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# The Use of «Collective Memory» in Muḥammad al-Ġazālī's Religious Discourse – the Battle of Badr (624) and the October War (1973)

Francesca Badini

The goal of this study<sup>1</sup> is to show how the contemporary exegete Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (1917–1996)<sup>2</sup> used the Battle of Badr (624) as an element of «collective memory», to revive a «retrospective utopia» and to justify, through Qur'anic exegesis – conducted through the production of his sermons – the October War of 1973. The Battle of Badr accompanies the present and establishes itself in the collective imagination of the Muslim community (*umma*) as a «memory» strongly amplified by *da'wa* (proselytism) and often directed by public powers, in this specific case by Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president from 1970 to 1981.<sup>3</sup> The past is transformed into «collective memory» after being selected and reinterpreted according to cultural sensitivities, ethical questions, and political conveniences of the present, where political conveniences materialize in the desire to justify the Egyptian attack on Israeli power during the month of Ramadan and on Yom Kippur. The problem of fighting during the sacred month is an issue that was also addressed in the Qur'ān 2:217, and, thanks to this, al-Ġazālī succeeds in proposing

<sup>1</sup> All the translations of the sermon and the autobiography are mine. The Qur'ān translation referenced in this article is: The Qur'an, translated by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, New York 2016.

<sup>2</sup> To delve deeper into the life and thoughts of Muḥammad al-Ġazālī, see: Mohammed Moussa, Politics of the Islamic Tradition. The thought of Muhammad al-Ghazali, New York 2016; Haifaa G. Khalafallah, The al-Ghazali Enigma and why Shari'a is not Islamic Law, Cambridge 2017; Raymond William Baker, Islam Without Fear. Egypt and the New Islamists, Cambridge 2003; Ahamed Rouadjia, Les frères et la mosquée. Enquête sur le mouvement islamiste en Algérie, Paris 1990; Muḥammad al-Ġazālī, Qiṣṣat ḥayāt, in: Islāmiyyat al-Ma'rifah, 2 (1997), 155–230; Yusuf al-Qaraḍāwī, Al-Šayḥ al-Ġazālī kamā 'araftuhu (Šayḥ al-Ġazālī as I Knew Him), Cairo 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The definition is an elaboration of: Enzo Traverso, Il passato: istruzioni per l'uso. Storia, memoria, politica, Verona 2006, 9–10. For further on the topic of «collective memory», see: Paul Ricoeur, La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli, Paris 2000.

a sermon on the subject, reconnecting it to his own time and offering the *umma* a new reading of the October War.

Numerous questions confront the scholar. To which *umma* was the sermon addressed? Why did al-Ġazālī feel the need to justify Sadat's actions at that precise historical moment? What exegetical strategies did he apply to revive a historical event of the past? This contribution will attempt, through historical and textual analysis, to elaborate valid answers to these questions.

### *The two historical events*

The year 622 of the Christian era is considered in the Muslim tradition to be the initial year of the Islamic calendar. From the great emigration that the Prophet Muḥammad undertook from Mecca to Medina (*hijra*), the first *umma* was born, and this event was conceived by scholars as an essential political turning point.<sup>4</sup> The creation of the community is also attested in the Qur'anic text. Indeed, those suras that scholars tend to define as Medinan are characterized by a more normative approach, as they have the task of providing all the necessary tools for the community to self-regulate. It is precisely in the Medinan period that an important battle takes place, that will have a tremendous weight in the self-narration of the Islamic community, in the perspective of retrospective utopia.<sup>5</sup>

Fred Donner, analyzing the Battle of Badr, assumes that: «This victory must have strengthened both the morale and the economic position of Muḥammad's followers and may mark the beginning of a virtual blockade of Mecca by Muḥammad and the Medinese.»<sup>6</sup> The two key elements that allow this battle to be used as an object of «collective memory» are the fact that it was the first great victory of the Muslim community against the unbelieving Meccans, and furthermore, that what is interpreted as divine intervention allowed this victory. The Battle of Badr sees the group of followers of the Prophet Muḥammad clashed with the Meccans belonging to the Banū (tribe) Quraysh, who were numerically superior to the Prophet's army and therefore assured of victory. The tradition narrates, however, that just before the start of the battle, when the Quraysh were already approaching the battlefield, Muḥammad had confirmation of God's help in a

<sup>4</sup> Francis Edwards Peters, *Muḥammad and the Origins of Islam*, Albany 1994, 212.

<sup>5</sup> According to the concept of retrospective utopia, the era of the Prophet and the well-guided caliphs is conceived as a golden age, a perfect era, free of errors, to which today's Muslims should refer in order to return to true and pure Islam. In al-Ġazālī, this utopian element plays an important educational role: according to the author, in fact, the Muslims of the twentieth century must return to their origins, they must know and understand tradition in order to then enliven it in the contemporary world.

