

STAGNATION IN ISLAM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF AL-GHAZALI TO ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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Abstract: This writing discusses the implications and contributions of Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, driven by the fact that there is an ongoing debate regarding whether intellectual stagnation in Islamic thought can be attributed to al-Ghazali's ideas or not at all. As a prominent figure, Al-Ghazali has been the subject of extensive research and study by numerous Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. This paper serves as a complementary addition to existing literature. In detail, there are three key points addressed in this paper: a summary of the intellectual biography of al-Ghazali, a critical examination of Islamic thought, particularly in philosophy, and the implications and contributions of al-Ghazali to the development of contemporary Islamic thought through an intellectual biography approach and a research design focused on concept/thought studies. The findings of this study suggest that al-Ghazali's critique of philosophers and philosophy should be viewed as a preventive measure. al-Ghazali successfully campaigned to establish Ash'arite theology as the unassailable religious orthodoxy in Islam. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to consider al-Ghazali as one of the most influential figures in the history of Islamic thought.

Keywords: stagnation; Islam; contribution; al-Ghazali; Islamic thought

Abstrak: Tulisan ini mendiskusikan mengenai implikasi dan kontribusi Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali serta tulisan ini didorong juga oleh fakta adanya kesenjangan mengenai apakah kejumudan berpikir dalam Islam itu disebabkan oleh pemikiran al-Ghazali atau bukan sama sekali. Sebagai tokoh besar, kajian dan penelitian tentang al-Ghazali telah dilakukan oleh banyak sarjana, baik muslim dan non-muslim. Tulisan ini hanya berposisi sebagai komplementer bagi tulisan-tulisan terdahulu. Secara rinci, ada tiga poin yang dibahas pada tulisan ini, yaitu ringkasan biografi intelektual al-Ghazali, pemikiran kritis terhadap pemikiran Islam, khususnya filsafat, dan implikasi dan kontribusi al-Ghazali bagi perkembangan pemikiran Islam kontemporer dengan pendekatan biografik intelektual dan desain penelitian studi konsep/pemikiran. Temuan yang dihasilkan adalah serangan al-Ghazali terhadap para filsuf dan filsafatnya harus dipandang sebagai tindakan preventif, al-Ghazali terbukti berkampanye menjadikan teologi Asy'ariyah sebagai ortodoksi keagamaan Muslim yang sulit diganggu gugat, sehingga tidak berlebihan untuk mengatakan al-Ghazali sebagai salah satu tokoh pemikiran Islam yang paling berpengaruh sepanjang sejarah.

Kata kunci: kejumudan; Islam; kontribusi; al-Ghazali; pemikiran Islam

Introduction

Many Muslims, if not all, would undoubtedly agree that the advancement of knowledge and intellectual pursuits is one of the key factors supporting the success of Islam, as expressed by Nurcholish Madjid (1992). This can be substantiated by the emergence of highly intellectual scholars, such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Razi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd, during the classical to medieval period, spanning from the 650s to the 1200s (Nasution, 1991). However, since the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongol armies, the progressive-liberal aspects of Islamic civilization appeared to diminish gradually. One of the slogans that emerged was that the door of *ijtihad* had been closed. For those who believed in this slogan, it was based on the argument that no scholar dared to distinguish themselves or was elevated by their followers as a thinker of the calibre of the figures mentioned above (Yusliani, 2007).

In this context, the figure of Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali becomes an icon in the field of Islamic thought. As a figure often referred to as "*bujjatul Islam*", scholars frequently understand him differently. On one hand, he is sometimes positioned as a figure who promoted the revitalization of the spirit of *ijtihad*. However, on the other hand, he is also sometimes regarded as the executor of the demise of rationality in Islam (Bakhtiar, 2004). The differences in views regarding al-Ghazali are intriguing and warrant exploration by examining his implications and contributions to contemporary Islamic thought.

As of the time this writing is produced, the name of al-Ghazali has never faded from academic debates among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Scholars approach al-Ghazali in various ways: some seek to establish conceptual foundations for Islamic business ethics from al-Ghazali's thoughts (Sidani & Al Ariss, 2015). Some scholars delve into studying al-Ghazali's thoughts and criticisms of philosophy (Atabik, 2014; Munir, 2014). Moreover, some specifically explore al-Ghazali's thoughts on Sufism (Zaini, 2016).

