. 122.

epistemological crisis. Al-Ghazzālī's doubt of the trustworthiness of reason was not generated from "below" or by the reflection of reason upon its own self, but was suggested from "above" as a result of his acquaintance with the Sufi's mode of knowledge, which claims to be supra-rational and which "offers its own critique of reason". Likewise, the doubt was removed not through the power of reason, but from "above" as a result of the light of divine grace, which restores to each faculty of knowledge its rightful position and its validity and trustworthiness at its own level.

Al-Ghazzālī was also never at any time a religious sceptic. He tells us in the *Munqidh* that, throughout his quest for certainty, he always had an unshakable belief in the three fundamentals of the Islamic faith:

> "From the sciences which I had practiced and the methods which I had followed in my inquiry into the two kinds of knowledge, revealed and rational, I had already acquired a sure and certain faith in God Most High, in the prophetic mediation of revelation, and in the Last Day. These three fundamentals of our Faith had become deeply rooted in my soul, not because of any specific, precisely formulated proofs, but because of reasons and circumstances and experiences too many to list in detail."[32]

The above quotation is yet another evidence provided by the *Munqidh* that al-Ghazzālī's so called scepticism is not to be equated with the scepticism encountered in modern western philosophy. The doubting mind of al-Ghazzālī was never cut off from revelation and faith. On the contrary, it was based upon a "sure and certain" faith in the fundamentals of religion. As for the doubting mind of the modern sceptic, it is cut off from both the intellect and revelation and, in the pursuit of its directionless activity, it has turned against faith itself. Now,

32. McCarthy, *Munqidh* . . ., pp. 90-91.





what is the distinction between the "sure and certain" faith which al-Ghazzālī always had and that certainty which he was ever eager to seek? We will deal briefly with this question because in its very answer lies the significance of the Ghazzalian doubt and also because charges have been leveled against al-Ghazzālī by scholars like J. Obermann[33] that his haunting doubts of objective reality led him to find sanctuary in religious subjectivism.

The answer to the above question is to be found in the idea of certainty *(yaqīn)* in Islamic gnosis. There are degrees of certainty: in the terminology of the Quran, these are *'ilm al-yaqīn* (science of certainty), *'ayn al-yaqīn* (vision of certainty) and *ḥaqq al-yaqīn* (truth of certainty). These have been respectively compared to hearing about the description of fire, seeing fire and being consumed by fire[34]. As applied to al-Ghazzālī's quest for certainty, the "sure and certain" faith, which he claimed he had acquired from his inquiry into the various sciences, referred to *'ilm al-yaqīn*, since his acceptance of the truths concerned was inferential in nature, based as it was upon data furnished by revelation and the authority of the Prophet. In other words, at the level of faith, the particular truth which is the object of the faith is not known directly or with immediacy. Nevertheless, to the extent that in one's act of faith one participates in the truth through both reason and heart, faith already implies a particular level of knowledge and of certainty. Thus, from the beginning of al-Ghazzālī's quest for the true knowledge of the Real, a certain element of certitude was always present.

In the *Kitāb al-'ilm* (Book of Knowledge) of his *magnum opus, Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revivification of the Religious Sciences), al-Ghazzālī discussed the usage of the term *yaqīn* by the major intellectual schools of Islam up to his time. He

33. J. Obermann, *Der philosophische und religiose Subjektivismus Ghazzalis' Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Religions* (Wien und Leipzig, 1921), p. 20.

34. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p.325; also Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din, *The Book of Certainty* (New York, 1974).

identified two distinct meanings to which the term was being applied. In one group were the philosophers *(nuẓẓir)* and the theologians *(mutakallimūn)*, who employed the term to signify lack or negation of doubt, in the sense that the knowledge or the truth in question is established from evidence which leaves no place for any possibility of doubt[35]. The second meaning of the term *yaqīn* was the one adopted by the jurists and the Sufis as well as most of the learned men. *Yaqīn*, in this case, refers to the intensity of religious faith or fervor which involves both the acceptance, by the soul, of that which "prevails over the heart and takes hold of it" and the submission of the soul to that thing in question.

