Book Review

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A story is recounted in the classical sources about the father of the well-known Ghazālī brothers. It was said that upon attending the gatherings of the jurists, he would become so consumed by love for their science, in the intricacies and the details of law, that he would pray for a son who would become a *faqīh*. Then, on entering the gatherings of preachers, of those who called to the way of God, his love for their art and vocation would reach such heights, he would pray for a preacher son. Later in life, or so the legend continues, God answered his first petition through Abū Ḥāmid (d. 505/1111), the most outstanding jurisprudent of his generation, and the second petition through Aḥmad (d. 517/1123 or 520/1126), whose sermons had the power to arouse hearts and “cleave solid granite.” While the tale, found in Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, is steeped in hagiographic lore, and while the two brothers would exert their influences on far more than simply the domains of jurisprudence and preaching, it nevertheless captures the salient role each would play in different arenas of Islamic culture and intellectual life.

In Western scholarship, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s place in Muslim history has been almost entirely overshadowed by that of his illustrious elder brother, a man whom Montgomery Watt once famously referred to—and not entirely without justification—as the “greatest Muslim after Muhammad.” By focusing on the life and thought of the younger of the two Ghazālis, the monograph under review fills a major gap in Islamic Studies. While it is clear Aḥmad was nowhere nearly as influential as Abū Ḥāmid in charting the trajectory of later thought in areas as diverse as *kalām*, *falsafa*, *taṣawwuf*, and *fiqh*, he nevertheless left an indelible mark on history, particularly on the development of Persian Sufism. Most importantly, he formed a key link through his many compositions in the “love tradition” separating Anṣārī (d. 481/1089) and Samʿānī (d. 534/1140)
before him from his successors, beginning with his student and disciple ʿAyn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d. 526/1131) to ʿAṭṭār (d. 617/1220), Rūmī (d. 672/1123) and beyond. The Sawāniḥ—his main treatise on love and the most widely read of his works—would become the subject of numerous Persian commentaries. In the words of Lumbard, it was “the first recorded treatise in the history of Sufism to present a full metaphysics of love” (2).

The study is divided into five main chapters. After proving an overview of the current state of research on the subject, Lumbard moves to examine the sources for what he calls the “Aḥmad al-Ghazālī Tradition” (chapter one), Aḥmad’s life and times (chapter two), his spiritual practices (chapter three), his teachings (chapter four), and finally, his doctrine of love in all its dimensions (chapter five). The author does more than simply bring to our attention a figure who has been, up until now, relatively marginalized in scholarship: he uses Aḥmad as a prism through which to explore debates in classical Islam around metaphysics, theories of love and eros, hermeneutics and exegesis, ethics, poetics, ideas about corporeality and the body (through an analysis of shāhid-bāzī), aesthetics, theodicy, spiritual psychology, and much more. Virtually no stone is left unturned in Lumbard’s highly erudite study—and if it is, it was invariably due to the constraints of space imposed upon him by the format of a focused monograph.

Particularly impressive is the sophistication with which Lumbard deals with the question of the treatises that have been ascribed to Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, especially the Bawāriq al-ʿilmāʾ fī l-radd ʿalā man yuḥarrimu as-samāʿ bi-l-ijmāʿ (Glimmers of Allusion in Response to Those who Forbid Sufi Music), a work that defends the use of song and dance in Sufi ceremonies. It was often assumed, particularly since the translation of the text into English in 1938 by James Robson (among the first works attributed to him to be made available to a Western audience), that he was indeed the author of the text. The attribution was not only entirely baseless considering that Aḥmad was known to have engaged in the oft-contested practice of samāʾ or “audition,” as we find, for example, in the medieval account of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī according to which he once spun in a gathering of dervishes in a state of ecstasy “until he had no feet or hands on the ground.” Lumbard, however, definitively demonstrates through a painstaking comparative examination of the Persian Sufi’s own writings alongside a close survey of the biographical source material, that the text in question could not have been authored by him. The sophistication of Lumbard’s analysis here reflects the overall quality of the study as a whole. Also noteworthy is his success in disentangling biography proper from hagiography—always a challenging task in the case of figures revered by tradition.