

"He who speaks does not know...": Some remarks by al-Ghazālī

Author: James Winston Morris

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4231>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Published in *Studies in Mystical Literature*, vol. 5, pp. 1-20, 1985

Use of this resource is governed by the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons "Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States" (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>)

"He Who Speaks Does Not Know. . .": **Some Remarks by al-Ghazālī**

James Morris

Anyone concerned with mystical literature must have had occasion to reflect on this famous Taoist saying and the ironic light it casts on scholarship. At the least, it is a healthy reminder of the paradoxical nature of the very notion of "mystical literature", a paradox likewise implicit in the Greek roots of the terms "mystic" and "mystery"— roots meaning "to close (the eyes and mouth)", but also "to instruct" or "to be initiated". In Islamic mystical literature far more attention is given to the dimensions (both practical and doctrinal) of instruction, initiation and explanation than to attempts at directly conveying the spiritual mysteries (the *asrār*) themselves. These latter are almost always represented, from the earliest period onward, by succinct references to a paradigmatic set of Koranic verses, teachings or stories (*hadīth*) of the Prophet and certain Imams, or ecstatic paradoxes (*shatahāt*) of exemplary Sufis and brief allusions by earlier masters of the Way.

As a result, Islamic mystical literature (perhaps most notably in the Arabic language) is typically marked by an extreme degree of reticence and allusiveness, an intentional multiplicity of meanings and intentions (some by no means "mystical"), that can make such writings seem confusing to the modern reader who

approaches them expecting a more direct treatment of the subject. The passage translated below from the famous Sufi Muhammad al-Ghazālī is one of the most straightforward statements of the understanding and intentions underlying the many forms and expressions of Islamic esotericism.¹ It is offered here, first of all, as a necessary 'key' for readers who may wish to delve further into that vast and fascinating literature. At the same time, however, al-Ghazālī's remarks also raise certain fundamental questions concerning the nature and role of "mysticism" and especially mystical writing: like the words of the Taoist sage, they may also recall realities we are sometimes tempted to forget.

* * *

Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) is surely among the two or three most influential writers in the long history of Islamic mysticism.² His influence, however, was manifested not through extraordinary spiritual gifts and experiences, poetic powers, or organizational abilities, but through a conscious intellectual effort to integrate all the sciences and forms of learning of his day within a perspective dominated and unified by the spiritual insights of Islamic mysticism — an effort which he understood and forcefully presented as merely restoring and continuing the essential thrust of the Prophet Muhammad's own mission.³ The secret of al-Ghazālī's vast influence, unparalleled in its geographic and historical depth and in the range of sciences it affected, has to do with his remarkable abilities as a teacher and writer able to reach all levels of readers. He synthesized clearly and cogently the most complex disciplines and bodies of learning with his conscious focus on communicating with the powerful institutional bearers and arbiters of Islamic civilization (the '*ulama*') as well as those devoted to Sufism.⁴ The full range of his pedagogical concerns is clearly brought out in the passage translated here, even if there is no room to illustrate the practical application of those remarks in

al-Ghazali's own writings, especially with regard to his understanding of the Koran and hadith.

The passage in question is the final chapter of a book entitled *Mizān al-'Amal* ("the Scales of Action"), a popular work devoted to the many-sided interplay of practice (*'amal*) and understanding (*'ilm*) along the path of spiritual realization, with the constant aim of awakening and intensifying any potential calling to Sufism or related studies.⁵ In the penultimate chapter, al-Ghazālī summarizes the broader context of the work, alluding to the higher stages of the path (including the various angelic conditions) – a topic that leads him to stress the implicit anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) in the popular conception of the relations of God and man.⁶ The essential difficulties this situation creates for any true discussion of spiritual realities and one's way or approach (*madhhab*) to realizing them form the point of departure for his concluding comments translated here. In the popular mind, this *madhhab* or "way of going" was (and is) ordinarily understood as a particular school or publicly shared body of opinion, belief, or practice (theological, juridical, political, etc.). Since al-Ghazālī's explanation is devoted precisely to the manifold meanings underlying this single expression (*madhhab*) – and by implication, to the ultimate meaning of this "way" which he insists that each reader must set out to discover for himself – we have kept the original Arabic term throughout the following translation.

