

A Painful Quest for God The Pre-Conversion Moment of Augustine and Al-Ghazali

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Abstract: More than six centuries separate the death of Saint Augustine (354-430) and the birth of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). Each of these two 'giants of the spirit' professed a different faith, and struggled with different social and political life. Augustine lived in the fourth and fifth-century Carthage, Rome, Milan and Hippo; Al-Ghazali in the eleventh and twelfth-century Baghdad, Damascus, Mecca and Tus. But the readers of the spiritual autobiographies left behind by Augustine and Al-Ghazali will certainly be amazed to find striking similarities that reflect a common struggle with the same existential questions about the paradoxes of the human condition and the perpetual search and longing for God. A solid scholarship, a great curiosity and a genuine thirst for certainty were characteristic of both Augustine and Al-Ghazali. Each of these two seekers of God immersed himself bravely in unfamiliar cultures, bridged different worlds, and subdued whatever he studied to his faith. The process of this cultural digestion did not pass without painful impact on these giant minds, not the least of it is the spiritual restlessness that Augustine and Al-Ghazali had to struggle with, and to make their way through, with a great difficulty and agony. This article emphasizes the quest for spiritual certainty in the autobiographies of Augustine and Al-Ghazali, as opposed to the quest for intellectual certainty, commonly associated with these two seekers of God.

Key words: Islam, Christianity, Al-Ghazali, Augustine, Spiritual transformation, Intellectual uncertainty, Quest for god, Sufism, philosophy

Introduction

More than six centuries separate the death of Saint Augustine (354-430) and the birth of Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). Each of these two 'giants of the spirit' professed a different faith, and struggled with different social and political life. Augustine lived in the fourth and fifth-

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century Carthage, Rome, Milan and Hippo; Al-Ghazali in the eleventh and twelfth-century Baghdad, Damascus, Mecca and Tus. But the readers of the spiritual autobiographies left behind by Augustine and Al-Ghazali will certainly be amazed to find striking similarities that reflect a common struggle with the same existential questions about the paradoxes of the human condition and the perpetual search and longing for God.

Augustine is seen by some scholars as the most important figure in Christian history since the time of St. Paul,² and so is Al-Ghazali seen by others within the Islamic context. Samuel Zwemer called Al-Ghazali “the greatest of all Moslems” since the days of Prophet Muhammad,³ and Montgomery Watt believed that Al-Ghazali “is by no means unworthy of that dignity.”⁴ The contribution of these two men to their own tradition and to the human intellectual and spiritual legacy is incomparable with the contribution of any other scholar, and their appeal is undying. Joseph McCabe wrote about Augustine: “the great Bishop of Hippo appeals to all times, not only as a commanding and interesting personality, but as one who lived at a notable crisis in the intellectual, religious and political development of Europe and who sprung forward with alacrity to meet every movement of his day.”⁵ This can also be seen as the best description of Al-Ghazali’s contribution to Islam.⁶

A crucial moment

This paper briefly compares one short, yet intense, stage of the spiritual journey of Augustine and Al-Ghazali, focusing especially on how each one of them described the beginning of his spiritual transformation and preparation to ‘return to God’. This is not an intellectual or a spiritual

2 “Life of St. Augustine of Hippo”, in *the Catholic Encyclopedia*. Retrieved on July 29, 2007 from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02084a.htm>.

3 Samuel M. Zwemer: *A Moslem Seeker after God: showing Islam at its best in the life and teaching of Al-Ghazali, mystic and theologian of eleventh century* (Fleming H. Revell Copmany: New York/Chicago, 1920), p.11.

4 Montgomery Watt in the introduction of his book *the Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali* (a translation of Al-Ghazali’s *Munqidh*) retrieved on July 27, 2007 from <http://www.ghazali.org/works/watt3.htm>.

5 Joseph McCabe, “The Conversion of St. Augustine”, *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Jul, 1902), p. 450.