<sup>6</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers. At the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge 2010, 46.

dream: «A light slumber came upon him, and when he [the Prophet] woke he said <Be of good cheer, Abū Bakr; the help of God hath come to thee. Here is Gabriel and in his hand is the rein of a horse which he is leading, and he is armed for war>».<sup>7</sup> Actually, following the narration of traditional sources used by Martin Lings, shortly after the start of the battle, a host of angels sent by God came to aid the army of the faithful:

«One of the believers was pursuing a man of the enemy, and the man's head flew from his body before he could reach him, struck off by an unseen hand. Others had brief glimpses of the Angels riding on horses whose hooves never touched the ground, led by Gabriel wearing a yellow turban, whereas the turbans of the other Angles were white, with one end left streaming behind them. Quraysh were soon utterly routed and put to flight, except in small groups where the Angles had not passed.»<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, divine intervention enabled the Prophet's army to gain victory, and this was interpreted by the faithful as a clear approval of the battle they were carrying out.<sup>9</sup> Al-Ġazālī adopts this interpretation in his exegetical works, thus confirming God's support for the Muslims' actions, also in contemporary times.

Not of secondary importance for understanding the discourse regarding the Battle of Badr is its inclusion, by historians, among the factors that determined Muḥammad's rise and establishment as a ruler in Medina.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the narrative given by the sources concerning Muḥammad's life and his military campaigns, *sīras* and *mağāzī* respectively, which as we have seen historians have interpreted, strongly problematizing the question of sources<sup>11</sup>, the battle of Badr is the only one that is explicitly mentioned within the Qur'anic text, in Q. 3: 123–125: «<sup>[123]</sup> God helped you at Badr when you were very weak. Be mindful of God so that you may be grateful. <sup>[124]</sup> Remember when you said to the believers, <Will you be satisfied if your Lord reinforces you by sending down three thousand angels? <sup>[125]</sup> Well, if you are steadfast and mindful of God, your Lord will reinforce you with five thousand swooping angels if the enemy should suddenly attack you!> and God arranged it so». Also to be considered is the background of the Battle, an event that may seem insignificant, but is crucial for the analysis of Q. 2:217 that, according to sources, would have been revealed immediately after. Indeed, in the sacred month of Rajab in 624, 'Abd Allāh ibn Ġaḥṣ, a companion

<sup>7</sup> Martin Lings, *Muhammad. His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, Rochester 2006, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Lings, *Muhammad* (see note 7), 148.

<sup>9</sup> To delve into how the Battle of Badr is portrayed in the Qur'ān and the biographies of the Prophet, see: Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam. Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective*, Minneapolis 2023, 140–142.

<sup>10</sup> Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquest*, Princeton 1981, 62–63.

<sup>11</sup> For a clear review on the problematization of traditional sources, see: Massimo Campanini, Maometto. *La vita e il messaggio di Muḥammad il profeta dell'Islam*, Roma 2020, 10–19.

of the Prophet, would have killed a Meccan. Usually, hostilities during the sacred month would have been suspended. This is why Muḥammad reproaches him through he is not named in the text and why Q. 2:217 is linked to this event.

The Battle of Badr (AD 624) is one of the historical events that modern Egyptian intellectuals and the Egyptian regime have reworked as a key element of its <collective memory>, as an event to be re-enacted in contemporary times, always with a utopian gaze turned towards the past, as described before. Indeed, the rise of radical Islamism in modern Egypt, which intertwines Islam and politics and envisions Islam as a pervasive ideology in societal structures, emphasized the concept of <anti-utopia> or <retrospective utopia>. According to this reasoning, the era of the Prophet and the rightly-guided caliphs – from 610, the year of the first revelation to 660, the year of the death of the last of the four *rāshidūn* (rightly-guided caliphs) – is conceived of as a golden age, a perfect era, free of errors, to which today's Muslims should refer in order to return to true and pure Islam. This concept does not look towards the future, but rather towards the past for the construction of the future, with a full view of a retrospective utopia. It is particularly related to the concept of modernity in Islam:

«After all, the essentialist construction of Islam was thoroughly modern in the sense that modernity demanded an essentialist standardisation of the world. The modern construction of reality created a modern Islam, which was not, however, related to the present, but to the time when Islam was still Islam, i.e. to early history.»<sup>12</sup>

It is in the historical period conceived of as golden age that the Battle of Badr takes place. The Battle of Badr, therefore, is presented as an exemplary battle by the scholar Muḥammad al-Ġazālī in his exegetical work. In al-Ġazālī's commentary this utopian element plays an important educational role: according to the author, the Muslims of the twentieth century must return to their origins, they must know and understand tradition in order to then enliven it in the contemporary world. Al-Ġazālī's thought is part of a context, the Egyptian context of the twentieth century, which saw the birth and development of numerous Islamist groups, the most relevant of which was the Muslim Brotherhood, which made retrospective utopia one of its main ideological weapons. Despite the fact that al-Ġazālī had been expelled from the Brotherhood twenty years before the October War, his proselytizing activities embodied the ideology elaborated by the Brotherhood and reproduced its echoes in the mosques.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Reinhard Schulze, *Is There an Islamic Modernity?* in: Kai Hafez (ed.), *The Islamic World and the West. An Introduction to Political Cultures and International Relations*, Leiden 2000, 21–32.

