SITTING BY THE RULER'S THRONE: AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON JUSTICE AND MERCY IN THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT

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The trend toward absolutism in Islam’s political history, whether based on theories of the deputyship of «God’s caliph» (khalīfāt Allāh) or on Iranian notions of divine kingship, has been a common theme in Western Islamic Studies. As has been noted, the rise of Turkish military régimes in the 5th/11th and 6th/12th centuries, given the problematic base of legitimacy of the sultanate, posed new challenges to the ideologues of state power. Here it shall be examined to what extent absolutist conceptions of the sultan’s power to punish or to show mercy resonated with medieval Muslim notions of God’s justice. In particular, the question will be pursued

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as to how the eschatological imagination of Islam coloured perceptions of the mercy and cruelty of the temporal rulers. As will be argued, the Saljūq throne scene, the theatre for many rituals of sultānic justice, was described by writers of the period in terms akin to how eschatologists imagined the Divine Throne of Justice on the Day of Judgment. Similarly, the kind of ‘throne justice’ meted out by the Great Saljūq Sanjar (r. 490-552/1097-1157) and other rulers of the Saljūq period, examples of which will be discussed in the following pages, played with Ashʿarite notions of God’s mercy and punishment. Besides suggesting a continuity of both Iranian and Islamic notions of sacred kingship into the period of Turkish absolutism in Islamic history, this «play of analogies» (Aziz al-Azmeh) is indicative of a deliberate strategy for the symbolization of absolute power.

Sanjar famously became the patron of the late al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). The latter’s view of divine mercy and punishment can be viewed as standing in an uneasy dialogue, sometimes critical, sometimes approving, with absolutist theories of sultānic justice. In fact, as this article argues, when al-Ghazālī’s views about the absolutism of kings are examined on the backdrop of his eschatological thought, his legacy as a political thinker, as preserved, inter alia, in his «Counsel for Kings» (Naṣīḥat al-mulūk), appears in a new light.

1. BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: THE SALJŪQ THRONE SCENE

It was inevitable, perhaps, that the worldly sovereign’s justice in medieval Islam would always be measured against God’s justice. As Tor Andrae has observed, the popular conception of God is inseparately connected with the picture of a king and his royal household.3 When the ruler sat on his throne, meting out acts of mercy or punishment to his subjects, the dread and awe inspired by his unrestricted, and sometimes arbitrary, use of violence conjured up in the minds of onlookers the terrifying prospect of God’s tribunal of justice on the Day of Judgment. Sometimes the analogy was spelt out in explicit terms: The mystic al-Qushayri (d. 465/1072), in his famous Risāla, states that the awe (hayba) a ṣūfī feels vis-à-vis God is best compared to the kind of awe one feels when entering into the presence of the earthly ruler on his throne, resulting in a complete loss of self-consciousness and self-control, to the extent that afterwards one will not remember any of the details of the

3 Tor Andrae, Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde, Stockholm, 1918, 260.
audience. This «play of analogies», as Aziz al-Azmeh has pointed out, was never systematically pursued in the Muslim literature on kingship, but was an underlying theme of much of medieval Islam’s rhetoric of royal power. As a prominent illustration of this theme, al-Azmeh cites Muslim manuals of dream interpretation, which «represent kingship and divinity as displacements one of the other» and «in which the appearance of a king in a dream must be interpreted as a representative of God, and in which a smiling king represents divine favor.»

Such forms of «sublime absolutism» had many roots in Islamic civilization. In the eastern Islamic lands, the awe felt in front of the ruler sitting on his throne derived from old Iranian traditions of divine kingship, which gave the throne a cosmological significance. In Firdawsi’s Shāhnāma, written around 400/1010, the ruler on his throne is compared to the sun and the moon shining over the earth, revealing his awe-inspiring divine effulgence (farr-i izadi) to humankind. This became a leitmotif of courtly panegyrics reprised, among others, by al-Ghazālī in an audience before Sanjar in 503/1109.

However, already the Qur’ān makes the throne (‘arsh, kursi) one of the key attributes of absolute power. As in the Judeo-Christian tradition,
the Qur’an talks of God’s throne as one of the constitutive elements in a court ceremony, where heralds announce the coming of the throne-sitter (XXXIX,75), guardians surround the throne (XL,7), and various groups of courtiers, the *mugarrabūn* («those who are brought near», cf. Hebr. *qār b le-malkūt*), are placed in proximity to the throne according to the level of intimacy they have achieved with the ruler (LVI, 8-11).