6 See: Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali* (ibid).

biography of these two great men; rather the focus here is on one moment in their life, the moment of pre-conversion, when each one of them was struggling with his decision to commit himself to God. The term 'moment', however, should be understood here in the broad sense that cannot be precisely defined, but it includes about two years of "burning struggle"⁷ in Augustine life, from the time he became a catechumen in the Catholic Church of Milan in 384 to his complete conversion in the garden of his Milanese home in 386. As for Al-Ghazali, he luckily defined his pre-conversion moment in about six month from July 1095⁸ when he started losing confidence in his spiritual life and ended in December of the same year when he left his teaching position in Baghdad and withdrew completely from public life. It was a very painful moment for both men that caused each one of them to suffer what looks like a nerve breakdown that manifested itself in Augustine's flowing tears in the garden of his home, and in Al-Ghazali's inability to talk or to eat for some time.⁹

Scholars have compared Al-Ghazali with a number of great Western thinkers such as Descartes, Thomas Aquinas, Kant and Eckhart (see the works of Tamara Albertini,¹⁰ Marianne Farina¹¹, Amin Abdullah¹² and Joseph Politella¹³). To compare Al-Ghazali and Augustine is woever, rare and new. James Highland wrote an excellent comparative work on *The Transformation of the Soul in the Conversion Narratives of Augustine and Ghazzali*.¹⁴ He also mentioned another work in English on this topic by Daniel Show¹⁵ (not available during the present research). But

7 *Confessions*, p. 146.

8 *Al-Munqidh*, p.92.

9 On this scenes see *Confessions*, p.146-147 and *Al-Munqidh*, p.92.

10 Tamara Albertini, "Crisis and Certainty of Knowledge in Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Descartes (1596-1650)", *Philosophy East and West*, January, 2005.

11 Marianne Farina, *Moral Goodness and Friendship with God: the Moral Teachings of Thomas Aquinas and Hamid Al-Ghazali* (PhD dissertation: Boston College, 2004), AAT 3135961.

12 Amin Abdullah, *Kant and Ghazali: the Idea of Universality of Ethical Norms*, (Frankfurt: Lan-deck, 2000).

13 Joseph Politella, "Al-Ghazali And Meister Eckhart: Two Giants of The Spirit," *The Muslim World*, Volume 54 Issue 3 Page 180-194, July 1964.

14 James A. Highland, *Alchemy: The Transformation of the Soul in the Conversion Narratives of Augustine and Ghazzali*, (PhD dissertation), Southern Illinois University, 1999. Highland spells the name of Al-Ghazali the Persian way, *Ghazzali*. I use the Arabic spelling.

15 Daniel Show, *City or Garden: St. Augustine and Al-Ghazali on the Final Estate of the Blessed*, (Master's dissertation) Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1987. See Highland p. 14.

Highland focused on the philosophical dimensions of Augustine and Al-Ghazali's narratives. His attention was mainly directed towards issues such as freedom and predestination. He also put both men within the context of the history of philosophy, and analyzed the importance of the narrative as a technique of soul transformation. I am focusing here on the *process* of the spiritual transformation of Augustine and Al-Ghazali, not on the philosophical *content* of their transformation.

The main sources of this comparison are Augustine and Al-Ghazali's autobiographies: Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and Al-Ghazali's *Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal*, or *Deliverance from Error*. There are several English translations of the two books, and I tried to use the best translation I could find. As for the *Confessions* I am using here *Saint Augustine's Confession: a New Translation by Henry Chadwick*.¹⁶ Peter Brown praised this translation as "a fresh rendering of the *Confessions* by Henry Chadwick, a master of Early Christian thought."¹⁷ And for Al-Ghazali's book I am using the excellent translation of Richard Joseph McCarthy which he published within a collection of Al-Ghazali's works under the title *Freedom and Fulfillment*.¹⁸ I checked McCarthy's translation against the Arabic original¹⁹ from time to time to be sure about the accurate rendering of some terms and concepts. I refer to these most used sources in this paper simply as *Confessions* and *Al-Munqidh*.

Dissatisfaction

At the school of Carthage Augustine started his education in law and rhetoric hoping to be a lawyer, and he became a brilliant professor of rhetoric in Milan. Al-Ghazali started his intellectual life as a student of Islamic jurisprudence in his native city of Tus (in today's Iran), and

16 *Saint Augustine Confession: a New Translation by Henry Chadwick*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

17 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. 2nd ed. (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

18 Richard Joseph McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al-Ghazali's Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazali*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980).

