

Al-Ghazali's Thoughts and Its Contributions to the Islamic Theological Tradition: Epistemic Crisis and Theological Synthesis

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Article	Abstract
Article History : Received : Oct., 22, 2025 Reviewed : Oct., 29, 2025 Accepted : Dec., 12, 2025 Published : Dec., 23, 2025	Departing from the complexity of the Islamic theological landscape of the 10th to 11th centuries AD, which was marked by tensions between philosophical rationalism, theological doctrine, and spiritual needs, this study aims to explore Al-Ghazali's thoughts and his contributions to the Islamic theological tradition. By using qualitative methods through a literature study of Al-Ghazali's works, this study found that Al-Ghazali responded to the epistemic crisis of his time through a fundamental critique of Hellenistic philosophy in <i>Tahafut al-Falasifah</i> and reconstructed the foundations of Islamic belief through a synthesis of sharia, aqidah, and Sufism in <i>Ihya Ulum al-Din</i> . Al-Ghazali's synthesis is a holistic and applicable theological paradigm that combines three main pillars of the Islamic tradition into a coherent framework. Al-Ghazali's contribution lies in his success in this synthesis, which not only placed the spiritual dimension at the core of belief but also bridged the dialectic between reason and revelation. Ultimately, Al-Ghazali's thought provided a fundamental contribution to integrating the Sunni tradition and creating balance in the discourse of the Islamic theological tradition.
Keywords: <i>Al-Ghazali's Dialectics, Al-Ghazali's Thought, Islamic Theology.</i>	

INTRODUCTION

Departing from the complexity of the theological landscape of Islam in the 10th to 11th centuries AD, where the dialectic between the rationalism of Hellenistic philosophy, the theological doctrines of the Mu'tazilah and Ash'ariyah schools, and the need for authentic spiritual experience created an epistemological need (Baidhawiy, 2011, p. 145). This situation raises fundamental questions about the ability of reason to achieve solid religious conviction and opens the door to skepticism. Amid this crisis of faith, Al-Ghazali emerges not only as a critic who sharply criticized the weakness of philosophical metaphysics in his book "*Tahafut al-Falasifah*," but also as an architect who attempted to reconstruct the foundations of Islamic knowledge (Wardani, 2014, p. 3).

Al-Ghazali's critique was a deconstructive measure to clear the field of claims deemed erroneous. The profound problem Al-Ghazali attempted to address at the time was the failure of individual disciplines, such as philosophy, theology, and Sufism (Yaqub, 2013, p. 70). Al-Ghazali solved this problem by creating a complete and applicable synthesis between sharia, aqidah, and Sufism in his various works such as "*Ihya Ulum al-Din*" and then made a significant contribution to the development of Islamic theological thought (Sholeh, 2009, pp. 43–44).

A review of previous research on Al-Ghazali's thoughts and his contribution to the Islamic theological tradition, such as by Muhdi Ali et al., explains that Al-Ghazali actively shaped the discourse of theology, especially from the Asy'ariyah school, with an approach that combined rationality and the authority of revelation (Ali, Muhdi and Sa'ad, Suadi and Anwar, 2025, pp. 174–175). Meanwhile, Khudori Sholeh emphasized that Al-Ghazali criticized the tendency of the mutakallimun to rely on reason in an extreme way and encouraged a balance

between logical argumentation and adherence to sharia and upheld the principle of *wasathiyyah* in the Islamic theological tradition (Sholeh, 2013, p. xiv).

Saidin Hamzah et al., then described Al-Ghazali's intellectual legacy as a primary reference in contemporary Islamic scholarly studies. Al-Ghazali's thought has impacted aspects of Islamic theology, ethics, and spirituality from the past to the present, addressing the challenges of the times and establishing a strong tradition of moderation (Saidin Hamzah et al., 2024, p. 116). On the other hand, Ahmad Sodik also explained that for Al-Ghazali, revelation was the primary authoritative source, compared to reason alone. Al-Ghazali pointed out the limitations of philosophers in explaining the phenomena of divinity, the universe, and the afterlife. He also urged Islamic theologians and philosophers to be based on revelation and not rely entirely on rationalism (Sodik, 2017, p. 36).

