

Al-Ghazzālī's Final Word on *Kalām*

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Al-Ghazzālī's last work on speculative theology—*Iljām al-ʿawām ʿan ʿilm al-kalām* (“Saving Muslims from Speculative Theology”)—reflects a significant departure from the Ashʿarī school of thought and arrival at the ‘way of the *salaf*’ (*madhhab al-salaf*). This so-called *salafī* path espoused in *Iljām* is indicative of the theological approach of Traditionalists, especially Ḥanbalīs, which vehemently rejected *Kalām* and allegorical interpretations of divine attributes. In *Iljām*, his opponents are not so much the Muʿtazilīs as they are the Ḥashwī anthropomorphists. Although he still recognized *Kalām* as a scholastic discipline that basically met the goal of protecting the Sunnī creed and defending it against heresies, he was convinced that its method ultimately failed to delineate a decisive hermeneutic path to intimately knowing God and His attributes. This paper briefly examines al-Ghazzālī's *Iljām*, its key theological constructs, its relative importance within the Sunnī corpus on *Kalām*, and the scholarly debate over the meaning of the ‘Way of the *Salaf*’.

Keywords: Ashʿarī interpretation; al-Ghazzālī; *Iljām*; *Kalām*; ‘Way of the *Salaf*’; common folk.

Introduction

Al-Ghazzālī¹ (d. 505 /1111), one of the most famous of all Muslim theologians, authored several Sunnī treatises on speculative or ‘scholastic’ theology (‘*ilm*

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1. Scholars have long differed on the proper pronunciation and writing of his name: al-Ghazzālī, al-Ghazālī, al-Gazel, etc. I adhere to the first, that is, al-Ghazzālī, based on the majority opinion of Muslim historians and genealogists who follow Ibn al-Athīr's rendition. See Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf al-sādat al-muttaqīm bi sharḥ Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Muʿassasa al-Tārīkh al-ʿArabī, 1994), vol. 1, 18.
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al-kalām)², including *al-Risāla al-qudsiyya fī qarwāʿid al-ʿaqāʾid* (“The Jerusalem Epistle”)³, *al-Arbaʿin fī uṣūl al-dīn* (“Forty Points on Islamic Orthodoxy”)⁴, *al-Iqtisād fil-iʿtiqād* (“The Golden Mean in Belief”)⁵, *Fayṣal al-tafrīqa baynal-Islām wal-zandaqa* (“The Criterion of Distinction between Islam and Clandestine Unbelief”)⁶, and *al-Maqṣad al-asnāʾ fī sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā* (“The Brilliant Aim of Explaining Allah’s Beautiful Names”).⁷ These works generally set forth his pro-Ashʿarī⁸ viewpoint. His final work on *Kalām*, entitled *Iljām al-ʿawām ʿan ʿilm al-kalām* (“Saving Muslims from Scholastic Theology”),⁹ however, marks a

2. I translate *ʿilm al-kalām*, or simply *Kalām*, here as ‘scholastic’ theology reservedly, since scholasticism proper developed as an intellectual method and system in an entirely different cultural context; namely, within the western church, particularly Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, Muslim *Kalām* and Christian scholastic theology share a hermeneutic approach in common, seeking to understand religious faith through rational proofs while integrating theology and philosophy. As for the origins of the term *ʿilm al-kalām*, according to Ibn Khaldūn, there are two theories: (i) it arose from the argumentation over heresies, which is a type of speech exchange (*kalām ṣarf*) and does not rebound upon action, or (ii) it stemmed from the dispute of theologians over affirmation of *al-kalām al-naṣī* (“speech of the soul or self”). See Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima* (Cairo: Dār al-Fajr, 2004), 559.
3. Translated by Nabih Faris and published as *The Foundations of the Articles of Faith* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1999).
4. Available in Arabic print.
5. A partial translation was done by A. Abu Zayd and published as *Al-Ghazali on Divine Predicates* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1970).
6. Translated by Sherman A. Jackson and published as *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
7. Translated by David Burrell and Nazih Daher and published as *Al-Ghazali on the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992).
8. The Ashʿarī theological school of thought is named after its founder Abū Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 334/945) who was a former Muʿtazilī. He is one of the original founders of Sunnī *Kalām* in opposition to Muʿtazilī *Kalām*. His works include the well known *Māqalāt al-islāmiyyīn*, *Risāla fī iḥtisān al-khawḍ fī ʿilm al-kalām*, and *al-İbāna ʿan uṣūl al-diyāna* which are available in Arabic print; the second work was translated and published as *A Vindication of the Science of Kalām* in Richard J. McCarthy, *The Theology of Al-Ashʿarī* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953).
9. Al-Ghazzālī, *Iljām al-ʿawām ʿan ʿilm al-kalām*, ed. M. al-Muʿtaṣim bi-Llāh al-Baghdādī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabī, 1985). This edition was translated by the present author under the supervision of Michael

departure from Ash'arism and arrival at the so-called 'Way of the *Salaf*' (*madhhab al-salaf*). His eventual embrace of the Salafī theological method, hitherto, has not received the attention that it deserves in the scholarly discourse on *kalām*. Although noting that *kalām* still had utility for some people on certain matters, he posited that its method had ultimately failed to pave a clear hermeneutic way to God and His attributes; therefore, he no longer recommended it for the "common folk" (*al-ʿawām*). This paper briefly examines al-Ghazzālī's *Iljām*, highlights its key theological constructs and relationship to his earlier *kalām* treatises, and explores his advocacy of *madhhab al-salaf*.

Authenticity of *Iljām*

Al-Ghazzālī wrote *Iljām al-ʿawām ʿan ʿilm al-kalām* shortly before he died. The work is cited in several listings of authentic works attributed to him, including Ṭājjuddīn al-Subkī's (d. 771/1370) *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfiʿiyya al-kubrā* (in which it is entitled *Iljām al-ʿawām fī* (instead of ʿan) *ʿilm al-kalām*),¹⁰ Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba's (d. 779/1448) *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfiʿiyya*,¹¹ al-Zabīdī's (d. 1205/1790) *Ithāf al-sādat al-muttaqīn bi sharḥ Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*,¹² and al-Ḥussaynī al-Wāsiṭī's (d. 776/1374) *al-Ṭabaqāt al-ʿuliyā*.¹³ Under the heading "Later Dogmatic Works" in his article "The Authenticity of Works Attributed to Al-Ghazali," W. Montgomery Watt cited the 1309 AH Cairo edition of *Iljām*.¹⁴ In his *Revised Chronology of Ghazali's Writings*, George F. Hourani included it with the following note: "*Iljām al-ʿawām ʿan ʿilm al-kalam* (Cairo 1309 = 1891/92, Maymuniyya Press). This work is dated precisely by a colophon as having been completed in 'the first days of Jumada II, 505,' i.e., a few days before Ghazali's death on the 14th of that month (December 18, 1111). The colophon is in a very early manuscript, Istanbul: Shehid Ali 1712: 1, which gives its own date of completion as the middle of Shaʿbān, 507=113."¹⁵ This citation agrees with Hourani's

Morony (UCLA), but has not yet been published.

