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Ghazālian Insights on Scholarly Critique and Freedom

1. Introduction

Thinking about scholarly critique and freedom of speech requires a historical sensibility as to how such categories would fit with tradition and history. All systems of thought, especially those developed in the pre-modern period, have a very different sense of liberty, rights, and responsibility. The Muslim tradition and Islamic thought are no exception. While accountability to God in Islamic ethics is often an individual burden and responsibility, especially in devotional matters (*'ibādāt*), by contrast transactional (*mu'āmalāt*) matters are different. In matters of homicide and injury, we notice that the individual might have committed the offense, yet it is the kin of the deceased who are entitled to satisfaction, while the kin of the offender carry the burden of responsibility to offer reparations and blood money to the bereaved party. A communitarian ethos is baked into the Islamic ethical order. Centring individual freedom to the exclusion of all other freedoms in Islamic discourse might undo or undermine the communitarian ethos of Islamic moral and ethical thought.

Accountability, claims and entitlements are part of anthropological and sociological equations where the individual and the collective have complicated relations of shared responsibility, claims and entitlements. This also depends on the specific time in history where such moral and ethical systems were formed. It is also widely accepted that these Islamic ethical and legal formulas that I had just recounted were based on social systems that were derived from the imprints of seventh-century Arabia and parts of the Near East where Islamic theology and law in their formative periods were constructed based on lived practices. And, according to Fazlur Rahman, these practices were organic and part of dynamic societies where these social, legal and moral coordinates showed remarkable flexibility in everyday life, based on the larger political and cultural contexts.[1] Later, however, these teachings took on a more dogmatic posture.

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1   Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute,

The idea of freedom rings very differently in slave societies when the same concept is deployed in societies that had eliminated slavery. Early Islamic societies valorised both free individuals and slavery, with sympathetic pathways to manumission and freedom. Women were entitled to dispense with their property freely, even though some law schools even restricted this right to married women.[2] Yet women were indeed awarded limited autonomy over their sexuality to enter marriages or for that matter, to exit unions. While the law schools have some slight disagreements, the default and preferred option always gave the guardian the final say in contracting legally sound marriages. Appeals to political authority via courts could find grounds for the dissolution of the marriage. And a woman with means could financially negotiate her way out of an unsatisfactory marriage by inducing her spouse with a sum of money for release.

My larger point in these examples is to illustrate one key idea, the question of *ḥaqq*. In all these discussions the terms used would be *ḥaqq* and its plural *ḥuqūq*. While the term *ḥaqq* is translated as 'right' today, it did not have the same resonance in the past. In early and medieval Islam, the idea of an individual possessing a non-derogable right, namely, a right that cannot be infringed, would be a rarity. Yes, individuals possessed a certain dignity in the moral sense. Yet, dignity did not feature as an independent or an unembodied variable or a value possessing the power to veto a *sharʿī* rule or abrogate a practice. Dignity was embodied in practices, and practices, in turn, are embedded in cultural rhythms and logics. Dignity when embedded in the practice of respect or vested in male guardianship made total sense in that context. But on its own the appeal to dignity in the pre-modern world could not abrogate slavery, nor could appeals to dignity level believers to be equal to non-believers or create equality between women and men. But an appeal to dignity, as a famous prophetic tradition made known, could be part of the rhetorical repertoire of cautioning a slave-owner not to chastise a slave by hitting the poor man in the face, because the face is literally the epitome of dignity.

The conceptual history of dignity or the right to make certain claims and demand reciprocal obligations needs to be studied historically. Similarly, the right to respond to a doctrine or to disagree with a doctrine held by a firm

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1984), 86.

2   Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Ayyūb Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ighāthat al-lahfān fī maṣāyid al-Shayṭān*, 2 vols (Doha: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 2016), 2:748–49.

majority in pre-modern Muslim society was regulated by norms of compliance and obedience, or norms of knowledge-based disagreement, *khilāf,* not norms of freedom. The difference is subtle and requires reflection. One side, normally the majority point of view, claimed the right to respond to or sanction the minority point of view. The latter, depending on the severity of the disagreement, could cautiously respond. Polemics between Sunnīs and Shī'as often rose to boiling point with mutual imprecations and anathematisation. Or witness the wounding rivalries between Ḥanafīs versus Shāfi'īs, Ash'arites versus Mu'tazilites in the early centuries. It would require the orchestration of mob violence to harm the offending party, or it would need some plot among contesting bureaucrats to get their opponents executed under some political or theological pretext. Only Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. *c.* 925 or 935) managed to get away with his radical ideas on prophecy without consequence.[3]

The past is a different world in terms of its conceptual vocabularies. That past had limits on what we today perceive as freedoms or the right to dissent, just as the modern world also places restrictions on freedoms. We cannot make irresponsible claims that endanger the lives of others by falsely shouting 'Fire!' in a packed cinema or in a sports stadium causing a stampede in a crowd where people are trampled to death.