19 A well edited copy of Al-Ghazali's *Al-Munqidh* in Arabic is available on this website dedicated to his life and thought on this link <http://www.ghazali.org/works/munqid.doc>

became a great jurist and professor at the most important university in the Islamic world in his time, Al-Nizamiyya College in Baghdad. Both Al-Ghazali and Augustine became more interested in philosophy than in their professional disciplines: “Augustine looked upon rhetoric merely as a profession; his heart was in philosophy”²⁰; Al-Ghazali lost interest in Islamic law and was attracted by mysticism. Both men, the student of rhetoric in Carthage and the professor of jurisprudence in Baghdad, became dissatisfied with the faith in which they have been raised, as presented and practiced by contemporaries. The nature of this dissatisfaction, however, needs to be clarified.

Two reasons made Augustine and Al-Ghazali dissatisfied with their original beliefs: an intellectual reason and a practical one. For Augustine, “two broad obstacles lay between him and Christianity; he could not conceive anything spiritual, and could not embrace the crude stories of the Old Testament.”²¹ Al-Ghazali shows some similarities. He suffered a deep epistemological crisis. He doubted everything he learned and, more importantly, the way he learned it. Moreover he was disillusioned with the religious leadership of the Muslim society of his time; a leadership he viewed as hypocritical, superficial and greedy—the same lack of spirituality Augustine deplored among the North-African Christians of his time.

Many scholars wrote about the philosophical doubt that both Augustine and Al-Ghazali experienced at a specific time of their lives; some have even seen their crisis as essentially epistemic, and compared it with the doubt of Descartes.²² Without denying the existence of an intellectual problem, the argument underlining this paper is that the challenge both Augustine and Al-Ghazali faced was much more spiritual and moral than intellectual and philosophical. This analysis is in line with the scholars who divide Augustine’s conversion into two separate

20 “Life of St. Augustine of Hippo”, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (ibid).

21 McCabe, *The Conversion of St. Augustine*, p. 452.

22 For example, Gareth Mathews, *Thought’s Ego in Augustine and Descartes*, (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1992); Bruce Bubacz, *St Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge: a Contemporary Analysis*, (New York/Toronto: the Edwin Mellen Press, 1981) p.40; Gerald O’Daly, *Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind*, (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987) p.171; Tamara Albertini, “Crisis and Certainty of Knowledge in Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Descartes (1596-1650)” (Ibid)

conversions: an intellectual one and a moral one, the first he described in book VII of his *Confessions*, and the second in book VIII.²³ The only new thing here is the emphasis on the primacy of the moral/spiritual conversion over the intellectual/philosophical one in Augustine and Al-Ghazali's journey.

After Simplicianus²⁴ told Augustine the story of Victorinus, a Roman nobleman who struggled with his own pride and bravely submitted his will to his beliefs²⁵; and after Ponticianus told him about the Egyptian monk St Anthony (c. 255-355), and "the fertile desert of the wilderness,"²⁶ Augustine found himself in these stories, and discovered the roots of his own crisis. It was not in essence finding the truth; it was living the truth. After reporting these conversations in his *Confessions*, Augustine called his intellectual problems 'my usual excuse' and 'my perception': "I no longer had my usual excuse, to explain why I did not yet despise the world and serve You, namely that my perception of the truth was uncertain. By now I was indeed quite sure about it. Yet I was still bound down to earth. I was refusing to become your soldier... afraid of being rid of all my burden."²⁷ This indicates that the problems of intellect were not the most serious obstacles between Augustine and his faith—at least as these obstacles were perceived by Augustine himself. .

The same thing can be said about Al-Ghazali who suffered intellectual skepticism for two months,²⁸ yet his narrative shows that even during the worse moments of his crisis, he had never given up "a sure and certain faith in God the Most High, in the prophetic mediation of revelation, and in the Last Day."²⁹ Al-Ghazali's diagnosis of his own problem, as well as of the problems of Islamic culture in his time is the lack of sincerity, not the lack of certainty. The purification of the soul, not the conviction of the intellect, was the main concern of Augustine

23 Allan Fitzgerald (ed.). *Augustine through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) p. 230.

24 Simplicianus (d.ca.400) is a Christian sage whom Augustine met in Milan. He succeeded Ambrose as the bishop of Milan in 397. See *Augustine through the Ages*, p. 799-800.

