

Zainab al Ghazali: Life and Work as Islam's Senior Scholar and Daae

Zaynab Al-Ghazali (Arabic: زينب الغزالي; 2 January 1917 – 3 August 2005) was an Egyptian activist. She was the founder of the Muslim Women's Association (*Jamaa'at al-Sayyidaat al-Muslimaat*).

Early Life

Her father was educated at al-Azhar University independent religious teacher and cotton merchant. He encouraged her to become an Islamic leader citing the example of Nusayba bint Ka'b al-Muzaniyya, a woman fought alongside Prophet Muhammad in the Battle of Uhud. For a short time during her teens, she joined the Egyptian Feminist Union only to conclude that "Islam gave women rights in the family granted by no other society. At the age of eighteen, she founded the Jama'at al-Sayyidat al-Muslimat (Muslim Women's Association), which she claimed had a membership of three million throughout the country by the time it was dissolved by government order in 1964.

Allegiance to Hassan Al-Banna

Hasan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, invited al-Ghazali to merge her organisation with his, an invitation she refused as she wished to retain autonomy. However, she did eventually take an oath of personal loyalty to al Banna. (Mahmood 2005: 68) The fact that her organisation was not formally affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood was to prove useful after the Ikhwan was banned, as for a time al Ghazali was able to continue to distribute their literature and host their meetings in her home.^[original research?]

Theory

Zeinab al-Ghazali promulgated a feminism that was inherently Islamic. She believed in a "notion of habituated learning through practical knowledge^[1]" of Islam and the Qu'ran, and felt that women's liberation, economic rights, political rights, etc. could be achieved through a more intimate understanding of Islam.^[2] al-Ghazali also believed that a woman's primary responsibility was within the home, but that she should also have the opportunity to participate in political life if she so chose.^[2] al-Ghazali's Patriarchal Islamist stance allowed her to publicly disagree with several issues that "put her at odds with male Islamist leaders".^[3]

Muslim Women's Association

Her weekly lectures to women at the Ibn Tulun Mosque drew a crowd of three thousand, which grew to five thousand during holy months of the year. Besides offering lessons for women, the association published a magazine, maintained an orphanage, offered assistance to poor families, and mediated family disputes. The association also took a political stance, demanding that Egypt be ruled by the Qur'an.

Some scholars, like Leila Ahmed, miriam cooke, M. Qasim Zaman, and Roxanne Euben argue that Al Ghazali's own actions stand at a distance,^[4] and even undercuts some of her professed beliefs.^[5] To these scholars, among many, her career is one which resists conventional forms of domesticity, while her words, in interviews, publications, and letters which do define women largely as wives and mothers.^[6]

If that day comes [when] a clash is apparent between your personal interests and economic activities on the one hand, and my Islamic work on the other, and that I find my married life is standing in the way of Da'wah and the establishment of an Islamic state, then, each of us should go our own way. I cannot ask you today to share with me this struggle, but it is my right on you not to stop me from jihad in the way of Allah. Moreover, you should not ask me about my activities with other Mujahideen, and let trust be full between us. A full trust between a man and a woman, a woman who, at the age of 18, gave her full life to Allah and Da'wah. In the event of any clash between the marriage contract's interest and that of Da'wah, our marriage will end, but Da'wah will always remain rooted in me (al Ghazali 2006).

In justifying her own exceptionality to her stated belief in a woman's rightful role, al Ghazali described her own childlessness as a "blessing" that would not usually be seen as such, because it freed her to participate in public life. (Hoffman 1988). Her second husband died while she was in prison, having divorced her after government threats to confiscate his property. al Ghazali's family were angered at this perceived disloyalty, but al Ghazali herself remained loyal to him, writing in her memoir that she asked for his photograph to be reinstated in their home when told that it had been removed.

Life in Prison

After the assassination of Hasan al-Banna in 1949, Al-Ghazali was instrumental in regrouping the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1960s. Imprisoned for her activities in 1965, she was sentenced to twenty-five year of hard labor but was released under Anwar Sadat's Presidency in 1971.

During the imprisonment, Zainab Al-Ghazali and members of the Muslim Brotherhood underwent inhumane tortures. Al-Ghazali recounts her being thrown into a cell locked up with dogs to confess assassination attempt on President Nassir. Al-Ghazali during these periods of hardship she is reported to have had visions of Muhammed. Some miracles were also experienced by her, as she got food, refuge and strength during those difficult times.

After her release from prison, al-Ghazali resumed teaching and writing for the revival of Muslim Brotherhood's magazine, Al-Dawah. She was editor of a women's and children's section in Al-Dawah, in which she encouraged women to become educated, but to be obedient to their husbands and stay at home while rearing their children. She wrote a book based on her experience in jail.

Return of the Pharaoh

She describes her prison's experience, which included sufferings of many heinous forms of torture, in a book entitled *Ayyām min ḥayātī* (literally, "Days from my life"), published in

English under the title *Return of the Pharaoh*. The "Pharaoh" referred to is President Nasser. Al Ghazali depicts herself as enduring torture with strength beyond that of most men, and she attests to both miracles and visions that strengthened her and enabled her to survive.^[7]

Legacy

Zaynab al-Ghazali was also a writer, contributing regularly to major Islamic journals and magazines on Islamic and women's issues. Although the Islamic movement throughout the Muslim world today has attracted large number of young women, especially since the 1970s, Zaynab al-Ghazali stands out thus for as the only woman to distinguish herself as one of its major leaders.

For More Information, Please visit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zainab_al_Ghazali#Biography