10. Al-Subkī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-shāfiʿiyya al-kubrā*, 5th ed. (Cairo: Dār Ihyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabī), vol. 6, 225.
11. Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfiʿiyya* (Hyderabad: Dāʾira Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1978), vol. 1, 328.
12. Al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf*, vol. 1, 41.
13. See the biography of al-Ghazzālī in al-Wāsiṭī's *al-Ṭabaqāt al-ʿuliyā* in Abdul al-Amīr al-Aʿsam, *al-Faylasūf al-Ghazzālī*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1981), 181.
14. W. Montgomery Watt, "The Authenticity of Works Attributed to Al-Ghazali," *JRAS* (1952): 44.
15. George F. Hourani, "A Revised Chronology of Ghazali's Writings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 2 (1984): 302.

information on it in an earlier listing of al-Ghazzālī's works.¹⁶ Examining *Iljām*, Frank Griffel opined that "both the early date of the manuscript as well as the notice [i.e. the colophon] about the dating of the text may have been inserted later in order to increase its marked value."¹⁷ This speculation is baseless.¹⁸ In his Arabic listing of al-Ghazzālī's writings, Mashhad al-Allāf noted that *Iljām* is "a book on the Way of the *Salaf* and is the last book that al-Ghazzālī wrote at the beginning of Jamādī al-Ākhira, 505 AH, that is, shortly before his death on Monday, Jamādī al-Ākhira 14, 505 AH (December 18, 1111) by no more than two weeks." He added: "It is considered a very important work of Imam al-Ghazzālī because you can clearly read in it that his method was the same as that of the righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*), so much so that *Iljām* is named in some manuscripts as *Risāla fī madhhab ahl al-salaf* ("A Treatise on the Way of the *Salaf*")...in which he emphasized Imam Mālik's (d. 179/795) statement¹⁹ as the foundation of his subject [of interpreting Divine Attributes], sticking to it, and repeating it in a number of places...."²⁰ Under the first section of his *Mu'allafāt al-Ghazzālī*, headlined "Works Attributed to al-Ghazzālī that are Definitely Authentic," Abdur Raḥmān Badawī confirmed the aforementioned entries on *Iljām*, giving additional listings of it in Brockelmann, the British Museum, and several other sources.²¹ *Iljām* has been published several times in Arabic: Istanbul (1278/1861); Cairo (1303/1885; 1309/1891; 1328/1910; 1350/1932; 1351/1932); and Beirut (1406/1985). A Spanish translation of *Iljām*

16. George F. Hourani, "The Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 79, no. 4 (October–December 1959): 233.

17. Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 266.

18. Cf. W. Montgomery Watt, "The Study of al-Ghazālī," *Oriens* 13/14 (1960/1961): 124 n. 1.

19. It is reported that Mālik b. Anas was once asked, "What is *istiwā'*?" He replied: "*Al-istiwā'* is known; its modality is unknown; faith in it is obligatory; and questioning it is heresy." The word is found in the Qur'ān in several places, such as [He] has applied His design (*istawā*) to the heaven (Q 2:29). *Istawā* is polysemic, having several meanings in Arabic, such as "seeking symmetry, evenness, or equality in things," "to own," and the like. See discussion of this below. See al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1992), 123–24; al-Bayḍāwī, *al-Taḥṣīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm al-'Arabī), vol. 1, 66.

20. Mashhad al-Allāf, *Kutub al-imām al-Ghazzālī al-thābit minhā wal-manhūl* (2002), <http://www.ghazali.org/biblio/AuthenticityofGhazaliWorks-AR.htm>.

21. Abdur Raḥmān Badawī, *Mu'allafāt al-Ghazzālī*, 2nd ed. (Kuwait: Wikāla al-Maṭbū'at, 1977), 231–33.

exists²² and, more recently, an English translation of it has been published for popular consumption.²³ There is no dispute that *Iljām* is an authentic work of al-Ghazzālī.

Kalām under al-Ghazzālī

Kalām, as defined by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), is “the science that involves arguments with rational proofs in defense of the articles of faith and refutations against heresies opposed to ways of the earlier Muslim generations (*madhāhib al-salaf*) and Sunnī orthodoxy (*ahl al-sunna*).”²⁴ Al-Ghazzālī had viewed *Kalām* in a similar way,²⁵ holding it to be a collective duty (*farḍ al-kifāya*) upon the Muslim community but not necessarily binding on every individual member (*farḍ al-ʿayn*). He himself evaluated most of his own writings on *Kalām*. In *Ihyāʾ al-ʿulūm al-dīn*, for example, he wrote, “We turn now to *ʿilm al-kalām* and say that it has advantages and disadvantages, usefulness and harm. With regard to its usefulness, whenever it is useful it is lawful, commendable, or obligatory, as the occasion demands. As for its harm, whenever it is harmful it is unlawful; and its harm lies in raising doubts and undermining the articles of faith, removing them from the realms of certitude and decisiveness. These things get lost at first and restoring them by means of proof is dubious and varies among individuals.”²⁶ Thus, a theologian (*mutakallim*) should act like a physician, adeptly administering strong medicine to the sick in the right dose, at the right time, and at the right place. He urged that his brief statement on the Sunnī creed (*tarjama ʿaqida ahl-sunna*), which is found in his *Ihyāʾ* and “is straightforward and free of arguments,” be taught to those who are exposed to one dominant school of theology and rarely encounter heresies. In an environment in which heresies are prevalent, however, he advised that children should be taught his *Jerusalem Epistle* instead. But “If [the youth] was bright

22. *El justo medio en la creencia*, trans. Miguel Asin Palacios (Madrid: Compendio de teleología dogmatic, 1929); see Badawī, *Muʿallafāt al-Ghazzālī*, 139.

23. Abdullāh bin Hamid Ali, *A Return to Purity of Creed* (Philadelphia: Lamppost Publications, 2008). Ali is of the view that al-Ghazzālī did not repudiate any opinion that he held about the Ashʿarī school or the science of *Kalām*. I discuss the various ways in which *Iljām* has been received in the section below entitled “Reactions to *Iljām* and the Way of the *Salaf*” of this paper.

24. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 551. Cf. al-Qinawwājī, *Abjad al-ʿulūm* (Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wal-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1978), vol. 2, 440–53; Louis Gardet, “ʿIlm al-Kalām” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), vol. 3.

25. See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī* (London: George Allen & Udwin Ltd., 1952), 27.

26. *Ihyāʾ*, vol. 1, 116.

but became aware of a certain question or grew skeptical about something in his mind, then the dreaded disease [of skepticism] has appeared and the malady has become visible. There is no harm, then, to promote [the youth] to reading the equivalent of that which we have included in the book entitled *The Golden Mean in Belief*, equaling about fifty folios and free of any departure from discussing foundations of the articles of faith to other investigations of the scholastic theologians.”²⁷ If doubt still persists after the foregoing pedagogical measures are taken, he believed that the malady had become chronic—and that *Kalām* is then useless in actually fostering belief in the fundamental articles of faith. Revisiting the discourse in his *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (“Deliverance from Error”)²⁸, al-Ghazzālī acknowledged the aim of *Kalām* but, at the same time, criticized its methodology:

Theologians performed the task to which God invited them; they successfully preserved orthodoxy, defended the creed received from the prophetic source, and rectified heretical innovations. Nevertheless in so doing they based their arguments on premises which they took from their opponents and which they were compelled to admit by naïve belief (*taqlid*), or the consensus of the community, or bare acceptance of Qur’an and Traditions. For the most part their efforts were devoted to making explicit the contradictions of their opponents and criticizing them in respect of the logical consequences of what they admitted. This was of little use in the case of one who admitted nothing at all save logically necessary truths.²⁹

In the west, there is no scholarly consensus on al-Ghazzālī’s final theology. Wolfson observed that “with regard to the *Kalam*, while he disapproved of its methods, he approved of its views, whereas, with regard to philosophy, quite the opposite—while he disapproved of its views, he approved of its methods. This, on the whole, may also be considered as a characterization of philosophized Ash‘arite *Kalam*.”³⁰ Wensinck remarked that “al-Ghazzālī did not radically reject *Kalām*, and so Aristotelianism kept its place side by side with Platonism.”³¹ On al-Ghazzālī’s attitude toward *Kalām* and Sufism, Watt commented that there was no radical change in his theological views when he became a Sufi mystic, only a change in his interests, and that some of his earlier works in the field

27. Ibid.; cf. Arent J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc, 1965), 95–101.

28. Translated as Watt, *Faith and Practice*.

29. Ibid., 28.

30. Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), 42.

31. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 83–84.

of dogmatics are quoted with approval in *al-Munqidh*.³² Investigating aspects of *Kalām* in which he believed al-Ghazzālī was considered innovative among Ash'arīs (e.g. his denial of the theory of optimum, atomism, and the theory of the soul), Nakamura argued that he had stepped out of traditional Ash'arism or did not faithfully adhere to it in every respect.³³ Marmura held that al-Ghazzālī's position remained basically Ash'arī, albeit pointing toward gnosis, and that he was generally and, at times, highly critical of the *Kalām* method.³⁴ Frank, who investigated his open conflicts with Ash'arīs and rejection of their *Kalām*, opined that "it would be extremely difficult to discern any notable theoretical development or evolution in al-Ghazzālī's theology—if any, indeed, there be—from *Maqāṣid* to *Iljām*."³⁵ Griffel, building on the views of Wensinck and others before him, went so far as to dismiss the notion that al-Ghazzālī embraced Traditionalism (i.e. what was claimed as the Way of the *Salaf*) before he died,³⁶ but the preponderant evidence in *Iljām* is against him, as will be discussed shortly.

Iljām contrasts sharply with al-Ghazzālī's earlier *Kalām* works in two significant ways. The first is that it represents his most scathing disapproval of *Kalām*. In *Iljām*, he argued that although *Kalām*-type propositions and arguments constitute an epistemological path to belief in Divinity, it did not reflect the highest or best standard of knowledge on the subject. For faith in God, His attributes, and His works can be "acquired by the speculative proofs of *Kalām* based on propositions that are acceptable only because of their popularity with leading scholars, the ignominy involved in repudiating them, and the people's aversion to any dissemination of doubt in them. In this manner, the science of *Kalām* is useful in some theological matters, constituting a justified belief (*taṣdīq jāzim*) for the few who do not perceive the possibility of its contradiction."³⁷ Beyond that, al-Ghazzālī saw little or no benefit in *Kalām*, advocating instead the teaching of Qur'ānic proofs to the common folk.³⁸ The second way is that *Iljām* distanced itself from the Ash'arī approach to Divine Attributes based on figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*), thereby aligning with the Traditionalists (like Ḥanbalīs) who strictly prohibited allegorical renditions of

32. Watt, *Faith and Practice*, 12.

33. Kojiro Nakamura, "Was Ghazālī an Ash'arite?" *The Memoirs of the Research Department of Toyo Bunko* 51 (1993): 4–5.

34. Michael E. Marmura, "Ghazali and Ash'arism Revisited," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 12 (2002): 92–94.

35. R.M. Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 91.

36. Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 266.

37. *Iljām*, 112.

38. *Ibid.*, 115–16.

divine attributes and who were mainly identified with the ‘Salafī’ theological method. In al-Ghazzālī’s own words in *Iljām*, “I say that it is unlawful (*ḥarām*) for preachers on the pulpits to answer questions [from the common folk] that delve into *ta’wīl* and elaborateness [on divine attributes]; rather, the preachers’ duty is to confine themselves to what we have mentioned here as well as the *salaf*, strongly emphasizing Allah’s sanctity and negating anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*).”³⁹

Post-Ash‘arī al-Ghazzālī

Throughout its long timeline, from the fourth/ninth century to the eighth/thirteenth century, the *Kalām* discourse was largely dominated by the dialectics of Ash‘arīs, Traditionalists, Mu‘tazilis, and Shi‘īs (especially Zaydis and Isma‘īlis to some extent). During this contentious period and beyond, many leading Muslim scholars, representing the majority Traditionalist orthodoxy,⁴⁰ were adamantly opposed to the ideas of *Kalām*. Several compilations of their names have been made. Among them were Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/769)⁴¹, Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798), al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/819), Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), al-Balkhī (d. ca. 309/921 or 319/931), Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 840/1436), al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834), and many more too numerous to mention here.⁴² Specifically on the issue of interpreting divine attributes, Mu‘tazilis⁴³ categorically denied them (*ta‘ṭīl*),

39. *Ibid.*, 64.

40. George Makdisi, “Ash‘arī and the Ash‘arites in Islamic Religious History I,” *Studia Islamica* 17 (1962): 49.

41. The evidence is indirect in respect of Abū Ḥanīfa, since there is no record of him, as far as I know, specifically condemning *Kalām*, unlike many of his Traditionalist contemporaries; rather, his opposition to it has been deduced from his reported dislike for disputation, far less sophistry, to promote religious truths. See al-Qārī, *Minah al-rawḍ al-azhār* (known as *Sharḥ al-fiqh al-akbār*) (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā‘ir al-Islāmiyya, 1998), 32–33.

42. For more on Traditionalists opposed to *Kalām*, see *Ihyā’*, vol. 1, 114; Faris, *Foundations of the Articles of Faith*, 16–20; al-Dhahabī, *Mukhtaṣar al-‘ulw li ‘alī al-ghaffār*, ed. al-Albānī (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1981), 135–286; Ibn al-Wazīr, *Tarjīḥ asālīb al-Qur‘ān ‘ala al-asālīb al-yunānī* (Cairo edition, 1930), 24–27; al-Suyūṭī, *Itmām ad-dirāya li qurrā’ al-naqāya* (Calcutta: Mazhar al-‘Ajā‘ib, 1864), 2–3; al-Qārī, *Sharḥ al-fiqh al-akbār*, 29–42; Ṣiddiq Ḥ. Khan al-Qinnawjī, *Qaṣd al-sabīl ilā dhamm al-kalām wal-ta’wīl* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2000), 46–56.