* * *

Explanation of the Meaning of *Madhhab* and People's Differences Concerning It

Perhaps you will object: "What you say in this book is divided into what agrees with the *madhhab* of the Sufis and what agrees with the *madhhab* of the Asharites and some of the mutakallimun."⁷ But what someone says can only be understood according to one *madhhab*, so which of these is

For if they were all true, how could we conceive of that? So now if some of it is true, which one is it?"

One must reply by saying that even if you knew the truth about the *madhhab* (in this matter) it would not be of any use to you at all, because people fall into two groups concerning it. (I) One group says the "*madhhab*" is a name covering three levels (of meaning): (a) The first level is what people cling to and take sides with in boasting and disputations.⁸ (b) The next level is what is used to lead (the student or disciple) in situations of teaching and guidance.⁹ And (c) the third level is what the person himself believes, based on what he has discovered from the has investigated.¹⁰ So in this respect every fully accomplished person¹¹ has *three madhhabs*. [The second group, the vast majority of people who think that "*madhhab*" can have only one true meaning, are discussed below.]

As for "*madhhab*" in the first sense (I-a), that is the way of one's forefathers and ancestors, the *madhhab* of one's teacher and of the people of the town where one grows up. This differs according to towns and countries, and according to the teachers concerned. Thus someone who is born in an Asharite or Mutazilite or Shafi'i or Hanafi town has the passionate clinging to that *madhhab* implanted in his soul from childhood, along with opposition to any other and disparagement of any *madhhab* but his own.¹² So people say that "His *madhhab* is Asharite" — or Mutazilite, Shafi'i, or Hanafi — and the meaning of this is that he is passionately attached to it, i.e., that he supports the group of those parading this cause by assisting them, just as the members of a tribe support one another.

Now the source of this passionate attachment is the eagerness of some group to seek power and domination by getting the masses to follow them.¹³ And the factors motivating the masses can only be aroused (for this purpose) by something that will bring them together and convince them to rally around a common cause. So the *madhhabs* were set up to divide all the religions, and people became divided into sects.¹⁴ The motivating factors of envy and competitive struggle were brought into play, their passionate clinging (to one sect or another) was strengthened, and thus their mutual assistance in domination became well established.

the true one? For if they were all true, how could we conceive of that? So now if some of it is true, which one is it?"

One must reply by saying that even if you knew the truth about the *madhhab* (in this matter) it would not be of any use to you at all, because people fall into two groups concerning it. (I) One group says that "*madhhab*" is a name covering three levels (of meaning): (a) The first level is what people cling to and take sides with in boasting and disputations.⁸ (b) The next level is what is used to lead (the student or disciple) in situations of teaching and guidance.⁹ And (c) the third level is what the person himself believes, based on what he has discovered from the things he has investigated.¹⁰ So in this respect every fully accomplished person¹¹ has *three madhhabs*. [The second group, the vast majority of people who think that "*madhhab*" can have only one true meaning, are discussed below.]

As for "*madhhab*" in the first sense (I-a), that is the way of one's forefathers and ancestors, the *madhhab* of one's teacher and of the people of the town where one grows up. This differs according to towns and countries, and according to the teachers concerned. Thus someone who is born in an Asharite or Mutazilite or Shafi'i or Hanafi town has the passionate clinging to that *madhhab* implanted in his soul from childhood, along with opposition to any other and disparagement of any *madhhab* but his own.¹² So people say that "His *madhhab* is Asharite" – or Mutazilite, Shafi'i, or Hanafi – and the meaning of this is that he is passionately attached to it, i.e., that he supports the group of those parading this cause by assisting them, just as the members of a tribe support one another.

