

The Question of *Takfir* from the Sunni Perspective: A Theological and Jurisprudential Inquiry

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Abstract

This study examines the theological and jurisprudential dimensions of *takfir* the act of declaring a fellow Muslim a disbeliever from the perspective of mainstream Sunni. Drawing on classical sources, particularly the works of al-Ghazali, it delineates the definitional boundaries of *kufir* and the conditions under which *takfir* may be legitimately applied. Qualitative in nature, the analysis emphasizes the Sunni tradition's insistence on 'restraint' from *takfir*; the presumption of Islam, and the dangers of misapplication of *takfir* in contexts of interpretive disagreement (*ta'wil*). Central to the discussion is al-Ghazali's framework, including his five levels of existence and his requirement of definitive proof (*qat'i*), which collectively underscore that *takfir* must rest on an explicit denial (*takzib*) of prophetic teachings and incontrovertible rejection of what is known by necessity in religion (*ma'lum min al-din bi al-darurah*). The paper argues that sectarian polemics and interpretive errors (*ta'wil*) cannot serve as grounds for *takfir*. By situating *takfir* within the methodology of the *salaf*, the study demonstrates that Sunni thought categorically rejects indiscriminate *takfir* and upholds the sanctity of Muslim unity and doctrinal tolerance, provided that such tolerance does not contravene the essential definition of *kufir*.

Keywords: *Kufir; takfir; ahl al-qiblah; ta'wil; Sunni*

Introduction

The problem of *takfir* amongst Muslims namely, accusing other fellow Muslims as *kufir* or *kafir* is not a novel issue; in fact, it has always been a problem in Islamic societies in all centuries. It is also not new to many of the claims which in fact can be questioned that movements which have global political agenda such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), are terrorist groups, who believe in *takfir* and therefore declare war on anyone who disagree with their ideologies.

The same problem today that the Muslims are facing, where there is a kind of passion among some people, especially the *Ahbash* group, in *takfir* of those who do not share their views. This includes *takfir* to some of the classical as well as contemporary Muslim scholars to the extent of their claiming *kufir* of those who refuse to declare *kufir* to one who contradicts their views in matters or issues which are open to interpretation (*ta'wil*). This dangerous position is indeed not the position or *manhaj* of the *salaf*, or the *manhaj* of *Ahl al-sunnah* by consensus, and it threatens the unity of this blessed *ummah*, the *ummah* of the Prophet SAW of which it is a responsibility of Muslims at all times to preserve it.¹

Although the issue of *takfir* has been deliberately discussed by classical and contemporary Muslim scholars, it continues to disrupt and divide the unity of the Muslim *ummah*, who are unfortunately experiencing so many internal and external problems and weaknesses in many respects.² There is a need, therefore, to revisit and contextualize this issue and provide sound answers to young and contemporary generations so that they are not dragged by this unpopular stand against the majority of the *ummah*.

In classical times, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali discussed this question in a few of his writings. He was one of the Muslim theologians who addressed this theological problem at great length despite his antagonistic stance and aversion to dealing with it. He regarded most of those who have engaged with this problem as

¹ Gomaa, Ali, *al-Namadhiy al-Arba'ah min Hadyin Nabi fi al-Ta'ayush ma' al-Akhar*, (Giza: Dar al-Faruq, 2013), 5.

² Mohammad Qasim Rashidi, and Habiburrahman Rizapoor, "The Phenomenon of al-Takfir: Impacts on Unity within the Islamic Ummah," *Al-Tatawur: International Journal of Social Science* 1.3 (2023), 56-72.

being actually motivated by fanaticism and following whims rather than adherence to religion.³ Contemporary Muslim thinker, Hatem al-Awni also addressed this issue and warned against claiming *ahl al-qibla* as an unbeliever due to very minor disagreement or misunderstanding on certain theological questions which are clearly open to interpretation.⁴

Addressing this controversial issue, the paper tries to answer the following questions: 1) how *takfir* is defined and discussed by classical and contemporary Muslim scholars; 2) how *takfir* is viewed in Sunni classical texts and the warnings against *takfir*; 3) what are the arguments against *takfir*?; 4) how is the legal ruling on *takfir* deduced? The paper ends with a conclusion, maintaining the arguments against reckless *takfir*, insisting on the danger of involving oneself in this precarious yet important theological issue.

In answering the above questions, the paper employs textual analysis on some selected representative Sunni texts, specifically those of al-Ghazali's texts in theology to re-emphasize the mainstream Sunni position on this issue, stressing the general principle of Islamic jurisprudence in deducing a legal ruling that is also applied in *'ilm al-kalam*. Specifically, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, *Faysal al-Tafriqa*, and *al-Mustasfa* are the main sources for al-Ghazali's elucidation of the problem of *takfir*. Other literature related to this issue will also be consulted.

Definition of *kufr* and *takfir*

The term *kufr* from the verb *kafara* which means he veiled, or concealed, hid, or covered the thing.⁵ *Kufr* also signifies denial, or disacknowledged, the favour or benefit conferred upon him, or like to say "he was ungrateful or unthankful, or behaved ungratefully or unthankfully; contradiction of *shukr*.⁶ At the beginning of *fasl fi al-kufr*, al-Ghazali stated:

³ Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad* (Beirut: Dar al-Minhaj, 2008), 305.