43. Muslim heresiographers list the Mu‘tazilis as a Muslim sect known by other names like *al-Qadariyya* and *al-Adaliyya*. Mu‘tazilis, however, called themselves *Aṣḥāb al-‘adl wal-tawḥīd* (“The People of Justice and

explaining away these predicates figuratively (*ta'wīl*): God's "hand" symbolizes His power, *istiwā'* His seizure or occupation of a thing by force, and the like, whereas Ash'arīs affirmed God's attributes like "knowledge" (*'ilm*), "will" (*irāda*), "power" (*qudra*), "life" (*ḥayāt*), "hearing" (*sam'*), "sight" (*baṣar*), "speech" (*kalām*), "face" (*wajh*), "eyes" (*a'yun*), and so forth, linking them to the eternal divine essence (*dhāt*) but "without asking how" (*bi-lā kayf*).⁴⁴ It is believed by some that al-Ash'arī also opened the door of *ta'wīl* as regards divine attributes, leading them to the opinion that he had a two-faced position, two schools of thought, or followed two middle-of-the-road theological positions.⁴⁵ Later Ash'arī scholars like al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1012), Ibn Fūrak, al-Baghdādī, al-Qushayrī, and others among the Nishapur Ash'arīs are believed to have also permitted and applied *ta'wīl* to divine attributes if deemed necessary.⁴⁶ But others have argued that al-Ash'arī, al-Bāqillānī, et al abandoned *ta'wīl* in the end, falling back on the Traditionalist *bi-lā kayf*.⁴⁷ This debate is perennial. Suffice it to say that it is possible that al-Ash'arī and al-Bāqillānī allowed *ta'wīl* at one time and disavowed it at another time, suggesting evolutionary phases of their theology and not necessarily simultaneous adherence to two

Islamic Monotheism"). One of their founders was Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā (d. 131/748). He differed with al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) on a number of issues and separated (*i'tazala*) from him; hence the label Mu'tazilīs. Their opponents associated Mu'tazilitism with a five article creed: i) *tawḥīd* ("Islamic Monotheism," which espoused creation of the Qur'ān, negation of Divine Attributes through figurative interpretations, etc.); ii) *'adl* ("Justice"); iii) *inqādh al-wa'īd* ("Salvation through Fulfillment of God's Promise"); iv) *bayna l-manzilatayn* ("Between Two Positions"); and v) *al-amr bil-ma'rūf wa nahy 'anil-munkar* ("Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil"). Mu'tazilīs were not a monolithic group, splintering into some 20 schisms over time. See al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wal-niḥal*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1993), vol. 1, 56–63; *Mawsū'a kashshāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn wal-'ulūm*, ed. Rafic al-Ajam (Beirut: Librairie du Liban Publishers, 1996), vol. 2, 1574–75.

44. Al-Bāqillānī, *al-Inṣāf fī mā yajib i'tiqādahu wa lā yajūz al-jahl bih*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: al-Makataba al-Azhariyya lil-Turāth, 2000), 25.
45. Al-Sharastānī, *al-Milal wal-niḥal*, vol. 1, 106; al-Subkī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'iyya al-kubrā*, vol. 4, 33; Makdisi, "Ash'arī and the Ash'arites I," 42–44.
46. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 79–84; Nakamura, *Was Ghazālī an Ash'arite?* 5.
47. Al-Dhahabī, *Mukhtaṣar al-'ulw li 'alī al-ghaffār*, 258–59; Ibn Darbās, "Risāla fil-Dhabb 'an Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī" in *al-Arba'in fī dalā'il al-tawḥīd*, ed. 'Alī b. Naṣir (KSA: Islamic University of Madina, 1984), 95–132; Abdul Raḥmān al-Maḥmūd, *Mawqif ibn Taymiyya min al-ashā'ir* (Riyadh: Maktaba al-Rushd, 1995), 538–40.

schools or positions. In any case, al-Ghazzālī undoubtedly had in mind Ash‘arī proponents of *ta’wīl* when he wrote, “Another group advocated the middle of the road position and permitted allegorical interpretation in everything which relates to the attributes of God but have taken the things which pertain to the hereafter in a literal sense and forbade their allegorical interpretation. The advocates of this position are the Ash‘arīs. The Mu‘tazilīs go further. They explain away the possibility of seeing God and His being possessed of hearing and sight.”⁴⁸ His repudiation of *ta’wīl* for the common folk comes to the fore in *Ijām*.

Returning to its form and content, al-Ghazzālī opened *Ijām*’s first section with the words “[Know] that the truth with people of insight, in which there is no doubt, is the *madhhab al-salaf*. By that, I mean the way of the Companions and the Followers (*al-tābi‘īn*). I hereby present its explanation and proof...”⁴⁹ The word *salaf* is polysemous, having several meanings in Muslim tradition. Etymologically, *salaf* denotes “such as have gone before,” “preceded,” or “preceding generations” as expressed in the Qur’ān: *And We made them [a people] of the past (salaf) and an example to later ages.*⁵⁰ In Islamic parlance, at least within the Sunnī narrative, *salaf* refers to the early Muslim generations up to the era of the Followers or the generation after them (i.e. *tābi‘ut al-tābi‘īn*); hence *madhhab al-salaf*, “the tenets of the early Muslim generations.”⁵¹ *Salafīyyūn* (“followers of the *Salaf*” or Salafists) is loosely applied to those who imitate their religious belief and practice, though not in a monolithic fashion. Since the 2nd/8th century, *salaf* and its derivatives (*salafī*, *salafīyya*, etc.) have been appropriated by many thinkers and groups to reclaim in diverse ways an imagined past utopia when Islam was best understood and implemented by pious Muslims. Thus, we find that the *Ḥashwiyya*,⁵² who were identified with anthropomorphism and apparently were still around in al-Ghazzālī’s time, claimed to be *Salafīyyūn*⁵³; among the three major schisms of Imāmiyya

48. *Ihyā’*, vol. 1, 123; Faris, *Foundations of the Articles of Faith*, 51; cf. al-Ghazzālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ ma‘ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1971), 192.

49. *Ijām*, 53.

50. Q 43:56 (Y. Ali translation). See also Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, n.d.), vol. 3, 2069–70.

51. Edward Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863), 1408.

52. Here al-Ghazzālī uses *Ḥashwiyya* pejoratively for anthropomorphists in general. For further information on the term, see the article “Ḥashwiyya (Ḥashawiyya, Ḥushwiyya, or Ahl al-Ḥashw)” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill).

53. *Ijām*, 51–52.

Shi'ism, one group called themselves *al-Salafīyya* (the other two were known for their Mu'tazila and Mushabbaha, i.e. *tashbīh*, orientations)⁵⁴; in Ibn Taymiyya's works, adherence to the path of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* is a major theme; more recently, the *Salafīyya* School in Egypt was pioneered by Muḥammad Abduh (d. 1905); and the contemporary Wahhabi-Salafī religious phenomenon, originating in Saudi Arabia, is the latest manifestation of the Salafī trend almost as old as Islam itself. By *madhhab al-salaf*, al-Ghazzālī clarified in *Iljām*, he meant the following: "The reality of the 'Way of the *Salaf*', which is correct to us, is that every lay person, who comes across an ambiguous tradition [concerning Divine Attributes], is obliged to do seven things: (i) "sanctification" (*taqdis*), (ii) "acceptance" (*tasdiq*), (iii) "confession of inability" (*i'tirāf bil-'ajaz*), (iv) "silence" (*sukūt*), (v) "restraint" (*imsāk*), (vi) "abstinence" (*kaff*), and (vii) "deference to the people of gnosis" (*al-taslīm li-ahl al-ma'rifa*)....These are the seven principles that the *Salaf* collectively believed are incumbent on the common folk. It is improper to think that they believed otherwise."⁵⁵

Why does this particular theological approach, which shuns anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) and denial (*ta'tīl*), constitute the Way of the *Salaf* and correct understanding of divine attributes in *Iljām*? To support his claims, al-Ghazzālī provided two arguments based respectively on logical and theological proofs. The rational proof is that the Prophet is better acquainted with God and His revelation than anyone else, that he faithfully disclosed the Guidance to the people, and that he never endorsed speculative inquiry into the nature of divine attributes; therefore, his Sunna as regards these matters ought to be followed. As for the theological proof, al-Ghazzālī expressed it in syllogistic form:

The Way of the Salaf is true and is opposite to heresy (bid'a), which is blameworthy,

The common folk's delving into interpretation (ta'wīl) of divine attributes is a blameworthy bid'a,

Therefore, opposition to it—abstinence from speculative inquiry into Divine Attributes (i.e. Kalām)—is recommended and praiseworthy.⁵⁶

Therefore, every time a layperson raises a question on the nature of divine attributes, al-Ghazzālī's advice is that Mālik's classic response should be given, so as to shut the door on the "strife" (*fitna*) of theological controversies and fanaticism in society. Recall that when Mālik was asked, "What is *istiwā*?" he answered, "*Istiwā* is known (*ma'tūm*); its modality unknown (*majhūl*); faith

54. Muḥammad 'Alī Tahānawī, *Mawsū'a kashshāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn wal-'ulūm* (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1996), vol. 1, 968–69.

