

<https://readingreligion.org/books/al-ghazali-condemnation-pride-and-self-admiration>

Al-Ghazali on the Condemnation of Pride and Self-Admiration

Book XXIX of the Revival of the Religious Sciences

Review

The Revival of the Religious Sciences is an enduring masterpiece of the Islamic tradition, a *summa* of Islamic religious disciplines (law, theology, etc.) within a rubric of virtue ethics, written by one of the most renowned thinkers of that tradition, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Admirers of the book in subsequent centuries enthused that, "if all the books of Islam were lost, the *Revival* would suffice for them," and that the *Revival* "verged on being a Qur'an" (Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf al-sāda al-muttaqīn bi-sharḥ ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 2nd ed., 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2002), vol. I, 37).

Several of the *Revival's* forty books were translated into English in the 20th century, but only in 1995 did the Islamic Texts Society (ITS) and the Fons Vitae publishing house embark on a project of translating the entire *Revival*. The project's pace has picked up in recent years, with thirty of the forty books now listed as published or awaiting publication. In parallel, Fons Vitae has launched the Ghazali Children's Project, a series of *Revival*-inspired books and workbooks designed to educate children in Islamic ritual and ethics. This project is a great service not only to those interested in the *Revival* for devotional purposes, but also to scholars of the Islamic tradition and others interested in comparative ethics and spiritual exercises.

No series editor is listed for the ITS translation of the *Revival*, though the translations follow uniform guidelines in several important features. Every volume has appendices of persons cited in the text and Qur'anic citations. All have scrupulous notes on the hadith that Ghazali cites, which is important because key critiques of the *Revival* over the centuries have attacked its citation of inauthentic hadith. But the seventeen translators to date seem to have been allowed a great deal of independence in their translation choices. Most of the translations I have read have been excellent, as is this recent contribution by Mohammed Rustom, *On Condemnation of Pride and Self-Admiration*.

Rustom first translated the book as an undergraduate and then returned to it nearly a decade later, entirely reworking his first draft. The result is a graceful rendering of Ghazali's original that strikes a skilled balance between accuracy and readability, avoiding faults like bringing too much Arabic syntax into the English or reproducing untranslatable Arabic idioms. When he departs from the literal Arabic, he calls attention to it in a footnote.

Like all books of the *Revival*, *Condemnation of Pride and Self-Admiration* begins with a catalogue of Qur'anic passages, hadith (short narratives of the normative speech and action of the Prophet Muhammad), and traditions of Muhammad's companions (*athar*), filling the first three of fifteen chapters, before turning to Ghazali's analysis of the vice. Ghazali distinguishes between "pride," which must be displayed vis-à-vis others (God, prophets, or one's fellow human beings) and "self-admiration," which is an interior vice. He analyzes the roots of pride and the other vices that provoke

it. He then turns to pride's opposing virtue, humility—again cataloguing scriptural references before giving practical strategies for cultivating humility and testing one's success.

Chapter 9, on how to cultivate humility and suppress pride, is the longest in the book. The section on pride ends with a brief chapter that analyzes practicing humility in terms that go back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as a mean between a vice of excess (pride) and vice of deficit (self-abasement), which is in keeping with the theoretical discussion of ethics found in Book 22 of the *Revival, On Disciplining the Soul*. The final five chapters on self-admiration are much shorter, covering much the same ground.

Rustom's brief translator's introduction does not present his own reading of the *Revival* as a whole. Instead, he reproduces Ghazali's short preface (*khutba*) to the *Revival*. This shows that ITS could have done more to bring consistency to the translation across the forty books. Ghazali's preface is found in Book 1 of the *Revival*, the *Book of Knowledge*, already translated in the ITS series by Kenneth Honerkamp, but Rustom produces his own translation. Other translation choices have likewise been reinvented rather than harmonized.

More significantly, there are substantial interpretive decisions, mainly about how to translate key terms, that could have profited from a unified editorial vision of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* and its aims. Most centrally, like all the other translators of the series, Rustom presents the *Revival* as a work of Sufism, although translators of some other volumes, such as T. J. Winter and David Burrell, also note Ghazali's engagement with the philosophical tradition. This philosophical aspect has been a major focus of Ghazali studies over the past three decades. Scholars who present the *Revival* as simply a Sufi work need to account for the fact that Ghazali claims to have written a book on what he calls *'ilm al-akhira*, the "science/knowledge of the hereafter" (*'ilm* can mean both science and knowledge), not Sufism.

Rustom chooses "knowledge" (as does Honerkamp), rendering it as "the knowledge by which we approach the hereafter." If this is a domain of "knowledge," it can be treated by existing Islamic religious sciences. But pre-ITS translations and much of the secondary literature render it as "the *science* of the hereafter" (as does Walter Skellie in his ITS translation of Book 21), indicating that Ghazali is creating a whole new discipline. Calling it a "science" rightly leaves open the question of the relationship between this new discipline and Sufism.

Deciding how to render this key term and standardizing translations across the series is a task for a chief editor with a clearly articulated reading of Ghazali's masterpiece. This may have been impractical for the translation of such a large book, a project that has spanned a quarter century so far. It is certainly not the responsibility of Mohammed Rustom, whose achievement shows the strengths of the series.

About the Reviewer(s):

Ken Garden is an Associate Professor of Religion at Tufts University.

Date of Review:

September 29, 2020

About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Mohammed Rustom is Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at Carleton University. He is the author of the award-winning book *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mulla Sadra* (2012), co-editor of *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (2015), and author of *Inrushes of the Heart: The Mystical Theology of 'Ayn al-Qudat* (2021).

Comments

Dr. Mohammed Rustom

October 2, 2020

I am grateful to Professor Garden for his kind words about my translation of Book 29 of Ghazali's famous *Revival*. One clarification is, however, in order: he notes that I also included a new translation of Ghazali's Introduction to the *Revival* itself, which would correspond to pp. ix-xvii of the work. As noted at the top of p. ix, the translation of this introduction is a standard one that is produced by ITS, and was not done by me. Rather, my own introduction, which traces Ghazali's Sufi sources for Book 29 of the *Revival* and offers a presentation of the structure and underlying argument of this work, is to be found on pp. xxv-xxxvi.