Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) stands out in the history of Islamic renewal (tajdīd) as a renewer who, in a sense, renewed renewal. Religious renewal has a scriptural basis in Islam. The hadīth of the renewer, or mujaddid, reads that “God sends to this umma at the head of every century whosoever will renew for it the affairs of its religion.”¹ While conferring this distinction had been a posthumous honor prior to his own time, al-Ghazālī took the initiative of bestowing it upon himself.² In his famous Deliverer from Error, he presents himself as the mujaddid of the fifth century, having assumed his position at the Niẓāmiyya Madrasa in Nishapur at its “head,” in the year 499/1106. In so doing, he took an office that had been used to confirm the authority of men who lived in the past and repurposed it to claim authority for himself in the present, thus endowing the position with a new significance. Al-Ghazālī’s bold claim was accepted by posterity, and others followed his precedent in later centuries.³

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² Ella Landau-Tasseron argues that the mujaddid hadīth began as an innovation that was created by the students of al-Shāfiʿī to vindicate him against his detractors. Critics of al-Shāfiʿī focused on the paradox that his championing of the sunna as a source of law against the opinion-based innovations of the ahl al-raʿy was itself an innovation. Landau-Tasseron suggests that the use of the term tajdīd instead of iḥyāʾ was intentional. Iḥyāʾ plainly signifies “restoration,” while tajdīd is more ambiguous and could imply both “innovation” and “restoration.” This allowed al-Shāfiʿī’s partisans to justify his innovations in the name of tradition. While tajdīd was initially opposed to raʿy, it later came to be opposed to bidʿa. This would suggest that the title mujaddid began as an innovation and had already undergone one modification before being further modified by al-Ghazālī. See Landau-Tasseron, “The ‘Cyclical Reform’: A Study of the mujaddid Tradition,” Studia Islamica 70 (1989): 79–117.

³ For example, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), elaborated on his qualifications and responded to his critics at much greater length. See Landau-Tasseron, “Cyclical Reform,” 80, 87.
It was not merely a coincidence of dates that led al-Ghazālī to claim to be the mujaddid, but rather the transformational agenda he brought at the turn of the century. His wording in this passage in the Deliverer points to this. The author of The Revival of the Religious Sciences takes an important liberty with the hadīth, writing not that God will send whosoever will renew (yujaddid) the affairs of the religion, but rather whosoever will revive (yuḥyī) the affairs of the religion. This is clearly a reference to the work al-Ghazālī wrote during his eleven-year hiatus from holding an official teaching position that preceded his resumption in Nishapur. He was a “renewer” insofar as he was the author of Iḥyāʾʿulūmal-dīn, and he made this claim to lend authority to his agenda of revival.

Al-Ghazālī adopted this strategy because of the tension that exists in any religious tradition between authority, tradition and change. Tradition is understood here as perceived continuity with foundational figures, scriptures, and the authorities of intervening generations who have shaped the tradition. To effect change, a would-be reformer must have authority that is based on adherence to tradition. And yet change by definition threatens the continuity that provides tradition its substance and authority. An agenda of change must therefore be couched in such a way as to maintain an appearance of continuity with tradition lest it undermine its own authority. Here we see al-Ghazālī achieving this by invoking an office that carries the weight and authority of tradition and precedent while imbuing it with an untraditional and unprecedented significance.

In what follows, I will examine four rhetorical strategies al-Ghazālī uses in Iḥyāʾʿulūmal-dīn to claim the authority of the Islamic tradition for the sake of forging a new path for it. In order to suggest that these four strategies constitute the kernel of a rhetorical typology for Muslim (and likely non-Muslim) reformist thought as a whole, I will also give examples of them from a “liberal” Muslim intellectual and two “Islamists” of the twentieth century. This comparison will further allow me to comment on a recent trend in reading al-Ghazālī that contrasts his “pluralist” approach to the tradition to that of some modern thinkers, who are accused of dishonestly presenting a narrow and mono-

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4 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Al-Munqidh Min Al-Ḍalāl / Erreur et Délivrance, ed. Farid Jabre (Beirut: Commission internationale pour la traduction des chefs-d’œuvre, 1959), 49. Al-Ghazālī presents this not as his own claim, but as the attestation of numerous, independent (mutawātira) dreams of righteous men (ṣāliḥūn). Mutawātir is a term applied to ḥadīth attested to by numerous independent isnāds.