25 *Confessions*, p.133-140.

26 *Confessions*, p.143.

27 *Confessions*, p.140.

28 *Al-Munqidh*, p.66.

29 *Al-Munqidh*, p.90.

and Al-Ghazali. No wonder that Al-Ghazali found his satisfaction only in Sufism: "I knew with certainty that the Sufis were masters of states [of the heart] not purveyors of words, and that I had learned all I could by way of theory. There remained, then, only what was attainable, not by hearing and study, but by fruitional experience and actually engaging in the way."³⁰

Return to God

The spiritual journey of Augustine and Al-Ghazali was very ambitious and not without price. That is probably why Augustine wrote about those "who know not at what a bitter cost truth is attained."³¹ The goal is a glorious return to God; the means is a great effort of spiritual self-purification and freedom from the 'chains' of this world; and the price is a great suffering of internal division of the self. The spiritual return to God, not the intellectual knowing of God, is the most important and most painful part of the crisis that Augustine and Al-Ghazali lived.

For these two seekers, the ultimate goal is the return of the human soul to God, though they might mean something different by the term 'return'. Augustine used this analogy to explain this concept of return to God: "A body by its weight tends to move towards its proper place. The weight's movement is not necessarily downwards, but to its appropriate position: fire tends to move upwards, a stone downwards... things which are not in their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest... by Your gift we are set on fire and carried upwards."³² Based on this view, humans who are disconnected from God are 'restless'. The whole spiritual struggle of Augustine and Al-Ghazali is a self-conscious effort to overcome the pains of this restlessness, and so is the case of every serious seeker for God in any time. When the human soul returns to God it becomes absorbed in the Divine presence, 'lost in God' for Al-Ghazali, 'molten' in Him and 'merged' with Him for Augustine. This is one of the reasons Al-Ghazali

³⁰ *Al-Munqidh*, p.91.

³¹ "Life of St. Augustine of Hippo", in *the Catholic Encyclopedia* (ibid).

³² *Confessions*, p.278.

found Sufism the only satisfying Islamic school of thought (better to be called here 'school of spirit'). He wrote: "in general, how can men describe such a way as this? Its purity –the first of its requirement- is the total purification of the heart from everything other than God the Most High. Its key, which is analogous to the beginning of the Prayer, is the utter absorption of the heart in the remembrance of God. Its end is being completely lost in God."³³ Augustine explained this direct and unspeakable experience of God in several places of his *Confessions*, among which this passage: "The storm of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you."³⁴

The two seekers expressed the inability of the human language to describe the mystical experience. Augustine tries to describe a moment of ecstasy he and his mother Monnica experienced shortly before Monnica died: "we drank in the water flowing from your spring on high... our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection..."³⁵ but at the end Augustine did not find human language powerful enough to explain such an ecstatic experience. He wrote: "we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an end,"³⁶ which implies that what was going on in their life that night cannot be expressed in 'human speech'. Al-Ghazali wrote that "the Sufis see the angels and the spirits of the prophets and hear voices coming from them and learn useful things from them. Then their 'state' ascends from the vision of the forms and likenesses to stages beyond the narrow range of words."³⁷ This idea of believers able to 'see the angels and the spirits of the prophets' is against the normative views in Islam, but Al-Ghazali raised it in another book, *Explaining the Wonders of the Heart*.³⁸ Al-Ghazali, however, kept always some sort of caution, when he discussed this controversial issue, and he used to quote a poetic verse in this context:

33 *Al-Munqidh*, p.94.

34 *Confessions*, p.244.

35 *Confessions*, p.171.

36 *Confessions*, p.171.

37 *Al-Munqidh*, p.95.

38 Al-Ghazali, *Explaining the Wonders of the Heart*, translated in McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p.370.