55. *Iljām*, 51.

56. *Ibid.*, 87–95.

in it is obligatory (*wājib*); and questioning it is heresy (*bidʿa*).⁵⁷ Moreover, al-Ghazzālī required laypersons to affirm that *istawāʿ* in the proof-texts does not refer to “sitting” or “settled,” “fixity of location,” which are attributes of material bodies; rather, they should recognize that the actual meaning of *istawāʿ* is unknown to them and they should not feel obliged to inquire into its knowledge, accepting as true the Qurʾānic words *the Most Gracious (istawāʿ) on the Throne of His almightiness*.⁵⁸ That, in a nutshell, is al-Ghazzālī’s explanation of the Way of the *Salaf* upon which he embarked in *Iljām*, sailing a middle course between outright denial of divine attributes (*taʿtīl*) and *taʿwīl*, on the one hand, and anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*), on the other. Divine Attributes are to be affirmed to the common folk just as they are reported in the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, without filtering them through figurative or literal interpretation. Thus, al-Ghazzālī’s “Salafi” approach with regard to explaining divine attributes to the common folk (as expressed in *Iljām*) differed from the Ashʿarī position mainly in its retention of *bi-lā kayf*, avoidance of *taʿwīl*, and rejection of *Kalām*; it differed from the anthropomorphists in its repudiation of *tashbīh*.⁵⁹

The Scope of *Iljām*

Iljām is a concise treatise. It addresses three major themes interspersed with rhetorical exchanges with an interlocutor. The first theme explains the reality of the Way of the *Salaf* concerning certain ambiguous “traditions” (i.e., *aḥādīth*) on divine attributes. The second theme discusses the proof that the Way of the *Salaf* is correct and devoid of error and that opposition to it constitutes “heresy” (*bidʿa*). The third theme addresses ancillary issues pertaining to understanding divine attributes within the context of Islamic axial texts, the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth. Al-Ghazzālī’s hermeneutic approach is two-fold, involving (i) the acceptance of textual descriptions of God, His attributes, and His works at face value, and (ii) the application of reason to prune them of anthropomorphic, negating, and figurative readings. According to this rational conceptual framework, wherever God is described in the proof-texts, for example, as having “eyes,” “hands,” and the like, and a being that “ascends” and “descends,” these descriptions ought to be accepted verbatim; at the same time, it should be understood that Divine Attributes neither resemble human attributes in essence or function nor are they metaphors for speculative abstract realities or allegories.

Here is a typical example from *Iljām*:

57. *Ihyāʿ*, vol. 1, 123–24.

58. Q 20:5 (M. Asad translation). Altogether, the verbal form of *istawāʿ* in the third person singular is mentioned in the same context in twelve places in the Qurʾān: 2:29; 7:54; 10:3; 13:2; 20:5; 25:59; 28:14; 32:4; 41:11; 48:29; 53:6; and 57:4.

59. See fig. 1 at the end of the paper.

When [the believer] hears the word *above* in the words of Allah, *He (Allah) is the Irresistible, [watching] from above (fawq) over His worshippers,*⁶⁰ or *They all revere their Lord, high above (fawq) them,*⁶¹ let him know that *fawq* is multivocal, designating two meanings. Firstly, *fawq* refers to a body's relationship to another, such that the one is above and the other below; that is, higher in relation to lower. Secondly, *fawq* also expresses rank, as in the statement "the caliph is above (*fawq*) the sultan, and the sultan is above (*fawq*) the vizier." The former invokes two bodies in [spatial] relationship to each other; the latter does not. Therefore, let the faithful firmly believe that the first meaning is not intended and is inconceivable in respect of Allah, since it is a contingency of bodies or accidents of bodies. If a person is aware of the negation of this unthinkable reference in relation to the Divinity, then nothing more is required of him if he does not know why it is expressed in such a manner or what is meant by it. Now compare what we have mentioned here with that which we have not.⁶²

Iljām is replete with such examples, which Frank considered to be often redundant and repetitious polemic.⁶³ Under closer scrutiny, however, such repetitiveness appears not to be woodenly repeated or pointless but is a literary style utilized by al-Ghazzālī to underline his concern about grave theological issues, namely, the believer's ascription of wrong or false beliefs to God and the necessity of heightening awareness of the errors of anthropomorphism and denial of divine attributes. Given the oft-repeated condemnations of anthropomorphism in *Iljām*, Frank suggested that "one could take it that the work is directed, at least in part, against the Karramiyya and the Hanbalites.... It is plain, however, that they lie only marginally within his line of fire. Al-Ghazali's principal aim is to distinguish those to whom it is given to have knowledge of the divine things, so as to understand the metaphorical descriptions of God, such as those who share his higher theology, from those to whom it is not."⁶⁴ But it is apparent from the text that the common folk were his prime audience, as is evident from the full title of his work (*Iljām al-ʿawām ʿan ʿilm al-kalām*; literally, "Saving the Common Folk from Scholastic Theology"), which brings us to the question: who are they? Curiously, al-Ghazzālī regarded the common folk as not only laypersons but also scholars of the exoteric Islamic sciences, including jurists (*fuqahāʾ*), theologians (*mutakallimūn*), exegetes (*mufasssirūn*), *hadīth* scholars (*muhadithhūn*), grammarians (*muhāṭ*), and the like.

60. Q 6:18 (Y. Ali translation).

61. Q 16:50 (Y. Ali translation).

62. *Iljām*, 58–59.

63. Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ashʿarite School*, 83.

64. *Ibid.*, 83.

All of them are in need of rescue from the dangers of *Kalām*, which encourages speculation, which in turn leads to abominable interpretation or, worse, denial of Divine Attributes contrary to the Way of the *Salaf*. Because of its probabilistic tendency, given the polysemous nature of descriptions, *taʿtīl* is more difficult to treat than *tashbīh*,⁶⁵ since the latter can easily be refuted with Qurʾānic proofs like *nothing is like unto Him (laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ)*.⁶⁶ The only class of people that al-Ghazzālī exempted from the broad category of “the common folk” are the “skilled divers into gnosis (*maʿrifā*)” who, by shortening their lives, renouncing the life of the world and passions, and abandoning wealth, glory, and pleasures, learned how to swim in its oceans; they are sincere to God in knowledge and deed, executing the ordinances of Islamic law (*sharīʿa*) and etiquette as regards obedience and disobedience, emptying their hearts collectively from everything besides God, and disdaining the worldly life, even the hereafter and the highest abode in Paradise, purely for the sake of God’s love; nevertheless, they too are in grave peril in which nine out of ten divers perish, save the one who is happy, having obtained the “hidden pearl” and “treasured secret.”⁶⁷ For this class of successful people—the skilled divers of gnosis—God has decreed *al-ḥusnā*, or, the “best outcome”: *And thy Lord knows all that their hearts conceal and all that they reveal*.⁶⁸

The preceding passage indicates al-Ghazzālī’s contention, to wit, that only those favored with the mystical experience, intuition, or union with God can truly apprehend the secrets and mysteries of divine attributes. These special people include of course the prophets, the “veracious ones” (*ṣiddiqīn*), the *Salaf* (who, as he defined them, were the Prophet’s Companions and Followers), the “people of gnosis” (*ahl al-maʿrifā*), and the “friends” (*awliyāʾ*) of God. As for the scholars (specialists in exoteric Islam) and laypeople who strive to be acquainted with God and His ways, they should avoid the perplexity of *Kalām*—the abstruse discussion on Divine Attributes, involving philosophical concepts of essence, bodies, accidents, substance, disputation, and its rational framework of speculative theology—applying themselves assiduously to his seven-point guideline based on *madhhab al-salaf*, lest they go astray, stumbling into esoteric pathways beyond their threshold of comprehension.