Post-Qur’anic eschatologists elaborated on these ideas. We know little about what Sanjar’s or other rulers’ thrones actually looked like, but the way in which Muslim theologians, including al-Ghazālī, described God’s sitting on the throne on the Day of Judgment appears to echo the rituals performed before and around the throne of the temporal ruler. God’s throne is elevated above those appearing before it, as if on a platform. Heralds at the throne’s feet (that is, angels blowing trumpets) announce God’s coming. Intimates of God (the Prophet Muḥammad as well as other prophets) stand to the right of the Throne, while Jahannam, the terrible beast of Hell, stands to the left. 7th/13th-century Iranian figurative depictions of throne scenes appear to play with the analogy: they show the ruler sitting on an elevated platform, surrounded by trumpet-blowing heralds, courtly advisers to his right, and executioners (*sayyāfs*), to his left. Some images (see figure 1) reverberate powerfully with how apocalypses from the third century B.C. to the second century C.E., see Himmelfarb, M., *Ascent to heaven in Jewish and Christian apocalypses*, Oxford, 1993.


Since the publication of my *Justice, Punishment and the Medieval Muslim Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 36-37, where I discuss Saljiq throne symbolism, I have come to the realization that, unlike the thrones of earlier dynasties, the Saljiq are likely to have used relatively simple and unadorned throne seats, possibly continuing nomadic traditions. The authenticity of a stucco panel in the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, believed to show the Saljiq prince Tughril III (d. 590/1194) sitting on a throne, is now in doubt.

According to Ghazālī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, ed. L. Gautier, Geneva, 1878, 58-59, tr. Smith, J., *The precious pearl*, Missoula, 1979, 56, the Throne is installed «on that white earth which God has created for this special purpose».


CREDIDAD Y COMPASIÓN EN LA LITERATURA ÁRABE E ISLÁMICA

[Figure 1: Rashid al-Din (d. 718/1318), Jami` al-tawānkh (Edinburgh University Library, Ms. Arab 20, f. 24r)].
al-Ghazālī describes the sinner’s lot on the Day of Judgment, when he will be led before the Throne «like a wild horse», approaching «with palpitating, fearful and dismayed heart, humble and abject eye and sundered breast». 

Another arresting image which applies to both the Throne of God and to the thrones of earthly rulers is that of the throne’s shadow. In Muslim eschatology, God’s Throne on the Day of Judgment shades the righteous, while the wicked suffer in the heat. According to al-Ghazālī, no shade shall there be upon the earth save that cast by the Throne of the Lord of the Worlds, which only those who have been brought nigh unto Him may enjoy. Thus shall they either take shade under the Throne, or be exposed to the sun’s blazing heat, and their sorrow and misery shall grow with its rays.

Panegyric authors of the Saljūq period liked to praise the shadow offered by their royal patrons, stretching over the entire realm under their control. As the chronicler al-Bundārī (d. 643/1245 or 6) records, the sultan’s shadow «stretched over all, and his grace was ample». The «sultan’s shadow» thus became a metonymy not only of royal favour, but of territorial sovereignty. For example, Khurāsān, in the latter part of Saljūq history, was «under the shadow» (fī zill) of the Great Saljūq, sultan Sanjar.
Such analogies suggested to the subjects of the sultan that the space in front of the throne was a space set apart and sacred. An aura of holiness surrounded the ritualized acts of mercy and punishment meted out in this royal penal theatre. Here, the temporal authority of the ruler and God’s eternal justice appeared to converge, as indeed there was always the very real prospect that one could literally be transported from this world to the next, as a look at the Saljuq chronicles will demonstrate.

2. SPLENDID ARBITRARINESS: ACTS OF CRUELTY AND MERCY BY THE SALJUQ SULTAN

This, then, was the stage on which the ruler displayed his justice and power. The Saljuq sultan Ahmad Sanjar, al-Ghazali’s patron during the later stages of his life, is reported to have held punitive tribunals from his seat on the throne with great frequency. This was usually in the wake of important battles, when Sanjar had fought back a challenge to his authority and the situation called for a show of force.

In 493/1100, Sanjar, whose seat of power was Khurasan, fought a battle against the rebellious governor of Western Khurasan, the amir Dād Ḥabashi b. Altīntāsh. Allegedly, Dād Ḥabashi had hired Bātīnis from Ṭabas to fight in his army.22 When he was captured and brought before Sanjar’s throne after the battle, he begged for mercy and offered a ransom of 100,000 dinārs. However, Sanjar would not have it. Instead, the amir was executed on the spot.23 Two years later, in 495/1102, Sanjar had to fight off an even bigger challenge. The ruler of Transoxania Qadrkhān Jibrā’il b. ʿUmar had invaded Khurasan. Fortunately for Sanjar, his amirs managed to capture Qadrkhān when he went out on a hunting spree, accompanied only by a small band of followers.24 Brought before Sanjar’s

