Political Philosophy of Al-Ghazali*

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Abstract—**The article is dedicated to the major issues of the political philosophy of the prominent medieval philosopher of the Muslim East al-Ghazali (1058 - 1111). It is exactly the consideration of both the historical circumstances and political practice of the state (Caliphate / Imamate) of his days that allowed al-Ghazali to re-examine the traditional Sunni dogma of combining the authority and power, and to take a different look at the nature of the state in his teaching about the Imamate, which differed both from the model found during the reign of the Prophet and the Rashidun Caliphs, and from al-Ghazali's predecessors and contemporaries among the fuqaha (the Islamic jurists) and ulama (the scholars of Islamic doctrine and law).**

Keywords—Caliphate/Imamate; Sultanate; authority and power; fiqh; state and religion; caliph; imam; sultan

I. INTRODUCTION

Al-Ghazali's life was not simple. A perfectly educated man of his era, he took an active part in the political, religious and spiritual life of the Caliphate. Just like many gifted Muslim minds, he was incredibly versatile, being an original yet in many ways controversial person.

The famous Peripatetic Averroes wrote that Al-Ghazali "adhered to no one doctrine in his books but was an Ash'arite with the Ash'arites, a Sufi with the Sufis and a philosopher with the philosophers" [1]. Other thinkers of the Muslim Middle Ages also pointed out to the inconsistency of al-Ghazali's views [2]. Still, it is necessary to take into account the Averroes' own comment that one must reckon "the conditions of time and place in which he [al-Ghazali] lived".

In fact, the ideological sources and components of al-Ghazali's synthesizing theory were not mutually repulsive but represented the stages of his ideological and spiritual evolution. By their internal logic, they had developed into a process of cognitive and ethical self-denial. Consequently, it would be far from accurate to describe them using such categories and concepts as "inconsistency", "eclecticism", "instability", etc. All of al-Ghazali's "transitions" and "disruptions" were motivated by cognitive skepticism, the quest for truth, anti-authoritarianism, which, like any sincere movement of the soul, led to the intertwining of problems of cognition and morality, receiving a concrete and perfect embodiment in the spirit and way of Sufism, so cherished by al-Ghazali. His political philosophy had changed and formed under these complex processes.

An analysis of his works on socio-philosophical and political issues shows that he allowed himself moderate freedom of thought yet within the framework of the Sunni tradition. His position is that of a rational jurist and moralist who well understood Islam being both spiritual and worldly, for all Muslim movements were as well political ones, be it Kalām, fiqh, or philosophy of Sufism. Al-Ghazali faced the problem of the need to strengthen a single Muslim state, which was possible only through increased political centralization.

Formal diarchy of the Abbasid Caliphate, the existence of two centers (religious, headed by the caliph, and secular, headed by the sultan), the never-ending intrigues, ambivalent position of ulama and fuqahā, and the constant external threat led to quick falling into decay of both the military-bureaucratic apparatus, and to the decomposition of the spiritual seat of power and ulama.

Al-Ghazali seized the consequences of such situation in the Caliphate. In his "The Revival of the Religious Sciences" and in other writings, one may come across a number of critical comments aimed at the rulers and ulama, the thoughts of their external purity with the absence of the internal one, on the things forbidden that became legal for them and vice versa [3]. He criticized sharply the Caliphate's rulers: "Nowadays most of the wealth owned by the rulers is illegal. Legal wealth either doesn't exist, or is very rare in their property." [4] He also criticizes warriors in the service of the rulers, believing that the legitimacy of trade transactions among them is highly questionable. Equally sharp he takes on those who grovel before the rulers. Al-Ghazali then criticizes ulama, considering them to be dogmatists, embarking on pseudo-theoretic researches. Those pseudo-ulama are demagogues, inciting the crowds, or smooth talkers, seeking to show off in front of those in power, and many of them present themselves as the only champions of the truth [5]. Al-Ghazali wrote: "In our time, ulama have decomposed, arrogance has choked their tongues. They no longer dare to criticize the rulers. Meanwhile, the depravity of the ulama leads to the depravity of the rulers, and the depravity of the rulers — the depravity of the nationals" [6].

