The Last Days of al-Ghazzālī and the Tripartite Division of the Sufi World

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī’s Letter to the Seljuq Vizier and Commentary

Jonathan AC Brown
University of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

Introduction

In 504AH/1110CE, the head of the Baghdād Niẓāmiyya college, ʿAlī Kiyā Harāsī, died, and Seljuq officials felt that the only suitable replacement would be the great scholar and former rector of the school, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī. Muḥammad b. Fakhr al-Mulk b. Niẓām al-Mulk, fully the third generation of his family to serve as Seljuq vizier and call al-Ghazzālī to teach, sent word to the aging Sufi master in his native city of Tūs. In his response, al-Ghazzālī hints that his end is near, giving the vizier one final lecture on the mystical path and the duties of just government before refusing the position. His excuses stem from his devotion to a strictly principled ascetic regime, his obligations to his disciples as well as logistical considerations. Like many of his personal correspondences, al-Ghazzālī wrote the letter in Persian. He himself dates it as 504AH, a year before his death.

The letter is a fitting end to a great career, as it draws on two traditions of which al-Ghazzālī was a master: Islamic mysticism and political counsel. In the letter’s vehement refusal to again associate with the government or participate in scholarly debate, we see how much al-Ghazzālī’s attitudes had changed from his days as an argumentative professor at the state-sponsored Niẓāmiyya. In the letter’s division of mankind into three tiers according to their desire to worship and encounter God, we see how al-Ghazzālī expresses the Islamic mystical idiom as it had emerged from the wider milieu of Muslim high culture. Representing a synthesis of various roles al-Ghazzālī had played in his life,
the letter weaves together the strands of ritual piety, mysticism and Islamicate political ideals. The letter is also a personal testament that sheds light on aspects of al-Ghazzālī’s life passed over in grand evaluations of his scholarship. We catch a glimpse, for example, of his family and the nature of his Sufi lodge in Ṭūs.

This article presents a translation of this letter as a window into the scholar’s concerns and worldview in the year before his death. Following the translation, this article places the concepts and terminology used by al-Ghazzālī within the historical contexts of Islamic political thought and mystical discourse. Specifically, it traces the history of a central motif in al-Ghazzālī’s letter: the Sufi tradition’s tripartite division of mankind into the three classes of ṭāmm, khāṣṣ and khāṣṣ al-khāṣṣ. Existing studies on Sufism have only treated these terms briefly, so the present commentary investigates their emergence and development within Islamic culture and mysticism through al-Ghazzālī’s time and in the wake of his seminal career.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) needs no introduction in the Muslim world, and very little for Western students of the religious tradition he did so much to shape. An orphan hailing from the Iranian city of Ṭūs, al-Ghazzālī rose to master the full range of Islamic sciences from law and theology to logic and philosophy. The works he composed on these subjects remain textbooks for Muslim scholars even today.

In 484/1091 the powerful and influential Seljuq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092) appointed this gifted and politically savvy thirty-two year-old scholar to the rectorship of the new Niẓāmiyya college in Baghdād. Al-Ghazzālī’s famous spiritual crisis occurred four years later in 488/1095, when he was plagued by existential and spiritual doubts so profound that he left his post at the Niẓāmiyya and went into seclusion. In an act that would eventually validate the previously suspicious Islamic mystical tradition and change the contours of Islamic orthodoxy, al-Ghazzālī turned to the path of introspection and spiritual discipline offered by Sufism. He spent the next eleven years cultivating this art in Damascus and other cities of the Levant. Al-Ghazzālī then established his own Sufi lodge in Ṭūs, where he instructed aspiring ascetics and wrote mystical and pietistic works such as Mishkāt al-anwār, “The Niche of Lights,” and Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn, “The Revivification of the Religious Sciences,” far from the din of public life.

Yet through persistent efforts, Fakhr al-Mulk, who had replaced his father as vizier after his assassination, convinced al-Ghazzālī to teach at the nearby Nishāpūr Niẓāmiyya in 499/1106. The scholar accepted but soon left his position to retire once again to Ṭūs and tend to his disciples. It was in this setting that he received the letter from Fakhr al-Mulk’s son Muḥammad, and there the scholar remained until his death.
Problems in the Text

Posterity has preserved al-Ghazzālī's letter extremely well in a variety of manuscript sources that have now been published. The most important of these are the famous Sufi biographical dictionary Rawdat al-jannāt of Muhammad Bāqir Khawaja Ansari (d. 1895CE), the collection of al-Ghazzālī's letters entitled Faḍā'il al-anām and the work Farāyed-e gheyāthī of Jalāl al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Aḥl (d. circa 870/1466). Khawaja Ansari's work preserves a copy of the letter originally taken from the Tārīkh-e estezhārī of Abū Bakr Shāshī (d. 507/1114), a contemporary of al-Ghazzālī. Faḍā'il al-anām is a collection of the great scholar's letters and sundry writings compiled by an anonymous relative and also dates from the years after his death. Finally, the document collection Farāyed-e gheyāthī, edited by Heshmat Moayyad, also contains a copy of the letter.

The text of the letter as assembled by Jalāl al-Dīn Homā'ī in his fascinating and valuable work Ghazzālī-nāme is based on the Faḍā'il al-anām and Tārīkh-e estezhārī manuscripts, but Heshmat Moayyad's edition also takes the Farāyed-e gheyāthī manuscripts into consideration. In addition, Homā'ī's version bears traces of significant interpolation within the manuscripts in an effort to explain challenging wording. Based on the principle of lexicus difficilior and on its wider scope, I have thus selected Moayyad's edition of the letter for translation.

These different versions of the letter differ about to whom al-Ghazzālī is addressing. Some manuscripts used in the Homā'ī edition identify him as one of Niẓām al-Mulk's sons, Mu'ayyid al-Mulk; but this is impossible since he had already died by the time the letter was written. Some manuscripts of Faḍā'el al-anām present the addressee as the then-deceased Niẓām al-Mulk or another of his sons, Aḥmad. The Farāyed-gheyāthī text used for this translation has yet another son of Niẓām al-Mulk, Fakhr al-Mulk, as the intended addressee. Fakhr al-Mulk had, however, also been dead for some time when the letter was composed in 504/1110–1. He was assassinated in 500/1106–7 after serving as the grand vizier of Malikshah's son Sanjar in Khorasan. The true addressee was most probably Fakhr al-Mulk's son, Muḥammad, who also served as Sanjar's vizier from 500/1106 to 511/1117, when he was dismissed and mulcted for over one million dīnārs in cash. It was Muḥammad b. Fakhr al-Mulk who, along with his uncle Aḥmad and another high government official, had been trying to convince al-Ghazzālī to return to teaching just before his death. The copyist of the Farāyed-e gheyāthī manuscript probably passed over the word “Muḥammad” when writing the addressee's name. This conclusion dovetails with al-Ghazzālī's invocation to God to “cleanse their spirits,” referring in all probability to Muḥammad b. Fakhr al-Mulk's martyred father and grandfather.
Text of the Letter

From the Pinnacle of souls, the Proof of Islam, Sultan of the World’s Scholars, Master of Unveiling and Inspiration, Advisor to Kings and Rulers, Guide of Noble Men at large, Imām Mūhammad Ghazzālī,9 to the Sultan of Viziers, Protector of the People, Khawāje [Mūhammad b.] Fakhr al-Molk b. Nezām al-Molk, may God comfort their souls and cleanse their spirits (asbāḥahum) with the pure waters of virtue (bizul al-afḍāl), concerning the refusal to head his madrase in Baghdād and some small moral advices.

Arrenga / Ḥosn-e Maṭlaʿ

In the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful.