And I want to caution against our use of categories and concepts that had very different resonances in the past, by merely transplanting them into the present without proper conceptual translation and adjustment. One is required to account for the discontinuities and explain the continuities and how they would or would not work today. And yet, even modern Muslims cannot journey in Islam without the memory of the past. Nor is it advisable to let the hold and grip of the past, namely tradition, be released on those living in the present. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer called that authority of the past 'effective-history'. For Gadamer, effective-history is the operative force of the tradition over those who belong to it. Even an acceptance or a rejection of tradition indicates the power and hold of tradition over us. As Abūl Kalām Āzād (d. 1958), the Indian Muslim religious scholar and politician, put it: 'No power can incarcerate a person as much as the chains of traditional convictions can fetter one.'[4] And at the same time, we also need to keep in mind that all these

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3   Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

4   Abū al-Kalām Āzād, *Ghubār-i Khāṭir* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1983), Letter no. 11, 99–100.

historical concepts and values are now operative in societies that are deeply secularised. To keep these conditions in perspective the caution of Michel de Certeau serves as valuable guidance: 'A society which is no longer religious imposes *its* rationality, *its* own categories, *its* problems, *its* type of organization upon religious formulations.'[5]

2. Ghazālī as Interlocutor for Scholarly Critique

Like many past and contemporary thinkers, I do find Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) to be a most insightful interlocutor. Of course, he also poses to be an enigmatic figure, but nevertheless a formidable character intellectually. Ghazālī allows me to think through the historical Muslim tradition and he gives me some openings to build out and construct concepts of tolerance that might have cache among Muslims today. Hopefully, I will build these concepts with the relevant attention to historical adaptation. While Ghazālī's intervention to lower the tensions between different Muslim sects to my mind cannot be viewed as 'freedom' understood in the modern sense, but it does offer toleration. Rather, the purpose of *The Decisive Separation between Islam and Subversion* (*Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa-l-zandaqa*) was twofold: one was to draw the proverbial boundaries of the theological red lines, so to speak.[6] The other was to create a range of interpretative possibilities of revealed discourses. Central was his effort to dissuade scholars from adhering to authority (*taqlīd*) in an uncritical and uninformed matter. And in his view, a version of the truth is available in every contending sect.

   When I think of scholarly critique within an Islamic context, I always find it regrettable that Ghazālī himself used some very strong language to excoriate those he deemed to be his intellectual and political adversaries. I am referring to the Ismāʿīlīs whom he dubbed as the *taʿlīmī*s, because they relied so exclusively on the teachings of their absolute and infallible leader. He also did not spare the Imāmī Shīʿa his caustic criticisms, just as he found dumb-witted Ashʿarī and

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5   Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 141.

6   Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa-l-zandaqa* (Damascus, 1993); Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghāzālī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*, Studies in Islamic Philosophy, vol. 1 (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Ḥanbalī scholars and theologians to be insufferable people to be around. And he had unkind things to say about law schools that rivalled the Shāfiʿīs, and he especially put down Abū Ḥanīfa in a youthful dissertation on legal theory.[7] But he reserved his strongest ire for the Muslim philosophers. He penned a well-known and elaborate critique of the Muslim philosophers, especially targeting Ibn Sīnā (d.1037), about which much ink has been spilt. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) has unfortunately for some people turned into a benchmark of how Ghazālī struck a blow to reason and philosophy.[8] In the eyes of some modern Muslim public intellectuals and historians who seek a short-cut explanation or analysis for the woes of Muslim societies in the modern period Ghazālī is turned into a scapegoat and unfortunately serves as grist for their polemical mill. This is less of an analysis but rather a poorly thought-out thought-experiment lacking historical credibility. Philosophy and reason in various shapes and sizes flourished in the post-Ghazālian era. The decline of Muslim political fortunes requires a much more serious diagnosis and to my mind the half-baked accounts that masquerade as analyses only cause more damage.