In the trajectory of Islamic thought, Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Ghazali al-Thusi, more popularly known as Imam al-Ghazali, is a unique figure in his life journey, especially his

intellectual exploration. He began his intellectual journey by delving into theology through the study of the works of theologians, then delved into philosophy by researching the writings of philosophers, and ultimately concluded with the methods employed by Sufis, which involve the integration of knowledge and practice through an intuitive approach known as Sufism or Tasawwuf. Based on the outlined description, this study discusses a summary of the intellectual biography of al-Ghazali, critical reflections on Islamic thought, particularly in philosophy, and the implications and contributions of al-Ghazali to the development of contemporary Islamic thought. Given that many scholars have examined the thoughts of al-Ghazali, this paper aims to complement existing research on al-Ghazali.

Method

This paper constitutes a research study with a conceptual/thought study research model or design. It involves researching a specific aspect or topic within various concepts/thoughts proposed by one or several figures (Nasution, 2016). In this case, the paper is focused on analyzing the implications and contributions of al-Ghazali by tracing his thoughts on Islamic thought, particularly criticism of his philosophers and philosophy. The research data for this study were obtained from personal collections, including downloaded scholarly articles and books. These data sources were analyzed descriptively and explanatorily using an intellectual biography approach to uncover the background and objectives of the figure, namely, al-Ghazali, in presenting his thoughts (Gazalba, 1996). Therefore, procedurally, this paper generates descriptive data, which in the context of this research consists of written words concerning predefined sub-subtopics outlined in the introduction.

Results and Discussion

Al-Ghazali: The Intellectual Wanderer and Prolific Teacher

Since the passing of his father, young Al-Ghazali was placed under the guidance and supervision of Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Razakani, a close friend of his father, in his hometown of Gazaleh (a small town near Tus, Khurasan). Later, as he entered adolescence, he moved to Jurjan to acquire

knowledge from Imam Abu Nasr al-Isma'ili and returned to Tus. However, Al-Ghazali seemed to feel he was not gaining a comprehensive and representative education in Tus. Therefore, during the span of approximately 20 to 28 years old, he resided in Nisapur/Naisabur to delve into the popular sciences of the time, such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), jurisprudential principles (*ushul*), philosophy, logic (*mantiq*), Sufism, and other religious sciences (Supriyadi, 2008).

As is known in the history of Islamic civilization, the city of Nisapur/Naisabur during the Abbasid Dynasty or Seljuk Sultanate era became one of the important centres of knowledge in the Islamic world (Nasution, 2014). In this city, al-Ghazali studied under the director of the al-Nizhamiyah Madrasah at that time, Imam Dhiya al-Din al-Juwaini, known as Imam al-Haramain. Al-Ghazali's decision to study under al-Juwaini proved to be the right choice. Thanks to al-Juwaini's guidance, he developed sharp analytical skills, a strong memory, and proficiency in debate. As a result, he emerged as an intellectual figure well-versed in various fields of knowledge, particularly in the fields of Ash'arite theology and Shafi'i jurisprudence. (Zaini, 2016). Indeed, through the learning process alongside al-Juwaini, al-Ghazali earned the title "*Bahr al-Mughbriq*" to signify his intelligence and prowess in debating and discussing matters (Munir, 2014). Furthermore, al-Ghazali was also known as "*Hujjat al-Islam*" (Proof of Islam) and "*Zain al-Din*" (Ornament of the Religion) due to his outstanding excellence.

After the passing of Imam al-Juwaini, al-Ghazali resided in Mu'askar for five years before moving to Baghdad, where he established a close relationship with Nizam al-Mulk (the Prime Minister of the Seljuk Sultanate) due to his introduction by al-Juwaini. Subsequently, al-Ghazali was invited to teach at the Nizhamiyah School and appointed its Grand Scholar and head in 484 H/1091 CE (al-Ghazali, n.d.-c; Bakhtiar, 2004; Dahlan, 2003). During this period, the name al-Ghazali became increasingly famous and popular, attracting serious attention to his *halaqah* (study circle) from both local and non-local students in Baghdad. However, amidst his brilliance and popularity, al-Ghazali experienced inner turmoil and restlessness to the extent that he could not continue teaching in 488 H/1095 CE. Consequently, he resigned from the Nizhamiyah School and left all his fame and renown behind.