God has said “to everyone there is a direction presided over by God, so vie in doing good deeds (khayrat)” (Qurʾān 2:148). God, may His truth be magnified, says that no man applies himself to a matter without it being his objective, his qeble. [O mankind, He says], devote yourself to that which is best and race to contend with one another in doing so. Now, those who have made some objective their qeble fall into three groups. The first are the vulgar masses (ʿavāmm) who are the people of heedlessness (ghaflat). The second are those elite (khavass) who are characterized by intelligence and perspicacity (keyāsat). The third are the elite of the elite (khāṣṣ al-khavass), who are the people of true perception and understanding (baṣīrat).

As for the people of heedlessness, their vision is limited to transient goods, for they think that the greatest blessings are the blessings of this world which one harvests by seeking wealth and prestige. They devote themselves to this quest, and wealth and prestige become the most beloved objects in their eyes (qorrat al-ʿayn). The Prophet, may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, said: “there are no two wolves let into a pen of sheep more destructive than the love of money and honor released into the faith of a believer (al-marʿ al-muslim).” So it is that these heedless people have not separated the wolf from its prey and have not properly distinguished between what is most dear to them and what brings them the greatest pain (sokhnat al-ʿayn). Thus have they attached dignity to the path of despondency. Of this misfortune the Prophet once said, “Woe unto the slave of the dīnār, woe unto the slave of the dirham.”10

As for the second group, they are the elite who have grasped [the nature of] the world through intelligence and perspicacity and are sure of the superiority of the afterlife. The verse “the life to come is better and more enduring” (Qurʾān 87:17) has manifested itself to them. It does indeed take some intelligence to realize that eternity is better than obliteration and annihilation (fanāʾ),11 so they turn their faces from the world and make the hereafter their qeble. And although these people are at fault for not seeking
only the Absolute Good, they have at least contented themselves with something better than this earthly world.

As for the third group, the elite of the elite who are the people of truly perceptive understanding, they realize that everything that is possessed of good cannot be the ultimate good. Such things are therefore transitory, and no discerning person is pleased with things that fade (al-āqil lā yuhbību al-āfilīn, based on Qurʾān 6:76). They realize that this world and the next are both created, and they understand that the best aspects of these two realms are the twin pleasures of eating and conjugal intercourse, both of which animals also enjoy. This could never be a sufficient station [for them], for the Lord and Creator of the world and the hereafter is greater and more lofty. For [the elite of the elite] the verse “and God is better and more enduring” (Qurʾān 20:73) has become manifest and they have chosen a place in “an assembly of truth in the presence of an omnipotent Lord” (Qurʾān 54:55), for “the companions of the garden are ever occupied with joy” (Qurʾān 36:55). Indeed the truth of “there is no deity but God” (lā ilāha illā Allāh) has revealed itself to them, and they have realized that any person who is bound to something, he is the slave of that object, and it becomes his god and object of worship. This is why [the Prophet] said “woe to the slave of the dirham.” Everyone whose objective is something other than God most high, his profession of God’s transcendental unity (tawḥīd) is neither complete nor free from subtle acts of granting other than God that place reserved for God alone (sherk-e khāfī). This group has therefore divided all existence into two opposing groups: God and other than God. They hold up these two groups against each other, like the two weighing pans of a balance, making their innermost heart (del) its measure (lesān-e mizān). When they see their hearts, out of their very nature and obeisance [to truth] leaning towards the best side, they conclude that “indeed the scale of good deeds is more heavy.” If they see it tilting away from that side they conclude “the scale of bad deeds is heavier.” They have realized that whatever does not pass this test will not pass the test on the Day of Judgment. And just as the first level were mere vulgar masses (ʿavāmm) compared to the second, so is the second group mere rabble (ʿavāmm) in relation to the third level; they do not understand their words and do not grasp the true meaning of gazing at the face of God most high.

Narratio

Since the Grand Vizier (ṣadr-e vezārat), may God most high grant him the loftiest of stations, calls me from a lower position to a higher one, I also call him from the “lowest of the low” (asfal al-sāfilīn; Qurʾān 95:5) to the “highest of the high” (dīlā al-īliyyīn). The lowest station is that of the first group, and the highest of the high is that of the third group. The Prophet, may God’s
peace and blessings be upon him, said “he who treats you with beneficence, repay him with equal treatment.” Yet I find myself incapable of such reciprocation and am without the means to reply in kind. [The vizier should] make preparation to move with all due haste from the depths of the masses (hadid-e dareje-ye 'avâmmi) to the acme of the elite of the elite (begâ'-e [sic!] dareje-ye khavâs-e khavâsâs). For the roads from Tūs and Baghdâd and any land to God’s Truth most high (Haqq-e ta’âlâ) are all one. None is shorter or longer than the others. As for the path from this position [that you are offering me], it is [also] no better. In truth, he should know that if he should omit even one religious obligation (fara’ed), commit any major sin (kabâ’er) from amongst those things that the sacred law has forbidden, or enjoy one peaceful night when in all of his realm there is one person suffering injustice, regardless of what excuse he might proffer, his station would be none other than the lowest, and he would be counted amongst the people of heedlessness. “Those heedless ones, certainly they are the losers in the Hereafter” (Qur’ân 11:22). I ask God most high to awaken [the vizier] from the sleep of heedlessness so that he might look to the morrow before his fate escapes his control.

Dispositio

Having come to the subject of the Baghdâd madrase and [my] excuse (‘odhr) for desisting from obeying the direction of the Grand Vizier, it is that nothing eases the inconvenience [of moving away] from [one’s] homeland and place of refuge except the prospect of an increase in either faith or worldly advantage. As for worldly increase, praise be to God’s grace, it has been removed from [Ghazzâlî’s heart]. Even if Baghdâd were brought to Tūs with no movement on [Ghazzâlî’s] behalf, its affairs fully arranged and given to Ghazzâlî as property, his heart would not heed it. For recognizing this [temptation] would be the fate of those weak in faith. My remaining days would be disturbed and no affair would come easily to me. As for an increase in faith and religion, by my life this does warrant some seeking and movement on my part. [Indeed,] there is no doubt that to inundate oneself in knowledge would be much easier there [in Baghdâd], that the means to do so would be much more elaborate and that the number of students there would be much greater. In the face of all this increase, however, there are excuses and religious reasons that would fall into ruin, such that this increase could not compensate for [so great] a loss.

One reason is that there are one hundred and fifty students here busy with learning and living in pious abstinence (motavarre’). Transferring them [to Baghdâd] and providing means for them [there] would not be feasible. The hope of having more students in another place is no license to neglect these students or cause them harm. This would be equivalent to someone who was
responsible for the care of ten orphans leaving them lost and hungry out of the hope that he could tend to twenty orphans somewhere else.

The second excuse is that, at the time that the noble martyr Nezām al-Molk, may God sanctify his soul, called me to Baghdād, I was alone and without family or relations. Presently, because I have such relations and children, moving them, neglecting them or injuring their hearts would likewise not be feasible.

The third reason is that since I attained the grave of God’s Intimate (khalil) [Abraham, in Hebron], may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, in the year 489 [AH] (it has been almost fifteen years since then,) I have made three oaths that I have so far fulfilled. The first is that I not accept any Sultanic money; the second is that I not call on any sultans; and the third is that I not engage in any scholarly debate. If I were to break this oath my heart and days [vaqt] here would be greatly disturbed and no religious act would be accomplished for me. In Baghdād there is no escaping debates, and one cannot avoid visiting the Caliphal Abode (dār al-kebelāfe). In that period since I returned from Syria (Shām) I have not paid a visit to Baghdād, have surrendered myself to not holding any position and have been in reclusion. Should I take some job I would not be at peace, for my soul would not be free denying such reclusion, and this would have its consequences.