Ghazālī deemed the interpretative dissent of the Muslim philosophers to be so grave that it became tantamount to denying categorical doctrinal certainty. In his definition unbelief, *kufr*, constitutes a violation of tolerable dissent. Unbelief in his scholarly assessment is to 'falsify' (*takdhīb*) even a single teaching of what the Prophet Muḥammad delivered.[9] This is the nub of Ghazālī's charge against the philosophers on three issues – (1) the pre-eternity of the world and that all substances are eternal, (2) God's knowledge does not encompass the temporal particulars among existing things and (3) the denial of bodily resurrection.[10] It is clear that the philosophers' conception of the nature of the divine and how the divine acts in the world differed substantially from the way the theologians understood things.

Since Islamic theology was also a constructed discipline and blended with interpretations from the scripture and the teachings of the Prophet, the question arises: from where does this discipline gain its authority to outlaw beliefs

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7   See Ebrahim Moosa, 'Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111)', in *Islamic Legal Thought: A Compendium of Muslim Jurists*, ed. David Powers, Susan Spectorsky and Oussama Arabi, Studies in Islamic Law and Society (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 261–93.

8   Ghazzālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers = Tahāfut al-Falāsifah: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, ed. Michael E. Marmura, 1st ed. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1997).

9   al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, 25; Jackson, *On the Boundaries*, 92.

10   Ghazzālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, 230.

contrary to its own invented systematic programme of thinking? Ghazālī and others will claim that they are merely constructing a system of thinking, like dialectical theology (*'ilm al-kalām*) and its disciplinary convention to protect the foundational dogma of a creed. As he put it, he is referring to those teachings that have 'been corroborated by innumerable reports, and belief in which is enjoined by religious law'.[11] The other argument Ghazālī makes is that the philosophers claim some teachings are anthropomorphic utterances or similes that are open to interpretation. He believes that utterances regarding paradise, hell and resurrection in the afterlife are not open to figurative interpretation in terms of the teachings of the religious law.[12] Interpretative possibilities must be in conformity with the conventions of the Arabic language to allow for such interpretative liberty, contrary to what the philosophers claim, he argued.

The development that we do observe is that after Ghazālī, theology, more correctly those who wield the authority of theology, gradually awarded it the authority of a master narrative and the authority to anathematise unacceptable ideas and their carriers. How? Theology now examined the complex implications of one's understanding of the universe by way of the resources of metaphysics or the natural sciences. In other words, if one denied God or the Prophet or the revelatory nature of the Qur'an in explicit terms, then one's membership of the Muslim community is obviously challenged. With the development of theology, micro-debates and implications of ideas were now subject to theological surveillance. Ghazālī creatively innovated – driven by his own passion to defend traditional Muslim doctrine and creed – a knowledge (epistemic) apparatus to surveil the granular implications of one's philosophical, natural science and cosmological convictions and how they squared or did not square with one's beliefs.

Ghazālī's epistemic apparatus to outlaw certain doctrines that were beyond the fold was gradually endorsed by different elements of the Muslim religious elites over time. And, for some, especially later Ash'arīs, his apparatus became the touchstone to evaluate philosophical doctrines. Most ignore the fact that Ghazālī himself was deeply invested in philosophy. In addition to his voluminous and wide range of writings, his authority became quasi-sanctified in these matters and his authority is frequently invoked as a conversation-stopper on difficult questions. To further and deepen respectful but necessary scholarly critique this unofficial ban on questioning the boundaries of theological dissent ought to be revised. While Ghazālī identified with the Ash'arī/Sunnī

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11 Ibid., 177.
12 Ibid., 218.

perspective, the effect of this unofficial policing of the micro-implications of philosophical and scientific commitments is not limited to Sunnī circles. Gatekeepers across the various branches of Islamic thought often exercise limitations to the detriment of the development of religious thought itself.

Just to push the point a bit further. Why would it not be possible for there to be two or multiple accounts of how the universe works? One could be a metaphysical account related to an explanation of the natural sciences as the philosophers of the past held. Another account could be a narrative largely premised on scriptural and prophetic authority. This version would have no truck with metaphysics and philosophy. However, this scriptural account is surely unconvincing if it is unable to credibly answer existential and real questions about being-in-the-world. Yet, for argument's sake, it remains a theoretical possibility for those who believe it to express it. The best example is a previous Saudi mufti who stated that the earth is flat on the grounds of scripture. Such a person is dead wrong in the minds of those who disagree. And one should allow this disagreement to play out in knowledge circles where the less convincing narratives are discursively defeated. Many lay Muslims today possess some literacy of Islam, but they find it difficult to navigate between their convictions of the nature of the universe and those strict and literal versions of scriptural accounts that challenge their credulity. Yes, it would be most confusing to lay Muslims of this ilk when scripturalism absurdly concludes that the earth is flat. But to millions of other believers who do not delve into the literacy of the tradition, but for whom religion is about rituals and elementary beliefs requiring little or no religious literacy, such unthinking scripturalism would either be received with acceptance, rejection or in most cases an indifference as to its veracity.