<sup>13</sup> Muḥammad al-Ġazālī was one of the leading intellectuals of the Azharite branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and it was in the movement that his proselytizing began to materialize. In



The second historical event considered in this contribution is the October War of 1973. On October 6, 1973, during the month of Yom Kippur and Ramadan – which by a fortuitous coincidence both occurred in October in 1973 – the Egyptians decided to exploit the situation using the element of surprise to attack Israel.<sup>14</sup> Egypt launched its attack from the south, Syria from the north, and together they managed to break through the Israeli defense lines in the Sinai. There were neither winners nor losers from a military point of view, as the international community imposed a cease-fire, but from a strategic point of view, the Egyptians presented an image of a people who had succeeded in launching an attack on Israel and, thus, were able to start negotiations from a position of strength. The Egyptian state exploited the battle on a propaganda level by using purely religious language and also obtained the consent of the Brotherhood, a consent that was useful to the regime considering the influence the movement had on a large part of the population. It is precisely the choice of terminology that Sadat uses and his decision to attack the enemy during the sacred month, that indicates the explicit reference to a past event that must be revived in the present:

«This campaign, which the regime clothed in religious rhetoric (code-naming the attack <Badr> and using the declaration <allahu akbar> – God is greatest – as a rallying cry), enjoyed the support of most Egyptians, but especially the Islamists. It was widely seen as a triumph, with the famous <crossing of the Canal> said to have restored Egyptian dignity after the calamity of 1967.»<sup>15</sup>

While the 1973 war is historically known as the October War, the regime's use of the codename <Operation Badr> was aimed at justifying Sadat's decision to fight during the month of Ramadan. This justification targeted Islamist groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. While fighting during the holy month is generally discouraged in the Qur'ān, later analysis by al-Ġazālī was able to justify Sadat's decision through significant exegetical effort. Moreover, Egyptian domestic politics exploited the <Operation Badr> at the level of propaganda. One only has to think of the numerous celebrations in honor of the <victory> against Israel that were organized in the following years (it was during one such celebration in 1981 that Sadat was assassinated).

fact, he was sent by the Brotherhood to Egyptian mosques and soon managed to attract the attention of Ḥasan al-Bannā, whom he held in high esteem. He remains officially part of the movement until the internal schism (1953), when Ḥasan Ismā'īl al-Huḍaybī (1891–1973) – the leader who replaced Ḥasan al-Bannā after his death –, decided on December 9, 1953, to expel permanently some of the members most opposed to him, among whom was Muḥammad al-Ġazālī. For more on the internal schism of 1953, see: Richard Paul Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, New York 1969, 116–125; Martyn Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West. A History of Enmity and Engagement*, Cambridge 2018, 215–231.

<sup>14</sup> To understand the role of USA and USSR in this war, see: John L. Scherer, *Soviet and American Behavior During the Yom Kippur War*, in: *World Affairs*, 141 (1978), 3–23.

<sup>15</sup> Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West* (see note 13), 326–327.

*Contextualizing the sources in the life of Muḥammad al-Ġazālī*

The autobiography written by al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (*A Life Story*),<sup>16</sup> is a biased narration, obviously, but it made it possible to understand which themes, encounters, and historical moments were crucial for al-Ġazālī.<sup>17</sup> Thanks to this source, the reader can delve into the perception that al-Ġazālī had of his role as a preacher in 1973, one month after the October War.

At the death of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser, the Egyptian president from 1956 to 1970, the vice-president of the Arab Socialist Union, Anwar Sadat, was elected president and al-Ġazālī described him as: «an eccentric man, we [have to] leave his account to God.»<sup>18</sup> The party assumed that, since Sadat had been a follower of Nasser from the very first hour – indeed, it was Sadat who spoke on the Cairo radio on the morning of July 23, 1952, to announce the coup d’état to the population – he would maintain his predecessor’s political approach, concentrating on nationalization and on an ever-greater exclusion of Islam from the public sphere. Al-Ġazālī opens the last paragraph of *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt*, namely the one entitled «With Sadat», with a reflection on the election of the new president:

«Anwar Sadat was not regarded as the most accomplished among his colleagues following Nasser, and he may have been the weakest of them, but destiny brought him...and they [Nasser’s supporters] were satisfied with him that the situation would be in their hands, in the sense that he would be a figurehead...The truth is that the army was in their hands, the police, the media and everything that bequeathed power, while Sadat was stripped without any support.»<sup>19</sup>

Even al-Ġazālī, therefore, who welcomed the end of the Nasser era, was initially convinced that there would be little change from the past and that the line adopted by the new president would be in continuity with the previous one.