Regarding al-Ghazali's withdrawal, several factors can be identified: (1) Inner Turmoil and Skepticism: Al-Ghazali's inner turmoil and restlessness were rooted in his sceptical attitude toward all sources of truth, whether empirical or rational, including those derived from the senses, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology, and philosophy; (2) Disapproval of Seljuk Policy: Al-Ghazali did not approve of the political policies of the Seljuk Sultanate, particularly their alignment with the Crusades (Perang Salib); (3) Worldly Attitudes of Colleagues: Al-Ghazali was also uncomfortable with the worldly attitudes of his fellow teachers, who tended to be too immersed in worldly matters (Watt, 1974). It is also narrated that what al-Ghazali experienced was an inner ailment caused by his doubt and uncertainty regarding every source of truth (Zar, 2014). Therefore, al-Ghazali's withdrawal was influenced by religious, psychological, and socio-political factors.

Eventually, al-Ghazali embarked on a journey to several cities, including Damascus, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina. In the first city, Damascus (specifically at the Umayyad Mosque), al-Ghazali engaged in '*uṣṭāḥ*' (seclusion), *ḵahwāḥ* (solitude for worship), *riyāḍḥāḥ* (self-discipline to rid oneself of vices), and *mujāḥadāḥ* (spiritual struggle against one's desires) (Atabik, 2014). From Damascus, al-Ghazali took the opportunity to perform the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and visit the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) tomb in Medina. After completing the pilgrimage and the visit, he resumed his activities at the Umayyad Mosque until 490 H/1097 CE.

Subsequently, in the years 490-492 H/1097-1099 CE, al-Ghazali continued his journey to Jerusalem, where he prayed near the tomb of Prophet Abraham. He then sequentially visited Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt. (Zar, 2014). He briefly resumed teaching in Nisyapur/Naisabur from 494 H/1101 CE until 499 H/1105 CE. Eventually, al-Ghazali returned to his hometown, Thus, in 499 H/1105 CE, where he established a Madrasah Fiqh for law students and built a *ḵhanaqāḥ* (spiritual retreat) for Sufis. He spent the rest of his life as a teacher and Sufi master, continually enhancing his spiritual journey.

In addition to his teaching responsibilities, al-Ghazali was a prolific writer, earning a reputation as a productive thinker who mastered various

fields of knowledge due to his curiosity and quest for ultimate truth. In every field of study he pursued, he documented his thoughts. Undoubtedly, he can be referred to as a *mutakallim* (theologian), *faqih* (jurist), philosopher, and Sufi all in one (al-Ghazali 2003). It is not an exaggeration to say that al-Ghazali was a *polymath*.

Indeed, al-Ghazali's intellectual journey resulted in some of his most phenomenal works, including: (1) *Ihyâ` 'Ulûm al-dîn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences); (2) *Tabâfut al-Falâsifah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers); (3) *Iqtishâd fî al-i'tiqâd* (Moderation in Belief); (4) *Al-munqidz min al-dhalâl* (The Deliverance from Error); (5) *Maqâshid al-Falâsifah* (The Aims of the Philosophers); (6) *Jawâbir al-Qur'an* (The Jewels of the Qur'an); (7) *Mi'yâr al-Ilmi* (The Criterion of Knowledge); (8) *Al-Mustashfa fî Ushûl al-Fiqh* (The Revival of Islamic Sciences); (9) *Bidâyah al-mujtahid* (The Distinguished Jurist Primer); (10) *Kimîyâ al-sa'âdah* (The Alchemy of Happiness). One notable characteristic and strength of al-Ghazali's works and thoughts resulting from his intellectual journey is that he refused to mindlessly follow opinions without understanding their underlying arguments. He consistently strove to challenge stagnation and revitalize a progressive-liberal spirit among the Muslim community by thoroughly delving into various fields of knowledge (al-Ghazali, n.d.-b).

Classification of Philosophers and Philosophy

Generally, when one speaks of al-Ghazali, it is usually in the context of his thoughts on theology (*kalam* science), philosophy, or Sufism. Al-Ghazali's purpose in studying these three fields was to seek the ultimate truth. As mentioned earlier, he did not find intellectual and spiritual satisfaction in studying theology, which led him to delve into philosophy before experiencing Sufism. However, he found that the arguments put forth by philosophers needed to be more robust and contradict Islamic teachings. Al-Ghazali's philosophical thoughts are documented in *Maqâshid al-Falâsifah*, which examines the ideas of philosophers, and *Tabâfut al-Falâsifah*, which contains comments and critiques of the philosophers' thinking (Nasution, 2014; Nata, 2001).

