

Al-Ghazali on Theological Tolerance

Asma Barlas

It is truly illuminating to read the work of Islam's most famous theologian, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, against the backdrop of religious politics (specially, the application of blasphemy laws) in Pakistan today. Of particular relevance is his *Faysal al-tafriqa bayna al-islam wa al-zandaqa*, which Sherman Jackson translates as "The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity" (*On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2002). In this book, al-Ghazali defines the methodological criteria by means of which Muslims can legitimately distinguish between belief and unbelief (*kufir*). However, in this essay, I discuss not his methodology—which emphasizes the need for reasoned and logical proofs—but those parts of his argument that bear on intolerance, claims to interpretive authority, and the rush to accuse people of *kufir*, since these are exceptionally pertinent to the problems in Pakistan.

As a way to situate *Faysal* both theologically and politically, Jackson makes a number of arguments. First, he points out that heresy was not always "synonymous with infidelity or apostasy" in classical Islam because scholars differentiated between formal and material heresy; it thus connoted "several categories of theological deviance," including *kufir* (3). For al-Ghazali, *kufir* is "purely a matter of rejecting the truthfulness of the Prophet Muhammad [pbuh]. Beyond this, it reveals, *in and of itself*, virtually nothing about a person's moral or religious constitution." Thus, "a *kafir* (*qua kafir*) is neither immoral, irreligious, nor exempt from receiving recognition—in this world—for the good he or she commits" (which is why, says Jackson, to use *kafir* "as a moral, ethnic, cultural, or even civilizational delineator ...[is] a patent misuse of the category") (7).

Second, while theology functions as a "category of exclusion," al-Ghazali's aim was "to define the boundaries within which competing theologies can coexist in mutual recognition" (4, 5). Such a project necessitates not only tolerance, but also a method for determining "acceptable theological interpretation." In this context—a thousand years before modernist Muslim scholars began to critique traditionalist methodologies for the same reasons—al-Ghazali rebuked the tendency (of both traditionalists and rationalists) to ignore that "interpretive presuppositions...are historically determined," and to conflate "*interpretation* and *revelation*" (6). Indeed, on his views, it was both these tendencies that were responsible for religious extremism in his day.

According to al-Ghazali, obscuring the historical situatedness of scholars and their work—"the very invisibility of the theologian's history"—is what makes "both him and his theology so powerful" by promoting the idea that he is "transcendent" and "harbours no biases, carries no past, and labours under no provisional, half-, or untrue premises" (67). This fiction enables the confusion of revelation with its interpretation and allows different schools to insist "that anyone who opposes their doctrine effectively charges the Prophet with lying" (6).

This was customary during al-Ghazali's lifetime—and in fact it was the “ease and frequency” with which the ulema made such claims that consumed “the bulk of [his] attention in *Faysal*” (39)—but while he refers to this issue only in passing, as Jackson makes clear, the struggle for interpretive hegemony always entails repression. In this regard, Jackson makes the important point that just because there is no formal authority (like a clergy) in Islam does not mean that there is no orthodoxy or that Muslims don't curb theological dissent by such informal means as “the threat of stigma, malicious gossip, ostracism, or verbal attack by respected members in the community” (30).

If Jackson's introduction shows how little some things have changed in a millennium in Muslim societies, al-Ghazali's work shows the subversive potential inherent in Islamic theology that has been repressed and marginalized during the course of Muslim history.

Three of al-Ghazali's arguments are particularly revolutionary. First, in response to charges of *kufir* against himself (for having broken with traditional doctrines of his time) al-Ghazali asks what gives anyone “this monopoly over the truth ... Why should one of these parties enjoy a monopoly over the truth to the exclusion of the other?” (89). He shows—by contrasting the Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite position on a couple of issues—that there is indeed no basis for such claims and ends by saying that anyone who gives others “a monopoly over the truth is himself closer to being guilty of both Unbelief and contradictoriness” inasmuch as that person privileges others over the Prophet (91).

Second, al-Ghazali condemns “casting aspersions on the people of Islam—however much their ways may differ—while they hold fast to the statement, ‘There is no god but God; Muhammad is His messenger,’ being sincere therein” (92). That is, religious diversity in Islam is not a problem so long as Muslims share core convictional beliefs. In fact, al-Ghazali does not even view *bid'a* (“unsanctioned innovation”) as “an act of Unbelief” (114) and goes so far as to say that “not everyone who embraces senseless hallucinations must be branded an Unbeliever, even if his doctrines are clearly absurd” (119-120). He also questions whether consensus (*ijma*) can be used as the yardstick for judging what is acceptable or not, given the difficulties of defining consensus consensually.

Finally, al-Ghazali questions the authority of religious scholars and jurists to pass judgments about *kufir*. As he says: “those who rush to condemn people who go against ...any ...school as Unbelievers are reckless ignoramuses. For, how could the jurist, purely on the basis of his mastery of Islamic law (*fiqh*), assume this enormous task? In what branch of the law does he encounter the (aforementioned) skills and sciences? So when you see the jurist who knows nothing but law plunging into matters of branding people Unbelievers or condemning them as misguided, turn away from him and occupy neither your heart nor your tongue with him. For, challenging others with one's knowledge is a deeply ingrained human instinct over which the ignorant are able to exercise no control” (120).

How much more clearly can one say this and what more is there left to say?