

Converting al-Ghazali to Shī'ī Islam: The Reception and Legacy of the Sunni Theologian in Safavid Iran

Yusuf Ünal

The Safavids' adoption of Shi'ism as an official religion kindled a fierce contestation over the memory of the Islamic past in early modern Iran. The Safavid championship of Shi'ism led to the takedown of the veil of dissimulation in the face and fear of Sunni oppression, which gave rise to public denigration and vociferous vilification of iconic Sunni figures and symbols. In this inimical atmosphere that cultivated sacred hatred for ideological rivals and facilitated the crystallization of sectarian boundaries, renowned Shī'ī scholars like Shaykh 'Alī 'Āmilī (d.1703) declared al-Ghazali (d.1111) "the head of the enemies of the family of the Prophet." However, this antagonistic characterization of al-Ghazali was countered by a rather charitable representation of his personality and appreciation of his intellectual legacy during the cultural renaissance in Iran in the seventeenth century. By drawing on Shī'ī biographical dictionaries and some narratives of the death-bed conversion of al-Ghazali to Shī'ī Islam, I examine the alternative sympathetic portrayals of this Sunni scholar in Safavid Iran and the functions of these narratives in the naturalization of Ghazali and appropriation of his scholarly heritage within a Shī'ī milieu. I also study the intellectual climate that engendered the royal commission of the translation of al-Ghazali's famous work, *Ihyā al- 'ulūm al-dīn*, to the most prominent Safavid scholar, Şadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d.1640), more commonly known as Mullā Şadrā. The keen interest in Ihyā was embodied in the voluminous Twelver adaptation of this work by Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d.1680), Mulla Sadra's son-in-law, in his *al-Maḥajjat al-bayḍā' fī tahdhīb al-ihyā'*. Both the royal patronage of and scholarly interest in al-Ghazali's scholarship elicited a fierce reaction from some top-ranking jurists of the time. Most eminently, 'Alī Naqī Kamara'ī (d.1650), the *shaykh al-Islam* of Shiraz and later Isfahan, authored a scathing critique of the royal sponsorship of the *Ihyā* in his *Himam al-thawāqib*, in which the author accused al-Ghazali of unbelief and chastised the Safavid sovereign for deviating from the path of his ancestors in promoting Shi'ism and suppressing Sunnism. My investigation of the reception of al-Ghazali in Safavid Iran by studying the abovementioned contemporary sources will bring into the relief of the hitherto underexplored influence and reception of al-Ghazali in a non-Sunni context and the reaction it elicited.