According to al-Ghazali, philosophers can be classified into three categories, namely (1) *Al-dabriyyîn* (atheists), who are a group of philosophers

that do not believe in the existence of the Creator of the Universe and hold the view that the universe came into being on its own without a Creator. They are categorized as individuals with heretical beliefs (*ẓindīq*). (2) *Al-Thabi'iyūn* (naturalists) constitute a group of philosophers who extensively delve into the study of the material world (*'ilm al-thabi'iy*). However, due to their excessive focus on the material world and their profound admiration for it, they deny the concept of the Day of Judgment, Heaven, Hell, and the divine reckoning (*ḥisāb*). As a result, they, too, fall into the category of individuals with heretical beliefs (*ẓindīq*), and (3) *Al-Ilāhiyyūn* (theists) represent a group of philosophers who stand in contrast to the first and second categories (al-Ghazali, n.d.-a). Prominent figures belonging to this latter group include Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and their Muslim philosopher followers such as Ibn Sina and al-Farabi.

Meanwhile, concerning the issues addressed in philosophy, al-Ghazali categorizes them into six fields, namely (1) physics, (2) *mantiq* (logic), (3) metaphysics, (4) mathematics, (5) politics, and (6) ethics (al-Ghazali, n.d.-a). Out of these six philosophical issues, al-Ghazali categorizes them into three groups: (1) the parts that require disbelief (*kufr*), namely the field of metaphysics; (2) the parts deemed innovations (*bid'ah*), which include physics, metaphysics, and ethics; and (3) the parts that do not warrant any denial, encompassing mathematics, logic, and politics (Bakhtiar, 2004).

Based on the classification above, al-Ghazali believed that the area most likely to contain numerous errors in the thinking of philosophers is the field of metaphysics. In his work "*Tabāfut al-falāsifah*," he presents 20 philosophical issues that highlight contradictions and inconsistencies in the thinking of philosophers, thus revealing intellectual confusion (al-Ghazali, 2003). The issues in question are as follows:

1. The theory of the eternity of the universe.
2. The theory of the eternity of matter.
3. The dishonesty of philosophers in claiming that Allah is the Creator of the universe and that the universe is His creation.
4. The philosophers' inability to establish the Creator of the universe.
5. The philosophers' inability to construct arguments for the impossibility of the existence of two Gods.

6. The philosophers' denial of God's attributes.
7. The philosophers' view is that there is no division of God's substance into genus and difference.
8. The philosophers' view is that God is a simple being without qualifications.
9. The philosophers' inability to explain that God is not corporeal (*jism*).
10. The assertion that the theory of the eternity of the universe and the absence of a Creator are certainties for philosophers.
11. The philosophers' inability to establish that God knows other things.
12. The philosophers' inability to establish that God knows His substance.
13. The philosophers' view is that God does not know particulars (*juḥūḍiyyat*).
14. The theory is that the heavens are living beings that move by will (*irāda*).
15. The theory regarding the purpose of the motion of the heavens.
16. The philosophers' view of the celestial soul that knows all particulars (*juḥūḍiyyat*).
17. The theory of the impossibility of something happening due to habit.
18. The theory is that the human soul is a separate substance, not a body or an accident.
19. The theory of the impossibility of the annihilation of the human soul (*fana*).
20. The philosophers' denial of bodily resurrection, physical pleasures in paradise, and physical torment in hell.

When broken down, the 20 issues criticized by al-Ghazali fall into two categories: 17 in the field of metaphysics and 3 in the field of physics. Of these 20 issues, al-Ghazali considers philosophers to be in error for their philosophical ideas regarding the metaphysical realm, specifically the eternity of the universe, God's knowledge of particulars, and the resurrection of the soul and the body in the afterlife (al-Ghazali 2003). These three issues received significant attention and criticism from al-Ghazali in his "*Tabāfūt*." Additionally, al-Ghazali discusses one aspect of physics with considerable emphasis, particularly concerning the laws of causality and miracles (*mukjizāt*).

The Confusion in the Minds of Philosophers and Al-Ghazali's Critique

The core and substance of Al-Ghazali's critique only targets some of the field of philosophy but focuses on the relationship between metaphysics and physics, which are branches of philosophy. For Al-Ghazali, this issue has often led to confusion and errors among philosophers, primarily because it contradicts Islamic teachings (Bakhtiar, 2004). While Al-Ghazali did criticize certain branches of philosophy, he did not reject all fields within philosophy. For instance, logic is not one of the areas that should be denied, as it does not directly connect to religion but is considered a tool (al-Ghazali, n.d.-a).