24 Hunting in the Saljuq period seems to have been a dangerous pastime not so much because of the danger involved in hunting itself, but because of the peril of being outnumbered by enemy forces. The Saljuq sultan Alp Arslān, together with a hundred of his servants, was captured by Armānūs, the Byzantine emperor (qayṣar), while he was on a hunting expedition. Miraculously, Alp Arslān remained unrecognized, and the vizier Nizām al-Mulk successfully negotiated the ransom for his release. See Safi, O., The politics of knowledge in premodern Islam: negotiating ideology and religious inquiry,
throne, Sanjar «began to chide him, and he [Qadrkhān] asked for mercy,» reportedly kissing the ground before the sultān.\textsuperscript{25} However, his plea was not accepted. «Either you serve us, or you don’t,» Sanjar exclaimed, «and if you don’t, then the sword will be your only reward!» Then Qadrkhān was beheaded.\textsuperscript{26}

Sanjar did not exactly soften in the later years of his reign, even if his position was by then much more secure, having assumed the title of Great Saljuq in 511/1118. In 526/1132, his nephew Mas‘ūd b. Muḥammad (r. 529-47/1134-52) challenged him over the succession to the sultanate of Iraq. After defeating Mas‘ūd’s troops, Sanjar summoned one of Mas‘ūd’s amirs to his throne, interrogated him and then proceeded to execute the defenseless man (qatala-hu šabr\textsuperscript{m}).\textsuperscript{27}

The formula qatala-hu šabr\textsuperscript{m} deserves some attention. The expression has two possible meanings according to whether one takes šabr\textsuperscript{m} to be the state (ḥāl) of the subject or the object of the verb qatala.\textsuperscript{28} If taken to refer to the victim, šabr\textsuperscript{m} indicates the condemned suffers his punishment «patiently» or «steadfastly», or simply as a defenseless prisoner tied up in chains.\textsuperscript{29} Şabran, however, can also refer to the person


\textsuperscript{25} Husayni, Zubdat al-tawārīkh, 180.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibn al-Athir, Kāmil, VIII, 477. See also Bundārī, Tārikh dawlat al-Saljuq, 241.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibn al-Athir, Kāmil, IX, 36-7; Bundārī, Tārikh dawlat al-Saljuq, 199; Anon., Mujmal al-tawārīkh wa-l-qisas, ed. Malik al-Shu‘arā’, Bahār, Tehran, 1318/1939, 413. Mas‘ūd b. Muḥammad b. Malikshāh tried to wrestle power from his brother tingham, to whom Sanjar had given Iraq. In the course of the battle, the amir Qarāja had ridden a frontal attack on Sanjar’s position. Cf. EI, s.v. «Mas‘ūd b. Muḥammad b. Malikshāh,» VI, 782a [C. E. Bosworth.]

\textsuperscript{28} Syntactically, both is possible. See Reckendorf, H., Arabische Syntax, Heidelberg, 1921, 98 (§ 55).

\textsuperscript{29} See Brockelmann, C., Arabische Grammatik, Berlin, 1913, 115; Shālji, ‘A., Mawsū‘ at al-‘aḏhāb, Beirut, 1980, IV, 245, 247. Camilla Adang kindly draws my attention to the fact that many of the venerable Muslim leaders of the first generations met their violent deaths šabr\textsuperscript{m}. Ibn Ḥazm’s Naṣr al-‘arūs fī tawārīkh al-khulafa‘ has a chapter on «those who did not comply with their deposition and met death steadfastly: man lam yuḥūb līl l-khulafa‘ wa-sabarabu ḥattā qutila. This includes the caliphs ‘Uthmān, ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, Marwān b. Muḥammad, and al-Muhtadi. See Ibn Ḥazm, Rasā‘il, ed. I. ‘Abbās, Beirut, 1980-83, II, 84. During the reign of Yazid b. Mu‘awiya many of the most excellent Muslims from among the remaining saḥāba and venerable tābi‘īn were thus killed: qitilīj ūmarī ‘al-harb wa-sabrīn. See ibid., II, 140. See also Ibn al-Jawzī, al-Thahāt ‘inda l-mamārā, Beirut, 1413/1993, for a manual of edification explaining the proper attitude at the moment of death and including stories about pious men of the past who met their death šabr\textsuperscript{m} (e.g., ‘Uthmān, 244). Some hadiths declare šabr at the moment of execution (qatil al-rajud šabr\textsuperscript{m}) a propitiatory act (kaffāra) which wipes out the sins of one’s life. See al-Muttaqi al-Hindi, Kanz al-‘umāmāl, ed. al-Dimyātī, Beirut, 1419/1998, V, 123.
who does the killing, suggesting a premeditated, perhaps even ritualized act, done «in cold blood». This reading would also seem to suggest that in the case of Sanjar’s execution of Mas’ud’s amīr, Sanjar killed the amīr with his own hands.