Finally, the greatest excuse is that of livelihood. If I do not accept any of the sultan’s money, and since I have no property or means of sustenance in Baghdād, the path of livelihood would be closed off to me. Furthermore, this trifling property here in Tūs, which suffices my children only after our excessive efforts at parsimony and contenting ourselves [with what we have], would not prove sufficient in our absence from this place. These are all religious excuses that are very significant to me, although the majority of people would consider these matters quaint.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, since [my] time has drawn long (dour dār dar keshīd), it is time to bid farewell rather than travel to Baghdād. It is expected from one so bounteously endowed with good character (makārem-e akblāq) [like the Grand Vizier] that he accept these excuses. Also, he should suppose that if Ghazzālī came to Baghdād and then the term [set for his life] set by God (Haqq), may He be glorified and elevated, also came to pass, plans would again need to be made for [finding] another teacher. [The vizier] should consider as if this [had happened] today. Peace be unto him who has followed God’s guidance. May God (Ẓād) most eminent adorn the universal minister (ṣadr-e jahān) with the essential truth of faith (ḥaqīqat-e īmān) which lies beyond faith’s outward form (ṣūrat-e īmān) that he might become one of its
Knowers. Praise be to God for His favors, and may His blessings be upon the Prophet and his family. May God endow us with a loathing for the Abode of Delusion (dâr al-gbûrûr) and assign us to the Abode of Bliss (dâr al-sûrûr) by His mercy and the breadth of His generosity, indeed He is the most merciful of those who grant mercy.

Genre of the Letter: Mirrors for Princes

At the time al-Ghazzâlî composed this letter, classical Islamic political writing had already reached its full maturity. Just as al-Mâwardî’s (d. 450/1058) al-Ābkâm al-ṣuṭlānîyya formulated a coherent Islamic political theory from a juridical point of view, the more practical “Mirrors for Princes” genre fit the ancient Sassanian notion of just rule into an Islamic idiom. Al-Ghazzâlî and his patron, the inimitable vizier Niẓâm al-Mulk, both wrote exemplary works in this genre, combining the language of Islamic piety and holy law with the practical political advice inherited from the Pahlavi Andarz-nâme (advice literature). This Persian literature probably first entered the Islamic tradition in the late Umayyad period through translations of texts like the Ṭabd Ardashûr.16 Other Persian texts were later translated by Ibn al-Muqaffâ‘ (d.c. 139/756) in the early Abbasid period.17 The syncretic nature of this genre and its synthesis of Near Eastern traditions is no more evident than in Niẓâm al-Mulk’s eclectic Siyâsat-nâme, which cites the political wisdom of Alexander the Great, Sassanian kings and the Companions of the Prophet within a few pages.18

Also steeped in Persianate, Hellenistic and Islamic traditions, al-Ghazzâlî penned the Naṣîbat al-mulûk, “The Advice of Kings,” in which he dubbed the sultan the “Shadow of God” and called upon the ruler to preserve the famous Circle of Justice. In this classical Persian ideal of government, a pious monarch strengthens his dynasty by maintaining the perfect balance between taxation and military spending under a consummately just eye.19 For both ruler and the ruled, a fear of God and devotion to justice are requirements for prosperity.20 Works like the Siyâsat-nâme and Naṣîbat al-mulûk express this ideal of a just ruler through stories that portray kings like Sultan Mahmûd of Ghazna engaged in their daily prayers and personally tending to the most minor infractions of the law.21 Al-Ghazzâlî’s letter to Muḥammad b. Fakhr al-Mulk reiterates these motifs by reminding the vizier to fulfill his religious obligations (farâ’îd) and warning him against allowing any injustice to appear in his realm.

In al-Ghazzâlî’s time it was not novel for scholars to encapsulate such advice in letters to viziers. An earlier scholar and Sufî named Abû al-Ḥasan al-Bûṣtî (d. 478/1085–6)22 had written Niẓâm al-Mulk reminding him of his duties and even quoting a similar letter written to the Buyid vizier al-Ṣâhîb b. ‘Abbâd (d. 385/995) a century earlier.23 In the Faḍâ’il al-anâm alone we have twelve letters that al-Ghazzâlî wrote to viziers and five to military commanders.24 Like
his letter to Muḥammad b. Fakhr al-Mulk, these correspondences address specific and often banal topics. Even when addressing the Seljuq sultan himself, however, al-Ghazzālī does not hesitate to draw from the Mirrors for Princes genre with advice like “today it has reached such a point that [for a ruler] one hour of justice is the equivalent of a hundred years of worship.”

**Khāṣṣ and Āmm: The Elite and Commoners in Islamic Intellectual and Political Culture**

Al-Ghazzālī’s choice to divide human beings into the three distinct levels of āmm, the vulgar masses; khāṣṣ, the elite or the elect; and khāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ, the select elite of the elite, draws on an elitist strain in Islamic social and intellectual history that has its origins in late Umayyad and early Abbasid times. The terms āmm (or āmma, pl. āwāmm), meaning “general, common, or plebian,” and khāṣṣ (or khāṣṣa, khusūṣ, or pl. khawāṣṣ), meaning “specific, elite, or select” are ubiquitous in Islamic sciences and literature. Like other terms such asasl and farā, the pervasive āmm / khāṣṣ distinction binds together the disparate and stratified branches of the Islamic sciences as well as broader expressions of Islamic civilization as a whole. In an instance of what one might term the “logocentrisme” of Islamic thought, words such as khāṣṣ and āmm serve as conceptual touchstones wherever they appear, their specific connotations and technical implications shifting in context while their general import ties both text and reader to the united worldview that defines Islamic civilization. Thus, Muslim jurists speak of naṣṣ āmm and naṣṣ khāṣṣ in the Qurʾān and hadith, alluding to legal injunctions that should be interpreted as either broadly applicable or specific to certain persons or circumstances.

The lands belonging to rulers from the Abbasid caliphs to the Ottoman sultans were deemed khāṣṣ, or private, and al-Ghazzālī addresses another letter to the Seljuq ruler with both a public (āmm) and a private (khāṣṣ) request. The former is his plea on behalf of the drought-stricken inhabitants of his native Țūs, while the latter cautions the sultan to ignore petty accusations leveled against the scholar by his rivals. A ruler’s khāṣṣa constituted his court or elite retinue, while the āmm were the masses he ruled.

Unlike other salient Islamicate terms such as asl and farā, however, āmm and khāṣṣ do not originate in the Qurʾān. Rather they make their first appearance in a religious or legal context in the hadith literature that developed in the first century and a half of Islamic history. There the two words generally denote one’s familiars versus the general public. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) transmits a report in which khāṣṣa simply means “familiars” or “friends and family.” In the Sunan of Ibn Mājā (d. 273/886) we find Anas b. Mālik quoting the Prophet identifying God’s people (ahlīn) as “the people of the Qurʾān, the people of God and His intimates.”
In the Kitāb al-zubd wa al-raqāʾiq of ʿAbdallāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), the author quotes one Bilāl b. Saʿd (d. between 105–125/724–743) as saying “indeed disobedience to God done covertly only harms those directly involved (khāṣṣatābā), but if it is made public and not rectified it harms the general public (al-ʿāmma).” Decades earlier, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) narrated a hadith in which the Prophet instructs his followers to be merciful, adding “this is not the mercy of one of you towards himself, his progeny or his familiars (khāṣṣatubu), but rather towards the people at large (al-ʿāmma). . .”

This original juxtaposition of “familiars” versus “general public” also appeared in a political context during the early second century of Islamic history. Just as this milieu produced Prophetic hadith in which devout believers are “God’s intimates (khāṣṣatubu),” so does the historian al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956) tell of the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s (d. 101/720) personal retinue (khāṣṣa). The concept of familiarity or closeness was clear in these political circumstances. For example, Yazīd b. al-Muḥallab (d. 104/720–1) is described as having enjoyed “intimacy (khāṣṣa)” with the Umayyad caliph Sulaymān b. ʿAbd al-Malik (d. 99/717), who regularly sat this advisor next to him on his throne. The influential political treatise ʿAbd Ardashīr is replete with juxtapositions between the khāṣṣa, the ruler’s ministers and junta, and the governed masses (ʿāmma). By the time of Niẓām al-Mulk, khāṣṣa was an indispensable term for the ruler’s ministers and elite retinue.