Now the source of this passionate attachment is the eagerness of some group to seek power and domination by getting the masses to follow them.¹³ And the factors motivating the masses can only be aroused (for this purpose) by something that will bring them together and convince them to rally around a common cause. So the *madhhabs* were set up to divide all the religions, and people became divided into sects.¹⁴ The motivating factors of envy and

competitive struggle were brought into play, their passionate clinging (to one sect or another) was strengthened, and thus their mutual assistance in domination became well established.

(Indeed) in certain countries, when the *madhhabs* came together so that the power-seekers couldn't use them to attract a following, they set up certain matters (as arbitrary points of contention) and caused people to imagine that it was necessary to dispute concerning them and to be passionately attached to them, such as "knowledge of X" or "knowledge of Y". So one group would say "The truth is X", and some others would say "No, it's Y!",¹⁵ Thus the aim of the leaders to seek the following of the masses was well arranged by that amount of disagreement: the masses thought that this was something important, while the leaders who set things up this way realized their goal in doing so.

The second (meaning of) *madhhab* (I-b) is what is appropriate in (moral or spiritual) guidance and teaching, to whoever comes seeking to learn or to be guided. Now this cannot be specified in only one way, but rather it differs according to the pupil, so that each pupil must be confronted (in his learning) with what his understanding can handle.¹⁶ Thus if one should happen to have a pupil who is a Turk or Indian or a stupid, dull-witted man,¹⁷ knowing that if one were to mention to such a person that God's Essential Reality — may He be exalted! — is not in any place, and that He is neither within the (physical) world nor outside it, neither part of it nor separate from it, then it would not be long before that person would deny the very existence of God — may He be exalted (above that)! — and refuse to believe in Him. Then (in such a case the teacher) must confirm in him (the naive belief) that God — may He be exalted! — is on the Throne (10:3; etc.) and that He is pleased with and rejoices in the obedience of His creatures, so that He rewards them and causes them to enter Paradise by way of compensation and recompense for that (obedience).¹⁸

But if (the pupil) has the capacity such that one can mention to him what is the "clear truth" (24:25; 27:29),

then he should reveal it to him. So "*madhhab*" in this sense changes and varies; with each person it is according to the capacity of his understanding.

The third (meaning of) *madhhab* (I-c) is what a man believes in his innermost self,¹⁹ between himself and God, such that no one other than God — may He be exalted! — is aware of it. He does not mention it except to someone who is like himself in his awareness of what he has become aware of, or else who has reached a stage where he is capable of becoming aware of it and understanding it. But this (requires) that the disciple be naturally intelligent, that the inherited belief he grew up with and became attached to not be deeply rooted in his soul, and that his heart not be so thoroughly impregnated with this belief that it cannot be erased from it.

(Otherwise the pupil) is like paper that has been written on and which the ink has penetrated so that it can only be removed by burning the paper and destroying it. The (spiritual) constitution of such a person has been corrupted, and one must despair of setting it right. For everything that is mentioned to him that is different from what he has heard (in his youth) does not persuade him. Indeed he tries vigorously *not* to be convinced by what is mentioned to him, and seeks to push it away. So even if such a person strained his attention and tried his very utmost to understand, he would only come to doubt his own understanding. How could it be otherwise, since his (unconscious) aim is to push it away and to *not* understand it? So the path to follow with such a person is not to say anything with him and to leave him with the belief he has —for he will not be the first blind man to perish in his delusion.²⁰

Now this is the way of one group of people (i.e., the "fully accomplished ones").

As for the second group (II), who are far more numerous, they say that the (true) *madhhab* is one: it is what they believe, and that is what (should be) proclaimed in teaching and guidance with every single human being, however different his condition may be. This is what (such a person) is passionately attached to, whether it be the

Asharite *madhhab* or the Mutazilite or Karramite one or any other *madhhab*.

Now the first group (i.e., the "perfect" or "fully accomplished ones") are in accord with these people, insofar as when they are asked about (their) *madhhab*, whether it is one or three, (they hold that) it is not permissible (or "possible") to mention that it is three, but rather it must be said that it is one.