At first sight, this might seem counterintuitive, and the analogy with divine justice appears to break down. On the Day of Judgement, God does not descend from his Throne to punish the sinners. Rather, He lets Jahannam and his minions, the punisher angels in hell (the zabāniyya), do the dirty work. Likewise, the sultān might be expected to delegate the actual business of shedding blood to his executioner, the sayyāf standing next to his throne, or to other agents of the repressive state apparatus such as the policemen (shīṭan, shurat). However, rather than undermining the elevated, aloof position of the sovereign as a superhuman ruler, his own direct involvement in the execution arguably served to strengthen the sense of terror and awe that permeated the throne scene. At least it may have appeared that way to the Saljūq sultāns who, it may be assumed, lacked in theological sophistication. Rulers of earlier periods in Islamic history appear to have doubled as executioners less frequently. Among the Saljūqs, on the other hand, not only Sanjar is known to have taken execution of enemies into his own hands. Again, this tended to happen in military tribunals that were set up after battles. In 494/1101, in the battle of Sharrā near Hamadhān between the two Saljūq pretenders Barkyārūq and Muḥammad, the latter’s vizier Mu’ayyad al-Mulk was captured by Barkyārūq’s forces. Barkyārūq resented that the vizier, whom he also suspected of Bāṭini connections, had incited Muḥammad to revolt against him. In what seems to have been an interrogation in front of the throne, Barkyārūq confronted the vizier with his alleged crimes. Mu’ayyad al-Mulk preferred to remain silent, whereupon the sultān proceeded to kill him «with his own hands».

31 Umayyad caliphs are occasionally reported to have killed their enemies, including members of their own family, with their own hands and in rather violent fashion. When the rebellious Umayyad ’Amr b. Sa’id, a former governor of Medina under Yazid, was captured by ’Abd al-Malik, the caliph first humiliated him in front of the court, then straddled his chest, butchered him and tossed his head out to ’Amr’s supporters gathered outside. See Robinson, Ch., ’Abd al-Malik, Oxford, 2005, 27. I owe this reference to Andrew Marsham. Another example is the public execution by ’Abd al-Raḥmān III of his son ’Abd Allāh discussed in Fierro, M., «Emulating Abraham: the Fāṭimid al-Qā’im and the Umayyad ’Abd al-Raḥmān III» in Ch. Lange and M. Fierro (eds.), Public violence in Islamic societies: power, discipline, and the construction of the public sphere, 7th-19th centuries CE, Edinburgh, 2009, 130-155.
Din al-Ayyūbī famously decapitated Reynald de Châtillon after the battle of Ḥuṭṭīn.33

For all we know, Šalāḥ al-Dīn’s decision to execute Reynald with his own hands was exceptional, and motivated by exceptional circumstances.34 Weighing especially heavily was that Reynald had treacherously broken a truce with the sūlṭān. In 582/1186, he had attacked a Muslim caravan near the castle of Kerak, his fortress by the Dead Sea. Treachery and rebellion also appear to have been the main reason for Sanjar to stage public acts of cruelty in front of his throne, as the examples given above indicate.35 The most well-known incident of this kind is the execution of his former chamberlain and boon companion ʿAlī Chatri, the Parasol Bearer, in 547/1152. ʿAlī Chatri had been a personal favorite of Sanjar, who had given the city of Herat to him as his fief. However, despite his protégé status, he had rebelled and plotted to overthrow Sanjar with the help of the Ghūrid king, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Ḥusayn (d. 556/1161). After giving battle to, and defeating, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn’s and ʿAlī Chatri’s combined forces, the latter was brought before the sūlṭān, and Sanjar ordered him to be cut in half by the throne, under the royal banner (be-zīr-e rāvat).36 Perhaps this was a nod to the eschatological notion that on the Day of Judgment, «God will raise a banner over each of the traitors [li-kullī ghādir] and he will be known by it, and it will be said [on the banner]: ‘This is the act of treachery [ghadra] of N.N. son of N.N.’»37 Putting it more crudely, another tradition details that those who betray the leader (imām) of the Muslim community will have planted a banner at their buttocks (yurkazu liwʿu-hu ʿinda ʾisti-hi).38

However, treachery and rebellion was not always and not automatically followed by public execution. Sanjar was quite capable of mercy, too. In 513/1119, Sanjar’s nephew Maḥmūd, who ruled over Iraq and Western Persia (r. 511-25/1118-31), was incited to rebellion against his uncle by his Chief Chamberlain, ʿAlī Bār. Sanjar invaded Iraq, defeating Maḥmūd

35 In this connection also see the contributions to this volume by L. Jones and M. J. Viguera.
38 Tirmidhī, Sunan, IV, 483.
and 'Ali Bār at Sāwa, but decided, at the request of Maḥmūd, to spare the Chief Chamberlain’s life. From the chronicles, it is difficult to tell what led Sanjar to punishment in one instance, and to mercy in another. Clues are few and far in between. In 497/1103-4, Sanjar’s vizier Abū l-Fath al-Ṭūghrā’ī was caught spinning an intrigue, trying to alienate the sulṭān from the powerful amīr and army general (ṣafaksālār) Bazghash. Reportedly, Sanjar arrested al-Ṭūghrā’ī and wanted to execute him. However, Bazghash convinced Sanjar to have mercy, reminding him that al-Ṭūghrā’ī had «the privilege of having served [la-hu ḥaqqu khidmāt]» Sanjar contented himself with exiling the vizier to Ghazna.

