

**Al-Ghazali's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul:  
Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology  
and Eschatology of the *Ihya'***

*Timothy Gianotti*

*Leiden: Brill, 2001. 205 pages.*

Gianotti's purpose behind this monograph is to draw out Ghazali's position on the vexed question of the true nature of the soul and its state in the after-life. Ghazali's actual views on this question have been a point of serious debate in both the Muslim intellectual tradition and Ghazali scholarship in the West. At the heart of this debate lies the question of his true allegiance: Was the man, widely held to be the *mujaddid* (renewer of religion) of the fifth Islamic century, a full-fledged Asharite, as tradition has made him out to be, or was he, as others have suggested, a closet Avicennian? Or was he, to complicate matters even further, neither? The source of the problem rests on the apparently conflicting doctrines he articulated in various places concerning the soul in various places in his vast and multi-layered literary *oeuvre*. These seeming inconsistencies led Averroes, in the thirteenth century, to accuse Ghazali of adhering "to no one doctrine in his books," and of being a Sufi with Sufis, an Asharite theologian with the Asharites, and a philosopher with the philosophers (p. 19).

Gianotti confesses that the "tensions and ambiguities are real and beg resolution" (p. 8). He poignantly asks, however, whether they were the "unintentional mess left by a brilliant but indiscipled mind," or whether

the master was fully aware of the apparently conflicting views he expressed in different places. Favoring the second view, he notes that Ghazali differentiated between religious doctrines that could be openly expressed and those that could not. These latter comprised the esoteric teachings of the mystics, the domain to which the nature of the soul and the spirit belong.

Gianotti argues that the tensions in Ghazali's writings reflect his pious restraint in treating the soul's true nature. Yet how is this restraint to be reconciled with what appear to be definitive statements about the soul scattered across his writings? The author's response to this question lays out the method for his entire study: Ghazali's writings should be divided into four categories: *falsafah* (philosophy), *kalam* (theology), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *tasawwuf* ("mysticism"). Confusion regarding Ghazali's position on the soul arises when we begin to cross the lines separating one category of discourse from another, or, put another way, when we attempt to extrapolate from one kind of discourse more than he intended to convey in it.

The purpose of Ghazali's philosophical works, notes Gianotti, is primarily to exposit and refute the views of the Muslim philosophers, primarily Avicenna, and, to a lesser extent, Farabi. He does, admittedly, in this genre and on more than one occasion, taken the positions of his interlocutors: a tactic consciously employed in the *Tahafut* for the purpose of argumentation, to demonstrate to the philosophers that even if we accept some of their premises, we are not forced to reach, through their own methods, the same conclusions that they have. But Gianotti also shows that Ghazali's relation to Islamic philosophy was far more complex and ambivalent than one might presume, judging from his public condemnation of certain philosophical positions. This complexity is brought to the fore once we begin to examine his writings on the soul in his mystical writings. The author, in effect, demonstrates that although Ghazali has commonly been perceived as "anti-philosophical," his actual views were much closer to those of Avicenna than we might be led to think.

As for his *kalam* works, one has to keep in mind Ghazali's own views about the limitations of this science: Its purpose is simply to safeguard the faith and articulate the basic Islamic creed. Gianotti writes that Ghazali does not explicate, as one might expect, the soul's true nature in this genre. He also demonstrates, through a very close reading of his main Asharite theological texts (viz., the *Qawa'id al-'Aqa'id* and *Al-Iqtisad fi al-'Itiqad*), that Ghazali did not ascribe entirely to Asharite notions of the soul. Gianotti illustrates this through a close examination of Ghazali's use and understanding of the term *jawhar* (substance), showing that he was less an Asharite than one would think on the basis of his theological profession. As for his legal works, their purpose is simply juridical in nature.

Most of Ghazali's mystical writings are pragmatic in nature. The purpose of these works, primarily the *Ihya'*, is to encourage the faithful to piety and sincere religious devotion. This fourth category is concerned with what he called "the Science of the Way of the Afterlife." This is a science that divides into the practical (*mu`amalah*) and the theoretical (*mukashafah*). Even in this genre, however, Ghazali does not openly explicate the secret of the soul, precisely because of its esoteric nature. But he does leave intimations and clues within the *Ihya'* to alert the minds of more perceptive readers to glimpses of this esoteric knowledge. Gianotti laboriously follows these subtle allusions and takes them to their most logical end. He concludes that although Ghazali was neither a full-fledged Asharite nor a closet Avicennian, his position comes very close to that of Avicenna. For the medieval thinker, the soul, although ontologically immaterial, has an experience of the afterlife that is material. He summarizes Ghazali's view when he concludes that "to assert an incorporeal Afterlife is to err more than to hit the mark, even when the assertion is, theoretically speaking, true. Al-Ghazali is willing to uphold and live with this paradox" (p. 176).

On the whole, this monograph is an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of medieval Islamic thought, particularly in the domains of philosophy, theology, and Sufism. David Burrell, the noted historian of medieval philosophy, claims that we are "indebted to Timothy Gianotti for outlining Ghazali's way so dramatically" (*Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies*, 179.4 [2004]: 1074-75). Pierre Lory, the French Islamicist, has stated, in no uncertain terms, that Gianotti's "brilliant exposé" raises Ghazalian studies to an altogether new level (*Studia Islamica* 95, [2002]: 169-70). This reviewer has no reservations in seconding both assessments.

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