Most sensible theologians attempt to combine both the metaphysical debates with scriptural theology as Ghazālī did. But Ghazālī found some of the literalist scripture-based propositions to fundamentally clash with some of the metaphysical propositions he held. This made him excoriate the unworthy and uncritical Muslim theologians for promoting false beliefs and views of the world. And the same impulse also drove his critique of the philosophers who gave priority to metaphysics and in doing so ignored scriptural teachings and consensus-based theological propositions. But Ghazālī failed to recognise that there could have been more than one metalanguage to understand the role of humans in the world. Ghazālī, among others, tried to make philosophy subordinate to the metalanguage of theology.

This game of knowledge gridlock in contemporary Muslim contexts where the framework for religious thought has become moribund does succeed to inhibit, or intimidate, conscientious Muslims from boldly engaging in scientific exploration and engage with social and philosophical challenges. How? Young Muslims and adult professionals are constantly petrified that their scientific inquiries or philosophical curiosities might leave them stranded in a theological heresy-land. While large numbers of Muslim scientists do undertake research and explore science with the presumptions of the big-bang theory and evolutionary biology at work, they are equally petrified about pronouncing their views on Darwinian evolution. The reason is that they fear the wrath of the Muslim theological thought-police who would unleash their fury on them if they violated official theological doctrines if they approved of evolution. In some instances, social ostracism would be a mild alternative when compared to harsh imprisonment or death if found guilty in heresy-related show-trials in some Muslim-majority contexts.

In the *Decisive Separation* Ghazālī created an opening for multiple shades of interpretation or interpretative keys to be tolerated in Islamic thought. These interpretative keys are established concepts. They are related to our ordinary and sophisticated conceptual systems, not just in language, but in the way we think and act, which are metaphorical in nature. Concepts structure how we perceive things, how we move around in the world, how we navigate both seen and unseen reality. This ranges from the most mundane acts and thoughts to the most profound thoughts and practices as well as their linguistic expression.[13]

So, in Ghazālī's proposal, one must first try and read any text in the interpretative key of 'essential existence'. This simply means to view things the way they occur to us in everyday life in obvious and unreflective terms. For instance, these are clouds in the sky, this is the earth or she is a woman. The way we see things in their essence. If it is not possible to understand something in this essential manner, then one proceeds to understand things in 'sensory' terms, namely, what your senses tell you if things are hot or cold or how you experience pain or happiness. Other times, and this is his third key, we understand things in terms of 'imaginary' existence: in other words, in 'mental' and abstract terms. Like we imagine the existence of an imaginary object like the reindeer or the mythical bird known as the phoenix. Also, the way you remember in your mind the way the pyramids look after you visited Giza in Cairo.

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13   George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 13.

Once you left Giza, the pyramid becomes an imaginary object now located in your memory. Then there is the fourth key, 'rational' existence, meaning the implications that flow from rational discourses. One can say, for example, this pen is in my 'hand', when hand rationally signifies my power and my ability to physically grasp a writing object. Finally, the fifth key is 'analogical' existence, which occurs when a word or experience simulates something else. Anger, for example, is when one's blood pressure rises and causes a heightened emotional state. God's anger, for example, does not involve such bodily transformations, but results in an analogous sensibility of God's displeasure or imminent wrath, figuratively speaking. If an interpretation could sensibly and systematically fall into one of these five registers of interpretation, then to Ghazālī's mind one's understanding and interpretation falls within an acceptable level of toleration and thus one remained within the fold of a religious tradition and its boundaries.

With these hermeneutical keys in hand Ghazālī was hoping to introduce a level of sophistication, nuance. The key issue is toleration in order to reduce the contentious theological differences and interpretations among contending groups of Muslims. What he had in mind was especially divisions within intra-Sunnī debates, but this could also possibly apply to some Shī'a groups. There-fore, Ghazālī's work gained a warm reception in Imāmī Shī'a circles, thanks to the labour of Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1680).[14] Ghazālī aimed to keep disagreement within a reasonable sphere of tolerable coherence and disagreement. However, despite a panoply of interpretative keys at his disposal, Ghazālī could not find a register to accommodate the interpretations of the philosophers in any of the keys of the five levels of interpretative possibilities he devised.