As the early pietism and nascent scholarly culture of the first Islamic century matured into the cosmopolitan Near Eastern atmosphere of the Abbasid period, khāṣṣ and ʿāmm developed from the distinction between familiar and general to the dichotomy between elite and common. This transition was natural for scholars and litterateurs whom the state often either patronized or employed as secretaries and judges. Sophistication and proximity to the state thus went hand in hand. The scion of a noble Persian family and an advisor to the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (d. 158/775), Ibn al-Muqaffaʾ endows the terms with the notion of a small, sophisticated elite as opposed to the uncultured masses. Al-Jāḥiṣ (d. 255/869), who wrote many of his letters for the political elite, composed a treatise describing the characteristics of these commoners in Abbasid society (Risāla fī waṣf al-ʿawāmm). Al-Jāḥiṣ’s younger contemporary, the judge Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), adorned his letters with assertions such as “scholars would prohibit the masses (al-ʿawāmm) from asking too many questions, [since] to be presented with something of which one is ignorant is safer than being presented with something of which one has knowledge.” This shielding the uneducated from knowledge that might harm them can be traced back as early as Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) in the mid second/eighth century.
Later scholars carried this distinction to more theoretical levels. In his division of the different fields of knowledge, the philosopher Abū al-Ḥasan al- Npgsql d. 381/992) explains that only the educated and gifted khāṣṣa should learn or practice the sciences (ṣina‘āt), guiding the blissfully ignorant ‘āmm. This would remain a central usage of khāṣṣ and ‘āmm until the modern period. Administrators and viziers looked down upon the vulgar masses and emphasized the need to guide them properly. Niẓām al-Mulk, for example, describes the licentious and disgraceful sexual communism of the Mazdakean heresy as appealing especially to the ‘awāmm.

Al-Ghazzālī was very much a product of this stratified intellectual culture. Debate has raged over whether or not the famous scholar cultivated esoteric doctrines that he hid from all but his finest students. Indeed his writings are pregnant with suggestive statements such as "you have wrapped on a door opened only to the most discerning scholars . . . and the breasts of those free [souls] are the tombs of secrets." Furthermore, he cites adages such as “revealing the Secret of Lordliness is disbelief.” The scholar Lazarus-Yafeh argues that this debate arises from a misunderstanding of al-Ghazzālī’s approach to teaching and Islamic religious discourse in general. Knowledge and higher truths were always the purview of the elect, who in turn guided the masses only to that knowledge which benefited them in this world and the hereafter. Thus throughout his works al-Ghazzālī repeatedly quotes maxims such as “speak to people according to their minds' ability.” He states in his Ḥiyā‘ ulūm al-dīn that a scholar should not expose commoners to an esoteric understanding of the Qur’ān, for “his bonds as a common man [to religion] would be loosened, and it would not be easy to bind him in the bonds of the elite (khawāṣṣ).” Al-Ghazzālī’s contempt for the ignorance of the masses sometimes expresses itself palpably in his writings. In his Mi‘yar al-ilm, for example, he criticizes scholars who have allowed themselves to be deceived by false arguments as if they were “stupid commoners” (al-‘awāmm al-aghbiya‘).

The Tripartite Division of the Sufi World: ‘āmm, khāṣṣ and khāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ

Al-Ghazzālī’s use of ‘āmm, khāṣṣ and khāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ to divide mankind into three classes in his letter represents an expression of a specifically Sufi worldview. Yet the role of these terms in Islamic mystical discourse has not received significant attention. There has been no attempt to trace their emergence as a framework for establishing a tripartite division of society with Sufi mystics at its apex. M.A.J. Beg’s otherwise excellent article on ‘āmma and khāṣṣa in the Encyclopaedia of Islam does not venture into the Sufi genre. Nikkie Keddie’s insightful article on the elitist tendencies of Islamic intellectual
and religious culture has too broad a scope for a detailed investigation of the link between these terms and Sufism. If Sufi glossaries produced from within the Islamic tradition include the terms, they often give them either cursory or anachronistic definitions. Furthermore, the many modern studies of Islamic mysticism are often too general to focus on such obscure issues, and even the books’ indices of technical terms frequently omit khāṣṣ, ‘āmm and all their derivatives.

We find no trace of any religious usage for khāṣṣ and ‘āmm amongst the early Muslim ascetics (zuhbād) to whom later Sufis would look as forbearers after Sufism had emerged as a distinct tradition with its own technical lexicon. In early ascetic works such as material attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ibn al-Mubārak’s Kitāb al-zuhd wa al-raqā’tiq and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s Kitāb al-zuhd, the terms appear very rarely, only denoting the general juxtaposition of familiars with the unknown. They possess no spiritual dimension. Even in the mid third/ninth-century writings of the pivotal Sufi al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) the terms have no specifically spiritual significance. Although he was an important ascetic, al-Muḥāsibī uses the terms in the same manner as mainstream scholars of the Abbasid period; khāṣṣ and ‘āmm simply denote the elite minority and common masses in Muslim society.

Most of the early figures associated with Sufism left no written works. For ascetics like Rābi’ā al-`Adawiyya (d.c. 185/801), Bishr al-Ḥāfi (d. 227/841)) and Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161–3/777–80), we only have isolated sayings preserved in later works such as Muḥammad al-Sulami’s (d. 412/1021) Ṭabaqāt al-sūfīyya, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī’s (d. 437/1045) Risāla, Abū Nu‘aym al-İṣbahānī’s (d. 430/1038) Hīlyat al-aqwa’iyā, `Abdallāh al-Harawī’s (d. 481/1089) Ṭabaqāt al-sūfīyya, and Farīd al-Dīn `Aṭṭār’s (d. 586/1190 or 627/1230) Ṭadbkerat al-aqwa’iyā. The first figure they cite as employing khāṣṣ and ‘āmm in a technical sense is al-Muḥāsibī’s contemporary Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 246/861) in the mid third/ninth century. He is quoted as saying “the ṣawāmm repent for sins, but the khawāṣṣ repent for heedlessness (ghafla).” In this statement, we see the first use of these terms to distinguish between laymen and a special Sufi caste. Margaret Smith has recognized Dhū al-Nūn’s pioneering role, crediting him with the elaboration of the different stations (maqāmāt) along the mystical path. After him, the terms khāṣṣ and ‘āmm divided Sufi mystics from religious society at large and became prevalent in Baghdād among the disciples of al-Junayd (d. 298/910), the epicenter of classical Sufism, and in the Khorasan school of mysticism.

