

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 Nizāmiyah College in order to lead a simple Sūfi 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-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, in which he explained the reasons why he had quit Nizāmiyah at Baghdad and resumed afterwards the teaching position at Nizāmiyah 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 Sūfi 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 *Sūfi*,

when he composed the *Munqidh*, to tend to view his past (pre-Sūfi) life from the Sūfi 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-Ghazālī's account, attempts to see the significance of his conversion in the intellectual history of Islam. On the other hand, Baqarī, who goes so far as to deny al-Ghazālī'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 Ismā'īlis whom he had criticized before in his intellectual efforts to renew Islam. According to Sawwaf, al-Ghazālī, estranged and isolated from the 'ulama' and the political authority because of his turn to Sūfism 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-Ghazālī'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-Ghazālī. 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)