⁴ Awni, Hatem bin 'Arif, *Takfir Ahl al-Shahadatayn* (Beirut: Namaa Centre for Research and Studies, 2016), 31.

⁵ Lane, Edward William, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic Book Centre, 1982), 2620.

⁶ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2620.

لعلك تشتهي أن تعرف حدّ الكُفر بعد أن تتناقض عليك حدود أصناف المقلّدين، فاعلم أن شرح ذلك طويل ومُدركه غامض، ولكنني أعطيتك علامة صحيحة فتطردها وتعكسها لتتخذها مطمح نظرك وترعوي بسببها عن تكفير الفرق، وتطويل اللسان على أهل الإسلام وإن اختلفت طرقهم ما دامو متمسكين بقول لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله صادقين بما غير مناقضين لها فأقول: الكفر هو تكذيب الرسول عليه الصلاة والسلام في شيء مما جاء به، وإيمان تصديقه في جميع ما جاء به.

Translation: Perhaps you may desire to know the definition of unbelief, after the definitions of the various categories of *muqallidun* have become contradictory for you. Know, however, that its full explanation is extensive and its comprehension subtle. Yet I have given you a sound criterion: apply it consistently and in reverse, so that it may serve as the focus of your reflection. By it you will refrain from declaring sects to be unbelievers, and from speaking harshly against the people of Islam so long as they hold fast to the words there is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God with sincerity and without contradiction to it, so I say: *kufir* is to deem anything the Prophet brought to be a lie, and *iman* is to deem everything he brought to be true.⁷

⁷ Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid, *Fasl al-Tafriqah*, in *Majmu'at Rasa'il al-Imam al-Ghazali* (Beirut: Dar al-fikr, 2008), 240; see also in *Faysal al-Tafriqa*, tr. Jackson Sherman A., *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 92; al-Iji, *al-Mawaqif fi 'Ilm al-kalam* (Beirut: Alam al-Kutub, n.d.), 388.

Al-Ghazali defined it in a very strict and sharp phrase that One who regards the Prophet as an untrue prophet or denies his message is therefore a *kafir* (unbeliever), and the consequence is to be condemned to Hellfire. Al-Ghazali elucidated that *kufr* can be known and confirmed through *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) and it is amongst the issues in *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence), and there is no room for rational proof (*dalil 'aqli*) in affirming *kufr*.⁸

The general principle amongst the Ash'arites says: "no one amongst the people of the *qiblah* (ahl al-qiblah) is considered an unbeliever for a sin that is not considered permissible."⁹ It is the consensus amongst the Muslim theologians and scholars that the pronouncement of *shahada* makes a person a Muslim and nothing can take him out of Islam as long as he does not reject any of the fundamental beliefs in Islam which are: belief in God, the Prophets, the Angels, the Books, the Day of Judgement and the Predestination, and also submitted to Islam as religion. In other words, the Muslim who pronounced *shahadah* and believed in all principles of Islamic faith never rejects any of the fundamental Islamic beliefs. If he commits sinful acts and dies without repentance (*tawbah*), he is a Muslim and he will not be permanently in the Hellfire (*laysa mukhalladun fi nar*). This means if he is to be punished with hellfire, he will not stay there forever.¹⁰ In a Hadith narrated by Anas RA that the Prophet SAW said:

يُخْرَجُ مِنَ النَّارِ مَنْ قَالَ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ، وَفِي قَلْبِهِ وَزُنْ دَرَّةٌ مِنْ حَبِّهِ.

Translation: Will be removed from the hellfire of the person who pronounces "there is no god but God and in his heart there is a good (faith, although it is) very small one."

(al-Bukhari)

⁸ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 305.

⁹ Al-Subki, Taj al-Din, *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyyah al-Kubra* (Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 1: 99.

¹⁰ Fodeh, Sa'id, *Hashiyat 'ala al-Khamsin fi Usul al-Din* by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (Kuala Lumpur: Kalam Research and Media, 2017), 220.

In a Hadith narrated by Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, the Prophet SAW said:

مَا مِنْ عَبْدٍ قَالَ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ، ثُمَّ مَاتَ عَلَى ذَلِكَ، إِلَّا
دَخَلَ الْجَنَّةَ .

Translation: There is no servant [of God] who says: There is no god but God, and then dies upon that, except that he will enter Paradise.

(al-Bukhari)

In this understanding, one who pronounces *shahadah* and never leaves Islam, even if he falls into the mistake of committing disobedient acts according to the *Shari'ah*, he is a Muslim as long as he does not reject any of what is known as necessary of the religion. Clearly, there is a distinction between one who fails to obey called *munafiq* in the case of grave sin and one who rejects the 'Message'. Similarly, one who does not reject any of the message brought by the prophet, but has a different understanding of the texts and interpretation (*ta'wil*), will not be categorized under '*takzib*' or reject what the Prophet brought.¹¹

Warnings against *takfir*

Perhaps the most important principle to be upheld concerning the problem of *takfir* is the sound Hadith narrated by Bukhari, that the Prophet SAW said:

If a man says to his brother, '*ya kafir*,' (oh disbeliever) then one of them will be guilty of it."

