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Driving home from a family visit on Boxing Day, I tuned into a Radio 4 programme about the rise of Pentecostalism, whose adherents now account for one quarter of the world's two billion Christians. So rapid is the growth of this very modern form of Christianity that it is disturbing not only to atheists but also to the Roman Catholic Church and the Chinese Communist Party.

We might well ask: what gives it the power to challenge simultaneously both secular ideologies and traditional religious institutions? Quite simply, because it appeals to the hunger for direct personal experience of God, something that can be nourished neither by the rationality of the Enlightenment nor by authoritarian religious dogma. The phenomenon most widely associated with Pentecostalism is speaking in tongues, a manifestation of the emotional release and sense of spiritual liberation that can come about through the suspension of that critical faculty which causes us to distrust the authenticity of our own experience.

The emphasis on direct spiritual experience reminded me that this year marks the 900th anniversary of the death in AD1111 of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (known as Algazel in medieval Europe). Al-Ghazali was one of the great thinkers of the Muslim world, a polymath who wrote on a wide range of topics and in many respects was the architect of the later development of Islamic sciences. In under 50 years after their composition, his great works were exerting a tremendous influence on Jewish and Christian scholasticism, and he not only anticipated in a remarkable way John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* but also influenced St Thomas Aquinas, St Francis of Assisi and Pascal.

When I reflect on the towering figure of al-Ghazali, I invariably turn to the wisdom distilled in his great dictum that "tasting is the way to certitude". Those who taste, know. Tasting, direct experience of truth, or realisation, goes beyond what he called the conventional learning of the age, formal religious knowledge without the flavour imparted through inner perception. Rejecting also the ability of philosophy to reach truth and certainty on the basis of its own premises and assumptions, he concluded that the mystics were the heirs of the Prophet Muhammad, walking as they did the path of direct knowledge. The connection between wisdom and direct experience is of course enshrined in the English word *sapience* from the Latin *sapere*, to taste, and by extension, to discriminate, to know.

This realisation was the fruit of Ghazali's own spiritual journey and the conscious development and self-questioning it entailed. Al-Ghazali himself tells us of the moment when the protective ignorance instilled in him through conditioned thinking and unquestioning acceptance of dogma shattered like glass. Thereafter, his own development followed a path of unceasing struggle from scepticism towards expanding awareness, and ultimately a higher form of cognition not only far beyond the shackles of an imitative mentality but also beyond the limitations of knowledge derived from the study of canon law, scholasticism and intellectualism alone.

He described this knowledge as something as specific as if one had actually touched an object.

This higher organ of perception or "tasting" can be equated with that of *nous* in Orthodox Christianity (*Hesychasm*). In this tradition, it is the highest faculty in Man, to be distinguished from *dianoia*, the faculty of mere discursive reason. Through it, Man knows God or the inner essence or

principles (logoi) of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception. It dwells in the depth of the soul and constitutes the innermost aspect of the heart.

Let us be very clear, however, that al-Ghazali did not attain to his wisdom simply by suspending his critical faculties. He understood that valid refutation can only be based on thorough understanding. Known as "the proof of Islam", he was an intellectual giant who effected a conscious synthesis of Islamic theology, philosophical inquiry, ethics and mystical practice.

Through the depth and breadth of his thought, Al-Ghazali can be viewed as the prototype of the Muslim intellectual. But he was, above all, a man of wisdom, who came to understand that the only certain way to knowledge is through tasting.

Jeremy Henzell-Thomas recently retired as founding director of The Book Foundation