**Al Ghazali and the Golden Age of Islam**

[Zafar Aziz Chaudhry](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/zafar-aziz-chaudhry/" \o "More Articles by Zafar Aziz Chaudhry)

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Al Ghazali has been acknowledged by Encyclopedia Britannica as well as by Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as the greatest Muslim philosopher whose influence was not limited to Islam only but most of his ideas were widely followed and circulated among Christian and Hebrew scholars and philosophers. His 11th-century book titled “The Incoherence of the Philosophers” marks a major turn in Islamic epistemology. Al-Ghazali came to believe in a form of theological occasionalism, which meant that all causal events and interactions are not the product of material conjunctions but rather the immediate and present will of God.

Al-Ghaz?l?’s greatest work is I?y?? ?ul?m al-d?n, which in 40 “books,” he explained the doctrines and practices of Islam and showed how these can be made the basis of a profound devotional life, leading to the higher stages of Sufism, or mysticism. The Islamic Golden Age-from the 8th to the mid-13th century-was one of the greatest periods of human flourishment in knowledge and progress, with Baghdad as its focal point. Despite Al Ghazali’s great contribution to the corpus of Muslim practices, its theology and the development of its mysticism, he remained to the end a controversial figure as his crusade against Greek philosophy and western knowledge were concerned. Most critics also blame him for being a cause of the fall or decadence of the Golden age of Islam, which was finally liquidated by the Mongol invasion of 1258.

Ghazali had started as a sceptic during his early phases when he came to read Greek philosophical treatises written by prominent Muslim scholars like Al-Farabi (d.951) and Ibn Sina (d.980). Going with the stream, he wrote his first philosophical treatise, Maqasid al Falasifa.

Al Ghazali, in his religious philosophy, had argued that God was the centre point of all human life that played a direct role in all world affairs.

From the year 1095, a crisis turned him around, and he felt that the Greek philosophy lacked intellectual sincerity as a rebuttal, he wrote his monumental book, “Tahaful al Falasifa,” “The Incoherence of the philosophers.” At that time, Muslims in their attitudes towards Greek philosophy and western influences were divided into two classes: Asha’rites who were opposed to any innovation to Islamic theology. The other school of thought was called Mut’azillites, who believed in liberal thought and also liked to capitalize on Greek philosophy. Al Ghazali bitterly criticized the thinkers who supported the Muta’zillites school of thought which led most historians and critics to say that Al Ghazali was responsible for the fall of the Golden Islamic age. Ghazali crusaded against Greek thought and considered it too heretical and damaging to Islamic thought. I cannot understand why al-Ghazali felt that Greek philosophy would damage the Islamic faith. Historically speaking Greek philosophy came several centuries before the birth of Islam. Thus Islam being a modern creed could with better logic and reason correct and refurbish the ideology coming earlier. If Ghazali was a great master of religious and mystical erudition to write over 40 books in their defence why did he fear the impending Greek influences and new trends in knowledge, because as a philosopher he must have known how new ideas are born and old ones are discarded? His fear and frustration over new knowledge were so severe that towards his later life, he resigned from his honourable position as Professor and left his country to wander in Arab lands as a mystic.

Thus his critics say that despite his magnum opus enumerating the ‘incoherence of philosophers’ he had in fact been responsible for blocking new knowledge and influences in the Islamic religion, which ultimately caused the fall of the Islamic Golden age. If Ghazali had not so fiercely opposed the new trends in Islam and had not given his implied approval for the persecution of Islamic philosophers, today we would have evolved a multi-ethnic culture based on Islamic religion embracing universal feelings of common brotherhood and understanding, of justice and equality as against narrow parochial divided and bigoted society ridden with sect and class frictions.

A study of the Golden Islamic age ( from the middle of the 8th century to the 14th century) is so thrilling and exciting that it makes all Muslims feel proud of the great achievements of Muslim Scientists and philosophers which remains unparalleled to this date. The period of the Abbasid Caliphate resulted in an astonishing growth of philosophers and scientists such as Ibne Rushd (translated Aristotle, and wrote books on Islamic jurisprudence ) Al-Kindi (discovered rules of astronomy and optics ) Khawarzmi ( Father of Algebra and mathematics ) Ibne Sina (Father of Medicine, astronomy and Logic ) who ushered in a golden era of knowledge.