¹¹ Al-Ghazali's *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad* for his detailed explanation of categories of those who do not reject or 'deem what the Prophet brought to be a lie', but they deny or have a different understanding of matters related to the Day of Judgment, prophethood, and what is known as necessary in religion.

In another Hadith, the Prophet SAW said:

Whoever curses a believer is as if he has killed him, and whoever accuses a believer of disbelief is as if he has killed him.¹²

Takfir of the Muslim is one of the greatest sins as indicated in the Hadith, stating it to be tantamount to the guilt of ‘killing’, which is one of the *kaba’ir*.¹³ Al-Ghazali reminded not to make accusations and ill speaking (tatwil lisan ‘ala ahl al-Islam) of Muslims. The position of the mainstream Sunni or *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama’ah* is not a *takfir* position. Muslims who never reject the fundamental principles of Islamic belief, nor reject what is known as necessary in the religion, like fasting in Ramadan, pilgrimage to Makkah, paying alms, and so on, are Muslims for their *shahadah*. In the history of *Khulafa’ al-Rashidun*, the *salaf* was very careful in this problem. Upon being questioned on his position by *ahl al-Nahrawan* (Khawarij) who fought and finally killed him, ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (d. 40A.H./661A.D.) responded:¹⁴

سُئِلَ عَلِيٌّ عَنْ أَهْلِ النَّهْرَوَانَ أَشْرِكُونَ هُمْ؟ فَقَالَ: مِنَ الشَّرِكِ
فَرَّوْا، قِيلَ: أَفْمُنَافِقُونَ؟ قَالَ: إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ إِلَّا
قَلِيلًا. فَقِيلَ: فَمَا هُمْ يَا أَمِيرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ؟ قَالَ: إِخْوَانُنَا بَغَوْا عَلَيْنَا
فَقَاتَلْنَاهُمْ بِيَعْيِهِمْ عَلَيْنَا.

Translation: Ali was asked about the people of Nahrawan: Are they polytheists? He replied: From polytheism they fled. It was said: Then are they hypocrites? He said: In fact, the hypocrites remember God only a little. So it was said: Then what are they, O Commander of the Faithful? He replied, They are our brothers who transgressed against us, so we

¹² Awni, *Takfir Ahl al-Shahadatayn*, 31.

¹³ Awni, *Takfir Ahl al-Shahadatayn*, 31.

¹⁴ Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah* (Dar Ibn Kathir Dimashq, 2010), 7:489.

fought them because of their transgression against us.

Ali's stance clearly shows the position of the *salaf* who did not easily declare fellow Muslims who prayed towards the Qiblah as *kafir*. Hatem al-Awni contended that "one who accepted Islam with certainty is not leaving it but with certainty, too, and that the certainty of entering Islam is through testimony of *shahadatayn* or what takes their place."¹⁵ This is what al-Ghazali explained, "a decisive proof (al-qati'), that is, testimony of "there is no god but God" is *qat'i* and cannot be cancelled with other *dalil* or argument of the lesser degree than the latter,¹⁶ as it has to be of the same category in terms of the degree of *dala'il* in Islamic jurisprudence.

In *Faysal al-Tafriqah bayn al-Islam wa al-Zandaqah*, the issue of *takfir* is addressed at great length. He insisted that not all differences in understanding or interpretation (*ta'wil*) dismiss one from the fold of Islam, as this difference does not fall under the category of *takzib*. To him, many sects and schools of thought may fall into mistakes or doctrinal errors, but that does not necessarily mean they fall into *kufir*.¹⁷ He warned against rushing into *takfir*, emphasizing that preserving the blood of a Muslim takes precedence over exerting *ijtihad* to expel them from the fold of Islam. He said that:

The shedding of blood and the killing of those who pray towards the *Qibla* and declare, There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God, is dangerous, and the mistake of leaving a thousand infidels alive is less serious than the mistake of shedding a drop of a Muslim's blood.¹⁸

¹⁵ Awni, *Takfir Ahl al-Shahadatayn*, 75-76.

¹⁶ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 306.

¹⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 240.

¹⁸ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 305.

A Muslim also should not be declared an unbeliever unless he denies a fundamental principle of the religion that is known by necessity, such as the obligation of prayer, belief in the prophethood, or the prohibition of adultery, provided that certain conditions are met, and there are no impediments (such as ignorance or misinterpretation). This is called 'indirect denial' or not explicitly denies or rejects what is brought by the Prophet in general, but he rejects or claims that he does not know that five times a day prayers are obligatory upon Muslims, for example.¹⁹ Al-Awni, however, refines the conditions (*manat*) for this rejection by stipulating that it must be based on conscious denial, and it does indeed mean denying it without doubt, not out of ignorance.²⁰

In *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, al-Ghazali also maintained that disagreement over branches of jurisprudence or even over some subtle doctrinal issues such as the Divine Attributes and their interpretation (*ta'wil*) does not necessitate *takfir*,²¹ but rather falls within the realm of *ijtihad*. He said: "If someone errors in interpreting a verse or Hadith, we do not declare them an unbeliever, for errors in interpretation are forgiven for those who strive for *ijtihad*."²² Differences in understanding or interpretation, thus, do not lead to expulsion from Islam. He has criticized fanaticism (*ta'assub*) amongst some people who declare their opponents to be disbelievers for the slightest reason.²³ He states:

The Hanbalite [for example], brands the Ash'arite an unbeliever, claiming that the latter deems the Prophet to be a liar in his attribution of 'aboveness' (*fawq*) and (a literal) mounting of the Throne (*al-istiwa' 'ala al-'arsh*) to God. The Asha'arite brands Hanbalite an unbeliever, claiming the latter to an anthropomorphist (*mushabbih*) who deems the Prophet to be a liar when he says (about God), nothing is anything like Him. The Ash'arite

¹⁹ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 306.

