

# Al-Ghazālī

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn  
Aḥmad al-Ṭūsī, al-Ghazālī

DATE OF BIRTH 1058  
PLACE OF BIRTH Ṭūs  
DATE OF DEATH 8 December 1111  
PLACE OF DEATH Ṭūs

## BIOGRAPHY

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad, known as al-Ghazālī because his father was probably a spinner, *ghazzāl*, and as *ḥujjat al-Islām*, 'the proof of Islam', was one of the most famous and influential scholars in the history of Islam. He wrote about his life in *Al-munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, 'The deliverer from error', though this book should be considered as an evaluation of the important stages of his thought and experiences rather than as an autobiography.

Al-Ghazālī started his education in Ṭūs, but in 1077-78 he went to Nishāpūr in order to study under the famous Shāfi'ī and Ash'arī scholar Abū l-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī (q.v.). He remained in Nishāpūr until 1091, studying theology, philosophy, logic and the natural sciences. After the death of al-Juwaynī in 1085, he himself started to teach and became known to the Saljuk Vizier Nizām al-Mulk (d. 1092), a supporter of Ash'arī theology and Sufism. The vizier sent al-Ghazālī to be director of the Nizāmiyya college in Baghdad in 1091, where he wrote most of his works on philosophy. He passed through a spiritual crisis, ending with the certitude that he found in Sufism. After 11 years of wandering, he returned to Nishāpūr in 1106, and finally to his own town of Ṭūs, where he taught and wrote until his death in 1111.

The scope of al-Ghazālī's writings is very wide and embraces his interests in Islamic law, theology, philosophy and mysticism. The most important of his numerous works include *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*, 'The intentions of the philosophers', *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, 'The incoherence of the philosophers', *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 'The revivification of the religious sciences', *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, 'Jewels of the Qur'an', *Mishkāt al-anwār*, 'The niche of lights', and *Al-mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*, 'The selection from legal theory'.

Four works by al-Ghazālī or associated with him make more than passing references to Jews and Christians.

In the *Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayna l-dīn wa-l-zandaqa*, ‘The criterion for distinguishing between religion and unbelief’, he contends that Christians and Jews do not always deserve the accusation of unbelief because, while they generally portray the Prophet as deceitful, some may not have full knowledge of the facts or may have been influenced to do this from childhood, when they could not decide for themselves. God’s mercy will embrace all who search sincerely for the truth about him, and Muslims should be careful when making the accusation of unbelief.

In the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, his great work comprising 40 books in four volumes, al-Ghazālī presents a new interpretation of religion, bringing out its spiritual and mystical dimensions. He supports and illustrates his teachings with numerous quotations from significant religious figures, including sayings from the biblical prophets. Among them are 44 otherwise unknown sayings of Jesus, contributing to what has been called the Muslim Gospel. What is important is that al-Ghazālī appears to accept the authenticity of these sayings, even though it must have been clear to him that they were derived from Jewish and Christian traditions. Nowhere in the *Ihyā’* does he express doubt about their integrity, despite the fact that most are not from the canonical books of the Bible but from apocryphal books and collected traditions. He occasionally gives a reference for a saying, but in the main he introduces them with ‘it has been reported’.

In three chapters of the *Mustasfā* al-Ghazālī discusses the reliability of reports from Christians and Jews, and argues that they should not be rejected out of hand but should be judged according to the rules of uninterrupted transmission of reports (*tawātur*). He examines issues that contradict qur’anic teachings, such as the doctrine of the Trinity and the abrogation of the law of Moses, and shows that, when Christians and Jews collected their reports on these, they did not follow the rules of *tawātur*. For example, when Christians reported the crucifixion of Jesus, they were truly reporting what they saw, but what they did not know is that Jesus was miraculously saved from such a shameful death (see Whittingham, ‘Al-Ghazālī on Jews and Christians’, and ‘How could so many Christians be wrong?’).

The fourth work, *Al-radd al-jamīl*, a polemical work attributed to al-Ghazālī, demonstrates its author’s deep knowledge of the Bible and of Christian theological history. On this work, see below.