But these achievements (in the first few centuries of Islamic history) took place in the Islamic Empire when all great scientists and thinkers belonging to Greek, Christian, Hebrew and Indian civilizations sat together in the spirit of inter-faith harmony and cooperation and jointly found solutions to their common afflictions. Prof. Akbar S Ahmed, a very eminent Pakistani Muslim scholar in the West who holds Ibne Khaldoon Chair of Islamic studies in American University, Washington, D.C. has recently written a book ‘The Flying Man’ in which he has stressed the need for the same inter-faith harmony and co-operation between the great scientists belonging to the Abrahamic religions to sit together and jointly fight against the present-day common afflictions of pandemics, decay and death, by rejuvenating the same spirit of harmony. The greatest scholars in Islamic history, such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, were very anxious to know about the culture of other civilizations, and for this reason, the Imam-Ulema community condemned them as heretics. Al-Haysam’s writings were burned by the Imam community for their astronomy, and Ibn Rushd was exiled for his unorthodox philosophy. Were these persecutions not sufficient enough to stall the progress of this age of Enlightenment?

There were scores of Muslim philosophers who tremendously benefited from the translated works of Greek which also led to many inventions and discoveries. Ibn al-Haythm invented the first camera and was able to form an explanation of how the eye sees. Doctor and philosopher Avicenna wrote the Canon of Medicine, which helped physicians diagnose dangerous diseases such as cancer. And Al-Khwarizmi, a Persian mathematician, invented algebra, Besides new ideas found currency in philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and many other disciplines. In addition to preserving information, these scholars contributed new insights in their fields and ultimately passed their discoveries along to Europe.

After Ghazali wrote Tahafut al-Falasifah (The Incoherence of Philosophers), his critics argued that he challenged philosophers on the grounds that they could not lay down rational explanations for metaphysical arguments. And this challenge, in a way, stopped critical thinking in the Islamic world.

However, recent research on Islamic Science done by various scholars, more particularly by George Saliba, a Professor of Arabic and Islamic Science at Columbia University who specializes in the development of astronomy within Islamic civilization, has called these arguments into question. His research has established that Al Ghazali alone could not have been responsible, for causing setbacks to the Muslim Golden age. His research shows that If Ghazali had blocked Greek influences then Al-Shatir’s work in the 14th century and that of Copernicus in the 16th century would not have evolved.

Al Ghazali in his religious philosophy had argued that God was the centre point of all human life that played a direct role in all world affairs. Al-Ghazali’s influence was not limited to Islam, but his works were widely circulated among Christian and Hebrew scholars and philosophers who were his great admirers.

The Muslim philosophers gave new insights in all branches like philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and many other disciplines, and ultimately passed their discoveries along to Europe.

The Muslim civilization after a glorious period of enlightenment had to suffer first and the last shock with the invasion of Mongols who sacked Baghdad and ransacked all remnants of civilizations and treasures of knowledge including 600,000 books in Baghdad’s Dar ul Hikmat. But the real damage to Islamic society started to appear in the early 13th to 15 centuries for which Muslims themselves were responsible for their ignominy by causing violent disunity among the Ummah, moral decadence, a decline in intellectual and scientific activity, and loss of dynamism in Islam. The height of their insensitivity to the acquisition of knowledge can be seen from the fact that An Ottoman king Bayazid ii on discovering a few clerical errors in the printing of the Holy Qur’an, issued an edict in 1485 banning the printing of books in the Ottoman empire, which remained in operation for 350 years, during which Islamic age was virtually thrown in a dungeon of darkness. During those 350 years, the European countries progressed by leaps and bounds, and reached a new era of European Renaissance, while the same precious time was lost forever by Muslim forces due to their religious bigotry and intransigence.

*The writer is a former member of the Provincial Civil Service, and an author of Moments in Silence.*