Al-Ghazali's Sufi Thought as a Foundation of Contemporary Islamic Spirituality: Evidence from Classical and Modern Islamic Discourses

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Abstract: This article explores the Sufi philosophy of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as articulated in al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal. It examines the continuing relevance of al-Ghazali's Sufi thought to contemporary Islamic spirituality, with particular emphasis on education and the promotion of religious moderation. Employing a qualitative library-based research method, the study analyzes classical and modern primary and secondary sources. The findings reveal that spiritual purification (tazkiyat al-nafs) and the harmonization of intellect and inner conscience constitute fundamental pathways toward ma'rifatullah. Al-Ghazali's ideas remain significant for cultivating an Islamic spirituality that is rational, moderate, and ethically grounded. These insights advance Islamic studies and educational practice, especially in the design of a holistic educational framework capable of responding to modern spiritual challenges.

Keywords: al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal, Sufism, Islamic Spirituality, Moderation, Islamic Education.

Introduction

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (450–505 AH / 1058–1111 AD) is known as one of the greatest thinkers in Islamic intellectual history who successfully combined rationality and spirituality. [1]Through his works, especially al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal, he became an essential figure in the formation of an Islamic scientific paradigm that balances reason and heart. This work not only reflects al-Ghazali's personal spiritual journey but also serves as an intellectual reflection on the epistemological crisis that hit the Islamic world at that time. [2]In al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal, al-Ghazali evaluates various paths of

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[1]MM Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy* , 1963.
[2]Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1967), 5–

seeking truth—from theology and philosophy to Sufism—until finally finding peace and certainty of knowledge through Sufism as a source of knowledge of God.

Amidst the advancement of modern science and technology, the Muslim community faces new challenges in the form of a spiritual crisis and disorientation of values. This phenomenon manifests itself in tendencies toward materialism, hedonism, and identity fragmentation, weakening human transcendental awareness. In this context, al-Ghazali's Sufi thought regains relevance as a guide for harmonizing the intellectual and moral dimensions of modern life: he accepts rationality, but rather positions it as an instrument toward higher spiritual knowledge, namely, ma'rifatullah (the knowledge of God).[3]

Several studies have reviewed al-Ghazali's contributions to Islamic spiritual epistemology and ethics. For example, Abdullah Saeed (2018) emphasizes the need for a rational approach grounded in Islamic spirituality, [4]while Zainuddin and Ningsih (2020) demonstrate the relevance of al-Ghazali's Sufism to the character development of students in the modern era. [5]However, studies that systematically connect the key concepts in al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal with contemporary models of spirituality and their application in modern Islamic educational practice are still relatively limited. In other words, there is a research gap in the lack of comparative studies that place al-Ghazali's ideas in direct dialogue with modern thinkers or models of spirituality to demonstrate his uniqueness and contribution to addressing today's spiritual challenges.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to: (1) explain the main concepts of al-Ghazali's Sufism in al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal; (2) examine its relevance to contemporary Islamic spirituality and educational practices; and (3) explain al-Ghazali's conceptual contributions in formulating a holistic Islamic educational model oriented towards ethics and life balance. To guide the discussion, this study formulates the research questions explicitly as follows:

Research question: How can the concepts of Sufism put forward by al-Ghazali in al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal be applied or contextualized to

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[3]Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: Knowledge, Love, and Action in the Islamic Path* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 23.

[4]Abdullah Saeed, "Islamic Thought and Spiritual Ethics," 2018.

[5]Zainuddin & Ningsih, "Al-Ghazali's Sufism and Character Education," 2020.

build contemporary Islamic spirituality, especially in the realm of education and religious moderation?

Thus, this study not only conducts a historical analysis of the text but also presents a comparative and applied study that positions al-Ghazali's Sufism as an ethical and pedagogical foundation for addressing modern spiritual challenges.

To strengthen the study's novelty and originality, this study will include a comparative analysis of al-Ghazali's ideas with several contemporary thinkers/models of spirituality. The goal is not simply to juxtapose, but rather to demonstrate the uniqueness of al-Ghazali's approach to balancing reason and heart, and its implications for contemporary educational practices and religious moderation. For example, comparisons can be made with: (a) contemporary models of spiritual pedagogy in contemporary Islamic studies; and (b) the ideas of modern thinkers who emphasize the reconciliation of rationality and spirituality (e.g., figures of contemporary Islamic thought). This comparative approach will clarify al-Ghazali's contribution to contemporary challenges in theory building.

Literature Review

Studies on al-Ghazali's thought have developed widely in both the Islamic world and the West. Abdullah Saeed emphasized the importance of strengthening a rational approach to the sources of Islamic teachings without abandoning the spiritual dimension as the foundation of religious experience. [6]This view demonstrates that a complete understanding of Islam can only be achieved if reason and heart collaborate in the process of interpreting religious reality.

Research by Zainuddin and Ningsih highlights al-Ghazali's contribution to Sufism's role in character formation in modern Islamic education. [7]By applying spiritual values such as mujahadah (reflection), muhasabah (introspection), and tazkiyatun nafs (self-respect), Islamic education is believed to shape students' moral awareness, personal integrity, and emotional maturity. These findings argue that Sufism is not merely a theoretical discourse but has direct implications for contemporary pedagogical design.

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[6]Abdullah Saeed, *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'an and Sunnah* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[7]M. Zainuddin and L. Ningsih, "The Relevance of Imam al-Ghazali's Sufi Thought in Modern Islamic Education," *Journal of Religious Studies* 21, no. 2 (2020): 148–150.