As these examples suggest, Sanjar did not indiscriminately execute everyone who had challenged his authority, not even in cases of high treason. On the other hand, his acts of mercy do not appear to follow a particularly consistent logic, either. Sanjar appears as the perfect embodiment of the «extensive arbitrariness» of sulṭānic governments that had arisen after the collapse of a central caliphal bureaucracy. «Even great sulṭāns», as Marshall Hodgson observed, «tended to be drastically arbitrary, splendid in their moments of generosity, inhuman in their anger or their fears.»

However, it stands to reason that this was exactly the point: in order to preserve the awe (hayba) felt by his entourage towards him, Sanjar’s acts of cruelty and of mercy relied on the element of unpredictability. Only in this way could the supreme power of the sulṭān, who qua ruler was responsible to no one but himself, be made sufficiently clear. Arbitrariness, as long as it did not descend into complete capriciousness, was part of what being a ruler was all about. Intercession (ṣhafa’ā) remained a possibility, as the examples show, but there could never be a guarantee for the offender that he would escape unharmed. Sanjar reserved the right to pardon whomever he wished, but he also took pains to announce to all and everyone, through ritual executions in front of his throne, that nobody was safe from his wrath.

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40 Ibn al-Athīr, Kāmil, VIII, 500. At times, rebellious amīrs also enjoyed the mercy of Sanjar, rather than earning the ire he showed on other occasions. For example, Sanjar ordered the treacherous amīr Kundughdi to leave Khurasān (amara-hu bi-mufāraqaṭ bilādī-hi) and settle in Ghazna. See Ibn al-Athīr, Kāmil, VIII, 478.
41 Hodgson, Venteure, II, 131.
42 Ibid., 132.
43 According to Josef van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jhd. H., Berlin, 1991-97, IV, 545, the idea of shafa’ā is «yet another proof that God was imagined in the fashion of an earthly ruler». 
Couching the sultan’s exercise of justice in such terms we are not too far away from the language of kalâm. In fact, the Iranian theory of divine kingship here appears to echo the Ash’ari doctrine of God’s attributes. This brings us back to al-Ghazâlî.

3. THE «WHIP OF FEAR»: AL-GHAZÂLÎ ON GOD’S MERCY AND WRATH

Received wisdom has it that the god of Islam is a god of mercy. After all, His most famous epithet is «the All-Forgiving Forgiver», al-rahmân al-rahîm. The Qur’an (7:156) says: «I punish whomsoever I please, but My mercy encompasses everything.»44 Later tradition clothed this into the formula of the famous hadîth qudsi: «My mercy outweighs my wrath (inna raḥmatu taghlibu ghâdâbi)».45

However, pitching God’s mercy against His wrath would hardly be necessary if both were not an essential ingredient of the religious imagination. Rudolf Otto pointed out long ago that the experience of the divine across cultures is predicated on a feeling of both loving nearness and awe-inspiring terror; the Deity is always both fascinans and tremendum.46 The god of Islam is no exception to this. The wavering between bliss and doom, between visions of eternal happiness and eternal suffering is perhaps most eloquently expressed in the isrâ’ tradition, in which the Prophet Muḥammad witnesses, in rapid succession, both the bounties bestowed on the inhabitants of Paradise and the torments meted out to the sinners in Hell.47

In the Kimiyâ-yi sa’âdat, al-Ghazâlî puts it this way:

There are people ignorant of God’s attributes who say: «God is merciful and kind [raḥim va-karîm], He shows mercy to us in every respect [be-har sifāt raḥmat mi-kunad].» They do not know that He is as kind as He is

44 Arguably, God’s violence in the Qur’an is never completely arbitrary or unaccountable. When God kills in the Qur’an, usually a justification is given. See Peña, S. and Vega, M., «La muerte dada en el Corán» in M. Fierro (ed.), De muerte violenta: política, religión y violencia en Al-Andalus, Madrid, 2004, 249-300. Whether Muslim theologians of the Middle Ages stressed God’s justice more than his sovereignty, however, is another matter.