²⁰ Al-Awni, *Takfir Ahl al-Shahadatayn*, 75.

²¹ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 306.

²² Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 305.

²³ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 305.

brands the Mu'tazilite an unbeliever, claiming that the Mu'tazilite deems the Prophet to be a liar when the latter informs us of the beatific vision (ru'yah Allah), and of God's knowledge, power, and (other) Attributes. The Mu'tazilite brands the Ash'arite an unbeliever, claiming that (the latter's) belief in the Divine Attributes constitutes (belief in) a multiplicity of eternals and a denial of the truth of what the Prophet taught in the way of monotheism (tawhid). And nothing will free you from the likes of this dilemma save a firm grasp of the meaning of 'deeming to be a lie (takzib)' and 'deeming to be a truth (tasdiq)', and the reality of how these designations apply to statements by the Prophet.

We should know that al-Ghazali, only in one book, decided to declare his opponents i.e. al-Farabi and Ibn Sina as *kafir* because of their belief in the eternity of the world, rejecting God's knowledge of the particulars (juz'iyat), and the resurrection of body and soul.²⁴ Disregarding this part of his understanding of *takfir* and *takzib* would render the discussion incomplete.

In sum, for classical Sunnis, formal declaration of *takfir* was understood to be immensely complex and difficult.²⁵ Murad called it one of the indicative qualities of fearful Islam, which is its enthusiasm for hurling anathemas and excommunications: the assassin's blade of *takfir*. He discussed it under the *tanfir*, i.e., repelling souls instead of attracting them.²⁶ Although the context of the discussion is on the Muslims in Europe, the message he conveys is consistent with the subject of this paper in its general term, in which the cause is not only a consequence of frustration and of failure to master emotion, but it represents also ignorance of *usul*, the jurisprudential and ethical methods by which appropriate Muslim behaviour is discovered in revelation.²⁷

²⁴ Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (Misr: Dar al-Ma'arif, n.d.), 307-310.

²⁵ Murad, Abdal Hakim, *Travelling Home: Essays on Islam in Europe* (Cambridge: The Quilliam Press Ltd., 2020), 132.

²⁶ Murad, *Travelling Home*, 120.

²⁷ Murad, *Travelling Home*, 132.

Proof and Arguments against *Takfir*

The definition of ‘kufr’ is to deem anything the Prophet brought to be a lie, and faith (iman) is to deem everything he brought to be true. In other words, ‘kufr’ is rejecting his message, and faith is accepting his message, and accepting his message means believing in him as a true Prophet. Therefore, one who accepts what the Prophet SAW reported on, they are not truly rejecting it. However, disputes regarding the reports often arise because some groups have different understandings and accuse each other of denial (takzib) when in reality, they affirm them in different ways. And what the Prophet has reported is called ‘existence’ (wujud).

Al-Ghazali categorized existence into five levels of existence (maratib al-wujud). Again, anyone who affirms or acknowledges the existence that the Prophet reported even at any of these five levels, cannot be considered ‘takzib’ of the message he brought. The five levels of existence are: 1) the real existence or ontological (dhati); 2) sensory (hissi); 3) conceptual (khayali); 4) noetic (‘aqli); 5) analogous (shabahi). He explained these five levels and cited a few examples (of the role they play) in figurative interpretation (ta’wil).²⁸

The Five Levels of Existence (Maratib al-Wujud)

Ontological Existence (al-Wujud al-Dhati)

This refers to the ‘real existence’ of things outside the senses and the mind. The senses and the mind, however, receive impressions of these things, which process is referred to as apprehension (*idrak*). This includes the existence of the heavens, the earth, animals, and plants. This, in other words, is ‘apparent reality’. Nay, this is the ‘existence’ known to most people.²⁹

In figurative interpretation (ta’wil), ontological existence requires no example. For this is existence according to the apparent meaning of the term, devoid of any figurative interpretation. This is simply real existence in the absolute sense, such as the existence of the Throne (‘arsh), the *kursi*, the seven heavens. These are understood according to the apparent meaning of these terms, devoid of any figurative interpretation, for these

²⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 239-243.

²⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 240.

corporeal entities exist in their own right, whether they are apprehended by the senses or the imagination or not.³⁰

Sensory Existence (al-Wujud al-Hissi)

This refers to things that acquire form through the visual power of the eye, while they have no existence in the world outside the eye. They exist, in other words, on the level of the senses and are particular to the one whose senses grasp them, no one else sharing their apprehension. For example, a sleeping person, or even a delirious person who is awake, may ‘see’ something, inasmuch as a physical image ‘appears’ to him. This thing, however, has no existence outside of this person’s senses.³¹

In figurative interpretation, an example of this sensory existence is what has been informed to us through the Hadith:

يُؤْتَى بِالْمَوْتِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فِي صُورَةِ كَبْشٍ أَمْلَحٍ فَيُذَبِّحُ بَيْنَ
الْجَنَّةِ وَالنَّارِ.

