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Reviving an Economics for the Common Good:  
The Science of Earning in al-Shaybānī, al-Ghazālī, and al-  
Dimashqī

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This article reflects on what might be called the *kasb* genre in classical Islamic thought—with special reference to al-Shaybānī, al-Ghazālī, and al-Dimashqī—and goes on to argue the case for a more beneficial redefinition of economics as the “science of earning and provisioning for the common good.”

**Keywords:** al-Shaybānī, al-Ghazālī, al-Dimashqī, *kasb*, economics, common good.

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I noticed the significance of Imām al-Shaybānī’s (132-189/749-804) *Kitāb al-Kasb* through the course of my research on Shaykh Abū Faḍl Ja‘far ibn ‘Alī al-Dimashqī’s (fl. 570/1175) remarkable *Kitāb al-Ishāra ilā maḥāsini al-tijāra*,<sup>1</sup> especially with regard to how the former’s traditional (*āthārī*)<sup>2</sup> and juristic (*fiqhī*) approach to economics and livelihood so nicely complements the latter’s

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1. Ed. al-Bishrī al-Shūrabjī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyat al-Azhariyya, 1977); annotated translation and introduction by Adi Setia as *The Indicator to the Virtues of Commerce* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2011).
  2. i.e., based on the Prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) and the reports (*akhbār*) of the Prophet’s Companions (*ṣaḥāba*) and their immediate Followers (*tābi‘ūn*).

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distinctly philosophical (*falsafī*) and pragmatic (*‘amali*) treatment. In the way they reinforce one another, one can safely infer an underlying vision in both of a science of economics that is primarily concerned about the prudent *organization of livelihood*.<sup>3</sup>

This idea of economics as ethico-pragmatic organization of livelihoods for the common good is also apparent in the *Kitāb Ādāb al-kasb wal-ma‘āsh* of al-Ghazālī (450/1058-505/1111). Thus he says:

A person should seek in his practice of his craft or his trade to discharge an obligation among the obligations of realising sufficiencies; for if the crafts and trades were to be abandoned, livelihoods would vanish and most people would perish. Hence the affairs of all people are put in order by the cooperation of all through each party undertaking some work, for if all of them were to devote themselves to single craft, then all other crafts would be left derelict, and they would all perish. Because of this realisation some people have interpreted the Prophet’s statement (may Allāh bless and give him peace), “The difference of my community is a mercy,” as referring to the variation in their occupation with the crafts and trades.<sup>4</sup>

As for the *Kitāb al-Kasb* of al-Shaybānī, it is generally considered to be the first proper book on the discipline that we now call economics, or rather, microeconomics;<sup>5</sup> and if we redefine economics as the “organization of

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3. In an interesting paper entitled, “Re-embedding Economy for the Common Good,” which he presented in the important, recently concluded five-day Christian-Muslim Interfaith Dialogue on “Engaging Structural Greed Today” organised by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Sabah Theological Seminary (STS), held in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 25-30 September 2011, B. Herry-Priyono (on pages 2-3 of his paper) argues forcefully and eloquently the case for the redefinition of the concept of ‘economy’ as “organization of life sustenance,” or “organization of livelihood,” a profound point also alluded to by al-marḥūm Shaykh ‘Abdul Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah in the introduction to his meticulous edition of the *Kitāb al-Kasb* (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘at al-Islāmiyya, 1417/1997), 11-21 passim; see also the edition of Suhayl Zakkār, ed., *Risālatān fīl-Kasb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 21-26 passim.
  4. *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn (Revival of the Religious Sciences)*, ed. Abū Ḥafṣ Sayyid ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Ṣādiq ibn ‘Imrān, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1992), vol. 2, 132.
  5. Abū Ghuddah, *Kitāb al-Kasb*, 15, 47; Zakkār, *Risālatān fīl-Kasb*, 19; Aḥmad Jābir Badrān, ed., *Kitāb al-Kasb: al-Iktisāb fī rizq al-mustatāb* (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Fiqhiyya wal-Iqtisādiyya, 2004), 131. One may argue that Imām al-Shaybānī’s *Kitāb al-Kasb* (on microeconomics) was preceded, albeit only slightly, by Qāḍī Abū Yūsuf’s *Kitāb al-Kharāj* (on macroeconomics), but, be that as it may, the former is viewed as the

livelihood,” or the “science of earning (*kasb, iktisāb*) and provisioning (*infāq*) for the common good (*maṣlaḥa ‘amma*),” whether at the level of the individual and family, or at the level of the community and society, then that consideration can be seen to be pretty much on the mark. This redefinition, which projects itself into the reflective mind through a close reading of the book, clearly connects means to ends, and integrates the two within a clear *meta-economic* vision of the role and function of the temporal life of human beings on earth, their inborn spiritual identity, and their ultimate, eschatological destiny.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the wide appeal of the *Kitāb al-Kasb*<sup>6</sup> (and also perhaps of his other works) is the fact that the author was no ivory-tower, armchair juriconsult, but one who was concerned about grounding his legal conclusions not only in textual evidence (*muṣūṣ*) but also in the everyday realities of political, social and commercial life. It is reported of him that he used to go out to visit the dyers (*ṣabbāghūn*) in order to be able ask them personally about their work and their transactions among themselves. Shaykh al-Kawtharī documented this report in his biography of Imām Muḥammad, *Bulūgh al-Amānī*, and commented in admiration:

