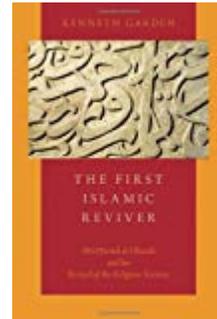




**Kenneth Garden.** *The First Islamic Reviver: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and His Revival of the Religious Sciences.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 256 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-998962-1.



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## Al-Ghazālī the Ascetic Orthodox Sufi or the Philosophically Inclined Revivalist? A Reassessment

The basic contours of Persian scholar Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) life are well known to many. His early life included a bout with radical skepticism, acclaim as a celebrated scholar, and a search for Truth which carried him through the four celebrated schools of thought of his day: Islamic theological discourse (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsāfa*), Ismā'īlism, and mysticism (*taṣawwuf* or Sufism). Al-Ghazālī finally discovered in Sufism that which had been eluding him; however, his love of public prestige hindered his full embrace of its self-renouncing ways, to which God responded by striking him mute and unable to eat. Prodded on by this crisis, al-Ghazālī assumed the life of a spiritual and reclusive peripatetic, setting out on a two-year journey that took him through Damascus, Jerusalem, Medina, and Mecca. Upon his return and in the closing years of his life, al-Ghazālī returned to teaching a changed man.

Or so the story goes. This narrative, taken from al-Ghazālī's autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*), has long served as the hermeneutical key by which many scholars interpret his life and

thought. However, this paradigm has been increasingly subverted by a series of revisionist studies since the 1990s from such scholars as Richard Frank, Jules Janssen, Frank Griffel, and M. Afifi al-Akiti, to name only a few. Such work has questioned portrayals of al-Ghazālī as an "orthodox Sufi" by bringing attention to the ways in which his thought, far from rejecting the philosophical tradition, was grounded in it, particularly that of Ibn Sīnā (known also by his Latin name, Avicenna) (d. 428/1037). Moreover, these scholars have sought to treat al-Ghazālī not only as a scholar but also as a historical actor whose intellectual corpus was shaped by the sociopolitical matrix of the Seljuk-Abbasid order of which he was a prominent member.

To this growing body of scholarship we may now add Kenneth Garden's *The First Islamic Reviver: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and his Revival of the Religious Sciences*. As the title suggests, Garden argues that al-Ghazālī is best understood, not as a world-renouncing seeker with an inward gaze, but rather as an "engaged scholar" who constructed and actively promoted a program of revival

(*iḥyāʾ*) and renewal (*tajdīd*) meant to address the ills of a society in the midst of a social and political crisis (p. 9). The centerpiece of this program was al-Ghazālī's seminal and widely influential work, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*), and it was on the basis of this work that he claimed the mantle of "Renewer" (*mujaddid*) of the century. Although the *Revival* has remained "oddly neglected" (p. 8), Garden argues that by placing it and the historical circumstances surrounding its authorship at the center of our analysis, we gain a more accurate portrait of the organic relationship between al-Ghazālī's life and thought as well as an interpretive context that makes sense of a number of his other works, including *The Scale of Action* (*Mīzān al-ʿamal*) and the *Deliverer* (p. 176).

The book unfolds in three parts: part 1 focuses on al-Ghazālī's life and thought up to his decision to depart from Baghdad in 488/1095 in order to initiate his revivalist program; part 2 examines the *Revival*, its structure, content, and rhetoric; and part 3 surveys al-Ghazālī's final fifteen years in Khurasan promoting his revivalist vision. Garden begins by examining al-Ghazālī as a renowned scholar who came to serve and socialize with the most prominent figures of his day, including the powerful Seljuk vizier Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), the Seljuk sultan Malikshāh (d. 485/1092), and the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadī (d. 487/1094). During this time, he not only taught at the prestigious Nizāmiyya Madrasa in Baghdad, he also immersed himself in politics, acting as an emissary to the Abbasid caliph and, at times, playing the part of the diplomat when tensions flared between the sultan and caliph. Garden argues that Nizām al-Mulk, far from promoting his own network of Shāfiʿī-Ashʿarī madrasas for sectarian purposes, pursued a policy of religious reconciliation in order to maintain social stability. This policy was abandoned, however, with the assassination of Nizām al-Mulk which was followed only months later by the death (and possible assassination) of Sultan Malikshāh and then, a short time later, by the unexpected demise of Caliph al-Muqtadī.

After these events, the Seljuk Empire, only recently at the pinnacle of its power, was reduced to political instability and civil war as various figures struggled for succession. In one of the book's more fascinating insights, Garden states that this climate profoundly impacted al-Ghazālī and set him on the path of his revivalist project. This stemmed from his realization that a Muslim community which overly relied on the policies of the political regime for its stability and flourishing was bound to be disappointed. In light of these experiences, Garden

writes, al-Ghazālī "began to formulate a new relationship between the pious individual and the government that took these political realities into consideration. Rather than politics guaranteeing a stable environment for the pursuit of individual piety, it was individual piety that would be responsible for guiding the ruler to rule justly" (p. 27). As a consequence of this growing disillusionment with the politics of his day and in order to pursue his new project, al-Ghazālī severed his ties with Baghdad and set out on a journey that would take him to Damascus, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina; however, rather than embracing the life of a reclusive scholar, he corresponded and personally met with a network of scholars and court officials in order to spread the revivalist message he was beginning to formulate.

