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

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The Safavids' adoption of Shiʿism as an official religion kindled a fierce contestation over the memory of the Islamic past in early modern Iran. The Safavid championship of Shiʿism led to the teardown 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 Shīʿī scholars like Shaykh Ṭabāṭabāʾī (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 Shīʿī biographical dictionaries and some narratives of the death-bed conversion of al-Ghazali to Shīʿī 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 Shīʿī milieu. I also study the intellectual climate that engendered the royal commission of the translation of al-Ghazali’s famous work, Iḥyāʾ al-ʿulūm al-dīn, to the most prominent Safavid scholar, Ṣadr ad-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d.1640), more commonly known as Mullā Ṣadrā. The keen interest in Iḥyāʾ was embodied in the voluminous Twelver adaption of this work by Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d.1680), Mulla Sadra’s son-in-law, in his al-Maḥājjaṭ al-bayḍāʾ fi tahdhib al-ḥiyāʾ. 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, ʿAlī Naqī Kamaraʾī (d.1650), the shaykh al-Islam of Shiraz and later Isfahan, authored a scathing critique of the royal sponsorship of the Iḥyāʾ in his Himam al-thawāqīb, in which the author accused al-Ghazali of unbelief and chastised the Safavid sovereign for deviating from the path of his ancestors in promoting Shiʿism 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.