Contrary to what al-Ġazālī thought, Sadat’s aim was to overthrow the ruling political class that had taken root in the Nasser era and to change course completely with regard to economic policy and external alliances. Since October 1970, there has been an increasing distancing of Sadat from the socialists and representatives of Arab nationalism, up to the Corrective Revolution and the 1971

<sup>16</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (see note 2), 155–230.

<sup>17</sup> On the methodology used to analyze al-Ġazālī’s autobiography and on the autobiography as a genre, see: Brynjar Lia, *Autobiography or Fiction? Ḥasan al-Bannā’s Memoirs Revisited*, in: *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, 15 (2015), 199–226; Bonnie Braendlin, *Who Speaks (for) Autobiography?*, in: *The CEA Critic*, 57(1994), 9–11; Paul John Eakin, *What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?*, in: *Narrative*, 12 (2004), 121–132; Charles Berryman, *Critical Mirrors: Theories of Autobiography*, in: *Mosaic. An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 32 (1999), 71–84; David J. Gordon, *Character and Self in Autobiography*, in: *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 18 (1988), 105–119.

<sup>18</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (see note 1), 224.

<sup>19</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (see note 1), 219.

Permanent Constitution.<sup>20</sup> In the new constitution, religious education, therefore, must be a commitment of society. After initially stabilizing his power and ordering the imprisonment of those political opponents most adverse to him, Sadat decided to meet two chief religious delegations: the Azhar representatives, headed by Muḥammad al-Fahhām (*Šayḥ* of Azhar from 1969 to 1973) and the Ministry of Endowments, led by Minister 'Abd al-'Azīz Kāmil. Also present at the summit was al-Ġazālī, who came out of the meeting with Sadat very hopeful. The new president is described by al-Ġazālī as a man from whom global change could be expected. Indeed, «Sadat's warm welcome was sincere, because the outgoing gang left no love in their hearts, and it is obvious that the new president promises global change, and good things are expected of him!»<sup>21</sup>

After this first meeting, al-Ġazālī was offered a position at the Ministry of Endowments. The activities he undertook at the ministry fully reflected the sentiment of religious education expressed in Article 12 of the Permanent Constitution, and al-Ġazālī was particularly convinced of his new role. Al-Ġazālī concentrated on two activities during his years at the ministry: the training of *imāms* and proselytizing among the people. The training period devised and organized by al-Ġazālī was held at the Azhar, where the *imāms* spent a month to complete their training, studying the subjects they did not know: «and the greatest thinkers gave them the fruits of their experiences, and remained in their scientific isolation for this period, then went to work after an examination that would benefit them in the future.»<sup>22</sup> In addition to the training activities held at the Azhar, al-Ġazālī's work also spread to rural areas, where the *Šayḥ* sought to have the libraries attached to the mosques expanded, in order to make access to religious knowledge easier.

In 1973, Abdel-Halim Mahmoud (1910–1978) was appointed *Šayḥ* of the Azhar, a position he occupied until his death. As *Šayḥ* of the Azhar he organized, with the help of al-Ġazālī, a student competition for memorizing the Qur'ān. Al-Ġazālī believed strongly in this Azharite project, convinced that it could be an important step in the education of students: «So I beginning to thank him for this

<sup>20</sup> In 1971, Sadat dismissed 'Alī Šabrī (1920–1991) and other ministers or leading figures of the Nasserite left and had them arrested, triggering what was called the Corrective Revolution (*ṭawrat al-ṭaṣḥīḥ*), declaring the complete failure of the Nasserite reform project. Regarding the Corrective Revolution, al-Ġazālī reflected on the particularity of the event, emphasizing that: «It was a strange sight that those who beat the Brotherhood yesterday, today receive torments with them» (al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* [see note 1], 219). In 1971, the new constitution of Sadat, known as 'The Permanent Constitution of Egypt', was issued. The 1971 constitution, with all its subsequent additions, can be found in: *Costituzione permanente della Repubblica Araba d'Egitto*, in: *Oriente Moderno*, 51 (1971), 686–698. The original Arabic text of the constitution can be found at: <<https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2015/12/7/1971-دستور-مصر>> (July 8, 2023)

<sup>21</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (cf. note 1), 219.

<sup>22</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (cf. note 1), 220.



direction, and what he desired was accomplished, and the good man opened his business, providing that wealth to the Muslims!»<sup>23</sup> Added to this was Mahmoud's choice to entrust al-Ġazālī with the Friday sermon at the 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ Mosque. Al-Ġazālī accepted to deliver sermons at a mosque in Cairo, but with much perplexity: «So I told him: This is not a mosque...! Its characteristics have changed, and it has become an empty land between worn-out walls, and often overflowing with water [...]! He said: that is why I have chosen you!»<sup>24</sup> Al-Ġazālī described the mosque as a place full of rubbish, dirty, and without worshippers. In a short time, however, al-Ġazālī managed to attract more and more people ready to listen to him and, thanks to what he describes as «the hard struggle»<sup>25</sup>, the faithful began to number in the hundreds. The *dāʿī* (he who calls) skills demonstrated by al-Ġazālī succeed in engaging the masses and, once again, al-Ġazālī became a man of *daʿwa*. In the early years of Sadat's presidency, therefore, al-Ġazālī managed to become Supervisor of Islamic Affairs and Director of Training.