And this does away with your worrying about the question about (my) *madhhab*, if you are reasonable: for everyone is in accord as far as proclaiming that the (true) *madhhab* is one. Moreover, they are also agreed in being passionately attached to the *madhhab* of their father, their teacher, or the people of their town. So if someone should happen to mention his *madhhab*, what use is that to you? For the *madhhab* of another person is different from his, and none of them has a miracle which would give his side precedence.²¹

So put aside being concerned with *madhhabs*, and seek the truth by way of inquiry and reflection,²² so that you may become the master of a *madhhab* (i.e., of your own spiritual way) — and so that you do not become like the image of a blind man heedlessly accepting a leader to guide you to a Way, while all around you there are a thousand (other) leaders like yours, all calling out to you that he has destroyed you and made you go astray from the right path (5:77; etc.). And in the outcome of your affair you will know the iniquity of your leader.²³

For there is no way out except by relying on yourself;²⁴

"Take what you see, and forget what you heard/

When the Sun has risen, what need have you of Saturn?"

Even if the only effect of these words were to make you doubt your inherited belief so that you devoted yourself to seeking, that would be benefit enough for you, since doubts are what leads to the Truth.²⁵ For he who does not doubt does not look, and he who does not look does not truly see, and he who does not truly see remains in blindness and delusion — may God preserve us from that!²⁶

* * * *

In themselves, these observations hardly need any further commentary: each reader, as al-Ghazālī must have intended, can best supply his own illustrations. However, a few clarifications may still be in order regarding the broader applicability of his comments to Islamic mystical literature, and to the various traditions of Islamic esoteric writing more generally.²⁷ For his remarks reflect two fundamental assumptions about the nature of prophecy and revelation — and ultimately, about the nature of man and society — which are common to virtually all the major representatives of those traditions, but which are by no means taken for granted in the modern world.

The first of these key assumptions is that of the positive and necessary role of the paradigmatic mystical symbols and religious language as they are understood on the unreflective, popular level, a function which, in the context of the Islamic *sharī'a*, or Law, is at once moral, legal, and political. A particularly important example of this, for al-Ghazālī and most other Islamic esoteric writers, is the vivid eschatological language of the Koran (and related hadith): although their emphases and (esoteric) interpretations may differ greatly, they rarely lose sight of the ongoing and indispensable function of the literal, popular understanding of these passages as an essential underpinning of both the this-worldly role of the Law, and of the faith and practice leading to an awareness of its deeper mystical dimensions.²⁸ This positive concern for the "exoteric" dimensions of Islamic mystical literature means that the "esotericism" of a writer like al-Ghazālī cannot be simply reduced to a form of self-protection or prudent concealment of unpopular or potentially dangerous views. In fact, the two aspects (the *zāhir* and the *bātin*) may not be so clearly separable — especially if, as is clearly the case for al-Ghazālī, the "mystical" understanding of religion is also meant ultimately to

inform and guide its more popular manifestations and applications.²⁹

Ghazālī's second and even more essential assumption is that of a natural hierarchy and consequent rarity of souls qualified to grasp and pursue, in a systematic and self-conscious way, humankind's more profound spiritual potential.³⁰ Granted that assumption, as he clearly points out in the passage translated above, one can only judge the capacity of a potential seeker and truly guide him on the basis of continued appropriate personal contact (the "*suhba*" of the Sufis). From this perspective, the function of "literature" — precisely at this mystical level — must inherently be propaedeutic or ancillary to the broader, truly indispensable context of spiritual practice (*'amal*); it cannot be seen as an end (or even a tool) sufficient in itself.³¹

How should one regard mystical literature then? Any reader of Islamic mystical literature, should learn two simple lessons — although applying them is not simple. First, without a solid and wide-ranging knowledge of the historical *context* of a given text, something that is unfortunately lacking for the vast majority of translations now available, it is often extremely difficult both to recognize the actual "mystical" elements and to separate them from the many other concerns (political, ethical, legal, theological, etc.) which al-Ghazali alludes to in his comments. Secondly — a task that is even more difficult, but no less essential — one must make the necessary effort to move to al-Ghazālī's "third level", the level of what has been kept tacit, but is implicitly the most important of all.