The khāṣṣa came to correspond to those elect who devote themselves to the mystical path and whom God has initiated into its secrets. The ‘āmma consists of the laymen for whom the basic requirements of faith and the sacred law (sbarī’ā) suffice. For the great mystic Ibn Maṇṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), the
khāṣṣa are “the professional mystics” as opposed to the uninitiated ‘āmma.59 While the masses are separated from God’s reality, the elect enjoy a different relationship with the Divine and are exposed to its majesty. Only the elect experience the bliss of encountering God.60 The famous Sufi master al-Qushayrī writes in his Risāla that “the masses (‘awāmm) are shrouded by the veil [between man and God], while [God] is constantly revealed (tajallā) to the elect (khawāṣṣ).”61 The elect thus understand God’s commands in the light of their desire to know Him and devote themselves exclusively to His worship. The ‘awāmm obey God out of fear of divine retribution and hellfire, while the elect heed God for His sake alone.62 In Dḥū al-Nūn’s statement about the repentance of the khawāṣṣ, so intent are these elect on constantly remembering God and so close is their tie to Him that even a moment’s neglect is tantamount to a sin in their eyes. Abū Tālib al-Makkī (d. 382/993 or 386/996), whose comprehensive Sufi manual Qūt al-qulūb had a large impact on al-Ghazzālī, uses ‘āmm and khāṣṣ in essentially the same manner.63

It remains to be seen whether mysticism borrowed the khāṣṣ / ‘āmm bifurcation from political culture. Regardless, in both realms the usage stemmed from the general import that the terms displayed in the hadith literature. Sufis expressed khāṣṣa in its abstract meaning of intimacy with God through the term kbusūṣīyya, a word equated with sainthood (wilāya). The notion of personal familiarity attached to khāṣṣ in hadith literature was the root of wilāya and kbusūṣa, both of which portrayed the Sufis as God’s inner circle. In his work Khatam al-wilāya the Sufi master al-Ḥakīm b. ‘Ali al-Tirmidhī (d. 285/898 or 318/930) therefore devotes a chapter to the prophets and God’s intimates (khāṣṣa).64 In his exegesis of the Qurʾān, al-Sulamī ties khāṣṣa and wilāya together, noting the ways in which God has elected (kbusṣa . . . bi-khāṣṣatībi) the Prophets, saints (awliyā’) and the true believers.65 Al-Junayd explained these saints’ relationship to the masses. In one of his letters he identifies his addressee as one of those who know God (ahl maṣrifatībi) and whom God has elected (kbusṣa) by granting him a true understanding of the Qurʾān. Al-Junayd then urges him to guide the ignorant and misled masses.66 In reciprocation for this direction, the major early Sufi authority Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) asserts that all people must believe in the existence of the spiritual elect (kbusūṣīyya).67 Two centuries later al-Ghazzālī adds that, along with basic religious obligations, the ‘awāmm should devote themselves to supporting the elect so that these sages could seek true knowledge.68

The emergence of khāṣṣ and ‘āmm in the budding Sufi lexicon was part of a major transition occurring in Sufism. Dḥū al-Nūn’s teachings introduced the notion of gnosis, or an elevated knowledge of God that revealed His oneness to His elite devotees.69 At this time mystics such as al-Junayd and Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 261–4/874–8) began seeking direct experience with the
Divine and the annihilation of the self before God’s transcendental unity. This ecstatic drive to know God in the most immediate sense was a departure from the sober piety and rigorous religious discipline found amongst earlier ascetics in works like Ibn al-Mubarak’s *Kitāb al-zuhd*. Marshall Hodgson observed that in this period “a new dimension was being added to the expectations mystics had of what mystical experience could lead to.” From the material that has survived it appears that at this time Dhū al-Nūn first elaborated the tripartite division of people in relation to their knowledge of the Divine. ‘Attār quotes him as saying:

Knowledge exists on three levels: the first is the knowledge of God’s oneness (*tawhīd*), which is for the masses of believers (*ʿammme-ye mo’menin*); the second is the knowledge of compelling argument and elucidation (*bōjat va beyān*), which the wise, cultured and scholarly possess; the third is the knowledge of the attributes of the Absolute Unicity (*vabdāneeyyat*), which is the dominion of the saints (*ahl-e velāyat*).

‘Attār was writing nearly four hundred years after Dhū al-Nūn, whose aphorisms are preserved only by later authors. The evidence from ‘Attār’s *Tadhkerat* alone thus does not suffice for dating the emergence of the tripartite division with Dhū al-Nūn. The Egyptian Sufi’s student, Sahl al-Tustarı, however, echoes this tripartite distinction in his surviving exegesis of the Qur’an. There he divides men into the masses of the believers (*ʿammat al-mu’minin*), the ‘*ulamā*’, and finally the Prophets and the righteous (*siddiqūn*). Sahl’s younger contemporary al-Junayd’s threefold division of religious men into the ritually devoted who worship God out of fear, the ascetics, and finally the Sufi mystics strengthens evidence for the emergence of the tripartite division by this time.

After Dhū al-Nūn’s time the tripartite division acquired a central role in Sufi discourse and crystallized around three terms. In addition to the ‘*āmm* and *khāṣṣ* distinction between the masses and the more devoted ascetics, the third level stemmed from Hodgson’s “new dimension” of a direct experience of the Divine. Like the early Christian Gnostic groups of the second century CE that divided humanity into three tiers, this third level was one of gnosis (*ma’rifā*), whose practitioners (*ʿarifūn*) sought an immediate knowledge of God. One of al-Junayd’s associates, Abū al-Hasan al-Nūrī (d. 295/907) thus groups men’s hearts into three tiers, with the third and most pious that of the gnostics (*ʿarifūn*). In his early fifth/eleventh century work *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, al-Sulamī quotes Sahl as dividing the trials and pitfalls (*fitan*) facing believers into the three levels of the ‘*āwāmm*, *khawāṣṣ*, and *ʿarifūn*. Several decades later al-Qushayrī records a statement detailing these three increasingly demanding stages of asceticism. For al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī’s
contemporary Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī, the term ‘ārif served as a mainstay for denoting the true Sufis.79

The concept of gnosis continued to define the topmost level in the Sufis’ tripartite division of mankind, but in the late third/early tenth century another term entered mystical discourse and superseded ‘ārif as the designation for man’s ultimate relationship with the Divine. The first occurrence of the term ḫbāṣ ḫal-kbawāṣ (or its Arabic and Persian variants of ḫbūṣūṣ al-kbūṣūṣ and ḫbāṣ-e ḫbāṣ) I found appears in the Kitāb al-luma’ of the Khorasani Sufi Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988).80 This seminal work represents a concerted and organized explanation of Islamic mysticism, featuring a chapter that systematically defines Sufi jargon. Al-Sarrāj resorts to a quote from the Baghdādī mystic Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334/948) to explain ḫbūṣūṣ al-kbūṣūṣ. Al-Shiblī states that his master al-Junayd asked him what he had heard about the term and what his opinion was concerning it.81

This anecdote about al-Junayd discussing what appears to be an unfamiliar term with his younger student seems accurate. Al-Junayd’s surviving works bear no trace of this highly formalized lexicon, while his disciples clearly employed this term.82 It therefore seems both appropriate and convenient to date the emergence of the term ḫbāṣ ḫal-kbawāṣ at this juncture between al-Junayd and his student al-Shiblī, whom he respected a great deal.83

Unlike the term ḫbāṣ, however, ḫbāṣ ḫal-kbawāṣ did not flourish in political discourse. Although al-Mas‘ūdī does use ḫbāṣ ḫal-kbāṣ in a political context in his Murūj al-dbāhab at approximately the same time as al-Shiblī,84 the term is conspicuously absent from the Abbadid secretary Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Jahshiyārī’s (d. 331/942) Kitāb al-wuzur a wa al-kuttāb. Considering that author’s intimate knowledge of Islamic political culture up to his time and his liberal use of ḫbāṣ and ‘āmm throughout his book, this absence suggests that the superlative form ḫbāṣ ḫal-kbawāṣ was not widely used on the early tenth century political scene.85 Neither do the term and its variants appear in al-Mas‘ūdī’s Ithbāt al-waṣīyya li-l-imām ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālibī, a politically charged defense of the Shiite doctrine of the Alid right to religious leadership.86 Finally, although al-Ghazzālī uses the term in several of his Sufi works, he does not employ ḫbāṣ ḫal-kbawāṣ in his political treatise Naṣīḥat al-mulūk.