Translation: Death will be brought forth on the Day of Judgement in the form of a black and white ram (*kabshin amlah*) and slaughtered between Paradise and Hell.³²

Al-Ghazali interpreted the Hadith that the people who are present on the Day of Judgement whoever holds it to be a logically proven fact that death is an ‘accident or attribute’ (‘arad), and that it is impossible for accidents to turn into bodies, will interpret this report to mean that the people who are present on the Day of Judgement will see this event and believe that the slaughtered animal is ‘death’. This, however, will exist as a fact only to their senses, not in the outside world. And this also will bring them certainty that the ‘death’ is no longer a reality, since nothing can be expected of a thing once it has been slaughtered.

According to the Hadith, this brings disappointment to *ahl al-nar* – those who are condemned to Hellfire – as they hope to return to the world to be good persons and to ‘die’ again so that

³⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 241.

³¹ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 240.

³² Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 241. This Hadith narrated by al-Bukhari.

they can enter Paradise. The death of the ‘death’ thus made them despair, but on the other side, it brings joy to *ahl al-jannah* as this is the sign that they will stay forever in the Paradise. And for those for whom [looking at] the impossibility (of accidents turning into bodies) is not a logically proven fact, perhaps they will believe that death is actually transformed into a ram, after which it is slaughtered.

Another example brought by al-Ghazali in this sensory existence is what is narrated from the Prophet in the Hadith:

عُرِضَتْ عَلَيَّ الْجَنَّةُ فِي عَرَضِ هَذَا الْحَائِطِ.

Translation: Paradise was presented to me as on display on this wall.

(al-Bukhari)

Al-Ghazali’s explanation is that whoever holds it to be a logically proven fact that (whole) bodies do not intersect each other and that the smaller body cannot encompass the larger will interpret this statement to mean that Paradise was not actually transformed into this wall, but that the image of Paradise being in the wall presented itself to the Prophet’s senses, such that it became as if he was actually seeing this. And it is not impossible for a large thing to appear in a small body, as one sees the sky in a small mirror. This ‘seeing’, however, (by the Prophet) is different from simply imagining the image of Paradise; for there is a difference between seeing the image of the sky in a mirror, on the one hand, and closing one’s eyes and apprehending the image of the sky in the mirror through the use of one’s imagination, on the other.³³ This existence, according to al-Ghazali is a sensory existence.

Similarly, the slaughtered ram witnessed by the people on the Day of Judgement, and the image of Paradise which the Prophet saw it on the wall, is just a sensory experience. They do not exist outside of the senses of those who grasp that image.

³³ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 241.

Conceptual Existence (al-Wujud al-Khayali)

This refers to the physical image of things that are normally perceived through the senses in instances where these things themselves are removed from the reach of the senses. Thus, for example, even if you close your eyes, you can produce the image of an elephant or a horse in your mind, to the point that it would be as if you were actually seeing it. The image exists, however, in all its fullness, only in your brain, not in the outside world.³⁴ An example of this conceptual existence is the statement of the Prophet, narrated by ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Abbas:

كَأَنِّي أَنْظُرُ إِلَى يُونُسَ ابْنِ مَتَّى عَلَيْهِ عِبَاءُ تَانِ قَطَوَانِيَتَانِ يُلَيِّ
وَيُجِيبُهُ الْجِبَالُ وَاللَّهُ تَعَالَى يَقُولُ لَهُ: لَبَّيْكَ يَا يُونُسَ.

Translation: It is as if I see Yunus ibn Matta wearing two *Qatwani* cloaks, calling out labbayk (here I am, O Lord), and the mountains respond to him, while God, Exalted be He, says to him: Labbayka ya Yunus.³⁵

This is obviously a reference to an image unfolding in the Prophet’s imagination, since the actual existence of this event preceded the existence of the Prophet and had long passed into non-existence.³⁶ Thus, it was not in existence at the time (of the Prophet’s statement). Now, it would not be unreasonable to say that this image appeared to his sense (of sight) to the point that he came to ‘see’ it, just as a sleeping person sees images. However, his statement, ‘as if I were looking...’ gives the impression that ‘no real seeing took place’, rather, only something tantamount to seeing. Al-Ghazali brought this to represent an example for the conceptual existence. In sum, everything that appears to the imagination can conceivably appear to the eye, which is what qualifies this as (a species of) ‘seeing’. And according to al-Ghazali, what the mind can imagine cannot actually be disproved with certainty just by the ‘impossibility’ of its existence.³⁷

³⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 241.

³⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 242. See the Hadith in al-Hafiz al-Daylami.

³⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 242.

³⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 242.

Noetic Existence (al-Wujud al-‘Aqli)

This refers to instances where a thing possesses a functional nature (ruh), a reality (haqiqah), and a meaning (ma‘na), which the intellect (‘aql) receives as a pure meaning without fixing its form in the imagination (khayali), the senses (hiss), or in external existence.³⁸ For example, the hand which has a sensible and imaginable form, but it also has a meaning which is its reality, namely, the power to grasp. This power to grasp is the ‘noetic hand.’ Likewise, the pen has a physical image, but its true reality is that by which knowledge is inscribed. This is what the intellect receives without it being tied to the imagined or sensed form of reed, wood, or any other such material shapes that are apprehended by the imagination. An example of this existence is what was reported in the Hadith:

إن الله تعالى خَمَّرَ طِينَةَ آدَمَ بِيَدِهِ أَرْبَعِينَ صَبَاحًا.