As previously explained, Al-Ghazali specifically rejected branches of philosophy that dealt with issues such as the eternity of the universe, God's knowledge of particulars, the resurrection of the soul and body in the afterlife, and the laws of causality and miracles. In more detail, this section will outline the philosophical ideas that Al-Ghazali criticized and rejected.

1. The Eternity of the Universe

For Muslim philosophers such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina their theory of emanation has given rise to the notion that the universe possesses a primordial nature. In support of the theory of emanation, these philosophers put forth arguments suggesting that the precedence of God over the universe can be understood in two possible ways: (1) God's precedence in terms of essence and not in terms of time, meaning that God and the universe exist simultaneously in terms of time; (2) God's precedence over the universe in terms of time, but the time in question is the time of preexistence (*zamân al-'adâm*) (al-Ghazali, 2003). Furthermore, it is asserted that God created the universe and cannot exist on His own without having created it from the beginning, as this would imply a change in God, which is an impossibility.

In the context of the creation of the universe, according to al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, the universe was not created *ex nihilo*. Allah, the Most Sublime, indeed serves as the prime cause, the first cause, the initial mover, and the necessary existent. However, Allah is not the creator of the universe but rather the initial mover. Allah creates something from pre-existing material through emanation. Thus, Allah has been creating the universe since eternity, with the material originating from eternal energy. In contrast, the arrangement of this

material into the universe results from the emanation of the First Intellect's thought (Zar, 2014).

The eternal nature of God's relationship with the universe, according to al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, is equivalent to the eternal nature of the *'illat* (cause) for its *ma'lul* (effect), both in terms of essence and hierarchy, as well as in terms of time. The philosophers of that era argued that it is inconceivable for something eternal (God) to precede the emergence of the eternal (the universe). This would imply that the eternal entity (God) existed while the universe did not (al-Ghazali, 2003; Supriyadi, 2008).

Meanwhile, according to al-Ghazali, a primordial entity (one without a beginning) is exclusive to God alone, and everything apart from God must have a beginning (hadith). This is because if there were other primordial entities besides God, it could lead to the thought that "if there are many primordial entities, then there must be many Gods." On the other hand, the belief that the universe is primordial implies that it exists independently, without being created by God. Al-Ghazali considers such thinking impossible, as it contradicts Islamic teachings, stating that God is the Creator of the entire universe. Furthermore, this line of thought can lead to polytheism, with those who hold such beliefs committing a grave sin unforgivable by God or falling into the category of atheists who assert that a primordial universe requires no creator. Therefore, according to al-Ghazali, embracing the idea of a primordial universe leads its adherents down a path of misguidance and disbelief (Dahlan, 2003; Nasution, 2002).

2. God's Knowledge of Specific Matters

Al-Ghazali categorized philosophers into two groups concerning God's knowledge: (1) a group that believes God only knows Himself, and (2) a group that believes God knows things other than Himself, but His knowledge is universal and not bound by time (al-Ghazali, 2003, p. 206). From these two philosophical viewpoints, al-Ghazali pronounced a verdict of disbelief (*kufur*) against them.

God cannot possibly know particular things. Aristotle held this view and was later adopted by Muslim philosophers. According to al-

Ghazali, Muslim philosophers believed that Allah only knows His essence because the universe constantly changes. If Allah were to know the details of these changes, it would imply a change in His essence. They provided an analogy that a change in the object of knowledge would bring about a change in the subject of knowledge (an increase or decrease), which is an impossibility for Allah, the Most Sublime (al-Ghazali, 2003).

In connection with this, Al-Ghazali criticized and asserted that the philosophers had made a critical error. According to him, a change in the object of knowledge does not bring about a change in knowledge itself. This is because a change in knowledge does not lead to a change in essence. In other words, the state of a person possessing knowledge does not change. Al-Ghazali then illustrated that if something on our right moves to our left, the one changing is that thing, not us. He (God) knows everything with His singular (One) knowledge from eternity and remains unchanged even though the universe He knows transforms (al-Ghazali, 2003). Several sources suggest that the belief that God does not know particular things is not a perspective Muslim philosophers hold (Dahlan, 2003). However, paradoxically, in his "*Tahâfut*," Al-Ghazali attempts to present the idea attributed to Ibn Sina that nothing is hidden from God's knowledge. Nevertheless, God's knowledge of particular things is similar to His knowledge of universal things (al-Ghazali, 2003).

