The Study of al-Ghazālī and its Problems (II)

—with reference to his conversion and retirement—

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Al-Ghazālī’s “sudden” retirement from the professorship at Niẓāmiyyah College in order to lead a simple Sūfī life was an enigma even to his own generation, though it was in reality the most significant event in his life, and in the whole history of Islam as well (in the sense that it was symbolic of the turning-point in the history of Islam from the “communal” type of faith to the “mystical” one). Toward the end of his life, al-Ghazālī composed a book for apologia pro vita sua, entitled al-Munjidh min al-Ḍalāl, in which he explained the reasons why he had quit Niẓāmiyyah at Baghdad and resumed afterwards the teaching position at Niẓāmiyyah at Nishapur, and so on.

Thus it is quite natural that the Munqidh was, and has been, regarded as the primary source material for the study of the inner development of al-Ghazālī’s life. And his retirement from the public life and his subsequent devotion to the Sūfī way were traditionally explained, according to his own description in the Munqidh, more or less as the consummation of the inner psychological conflict between his seeking after God and his worldly concern.

It seems improbable, however, that the unexpected retirement of such a great church doctor as al-Ghazālī took place in complete isolation from the politico-religious situations as is depicted in the Munqidh. This is particularly so since Islam is a religion which is religiously and positively concerned with the mundane life of the Muslims as well. Furthermore, it was also perhaps inevitable for al-Ghazālī as a Sūfī,
when he composed the *Munqidh*, to tend to view his past (pre-Sufi) life from the Sufi standpoint. All this suggests that we should be very critical of the *Munqidh* as the primary source, even though we can not deny the main story of it.

Thus there have recently appeared some new approaches to this problem and challenged the “traditional” interpretation of the event. They are all sceptical in some way or other about the *Munqidh* as the primary source and try to interpret it in the sociological and historical context, relying rather on other materials. W. M. Watt, though still accepting the essential truth of al-Ghazâli’s account, attempts to see the significance of his conversion in the intellectual history of Islam. On the other hand, Baqari, who goes so far as to deny al-Ghazâli’s sincerity in his account and regard the *Munqidh* as a total fiction, explains his retirement as motivated by his desire for fame. F. Jabre attributes it to his fear of assassination by the Ismâ‘îlis whom he had criticized before in his intellectual efforts to renew Islam. According to Sawwaf, al-Ghazâli, estranged and isolated from the ‘ulama’ and the political authority because of his turn to Sufism in his search for the new reformed Islam in place of the old “communal” one (“statisme”), took the retirement as the opportunity to put into practice his cherished ideal.

These scholars explain al-Ghazâli’s decision in different terms from his own in the *Munqidh*, attributing it to the external factors without regard to his subjective intention. The question, however, is whether or not the proposed explanations fit logically well into the whole life and thought of al-Ghazâli. This suggests that the external factors be not directly related to his behaviors, but rather through his own interpretation of them. And the desirable way to understand his interpretation of these factors will be to review the *Munqidh* against the back-
ground of the contents of his entire writings arranged in chronological order. This also raises another complicated problem of the chronology and authenticity of his works.

(To be continued)