*There was what was, of what I do not mention:
So think well of it, and ask for no account*³⁹

This warning, of course, did not deter some Muslim scholars from questioning Al-Ghazali's belief and the compatibility of his thought with the normative doctrine of Islam that rejects any kind of pantheism. Al-Ghazali knew that such questions would be raised and he quickly affirmed, after quoting this poetic verse, that any understanding of the mystical experience in term of 'indwelling' in God, 'union' with Him or 'reaching' Him is completely wrong. He elaborated his own refutation of these ideas in another book of his, *The Noblest Aim*.⁴⁰

Both Augustine and Al-Ghazali were aware of the doctrinal problems surrounding any excessive expression of mystical notions, and the difficulties this might raise within normative Christianity and normative Islam, but Augustine did not need the extreme caution we find in Al-Ghazali's words. The Christian culture of Incarnation would have probably given Augustine more room to talk about the 'return to God' in more explicit and less cautious terms. This is one of the major differences between the two.

Divine light

If the goal is 'returning to God', not simply knowing Him, Augustine and Al-Ghazali found a little help that the human intellect can offer here. Al-Ghazali described how he realized that his rational culture failed him: "when I have finished with the science of philosophy –having mastered and understood it and pinpointed its error- I knew that philosophy also was inadequate to satisfy my aim fully. I also realized that reason alone is incapable of fully grasping all problems or getting to the heart of all difficulties."⁴¹ For Al-Ghazali, the best thing philosophy can achieve is to prove to us the truth of the 'primary truths'—the basic principles of logic. But trying to prove the validity to these logical necessities, he found later, is counterproductive "for primary truths are

39 *Al-Munqidh*, p.95.

40 See Al-Ghazali, *The Noblest Aim*, translated in McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, p. 333-363

41 *Al-Munqidh*, p.81-82.

unseekable, because they are present in the mind; and when what is present is sought, it is lost and hides itself."⁴²

At the end of several conversions and transformations, Augustine realized that his only hope for guidance is the 'immutable light' of God, a light that cannot be reached through rational reasoning, but through sincere supplication: "with you as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel... I entered and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light."⁴³ Augustine's lack of confidence in reason as a guide to God and to spiritual happiness made him cry out painfully that his brilliant mind is failing him: "I turned on Alypius and cried out: '... uneducated people are raising up and capturing heaven and we with our high culture without any heart—see where we roll in the mud of flesh and blood."⁴⁴

Al-Ghazali followed the same pattern in the darkest moment of his life, when he lost confidence in almost everything the learned and believed in, including the sense-data and the self-evident principles of logic. Al-Ghazali found in the divine light the only source of guidance after his reason betrayed him, and he fell, for a short period of time, in the trap of skepticism and sophistry: "this malady [of skepticism] was mysterious and it lasted for nearly two months. During that time I was a skeptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine. At length God Most High cured me of that sickness. My soul regained its health and equilibrium, and I once again accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them for certainty. *But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge*"⁴⁵ (my emphasis). But 'light' should not be understood here literally; rather it should be taken as a metaphor for the guidance and support God gives to those who earnestly seek Him and sincerely strive to follow His way. Montgomery Watt called this light "an immediate intuition."⁴⁶

42 *Al-Munqidh*, p.67.

43 *Confessions*, p.123.

44 *Confessions*, p.146.

45 *Al-Munqidh*, p.66.

46 Watt, *Muslim intellectual: A study of al-Ghazali*, (R. & R. Clark Ltd.: Edinburgh, 1962), p.134.

Torturing hesitation

Augustine and Al-Ghazali realized that reason alone could not help them find the truth; and if it did, it could not make them live the truth. The latter was in no way less important for Augustine and Al-Ghazali than the first. In their journey to God -“this pilgrimage to the hereafter”⁴⁷ as Al-Ghazali called it- both men turned to the divine light of God, and expressed their helplessness and dependency on God for attaining both faith and action. The difficulty of committing oneself to the truth, as opposed to knowing it abstractly, can best be illustrated through the painful hesitation and intensive conflict both Augustine and Al-Ghazali found within their souls after all remaining intellectual doubt was gone from their minds. Not only are the ideas of the two seekers similar on this issue, but also their terminology. This can partially be explained by their shared Neo-Platonism but, more importantly, by the resemblance of the existential questions they were struggling with.