Ghazālī argued that those teachings that were derived from the Qur'an and prophetic reports must first be understood in the interpretative key of essential existence; in other words, it must be understood in realist terms. Only if such a statement amounts to incoherence and nonsense in that interpretative key, one should then turn to understanding it in sensory terms, followed by the sequences of the imaginary, rational and analogical interpretative keys, respectively. In the end Ghazālī himself admits that not a single group of scholars can avoid interpretation.

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14   Kāshānī produced an adaptation of the *Iḥyā'* as Muḥammad ibn al-Murtaḍā al-Muḥsin (Fayḍ) al-Kāshānī, *Maḥajjat al-bayḍā' fī tahdhīb al-Iḥyā'*, 8 vols, 2nd ed. (Qom: Daftar-i Intishārāt-i Islāmī, *c.* 1964).

Now, one would have thought that these expansive interpretative registers would have reduced disagreement among rival Muslim schools or made them more tolerant of each other, but alas. The fact that Ghazālī's expansive interpretative framework did not foment tolerance is indicative of the absence of a sophisticated theological literacy among Muslims today. We have not yet fully deployed Ghazālī's helpful intervention. Or as the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal put it: 'The ritual of the call to prayer (*adhān*) remains, but the spirit of Bilāl is missing; philosophy is found, but the conviction of Ghazālī is absent.'[15] Muslim theologians and their interlocutors have yet to properly deploy these Ghazālian hermeneutical keys to effectively create relations of toleration. So, toleration, not freedom, was the key issue in the medieval Islamic world. Perhaps toleration was a very elementary form of qualified freedom, the ability to deal with tolerable disagreement produced by the exercise of knowledge disciplines and growing human experiences in understanding faith teachings produced in a bygone world.

But even when one follows Ghazālī's hermeneutic and tries to rely on the realist understanding of things, one cannot always fully subscribe to an essential interpretation. Some figurative elements inevitably do insinuate themselves even in ordinary religious and everyday discourse. So, a prophetic report states that on the Day of Judgement one's actions will literally be weighed.[16] Linguists and logicians understand that actions are qualities. And, such entities, like qualities, cannot be weighed. In a bid to understand this teaching in a very elemental sense, Ashʿarī himself had to resort to an interpretative fiction. It is imagined that the actions of humans will be recorded on scrolls, and then ultimately the *scrolls* will be weighed on the Day of Judgement, not one's individual actions. Now this interpretation, while intelligible, clearly required the interpreter to step away from a literal interpretation in pursuit of a line of argument that stresses coherence and intelligibility. Of course, with this interpretative shift Ghazālī moved away from the literal words of what the Prophet had said, to grasp what the Messenger of God intended. At the end of the day, we need to understand that a sacred text or a teaching of significance is ultimately a conversation with the reader. While the reader cannot read his

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15   Muhammad Iqbal, *Shikwa & Jawab Shikwa: The Complaint and the Answer: The Human Grievance and the Divine Response*, trans. Abdussalam Puthige, Muhammad Iqbal Memorial Series (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: The Other Press, 2015), 67.

16   al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafrida*, 45–46.

or her own meaning into the text, disapproved as eisegesis or *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y*, the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader will nevertheless have to find some meeting place.

Ghazālī also advocated that in matters of fundamental doctrine one could not abandon the apparent meaning of a text unless one was compelled by a categorical indicator to do so. It is a good question to ask: what constitutes such a categorical indicator? If one loyally follows the apparent meaning of a text and then it produces a rationally impossible meaning, then one is obliged to resort to an interpretation that will eliminate such incoherence. So, for instance, a prophetic report states that on the Day of Judgement death itself will appear in the form of an embodied ram and then the animal will be slaughtered.[17] On the face of it, this report invokes figurative language and hence makes us understand that in the afterlife death is no longer a possibility. But few scholars could agree on what constitutes a rationally impossible meaning. Many Ḥanbalīs literally accepted the report as mentioned. In short, Ghazālī himself realised that interpretation in any scheme of thought is a necessity, sometimes even in the most everyday and common-sense terms. Literal phrases are profoundly metaphorical in our everyday use because they are deeply embedded in our experiences. Reading and interpreting are what we denote as our experiences and '*every* experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions', write George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.[18] Philosophers and scholars who try to grasp the big picture of things often have to dig deep into the metaphors or provide interpretations that do not square with apparent meanings.[19]