Reactions to *Ijām* and the Way of the *Salaf*

Al-Ghazzālī’s late ‘Salafī’ theological re-orientation and advocacy have long since won the plaudits of Traditionalists in the Sunnī world. In his book on the unlawfulness of *Kalām*, the Ḥanafī scholar Sirājuddīn al-Qazwīnī (d. 750/1349)

65. *Ijām*, 100, 103–04.

66. Q 42:11.

67. *Ijām*, 67–68.

68. Q 28:69 (Y. Ali translation).

mentioned that “al-Ghazzālī came around to accepting that (*taʿwīl*) was unlawful after he had praised it.”⁶⁹ In his *Irshād al-fuḥūl min ʿilm al-ʿuṣūl*, al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) recounted Abū ʿAmr b. al-Ṣalāḥ’s (d. 643/1245) statement that there were three schools of theological thought as regards interpreting divine attributes: one group figuratively explained their apparent meanings; another group anthropomorphized them; and a third group presumed that the Divine Lawgiver would not have expressed them in such a manner unless He deemed its usage permissible and its outward acceptance proper—thus they declared God’s sanctification (*taqḍīs*), transcendence (*tanzīh*), and exoneration (*tabarrī*) from all limitations, including anthropomorphism. The latter was the way of the first part (*ṣadr*) of the Ummah, the Muslims and their leaders, which prominent *fuqahāʾ*⁷⁰ and *muhaddithīn* later adopted and which none of the great *muttakallimīn* ignored or rejected.⁷⁰ Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ further stated, “In several places, al-Ghazzālī eloquently articulated fleeing from everything besides this path, and ultimately reined in every scholar and layperson to it with his bridle—i.e., his book *Ijām al-ʿawām ʿan ʿilm al-kalām*. It is definitely the last book of al-Ghazzālī, in which he urged them to adhere to the Way of the *Salaf* and those who followed them.”⁷¹ Al-Shawkānī added this comment:

Al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1374), in his [*Siyar*] *al-nubalāʾ*, on the biographical profile of Fakruddīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), stated that “he recognized it (the Way of the *Salaf*) toward the end of his life, saying ‘I have reflected on the methods of *Kalām* and the philosophers but did not see them curing the sick or soothing grief; but I did see that the nearest path [to it] is that of the Qurʾān. For I read in it about affirming (*ithbāt*) that the Most Gracious, established (*istawāʿ*) on the throne of His almightiness?⁷²; unto Him ascend all good words.⁷³ I also read therein about negation (*nafy*): there is nothing like unto Him.⁷⁴ Whosoever experiences what I have experienced will know what I have learnt [about the ambiguity of Divine Attributes].”⁷⁵ On al-Juwaynī’s (d. 478/1085) biographical profile, al-Dhahabī wrote that he explained [in his *al-Risāla al-nizāmiyya fī al-arkān al-islāmiyya* (“The Nizāmite

69. Al-Qārī, *Sharḥ al-fiqh al-akbār*, 30.

70. Cf. Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqadimma*, 557–58.

71. Al-Shawkānī, *Irshād al-fuḥūl* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), vol. 2, 47.

72. Q 20:5 (M. Asad translation).

73. Q 35:10 (M. Asad translation).

74. Q 42:11 (M. Asad translation).

75. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, eds. al-Arnaʿūt and al-ʿArqaswī, 11th ed. (Beirut: al-Resalah Publishing House, 1996), vol. 21, 501.

Treatise on the Islamic Pillars”⁷⁶] that “the learned among the *Salaf* rigidly abstained from figurative interpretation (*taʿwīl*), accepting the apparent sense of the texts, and committing the meanings to the Lord, May He be exalted! (i.e., they declined the mortal responsibility of interpreting them). As for the opinion that satisfies us and by which we are devoted to Allah as a duty, it is emulation of the *Salaf* of this *Umma*.” That is how the author of *al-Nubalāʾ* reported it,⁷⁷ adding that al-Juwaynī also wrote “you must bear witness that I have turned away from every statement that contradicts the *Salaf*.”⁷⁸ These three scholars—I mean, al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazzālī, and al-Rāzī, who greatly extended the discourse on *taʿwīl*—ultimately returned to the Way of the *Salaf*, as you have learnt herein.⁷⁹

According to Makdisi, “Bāqillānī and Juwaynī, insofar as they adopted the way of the Ancestors (*salaf*), would appear to be against *Kalām*. And this attitude against *Kalām* carries itself further down the line to a student of Juwaynī, Ghazzālī, whose fame surpassed that of the master.”⁸⁰

The reactions of Ashʿarīs to al-Ghazzālī’s apparent adoption of the Way of the *Salaf* varied: they either belittled his knowledge of *Kalām* or persisted in typecasting him as a proponent of Ashʿarī thought. The latter is obvious in the works of Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 1176), al-Subkī (d. 1370), and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), to name a few—an apologist trend that continues today, as found in Ḥussayn Athāy’s *Mawqif al-Ghazzālī min ʿilm al-kalām*, Saʿīd Abdul Laṭīf Fūda’s *Mawqif al-imām al-Ghazzālī min ʿilm al-kalām*, and others. “Ghazzālī’s hostile attitude toward *Kalām* is well known,” Makdisi wrote. “His work entitled *Iljām al-ʿawāmm an ʿilm al-kalām* (*The Reining of the common people from the science of kalām*) was a source of embarrassment to the Ashʿarite propagandists who reacted to it in various ways...the Ashʿarite apologists (in general) do not mention Ghazzālī’s *Iljām* itself, though their concern about it and his reference to Shāfiʿī in the *Ihyāʾ* as prohibiting *Kalām* is evident....”⁸¹ The Mālikī scholar al-Māzarī (d. 530/1136), for example, when asked about al-Ghazzālī’s theology, said “As for *ʿilm al-kalām*, which constitutes the foundations of the religion (*uṣūl*

76. See al-Juwaynī, *al-ʿAqīda al-nizāmiyya fī al-arkān al-islāmiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azharī lil-Turāth, 1992), 32–34.

77. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, vol. 18, 472–74.

78. *Ibid.*, vol. 18, 473.