Meanwhile, according to al-Ghazali, it is impossible for God, as the Creator of the entire universe, not to know specific details. Furthermore, this view contradicts the teachings of Islam. If God does not know particular matters, it will result in the removal of God's providence (*inâyah*) over His creatures, negating the concept of rewards and punishments in the afterlife.

3. The Resurrection of the Soul and the Body in the Hereafter

There is no difference between Muslim philosophers and al-Ghazali regarding the existence of resurrection. The disparity between Muslim philosophers and al-Ghazali concerning the issue of resurrection lies in its form. Muslim philosophers believe that the

resurrection of the soul or the spiritual aspect in the Hereafter is superior and logically acceptable because the Hereafter is a spiritual realm (al-Ghazali, 2003). According to the philosophers, the soul will separate from the body when death approaches. If the soul is eternal, on the contrary, the body will disintegrate, and thus, only the spiritual aspect will experience happiness or suffering (Dahlan, 2003). Therefore, the resurrection of the physical body is deemed impossible in the philosophers' view.

About the philosophers' viewpoint mentioned above, al-Ghazali does not deny that the soul's pleasure in the Hereafter is superior to bodily pleasures and the concept of the soul's immortality. However, al-Ghazali rejects the excessive authority placed on reason to the extent that reason is considered the primary source of knowledge about the Hereafter. Instead, according to al-Ghazali, knowledge about the Hereafter should be based on religious law (*syara'*) (al-Ghazali, 2003).

Furthermore, al-Ghazali explains that the philosophers' understanding of the religious evidence (*dalil syara'*) regarding bodily resurrection needs to be grasped in its literal and real sense. Al-Ghazali suggests that philosophers interpret the statements in the Quran and Hadith metaphorically (Dahlan, 2003). In other words, when it comes to the matter of resurrection in the Hereafter, the error made by the philosophers is that they rely on something other than the literal meaning of the Quranic text.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable for the philosophers to feel that understanding bodily resurrection is illogical, even though al-Ghazali rejects this view. He argues that what is resurrected in the Hereafter is both the soul and the body, so pleasures and suffering can have both a physical and a spiritual aspect. Furthermore, al-Ghazali affirms that the soul's eternal nature after death does not conflict with Islamic teachings. Moreover, several hadiths mention that human souls experience either blessings or the torment of the grave and other such phenomena. All of these serve as indications of the immortality of the soul. Meanwhile, the bodily resurrection has been explicitly affirmed by

religious law (sharia) as the return of the soul to the original body, another body, or a newly created body (al-Ghazali, 2003).

4. The Law of Causality and Miracles

The law of causality is one of the most significant contributions to the advancement of philosophy in the history of scholarship. It is a foundational theory often employed in the sciences. The theory of causality was initially developed in ancient Greece and subsequently embraced and further elaborated upon by philosophers within the Muslim and Christian intellectual traditions (Bakhtiar, 2004).

Within the Islamic scholarly tradition, the law of causality found support among philosophers who believed that every event in the natural world is inherently linked to cause and effect, such as fire causing combustion or water causing wetness. However, al-Ghazali took a different stance by rejecting and critiquing the theory of causality. According to al-Ghazali, causality is not an absolute law or something that signifies certainty but merely a law of possibility (Bakhtiar, 2004). In other words, everything that occurs in the natural world does not follow a deterministic path but rather sequentially happens by chance and proceeds due to habituation.

Regarding the law of causality (cause and effect), al-Ghazali (2003) does not deny the existence of causality. Instead, he rejects Muslim philosophers' stance that the cause-effect relationship represents a relationship of certainty or necessity. Al-Ghazali's position is rooted in the concept that Allah is the creator of all that exists, including events beyond the usual course of events (*khâriq al-'adat*). According to al-Ghazali, the relationship between cause and effect is not necessary (certain or *dharuri*), meaning they do not necessarily have to apply to each other. However, each of them has its individuality (al-Ghazali, 2003). For instance, there is no necessary relationship between eating and feeling full. Eating does not necessarily lead to feeling full because eating does not have to cause a person to feel full. This is a customary aspect of the natural world, not a necessity. Everything occurs due to the power and will of the Almighty Creator, Allah. Another example is the case of Prophet Ibrahim not being burned

when cast into the fire. They believed this was impossible unless the fire's burning nature was removed or the substance (essence) of Prophet Ibrahim was transformed into a material that could not be burned by fire (Zar, 2014).