47 See, for example, Qushayri, Mi’râj, Cairo, 1384/1964, 39-42. Another illustration, the isrâ’ version transmitted by Ibn Hibbân (d. 354/965), is found in Suyûti, al-La’âlî al-masnû’û fî l-ahâdhîth al-mawdû’û, Beirut, 1417/1996, I. On God’s anger, cf. Shahzad B., «Anger» in J. D. McAuliffe (gen. ed.), Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an.
fierce in punishment [ṣhadīd al-ʿiqāb], and they do not realize that He thrusts many people in this world into affliction, disease and hunger, despite the fact that He is kind and merciful.⁴⁸

Al-Ghazālī is arguing here that the believer must not think that God is incapable of acts of seeming cruelty. On the contrary, he says, just look at the tribulations God sends down on people in this life! One might add that God’s terror-inspiring penchant for violence is also manifest in the way in which He punishes the sinners (mufsidūn) in Hell. Al-Ghazālī himself gives plenty of examples, both in the Iḥyāʾ ʿulīm al-dīn and in his eschatological manual al-Durra al-fākhira, of God’s truly horrific punishments of the mufsidūn. A full catalogue of the tortures in Hell would go beyond the scope of this article;⁴⁹ suffice it to say that the mufsidūn are humiliated, castigated, mutilated and incinerated. But as if that were not enough, God seems to be taking a kind of malicious pleasure in literally scaring the hell out of the resurrected on the Day of Judgement.

For example, in the al-Durra al-fākhira, al-Ghazālī relates the story of a pious ascetic who is brought before God’s Throne on the Day of Judgement. The ascetic boasts that he has lived for 500 years on a desert island, doing nothing but serving God in fasting, prayer and devotion. Surely, he boldly affirms, God will reward him for his good actions. God answers that all good works of men are nothing in comparison to the blessings God bestows on them. To the ascetic, He has given birth and existence, the means of subsistence on his desert island, and He has listened to the ascetic’s prayers. Surely, God concludes, the man has no claims on Him whatsoever. He then sends the ascetic to the Fire, in what seems like a wanton act of cruelty. But the story has a pun. As the shell-shocked ascetic turns away and begins his painful descent into Hell, God calls him back, with a smile on His face, and says: «Enter the Garden by My mercy; you have been a good servant.»⁵⁰

The point of this story is that believers do not deserve reward by virtue of their actions since, in line with Ashʿarite thinking, God does not owe anything to anyone at all. What is more, the story also manifests a certain malice on God’s part. As the Qur’ān and the ḥadīth remind us, it is a grave sin (kabīra) «to think oneself safe from the malice of God

⁴⁸ Ghazālī, Ḳimiyāʾ-yi saʿādat, Tehran, 1333/1914 or 15, 57-58.
⁴⁹ For a more extensive presentation, see Lange, Ch., Justice, punishment and the medieval Muslim imagination, 144-150.
⁵⁰ Ghazālī, al-Durra al-fākhira, 92, tr. Smith, 78. It should be noted here that the ascription of the Durra to al-Ghazālī is in doubt.
Too many are heedless of God’s punishment in the hereafter: “If the believers knew about the extent of God’s punishment [‘uqūba], none of them would hope for the Garden [mā tama’a fi jannati-hi aḥad].” Approvingly citing traditions such as this one, al-Ghazālī maintains that the wrath of God is a very real prospect for the believer. As he pontificates in the Iḥyā’ ‘ulīm al-dīn, “your coming unto it [hell] is certain, while your salvation therefrom is no more than conjecture,” urging the believer to “fill up your heart, therefore, with the dread of that destination.”

How could al-Ghazālī reconcile this grim picture with the idea that God is “all-merciful”? The answer he gives in the Iḥyā’ ‘ulīm al-dīn is that in an ideal world, where everybody leads a pious and virtuous life, God’s true character as a god of mercy would shine unimpeded. However, in the current situation, where the umma is divided and wickedness widespread, the prospect of God’s punishment has a more significant role to play than the hope in His mercy. “Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” according to the Biblical adage, also preserved in the Islamic tradition (ra’s al-hikma khashiyat al-rabb).

In consequence, al-Ghazālī recommends that believers practice psychological self-flagellation with the “whip of fear” (sawt al-khawf). This injunction is no less than an instrumentalization of fear. Al-Ghazālī invokes the threat of divine punishment because he thinks this will help Muslims to achieve the unity of the umma. As Frank Griffel sums up al-Ghazālī’s reasoning, “[i]f doubts about God’s [...] ability to impose bodily

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52 Samarqandi, Tābnīh al-ghāfīlim, ed. ‘A. M. al-Wakił, Jedda, 1401/1981, I, 94. It must be admitted that such statements designed to inculcate fear, however, are usually juxtaposed with promises of salvation. Thus, the tradition in Samarqandi continues: “... and if the unbelievers knew about the extent of God’s mercy, none of them would despair of His mercy.”

53 Ghazālī, Iḥyā’, tr. Winter, 220.

54 Ibn Abī Shayba, Musannaf, ed. al-Hūt, Riyadh, 1409/1988-1989, VII, 68. Ibn Abī Shayba states that the saying is found in the Fātiḥat al-zabūr, «which is called the Zabūr of David,» i.e the Psalms. Cf. Psalm CXI, 10. See also Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, Beirut, 1401/1980-1981, I, 323 (where the saying is attributed to Ibn Mas`ūd); Muttalqī, Kanz al-‘ummāl, III, 60.


pain in the afterlife spread amongst the Muslims, the religious law may be disrespected». For al-Ghazālī, social harmony and cohesion will result from the spectre of God’s violent retribution.