Based on the literature review in this article, it can be identified that the main research gap lies in the lack of in-depth exploration of the dialectical relationship between Al-Ghazali's crisis of faith and spiritual experience, and the theological response he developed in his work. Previous studies have adequately mapped Al-Ghazali's contribution to forming a synthesis between reason and revelation and the principle of *wasathiyyah* in Islamic theology. However, this study reveals that the aspects of Al-Ghazali's epistemic and spiritual crisis as his intellectual background have not received adequate analysis. The majority of the literature tends to focus on the systematic solutions Al-Ghazali offers, without deeply exploring how his experiences of doubt, spiritual search, and internal transformation influenced the construction of Al-Ghazali's theological thought.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical-hermeneutic approach through library research to analyze Al-Ghazali's thoughts and their contributions to the Islamic theological tradition. This approach is employed to interpret Al-Ghazali's texts contextually by relating his epistemic crisis, intellectual journey, and theological synthesis to the historical and doctrinal dynamics of classical Islam.

The research was conducted through an intensive study of textual sources accessed from academic libraries and reputable online databases. The research objects consist of primary texts authored by Al-Ghazali, particularly *Tahfut al-Fal-sifah*, *Iyya' 'Ulum al-Din*, and *al-Munqidh min al-Galil*, supported by secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books discussing his theology, philosophy, and Sufism.

Data were collected using a documentation technique, with the researcher acting as the main instrument guided by an analytical framework focusing on epistemology, dialectical critique, and theological synthesis (Hardani et al., 2023, p. 109). Data analysis was conducted through thematic hermeneutic analysis, involving (1) close textual reading, (2) thematic categorization of key concepts, (3) interpretative analysis by linking texts with historical and intellectual contexts, and (4) synthesis of findings to formulate Al-Ghazali's contribution to Islamic theology. The credibility of interpretation was ensured through source triangulation and comparison of scholarly perspectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Al-Ghazali: Phases of Life

Life Phase	Period	Key loci and events	Characteristics of intellectual thinking and activity	Works and contributions
Early education and intellectual formation	Youth to early adulthood (before 1095)	Tus and Naisabur (intellectual centers). Studied	Study Fiqh, Theology (Kalam), and Philosophy in depth. Be critical and actively debate various ideas.	Membangun fondasi pengetahuan yang kuat untuk tahap selanjutnya.

		under Imam Al-Juwaini.		
Crisis of doubt and spiritual search	Around 1095 AD	Baghdad (leaving his professorship at the Nizamiyyah Madrasah). Undergoing a spiritual journey (<i>suluk</i>).	Doubting the authority of philosophy and rational science alone. An existential crisis that drives the search for ultimate truth through inner experience.	The decision to leave behind academic and worldly luxuries.
Synthesis and writing of monumental works	After the spiritual crisis (circa 1096-1106 AD)	Sham (Damascus, Jerusalem), Hijaz, and Tus. Productive writing period.	Integrating Islamic teachings (jurisprudence and theology) with spiritual experience (Sufism). Emphasizing that knowledge without practice and purification of the heart is empty.	Ihya Ulum al-Din (Reviving Religious Sciences), Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal.
Final reflection and teaching	Final stage of life (around 1106-1111 AD)	Returned to Tus. Founded a khaniqah (Sufi Islamic boarding school) and taught.	Focusing on spiritual and Sufi education, acting as a bridge connecting various traditions of Islamic thought (jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and Sufism).	Advanced Sufi works, direct teaching to students.
Legacy and influence	11th century AD to present	The Islamic and Western Worlds.	Distinctive Features: Rejecting the separation between reason, spirituality, and sharia. Unique Contribution: Reconciling Sufism with Islamic orthodoxy and providing constructive criticism of Hellenistic philosophy.	Enriching Islamic theology with an inner dimension, influencing thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, recognized as Hujjatul Islam

Table 1. Al-Ghazali: Phases of Life

Al-Ghazali, whose full name was Abu Hammid Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali, a prominent philosopher, theologian, and Sufi scholar of the 10th to 11th centuries, had a profound influence on the Islamic tradition of thought. Born in 1058 in the Persian city of Tus, Al-Ghazali is known as one of the most influential figures in Islamic intellectual history. His works not only transformed views on Islamic theology but also influenced Western thought. In this context, it is important to understand the phases of Al-Ghazali's life and his interactions with other Muslim theologians (Lidia Artika et al., 2023, p. 32).