Translation: God fermented the clay of Adam AS with His hand for forty mornings.³⁹

The degree of Hadith is considered weak by al-‘Iraqi and others, but al-Bukhari also narrated with a different expression that God has created Adam with His hand. The Hadith attributed to God a ‘hand’. Al-Ghazali said: “Those who hold it to be logically impossible for God’s hand to be a physical hand that can be apprehended through the senses or the imagination will deem this hand to be an immaterial, noetic hand. That is to say, they will affirm the essence, ipseity, and functional nature of ‘hand’ rather than its physical form.”⁴⁰

Analogous Existence (al-Wujud al-Shabahi)

This refers to instances wherein a thing itself does not exist, either as an image or in reality, either in the outside world or in the senses (hiss), the imagination (khayal), or the mind (‘aql), but something analogous to it that possesses some quality or attribute peculiar to

³⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 242.

³⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 242; the Hadith also mentioned by al-Haddad, Mahmud bin Muhammad in *Takhrij Ahadith Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din li al-‘Iraqi wa Ibn al-Subki wa al-Zubaydi* (Riyadh: Dar al-‘Asimat li’Nashr, 1987), Hadith 3680, 5: 2314.

⁴⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 242.

it exists.⁴¹ This type is easily understood according to al-Ghazali when he gives examples during the discussion on figurative interpretation (*ta'wil*). Examples of this would be 'anger', 'longing', 'joy', 'patience', or any of those sentiments attributed to God the Exalted in reports that have come down to us. For the reality of anger, for example, is the boiling of blood in the heart engendered by a desire to satisfy one's thirst for vengeance. And this inevitably entails suffering a flaw and experiencing a measure of pain. Thus, those who hold it to be logically impossible for God to experience anger, so defined, as an ontological, sensorial, conceptual, or noetic reality, will interpret anger to refer to some other attribute which produces the same result as anger, such as the will to punish.⁴² And while will may be unrelated to anger in terms of its essence, it does relate to an attribute that goes along with anger and to one of the effects that results therefrom, namely the infliction of pain.⁴³

These are the levels of figurative interpretation. These, then, are the levels on which things can be said to exist according to al-Ghazali. He insisted that "no one who acknowledges the existence of what the Prophet informed us of or on any of these five levels can be said to be categorically 'deeming what the Prophet brought to be a lie,'" they are in fact 'musaddiqin.' To him, the Sunni stance does not necessarily attribute *kufir* to those who interpret these meanings.⁴⁴ Al-Ghazali discussed in great detail issues related to *ta'wil*,⁴⁵ and the manner when the *ta'wil* is not permissible and may lead to *kufir* such as *ta'wil bi ghalabati al-zunun* in matters related to the fundamental beliefs, where it replaces the literal meaning (*zahir*) of the text without definitive evidence (*burhan qati'*).⁴⁶ Of this type, if it is not on matters related to the fundamental concepts, it is *bid'ah*. The basic condition of the right exercise of *ta'wil* is that there should be a definitive proof (*burhan*) showing the impossibility of the 'literal' *zahir* interpretation, and

⁴¹ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 243.

⁴² Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 243.

⁴³ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 243.

⁴⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 243.

⁴⁵ Izutsu, Toshihiko, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology* (Yokohama: Yurindo Publishing Co., Ltd, 1965).

⁴⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, 245-6. In his *Fadaih al-Batiniyyah*, *ta'wil al-batini* has been covered at length by al-Ghazali, and he considered it under the category of 'not permissible *ta'wil*.'

it should not contradict the key concept of the religion.⁴⁷ *Ta'wil* of this type, however, if it does more harm than good to the naive beliefs of the common folk, too, constitutes the sin of *bid'ah* not *kufir*.⁴⁸ But when the non-literal interpretation proposed is completely arbitrary and goes beyond the bounds of the Arabic language, it is of course, downright *kufir*, and he who proposes it is a *mukazzib*, that is, *kafir*.⁴⁹

The issue of *ta'wil* was equally discussed in his *iljam al-awam* where he elaborated the position or responsibility every Muslim should take when he hears about the Divine attributes in *mutashabihat* from the divine texts; they should adhere to *taqdis*, *tasdiq*, *al-i'tiraf bi al-'ajz*, *sukut*, *imsak*, *kaff*, and *taslim li ahl al-ma'rifah*.⁵⁰

Deducing Legal Rule from 'Definitive Proof' (Qat'i) in the Problem of *Takfir*

Al-Ghazali maintained that *kufir* is known and confirmed through revelation (*adillah al-sam'iyah*), the divine texts. He asserted – as it were – that it is amongst the issues in *fiqh*, and there is not for personal reasoning or rational proof (*dalil 'aqli*) to decide on *kufir*.⁵¹

Back to the definition of *kufir* according to al-Ghazali is “deeming anything the Prophet brought to be a lie.” Now, the implication of ‘kufir’ deeming anything that the Prophet brought to be a lie therefore, is referring to what has been told by the Prophet on his destiny in the Hereafter, namely, he will be condemned to Hellfire, and that *qisas* is not applied to one who killed him, etc.⁵² His position in *Usul al-fiqh* is identified or can be known based on either *usul al-shar'i* from consensus (*ijma'*) or revealed proof (*naql*), or *qiyas* which is based on the *asl*. He says:

⁴⁷ Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 33.