At the end of their intellectual struggle, Augustine was completely convinced to commit his life to the Catholic Church, and Al-Ghazali was completely convinced to commit his life to Islamic Sufism, but none of them was able to put into practice what he believed in theory. The intellectual struggle was won; the spiritual one had just begun. During his last two year in Milan, Augustine was no longer a Manichee or a Neo-Platonist (at least in the doctrinal sense) nor was he put off anymore by the Christian Scripture (Ambrose had already solved these problems for him). Likewise, during his last half year in Baghdad (before his withdrawal from public teaching), Al-Ghazali was no longer confused by the sophistry of the philosophers or the formalism of the jurists. He studied the philosophers to be self-confident enough to say that “exposing them was easier for me than downing a mouthful of water,”⁴⁸ and that is exactly what he did in his book the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.⁴⁹ He also studied jurispr-

47 *Al-Munqidh*, p.92.

48 *Al-Munqidh*, p.105.

49 In this book, Al-Ghazali refuted twenty philosophical ideas that he found incompatible with the Islamic faith. See, Al-Ghazali, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, translated by Sabih Ahmed Kamali, Pakistan Philosophical Congress: Lahore, 1963. For a summary of Al-Ghazali's attack on philosophy see Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 41-143, and F.E.Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs: the Aristotelian Tradition in*

rudence enough to have the greatest jurists of Islam among his students.

But as noted above, the hardest challenge for these two great minds was not intellectual, but spiritual. Augustine described “how the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. I was divided between them... in large part I was passive and unwilling rather than active and willing.”⁵⁰ Intellectual excuses were scattered, but the earthly ‘chains’ were not. Augustine knew that what he was then fighting was a new war against bad habits and low desires, not the old war against sceptical ideas and arguments: “my soul hung back. It refused and had no excuse to offer. The arguments were exhausted, and all had been refuted. The only thing left to it was a mute trembling, and as it were facing death it was terrified of being restrained from the treadmill of habit by which it suffered sickness unto death.”⁵¹ It was a test of the will that no hope of salvation exists without winning it, a decision to carry on the decision, a determination to fulfill the promise: “when I deliberated about serving my Lord God which I had long been disposed to... I was neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling. So I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself.”⁵²

Al-Ghazali suffered the pain of hesitation the same way Augustine did. His deep self-examination made him obsessed with the lack of focus and sincerity in his religious life, and made him suffer from what Montgomery Watt called “his distrust of his own motives.”⁵³ This distrust included his teaching of religion to hundreds of students in the most prestigious Islamic university of his time: “I attentively considered my circumstances, and I saw that I was immersed in attachments which had encompassed me from all sides. I also considered my activities –the best of them being public and private instruction- and saw that in them I was applying myself to sciences unimportant and useless in this pilgrimage to the hereafter. Then I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and saw that it was not directed purely to God, but rat-

Islam, (New York: New York University Press, 1986) p.188-192.

50 *Confessions*, p.140.

51 *Confessions*, p.146.

52 *Confessions*, p. 148.

53 Watt, *Muslim intellectual: A study of al-Ghazali*, p.138.

her was instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige."⁵⁴ This diagnosis of his spiritual life put Al-Ghazali in a great turmoil and concern for his salvation: "I became certain that I was on the brink of a crumbling bank and already on the verge of falling into the Fire, unless I set about mending my ways."⁵⁵

Mending ways, however, proved to be a difficult task. Al-Ghazali decided to leave his highly-esteemed position in Baghdad and to live a monastic life of poverty and remembrance of God. But to live such a life he needed to 'disengage' from what he perceived as the 'chains' of this world. Such disengagement proved to be extremely challenging. The internal conflict and the tortuous hesitation Augustine painfully suffered were also experienced by Al-Ghazali: "I therefore reflected unceasingly on this for some time... One day I would firmly resolve to leave Baghdad and disengage myself from those circumstances, and another day I would revoke my resolution. I would put one foot forward and the other backward. In the morning I would have a sincere desire to seek the things of the afterlife; but by evening the hosts of passion would assail it and render it lukewarm."⁵⁶

Both men felt finally torn apart and overwhelmed by their longing to change their life and their inability to make the decision. Both found themselves suspended between two irreconcilable wills. Augustine expressed, in these words, how torturous the situation was: "such was my sickness and my torture... I was hesitating *whether to die to death or to live to life*. Ingrained evil had more hold on me than unaccustomed good. The nearer approached the moment when I would become different, the greater the horror of it struck me. But it did not thrust me back nor turn me away, but left me in a state of suspense."⁵⁷ The gap between conviction and action, belief and will, is the torturous reality that a sensitive consciousness such as the one of Augustine and Al-Ghazali cannot bear. This moral gap was described by Augustine thro-

54 *Al-Munqidh*, p. 91.