79. Al-Shawkānī, *Irshād al-fuḥūl*, vol. 2, 48; al-Qinawwājī, *Qaṣd al-sabīl*, 65.

80. George Makdisi, “Ashʿarī and the Ashʿarites in Islamic Religious History II,” *Studia Islamica* 18 (1963): 32.

81. Makdisi, “Ashʿarī and the Ashʿarites II,” 32–33.

al-dīn),⁸² al-Ghazzālī also wrote on it but did not expatiate it or attain mastery (*mustabḥir*) of it. I investigated the reason, discovering that it was due to his study of philosophy (*falsafa*) before achieving mastery in *uṣūl al-dīn*; consequently, his reading of *falsafa* caused him to take an audacious approach on semantics but was lax toward realities. That is because *falsafa* proceeds on its own thoughts ungoverned by rulings of *sharīʿa* or without fear of contradicting the leaders who follow it.”⁸³ This critique of al-Ghazzālī was robustly deflected by al-Subkī: “I concur with al-Māzarī’s statement that he was not proficient (*mustabḥir*) in *Kalām*, but I argue that his feet were firmly rooted in it, though not to the same extent as they were in the other sciences; so his opinion is speculative. As for his statement that al-Ghazzālī was preoccupied with *falsafa* before he engaged *uṣūl al-dīn*, it is not so; rather, he did not study *falsafa* until after he had delved into *uṣūl al-dīn*, as he himself clearly explained in *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāla* (“Deliverance from Error”).⁸⁴ Furthermore, al-Māzarī’s claim that al-Ghazzālī read *falsafa* before becoming proficient (*mustabḥir*) in *uṣūl al-dīn*, which comes after his previous statement that he was not proficient (*mustabḥir*) in *uṣūl al-dīn*, is contradictory.”⁸⁵ Indeed, despite being widely acknowledged as one of the greatest scholars of Islam (*kibār al-ʿulamāʾ*), al-Ghazzālī had his fair share of critics among Shiʿis, Muʿtazilis, Zanādiqa⁸⁶, and Sunnis, such as al-Māzarī, al-Ṭarṭūshī (d. 520/1127), Ibn Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1327), Ibn Qayyim (d. 751/1350), and others who differed with him on a wide range of issues, including Arabic grammar, philosophy, Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), Ḥadīth, and *Kalām*.

In the western scholarly discourse on Muslim theology, the post-Ashʿarī ‘Salafī’ phase of al-Ghazzālī’s reflection on *Kalām* is often overlooked. Wolfson

82. *Uṣūl al-dīn* (like *ʿilm al-kalām* or *al-ʿaqāʾid* (sing. *ʿaqīda*) is another term for Muslim theology.

83. Al-Subkī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-shafiʿiyya*, vol. 6, 240–41.

84. Al-Ghazzālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāla*, ed. Maḥmūd Bījū, 2nd ed. (Amman: Dār al-Fatḥ, 1992), 37–40; Watt, *Faith and Practice*, 27–29.

85. Al-Subkī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-shafiʿiyya*, vol. 6, 247; al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf*, 29.

86. *Zanādiqa* (sing. *zindīq*) is Arabized from the Persian, meaning Manichaean; originally, it referred to a follower of Mazdek, a Zoroastrian high priest, who preached that women and wealth are to be enjoyed and shared, and in whose time appeared the book *Zend*—hence *zandī* or the Arabized *zindīq* (pl. *zanādaqā*). The term was broadly applied to a person without religion, one who believes in the eternity of time, a disbeliever in the Hereafter, or simply non-Muslim heretics. See al-Khwārizmī, *Maḥāṣin al-ʿulūm*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1989), 56; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif), vol. 3, 1871; Edward W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1258; F.C. de Blois, “Zindī” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill).

did not refer to it or the *Iljām* in *The Philosophy of the Kalam*. Wensinck omitted it in *The Muslim Creed*. Nagel, in his *History of Islamic Theology*, presented al-Ghazzālī as an innovative “Ash‘arite theologian”⁸⁷ and did not detect any paradigm shift in his theology. Marmura, apart from a lone footnote on *Iljām* in his *Ghazali and Ash‘arism Revisited*, was preoccupied with the pre-*Iljām* works. The list goes on. Al-Allāf took umbrage at this seemingly glaring omission by Wolfson et al, suspecting it as part and parcel of an Orientalist agenda: “This book (*Iljām*) is one of the most authentic books attributed to [al-Ghazzālī], yet Orientalists eschewed it because of its commitment to the Sunna, maxims, and lessons pertaining to the unification of Muslim ranks and their guidance to the straight path. Orientalists tried to disregard it and misdirect students of knowledge away from it.”⁸⁸ Al-Allāf is right regarding the oversight of al-Ghazzālī’s Salafī position in *Iljām* on the part of some non-Muslim scholars (as on the part of many Muslim scholars), but he misreads their reasons. First, some Islamicists’ information on *Iljām* might have been secondhand or they may not have inquired into it in the first place. Second, it is also possible that al-Ghazzālī’s discussion of the ‘Way of the *Salaf*’ has simply been overshadowed by the long established conventional image of him as an Ash‘arī thinker, causing many not to notice his late theological emphasis or underestimate it. Third, several scholars in the west have discussed *Iljām*, holding conflicting assessments of its thesis. Take Watt, for instance, who acknowledged that *Iljām* is al-Ghazzālī’s final work, insisting that he remained an Ash‘arī. “A few days before his death he completed a short work (roughly within the field of jurisprudence⁸⁹) in which he maintained that it was wrong to communicate the subtleties of *Kalām* to ordinary people. From these facts it seems certain that al-Ghazālī remained a Shāfi‘ite and Ash‘arite to the end of his life, though he was using philosophical methods to defend Ash‘arite doctrine.”⁹⁰ Watt later revised his opinion: “It has now received powerful confirmation from the discovery by Bouyges of a date for the *Ilcām* (*Iljām*) which makes it the latest of all al-Ghazālī’s works; for the *Iljām* is concerned with problems of *tašbīh* (anthropomorphism) which are essentially within the universe of discourse on scholastic theology.”⁹¹ Griffel had first-hand information on *Iljām*, even examining one of its manuscripts in order to

87. Tilman Nagel, *History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), 195.

88. Al-Allāf, *Kutub al-imām al-Ghazzālī*; see note 19 above.

89. Watt mischaracterized *Iljām* as a work of jurisprudence. Unmistakably, *Iljām* is a work on Muslim theology.

90. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 92.

91. Watt, “The Study of al-Ghazālī,” 124–25.

determine its authenticity, as noted earlier, but he was primarily interested in traces of changes in al-Ghazzālī's cosmology in *Iljām*.⁹² Frank treated *Iljām* in his *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School* substantively, observing that "al-Ghazali's break with the school tradition—his isolation from scholars in the tradition in which he had been formed—seems to have preoccupied him, for *Iljām*, written at the very end of his life, appears to be another response, albeit from a somewhat different angle."⁹³ As for Nakamura, he argued that because "his official theological viewpoint in a work from his final years, the *Iljām*, is no different from his early one [as expressed in *Ihyā'* and *Mizān*, for example], we may conclude that Ghazālī had two standpoints since a fairly early period: one was the official view of Ash'arism and the other was the teachings of the elite."⁹⁴

In the final analysis, al-Ghazzālī's gravitation to the 'Way of the *Salaf*' was not sudden or erratic, far less "unintellectual"⁹⁵ or "child-like."⁹⁶ Indeed, he left us clues to this position scattered throughout his *Kalām* treatises, some of which were examined here. To buttress this point, we find al-Ghazzālī, in his *Faysal al-tafriqa bayna-l Islām wal-zandiqa* ("The Criterion of Distinction between Islam and Clandestine Unbelief"), outlining the 'Salafi' method (in much the same way that his teacher Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwaynī had done in his "The Nizāmī Treatise on the Islamic Pillars"⁹⁷) as follows:

For the Common Folk, the truth [concerning *ta'wil*] lies in following the Way of the *Salaf* and their refrain from changing the text's apparent [meaning], innovating interpretations (*ta'wilāt*) that did not issue from the Companions, questioning [these ambiguities], delving into *Kalām*, and examining ambiguities in the Qur'an and the Sunnah.... As for those thinkers who are troubled by their inherited beliefs, their investigation of these issues should only be carried out as a necessity and their leaving aside the apparent [meaning of the text] by definite proof.... Some people have hastened to *ta'wilāt* out of speculation, not certainty.... If the issues are unconnected with fundamental articles of faith, such people should not be judged unbelievers or blameworthy innovators in the religion.... Nevertheless, were the door [of *ta'wilāt*] opened and its articulation permitted, it would confuse the minds of the common folk, causing them to commit innovation in all that has been related from the *Salaf*....

92. Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 266.

93. Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School*, 80.

94. Nakamura, "Was Ghazālī an Ash'arite?" 16.

95. Nagel, *History of Islamic Theology*, 195.

96. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 83.

97. Al-Juwaynī, *al-'Aqida al-nizāmiyya*, 32.

But if the *ta'wīlāt* are connected with fundamental articles of faith, then it is mandatory to declare them unbelievers who have changed the apparent meaning [of a proof-text] without any decisive evidence—such as their denial of the resurrection of bodies and physical punishments in the Hereafter based on sheer speculation and conjecture, since there is no proof that the return of souls to bodies is an impossibility...⁹⁸

In short, it appears that al-Ghazzālī's eventual turn to the 'Way of the *Salaf*' was the culmination of a gradual realization, to wit, that the recondite method of *Kalām* was essentially speculative, confusing, and did not promote intimate knowledge of God and His divine attributes. *Kalām* did not expand consciousness of God in the hearts or minds of common believers or cause them to imbibe—far less inculcate—divine attributes; therefore, his ruling is that they should abandon it in terms of seeking to know God, His Attributes, and His works.

Is Sunnī Theology Ash'arī or 'Salafī'?

Ijām is not a mystical or Sufistic but a theological work, slightly intimating at the path to gnosis. Al-Ghazzālī's treatment of divine attributes through the conceptual framework of the 'Salafī' method makes his perennially popular Ash'arī label a dubious distinction. Whatever was the trigger for this radically modified view on *Kalām*, he seemed to have realized that its disadvantages definitely outweighed its advantages for those he called the common folk. *Ijām* was his last-ditch effort to establish a hermeneutic approach to Divine Attributes on a didactic foundation, substituting the clichéd '*ilm al-kalām*' with the 'Way of the *Salaf*'. The gravitation of so many leading Muslim scholars in the past to the Salafī method corroborates the findings of Makdisi and others that Ash'arism was never the mainstream, far less the dominant orthodoxy of Sunnī Islam. Thus, one can hardly speak of a universally agreed upon Sunnī Muslim orthodoxy. As far as al-Ghazzālī is concerned, his ultimate theology is nuanced: he had some things in common with Traditionalists that he did not share with Ash'arīs; in the same way, he had some things in common with both Ash'arīs and Traditionalists that he did not share with Mu'tazilīs (see fig. 1).

98. Al-Ghazzālī, *Fayṣal al-tafrīqa bayna al-islām wal-zandīqa*, ed. M. Bejou (Damascus: 1993), 48–49, 53, 55–56; al-Qinawwājī, *Qaṣd al-sabil*, 66–67.

Al-Ghazzālī on Divine Predicates

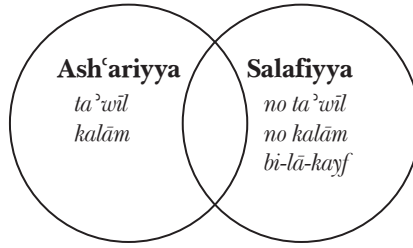


Fig. 1: Illustrated above is al-Ghazzālī's final interpretive method on Divine Attributes as presented in this paper. On the right is the Way of the *Salaf* circle, representing his theological thoughts distinct from the Ash'ariyya, the circle on the left, insofar as *Ijām* is concerned. In the intersection, where the two circles meet, are found tenets and principles that al-Ghazzālī shared with Ash'arīs, such as a basic identification with Sunnism, rejection of *ta'wīl* and *tashbih*, belief in the Qur'an's uncreatedness, opposition to Mu'tazilis, and so forth.

NB: The Ash'ariyya circle can be further elaborated with many other differences that al-Ghazzālī had with Ash'arīs scholars and which Makdisi, Frank, Nakamura, et al have discussed in their works, such as gnosis, atomism, denial of the theory of the optimum, theory of the soul, etc., but which were beyond the scope of this paper.

In the final analysis, being the towering intellectual figure that he is in Muslim history, it is apparent that different schools of religious thought, sects, scholars, believers and unbelievers alike—indeed, students of al-Ghazzālī in general—tend to make him over into their own images. Thus, he remains an adept mystic to Sufīs, a *mutakallim* to Ash'arīs, a Muslim philosopher (*faḥḥāṣ*) to those interested in Islam's relationship with Neo-Platonic philosophy, an *uṣūlī* (legal theorist) to proponents of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, a Shāfi'ī *faqīh* (legist) to adherents of al-Shāfi'ī's (d. 205/820) school of law, and a *salafī* to Traditionalists insofar as *uṣūl al-dīn* or Sunnī orthodoxy is concerned. He was probably all of that and more. His complex theology is perhaps best understood by mapping its trajectories found in his own writings, as I have attempted to do here. Nevertheless, like many luminaries of Islam, al-Ghazzālī journeyed through several stages of intellectual inquiry and maturation, continually revising and refining his thoughts and ideas right up to his death. His last moments were reportedly spent poring over the *Ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīth collections of al-Bukhārī and al-Muslim.⁹⁹

My final suggestion here is that it is likely that master scholars such as al-

99. Al-Subkī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'īyya*, vol. 6, 210.

Juwaynī, al-Ghazzālī, al-Rāzī, et al, while being fully cognizant of the ‘Way of the *Salaf*’ as is plain in their writings, embraced the *Kalām* method temporarily, infusing it with a philosophical outlook,¹⁰⁰ largely for polemic reasons. Their opponents the Mu‘tazilīs propagated their theology principally through *Kalām* and were joined in that by the Ash‘arīs, practically challenging their detractors to ‘use the master’s tools to destroy his house’; for no sooner were these scholars satisfied and confident that they had repudiated the dogmatic positions of Mu‘tazilīs, anthropomorphists, and others, meeting the dialectic aim of *Kalām*, which is to preserve the faith and protect it against heresies, than they began to expose its shortcomings and frown upon it as a valid hermeneutic approach to knowing God—as if to acknowledge that the time had come to move on with the more important task of instructing believers to become acquainted with Divinity through the simple albeit correct ‘Way of the *Salaf*’, as they espoused it. *Ijām* is the primary and best documentary evidence that we have of al-Ghazzālī’s switch in theological method from Ash‘arism to ‘Salafism’ in respect of understanding divine attributes. Today the question or challenge to us is whether his ultimate theological orientation is to be evaluated on the basis of his earlier works or his final word on *Kalām*.

100. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 41–43.