Furthermore, Mohammad Hashim Kamali emphasized that the principle of wasatiyyah (moderation) aligns with al-Ghazali's concept of balance between sharia and social reality. [8]By highlighting the harmony between law, spirituality, justice, and welfare, Kamali positions al-Ghazali as a key figure in modern discourse on Islamic legal ethics and the practice of religious moderation. This reinforces the reading that al-Ghazali's thought is not only influential in the classical Islamic intellectual tradition but continues to serve as a reference for responding to spiritual and social challenges in the modern era.

Research Methods

This research is qualitative with a library research approach. The analytical techniques used are explained as follows to enhance methodological transparency:

1. Source collection: Selection and collection of primary sources (the text *of al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* in reliable translations/criticisms and classical editions) and secondary sources (modern academic studies, journal articles, and literature related to spiritual education). All sources will be systematically documented in the bibliography.

2. Textual-interpretive (hermeneutic) analysis: Primary texts were analyzed in depth using a hermeneutic approach to interpret the meaning of key terms (e.g., tazkiyah, ma'rifah, qalb) in historical and conceptual contexts. This process included identifying themes, categorizing concepts, and reconstructing al-Ghazali's arguments.

3. Comparative conceptual analysis: Once key concepts have been identified, a conceptual comparison is conducted between al-Ghazali's thought and relevant contemporary models/thoughts to assess similarities, differences, and al-Ghazali's potential contributions to contemporary issues (e.g., spiritual education curriculum, religious moderation). This technique uses a thematic comparison matrix to map points of contact and gaps.

4. Source triangulation: To ensure the validity of the interpretation, the author conducted triangulation by combining findings from primary texts, secondary studies, and relevant empirical literature (e.g., case studies of spirituality-based character education). This triangulation strengthens claims regarding the relevance and applicative implications of al-Ghazali's thought.

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[8]Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Moderation in Islam: Balance between Sharia and Spirituality* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Press, 2015).80

5. Critical reflection and applied inferences: Based on the analysis, the author draws inferences regarding how al-Ghazali's principles can be adapted within the framework of holistic Islamic education and religious moderation policies. Each inference will be distinguished between (a) conclusions based directly on the text, and (b) applicable recommendations that are interpretive in nature and require further fieldwork.

The explanations of the methods above are designed to increase methodological transparency, so readers can trace the analysis steps and assess the strength of the research arguments.

Results and Discussions

Al-Ghazali experienced an intellectual existential crisis that made him aware of the limitations of human reason in achieving metaphysical truth. In *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal, he concluded that intellectual certainty can only be achieved through direct spiritual experience and the* purification of the soul. For al-Ghazali, Sufism was not merely a ritual practice, but a process of psychological and existential transformation that leads humans to ma'rifatullah. The concept of tazkiyatun nafs (self-purification) is at the heart of his ideas, in which individuals are guided to cleanse their souls of arrogance, hedonism, and various traits that hinder a spiritual connection with God.

Compared with other Sufi figures, such as Jalal al-Din Rumi, there is a similarity in that the spiritual journey is a process of inner union with the Divine will. However, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the balance between reason and the heart, while Rumi emphasizes love as the driving force of the spiritual journey, in contrast to Ibn 'Arabi, who emphasizes the ontological aspect of wahdat al-wujud. Al-Ghazali still positions reason as a legitimate epistemological instrument, provided it is directed towards actual knowledge. This comparison demonstrates the uniqueness of al-Ghazali's approach, which positions Sufism as a synthesis of rationality and spirituality.

In the context of contemporary Islamic education, al-Ghazali's Sufi principles can be applied by integrating moral values and self-awareness into the learning process. For example: (1) the habit of muhasabah (self-reflection) at the end of the learning process; (2) experiential learning, where students are trained to feel the relationship between knowledge, actions, and moral impact; and (3) a personal mentoring approach or spiritual mentoring as practiced in the halaqah tradition. Zainuddin and Ningsih (2020) showed that applying these principles can foster spiritual

awareness in students without eliminating rationality. This approach can serve as a model of character education that emphasizes moral awareness, personal integrity, and the balancing of intellectual and emotional dimensions.

Thus, al-Ghazali's Sufi thought can be understood as a productive theoretical framework for the development of modern Islamic education, especially in responding to the challenges of materialism, spiritual saturation, and the crisis of religious identity in the global era.

Conclusion

Al-Ghazali's Sufi thought in *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* demonstrates that attaining actual truth is not sufficient through the work of reason alone, but must be supported by the purification of the soul as the foundation of spiritual experience. For al-Ghazali, Sufism is a synthesis of knowledge and practice, between sharia and reality, between the work of reason and inner intuition. This concept offers a crucial contribution to the development of Islamic spirituality that is rational, transcendental, and applicable.

The original contribution of this study lies in its comparative analysis of al-Ghazali's thought and contemporary models of spirituality, and in their application in modern Islamic education. Thus, this research strengthens Sufism's position not only as an individual experience but also as an ethical and pedagogical framework for building students' character and spiritual awareness.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis relies on a literature review and therefore does not examine the implementation of Sufi values in practice. Second, the study does not delve into the variations in student responses to Sufi approaches across different educational institutions. Therefore, future research could develop empirical studies based on classroom observations, case studies in Islamic boarding schools, or in-depth interviews to assess the practical effectiveness of al-Ghazali's Sufi approach.

Further research can also expand the comparison with other modern thinkers, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Fazlur Rahman, as well as with contemporary spiritual education approaches, to make the mapping of al-Ghazali's contributions more comprehensive and measurable.

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Additional Resources (Post 2020)

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