In mystical discourse, however, the elitist idiom of ‘āmm / ḫbāṣ / ḫbāṣ ḫal-kbawāṣ provided a convenient and well-understood tool from the fifth/eleventh century on. Although its usage differed slightly according to author and context, this idiom became the Sufis’ primary means of ranking mystical awareness, from the uninitiated masses, to the Sufi neophyte and finally the accomplished mystic. Thus al-Sarrāj relied on the three terms to list the stations of faith in God (ʿilm al-yaqīn, ʿayn al-yaqīn and ḥaqq al-yaqīn).87 A century later ʿAlī Hujvīrī (d. 465–9/1072–7) of Ghazna, who wrote the first Persian
treatise on Sufism, employed the same three terms to the same end. The most conspicuous use of this phrasing of the tripartite division appears in ‘Abdallāḥ al-Harawi’s (d. 481/1089) comprehensive Sufi glossary Manāzīl al-sā’īrīn. There the author divides almost every Sufi concept he addresses, from God’s unicity (tawḥīd) to spiritual discipline (riyāḍa), into the three levels of ‘āmm, kbāṣṣ and kbāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ.

It is thus no surprise that in his letter al-Ghazzālī chose this idiom to divide mankind into those obsessed with worldly goods, the religiously devout, and the mystical elite. This tripartite division had become commonplace amongst Sufis, and the great scholar frequently employed it in his works. It appears prominently in his Mīskāt al-anwār, which al-Ghazzālī begins by explaining that the word “light” has different meanings according to the three levels of people, the ‘āmm, kbāṣṣ and kbāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ. Later in the work the scholar undertakes an exegesis of the mystical hadith in which the Prophet states that God has seventy veils of light and darkness. There, he again divides mankind into the three groups, the lowest veiled by total darkness, the second by an admixture of light and darkness, and the third by sheer light. Of this elect gnostic class, the most elite are the kbāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ whose piercing knowledge of God and His oneness effaces their essence and brings them into mystical union with the Divine.

Conclusion: Sufism’s Terminological Authenticity and Life after al-Ghazzālī

Much of the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Sufism in the Muslim world has centered on the relatively late development of the Islamic mystical tradition. Sufis hold up early ascetics such as Ibrāhīm b. Adham and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī as the progenitors of the mystical tradition and its authoritative guarantors amongst the early Muslim community. Yet we see that the ‘āmm / kbāṣṣ and kbāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ terminology so prominent in Islamic mystical discourse after its efflorescence in the fourth/tenth to sixth/twelfth centuries did not appear in early Sufi writings. Moreover, these terms are absent even in the Sufi tradition’s later depiction of its early pioneers. As early as the fourth/tenth century, Sufis recognized this dearth of an early nomenclature, explaining that “today Sufism (taṣawwuf) is a name without a reality, it was once a reality without a name.”

Yet an overemphasis on Sufism’s tangible origins in preserved texts clouds the important issue of the tradition’s organic roots in Islam. Moreover, casting an overly diachronic eye on the Sufi tradition ignores Nicholson’s insight on Ibn al-ʿArabī’s (d. 638/1240) usage of kbusūṣ al-kbusūṣ, a notion whose underlying meaning he describes as “almost as old as Sufism itself.” Indeed the tripartite division of people according to their submission to God and grasp
of His reality may be seen expressed in the Qur’ân. One such verse states that the communities to whom God has revealed His books are divided into those who wrong their own souls, those who take a middle course in religion, and those “who are the foremost in doing good (sâbiq bi-al-khayrât, Qur’ân 35:32).” As part of his effort to prove the orthodox character of Sufism, al-Sarrâj uses this verse to ground the notions of khâṣṣ and khâṣṣ al-khawaṣṣ in the Qur’ânic paradigm. Al-Ghazzâlî himself begins his letter to Muhammad b. Fakhr al-Mulk with a reference to this duty of striving for preeminence in doing good.

Whatever the conceptual authenticity of the tripartite division in the Qur’ân, it is nonetheless clear that neither this distinction nor the ʿâmm / khâṣṣ or khâṣṣ al-khawaṣṣ model appeared in the Sufi tradition until the second half of the third/ninth century. The tripartite division was a feature of Near Eastern Gnosticism from as early as the second century, but even with the Islamic tradition’s adoption of Gnostic ideas, this development probably stemmed from the very nature of the Sufi calling itself. As Margaret Smith points out, the early Muslim ascetic tradition as evidenced in the work of Ibn al-Mubârak and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrî, was founded on supererogation. The practices of these early devotees centered on superceding the normal religious requirements of the masses and attaining higher levels of piety. Later mystics like Dhû al-Nûn and Sahl al-Tustârî were intimately acquainted with the intellectual milieu of the Abbasid world. In an environment where intellectual giants like al-Jâhîz and Ibn al-Qutayba had divided the political, social and religious world into two classes, Sufis would require a third and higher level that acknowledged their superlative devotion. This may explain why the term khâṣṣ al-khawaṣṣ was effectively limited to mystical discourse. Even within this Sufi community the stage was set for laymen (ʿâmma) and ascetics (khâṣṣa). Those gnostics who sought the “new dimension” of salvational knowledge would need a class for themselves. Moreover, as the adherents of Islamic mysticism increased in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, Sufis like Hujýrî worried about “fraudulent claimants to the Way.” If some of those claiming to be part of God’s khâṣṣa were mere charlatans, then a third and higher level was necessary for the truly sincere.

It may also have been the very marginal nature of the Sufi movement in this period that led to the important role that terms like khâṣṣ al-khawaṣṣ would acquire in Islamic mystical thought. Heterodox groups derided and occasionally forced into dissimulation naturally had to develop a worldview that deemed “the majority of Muslims as, at least for the present, too misled and unenlightened to appreciate higher truths.”

It thus seems natural that in the wake of al-Ghazzâlî’s successful adoption of Sufism into orthodox Islamic tradition, the ʿâmm / khâṣṣ / khâṣṣ al-khawaṣṣ
triad lost much of its barbed and condescending tone. The decades after the famous scholar’s death saw the institutionalization of Sufi brotherhoods that brought mysticism to the masses. Al-Ghazzālī had already included non-Sufi ‘ulamā’ among the ranks of the ‘awāmm, but as mysticism spread well beyond its original spiritual elite the tripartite division served more as an internal ranking within Sufism and less as a means of dividing up human society as a whole. Over a century after al-Ghazzālī’s death another Persian mystic, Nūr al-Dīn Isfārāyīnī (d. 639/1242), applied this tripartite ranking to both saints and prophets. He proposed that both these revered classes be divided into ‘awāmm, kbās and kbās al-khawāss. If one could refer to God’s prophets as ‘awāmm, the term had clearly matured from the stupidity and iniquity associated with it in al-Ghazzālī’s time. Isfārāyīnī’s contemporary Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-ʿArabī’s usage of the three terms differs according to context, with the bottom end of the spectrum (‘awāmm) ranging from the believers in general to an average Sufi adept. In all cases, however, Ibn al-ʿArabī employs the terms as an internal ranking for either the believing or mystical community. Gone is al-Ghazzālī’s damning dismissal of the ‘awāmm as “the people of heedlessness” obsessed with worldly aims. In his encyclopedia of Sufi terms, Muḥammad al-Kāshānī’s contemporary Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-ʿArabī’s usage of the three terms differs according to context, with the bottom end of the spectrum (‘awāmm) ranging from the believers in general to an average Sufi adept. In all cases, however, Ibn al-ʿArabī employs the terms as an internal ranking for either the believing or mystical community. Al-Ghazzālī’s damming dismissal of the ‘awāmm as “the people of heedlessness” obsessed with worldly aims. In his encyclopedia of Sufi terms, Muḥammad al-Kāshānī’s contemporary Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-ʿArabī’s usage of the three terms differs according to context, with the bottom end of the spectrum (‘awāmm) ranging from the believers in general to an average Sufi adept. In all cases, however, Ibn al-ʿArabī employs the terms as an internal ranking for either the believing or mystical community. 104 Al-Ghazzālī’s damming dismissal of the ‘awāmm as “the people of heedlessness” obsessed with worldly aims. In his encyclopedia of Sufi terms, Muḥammad al-Kāshānī’s contemporary Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-ʿArabī’s usage of the three terms differs according to context, with the bottom end of the spectrum (‘awāmm) ranging from the believers in general to an average Sufi adept. In all cases, however, Ibn al-ʿArabī employs the terms as an internal ranking for either the believing or mystical community.