One cannot readily make that last effort without questioning for oneself the contemporary relevance of al-Ghazālī's insights and assumptions. It is tempting, for example, to think of his first key assumption, concerning the indispensable ethical, legal, and political role of "religion" (in the broadest sense) as the artifact of an earlier stage of historical evolution, or as a phenomenon uniquely bound up with the historical origins and development of

Islamic civilization. However, even if that were the case, it might still be useful to note that al-Ghazālī's discussion here of the ideological dimensions of religion remains literally (and inescapably) applicable in the context of most Muslim societies today – and indeed, if appropriate analogies are made to the "civil religion" concerned, in all but a handful of contemporary states. At a minimum, that might give us pause to reflect on the astonishing historical rarity (if not uniqueness) of this situation in which we can speak *openly* of "mystical literature", and of the efforts and fragile conditions which have made that unusual situation possible.

Finally, with regard to al-Ghazālī's central assumption of an inescapable hierarchy of psychic, spiritual and intellectual potentialities, with all the pedagogical and rhetorical consequences he draws from it, the contrasts with the corresponding educational and political premises of our own day are too striking to ignore. At the very least, such reflections – like the famous words of Lao Tzu with which we began – may remind us of the misunderstandings and delusions that beset all speech in this domain. . .

Notes

1. Although most of al-Ghazālī's writings, including the passage translated here, are clearly meant to be understood in the context of Islamic mysticism (and Sufism in particular), many of the considerations he alludes to – and the methods of esoteric writing embodying those concerns – are common to other Islamic intellectual traditions, especially a range of philosophic and Shiite ones. A basic introduction to the pervasive influence of esoteric assumptions and methods in later Islamic culture can be found in M.G.S. Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1974), II, pp. 192-200. For the manifestations in the philosophical traditions, see our discussion and further references in *The Wisdom of the Throne: An*

Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra (Princeton, 1981), pp. 41-46; for the Shiite dimensions, see our article on "Taqīya" in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan, NY), ed. Eliade, *et. al.* Al-Ghazālī's own writings draw on a thorough knowledge of all these traditions, integrated within his own predominately Sufi perspective.

2. The best general English introduction is probably R.J. Mc Carthy's *Freedom and Fulfillment* (Boston, 1980). The first name Muhammad (or Abu Hamid) is often mentioned in order to distinguish him from his younger brother Ahmad, who was a renowned Sufi master and author of several important Persian prose works with a more strictly mystical and spiritual focus (cf. article by H. Ritter in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.).
3. It should be stressed that al-Ghazālī's intellectual efforts extended to all the sciences of his day, including the defense and integration of the "rational" or "Greek" sciences within his own distinctive spiritual perspective. Since then, Muslims throughout the Islamic world have frequently tended to view those traditions (and Shiism as well) in light of al-Ghazālī's judgments and evaluations.
4. In the context of this article, it is especially important (if not totally unsurprising) to note that the "exoteric" or popular dimensions of al-Ghazālī's arguments have frequently been more influential than his deeper and more personal views, both in the Islamic world and in the perceptions of Western scholars. For example, his apparent (and politically motivated) criticisms of Shiism and of philosophy are far better known than his extensive debts to both traditions, and modern editions of his work have often reflected more of an admiration for his legalist apologetics than a genuine appreciation of his more profound spiritual and mystical intentions. Among other things, this failure to appreciate the full rhetorical implications

of al-Ghazālī's remarks here has led to an extensive secondary literature attempting to use chronology and /or accusations of "apocryphal" writing to resolve the apparent contradictions and multiple points of view in his works.