According to Garden, a focus on individual and communal piety rather than on a just ruler became the *sine qua non* of al-Ghazālī's project of revival. That is, there was a noticeable shift of emphasis in his thought from politics to ethics. This is not to say that al-Ghazālī's political thought held no place for either the sultan or the caliph, for, in such works as *The Scandals of the Esotericists and Virtues of the Mustazhirites* (*Fadāʾiḥ al-bāṭiniyya wa faḍāʾil al-mustazhiriyya*) and *The Balanced Book of What-to-Believe* (*al-Iqtisād fī al-iʿtiqād*), he continued to emphasize the necessity of both the sultan and caliph to the community of believers. However, Garden argues, a distinct emphasis on the cultivation of virtuous character in the pursuit of piety and salvation came to characterize al-Ghazālī's work, most notably the *Scale* and the *Revival*. In fact, Garden claims that the *Scale* is a sort of first draft of the *Revival*, both of which reveal the centrality of ethics, or, as it was broadly understood in the philosophical tradition, Practical Science, to al-Ghazālī's thought during this period.

The last chapter of part 1 and the first chapter of part 2 bleed together in their comparative analyses of the *Scale* and the *Revival*. Both treatises addressed the topic of the quest for felicity in the hereafter (*al-saʿāda al-ukhrawiyya*), a state beyond salvation which is attained through the acquisition of ethical practice (*ʿamal*) and theoretical knowledge (*ʿilm*). Garden points out that al-Ghazālī adapted elements for use in the *Scale* and the *Revival* from Sufism as well as from figures shaped by the philosophical tradition such as al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108) and Ibn Sīnā. These influences manifested themselves in the Aristotelian-Avicennan division between the practical and theoretical sciences as well as in the ethical theory that permeates both works. However, never one for slavish imitation, al-Ghazālī created a synthesis of Su-

fism and philosophy that viewed the habituation of virtuous character through practice and the pursuit of divine knowledge through rational investigation as interdependent sciences for the attainment of felicity.

Perhaps most striking about this paradigm which Garden argues is consistently found in both the *Scale* and the *Revival* is that, while Sufism provided a suitable path to achieve felicity in the afterlife, it was the rational investigation of an elite group al-Ghazālī referred to as the “Theoreticians” (*nuzzār*) that proved itself a surer method still. This was so because the epistemic standard of rational demonstration (*burhān al-‘aql*) embraced by the Theoreticians prevented the uncritical acceptance of ecstatic experience found among Sufis. Far from being antithetical to the Sufism, however, the Theoreticians endorsed the Sufi emphasis on praxis as the most effective means of taming the passions and themselves pursued this path in conjunction with one that was more philosophically inclined. Moreover, al-Ghazālī spoke of Sufi practice as a live option for a subset of the Theoreticians (“the elite of the elite”) who possessed the requisite capabilities to attain a more profound mystical knowledge than that made possible by rational enquiry alone. As Garden notes, al-Ghazālī surely considered himself a candidate for this hybrid path.

While the *Scale* and the *Revival* share the elements elaborated above, Garden notes that we find a more comprehensive account of the practical sciences in the *Revival*. This stemmed from al-Ghazālī’s intention to appeal to a broad audience, a desire which also led him to conceal the philosophical influences more on display in the *Scale*. Thus, what was “Theoretical Science” (*al-‘ilm al-nazarī*) in the *Scale* became the “Science of Unveiling” (*al-‘ilm al-mukāshafa*) in the *Revival*, and what had been “Practical Science” (*al-‘ilm al-‘amali*) in the *Scale* was now the “Science of Praxis” (*al-‘ilm al-mu‘amala*). However, as Garden writes, “behind these novel titles, the content of these disciplines has changed little” (p. 69).

As al-Ghazālī made clear, rather than the Science of Unveiling, the focus of the *Revival* was the Science of Praxis, which reflected the influences of law, *kalām*, Sufism, and philosophy. In this way it was more inclusive of the range of religious sciences that constitute the Islamic tradition than the account of Practical Science found in the *Scale*; hence the *Revival*’s sprawling nature. It consists of four quarters that contain ten books each, covering ritual observance (*‘ibādāt*), daily customs (*‘ādāt*), destructive vices (*muhlikāt*), and saving virtues (*munjiyāt*). These areas which together comprise the Sci-

ence of Praxis weave together ritual and legal obligations into a philosophical ethical framework such that proper intention informs the performance of ritual while ritual aids in the cultivation of proper intention.