*How the Battle of Badr became <collective memory>:  
the exegesis of Muḥammad al-Ġazālī*

It is during this period of preaching at the Mosque of 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ in Cairo that al-Ġazālī focuses three of his Friday sermons on the exegesis of *Sūrat al-Baqara*.<sup>26</sup> The *asbāb al-nuzūl*<sup>27</sup>, or the circumstances of revelation, of verse 2:217 tending to justify, according to the exegetes, a clash that occurred shortly before the Battle of Badr, namely the attack of 'Abd Allāh ibn Ġaḥṣ against a caravan of Meccans.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the sermon, it is good to ask: which community is the preacher addressing? As previously mentioned, al-Ġazālī echoes the thoughts of the Brotherhood. This can be observed not only by reading his texts and sermons, but also by the positions he takes in public debates.<sup>28</sup> The *umma* to which he refers, therefore, is the same to which the Brotherhood appeals.

<sup>23</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (see note 1), 220.

<sup>24</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (see note 1), 220.

<sup>25</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt* (see note 1), 222.

<sup>26</sup> The sermons focusing on this sūra were delivered at the 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ mosque in Cairo on three Fridays (November 30, December 7, and December 14, 1973). The one considered in this article is the third, delivered on December 14, 1973.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Rippin, *The Exegetical Genre asbāb al-nuzūl: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey*, in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 48 (1985), 1–15.

<sup>28</sup> An example of this is his speech at the Cairo Book Fair in 1992, during the debate: *Islamic State or Civil State? The transcript of the speeches and the entire debate can be found in: Moḥsen Ḥāled (ed.), Miṣr bayna al-dawla al-islāmiya wa-al-dawla al-ʿilmāniyat* (Egypt between the Islamic State and the Secular State), Cairo 1992.

There is an important turning point to consider in defining this *umma*. As Gershoni points out, indeed, the change in the object of communication coincides with the transition of the Brotherhood from a simple movement to a mass movement, which coincides with the Arab revolts in Palestine (1936–1939). The communicative objective changes radically and the Brotherhood reveals itself ready to open up to the *umma* in a broader sense. Thus, the Islamic *umma* was not only considered as a national element, but went beyond the borders of the Egyptian state and defended the Palestinian populations.<sup>29</sup> Then, al-Ġazālī speaks to the audience of a mass movement and is not only focused on national events, but also on what involves foreign politics.

In his sermon, al-Ġazālī explicitly mentions the Battle of Badr and its antecedent when introducing the reasoning on 2:217. Indeed, the author argues that the sura was revealed in the first two years of the *hijra* – a fact confirmed by other exegetes<sup>30</sup> – and that this period was filled with battles, including the one at Badr: «*Sūrat al-Baqara* [emphasis added] was primarily revealed in the first two years of the *hijra* [emphasis added], and during those first two years there were battles between the polytheists and the believers at «Badr»».<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the focus is placed on the battle of the golden age – hence the reference to retrospective utopia – which Sadat drew inspiration from for the codename of the October War.

In the sermon examined here, the author emphasizes and mixes educational intent and his idea of liberation from the oppressor. The importance that al-Ġazālī gives to this sura is evident. The author argues, indeed, that *Sūrat al-Baqara* is the chapter of the Qur'ān that has «divided people based on their beliefs and paths into believers, unbelievers, and hypocrites.»<sup>32</sup> The sura, therefore, is decisive and by proceeding with the reading of the sermon, one arrives at the interpretation of verse 2:217, in which particular attention is given to the analysis of the term *fitna*.<sup>33</sup>

The analysis proposed in the sermon is not philological and does not rely on any previous commentators, but al-Ġazālī offers a crosscutting discussion of the history of the Muslim polity, making a leap between past and present. Starting

<sup>29</sup> For more on the action of the Muslim Brotherhood during the Palestinian revolt, see: Israel Gershoni, *The Muslim Brothers and the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1936–1939*, in: *Middle Eastern Studies*, 22 (1986), 367–397; James Jankowski, *Egyptian Responses to the Palestine Problem in the Interwar Period*, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 12 (1980), 1–38; Brynjar Lia, *The Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt. The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement 1928–1942*, Reading 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Alessandro Bausani, *Il Corano*, Milan 1994, 513.

<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad al-Ġazālī, *Ḥuṭba al-Šayḥ Muḥammad al-Ġazālī*, Cairo 1988, 143.

<sup>32</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Ḥuṭba al-Šayḥ Muḥammad al-Ġazālī* (see note 31), 136.