55 *Al-Munqidh*, p.91.

56 *Al-Munqidh*, p.91.

57 *Confessions*, p. 150-151. This is an indirect quotation of these two verses of the Bible: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Mathew 13:45, New American Standard Bible)

ugh an economic metaphor borrowed from the Christian Scripture. He wrote: "now I had discovered the good pearl. To buy it I need to sell all that I had; and I hesitated."⁵⁸

Habits and desires

One might ask why all of this torture? Why could not these serious seekers of God make their mind easily? Why did not they simply do what their deep convictions were leading them to do? To answer these questions we need to remember, once again, that the problem of Augustine and Al-Ghazali was not in essence an intellectual one; rather it was a spiritual/moral one. To solve such problems one needs to have will, commitment, and determination, not simply a theoretical conviction.

At the peak of their crisis Augustine and al-Ghazali were looking for practical virtue, but there was a big obstruction on their way: bad habits and low desires, or what both of them called 'the chains' of this worldly life. The pain was intensifying, and the more they became closer to their decision, the more the 'chains' became heavy and obstructive. Augustine wrote about "the *chains* of sexual desire by which I was tightly bound... the slavery of worldly affairs"⁵⁹ (my emphasis). Al-Ghazali wrote that "Mundane desires began tugging me with their *chains* to remain as I was, while the herald of faith was crying out: 'away! Up and away! Only a little is left of your life, and a long journey lies before you'⁶⁰ (my emphasis). To the reader of the *Confessions*, these words of Al-Ghazali are the exact equivalent of Augustine's cry: "how long, how long it is to be? Tomorrow, tomorrow? Why not now? Why not an end to my impure life in this very hour?"⁶¹

Since for this kind of chains intellectual conviction is not enough, another approach had to be adopted: the purification of the heart and the soul from worldly aims and ambitions, and the preparation to make

58 *Confessions* 141

59 *Confessions*, p.141.

60 *Al-Munqidh*, p.91.

61 *Confessions*, p.152.

the way through some narrow paths that are not smooth at all. Augustine diagnosed this dilemma very well when he wrote: "I was attracted to the way... but was still reluctant to go along its narrow paths,"⁶² "bad habits had become so embattled against me."⁶³ "My heart needed to be purified from the old leaven."⁶⁴

Al-Ghazali, like Augustine, had to fight his own bad habits and desires—the desires and habits of fame and fortune of the most respected and influential scholar in the Islamic Empire of the eleventh century: "it had already become clear to me that my only hope of attaining beatitude in the afterlife lay in piety and restraining my soul from passion. The beginning of all that, I knew, was to sever my heart's attachment to the world by withdrawing from this abode of delusion and turning to the mansion of immortality and devoting myself with total ardor to God Most High. That, I knew, could be achieved only by shunning fame and fortune and fleeing from my preoccupations and attachments."⁶⁵

Transformation

On a day in September 386, Augustine made his painful decision to give up his worldly life of physical pleasure and earthly ambition, and to commit himself to his faith with all his commitment and determination. The emotional episode of this conversion was vividly described by Augustine himself in book VIII of his *Confessions*. Seven hundred and nine years later, in November 1095, Al-Ghazali made his painful decision, with the same level of commitment and determination, to leave his prosperous life in Baghdad and to live a mystic life of a wandering Sufi in Damascus, Jerusalem, Mecca and Tus. Timothy Gianotti rightly remarked that Al-Ghazali was "a practical man, even in his mysticism,"⁶⁶ a statement that easily applies for Augustine. Both men looked for practi-

62 *Confessions*, p.133.

63 *Confessions*, p.140.

64 *Confessions*, p.133.

65 *Confessions*, p. 91.

66 Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazali's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul*, (Brill: Leiden/Boston, 2001) p.176.

cal self-purification, not philosophical abstraction, and they finally found what they looked for. What happened later to Augustine and Al-Ghazali is beyond the scope of a paper focusing on that specific moment that preceded the conversion of these two 'giants of the spirit'.