As a solid politician who took an active part in the public affairs during the reign of Nizam al-Mulk, al-Ghazali, apparently, didn't put much hope for the revival of the caliph's power and was sure that the future of a Muslim state is connected with the Sultanate. So it was necessary to take a fresh look at the political-religious problem of *authority and power*.

II. AUTHORITY AND POWER

History proved the ineffectiveness of the traditional Sunni dogma of combining authority and power in one person. Al-Ghazali found yet another aspect of authority and power relation, which became the cornerstone of his political theory: "religion and power are twins". He somewhat differently than his predecessors scrutinized the conceptual nature of a Muslim state.

Before we proceed to analyze al-Ghazali's political doctrine, let us review the difficulties of the political-religious order that he had to face. The direct source of authority in Islam and in its political doctrine in particular is sharia.

Fuqahā — Islamic jurists — are to a large extent limited to the interpretation within the frame of fiqh; however, many of the fuqahā were also ulama. Given the role and significance of religion in a caliphate, ulama, as the authorities of religious knowledge, played a key role in both spiritual and political lives of the state.

The state's aim was to ensure compliance with sharia. However, there should be a special category of people associated with the political functions of a state. The unity of religious-political functions, which was initially carried by the ulama, was possible as long as power and authority fused in one person. Therefore, Islam's political doctrine, based on the idea of an imam as a secular and religious ruler, lacked the issue of the nature of power — only historical conditions of the actual separation of secular and religious power made al-Ghazali take a different look at it. He was no longer considering the unity of religion and secularism but spoke of the alliance of religion and secularism with the concept of a "unitary Muslim state" acquiring a broader meaning.

III. THE NATURE OF THE STATE

Another difficulty faced by al-Ghazali was a question on the nature of the state, i.e. the same problem of authority and power from a different perspective. In Islamic dogma that means the relation of the caliphate and sharia. Since the reign of the Banu Umayya and in the early times of the Abbasid Caliphate the caliph was a representative of power rather than an authority. In later years of the Abbasids, the imams had troubles claiming power still remaining the main bearer of authority. The political theory of the Caliphate, as particularly evident in the works of al-Mawardi, settled on historical precedents rather than on sharia. At the same time, the original Sunni doctrine assumed the strict adherence of acaliph to sharia norms. This was evidenced by the widespread criticism of the piety and personal behavior of the Banu Umayya caliphs exercised by their political opponents. The caliph's authority was associated with the idea of following sharia because the Imam was considered to be a deputy of the Prophet. This is not of a surprise since the historical consequences determined the head of the Muslim state and his functions. The history's legislative role could no longer be ignored. The political theory of al-Mawardi and al-Juwayni to a greater extent was based on the given historical circumstances.

Worth noting that during the period of the sultans' accretion of power, fuqahā focused on the quality, functions, and responsibilities of the caliph. The nature of the Caliphate wasn't actually questioned, the Caliphate was considered as something given. Therefore the discussion of the power and authority of a caliph wasn't connected with the problem of the nature of the very institute of the Imamate. Al-Mawardi, al-Bāqillānī, al-Baghdādī, and al-Juwayni considered the Caliphate institution just as a conduit of the divine law. Yet it paradoxically turned out that the legitimacy of the government, and, ultimately, of the state, rested on the formal religious authority of a caliph, who, in turn, depended on the real power of a sultan.

Al-Ghazali associated a way out of the situation at hand with a different understanding of the nature of the Caliphate. In many ways his political theory diverges from his predecessors' doctrines, however, this divergence is carefully hidden behind the generally accepted terms of the Sunni theology.

For al-Ghazali politics was a necessary component of religion and morality. It was thought to be as an art of behavior in accordance with the specific circumstances of an individual's life, who should measure own actions with the existing state order. Just as science, politics stood on "theology", Muslim law and the theory of man being "social animal". At the heart of these disciplines lays the eschatological idea of human destiny: the outside world is considered only as a pillar for the otherworld and the subject of politics, preparing a person for the highest happiness in the future life.