Endnotes


2. Harāsī died in the first month of 504AH, a year and a half before al-Ghazzālī. Assuming that the correspondence between al-Ghazzālī and the Seljuq officials took place in the months following Harāsī’s death, it is probable that al-Ghazzālī wrote this letter approximately one year before he died.

3. Although such a personal communication written during the last year of al-Ghazzālī’s life offers an insightful glimpse into his mindset, this letter was probably not his last composition. His work Ilīm al-awāmm an ilm al-kalām, a warning about the damage that dialectical theology could wreck when wielded by the uneducated masses, was written a month before his death; see George F. Hourani, The Chronology of Ghazālī’s Writings, Journal of the American Oriental Society 79.4 (1959): 233.

5. See, for example, the second paragraph of Homāʾī’s text where the words “concerning his [Ghazzālī’s] death” are interpolated to explain the sentence. Moayyad’s edition lacks this addition; see Jalāl al-Dīn Yūsuf Ahl, Farāyed-e gheyābī, ed. Hesmat Moayyad, 2 vols. (Tehran: Bonyād-e Farhang-e Īrān, 1358/1980), 163; Homāʾī, 212.


9. Note on Transliteration and Organization: In general I have transliterated this letter according to Persian pronunciation. Any Arabic portions more significant than Arabic phrases commonly used in Persian have been rendered in italics and transliterated according to the Arabic pronunciation. Al-Ghazzālī wrote the letter according to the perennial structure of Persian diplomatic correspondences. I have thus placed the standard names for the various parts of such letters in small font at the beginning of each section; see H. Busse, “Diplomatics: Persia” Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM Edition v. 1.1. Henceforth EI².

10. This hadith was a staple in al-Ghazzālī’s writings. He also used it in an advice letter to the Seljuq courtier and treasurer Saʿādāt al-Khāzin; see Homāʾī, 369.

11. This is no doubt a play on words. For al-Ghazzālī the obliteration of the self and its union with the Divine, ḵanā, was the highest aspiration of the mystic. His use of the same word for the bodily death so feared by the masses represents an instance in which Sufis invert the meaning of word as it moves from the level of the common man to the ranks of the initiated.


14. The correct English term for the indicator on this type of scale, the equal-armed beam scale, is the pointer. I have rendered lesān-e mīzān as ‘measure’ simply because it seems more befitting the spiritually poignant context. For a helpful discussion of the traditional scale used in Islamicate lands; see J. D. Latham, The Interpretation of a Passage on Scales (Mawāzīn) in an Andalusian Hisba Manual, Journal of Semitic Studies 23 (1978): 283–290; and “Mizān” in EI².

15. This sentence must have caused copyists a great deal of trouble. The Farāyed-e gheyābī version of the letter features the word “beqāʾ,” which one can at best translate as “ground” and does not fit the fit the overall juxtaposition of ‘depths’ (ḥadīd) and ‘high’ in the metaphor that al-Ghazzālī employs. Jalāl al-Dīn Homāʾī’s edition of the letter has the word “refāʾ,” a word that does not actually exist but seems to indicate ‘heights,’ instead of beqāʾ. This is most probably a confused but benevolent copyist’s attempt to restore the overall
stylistic balance of the sentence. Fortunately, al-Ghazzâli uses the same metaphor in his Misbâḳat al-anwâr. There he describes how the gnostics (carîfîn) rise from the ‘depths of metaphor (hadîd al-majâz) to the elevation (ya'fâ) of the Real (al-baqîqâ); see al-Ghazzâli, Niche, 16. It seems very probable that ya'fâ was the original word al-Ghazzâli used in the letter, and that a copyster mistook this rare word for beqa'.

16. Al-Masûdî noted a horde of Persian texts dated 113/731–2. Ihsân 'Abbâs feels that this may have included the 'Abd Ardashîr, the political wisdoms of the great Sassanid ruler Ardashir. At the very latest this work entered the Arab-Islamic corpus by 218/[833–4]; see Ihsân 'Abbâs, ed., 'Abd Ardashîr (Beirut: Dâr Sadîr, 1967), 33–4.


23. Ahl, 2:157. Bustî writes “tend to the matter [of state] now, since the worldly chieftainship (kadkbodâ-ye jeûbânî) will pass from your hands [like] two transitory days.”


25. Homâ'î, 126.

26. I have modified this term from Mohammad Arkoun’s original usage; see Mohammad Arkoun, Logocentrisme et Vérité Religieuse dans la Pensée Islamique, Studia Islamica 35 (1972): 5–51.

27. This legal usage of the two terms was definitely attested by the early third/ninth century; see Abû 'Uthmân al-Jãhîz, Rasa'il al-jâhîz, ed. Hasan al-Sandûbî (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Râjmâniyya, 1352/1933), 139.

28. Homâ'î, 199.


31. Wensinck: Ibn Mâjâ muqaddima, 16. For similar instances see Abû Dâwûd, imâra, 19, 23; and al-Tirmidhî, manâqib, 60 and taʃfîr suurat al-ma’ida, 5, 18.


33. Al-Ḥasan al-Bayṣrî, al-Zubd, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Râjm Muḥammad (Cairo: Dâr al-Ḥadîth, 1991), 139–40. Much material is attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Bayṣrî, and it is difficult to determine the provenance of works such as this book. That the usage of ‘āmm
and *khāṣṣ* in the above hadith is echoed in Ibn al-Mubārak’s better attested *Kitāb al-Zuhd* less than seventy years after al-Ḥasan’s death (110/728), however, suggests that the hadith found in al-Ḥasan’s book is at the very least faithful to the words’ usage in the early second century AH.

34. Although al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* includes accounts in which *khāṣṣ* is used in the political sense of ‘elite retinue’ in the context of the caliph ‘Uthmān, these reports cannot be accurately dated. Al-Masʿūdī’s political usage of the term during later Umayyad times, however, is corroborated by the famous Umayyad secretary ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd’s (d. 132/750) patently political use of *khāṣṣ* and *ʿamm*; see Ḫisān ʿAbbās, ed., *ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn Yahyā al-Kāṭib* (Amman: Dār al-Shuruq, 1988), 261 and 275; Muḥammad b. Jārīr al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: the Crisis of the Early Caliphate*, trans. R. Stephen Humphreys (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 54.


37. ʿAbbās, *ʿAbd Ardasbīr*; 62, 98 and 104. On this last page, Ardasbīr is quoted as saying “the more frightened the masses, the more secure the ministers (*akhwaf takūn al-ʿammā āman takūn al-wuzurāʾ*)”.


42. Arkoun, 20.

43. Nizām al-Mulk, 298.


47. Heer, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī’s Esoteric Exegesis of the Koran, 256. Translation from Heer.


49. Although Sufi writings abound with lists and descriptions that divide groups into any number of components, the hierarchical division of society in Sufi discourse centers on this tripartite division. The term “tripartite” is taken from Gerhard Böwering’s *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 226, where the author discusses the tripartite division of knowledge in the thought of Sahl al-Tustārī.
Michael Cooperson also touches upon the concept of a three-fold division of mankind in Sufi discourse in his article on the competing portrayals of Sufis and the *abd al-badīth*; see Michael Cooperson, Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr al-Ḥāfi: a case Study in Biographical Tradition, *Studia Islamica* 86 (1997): 76 note #17, and 85 note #54.