So, when the Muslim philosophers refused to accept bodily resurrection, they were indeed wedded to their interpretative framework and principles. The key principle at work was this: if something is non-existent then it is rationally impossible to replicate it. On this basis the Muslim philosophers argued that once a human body is disintegrated then it becomes non-existent. Thus, it is impossible to resurrect that same non-existent body, rationally speaking. In doing so, they were consistent with their rational argument.

Ghazālī argued that the Muslim philosophers ought to have switched to authoritative discourse based on the teachings of scripture and the teaching of the Prophet Muḥammad in these matters. (When I use the term scriptural

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17   Ibid., 33–34.
18   Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 57.
19   For my extensive views, see Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

authority, I mean both the teachings of the Qur'an and the authoritative Sunna.) In other words, their philosophical rationality should give way to scriptural authority, he insisted. Ideally, he argued the best argument combines reason ('*aql*) and tradition (*naql*). Scriptural authority, in his view, trumped philosophical reason if there was an irreconcilable contestation between the two. In fact, scriptural authority generated its own tradition or authority-constitutive reason. In other words, reason bends to the tunes of the theological imperatives. So, the best way to explain this is to say, that our reason is often shot through with the experiences and logics of revelatory discourse. Ghazālī and the theologians believed that constructing such an edifice was a necessary and compelling requirement. The philosophers either never thought along those lines or they perhaps did not see the need to construct such an edifice. They thought philosophical reason was more compelling in understanding God and the cosmos.

The question arises: did the philosophers wilfully ignore the imperatives of the scripture and prophetic authority? They made it quite clear that religion and philosophy tried to accomplish the same goals, but each used different means. Both were catering to the truth but for different audiences. The philosophers believed they catered for the elites, while they thought religion catered for the needs of laypersons. Each audience required a different language of persuasion.

Ghazālī found this claim to be most nauseating and offensive. The implication that God spoke in a different idiom to common folk, while God gave humanity the gift of philosophy that only spoke to the elites, was a proposition that caused him great anguish and revulsion. The philosophers, he claimed, portrayed God as speaking in different tongues to different audiences. On their part, the philosophers were convinced that their language was the truth. What religion taught laypersons were teachings adapted to their level of common understanding, an approach we today would deem as being paternalistic or elitist. In other words, the philosophical discourse in essence, Ghazālī alleged, erased the discourse of religion. Philosophers opportunistically and superficially retained the discourse of religion to convince the less educated that their beliefs were identical when in truth it was not so. This provoked Ghazālī's ire to no end. If only the philosophers said, in my view, that the teachings of the Prophet could be understood in multiple ways, Ghazālī would have been satisfied. After all, Ghazālī too repeatedly spoke about appropriately addressing people according to their levels of understanding. But he did not claim that God spoke in different registers to different audiences. He also subscribed to the differences between the requirement of the elites (*khawāṣṣ*) as different from the needs of the laity

(*'awāmm*). However, he often stated that something could mean both *x* and *y*, depending on which angle one stared at the problem, and provided one did not look at both angles simultaneously. The philosophers effectively viewed things from their singular and exclusive angle, which, in their view, was the correct or superior knowledge perspective. Knowledge, of course, we learn is highly dependent on epistemic virtues, namely, certain distinct ideals and specific ways of investigating and picturing nature and reality.[20] The Muslim philosophers were committed to a single set of epistemic virtues that excluded all others. Another way of looking at this is to agree that theologians and philosophers use different sets of metaphors. Reality is not entirely external to us, perhaps something neither the philosophers nor the theologians in the past fully recognised. The way each group conceptualises the world also involves human aspects of reality, such as their unique conceptualisations, motivations and actions that constitute their reality. By not accounting for the difference in metaphors can often result in deep misunderstanding of contesting sets of ideas.