<sup>33</sup> Q. 2:217: «They ask you [Prophet] about fighting in the prohibited month. Say, «Fighting in that month is a great offence, but to bar others from God's path, to disbelieve in Him, prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and expel its people, are still greater offences in God's eyes: persecution is worse than killing»»

with the persecution of the enemies of the early Muslim community – the reference to the Banū Quraysh is evident given the premises about the Battle of Badr – the author discusses persecution in a general sense and draws from the text for his listeners a valid teaching for contemporary times. The key terms around which this part of the sermon revolves are: *fitna* (persecution),<sup>34</sup> oppression of the weak (*al-ḍağṭ ‘alā l-mustaḍ‘afīn*), and finally defensive *ḡihād*. The reasoning put forward by the author is linear. The Israeli powers were implementing a *fitna* against the Palestinians, who are conceived by al-Ġazālī as the *mustaḍ‘afūn* (weak). If one considers the expansion of the *umma* beyond national borders, the spontaneous implementation of a defensive *ḡihād* arises. In al-Ġazālī’s eyes, the same dynamics had presented themselves in the past, when the Prophet Muḥammad’s first community defended itself at Badr from the persecution of the Qurayshites, and when, also near Badr, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ġaḥṣ had killed a man during the sacred month of Rajab:

«The battle took place in the last month of Rajab, which is the sacred month! The polytheists spread wide propaganda against Muḥammad – God bless him and his companions – saying: «They have violated the sacred month, fought in it, and did such and such!» This upset the Muslims and saddened the Prophet, and there was much talk about it until the revelation came decisively refuting these claims and supporting the actions of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ġaḥṣ towards the polytheists.»<sup>35</sup>

The author defines *fitna* as the oppression of the weak and the willingness on the part of the stronger to turn them away from their religion. *Fitna* is: «the killing of leaders, the killing of souls, the expulsion of followers of doctrines, the suffocation of living consciences, the terrorizing of believers. All this is not allowed.»<sup>36</sup> In the conclusion to the sermon, al-Ġazālī relies on Q. 2:190<sup>37</sup> to give his own definition of *ḡihād*, which, in his view, is defensive, since it is a reaction to the newly defined *fitna*.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> The term is explained by al-Ġazālī in its context. The author claims to use the term *fitna* to refer to the oppression of the weak and the desire to drive them away from their religion by forcing them to renounce their faith. According to al-Ġazālī *fitna* is the action of tyrants against believers. The author uses the term *fitna*, therefore, in its Qur’anic sense (Q. 2:217), in which it has the meaning of persecution. «The term *fitna* refers to the act of exerting pressure on vulnerable individuals in an attempt to sway them from their religious beliefs and coerce them into renouncing their faith. It is the method used by oppressors to disdainfully target people of faith and compel them to forsake their religion» (al-Ġazālī, Ḥuṭba al-Šayḥ Muḥammad al-Ġazālī [see note 31], 144).

<sup>35</sup> al-Ġazālī, Ḥuṭba al-Šayḥ Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (see note 31), 144.

<sup>36</sup> al-Ġazālī, Ḥuṭba al-Šayḥ Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (see note 31), 144.

<sup>37</sup> Q. 2:190: «Fight in God’s cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits».

<sup>38</sup> «And the sura revealed that *ḡihād* for us is not aggression, but it is the struggle against oppression» (al-Ġazālī, Ḥuṭba al-Šayḥ Muḥammad al-Ġazālī [see note 31], 144).

The intent of al-Ġazālī is, therefore, to define *fiṭna* and *ġihād*, identifying Muslim society as oppressed – in the past by polytheists and in the present evidently by Western powers and Israel in this specific case-study – and pointing out to the faithful how to react based on the interpretation of the Qur'anic text. Al-Ġazālī concludes the sermon with a very clear message for his listeners: «And the sura revealed that *ġihād* with us is not aggression, but it is defensive *ġihād*.»<sup>39</sup> The justification for the attack on Israel in the holy month of 1973 lies precisely in this reasoning. Just as in Badr, in Israel too, where *ġihād* is to be considered defensive because it is caused by oppression, it is allowed even during the holy month. This is how al-Ġazālī, reviving in the memory of the faithful what tradition has always identified, as seen, as the first great Muslim victory against the oppressor and the unbeliever, constructs a 'collective memory' through which he spreads the rhetoric of the regime.