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## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Al-radd al-jamīl li-ilāhiyyat ʿĪsā bi-ṣarīḥ al-Injīl*,  
 ‘The fitting refutation of the divinity of Jesus  
 through what is evident in the Gospel’

DATE Unknown; before 1111 (if original)

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Arabic

## DESCRIPTION

*Al-radd al-jamīl* is a long refutation of the divinity of Jesus (63 pages in Chidiac’s edition), based on one of the most thorough analyses of Gospel texts known from a Muslim author. Al-Ghazālī’s authorship has been disputed since Bouyges expressed reservations in 1959. Watt, Badawī and Jabre followed him, and in 1975 Lazarus-Yafeh presented strong arguments against its attribution to al-Ghazālī. On the other hand, scholars such as Massignon, Chidiac, Sweetman, Arberry, Wilms and Elkaisy-Friemuth accept that, although the style of the work is not typical of al-Ghazālī, the contents and arguments are closely related to his other polemical works.

In addition to the arguments presented by Elkaisy-Friemuth in her examination of the work, it may be pointed out that in the *Ihyā’ ulūm al-dīn* al-Ghazālī represents Jesus as a prophet and Sufi master, as does the author of the *Radd*, and while he emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, he describes his relationship to the ‘Father’ as similar to the Sufi experience of union with God, just like the author of the *Radd*. This is additional evidence for attributing the *Radd* to al-Ghazālī (see Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, pp. 163-87).

Concerning the dating of the work, if it is by al-Ghazālī, there is some possibility that it is linked with his stay in Egypt in the years following his withdrawal from his post at the Niẓāmiyya, though this stay is disputed. If it is not by him, it must pre-date the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, because that is when it is first quoted by the Coptic author Ibn al-Ṭayyib.

The main arguments of the *Radd* are concerned with the proper meaning of a series of verses from the Gospels, and the contradictions in the Christological teachings of the main Christian sects. After an introduction in which he shows the weakness of Christian beliefs about Jesus and their blind faith in philosophical principles, the author turns to six Gospel texts that appear to attribute divinity

to Jesus. He compares them with other biblical texts that attest to his humanity, arguing that all the passages that refer to Jesus' divinity are to be understood metaphorically. Jesus himself confirmed his humanity, so there is no valid reason for Christians to do otherwise.

To these exegetical arguments the author adds a refutation of the divinity of Jesus as it is explained by the three Christian sects best known in the medieval Islamic world, the Jacobites, Nestorians and Melkites. Here, he adopts the same approach as earlier refutations of Christian doctrines, exposing the logical flaws in his opponents' Christological models according to the formulas they present. He moves on to show that the titles 'Divinity', 'Lord' and 'Son' are not to be understood literally when used of Jesus (he draws a parallel with the exclamations of al-Ḥallāj and other mystics). And he concludes with substantial exegeses of three passages from John's Gospel that appear to confirm Jesus' divinity, including the Prologue, and an elucidation of the instance of the term 'Word' in Q 4:17.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

*Al-radd al-jamīl* contains some of the most detailed and complete discussions of biblical texts that are known from the medieval Islamic period. They reveal that the author was deeply knowledgeable of the Gospels, and was also acquainted with Christian interpretations of them. An unusual, though not entirely unique, feature is that the author accepts the authenticity of the text itself, while he disputes the interpretation given by Christians.

Even more strikingly, he accepts that Jesus was united with God, though he interprets this as a unique form of mystical experience. Instead of insisting on the humanity of Jesus, as other Muslim polemicists tended to, he goes to the root of the problem and argues that it is possible for a human to have union with God, although it is logically impossible to become God.

The author's attitude towards Jesus' disciples and their experience of his divinity is also unusual. He considers this to be authentic, although he insists that it must be interpreted in the Sufi sense of union.

No doubt as a consequence of these features, the *Radd* never appeared to be popular among Muslim polemicists, and exerted little or no influence on the later course of anti-Christian polemic.

## MANUSCRIPTS

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