Commenting on Ghazālī's attitude towards the philosophers, the legendary Indian Muslim scholar Muḥammad Shiblī Nuʿmānī (d. 1914) was courageous enough to raise questions about Ghazālī's strictures to sustain a healthy conversation within Muslim theology.[21] Nuʿmānī argued that Ghazālī often found sympathetic interpretative solutions to rescue several Sufis from being accused of doctrinal waywardness for their semi-heretical utterances. Why, he asked rhetorically, did Ghazālī not show the same generosity or hermeneutic charity to the Muslim philosophers as he did the Sufis? While this is a rhetorical question any conclusive reply is difficult unless we can pose the question to Ghazālī himself! One speculative reply would be that Ghazālī was invested in the experiences of the Sufis and shared their metaphors more empathetically. He possibly found philosophy useful as an epistemic framework but was less invested in its experiential reality. Politically also the stakes were too high for Ghazālī to give an inch to the Muslim philosophers, given that the philosophy-loving Ismāʿīlīs posed a political threat from Egypt, challenging his Seljuk-Abbasid patrons. And the Ismāʿīlī political propaganda was highly persuasive for some audiences and it relied heavily on philosophical discourses.

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20   Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York and Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2007), 28.

21   ʿAllāma Shiblī Nuʿmānī, *ʿIlm al-kalām aur kalām* (Karachi: Nafīs Academy, 1969).

In short, the invincible aura of philosophy had to be punctured, so to speak. In the meanwhile, some of Ghazālī's closest students claimed that he himself remained in thrall of philosophy.

3.   Lessons

From the above journey with Ghazālī we might learn a few lessons of tolerance and deploy these in a broader framework of the discussion on freedom of speech. In doing so, I am aware of the observation by the Marquis de Vauvenargues that, 'It is easier to say original things than to reconcile things that have already been said.'[22] So my task of putting a medieval thinker into conversation with the present is daunting. All theological and philosophical thought claim to be in pursuit of the truth. We have no reason to doubt any of their claims at face value. What we do have to concede is that the truth always comes packaged with the passions and the interests of both the truth-seekers and the wider communities that subscribe to such truths. Hence the truth never stares one nakedly in the face, but it is always clothed in the most impressive and persuasive ideological apparel. In other words, there is always a politics, meaning a discourse of power attached to debates about the truth. This means, to be real, truth must first be a power discourse; it ought to have the power to convince others. Without power, the truth cannot possess our minds and our souls, hence power is intrinsic to the truth. We therefore must be alert to the politics of the truth. Such a politics is not a negative thing in and of itself. By recognising the politics of truth, we also recognise the constructive nature of the truth.

In pre-modern societies truth came packaged in the political-theological orders that governed societies. The emperor or monarch often exercised power in the name of an authority: as a delegatee (caliph) of the office of the Prophet, the caliphate in Sunnism. In the Shīʿī tradition the Imāmate at various times found some compact with political authority until the great occultation. In the absence of the Imāmate, the jurist governs in the aura of the absent Imām. Adherence to the truth and obedience to authority created the space for a domain free from political restraint, provided the absence of restraint did not threaten the stability of the political order. Obedience to authority was prior to absence of restraint or freedom. Freedom to dissent from the political order often came at a cost,

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22   Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg, 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), §192, 3:345.

since stability was a cherished norm and freedom always harboured chaos and disorder. And, in many Muslim-majority contexts, the priority of obedience in the interest of stability is still the preferred order of political institutions and Muslim religious leaders, the *'ulamā'*, with rare exceptions, of course.

Muslim political theology, even in the age of the nation-state, has not succeeded in calibrating a new political theology in the age of democracies. In most Muslim-majority nation-states, the preferred political model often favours authoritarian and coercive politics. That is because the political theology in place has yet to revise itself in a democratic key with a different kind of philosophical apparatus at its centre. At the centre of the political, the idea of sovereignty should be reconfigured from some symbolic sign of authority and could be reimagined as the imbrication of knowledge, freedom and obedience. How? Critical to any public debate is the density and sophistication of knowledge in a society. Knowledge allows one to aspire for the truth. A commitment to truth creates its own obligations and norms of obedience. When obedience is a choice based on knowledge the very nature of freedom is altered: it is freedom with responsibility. In Muslim theological circles in multiple modern contexts, in Muslim-majority or -minority contexts, freedom of speech and freedom of expression is always deeply threatening to political interests.

One reason why it is so threatening is that the dominant liberal notions of freedom are not always tethered to responsibility. With responsible freedom at the centre of political and theological debates, the dominant obedience-centred Muslim political-theology can be displaced with something different. Responsible discourse is not envisaged as a conversation-stopper, but should rather be an enabler of sensitive debates without a risk to the one initiating the debate and ought to be combined with a surplus of civility. Both the Ayatollah and the secular philosopher have a responsibility to the truth without demonising the other. Sensitive and difficult conversations should be conducted in the interests of the common good. To have freedom at the political and theological centre means the need to completely overhaul the dominant Muslim political-theology from an obedience-centred worldview to a responsible-freedom-centred polity and theology.