Look at this great *mujtahid*, how he did not make do with what he possessed of knowledge of the Book and the *Sunna*, and the opinions of the Companions and Followers, and others of the juriconsults of all the lands....but rather saw himself to be in need of being familiar with the manners of transacting (*wujūh al-ta‘āmul*) among the practitioners of the trades (*arbāb al-ṣinā‘āt*), and the difference between the manners of the old custom (*al-‘urf al-qadīm*) and those of the fresh new custom (*al-‘urf al-ḥadīth al-tarī‘*), that his words might be secured from errors in any aspects that pertain to the explication of the rulings of the Divine Law (*al-Shar‘*).<sup>7</sup>

I therefore believe that it is very important that we revisit the meaning of ‘economics’ and ‘economy’ by going back to these classical texts on the ‘common-good economy’, that are so very careful to differentiate between ‘provisioning’ (*infāq*) and ‘squandering’ (*isrāf*). The word ‘economy’ originally referred to “household management” (*tadbīr al-manzil*)—or rather, household *caretaking* or stewardship—and the primary duty of the householder is to ensure that the resources and revenues of the household, tangible and intangible, are managed prudently so that the needs, material and spiritual,

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beginning of economics as “an independent body of literature”; and, in any case, a prosperous macroeconomy is founded on a healthy microeconomy. See Ahmed El-Ashker and Rodney Wilson, *Islamic Economics: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 169-204 *passim*.

6. Badrān, *Kitāb al-Kasb*, 141-142

7. Abū Ghuddah, *Kitāb al-Kasb*, 47-48; Badrān, *Kitāb al-Kasb*, 140-141.

of all members of the household are met and taken care of, and *provisioned* in such a way that none is marginalized, especially the weaker and more dependent members, such as babies, young children, the handicapped, the ill, the elderly, including even pets and animals and plants of the household. In the classical Islamic system of philosophy, *tadbīr al-manzīl* comes under the division of *al-ḥikmat al-ʿamaliyya* or practical philosophy, which includes, apart from economics (management of the household), ethics (management of the self), and politics (management of society).<sup>8</sup>

We can glean from a close, comparative reading of al-Shaybānī's, al-Ghazālī's, and al-Dimashqī's treatises the underlying message that good stewardship of the self (ethics, *akhlāq*) is the basis for good stewardship of the household (the original meaning of 'economics', or *tadbīr al-manzīl*), and this in turn is the basis for good stewardship of society (politics, *siyāsa*)—and therefore that the material economy should be embedded in the moral economy in order to realize a true economy of the common good (*al-maṣlaḥa al-ʿamma*), leading to felicity in temporal and eternal life. As Essid explains in regard to al-Dimashqī:

We see here the beginnings of an ideology of the common good in which commercial exchange satisfies the common necessity, with trade raised to the rank of an eminently social link.<sup>9</sup>

In this mode of thinking, market aspects and welfare aspects are both integral, constituent aspects of the same wholesome economy, which in this regard can be termed as the 'market-welfare' economy, or the Islamic Gift Economy (IGE, *al-iṭqīṣād al-infāqī*), or an economics of "provisioning," in which profits and surpluses are to be reinvested into serving communal well-being.<sup>10</sup>

This understanding of the underlying notion of "giving" or "gifting" finds support in Michael Bonner's careful study of early, pre-Dimashqīan economic thought in Islam as exemplified in al-Shaybānī's important *Kitāb al-Kasb*, which has recently been translated into English.<sup>11</sup> Here, the corresponding notion is that of a virtuous "circulative exchange" between rich and poor,

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8. See Yassine Essid, *A Critique of the Origins of Islamic Economic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

9. *Ibid.*, 221.

10. For some discussions of the operational meaning of *infāq* in contemporary Arab-Islamic scholarship, see, inter alia, Muḥammad Aḥmad Maḥmūd Mukhlis, *Wujūh kasb al-māl wa-infāqihī fī dhaw' al-Qurʿān al-karīm* (Alexandria: Dār al-Jāmiʿat al-Jadīda, 2008), and Maḥmūd Muḥammad Bāballī, *al-Kasb wal-infāq wa ʿadālat al-tawzīʿ fīl-mujtamaʿ al-islāmī* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1988).