Al-Ghazali experienced various phases in his life, from his early education and his stage of doubt to his profound spiritual search. Each of these phases not only shaped his thinking but also influenced how he interacted with the intellectual traditions of his time. Therefore, understanding these phases is crucial for analyzing the contribution of Al-Ghazali's thought to the development of Islamic theology. As a theologian, Al-Ghazali not only focused on the rational aspects of religion but also integrated spiritual and mystical experiences. This distinguished Al-Ghazali from many other Muslim theologians of his time, who prioritized a rational approach with reason (Ahmad, 2005, pp. 56–57).

Al-Ghazali's life can be divided into several important stages that reflect his intellectual and spiritual journey. The first stage is his early education in the cities of Tus and Naisabur, which were intellectual centers of his time. Here, Al-Ghazali studied with various teachers, including Imam Al-Juwaini, a prominent theologian. This early education provided him with a deep knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and philosophy. At this stage, it is important to note that Al-Ghazali did not simply passively accept teachings but actively discussed and questioned various ideas, demonstrating his critical intelligence (Fikri, 2022, p. 35).

The second stage of his life was a period of profound doubt. After reaching the pinnacle of his academic career, Al-Ghazali began to doubt the value of the rational knowledge and philosophy he had studied. This feeling prompted him to leave his position as a professor at the Nizamiyyah and embark on a spiritual journey. During this journey, Al-Ghazali underwent a profound search, in which he sought to discover the ultimate truth. This experience profoundly influenced his thinking and became the basis for his later spiritual works (Fikri, 2022, p. 37).

After passing through a phase of doubt, Al-Ghazali entered a third phase, where he began writing important works that integrated his spiritual experiences with theological knowledge. These works, such as the *"Ihya Ulum al-Din,"* emphasized the importance of spiritual experience in understanding religion. Al-Ghazali argued that knowledge unbalanced by spiritual experience would result in shallow understanding. This approach became one of the hallmarks of his thought and contributed significantly to the development of Islamic theology (Yaqub, 2013, p. 75).

The final phase of Al-Ghazali's life was one of retirement and reflection. Having reached the peak of his career, he chose to spend time in his hometown, continuing to write various works and teach his teachings. During this phase, Al-Ghazali also began to focus on the development of Sufi thought, further enriching the Islamic theological tradition. During his time, Al-Ghazali served not only as a theologian but also as a bridge between various traditions of thought within Islam (Alijafari & Hajebrahimi, 2023, p. 75).

Based on the description above, the phases of Al-Ghazali's life depict a complex and profound journey, reflecting not only his intellectual development but also a profound spiritual quest. This analysis reveals how personal experiences and historical context influenced Al-Ghazali's thinking and his contributions to Islamic theology.

Al-Ghazali's Works

Al-Ghazali, a Muslim thinker and theologian, has many works that make significant contributions to Islamic thought (Ruslan, 2023, p. 2). One of his most famous works is *"Ihya Ulum al-Din,"* which consists of four main sections: worship, etiquette, knowledge, and morals. In this book, Al-Ghazali explains the importance of integrating spiritual aspects and religious practices (Al-Ghazali, 2011). In addition to *"Ihya Ulum al-Din,"* Al-Ghazali also wrote *"Tahafut al-Falasifah."* In this book, Al-Ghazali criticized philosophical views that were considered contrary to Islamic teachings, especially the views of philosophers such as Aristotle and Avicenna. Al-Ghazali argued that human reason has limitations and cannot understand everything without revelation (Al-Ghazali, 1972).

Al-Ghazali's other works include *"al-Munqidh min al-Dallal,"* in which he recounts his intellectual journey and search for truth. In this book, he also expresses his doubts about various schools of thought and ultimately finds solace in Islamic teachings. According to Al-Ghazali, theological knowledge serves only as a defensive tool to protect the faith of the laity from the doubts raised by heretical groups. But fails as an offensive tool to reach spiritual truth. His dialectical method is evident in the way he uses the logic of kalam itself to demonstrate its limitations, especially when dealing with metaphysical issues that transcend the scope of discursive reason. This demonstrates the importance of spiritual experience in the context of theological thought. Al-Ghazali also provides concrete examples of how spiritual experience can shape one's understanding of religion (Al-Ghazali, 1996).

