

Yazeed Said, *Ghazālī's Politics in Context* (Culture and Civilization in the Middle East 34), London & New York: Routledge, 2013. 204 pages. ISBN: 978-0-415-62513-5.

Frank Griffel*

Yazeed Said's book is the fruit of his dissertation, completed 2010 at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, UK, which seeks to fill a lacuna on "the relationship between law and politics in the writings of (...) al-Ghazālī" (p. 1). Western authors such as Henry Laoust, Leonard Binder, Ann Lambton, Carole Hillenbrand, and Patricia Crone have worked on al-Ghazālī's political ideas, and even more have written about his jurisprudence. Few, however, have combined these two fields to produce a comprehensive study of his fusion between the ethical and the political. Unfortunately, Ovamir Anjum's readable and provocative book, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment*¹, which advances a critical attitude toward the kind of Ash'arite political theory developed by al-Ghazālī, came too late for Said. In Anjum's opinion, al-Ghazālī's expression of "a thoroughly elitist and hierarchical system of thought [that] undermined, even abhorred, the commonsense and practical reasoning of ordinary people"² was responsible, after being further advanced by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), for contributing to what he calls a "crisis" of Muslim society under the Mamluks.³

Said is aware of both al-Ghazālī's elitism and authoritarianism. After all, al-Ghazālī wrote that the ruler "is the vehicle of the act of God on the formation of the common good" and that his subjects are required "to heed their places and accept it and not seek to change their natural affiliations (...)" (p. 111). But Said, who acknowledges that this political philosophy "may not be congruous with modern culture" (p. 111), is not interested in normative judgments about al-Ghazālī's political theory or in the day-

1 Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2 Ibid, p. 166.

3 Ibid, pp. 173-77.

* Professor of Islamic Studies, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA.

to-day politics in which he was involved; rather, he is interested in a philosophical analysis of this theologian's political and ethical theories.

In the first half of his book, Said seeks to convince his readers that al-Ghazālī held a particular kind of Natural Law theory. Or, as he expresses it more cryptically, he argues “for the possibility of Natural Law theory as explicated by John Finnis in relation to Ghazālī’s text (...)” (p. 8). In my understanding, Natural Law theories are based on the idea of human nature. Said says that such a view is “rather simplistic” (p. 58) and, along with the Catholic moral philosopher John M. Finnis and his work, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*⁴, he argues that the idea of a law that stresses the common good can equally be called a Natural Law theory.

I find this argument (pp. 52–63) rather complicated and prefer the simplicity of a connection between human nature and Natural Law. Attracted by the positive connotations of “Natural Law” in contemporary theories of law, Finnis and Said seek to associate their theory and al-Ghazālī’s with that label. For Said, al-Ghazālī subscribes to a Natural Law theory because he holds “a monotheistic view that there is a natural and eternal order, not simply constructed by human conventions” (p. 63). I am not sure I understand Said correctly, but it seems that what he means to say is (and here I use my own words, peppered with phrases from Said) the following: There is no question that al-Ghazālī holds a “divine command ethics” (p. 102) in which good and bad are defined by what God rewards and punishes in the afterlife. Only revelation gives us clues about what ethical value a person’s actions might have. But al-Ghazālī’s inquiry goes deeper than that of many of his Ash‘arite predecessors. Prompted by philosophical literature, he assumes that God’s law is not arbitrary but purposeful because while God can reward and punish whatever action He likes in an arbitrary way, the study of His law reveals that the ensuing regulations lead to thriving human communities and an increased benefit in both worlds. In other words, humans can detect the “purposes of the divine law” (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘a*) and can therefore progress to the next step: devising and implementing human legislation that tries to emulate God’s practice and issue laws that further increase human benefits (*maṣlaḥa*). In short, God’s law is good for humans not only because obeying it leads to reward in the afterlife, but also because it takes care of humans and creates prosperous human societies in this world.

This is what Said calls al-Ghazālī’s “pastoral understanding of *fiqh*” (p. 85). It is indeed worth pointing out that he was the first one to introduce the idea of *maqāṣid al-sharī‘a* and its subsequent *maṣlaḥa* theory into Ash‘arite jurisprudence. But