⁴⁸ Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 33.

⁴⁹ Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology*, 34.

⁵⁰ Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid, *Iljam al-Awam 'an 'Ilm al-Kalam* (Jeddah: Dar al-Minhaj, 2017), 49.

⁵¹ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 302.

⁵² Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 303.

We have established in the principles and branches of *Usul al-Fiqh* that any legal ruling claimed by a claimant must be known either by a fundamental source (asl) of the *Shari'ah* such as consensus (ijma'), transmitted report, or by analogy with a foundational principle (qiyas 'ala al-asl). Similarly, the judgment of a person being a disbeliever can only be determined by reference to a foundational source (asl) or by analogy with that source (qiyas 'ala dhalik al-asl).⁵³

He said, "the definitive foundational principle (qat'i) is this: whoever deeming what Muhammad brought to be a lie is a disbeliever that is, condemned to eternal punishment in Hell after death, and his blood and wealth are permissible (to take) in this life." However, this act of denying or rejecting occurs in different degrees (or levels). Al-Ghazali presented six levels or groups of rejections [takzib] to the Prophet's message, in which some of them are not really 'belying' or 'rejecting' in a true sense.⁵⁴

The first group is the Jews and the Christians and also people of other beliefs, such as the Magians and idol worshippers, whose rejection is indicated in the Qur'an in a clear manner; 2) The *Barahima* who have rejected the Prophethood; 3) Philosophers who reject the resurrection of the bodies in the Hereafter, the punishment of Hell and reward of Paradise, and those who believe that God does not know 'particulars', or the world is co-eternal with God; 4) those belonging to sects (firaq) who do not reject anything brought by the Prophet but they are wrong in their interpretation (ta'wil); 5) group of people who do not clearly reject the message brought by the Prophet, but rejected what is necessary to be part of the religion (ما يُعَلِّم من الدين بالضرورة); 6) groups that do not clearly indicate their rejection of what is known as a necessity in religion, but reject what is known to be authentic by consensus.

⁵³ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 303.

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 303-7.

For the fourth category, al-Ghazali contended that their positions are matters of *ijtihad* (juristic reasoning), because they do not reject the Prophet's message, but they are wrong in their *ta'wil*. Those in the fourth category are the *Mu'tazilites*, the *Mushabbihah*, and all sects except the philosophers. He insisted not to claim them to be 'disbelievers'. He presented proof (*dalil*) and arguments maintaining that mistakes in *ta'wil* are not justified for *takfir*.⁵⁵ Whatever arguments he presented, al-Ghazali insisted on holding to the principle Islamic jurisprudence on what is 'certain' with 'decisive proof' (*nas qat'i*) is "the disbelief of those who reject what is brought by the Prophet" as he said, "I was commanded to fight people until they say, there is no deity but God; when they say it, their blood and property are protected from me except by right."⁵⁶

Those who were wrong in their interpretation (*ta'wil*), they do not reject the messages of the Prophet at all. There is no decisive evidence according to al-Ghazali that mistakes in interpretation necessitate *takfir*.⁵⁷ Again, what is certain is that what prevents one from *kufir* is his saying of "there is no god but God" *qati'*, in which if to be dismissed then it should be replaced by another *qat'i*, the same category, and not with other *dalil* of the lesser degrees. In the principle of Islamic Jurisprudence, the *qat'i* cannot be obliterated but with the *qat'i*, and it cannot be cancelled with personal reasoning or views of the jurists. He asserted that:

وثبت أن العصمة مستفادة من قول: لا إله إلا الله قطعاً،
فلا يُرفع ذلك إلا بقاطع.

Translation: It has been established that legal protection ('*ismah*, i.e., immunity from *takfir*) is definitively derived from the utterance of *la ilaha illa Allah*. Therefore, this ruling cannot be annulled except by a counter-evidence of equal certainty (*qat'i*).

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 305.

⁵⁶ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 305.

⁵⁷ Al-Ghazali, *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*, 306.

In Islamic legal principles, it is not permissible to abrogate (naskh) a definitive and widely transmitted text (mutawatir) with analogy (qiyas), which is known through conjecture and independent reasoning at its various levels, whether it is clear or hidden *qiyas*. And this is what the majority has decided (ما قُطِعَ بِهِ)⁵⁸ (الجمهور). Therefore, it is not possible, in this context, to overrule the *qat'iy al-thubut* with opinions of jurists or religious scholars who issue a *fatwa* of *kufir* to those who disagree with them on certain theological issues which are not of the fundamental doctrine, or misunderstandings over the word 'illah (عِلَّة) – for example attributed to God in a sense it means 'ill which no Muslims in fact believe as such.