53. In Abū Ṭālīb al-Makki’s (d. 382/993 or 386/996) *Qūṭ al-qulāb* we find the distinction between *fitnāt al-ʿāmmin* and *fitnāt al-khāṣṣ* used in the context of the Companion Hudhayfa b. al-Yamān, but this only relates his expertise on hypocrisies (*nīfāq*) within the community; see Abū Ṭālīb al-Makki, *Qūṭ al-qulāb* (Cairo, 1893) I:150, cf. A. M. M. MacKeen, The Sufi Qawm movement, *Muslim World* 53:3 (1963): 215–6. One finds words that would later enter Sufi jargon used in bizarre contexts during the time of early Muslim ascetics. In his travels amongst the non-Muslim Turks, the ascetic Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/809–10 ?) met a group of idol worshippers who called themselves *al-Khusūṣiyya*, a term later Sufis such as al-Ḥakim al-Tirmidhī would use for ‘sainthood’; see Abū Nu’am al-ʾIṣbahānī, *Hilya al-auliya wa ṭabaqat al-asfiyā*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ḥanāfi & Mṭba’at al-SA’āda, 1357/1938), 8:59.

54. Ahmad Mahdavi describes Ibn al-Mubārak’s book as both the first book on practical Sufism and also the first Sufi history; see Ahmad Mahdavi, Persian Contributions to Sufi Literature in Arabic, in *The Heritage of Sufism*, 1:35. The instances of the two words in Ibn al-Mubārak’s *Kitāb al-Zubd* and al-Ḥasan al-บาṣrī’s writings have been discussed above. The words appear only once in Ahmad b. Ḥanbal’s book, indicating ‘specific versus general’ with no religious significance; see Ibn Ḥanbal, *Kitāb al-zubd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Imāmiyya, 1396/1976), 222.


58. See, for example, the words of Abū Ḥafs al-Naysābūrī (d.c. 270/884) and al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, who was one of the first to define the terms; Muḥammad Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulāmī, *Ṭabaqāt al-sūfīyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAtā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʾIlmiyya, 1419/1998), 104, 181.


60. Böwering, 214.


68. Lazarus-Yafeh. 354.

69. See Margaret Smith, “Dhūʾ ʿl-Nūn, Abū ʿl-Fayḍ.”


71. Al-Qushayrī’s *Risāla* quotes Ahmad b. Hanbal with a statement dividing asceticism (*zuḥd*) into three levels, “the first is abandoning what Islam has forbidden (*al-barām*), which is the asceticism of the masses (*al-awāmm*). The second is leaving those luxuries allowed by God, which is the asceticism of the elect (*al-kbawāṣ*). The third is abandoning [all] that which distracts the slave from God most high, and that is the asceticism of the Knower’s (*al-ʿārifīn*)” (see Al-Qushayrī, 119). If this were authentic it would make Ibn Ḥanbal the first known person to use the tripartite distinction between the masses, the ascetics, and the gnostics. Although scholars such as Leah Kinberg and Michael Cooperson have treated this attribution as authentic, I feel it is apocryphal. Firstly, the statement is highly formalized and does not resemble the terse statements Ibn Ḥanbal makes in attested
works such as Kitāb al-ward, Kitāb al-zuhd or in chapters devoted to his views on zuhd in later Hanbali literature. Secondly, this quote does not appear in these other works or in al-Qushayrī’s contemporary Abū Nu‘aym al-Isbahānī’s long entry on Ibn Ḥanbal in his Sufi biographical dictionary Hilyat al-awliyā’. Thirdly the statement contradicts a narration in Ibn Ḥanbal’s Kitāb al-zuhd insisting that “asceticism in this world is not prohibiting what God has allowed . . .”; see Leah Kinberg, What is Meant by [1973].

Here I am indebted to Christopher Melchert’s referral to an unpublished manuscript by al-Junayd; see Melchert, 70–1.

In the place of ‘āmm and kbāṣṣ, al-Nūrī’s first two levels are those who disobey God (al-‘asāt) and those who sincerely obey Him (al-muṭrī‘īn); see Paul Nwyia, Textes mystiques inédites d’Abū-l-Hasan al-Nūrī, Mêlanges de l’Université Saint Joseph 44 (1968): 138.

There is evidence that the avant-garde Iranian mystic Abū Yazīd al-Bīšṭamī was the first to utilize the term kbāṣṣ al-kbawāṣṣ. Bīštamī’s legacy is only recorded in later works, the most prominent of which is Abū al-Faḍl al-Sahlāgī’s (d. 476/1084) extant Kitāb al-nīr fi kalīmāt Abī Yazīz al-Tayfīr. This material, however, is not credible. Although Sahlāgī uses ḫnāds to bridge the chasm of almost two hundred years between him and Bīštamī, some of the material he attributes to his predecessor does not seem authentic. In the one instance where Bīštamī supposedly employs the ‘āmm / kbāṣṣ / kbāṣṣ al-kbawāṣṣ distinction, the narrations are disjointed and incomplete. He allegedly tells his audience that the path of worship (‘ubūdīyya) consists of the aforementioned three levels, but then only mentions two, the ‘āmm and the kbāṣṣ. Moreover, even the sub-groupings he says he will mention within these two levels are incomplete; see ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badāwī, Šbatābat al-ṣūfīyyā: Abū Yazīz al-Bīštamī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣrīyya, 1949), 97–8. Al-Sahlāgī or one of the transmitters he relied on for the quote could have been affected by teachings current in Khorasan at the time. Al-Qushayrī quotes his master Abū ‘Ali al-Daqqūq as dividing ‘ubūdīyya into that of the ‘awāmm, kbawāṣṣ and kbawāṣṣ al-kbawāṣṣ; see al-Qushayrī, 197. Another narration ascribed to Bīštamī and featuring the term kbāṣṣ seems much more authentic. In it the ecstatic Sufi presents the three levels (although he promises the reader four!) of God’s elect (kbāṣat Allāh), those who cannot bear the weight of the secrets God has revealed but are compelled to nonetheless, those who enjoy the experience, and those who are completely engulfed by the presence of God; see Badāwī, 80.

He probably did not, however, since he claims him as a teacher in his chain of mystical knowledge (ṣīla) only through an intermediary. Al-Sarrāj thus does not narrate pious sayings of al-Shiblī directly, and in the Kitāb al-luma' he either names this intermediary or uses the anonymous “it was recounted from al-Shiblī . . . ;” see al-Sulamī, Ṭabaqāt, 260; al-Sarrāj, 337.

82. Al-Sarrāj, 71. Here al-Sarrāj cites 'Amr b. 'Uthmān al-Makki (d. 297/909), one of al-Junayd’s disciples.


84. Beg, cf. al-Mas'ūdi, ibid.

85. The term kbāş al-khawās also seems to be absent from several addenda to al-Tabarī’s Tārikh that cover the first thirty years of the fourth century hijrī; see Dhuyūl tārikh al-Tabarī, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, [1960]), vol. 11 of Tārikh al-Tabarī, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl, 11 vols.


87. Al-Sarrāj, 71.


89. ‘Abdallah al-Harawī; 15, 80–82.

90. Al-Ghazzālī, Niche, 2

91. Ibid., 44.

92. Ibid., 52.

93. This was said by Abū al-Ḥasan Fūshanjī in the fourth/tenth century and repeated a century later by al-Hujvīrī; see Martin Lings, What is Sufism? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 45; cf. al-Hujvīrī, 49. Hujvīrī translates Fūshanjī’s Arabic statement “al-tasawwuf al-yawm ism bilā baqīqa wa qad kāna min qabāl baqiqtān bilā ism” as “tasawwuf emanż nāmis bi haqīqat va pisb azīn haqīqat bi būd bī nām.”


95. See also Qur‘ān 56:8–10.

96. Al-Sarrāj, 337.


98. Zarrīnkūb, 134.


100. Keddie, 59.

101. Hodgson, 2:211.


105. Al-Kashānī, 125.