Al-Ghazali actively used the experience of the Sasanian Empire in his political theory. According to the Sasanian political traditions, religion and power were regarded as "twins". So, in al-Ghazali's words, "religion is the foundation and the state power is its guardian, providing protection and guaranteeing its inviolability" [7]. People need a strong power — a sultan — that preserves and strengthens the order through the laws. These laws are the subject of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). Therefore Muslim jurists play an important role in the life of a state and their activities should be considered as the crucially important function of a state. In addition to legal laws, according to al-Ghazali, there are religious rules and norms, serving as the basis fortrue faith. Respectively, "speculative theology" ('Ilm al-Kalam) is a linchpin in the hierarchy of sciences.

Al-Ghazali's political doctrine should be viewed primarily in the light of his fears of turmoil and various kinds of unrest that could lead to anarchy and disorder. Even the Tripoli's qadi Fakhr al-Mulk ibn-Ammar's1107 appeal,

asking for help in the fight against the crusaders, remained without proper political evaluation by al-Ghazali.

For an adequate comprehension of al-Ghazali's political doctrine, it is also important to carry out a chronological analysis of his works starting with "al-Mustazhiri" and ending with "al-Mustasfa fi 'ilm al-isul" (The Clarified in Legal Theory). Al-Ghazali considers two aspects of the caliph/sultan problem: the first one is the relation of sovereignty and secular power with the second one being the relation of religion and the state.

In "al-Mustazhiri", written in 1094-1095 and dedicated to the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad al-Mustazhir, al-Ghazali addressed the issue of the legality of the imam's rule and argued the failure of the Batiniyya's claims to legitimate power. Quite in the spirit of al-Mawardi, al-Ghazali reveals the features of the Islamic Sunni political doctrine and described the qualities that are the must for a caliph, as well as the procedure for his election.

In "Al-Iqtisād fī al-iʿtiqad" (The Moderation in Belief) al-Ghazali is more realistic when assessing the role of caliph in strengthening the Islamic state, bringing up a concern of the relation of the Caliphate and the Sultanate. Carefully analyzing the foundations of the Islamic political doctrine and the historical practices of the Caliphate, he came to the idea of the need for an alliance between an imam and a sultan.

IV. THE THEORY OF IMAMATE

Al-Ghazali's teaching on the state, i.e. the theory of Imamate, settled upon three key provisions: 1. The necessary power to maintain order in the state; 2. The Caliphate symbolizes the unity of the Muslim community and its historical practice with the Sultanate being an integral part of the Caliphate; 3. The Caliphate's institutional authority rests on sharia.

According to al-Ghazali, an imam as the highest authority could be appointed either by the Prophet, or by an active caliph, or by a person, de factowielding power [8]. In those days the imams, generally, were appointed by the sultans, and only then the caliphs were formally elected by the ulama. Al-Ghazali tried to theoretically formalize this. He believed, the procedure for electing a caliph is consistent with sharia with a sultan being an actual institutionalizing power. After the factual appointment of a caliph (an imam) by a sultan, his candidacy was approved by the electors from among the ulama and the fuqahā, and then there was an announcement in mosques with ordinary believers considered it as destiny. However, despite the sultans actually appointing caliphs, they had to respect their authority since "faith and power are twins". And the sultan's power was considered legitimate even if he didn't comply with the sharia rules; the main thing is that he recognized the caliph's authority.

Al-Ghazali believed that the establishment of order and security provides a favorable field for the functioning of the Islam institution. For this reason, he is less strict with the caliph's qualities, associated with his secular functions. Thus,

the caliph is no longer a symbol and the unity of the Caliphate, but its component part. The imam's authority was based on the sultan's power with the power of the latter sanctified by the authority of the former. A sultan as an institutionalizing leader acknowledged the caliph's institutional authority. Thus, it was sultan as a secular ruler who ensured the unity and power of an Islamic state. The link between a sultan and an imam, by al-Ghazali's design, should have been fuqahā and ulama. Their political functions were: interpretation of sharia in accordance with historical realities; justification of the legitimacy of a caliph, appointed by a sultan; issuing of religious-legal acts (fatāwā), signifying the sharia's functional authority. So, according to al-Ghazali, a sultan had to perform secular functions of a caliph with the religious-ideological functions attributed to fuqahā and ulama.

