Ghazali's Theory of Mystical Exercises

— with Reference to Dhikr and Du'ā’ —

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Following our previous examination of Ghazali's idea of dhikr and du'ā’ in his general theory of mystical exercises in *The Memoirs* (No. 53), we first discuss in this issue how they are effectively put into practice in the daily life of the Sufi. Ghazali divides the whole day into twelve parts (wird), each of which consists of particular practices of dhikr and du'ā’ and other exercises. All this werd rules (and the prescribed supplications (du'ā’') for unexpected events) are designed in such a way that as the Sufi performs them he is constantly reminded of God, the Creator, in his daily activities.

We then try to identify Ghazali's dhikr and du'ā’ and analyse them in terms of F. Heiler's "prayer" and its typology. Heiler proposes two types of prayer: one is mystical (das mystische Gebet) and the other prophetic (das prophetische Gebet). The motive and form of mystical prayer are simple—ecstatic absorption and union with God by systematic annihilation of the self and detachment from the world. Prayer for the mystic, therefore, is preliminary and preparatory, and the verbal prayer of the mystic soon passes into wordless prayer and silent contemplation of God.

On the other hand, the prophet is a man fighting as a "tool" of God to transform the world according to the revealed norms. He is always conscious of the presence of a living, personal God, but this consciousness does not lead to union with God as it does in the mystic. Because of this vital feeling of the nearness of God, the prophet turns to God and calls upon Him at every moment of emotional upheaval in him
mission, be it a crisis or a joyful exaltation. He prays to God for anything ranging from worldly things to spiritual values. Prayer for the prophet is essentially spontaneous, not methodical as it is for the mystic.

Now there is no question that Ghazali’s whole idea of “prayer” belongs to this category of mystical prayer, except the type of mental dhikr as meditative exercise of cultivating certain moods, methodically by remembering something other than God (Type II). Nonetheless, du'ā’ is apparently of prophetic type and as such it is extensively used in harmony with the whole scheme of Ghazali’s mystical exercises. How should we understand this? First of all, it is undeniably due to Ghazali’s preference of the Prophetic traditions (Sunna) to “mystical prayers” of his own and other Sufis’ composition. It is, however, mainly because of the fact that prophetic prayer is related to almost every occasion of ordinary men’s daily life without any restriction to the object of supplication as in mystical prayer. According to Ghazali’s contention, man’s concern gradually shifts from worldly things to God, the Ultimate, in his constant prayer to God, no matter what the object of prayer may be. Ghazali is more concerned with the inner attitude of the suppliant. In this idea of du'ā’ we see his careful, methodical consideration for the mystical goal.

Furthermore, the combination of dhikr and du'ā’, namely, that of mystical prayer with a strong prophetic element, as a mystical practice is very significant for the following reason. Dhikr, or repeated pronouncement of the divine name as the final step toward unity with God stresses by nature human initiative and the effort of man’s will. Herein lies a grave danger of misconstruing special gift of God as the result of his own work and claiming it for himself by means of a “guaranteed” technique. This danger is averted by the practice of du'ā’ which stresses the divine initiative behind man’s act.

In conclusion, Ghazali’s mystical prayer is strongly tinged with the
prophetic element. This means for one thing that Ghazali’s mystical exercises are intended for ordinary men as well as the Sufi professionals—reinterpretation of the whole Islamic system in terms of Sufism. At the same time, his mystical thought is also highly prophetic and remains “orthodox.” On the other hand, because of this very stress on prayer as a preparatory method in the Sufi Way, there is little room in Ghazali’s prayer for another important aspect of mystical prayer, that is, confidential and loving talk (munājāt) with God.

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