

KNOWLEDGE GHAZALI

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Al-Ghazali, who lived in the intellectual and spiritual world of the Quran and the Sunnah and enriched it with his own enduring contributions, was a devoted soul and body for attaining true knowledge, wisdom and virtue

<https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ibrahim-kalin/2017/02/04/al-ghazali-and-the-search-for-knowledge-in-the-modern-wor>

At a time when it is easy to confuse knowledge with information and forget the meaning of wisdom, it is important that we get the basic concepts right as we move forward. In our search for veritable knowledge in the modern world, al-Ghazali is one of the most prominent Muslim scholars to turn to for such wisdom.

The reason that al-Ghazali stands out among his peers is because he is a thinker who has traveled across various paths, studying traditional sciences and coming to terms with the biggest questions of religious law, theology, philosophy and metaphysics. In his autobiography titled, "Deliverance from Error" (al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal), he tells the story of his journey as a dedicated seeker of knowledge and the pitfalls against which all seekers of knowledge and virtue must be careful in order not to lose their way.

Al-Ghazali lived in the intellectual and spiritual world of the Quran and the Sunnah, enriching the religious scholarly community with his own enduring contributions. His ability to combine the various fields of knowledge is a

testimony not only to his personal ingenuity but also to the intellectual-spiritual climate in which he flourished as a thinker and scholar. He rose to prominence in a cultural and educational environment where knowledge was regarded as a supreme virtue and the possessors of knowledge were held in high esteem. Clearly, this comes from the importance that the Quran attaches to knowledge.

The Quran uses the word knowledge ('ilm) and its variants in more than 750 places. Knowledge may refer to revelation, the stories of the prophets, human concepts or the natural world. In almost every instance, knowledge refers to something larger and more essential beyond information. It serves as a "sign" (ayah) which intelligent people are supposed to decipher, seeking not only to widen one's perception of the world in which we live but also to inculcate a sense of moral responsibility and spiritual direction in us. True knowledge leads to faith and virtue because all knowledge is ultimately a reference to the source of all things.

Without knowing that source, one cannot have a true and full knowledge of things. As Aristotle said, one cannot know the effect without knowing the cause. Since God is the cause of causes and the source of all effects, all true knowledge is inextricably bound up with knowledge of Him as the Creator. That is why the Qur'an establishes a strong connection between knowledge, faith and virtue.

In this sense, knowledge is not "mental gymnastics." It is not mere literacy. It is not a tool to manipulate the world of nature. Rather, true knowledge is an act of engaging in the reality of things and a process of existential transformation. It changes and matures the knower. It is deeply personal in the sense that one cannot remain indifferent to the transformative power of knowledge. Veritable knowledge not only gives us wisdom but also leads us to a life of virtue and spiritual contentment.

Al-Ghazali is one of the pinnacles of this synthesis of knowledge, wisdom and virtue. In his various works including "Ihya ulum ad-din," "al-Mustasfa," "al-Iqtisad fi'l-itiqad," "Mishkat al-Anwar" and "Tahafat al-Falasifah," he shows the essential unity of the revealed and reasoned knowledge. As true knowledge shows us the reality of things as they are, it also invites us to act in accordance with that knowledge. This is like knowing everything about the sea and the wind. Such knowledge is essential but the sailor will have to act in accord with it otherwise he can neither sail nor survive in the face of a storm. Knowing by itself is not enough; one has to have wisdom as well, which means distinguishing between right and wrong and act morally.

Al-Ghazali is so adamant on this point that he devotes considerable space to the importance of attaining true knowledge, wisdom and virtue in the introduction of his major work on logic called *Mi'yar al-'Ilm*. He thanks God for granting human beings reason and intellect ('aql) by which they distinguish truth from falsehood. He condemns sense knowledge based on ignorance and conjecture. He warns his readers against the dangers of groundless suspicion. He tries to show them the ways of attaining certitude in knowledge. Al-Ghazali praises reason/intellect (known as 'aql) as the key instrument for true knowledge and wisdom so much so that one can mistake him for a brute rationalist. But despite his praising of reason as the most important gift God has given to humans besides creating them, he is no rationalist. Al-Ghazali simply places reason in its proper place within the larger scheme of things.

Attaining true knowledge is a serious business and requires intellectual and spiritual commitment. This is how one moves from information to knowledge, from knowledge to wisdom and from wisdom to virtue and spiritual refinement. This is important to remember at a time when we think in a rather arrogant

manner that we have all the "information" on a computer screen. That screen, no matter how colorful or precise it is, cannot give us knowledge, wisdom and virtue. One has to know where to look for it.