In addition, seeing in the name of a sultan the only hope capable of preserving a united Islamic state, al-Ghazali allowed the possibility of absolute obedience to the secular ruler even when a sultan violated sharia and exercised unjust power, most importantly that the secular ruler recognized the authority of Islam. There are numerous warnings against the harmful consequences of a civil wat and all sorts of unrest and riots in "Iḥiyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn" (The Revival of the Religious Sciences). Since the order can only be ensured by a sultan, then he should be obeyed and supported under any circumstances.

In "Nasihat al-muluk" (Counseling Kings) al-Ghazali addressed the main responsibilities of the rulers in the effective management of the state. Given that this book was directed not to the fuqahā or the caliphs but only to the sultans, he stressed the great responsibility of the sultans before God and their people, showing that the power is given by God. The first duty of a sultan is the strengthening of his personal faith while the public duties are exercised through just power. On numerous examples from religious traditions, the history of the Sasanian Empire and the Caliphate, al-Ghazali showed how unjust rule led to tyranny and tyranny led to unjust rule. He urged the sultans to listen to the opinions of the fuqahā and ulama in matters of religion and to the pieces of advice of viziers in the public affairs. Al-Ghazali noted the exceptional importance of the position of vizier and, in particular, of the first vizier in the hierarchy.

In his "al-Mustasfa fi 'ilm al-isul" (The Clarified in Legal Theory) treatise al-Ghazali scrutinized the relation of society and state from the perspective of Islamic law. The treatise opens up with an explanation of the fundamental Islamic dogma that God is the only sovereign. By looking at the sources of fiqh, the author emphasized that the only absolute source is the Quran. A Sunnah is only valuable to the extent that it indicates and proves the existence of God's established order. So, ijmāʿ is valuable insofar as it indicates the existence of the Sunnah. Assessing ijmāʿ, al-Ghazali argued that it means the unanimous opinion of all members of the ummah. However, reviewing the rights of those who may be included in ijmāʿ, and those who are to be excluded from it, he ultimately came to the idea that the ijmāʿ is the unanimous opinion of the fuqahā and ulama, authorized of issuing fatāwā. The state's authority is thus associated with

the will of the Prophet that is the basis of ijmāʿ, and aims to establish Islam. Hence, the state shall protect Islam and the Islamic way of life. Worth noting is the appeal to the ijmāʿ, which, ultimately, should reflect the historical practice of the Caliphate. It is exactly ijmāʿ, according to al-Ghazali, that endows authority to the institution of the Caliphate [9].

Concerning taqlid (the blind conformity to authority) and ijtihad (creative developments of the theory of Islamic law), al-Ghazali argued the need for the general public to practice taqlid. He justified his position by the fact that even the Prophet's followers went along the path prescribed by Muhammad. Moreover, al-Ghazali believed that an independent quest for truth, justice, and happiness can lead to social instability.

V. CONCLUSION

An analysis of his works on socio-philosophical and political issues shows that he allowed himself moderate freedom of thought yet within the framework of the Sunni tradition. His position is that of a rational jurist and moralist who well understood Islam being both spiritual and worldly, for all Muslim movements were as well political ones, be it Kalām, fiqh, or philosophy of Sufism. Al-Ghazali faced the problem of the need to strengthen a single Muslim state, which was possible only through increased political centralization. Considering the relationship between religion and state, spiritual and secular, he asserted their continuity and interdependence. The ummah, uniting people on the basis of faith, aims to achieve happiness in the otherworld. Given that God is the only sovereign a person is obliged to strictly follow sharia. Politics, kalām, fiqh, and ethics as inextricably interconnected sciences indicate and determine the ways to achieve happiness. In the end, "political reforms are moral reforms: one who wants to improve the lives of the others must start with himself" [10].

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