5. The Arabic text followed for our translation (with minor corrections) is that of Dr. Sulayman Dunya, Cairo, 1964, pp. 399-409 for the translated passage.
6. In particular, al-Ghazālī stresses (p. 405) that this natural tendency to "liken God" (to material and human things) "has many degrees", ranging from naive materialistic conceptions to the more pervasive conception of divine "anger" or "pleasure" (and man's consequent obedience or rebellion) in anthropomorphic terms.
7. The Asharites were one of the major schools of *'ilm al-kalām*, the Islamic science which originally developed as an apologetic defense of the basic presuppositions of the Islamic Law.
8. "Disputation" here refers to the institution of the *munāẓara*, corresponding to the medieval Latin *disputatio*, a widespread form of academic training and competition in the Islamic world of the time. Al-Ghazālī gives a rather backhanded defense of it (no doubt reflecting his own experiences) at pp. 365-366: the desire to dominate, in such intellectual or rhetorical competitions, may be a useful incentive to pursue religious knowledge, "but in the end one awakens to the falsity of that quest and returns to the straight path."
9. "*Irshād*", the word translated as "guidance" here, is a Koranic term referring more specifically to moral and spiritual direction, especially by a spiritual guide or master. Here it reflects the fact that al-Ghazālī, throughout *Mīzān al-'Amal*, is primarily dealing with spiritual pedagogy, whether through Sufism or other disciplines, and not with "teaching" (*ta'līm*) of any particular subject abstracted from that moral and religious context.

10. Several of the Arabic terms here have possible Sufi overtones that are not fully reflected in this translation: *insān* (translated as "person") is often used specifically in Sufi texts to refer to the fully realized, enlightened "human being" (cf. the equivalent term "*al-kāmil*" at note 11), as opposed to *bāsher*, the "human-animal." Likewise *inkashafa* (translated as "discovered") is used more specifically in Sufi Writings to refer to one's inner spiritual discoveries or experiences.
11. Given the central focus of this book, the term "fully accomplished person" (*al-kāmil*) here almost certainly is used in the common Sufi sense of one who has attained (relative) spiritual perfection, although once again al-Ghazālī's terminology could also be applied to the expert or master in a particular science or discipline.
12. The Shafī'i and Hanafī *madhhabs* were two of the most influential Sunni schools of Islamic Law, and in al-Ghazālī's own native region of Nishapur (near modern Mashhad in Iran) communal struggles centering on these two "schools" – in a way reminiscent, for example, of the struggles between Guelphs and Ghibbelines in renaissance Italy – were a recurrent feature of local political and religious life: see the descriptions in R. Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur*.
13. It is important to note that al-Ghazālī seems to conceive of the process he describes here as natural and inescapable. In his ethical/spiritual theory outlined in the earlier chapters of this book, the tendency toward *riyāsa* ("power and domination", or control in the broadest sense of the term) is viewed as universal except in those rare individuals (certain Sufis, saints, etc.) who have managed to overcome it. Al-Ghazālī's political writings and remarks in general, even before his "conversion" to Sufism, all seem to reflect this sort of quietistic aversion to direct political activity.
14. Here al-Ghazālī draws a distinction (based on Koranic sources)

between the true divine "religions" (*adyān*, pl. of *dīn*) and the many human "sects" (*fīraq*) into which religions tend to degenerate. The passage is thus a clear allusion to the famous hadith concerning the division of Islam into 72 (or some other symbolic number of) sects, as well as to the many Koranic references to the ultimate unity of *Dīn al-Haqq* (the "True Religion").

15. Here "X" and "Y" are used to translate al-Ghazālī's "red" and "black": it should not be difficult, within the history of any religion, to fill in the "blanks" here with appropriate examples of bloody political and social struggles over what in retrospect or at a suitable distance appear as completely insignificant differences of religious symbolism.
16. The word *mustarshid*, which we have generally translated as "pupil" (for brevity's sake), literally means the person seeking moral and spiritual guidance (*irshād*: cf. note 9), and al-Ghazālī's advice here must be understood in that context.
17. Here (with reference to "Turks", etc.), Ghazālī is not indulging in some idiosyncratic racial slurs, but simply employing a rhetorical expression frequently used in medieval Arabic literature (along with the "Kurds" and "bedouin". *al-'arab*) to refer to "rustic", relatively uncivilized types. However, his casual assertion that such groups are by nature "closest to the brute animals" (p. 332 in this same work) does point out what are – at least from the modern viewpoint – some of the possible historical limitations of his assumptions concerning natural hierarchies.
18. These remarks refer back to the discussion of the two broad types of natural "anthropomorphism" (*tasbīh*) in the immediately preceding chapter: cf. note 6 above. Al-Ghazālī's treatment of Islamic eschatology in different works offers a particularly vivid illustration of his application of this principle. In his *K. al-Durra al-Fākhira* (tr. J. Smith, *The Precious*