4 John M. Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

does this amount to a Natural Law theory? Recently, Anver Emon made a similar argument that the *maṣlaḥa* theories of al-Ghazālī and other Ash‘arite *fuqahā’* were theories of Natural Law.⁵ In my book review⁶, I objected that since those theories do not allow for the idea of a just law that human communities could develop by themselves, they are not Natural Law. For instance, all Ash‘arites would argue that without revealed knowledge, a human community cast on a desert island will inevitably settle on an oppressive law that allows the strong to exploit the weak. In post-Ghazalian Ash‘arite jurisprudence, *maṣlaḥa* is only a patch designed to cover up situations in which no revealed law is available. Clearly, this is not the kind of Natural Law theory that developed among Western lawyers and led to, among other things, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Said reads al-Ghazālī through the lens of Finnis’ notion of Natural Law and comes to different conclusions. The numerous passages in which he expresses the theologian’s ideas in the words of Finnis suggest that the author equates the former’s ideas with that of the latter. In one instance (p. 77), he combines Finnis’ words with those of al-Ghazālī to create a text that can be read as a quote from both authors. Said, who tends to understand medieval ethical Islamic theories as expressions of Western moral ideas, presents the Mu‘tazilites as Kantians (p. 100) and al-Ghazālī as a combination of attitudes held by various Christian thinkers, among them Thomas Aquinas (pp. 86, 141), Karl Barth (p. 85) and, most of all, John Finnis (*passim*). He therefore refers to a staggering amount of Western scholarship on Islam, Islamic law, al-Ghazālī, ethical theories, and Catholic ethics. Unfortunately, this material is often not fully digested and sometimes consists of nothing more than name-dropping. For instance, his understanding of Ash‘arite theories of human actions (pp. 68–72) does not do justice to the sources. Said, who thinks that Ash‘arism contains a conflict between human freedom and divine omnipotence (won by the latter), remarks that “[a]t some level, man needs to let it happen” (p. 72). Yet al-Ghazālī and other Ash‘arites did not believe in human freedom, because whatever happens, including human actions, happens only because God wills it to happen.

A similar confusion reigns over his presentation of the theologian’s psychology (pp. 93–97). Although Said realizes that al-Ghazālī’s writings reflect a certain level of tension between Aristotelian theories of the soul as an independent substance and earlier Ash‘arite atomism, which has no real theory of the soul, he somehow remains unaware that the theologian ultimately sided with the Aristotelian theory.

5 Anver M. Emon, *Islamic Natural Law Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

6 Frank Griffel, review of *Islamic Natural Law Theories* by Anver M. Emon, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 164 (2014): 261-64.

He characterizes al-Ghazālī's attitude to the tradition of *falsafa* in Islam as an attempt to bring "Greek philosophy (...) and Islam in equilibrium" (p. 97), even though an equilibrium can only be found between two opposing extremes. If *falsafa* and Islam are these two extremes, then Said should rethink what he is saying here: Did al-Ghazālī move away from Islam and toward *falsafa*? I think the whole idea of an opposition, although widespread in earlier literature on this figure, is misleading and inevitably entails a mischaracterization of his attitude toward both *falsafa* and Islam. The idea of a *via media* of al-Ghazālī's thought appears throughout the book, and yet, other than repeating an element of Ash'arite propaganda, it remains unclear between which poles this middle road winds.

For readers interested in an analysis of al-Ghazālī's works, this book is heavily back-loaded. After dealing with a large amount of secondary literature (which Said confusingly calls "primary scholarship" [p. 25]) and with theories of politics and law, only chapters 5 and 6 (pp. 92–137) really engage with al-Ghazālī's writings. They offer interesting analyses of the fifteenth book of his *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* on the value of societal associations, brotherhood, and friendship (pp. 106–13) and of his two later works *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* and *Iljam al-'Awāmm* (pp. 131–37).

The over-theorizing in the first part leads to original contributions in the last. Here, Said's broad view of the political leads to fresh insights into texts that others who have written about al-Ghazālī and his politics did not consider. For example, he clarifies al-Ghazālī's position on the "pious forefathers" (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) and contributes to a better understanding of the conflict between rationalists and traditionalists in Islam (pp. 124–25). Al-Ghazālī shares the opinion of many traditionalists that the *salaf* had a privileged access to religious truths. However, he stresses that that truth needs to be accessed via a process of understanding (*fahm*, p. 121). Reports on these *salaf* are thus treated almost as revelation, which means that, like revelation, understanding them inevitably requires the use of rationalism. Hence every reader of holy texts is a rationalist to a greater or lesser degree, even Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (p. 134).

Said embeds all of these teachings in his view of the philosopher as a great harmonizer and thus rejects earlier suggestions that al-Ghazālī's idea of politics is a purely authoritarian defense of *shari'a* rule. In his words, al-Ghazālī's Muslim society is one "whose goal is, in good Sufi fashion, closeness to God and whose social bonds aim at participating in God's own unity as al-Ghazālī contemplated it" (p. 136).

Although the author's language often lacks clarity, his book—particularly in its final two chapters—is coherent and meets, but does not excel, the standard of scholarly literature in our field. Said refers too often to existing English translations when he should have presented the original Arabic. His own translations are good,

except for a few places where a contemporary understanding of Modern Standard Arabic stands in the way. The *ṣuḥba bi al-ittifāq* that al-Ghazālī mentions in book 15 of his *Iḥyāʾ*, for instance, is not a “contractual friendship,” but rather a “friendship by accident” with neighbors or colleagues whose acquaintance we do not make by choice.

Said’s book is a valuable addition to the relatively small bookshelf on the political in al-Ghazālī’s oeuvre. Its main contribution lies in the author’s inclusion of texts and teachings that others involved in this debate have not yet considered. If more studies like this one appear, we may one day be able to offer a more contextualized analysis of Ashʿarite political theory and check whether claims such as Anjum’s, that an elitist attitude to politics led to a crisis, are justified.