What is striking about this line of reasoning is that this is, in a nutshell, how the late-medieval ideologues of royal power justified the ruler’s exercise of violence. In the mirror-for-princes tradition, for example, we find the notion that it is because society has become wicked that «rulers must rely on punishment [siyāsat] and awe [haybat].» In the old days of the rightly-guided caliphs, it may have been enough for a ruler like ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb simply to carry a whip with him in order for people to desist from antisocial behavior. However, in the current situation, the ability to inspire terror through extreme punishments is a crucial requirement of good government. As the Qābūsnāma, a 5th/11th-century mirror-for-princes states, the king must not neglect bloodshed and punishment because it instills awe in the subjects, and therefore helps to hold society together. Perhaps, in an ideal world, there would be no need for cruelty and punishment; but because Muslims live in a world where disobedience is rampant, this is what the dictate of political expediency (siyāsa) requires. As Aziz al-Azmeh has observed, most medieval Muslim theories of kingship reflect a «pessimistic anthropology», according to which «the nature of humankind is such that its orderly collective existence can only be guaranteed by unrelenting maintenance on the part of a vigilant ruler».

This kind of argument, I suggest, drew part of its legitimacy from the fact that it echoed a commonly held Ash`arite understanding of the nature of God’s justice. In other words, the «play of analogies» worked not only through the mise-en-scène of courtly rituals, but also on the conceptual level, providing a basic rationale for justice. A ruler like Sanjar, who claimed that he had received kingship of the world directly from the Lord of the World —in Sanjar’s time, Saljuq sultāns no longer relied on the intermediary role of the caliph— would not have seen a contradiction in his unpredictable and arbitrary way of dispensing mercy and punishment. One of God’s names in the Qur’ān is al-jabbār, «Violent

60 Azmeh, Muslim kingship, 115.
Compeller» (LIX, 23-4), and this was also one of the titles of the Saljuq sultans. If God inspired fear through violent punishment, then surely the sultan, God’s shadow on earth, was justified to do so, too.

4. THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF FEAR AND AL-GHAZALI’S LEGACY

Let us recall that al-Ghazali is often admired for his critical stance vis-à-vis the temporal authority of kings, and for his constant warnings to the rulers not to behave in a tyrannical way. There can be no doubt that he would have raised fundamental objections to the suggestion that Ash`ari theology played a part in justifying the arbitrariness of sultanic justice. In his treatise on the ninety-nine beautiful names of God (asmā` Allāh al-husnā), al-Ghazali makes it clear that God is called «king» (malik) in a way which no temporal ruler could ever lay claim to. While there is a human portion accruing to each name, in the final analysis, the attributes of God, al-Ghazali points out, apply to no other than Him (lā tasīru ṣifāt li-ghayri-hi). Indeed, one must guard oneself against theories of the indwelling (ḥulūl) of divine attributes in man, or against the even more heretical notion that there can be unity (ittiḥād) of the attributes of God and those of certain outstanding human individuals. For, as the Qur'an states (XLII, 1), «nothing is comparable to Him». Translated into the language of kingship theory, al-Ghazali’s treatise can be read as a firm statement against notions of divine kingship.

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61 Cf. Gimaret, D., Les noms divins en Islam, Paris, 1988, 246: «It is striking [...] that the Qur’an calls God jabbār, given that in a number of other verses (XI, 59; XIV, 15-16; XIX, 13-14; XIX, 30-32; XXVIII, 19; XL, 35) the same attribute has an entirely pejorative sense. Depending on the context, jabbār means someone proud or violent, or a combination of these two in the person of a tyrant, a despot.» (The translation is mine.)
62 Ravandi, Rāhāt al-sudūr, 125 (Malikshāh).
63 (Pseudo-)Ghazali, Nasiḥat al-mulūk, tr. Bagley, 45.
64 Ghazali, al-Maṣḥad al-asnā sharḥ asmā` Allāh al-husnā, Cairo, 1910, 28. The Maṣḥad was written sometime after the year 490/1097, that is, after the completion of the Ḥiyā`. See Bouyges, M., Chronologie des œuvres de al-Ghazālī (Algazel), ed. M. Allard, Beirut, 1959, 46. Eric Ormsby has recently suggested that it was conceived as a «manual for meditation» for al-Ghazālī’s šīfī novices in Nishapur. See Ormsby, E., Ghazālī: the revival of Islam, Oxford, 2008, 62.
66 The danger that kings would end up stylizing themselves as deities is a well-known topos in Persian literature. Firdawsi’s Shāhnāma, Iran’s national epos, tells the story of the just king Jamshid, whose power crumbled when he claimed divinity. As a result, he
Al-Ghazālī’s mistrust vis-à-vis any form of arbitrary absolutism also comes out quite clearly in the first part of the Naṣīḥat al-mulūk (NM1), the mirror-for-princes that al-Ghazālī wrote toward the end of his life, probably at the request of Sanjar. Among other didactic tales about the justice of kings, al-Ghazālī includes stories that predict divine retribution for rulers who punish «in excess of what God bade» them, that is, those rulers who assume the power to punish beyond the relatively narrow framework of ḥadd, qīṣāṣ and taʿzīr penalties provided in Muslim fiqh.\(^{67}\)