Pearl . . . , Missoula, Montana, 1979), we are given a purely exoteric, literalist account of the events of the Last Day, based on the Koran and numerous *ḥadīth*, while in the *Ihya' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* – and even more so in the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (tr. J. Deladrière, *Le Tabernacle des Lumières*, Paris, 1981; the old English paraphrase by Gairdner is badly misleading) – al-Ghazālī alludes far more openly to his understanding of those symbols in light of the mystical experiences and illuminations of the Sufi path. These three works correspond perfectly, in this domain, to the three levels of understanding and intention outlined in this passage.

19. The word translated here as “in his innermost self” (*sirran*) may also mean “secretly” – but the subsequent explanation makes it clear that the meaning or realization here is something that is *essentially* “secret”, by its very nature, and not simply an opinion intentionally hidden or concealed from others.
20. The last part of this sentence is a paraphrase of or allusion to a number of Koranic verses (e.g., 10:43; 17:72; 27:81; etc.) which stress the pointlessness of attempting to guide or convince the spiritually “blind” and indicate that the Prophet (and by implication, his successors as guides) are not responsible for this blindness.
21. This last phrase is an ironic allusion by al-Ghazālī to the popular *kalam* argument that the truth of a prophet is determined by his probative miracles – an argument which al-Ghazālī attacks on a number of grounds. See especially his defense of prophecy, based on actual spiritual, experiential verification of the prophetic message, in *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (tr. of McCarthy cited at note 2 above, pp. 96-100), and the elaboration of that argument from the Sufi perspective throughout the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (tr. by Deladrière cited at note 18 above).

22. "Inquiry and reflection" here translate the key term *al-nazar*. Although it was often used as a sort of code word for the methods of the *mutakallimun* (who called themselves the "people of *nazar*") or of the philosophers, al-Ghazālī here seems to be using it in a broader (and at the same time intrinsically personalized or individual) sense drawn from the Koranic uses of the term, where, in dozens of verses, it conveys a combination of "looking" (the root meaning) and "pondering" or reflecting on God's "Signs" and active Presence in all their manifestations. This seems to be the meaning – i.e., by discovering the spiritual truth for oneself, not by adopting a particular method or doctrine – of al-Ghazālī's exhortation here to become the "master of a *madhhab*"
23. This paragraph contains a number of Koranic allusions and paraphrases, including the image of the "blind man" (cf. note 20 above) and the reference to the "final outcome of the matter" (*'āqabat al-'amr*) which "surely will be known", i.e., in the afterlife. The word *qā'id* used here ordinarily refers to a political, worldly "leader" of the type described above (at note 13 ff.), it is not one of the usual terms for a spiritual guide or master (whom al-Ghazālī certainly does not wish to criticize), motivated by something quite different from the usual desire for domination and control.
24. "Relying on yourself" is a free translation of the Arabic *istiqlāl*, "independence" (of spirit), reflecting al-Ghazālī's emphasis in earlier chapters on the necessity for the qualified individual to become a "mujtahid" – a word referring here to the independent seeker, not the advanced jurist (the more common technical meaning of the term). From that context, it is clear that he is pointing here to the opposite of that inner, often unconscious attitude of *taqlīd* (translated as "heedless acceptance" in the preceding paragraph): the distinction between the two states is marked precisely by the develop-