It is enough to say here that the quest for God by Augustine and Al-Ghazali had a transformative impact on two of the world religions and a great impact on the spiritual history of humankind. Augustine and Al-Ghazali left behind them a rich legacy of hundreds of books: "The surviving works of Augustine comprise a little over five million words"⁶⁷ and the books and epistles of Al-Ghazali count more than four hundred.⁶⁸ Beside these abundant words of wisdom, Augustine and Al-Ghazali inspired millions of people throughout the ages by their practical sacrifice and self-denial in their painful quest for God.

Conclusion

This paper emphasizes the quest for spiritual certainty in the autobiographies of Augustine and Al-Ghazali, as opposed to the quest for intellectual certainty, commonly associated with these two seekers of God. Both Augustine and Al-Ghazali became dissatisfied with their own faiths as represented (or practiced) by their contemporaries, as well as with the worldly prestige that they found unworthy of their life, and both of them looked for practical virtue more than philosophical satisfaction.

A solid scholarship, a great curiosity and a genuine thirst for certainty were characteristic of both Augustine and Al-Ghazali. Each of these two seekers of God immersed himself bravely in unfamiliar cultures, bridged different worlds, and subdued whatever he studied to his faith. The process of this cultural digestion did not pass without painful impact on these giant minds, not the least of it is the spiritual restlessness that Augustine and Al-Ghazali had to struggle with, and to make their way through, with a great difficulty and agony.

67 James O'Donnel, "Works of Augustine", retrieved August 1st, 2007 from <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/twayne/twaynebib.html>

68 Mourice Bouyges counted the books and epistles of Al-Ghazali, and found them 404 works. See his *Essai de Chronologie des Oeuvres de Al-Ghazali (Ghazel)*, (Beyrouth: Impremie Catholique, 1959).

With all their intellectual and spiritual achievements, no wonder Augustine and Al-Ghazali were seen by their contemporaries and many later generations of their coreligionists as divine gifts sent by God in the right time—a time of confusion and conflict of ideas and ideals. To appreciate the struggles and achievements of Augustine and Al-Ghazali, their pre-conversion moment is fascinating to explore.

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Özet - Tanrıyla İlgili Sancılı Bir Arayış: Augustine ve Gazali'nin İhtida Öncesi Anı- Aziz Augustine'nin (354-430) ölümüyle Ebu Hamid Gazali'nin doğumu (1058-1111) arasında 600 yıllık bir süre vardır. Bu iki ruh devri de, birbirinden farklı iman itiraflarına sahiptir, farklı sosyal politik koşullar içinde mücadele etmişlerdir. Augustine ve Gazali'nin arkasında bıraktığı manevi otobiyografilerin okurları, insan varoluşunun koşullarının paradoksu ve Tanrıyla ilgili sürekliliği bir arayış hakkında aynı varoluşsal sorular karşısında müşterek biçimde çabaladıkları gerçeğini yansıtan dikkat çekici benzerlikleri bulduğunda şaşıracaklardır. Yekpare bir bilimsellik, büyük bir merak, kesinliğe yönelik hakiki bir arzu, hem Augustin'in hem de Gazali'nin temel nitelikleridir. Tanrı'yı arayan bu iki adam da, farklı kültürler içinde kendileriyle meşgul olmuşlar, farklı dünyaları birbirine bağlamışlar, inceledikleri konu her ne olursa olsun onu kendi imanlarının kontrolü altına koymuşlardır. Bu kültürel sindirim süreci, bu büyük zihinler üzerindeki sancılı etki olmaksızın, en azından, Augustine ve Gazali'nin kendisiyle başa çıkmaya çalıştıkları manevi huzursuzluk olmadan ilerlemez. Bu makale, Augustine ve Gazali'nin otobiyografilerinde entelektüel kesinlik arayışına karşı olarak Tanrı'yı arayan bu iki kişinin müşterek biçimde kendisiyle ilişkili oldukları manevi kesinlik arayışını vurgular.

Anahtar kelimeler: İslam Hıristiyanlık Gazali, Augustine, Manevi dönüşüm, Entelektüel kesinlikten yoksun olma, Tanrı Arayışı, Sufizm, Felsefe.