What I am proposing is a theoretical solution which might sound radical. Change happens incrementally. To move in the direction that I am gesturing would mean a tryst with a particular kind of liberty. In other words, Muslim theology and ethics should centre liberty and community as central elements of its moral philosophy. Liberty does not only have to be the liberal variant. There could be communitarian modes of liberty that values freedom, respon-

sibility and the centrality of the community. By the latter I mean the importance of family, consensus-based decision-making and the right to creativity and innovation in the light of changing realities. Yes, this will create a host of contentious debates with the traditional modes of thinking but that is precisely the challenge: to create space for discussion and debate among Muslims on hard questions without the threat of fatwas of heresy and excommunication looming over the discussants and those who dissent. This would require intensifying the discursive traditions of Muslims by increasing the cultural, philosophical and political quotient of debates.

Here a few doctrinal elements could be debated. Among such issues would be what to do when scriptural teachings are literally adopted and then give rise to outcomes that would not be readily accepted by the sensibility of contemporary Muslims. The inheritance rules for daughters in the Sunnī tradition often elicits objections from females in a world seeking greater equality among the sexes. Could Muslim governance find a way in which a law passed by the majority would also allow a minority of legislators, scholars and members of the lay public to continue the debate about the suitability and validity of the law without any consequence to their safety, integrity and well-being? Can the inheritance laws or capital punishment laws of Pakistan and Iran, for instance, be publicly debated without an advocate of the unpopular perspective being harmed?

I do, however, advocate freedom within a communitarian ethos of individual and communal liberty. In socialist contexts Antonio Gramsci argued for certain political and intellectual freedoms in pursuit of improving the common good, especially the right to the freedom of association. What such freedoms require is some calibration of what purposes freedom would serve without turning it into a fetish. Political theorist Michael Oakeshott's support as well as caution deserves to be noted. 'The major part of mankind has nothing to say; the lives of most men do not revolve round a felt necessity to speak,' Oakeshott wrote. 'It may be supposed that this extraordinary emphasis upon freedom of speech is the work of small vocal section of our society and, in part, represents a legitimate self-interest. Nor is it an interest incapable of abuse ...'[23]

To revisit and revise theological concepts and to critique political practices, especially to explore the limits of theological and political tolerance, is a necessary task. Theology often posits itself as the search for the 'truth' about God. However, we need to distinguish between the political space and

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23   Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, new and expanded ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 391.

the theological space. The freedoms associated with the political realm do not pave the way to the search for the truth. Rather, politics has to do with maintaining the public peace and tranquillity, not the search for the one 'truth'. Political conversation is free but becomes corrupted with lies which should be avoided at all costs. To combat lies one needs to cultivate 'peaceable decencies of conduct' among the public.[24]

Ghazālī in his day opened the door to viewing theological truths and convictions based on a more expansive scale of acceptable interpretative possibilities. Let's recall that he invented this convincing schema in his time in a bid to widen the theological circle of toleration. He was motivated to expand the circle of toleration to reduce the amount of heresy-mongering among contending Muslim groups. His moral sympathies were with the Sufis, and his schema shielded their utterances and practices from being delegitimised by bone-headed theologians and jurists. He also wanted to create space for the use of philosophical and logical arguments in theological debate, another qualified sympathy he had with the Greek-inspired philosophical tradition in Islamdom.

Finally, theological differences are embedded in our experiences and our theological metaphors ought to reflect those experiences and differences. While Ghazālī did not include selected Muslim philosophers in this circle of toleration, it does not prevent us to broaden that circle of toleration. This expansion will be based on our experiences and circumstances to include philosophers and philosophical thinking that are appropriate to our epistemological paradigm. This also requires a weakening of epistemic absolutes and an empathetic understanding of the experiences of one's rivals. To energetically pursue pluralism and toleration we need to ensure that the knowledge system contemporary Muslims pursue is capacious enough to include the experiences of the varieties of Muslim practices and beliefs as well as the shared experiences with people who retain different commitments to ours. Ghazālī provided one such model in his time. In doing so, he paved a way for us to find new formulations appropriate to our times.

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24 Michael Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics, and the Moral Life*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 116.