- ment of one's own "*naẓar*", the ability and willingness to "look" for the Truth and truly inquire for oneself.
25. The "Truth" here (*al-Haqq*), as in most Sufi writings and following the Koran, could also be translated as "God" or the "Ultimate Reality": it is clear from the rest of this book and the wider context of al-Ghazali's writings that the "search" he has in mind is a particular spiritual condition, with its own definite Goal. The many hadith encouraging the "seeking of knowledge" (*ṭalab al-'ilm*) are taken by al-Ghazālī, and by Islamic mystical writers generally, to allude above all to this inner spiritual search.
 26. The basic terms of this progression – "blindness" and "delusion" or aimless wandering (*dalāl*); "looking" or inquiring (*naẓar*) and "true seeing" or spiritual insight (*baṣar*, not the more general *ra'a*) – are all key Koranic expressions understood by Islamic mystics in the spiritual sense al-Ghazālī has given them here.
 27. See the references to these other, not necessarily "mystical" traditions of Islamic esotericism in n. 1 above.
 28. The interplay of these two dimensions of religion (and prophetic revelation), as al-Ghazālī understands it in the Islamic context, is summed up in two sayings of the Prophet Muhammad which he cites repeatedly (quoted here from p. 368 of *Mizān al-'Amal*): "Indeed we, the assembly of prophets, were ordered to reveal to people (the divine Word) according to their ranks, and to speak to them according to the capacity of their intellects", and "No one (prophet or guide) has spoken to a people with a saying (*ḥadīth*) that their intellects could not comprehend, but that this was a cause of dissension and conflict (*fitna*) for some of them." Ghazālī follows these with an allusion to a famous speech of the Imam 'Ali (found in the *Nahj al-Balāgha*) which is one of the classic statements of Islamic esotericism.

29. These interrelationships are aptly summarized in al-Ghazali's earlier remarks (p. 329 of *Mizān al-'Amal*) concerning the "four kinds of *siyāsa* ("governance" or "political direction") that maintain the world":

"The first is the *siyāsa* of the prophets, which applies both to the élite and to the masses, in their external affairs (*zahir*) and in their inner, spiritual life (*bāṭin*). The second is that of the caliphs, governors, and sultans, and likewise applies to the élite and to the masses, but (only) to their external affairs, not to their inner life. The third is the *siyasa* of the wise (*hukamā'*) and the learned, which applies exclusively to the inner life of the élite. And the fourth is that of the preachers and the *fuqahā'* (the legal scholars), which applies exclusively to the inner life of the masses."

Although al-Ghazālī's own works reflect the detailed application of this schema to the sciences and society of his time, and his outlook was highly influential in Sunni circles throughout the Islamic world (down to our own day), the political thinking they embody was by no means universally accepted among Muslim thinkers. There were always philosophers, Shiite thinkers, and various mystical and messianic movements representing diverse alternative views — although frequently starting from some of the same basic categories (*khāṣṣ*/*'amm*; *zāhir*/*bāṭin*; etc.), differently interpreted.

30. The primary difference among the traditions of Islamic "esotericism" mentioned at notes 1 and 27 above, both in practice and theory, often had to do with their conception of the nature of that "élite" (*khāṣṣ*) which was the particular focus of their interest (e.g., philosophical understanding, the special status of the Shiite Imams or other inspired guides, etc.). Needless to say, all were careful to point out the fundamental distinction between the special, unchanging types

of natural hierarchy which concerned them (whether spiritual, intellectual, etc.) and the shifting popular notions of *khāṣṣ* and *ʿāmm* resting on such visible (and variable) criteria as rank, birth, wealth, race, etc.

31. Certainly mystical "literature" in this sense must be understood as excluding the sacred or revealed writings (in this context, especially the Koran), which are distinguished — among other things — by their "operative" or revelatory dimensions (e.g., in prayer, dhikr, etc.) and by their inexhaustible potential meaning, which continues to expand precisely in proportion to one's degree of spiritual advancement. For al-Ghazālī's conception, cf. the recent translation of his *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, *The Jewels of the Qur'an*, by M.A. Quasem, London, 1983.