11. Adi Setia, trans. *The Book of Earning a Livelihood: Kitāb al-Kasb* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, forthcoming).

or an economics of interdependence between rich and poor in which the surplus of the rich is “returned” (*radd, rujūʿ*) to the poor in order to maintain order, peace, and balance in society, especially in urban society.<sup>12</sup> So the “gift” economy is the “return” economy, in which the circulation of wealth is from the rich to the poor and not from the rich to the rich, so that it does not become something which circulates among the wealthy in your midst (*al-Hashr*: 7). And so the kind of run-away speculative, overly money-centred economics that has been systematically destroying middle-class America in recent years would be something unfathomable to the Dimashqīan and Shaybānian economic vision.<sup>13</sup>

From this foundational conceptual point of departure and all that it entails by way of logical and operational implications, any school of economics that deliberately focuses on the means at the expense of the ends, and that refuses to connect the economic dimension of life to other, undeniably higher and wider dimensions of human life, or that refuses to connect what is economical to what is cultural, ecological and spiritual, cannot be true economics, and cannot be truly for human well-being and happiness, which should be the proper goal of any functioning economy. To put it another way, if economics is the science of household stewardship, and the end of this stewardship is the well-being of the household, then any system of economics that leads, wittingly or unwittingly, to the dissolution of the household, or to the desolation of the earth as the *macro-household*, can only be an elaborate nihilistic inversion of the true meaning and purpose of economics.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard one may also do well to compare both works with the ethico-

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12. Michael Bonner, “The Kitāb al-Kasb attributed to al-Shaybānī: Poverty, Surplus, and the Circulation of Wealth,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 3 (Jul.-Sep. 2001): 410-427; idem, “Poverty and Charity in the Rise of Islam” in Michael Bonner, Amy Singer, and Mine Ener, eds., *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts* (New York: SUNY, 2003), 13-30; and idem, “Poverty and Economics in the Qur’an,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2005): 391-406.
13. There are a great number of books describing and analyzing the causes of the current global financial meltdown, but perhaps among the more accessible is the succinct volume by Dean Baker, *Plunder and Blunder: The Rise and Fall of the Bubble Economy* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint, 2009).
14. For more on this, see Adi Setia, “Mu‘āmalah and the Revival of the Islamic Gift Economy,” *Islam & Science* 9, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 67-88; and idem, “Ja‘far ibn ‘Alī al-Dimashqī on Community, Money and Prudent Management in Trading and Spending: Four Excerpts from His *Kitāb al-Ishāra ilā Maḥāsīm al-Tijārah*,” *Islam & Science* 9, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 11-32.

juristic and spiritual approach taken by Imām al-Ghazālī<sup>15</sup> in his *Kitāb Ādab al-kasb wal-ma‘āsh* (*Book of the Ethics of Earning and Livelihood*) and *Kitāb al-Ḥalāl wal-ḥarām* (*Book of the Licit and the Illicit*).<sup>16</sup> This is an approach that takes care to seamlessly embed the short-term goal of temporal worldly prosperity into the larger, long-term goal of eternal salvation and happiness in the hereafter, very much in line with the Worldview of Islam (*ru’yat al-Islām lil-wujūd*), “which encompasses both *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhirah*, in which the *dunyā*-aspect must be related in a profound and inseparable way to the *ākhirah*-aspect, and in which the *ākhirah*-aspect has ultimate and final significance.”<sup>17</sup> Also, many aspects of Imām al-Shaybanī’s thinking in the *Kitāb al-Kasb* are comparable to the slightly later work of ‘Abdullāh al-Ḥārith bin Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), *Kitāb al-Makāsib wal-wara‘*,<sup>18</sup> which may have been influenced to some extent by the earlier work, just as he was known to have had extensive influence on al-Ghazālī.

The overriding *meta-economic* vision here is always that the acquisition of material wealth is to find its direction and meaning in the service of communal belonging and spiritual advancement, that individual livelihood is to serve both communal and personal well-being—a vision, that, in the modern context, would resonate well with the “sacred economics” of Charles Eisenstein<sup>19</sup> and Eileen Workman,<sup>20</sup> and with the “Buddhist economics” of E. F. Schumacher’s incredibly insightful *Small is Beautiful*.<sup>21</sup>

If one is concerned about putting back soul, substance, and thereby meaning into the formal mechanisms of economic exchange, and directing

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15. There are arguments for properly spelling the name as al-Ghazzālī, but we shall not go into that controversy here.

16. *Ihyā’*, 96-243 passim.

17. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 1.