Al-Ghazali's works focus not only on theological aspects but also encompass ethics and morality in religion. In his book *"Kimiya al-Sa'adah,"* Al-Ghazali discusses how to achieve true happiness through self-control and character development. Overall, Al-Ghazali's works reflect his profound and comprehensive thinking. Through his writings, Al-Ghazali successfully combined spiritual, philosophical, and ethical dimensions, making him one of the

most influential figures in the history of Islamic thought. His works continue to be studied and used as references by theologians, scholars, and academics to this day (Fitridah & Asqalani, 2023, p. 9).

Al-Ghazali's Dialectic with Islamic Theological Schools

Al-Ghazali's dialectic with Muslim theologians is an important aspect in understanding his contribution to Islamic thought (Layalia, 2025, p. 45). Al-Ghazali frequently engaged in debates with various theological schools, particularly the Mu'tazilah. In his work "*Tahafut al-Falasifah*," Al-Ghazali not only criticized philosophy but also put forward a deeper theological perspective, emphasizing revelation as the source of truth. One significant example of dialectic is Al-Ghazali's debate with the Mu'tazilah school, which emphasized the importance of reason and God's justice. Al-Ghazali argued that although reason plays a vital role, there are limits beyond which human reason can transcend. Thus, Al-Ghazali proposed the view that God's justice cannot always be fully understood by human reason (Al-Ghazali, 1972).

Al-Ghazali made significant internal corrections to the theological school from which he derived his ideas. While retaining basic Asy'ariyah doctrines, such as the theory of "*kasb*" (acquisition) in matters of human action, he criticized the tendency of theologians to become entangled in convoluted verbal debates that were far from authentic religious experience. His critique of the Asy'ariyah concept of cause and effect, which he considered weak in the face of philosophical arguments, led him to reformulate the causal relationship as a mere habit of God, rather than a logical necessity. This demonstrates his attempt to align theology with a more robust metaphysical framework (Yahya, 1996).

On the other hand, Al-Ghazali also confronted theologians who believed that knowledge of God could only be attained through reason. In his "*Ihya Ulum al-Din*," he emphasized the importance of spiritual experience and the practice of worship as a means of drawing closer to God (Wafa, 2024, p. 2). This dialectic is not limited to Al-Ghazali, but also involves other figures such as Ibn Rushd, who criticized Al-Ghazali's views in his book "*Tahafut at-Tahafut al-Falasifah*." In response to this criticism, Al-Ghazali developed stronger arguments to defend his theological position. This confirms that Al-Ghazali's thought was not static, but continued to develop through interaction and criticism from other theologians (Al-Ghazali, 1972). Al-Ghazali's works such as "*al-Munqidh Min al-Dallal*" are evidence of how Al-Ghazali processed his experiences and thoughts in facing intellectual challenges (Sabila, 2020, p. 76).

Through this intense dialectic, Al-Ghazali ultimately constructed a unique epistemological synthesis. His efforts to bridge reason with revelation and speculative theology with spiritual experience gave birth to a holistic framework of thought. This synthesis was not only intended to address the challenges of the times but also to form a solid foundation for spiritual education that emphasizes a balance between Islamic knowledge, purification of the heart, and the search for truth. This approach is what makes Al-Ghazali's legacy of thought still studied today, as it successfully embraces various dimensions of religiosity without falling into reductionism (Ali, Muhdi and Sa'ad, Suadi and Anwar, 2025, p. 175).

The impact of Al-Ghazali's dialectic was far-reaching and transcended the boundaries of any particular school of thought. Al-Ghazali's contributions not only refined the Asy'ariyah tradition but also significantly influenced the development of Sunni Sufism and later Islamic studies. The maturity of Al-Ghazali's methodology in harmonizing various disciplines demonstrates the depth of his scientific vision. Thus, Al-Ghazali's intellectual journey mirrors the dynamics of classical Islamic thought, as it moves, refines, and evolves into an integral and applicable form (Saidin Hamzah et al., 2024, p. 121).

Based on the above description, Al-Ghazali's dialectic with Muslim theologians reflects the dynamics of thought within the Islamic tradition. Through these discussions and

interactions, Al-Ghazali not only strengthened his position as a theologian but also made valuable contributions to the development of Islamic thought as a whole. His holistic and integrative approach laid the foundation for many subsequent Muslim thinkers to explore the relationship between reason, revelation, and spiritual experience.