For al-Ghazzālī, both kinds of *yaqīn* need to be strengthened, but it is the second kind of *yaqīn* which is the nobler of the two, since without it serving as an epistemological basis for the first kind of *yaqīn*, the latter would definitely lack epistemic substance and value. Moreover, it fosters religious and spiritual obedience, and praiseworthy habits. In other words, philosophical certainty is of no value if it is not accompanied by submission to the truth and by the transformation of one's being in conformity with that truth. Although the jurists and the Sufis both have been identified with the second kind of *yaqīn*, they are generally concerned with different levels of *yaqīn*. The Sufis are basically concerned with a direct or immediate experience of the Truth, and with submission to the Pure Spirit not merely at the level of external meanings of the *Sharī'ah* (Divine Law) but at all levels of the selfhood. For this reason, the degrees of certainty earlier mentioned properly belong to *ma'rifah* (Islamic gnosis) rather than to *fiqh* (jurisprudence). In al-Ghazzālī's popular terminology in the *Iḥyā'*, these belong to *'ilm al-mukāshafah* (science of revelation) and not to *'ilm al-mu'āmalah* (science of practical religion).

35. Al-Ghazzālī, *Kitāb al-'ilm*, English trans. by Nabih Amin Faris, (Lahore, 1974), pp. 193-194.





Reverting back to al-Ghazzālī's "sure and certain faith", there are, with respect to his ultimate goal, deficiencies both in his modes of knowing and in the submission of his whole being. Deficiency in the former was a root cause of his first personal crisis which, as we have seen, was epistemological in nature. Deficiency in the latter had a lot to do with his second personal crisis which was spiritual, although the two crisis are not unrelated. We have identified al-Ghazzālī's "sure and certain faith" with certainty at the level of *'ilm al-yaqīn* which refers to a particular manner of participation in the Truth. Objectively, if doubts could be generated about the trustworthiness of *'ilm al-yaqīn* as being the highest level of certainty, it is because a higher level of certitude is possible, for as Schuon profoundly says, if man is able to doubt, this is because certitude exists[36].

Al-Ghazzālī's acquaintance with the methodology of the Sufis made hime aware of the *de jure* certitude of truth of a higher level. At the time of his epistemological crisis, he was only certain of this certitude in the sense of *'ilm al-yaqīn*. After the crisis, as a result of the light of intellectual intuition which he received from Heaven, that certainty was elevated to the level of *'ayn al-yaqīn*. This newfound certainty was not the end of al-Ghazzālī's intellectual and spiritual quest. He had a longing for the mystical experience of the Sufis. He had indulged in some of their spiritual practices but without success in terms of fruitional experience. This must have been a lingering source of inner discontent in him. He was to realize later his major fault: he was too engrossed in worldly desires and ambitions such as fame and fortune[37], while the efficacy of spiritual practices presupposes a certain frame of mind and a certain level of spiritual virtues like the sincerity of one's intention.

Al-Ghazzālī mentions in the *Munqidh* that immediately after his first crisis was over, he proceeded to study with greater

36. Schuon, *op. cit.*, p.13.
37. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p.91.

thoroughness the views and methods of the various seekers of the Truth. He divided the seekers into four groups. These were "the *mutakallimūn* (theologians) who allege that they are men of independent judgment and reasoning; the *bāṭinites* who claim to be the unique possessors of *al-ta'līm* (authoritative instruction) and the privileged recipients of knowledge acquired from the Infallible *Imām*; the philosophers who maintain that they are the men of logic and apodeictic demonstration; and finally the Sufis who claim to be the familiars of the Divine Presence and the men of mystic vision and illumination"[38]. There is no doubt that al-Ghazzālī had undertaken this comparative study of all the classes of seekers of the Truth with the view of exhausting all the possibilities and opportunities that were open to him in the pursuit of the highest level of certainty, although by then one could already detect in him a special inclination and sympathy toward Sufism.