18. El-Ashker and Wilson, *Islamic Economics*, 214-221. al-Muḥāsibī’s book has been edited by Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Khist (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur’ān, 1983).

19. Charles Eisenstein, *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift and Society in the Age of Transition* (Evolver Editions, 2011).

20. Eileen Workman, *Sacred Economics, the Currency of Life: A Revealing Look at the Erosion of Capitalism and a Reimagining of the Nature of Genuine Wealth* (Writeworks, 2011).

21. Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*, 25th anniversary ed. with commentaries (Hartley and Marks, 2000); see also his other, less well-known but equally important book, *Good Work* (Harpercollins, 1980). His concept of ‘good work’ can be fruitfully compared with al-Shaybanī’s ‘al-kasb al-ṭayyib’ = ‘wholesome earning’.

this exchange toward serving its proper end, which is *the earning and provisioning of livelihood for the common good*, and, for Muslims especially, reviving and re-realising true *mu‘āmala* (literally, “working together”), then Imām al-Shaybānī’s and Imām al-Ghazālī’s works on *kasb* will be found to be a most authentic, well-considered, and common-sensical guide toward attaining that important objective, and, moreover, one that is of impeccable authority, and deeply rooted in our religious identity and historical experience.

Although many readers would deem the *kasb* genre to fall under the purview of the formal discipline now known as economics, al-Sarakhsī (d. 483/109) actually informs us that Imām Muḥammad wrote his book to expound on the meaning of asceticism or detachment from the world (*al-zuhd*). Shaykh ‘Abdul Fattāḥ Abū Ghuddah, may Allāh be well-pleased with him, considers this operative embedding of prudence and abstinence into the every-day mundaneness of earning a living to be a grand idea on the part of Imām Muḥammad:

This is a lofty and subtle thinking (*fikrat ‘āliya daqīqa*) on the part of Imām Muḥammad, for he has embarked on expounding on the crux of abstinence and prudence (*ra’s al-zuhd wal-wara’*), which is wholesome livelihood (*ṭīb al-maksib*). Allāh’s is his achievement and with Allāh is his reward (*li-llāhi darruhū wa ‘alā Allāhi ajruhū*).<sup>22</sup>

Thus one reads the classical *kasb* books and comes away with the profound realization that the operational test of true abstinence and prudence—or true inner worth and spiritual discipline in general—lies in the way one conducts oneself through the everyday trials, tribulations, temptations, worries and vexations of working for one’s sustenance, whether by trading in goods and merchandise, working for a wage, or practicing a craft.

In a nutshell, a person is prudent and abstinent when he takes care to work in a wholesome enterprise (*al-kasb al-ṭayyib*) in order to provide for his needs and the needs of his family and dependents, and, if there is surplus, to provide therefrom for the poor and needy in his community, while at the same time avoiding the illicit, the abhorred, and the questionable, and turning away—as far as possible—from materialistic covetousness, and from indulging in an overly opulent life-style that one may avoid casting rancour into the hearts of the poor. Only then can his whole life be a life of solidarity with the poor, and of total worship in humble devotion to his Creator, to Whom he shall be returned, and to Whom he shall be accountable for all the blessings and enjoyments bestowed on him in the temporal earthly life. Hence, earning a livelihood in relation to the devotional life is as the ritual purification (*al-ṭahāra*) in relation to the canonically prescribed prayers (*al-ṣalāt*)—the one is seen to be dependent on the other, and the two are thereby integrated into a

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22. Abū Ghuddah, *Kitāb al-Kasb*, 20.

seamless whole.

We may extend and expand on this reflection to come to the necessary insight that observing personal, individual worship (*‘ibādāt*) is not sufficient in order for a person to live a fully Islamic life—or to realise Islam as a complete way of life—unless at the same time he takes care to cultivate the interpersonal transactional relationship (*mu‘āmalāt*) required to support it; thus the inextricable linkage between *farḍ ‘ayn* (individual duty) and *farḍ kifāya* (communal duty), and between personal devotion and social relation, so nicely alluded to by Imām Muḥammad al-Shaybānī with his statements, “In earning a livelihood there is the meaning of cooperation on acts of devotion (*fil-kasb ma‘nā al-mu‘āwana ‘alā al-qurab*),”<sup>23</sup> and “Permissible earning is in the category of cooperation on acts of devotion and obedience (*al-kasb al-ḥalāl min bāb al-mu‘āwana ‘alā al-qurab wal-ṭā‘āt*).”<sup>24</sup> Hence, in order to observe *‘ibāda*, we need to cultivate an appropriate *mu‘āmala* to support and nurture it; the one simply cannot do without the other.

*O believers, give of the good things you have earned*

(*al-Baqara*: 267)

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23. *Ibid.*, 136.

24. *Ibid.*, 164.