PART ONE

FOUNDATIONS: ISLAM AND THE MUGHALS
In 1095, after four years as an instructor at the prestigious Madrasa al-Nizamiyya in Baghdad, jurist and theologian Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111) resigned for personal reasons. In his Munqidh min al-Dalal, written after years of study that carried him from Baghdad to Damascus, Jerusalem, Hebron, Medina and Mecca, before returning him to his hometown of Tus (Iran), al-Ghazali wrote of the disillusionment with scholastic learning that drove him to seek an alternative approach to ‘Truth’. The most striking feature of his intellectual journey is that his abandonment of the Baghdad madrasa did not mean a turn away from doctrinal Islam, even in its legal form. Rather, he encountered and listed four ‘Classes of [Muslim] Seekers’ on his search, one to which he belonged while a madrasa instructor, two that he studied and rejected during his travels, and a last in which he found reason to end his search. In order, these are: (1) the mutakallimun—‘exponents of thought and intellectual speculation’; (2) the falasifa—‘exponents of logic and demonstration’; (3) the batiniyya—who ‘derive truth from an infallible imam [leader]’; and, (4) the sufiyya—who ‘possess vision and intuitive understanding’.

It may seem inappropriate to begin a work on Islam in the transition from Mughal to post-colonial South Asia with the biography of an 11th century author whose travels never touched the region. Yet, al-Ghazali’s works, which are still widely read across the Muslim World, best illustrate the limitations of any formula that reduces doctrinal Islam to a ‘formalism’ that is legalistic and judged locally intrusive, while sidelining all other disciplines as ‘informal’, hence, customarily accommodative. In essence, such approaches do not encapsulate doctrine or reflect the

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1 Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, Munqidh min al-Dalal, ed. and trans. W. Montgomery Watt, The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali (Lahore: Shan Muhammad Ashraf, 1963). It should be noted that there is great debate over al-Ghazali’s actual motives for leaving the madrasa in Baghdad, ranging from a fallout with the incumbent Sultan to fear of reprisals from local Isma’ils (i.e. the batiniyya he describes).

2 Ibid., pp. 26–27.