Al-Ghazali's Contribution to Islamic Theological Tradition

Al-Ghazali's contributions to the Islamic theological tradition left a profound and lasting mark. Al-Ghazali's presence occurred during a period when the Islamic world experienced a dynamic intellectual tension between traditional doctrine, Hellenistic philosophy, and esoteric teachings. In response to this situation, Al-Ghazali fundamentally reoriented Islamic theological epistemology, placing intuitive certainty and inner experience above mere speculative rationalism. This approach did not simply reject but rather rebuilt the foundation of faith by emphasizing the authenticity of spiritual experience as the pinnacle of the search for truth (Cholik, 2015, p. 289).

Al-Ghazali's critical contribution is manifested in his monumental work, "*Tahafut al-Falasifah*." In this work, Al-Ghazali conducted a systematic methodological critique of the metaphysical claims of Muslim philosophers, such as Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi. In particular, he criticized the eternity of the universe, the limitation of God's knowledge to universals, and the rejection of bodily resurrection. His incisive critique successfully demonstrated the limits of reason in discussing transcendental issues, effectively reducing the dominance of Hellenistic philosophy in Sunni theological discourse and affirming the principles of orthodox belief based on revelation. However, this work was not a total rejection of reason, but rather an attempt to place it in its proper place, namely as a tool for understanding the physical, not the supernatural (Mahmood et al., 2022, p. 6).

More than just criticism, his main contribution lies in his attempt to synthesize speculative theology (*kalam*), law (*fiqh*), and Sufism, which are harmoniously combined in his magnum opus "*Ihya Ulum al-Din*" (Al-Ghazali, 2011). Al-Ghazali argued that theology, with its apologetic function in defending the creed from error, is instrumental and inadequate for achieving genuine and comprehensive belief. True truth, according to Al-Ghazali, can only be achieved through spiritual discipline (*riyadhah*) and purification of the heart (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), thus he successfully integrated the exoteric (*sharia*) and esoteric (*hakikat*) dimensions into a coherent theological framework and provided a comprehensive path to salvation for Muslims. This synthesis could enable Sunni Sufism, which is oriented towards *sharia*, to gain strong theological legitimacy and become the mainstream of Islamic spirituality (Treiger & Alexander, 2012, p. 4).

The impact of Al-Ghazali's thought on the development of Islamic theology was fundamental and lasting. His critique of philosophy not only consolidated the Sunni *Asy'ariyah* tradition but also paved the way for subsequent developments in Islamic philosophy that were more integrated with theology, as seen in the works of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra. The paradigm of illumination that Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra developed can be seen as a response to and development of Al-Ghazali's notion of intuitive knowledge (Soleh, 2024, p. 84). Furthermore, Al-Ghazali's efforts to reconcile Sufism with Sunni orthodoxy prevented a deeper dichotomy between the jurists and the Sufis, thus establishing a unified religious tradition in which inner experience and outer law complemented each other. Through his intellectual legacy, Al-Ghazali established a solid foundation for the Islamic theological tradition, emphasizing the balance between reason, revelation, and spiritual experience (Rizky Ardian Khoirul Putera & Sudirman, 2024, p. 150).

CONCLUSION

Based on the above description, it can be concluded that Al-Ghazali's thought made a fundamental contribution to the Islamic theological tradition through a synthesis of *sharia*, *aqidah*, and Sufism, which was built as a response to the crisis of faith and skepticism that hit the Muslim community. Through Al-Ghazali's works such as "*Tahafut al-Falasifah*" and "*Ihya*

Ulum al-Din", Al-Ghazali not only criticized extreme philosophical and theological rationalism, but also reconstructed Islamic epistemology by placing spiritual experience and purification of the heart as a solid foundation of faith. Al-Ghazali's dialectic with Islamic theological schools created a balance between reason, revelation, and spiritual experience, thus enriching and consolidating the tradition in Islamic theological thought.

This study recommends that future researchers can adopt an interdisciplinary approach to explore more deeply the aspects of Al-Ghazali's spiritual crisis and its relationship to the responses of theological schools, as well as conduct comparative studies with Islamic thinkers who also experienced spiritual crises to enrich perspectives.

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