At the end of this thorough study, he came to the conclusion that "the Sufis were masters of states *(arbāb al-aḥwāl)* and not purveyors of words *(aṣḥāb al-aqwāl)*"[39]. He also came to realize that there was a great difference between theoretical knowledge and realized knowledge. To illustrate the difference he gave the following example. There is a great difference between our *knowing* the definitions, causes, and conditions of health and satiety and our *being* healthy and sated, between our *knowing* the definition of drunkenness and our *being* drunk, and between our *knowing* the true nature and conditions of asceticism and our actually *practicing* asceticism. Certitude derived from realized knowledge is what *ḥaqq al-yaqīn* is. This knowledge is free from error and doubt because it is not based on conjecture or mental concepts, but it resides in the heart and thus involves the whole of man's being[40].

Realized knowledge, however, demands the transformation of the knower's being. The distinctive characteristic of the Sufi

38. *Ibid*, p. 67.
39. Al-Ghazzālī, *Munqidh* . . . p.35.
40. Nasr, *op. cit.*, p.325.





mode of knowledge, says al-Ghazzālī, is that it seeks the removal of deformations of the soul such as pride, passional attachment to the world and a host of other reprehensible habits and vicious qualities, all of which stand as obstacles to the realization of that knowledge, in order to attain a heart empty of all save God and adorned with the constant remembrance of God[41]. This led al-Ghazzālī to reflect upon his own state of being. He realized the pitiful state of his soul and became certain that he was "on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire"[42] unless he set about mending his ways. Before him now lies the most important decision he has to make in his life. For about six months he incessantly vacillated between the contending pull of worldly desires and the appeals of the afterlife. This is al-Ghazzālī's second personal crisis which is spiritual and far more serious than the first, because it involves a decision of having to abandon one kind of life for another which is essentially opposed to the former. He tells us how, at last, when he has completely lost his capacity to make a choice, God delivers him from the crisis by making it easy for his heart to turn away from the attractions of the world. In the spiritual path of the Sufis, al-Ghazzālī found the light of certainty that he has tirelessly sought from the beginning of his intellectual awareness of what that certainty is.

It is therefore in the light of Islamic epistemology and, especially in the light of the idea of degrees of certainty *(yaqīn)* in Islamic gnosis that the famous Ghazzalian doubt should be studied and understood. When al-Ghazzālī turned to his own inner being to find the light of certainty, it was not an exercise in religious subjectivism or an act of disillusionment with objective reality, as maintained by scholars like Obermann and Furlani. On the contrary, al-Ghazzālī was drawn to the highest objective reality that is. The Ultimate Truth underlying objective

41. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p.90.
42. *Ibid*, p.91.

reality is identical to the Supreme Self underlying human selfhood or man's subjective consciousness. The intellectual and spiritual tradition in which al-Ghazzālī lived and thought made him fully aware of the fact that what veils man from this highest reality is the darkness of his own soul. Therefore in turning to his own inner being, al-Ghazzālī was merely following that traditional path which alone could guarantee, by divine grace, the removal of that veil. This is the universal path of all the real seekers of the Truth, of which al-Ghazzālī was an outstanding example.



# CHAPTER 4

# The Unity of Science and Spiritual Knowledge: The Islamic Experience

*Science,* understood in the restricted sense of an organized, orderly and objective knowledge of the natural order, is not the product of the modern mind alone. Such forms of knowledge had also been extensively cultivated in pre-modern civilizations such as in the Chinese, Indian, and Islamic civilizations. These pre-modern sciences, however, differ from modern science with respect to goals, methodology, sources of inspiration, and their philosophical assumptions concerning man, knowledge, and the reality of the natural world.

Another major difference between pre-modern and modern sciences pertains to the place of science in relation to other kinds of knowledge. In pre-modern civilizations, science was never divorced from spiritual knowledge. On the contrary, one finds an organic unity of science and spiritual knowledge. The main aim of this chapter is to explain how this unity was achieved in pre-modern times. My specific reference is to the Islamic scientific tradition. However, many of the features of Islamic science mentioned here equally apply to the other pre-modern sciences.