### *Conclusions*

At the beginning of his presidential term, Sadat dismissed ministers or leading figures of the Nasserite left and had them arrested, triggering what was called the Corrective Revolution (*tawrat al-taṣḥīḥ*), declaring the complete failure of the Nasserite reform project. Initially, in 1971, and in opposition to the previous Nasserian policy, Sadat had decided to release members of the Brotherhood who had been imprisoned during the previous presidency. Islam was invoked by Sadat for propagandistic and anti-Nasserian purposes, and this strategy functioned until September 1981, until the so-called Autumn of Rage.<sup>40</sup> In the decade between 1971 and 1981, Islamist groups had succeeded in gaining more and more acceptance within the population, mainly among students, and Sadat had allowed them to return to publishing their magazines, such as *al-Da'wa*. Sadat made many attempts to include Islam in politics. He did this to create a rupture with the Nasser era and the widest possible popular approval, which was extremely useful in establishing power in the early years of his presidency, when Sadat needed the support of Islamist groups. This is why he appointed al-Ġazālī, a man capable of attracting the masses with his preaching, as the preacher of the mosque 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ.<sup>41</sup> Following the reasoning proposed by the author of the sermon, indeed,

<sup>39</sup> al-Ġazālī, *Ḥuṭba al-Šayḥ Muḥammad al-Ġazālī* (see note 31), 144.

<sup>40</sup> Mustafa Hala, *I movimenti islamisti sotto Mubarak*, in: Laura Guazzone (ed.), *Il dilemma dell'Islam*, Milan 1992, 189–211, here 202.

<sup>41</sup> The same political strategy would be used by the Algerian president years later, in 1992. Chadli Bendjedid (1929–2012) was president of Algeria from 1979 to 1992. His aim in the first few years of his term was not to repress freedom in the mosques, but to be as accommodating as possible, so as to channel and thus control religious extremism. That is why, in

if one considers the extension of the *umma* beyond national borders, if defensive *ġihād* is allowed even during the sacred month of Ramadan, and if *fitna* corresponds to his definition, then Sadat justified in attacking Israel, which, in the eyes of al-Ġazālī, was implementing *fitna*, even during the sacred month. This possibility is justified by the revival of a «collective memory» linked to the Battle of Badr. The real issue, in addition to understanding how al-Ġazālī managed to interpret the Qur'anic verse (2:217) in favor of the October War using the battle of Badr as a «collective memory» element, is to understand why he did it. The motivations are in my opinion mainly two. On the one hand, one witnesses the regime's acceptance of al-Ġazālī's proselytizing activity. This, although temporary, greatly benefited the author who was able to preach openly and thus dedicate himself to spreading the values of the Brotherhood. But on the other hand, there is certainly something more, namely the importance that Israel had for the Brotherhood itself. The October War was being waged against one of the main enemies of the Muslim Brotherhood, the same enemy against which it had fought when it had become a mass movement. There was a dual purpose behind the Ġazālīan preaching. One aspect was to maintain continuity in their preaching within the country's internal politics until 1979. The other aspect involved foreign policy and the idea of a Muslim community beyond Egyptian borders, which also influenced the choice of al-Ġazālī's preaching.

It is evident that al-Ġazālī consciously supported the October War and consciously referred to a well-known event in tradition, such as the Battle of Badr in order to justify this support. Not all of al-Ġazālī's sermons are related to the exegesis of a single sura, and above all, not all of them are characterized by such a detailed analysis of a single verse. Considering the date of the sermon, just over two months after the October War, it can be argued that in this specific case of emphasizing an event from «collective memory» belonging to tradition, there is a conscious use of an element from the past that made possible to approve a political and military decision in the present: «remembering, whether of personal experiences or of events in the past of a society, is a mental activity of a subject who is conscious of performing it.»<sup>42</sup>

*The Use of «Collective Memory» in Muḥammad al-Ġazālī's Religious Discourse – The Battle of Badr (624) and the October War (1973)*

This article aims to explore the possibility of analyzing the concept of retrospective utopia in Muḥammad al-Ġazālī's (1917–1996) predication as a reconstruction of «collective memory».

1992, Bendjedid invited al-Ġazālī to the Multaqā l-fikr al-islamī, the Conference on Islamic Thought.

<sup>42</sup> Amos Funkestein, *Memory and Historical Consciousness*, in: *History and Memory*, 1 (1989), 5–26, here 6.



The analysis considers the sermon that al-Ġazālī presented at the 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ mosque in Cairo on 14 December 14, 1973, concerning verse Q. 2:217. The analysis of the sermon under consideration presents the exegetical strategy with which al-Ġazālī managed to justify the events related to the October War of 1973, i.e. the attack by Egyptian forces during what was considered the holy month, at the Battle of Badr in 624, an event reworked by Islamic tradition and presented to the Islamic community from the perspective of <collective memory>. In this contribution, I present the two historical events considered, contextualize al-Ġazālī's preaching activity in 1973, hinting at the relationship between the exegete and the political representation of the Egyptian state in those years, and then analyze the sermon considered, explaining why the author chose to justify the actions of President Anwar Sadat (1918–1981) through religious proselytism and the recall of <collective memory>.

Muḥammad al-Ġazālī – October War of 1973 – Battle of Badr – Islamic Community – Islamic Tradition – Egyptian State – Anwar Sadat.