While a preponderance of the attention in the *Revival* is given to the Science of Praxis, this along with the Science of Unveiling together constitute the “Science of the Hereafter” (*‘ilm al-ākhirah*), which is meant to equip one with the resources necessary for achieving felicity in the afterlife. Al-Ghazālī presents the Science of the Hereafter, not as a novel development, but rather as a reformation of the religious sciences intent on returning them to their state during the time of the “righteous forbearers” (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). This is required because the practitioners of the law and *kalām* have corrupted the Muslim community by treating their disciplines as means to acquire wealth and notoriety in this world at the expense of righteousness in the next. Therefore, only by executing this return can the flourishing of the community be assured, and, al-Ghazālī asserts, the Science of the Hereafter can expedite this process. In his analysis, Garden brings attention not only to the intellectual genealogy the Science of the Hereafter, but also to the rhetorical strategy undergirding al-Ghazālī’s presentation of it, which he refers to as a “narrative of revival.”

The theme of al-Ghazālī as activist scholar continues in part 3, where Garden discusses al-Ghazālī’s efforts to promote and defend his revivalist message during his two-year sojourn as well as following his return to teaching in Nishapur. Based on a number of Persian letters, Garden states that al-Ghazālī corresponded with other scholars and court officials in order to recruit students who might practice and propagate his vision of religious reform. Some of these individuals became his disciples, most notably Fakhr al-Mulk (d. 500/1106), son of al-Ghazālī’s former patron, Niẓām al-Mulk, and vizier to the Seljuk King of the East, Sanjar (d. 552/1157). More significantly, Garden considers a number of later works to be, in part, attempts by al-Ghazālī to defend himself from the criticism of a series of controversial claims made in the *Revival*. The controversy seems to have stemmed from an allegory about the relationship between God and the world which reflected the influence of Ibn Sīnā’s monistic cosmology. This emanationist account of the cosmos was taken not only to betray the corrupting influence of philosophy but also to threaten God’s sovereignty and independence. Garden’s argument about the defensive nature of al-Ghazālī’s later works is most convincing and most interesting when discussing the *Deliverer*. Far from simply being an autobiography, Garden argues that this

work was apologetic in its identification of al-Ghazālī with Sufism.

There is much to be commended in this study of al-Ghazālī. Relying on a synthesis of recent revisionist accounts of al-Ghazālī's work, historical scholarship, rhetorical analysis, and original insights, Garden puts forward a compelling argument for placing the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* at the center of al-Ghazālī's life and thought. Garden gives us an al-Ghazālī enmeshed not only in the scholarly but also in the social and political controversies of his day, an al-Ghazālī accomplished not only in law, *kalām*, philosophy, and Sufism, but in *realpolitik* as well. To be sure, other scholars too have brought attention to these elements; however, Garden's unique contribution lies in his historically contextualized analysis of both al-Ghazālī's extensive (yet critical) appropriation of the philosophical tradition as well as his claim to be the century's divinely appointed Renewer. As mentioned above, this brings with it substantial benefits, but it also raises a number of questions.

Garden, along with much recent scholarship, has brought needed attention to the ways in which al-Ghazālī's was shaped by philosophy, perhaps most significantly that of Ibn Sīnā. Importantly, this challenges long-regnant perceptions which hold, not only that al-Ghazālī opposed philosophy *en toto*, but that his incisive criticism brought about its demise in the religious sciences and the subsequent decline of the Muslim world. However, after reading Garden's book, one would be forgiven for forgetting that al-Ghazālī was also thoroughly shaped by Ash'arite theology. Granted, subjects such as causality and human agency which would likely include reference to Ash'arite theology are not directly germane to the range of topics addressed by Garden; however, one is left wondering where he stands on the issue of the relationship between philosophy and Ash'arite theology in al-Ghazālī's corpus. Interestingly enough,

Michael Marmura's work, which claims a prominent role for Ash'arism in al-Ghazālī's thought, is briefly cited in only one endnote (p. 180).

Regarding the intellectual framework of al-Ghazālī's post-485/1092 project, if we are to describe it as implementing a revivalist agenda which included a turn away from politics towards ethics, that is, as a move from the just ruler towards the individual and community as the surest guarantors of Islam's flourishing, then how are we to understand the subsequent claims made elsewhere in al-Ghazālī's works which emphasize the roles played by the caliph and sultan in ensuring the religious legitimacy of the sociopolitical order? Garden indicates his awareness of these two parallel tracks in al-Ghazālī's thought when he writes that, despite his disillusionment with politics, al-Ghazālī "continued to write about the importance of a just ruler to the community and to the pursuit of piety of its members in the *Revival* and other works" (p. 27). Here Garden speaks as if ethics and politics are best understood in complementary terms whereas elsewhere he seems to argue that, following the instability which resulted from the demise of the Seljuk-Abbasid order's leadership, al-Ghazālī abandoned politics for ethics (p. 67). It would seem that further clarification of the relationship between these two elements in al-Ghazālī's thought is needed.

These minor criticisms notwithstanding, Garden has made a significant contribution to our understanding of al-Ghazālī by bringing attention to him as a multifaceted scholar whose religious scholarship sought to address the social and political crises of his day. Moreover, this study on al-Ghazālī as revivalist sheds light on why subsequent reformist movements up to the contemporary period have deployed the vocabulary of "revival" in ways that reflect the imprint of this pivotal figure in the Islamic tradition.

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