
The year 2011 witnessed the 1000th anniversary of the passing away of the eminent scholar Imām al-Ghazālī. For a whole millennium, a range of his works has continued to influence both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. Today, an important piece of research brings new breath to al-Ghazālī’s world of thought. This research, which holds a sensitive position in terms of its timing, belongs to Dr. Noor Shakirah Mat Akhir, a specialist in Islamic Studies in Malaysia. Dr. Noor Shakirah, who completed her doctoral thesis at Leeds University, England, has now developed her research into a book, published in 2010. Her valuable work contains information on a range of topics, including al-Ghazālī’s life, his works and his influence on later periods.

From the title, we can see that the actual focus of her work is al-Ghazālī’s theory of the soul and the concept of personality. To the author the originality of the work lies within the broad investigation of al-Ghazālī’s theories concerning the psychological dispositions of the human being, and his attempts to clarify his distinctive psychological ideas relating to human personality, which has been the philosophical foundation for many academic works.

The first of the seven chapters of the book (pp. 4–17) contains comprehensive information on the socio-political environment of Imām al-Ghazālī and his life and education. The second chapter (pp. 18–84) provides an analysis of al-Ghazālī’s famous autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*. In this chapter, the author assesses the thoughts of al-Ghazālī with reference to ‘knowledge’ along with the stressful periods and hardship he endured throughout his mental and intellectual development. There is also a strong focus on Islamic theology and mysticism and the way in which al-Ghazālī understood these disciplines. The chapter also includes references to a range of other works by al-Ghazālī, providing some criticism of his theological speculation, mystic experience, the instinctiveness of suspicion and the innovations of philosophers. For this reason, the author in the second chapter not only offers a contextual analysis of *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* but also provides important information about al-Ghazālī’s other works including their historical context and chronology, along with information about his audience. In summary, according to al-Ghazālī, if *taṣawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) is under the control of the mind that has been educated and developed through
the Qur'an and Sunnah, then this can be the only place for happiness, wellbeing and bliss (p. 78).

Chapter Three (pp. 85–110) focuses on his magnum opus (Ihya' Ulum al-Din), which he produced during his retirement. The author accepts al-Ghazâlî’s Ihya’ Ulum al-Din as his first sociological research, as it discusses needed reforms for the re-construction of a better society (p. 98). In this chapter, the author provides extensive examples on how al-Ghazâlî through his work, Ihya’ Ulum al-Din, intends to increase the spirituality of the society while simultaneously trying to protect it from worldliness. The fourth chapter (pp. 111–217) summarises the thoughts of three popular Greek philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus) on the nature of the soul. The subject matter of this chapter includes the relationship between the body and soul, and materialism and the divine. She demonstrates similarities and differences in this chapter, and notes the Greek philosophers’ assessment of the importance of the relationship between the body and soul in reference to metaphysics. Following this, she outlines the cosmology of two Muslim philosophers (al-Fârâbî and Avicenna) who concentrate on the study of the relationship between the body and soul. The author notes the influence the Greek philosophers have on Muslim philosophers and points out differences in her detailed analysis. In this framework, the assessment of key concepts such as the soul, commands and knowledge among Muslim philosophers have special importance. As the author notes, with reference to Tritton, the acceptance of the soul is a lot easier than trying to define it (p. 173). Some 106 pages of this chapter are reserved for al-Ghazâlî’s understanding of the soul. Here al-Ghazâlî concentrates on the heart (qalb), spirit (rûh), knowledge (‘ilm) and soul (nafs), stating that the soul of man is under the command of God, that it is the indivisible essence of man, and that it belongs to the world of decrees, and is not everlasting (p. 179). The author later directs our attention to al-Ghazâlî’s differentiation of the carnal and spiritual soul, mentioning that the carnal soul ends with death (p. 180). The spiritual soul is neither physical nor accidental; on the contrary, it is a substance that exists in the heart (p. 185). According to al-Ghazâlî, the existence of the soul in a person is clear evidence of a capacity for knowledge and acceptance of the trust, amânah. Here al-Ghazâlî broadens the topic with reference to knowledge and concludes that the knowledge of the soul is an important step towards the knowledge of God. Among the important topics in this chapter is al-Ghazâlî’s interpretation and acceptance that the knowledge of the soul is the seat of knowledge and that the Prophets are the physicians of the souls.

Chapter Five (pp. 219–252) deals with the spiritual dynamics of al-Ghazâlî’s theory of the soul. In this chapter, the topics of human knowledge
and divine knowledge are discussed in detail and al-Ghazālī’s general opinion on spirituality is also addressed. The key concepts of this chapter pertain to chapters of Kitāb al-‘Ilm in Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn and Mīshkāt al-Anwār. Regular references are made to al-Ghazālī’s theory of the soul and his understanding of the human intellect, considering how the human mind processes information differently, which sets it apart from the intellect of other beings. On the topic of spirituality, the author provides a very good analysis of al-Ghazālī’s construction of a link between knowledge and practice while specifically separating elite and lay people (pp. 245–250).

The sixth chapter (pp. 253–282) studies al-Ghazālī’s concept of character and personality. The author draws attention to the concept of character, identity, persona, individuality and personality, and then discusses how al-Ghazālī follows the Qur’ānic method, interpreting the concept of character and personality from a spiritual rather than a biological perspective (pp. 255–257). The author evaluates al-Ghazālī’s approach to the attributes of good and bad character, mentioning that this is generally the characteristic of the dynamic or dimension of one’s own soul. The researcher, who analyses topics such as character-change, obstacles in the purification of the soul, the middle path, reason, justice and courage within this framework, sometimes notes various contradictions in al-Ghazālī’s works.

The last chapter, chapter seven (pp. 283–298), assesses the paradigm of the soul and the model of the soul, finalising the research with a general conclusion. Without forgetting the nature of the human being, the author refers in this chapter to al-Ghazālī’s assessment of the relationship between the heart, spirit, soul and intellect.

As mentioned at the beginning, her work mainly concentrates on the understanding of the spirit/soul along with the concept of character in al-Ghazālī’s teachings. The author who handles the topic from various perspectives uses rich sources. She assesses al-Ghazālī’s own works in chronological order and cleverly connects his thoughts on the topic with al-Ghazālī’s own personal experience of spiritual development. Furthermore, while it is not very frequent, the author’s criticism of al-Ghazālī is also worth mentioning. With very little error in its writing, the work can be considered an original piece.

While some topics may have been repeated, the book’s rich content is proof that even after a millennium; different perspectives of al-Ghazālī’s works can still be discussed. This book will be a reference for those interested in Islamic studies in general and it will specifically appeal to those interested in philosophical topics. Hopefully this valuable work will lead the way and
expand the horizon for other valuable works on al-Ghazâlî and the theory of soul in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

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