*Die Verwendung eines <kollektiven Gedächtnisses> im religiösen Diskurs von Muḥammad al-Ġazālī – die Schlacht von Badr (624) und der Oktoberkrieg (1973)*

Ziel dieses Artikels ist es, die Möglichkeit auszuloten, das Konzept der retrospektiven Utopie in Muḥammad al-Ġazālī's (1917–1996) Predigt als Rekonstruktion des <kollektiven Gedächtnisses> zu analysieren. Die Analyse betrachtet die Predigt, die al-Ġazālī am 14. Dezember 1973 in der 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ-Moschee in Kairo über den Vers Q. 2:217 hielt. Die Analyse der betrachteten Predigt zeigt die exegetische Strategie, mit der es al-Ġazālī gelang, die Ereignisse im Zusammenhang mit dem Oktoberkrieg von 1973 zu rechtfertigen, d. h. den Angriff der ägyptischen Streitkräfte während des als heilig angesehenen Monats, der Schlacht von Badr im Jahr 624, ein Ereignis, das von der islamischen Tradition aufgearbeitet und der islamischen Gemeinschaft aus der Perspektive des <kollektiven Gedächtnisses> präsentiert wurde. In diesem Beitrag stelle ich die beiden betrachteten historischen Ereignisse vor, kontextualisiere al-Ġazālī's Predigtstätigkeit im Jahr 1973 und weise auf die Beziehung zwischen dem Exegeten und der politischen Repräsentation des ägyptischen Staates in jenen Jahren hin. Anschließend analysiere ich die betrachtete Predigt und erkläre, warum der Autor sich dafür entschied, die Handlungen von Präsident Anwar Sadat (1918–1981) durch religiösen Proselytismus und durch den Rückgriff auf das <kollektive Gedächtnis> zu rechtfertigen.

Muḥammad al-Ġazālī – Oktoberkrieg 1973 – Schlacht von Badr – Islamische Gemeinschaft – Islamische Tradition – Ägyptischer Staat – Anwar Sadat.

*L'utilisation de la <mémoire collective> dans le discours religieux de Muḥammad al-Ġazālī – la bataille de Badr (624) et la guerre d'Octobre (1973)*

Le but de cet article est d'explorer la possibilité d'analyser le concept d'utopie rétrospective dans la prédication de Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (1917–1996) comme une reconstruction de la <mémoire collective>. L'analyse porte sur le sermon qu'al-Ġazālī a présenté à la mosquée 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ du Caire le 14 décembre 1973, à propos du verset Q. 2:217. L'analyse du sermon en question présente la stratégie exégétique avec laquelle al-Ġazālī a réussi à justifier les événements liés à la guerre d'Octobre 1973, c'est-à-dire l'attaque par les forces égyptiennes pendant ce qui était considéré comme le mois sacré, à la bataille de Badr en 624, un événement retravaillé par la tradition islamique et présenté à la communauté islamique sous l'angle de la <mémoire collective>. Dans cette contribution, je présente les deux événements historiques considérés, je contextualise l'activité de prédication d'al-Ġazālī en 1973, en faisant allusion à la relation entre l'exégète et la représentation politique de l'État égyptien dans ces années-là, puis j'analyse le sermon considéré, en expliquant

pourquoi l'auteur a choisi de justifier les actions du président Anouar el-Sadate (1918–1981) par le prosélytisme religieux et par le rappel de la «mémoire collective».

Muḥammad al-Ġazālī – guerre d'octobre 1973 – bataille de Badr – communauté islamique – tradition islamique – État égyptien – Anouar el-Sadate.

*L'uso della «memoria collettiva» nel discorso religioso di Muḥammad al-Ġazālī – la battaglia di Badr (624) e la guerra d'ottobre (1973)*

L'obiettivo di questo articolo è di esplorare la possibilità di analizzare il concetto di utopia retrospettiva nella predicazione di Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (1917–1996) come una ricostruzione di una «memoria collettiva». L'analisi esamina il sermone che al-Ġazālī presentò alla moschea 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ del Cairo il 14 dicembre 1973, a proposito del versetto Q. 2:217. L'analisi del sermone in esame presenta la strategia esegetica con la quale al-Ġazālī riuscì a giustificare gli eventi legati alla guerra di ottobre del 1973, ovvero l'attacco delle forze egiziane durante quello che era considerato il mese sacro, alla battaglia di Badr del 624, evento rielaborato dalla tradizione islamica e presentato alla comunità islamica dalla prospettiva della «memoria collettiva». In questo contributo presento i due eventi storici considerati, contestualizzo l'attività di predicazione di al-Ġazālī nel 1973, accennando al rapporto tra l'esegeta e la rappresentazione politica dello Stato egiziano in quegli anni, e analizzo poi il sermone considerato, spiegando perché l'autore scelse di giustificare le azioni del presidente Anwar Sadat (1918–1981) attraverso il proselitismo religioso e il richiamo alla «memoria collettiva».

Muḥammad al-Ġazālī – guerra d'ottobre del 1973 – battaglia di Badr – comunità islamica – tradizione islamica – Stato egiziano – Anwar Sadat.

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