Al-Ghazālī’s clear condemnation in NM1 of the absolutism of kings, together with his strong condemnation of ideas of divine indwelling (whether in šūfiṣ or kings), is a strong argument in favor of the view that the second part of the Naṣīḥat al-mulūk (NM2), which follows in the Iranian tradition, is unlikely to have been penned by him. This opinion has been put forth forcefully by Patricia Crone and Carole Hillenbrand,\(^ {68}\) even though others have insisted on al-Ghazālī’s authorship of both parts.\(^ {69}\)

However, a shift in emphasis is perhaps required with regard to this vexing question. Regardless of whether the two parts of the Naṣīḥat al-mulūk are al-Ghazālī’s or not, it is astonishing that the generations immediately following al-Ghazālī thought him perfectly capable of having authored both parts. According to Patricia Crone, the merger of NM1 and NM2 happened «as early as the second half of the 12th century».\(^ {70}\) It appears as if neither the person responsible for adding NM2 to NM1, nor the readers of the final two-part version sensed a contradiction. Not a single Muslim scholar before the modern period appears to have doubted was overthrown and cut in half by the evil usurper Zuhāk. See EP, s.v., «Zuhāk» [E. Yarshater.]

\(^{65}\) (Pseudo-)Ghazālī, Naṣīḥat al-mulūk, 22. For earlier formulations of the same principle, cf. Juwaynī, Ghiyāth al-umam, ed. A. al-Dib, Cairo, 1401/1981-1982, §§ 321ff.; Māwardī, Naṣīḥat al-mulūk, ed. M. J. al-Haddīth, Baghdad, 1986, 365-367. It should be noted, however, that al-Ghazālī was quite ready to expand the framework of Islamic criminal law if the «interest of the state» and the umma’s unity were at stake. This is evident, for example, in his legal views of apostasy, which he gave a much broader definition than al-Shāfī’i before him. See Griffel, «Toleration and Exclusion», 353.

\(^{66}\) Crone, P., «Did al-Ghazālī write a mirror for princes? On the authorship of Naṣīḥat al-mulūk», Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam, 10 (1987), 168; Hillenbrand, C., «Islamic orthodoxy or realpolitik? Al-Ghazālī’s views on governments», Iran, 26 (1988), 92. I am inclined to follow Crone’s and Hillenbrand’s lead, since impositions of the postmodern idea of hybridity on al-Ghazālī’s identity as an intellectual strike me as somewhat forced. This does not mean, however, that I think that al-Ghazālī’s legacy is one of unadulterated egalitarianism. See below.

\(^{67}\) See Fierro, M., El libro de las novedades y las innovaciones de Abū Bakr al-Ṭūrūsī, Madrid, 1993, 69. Also leaning in this direction is Sari, The politics of knowledge, 116-117.

\(^{68}\) Crone, «Did al-Ghazālī write a mirror for princes?», 169.
that the *Naṣihat al-mulūk* was written by al-Ghazālī in its entirety. Perhaps one element in the explanation of why this was possible is that al-Ghazālī’s Ash’arite view of God’s punishment as unrestricted and unpredictable, though tied to ulterior utilitarian ends, translated so well into the language of Iranian concepts of sacred kingship. As if by osmosis, the same logic of sovereign mercy and punishment is operational in both traditions.

There is no reason to doubt that al-Ghazālī was keen to draw a clear line between the justice of God and the justice of the temporal ruler. But in the last resort, he could not escape the thought that, if God could instrumentalize fear of punishment to achieve unity among the *umma*, the sultan, God’s shadow on earth, could not be criticized for using punishment toward the same end. Two years before his death, in 503/1109, al-Ghazālī was summoned to Sanjar’s encampment in order to defend himself against certain accusations that envious colleagues had leveled against him. Al-Ghazālī wrote a letter of apology, asking to be excused, but Sanjar insisted. When al-Ghazālī finally appeared before the throne, Sanjar reportedly stood up, embraced him and invited him take a seat next to him by the throne.71 It is difficult not to appreciate the irony of the scene. Al-Ghazālī, at the end of a long political career torn between anti-absolutism and the necessity to preserve the unity of the *umma*, ended up sitting next to Sanjar’s throne, as awkwardly perhaps as *NM1* sits next to *NM2*, but not, after all, a completely unwelcome guest in the royal tent.