Al-Ghazali on *Takfir*, *Takdhib*, and the Limits of *Ta'wil*: Reading *Tahafut* in Light of His Mature Theology

A proper understanding of al-Ghazali's position on *takfir* requires close attention to the technical criterion he consistently employs, namely *takzib* (تكذيب) the act of declaring false something that the Prophet has brought. This principle, articulated explicitly in *Faysal al-Tafriqah bayn al-Islam wa al-Zandaqah*, governs al-Ghazali's theological judgments across his corpus and is essential for interpreting his conclusion in *Tahafut al-Falasifah*.

In the final pages of *Tahafut*, al-Ghazali famously declares al-Farabi and Ibn Sina guilty of disbelief (*kufir*) on three specific doctrinal issues: (1) their claim of the eternity of the world; (2) their denial of God's knowledge of particulars; and (3) their rejection of bodily resurrection in the Hereafter. Crucially, al-Ghazali does not present this judgment as a blanket condemnation of philosophy or philosophers as such, nor does he ground it in speculative disagreement. Rather, he explicitly limits *takfir* to those positions that, in his assessment, amount to *takzib* of matters transmitted by the Prophet with decisive certainty (*qat'i*).

⁵⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfa min 'Ilm al-Usul* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.), 125.

This methodological restraint is consistent with al-Ghazali's broader theological principle that error alone does not entail disbelief, and that even grave doctrinal mistakes may fall under the category of *bid'ah* or erroneous *ta'wil* rather than *kufir*. As he repeatedly emphasizes, the legal and theological protection ('ismah) conferred by the *shahadatayn* is established with certainty and cannot be annulled except by an equally certain proof. Thus, *takfir* is not triggered by rational speculation, philosophical method, or interpretive disagreement *per se*, but only when one explicitly denies or renders false what is known with certainty to be part of the Prophetic message.

This framework becomes clearer when *Tahafut* is read alongside *Faysal al-Tafriqah*, where al-Ghazali offers his most systematic discussion of the boundaries between Islam, heresy, and disbelief. There, he defines *kufir* succinctly as "declaring the Messenger to be false in anything that he brought," while *iman* consists in affirming everything the Prophet conveyed. Within this definition, al-Ghazali carefully distinguishes between rejection (*takdhib*), ignorance, and misinterpretation (*ta'wil*). Doctrines that contradict revelation only at the level of interpretation—without an explicit denial of the Prophet's truthfulness—do not justify *takfir*, even if they are erroneous or philosophically unsound.

The significance of this distinction is further reinforced in al-Ghazali's later work *Ijlam al-'Awam 'an 'Ilm al-Kalam*, which is widely regarded as among his final writings. In this text, al-Ghazali articulates a mature and cautious doctrine of *ta'wil*, emphasizing that interpretive speculation must be tightly regulated, particularly for non-specialists. He argues that unrestricted theological discourse and excessive *ta'wil* pose a danger to faith, not because interpretation is inherently illegitimate, but because it risks dissolving the authority of transmitted meanings and leading to implicit *takdhib* under the guise of rational explanation.

Importantly, *Ijlam al-'Awam* does not represent a retreat from al-Ghazali's earlier principles but rather a consolidation of them. His insistence on restraining *ta'wil* among the general public complements the argument of *Faysal al-Tafriqah*: both works aim to preserve the integrity of belief by preventing the erosion of decisive doctrines while simultaneously guarding against reckless

takfir. Read in this light, al-Ghazali's condemnation of specific philosophical doctrines in *Tahafut* appears not as an exception to his general restraint, but as a carefully delimited application of his criterion of *takdhib* to doctrines he judged to contradict matters known necessarily and decisively in religion.

Accordingly, al-Ghazali's legacy on *takfir* cannot be reduced to his polemic against the *falasifa*. Rather, it is characterized by a consistent methodological commitment: affirming the certainty of Islam through the *shahadatayn*, restricting *takfir* to unequivocal denial of Prophetic truth, and regulating *ta'wil* so that interpretive reason remains subordinate to revelation. This approach situates al-Ghazali firmly within the mainstream Sunni tradition, which views *takfir* as a grave juridical judgment, not a tool for intellectual exclusion or sectarian polemic

Conclusion

In the conclusion, it can be said that the question of *takfir* remains one of the most controversial and potentially divisive issues in Islamic theology. The mainstream Sunni tradition anchored in the principles of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* approaches *takfir* with profound caution, legal precision, and theological humility. The Sunni position embodied in the methodology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* and expounded by Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali emphasizes that *kufir* is defined as deeming to be false anything that the Prophet has brought, and *iman* is to affirm as true everything he has conveyed. Within this framework, errors in interpretation, doctrinal disagreements, or even grave sins do not constitute grounds for excommunication unless they meet the stringent criteria of denying what is brought by the Prophet and what is known with *tawatur* as part of religion.

The works of al-Ghazali and some other Sunni scholars underscore that *takfir* is not a tool for sectarian exclusion, but a juridical judgment reserved for cases of explicit and incontrovertible rejection of the core tenets of Islam. Moreover, al-Ghazali's insistence that the certainty of submission to Islam through the pronouncement of *shahadatayn* cannot be annulled except by an equally certain proof reflects a deep legal and theological wisdom. This approach safeguards the believer's faith from arbitrary excommunication and protects the Muslim ummah

from further division, disunity, and even bloodshed. Upholding the Sunni methodology requires resisting the impulse to anathematize and instead, fostering a culture of theological tolerance, intellectual rigor, and communal solidarity.

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