The law of causality that al-Ghazali rejected is the idea of an inherent necessity between cause and effect that operates independently of God's will. If the possible world is one where all possibilities exist, al-Ghazali claims these possibilities only exist because of God's free will. According to al-Ghazali, the causal relationship is merely an appearance and is an effect of human habit, where people associate two events that consistently occur in the natural world.

Furthermore, concerning departures from the customary law of causality (*khāriq al-'adat*), these instances primarily occur with the prophets of God. Al-Ghazali addresses this by posing a question: Did these occurrences happen due to the individual power of the prophets themselves, or were they caused by something else? In this regard, both Muslim philosophers and al-Ghazali share a similar perspective. Just as philosophers can accept events like lightning or earthquakes occurring through the power of a prophet or other factors, al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of acknowledging that all of these occurrences happen through the mediation of angels, serving as miracles to strengthen the evidence of prophethood (al-Ghazali, 2003).

Al-Ghazali Between *Kalam*, Philosophy, and Sufism: Implications and Contributions

Since the intense debates between al-Ghazali and Muslim philosophers, followed by debates between al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd, the Islamic world has not been able to produce influential philosophers, or it could be said that it is experiencing a decline. This is attributed to several factors, including: (1) Intellectual Stagnation and Blind Adherence: The intellectual climate of the Islamic world at the time tended towards stagnation and blind adherence to established beliefs. (2) Loss of Cosmopolitanism and the Rise of Sectarianism: The loss of a cosmopolitan outlook and the emergence of sectarianism and fanaticism also played a role in this decline (Lapidus, 1999).

Furthermore, some argue that the decline of Islamic philosophical thought was influenced by the works of al-Ghazali, which seemed to limit the scope of reason.

It has been explained that al-Ghazali relied heavily on Quranic and Hadith texts in his critique of the philosophers. However, after refuting the philosophers' theses, al-Ghazali did not propose another philosophical system. This could be because al-Ghazali believed that no pure metaphysics could satisfy the religious need for certainty. Nevertheless, al-Ghazali still adopted a view of Islamic-Greek philosophy that aligned with Sufi ethics, emphasizing that the core of humanity is its spiritual aspect (Rahman, 2017).

Suppose it is asserted that the influence of al-Ghazali led to the stagnation of Islamic thought. In that case, it can be attributed to his widespread fame throughout the Islamic world in his time. Duncan B. MacDonald analyzed, as quoted by Syukur and Masharudin that the fame of al-Ghazali was more due to the appropriateness of his presence in space and time. Some factors proposed by MacDonald regarding al-Ghazali's fame include: Suppose it is asserted that the influence of al-Ghazali led to the stagnation of Islamic thought. In that case, it can be attributed to his widespread fame throughout the Islamic world in his time. Duncan B. MacDonald analyzed, as quoted by Syukur and Masharudin that the fame of al-Ghazali was more due to the appropriateness of his presence in space and time. Some factors proposed by MacDonald regarding al-Ghazali's fame include: (1) al-Ghazali was able to redirect people (Muslims) from scholastic activities concerning theological dogmas towards the study, interpretation, and contemplation of Allah's words and the sayings of the Prophet (*Hadith*). (2) In his advice and moral teachings, he reintroduced the element of *al-khauf* (fear), particularly the fear of hellfire. (3) Due to fear and influence, his thoughts on Sufism gained a strong and respected position within Islam. (4) He brought philosophical and theological ideas that were originally elitist into common thought among the general populace. (Syukur & Masharudin, 2002). Therefore, al-Ghazali's influence and contributions to Sufism cannot be denied.

Furthermore, the connection between Sufi influence and philosophy was highlighted by Fazlur Rahman, who asserted that post-al-Ghazali

philosophy evolved into a new form referred to as "philosophical religion" or "religious philosophy." This new philosophy was influenced by Sufi spiritualism, which shifted its focus from rational-natural principles to religious-spiritual ones. Some notable figures who championed this philosophy include Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra, and Ibn Arabi. Consequently, the development of philosophy within Islam continued despite al-Ghazali's criticism. Instead, its form and nature changed under the influence of Sufism, as developed by al-Ghazali (Rahman, 2017).

In the field of theology or *kalam*, al-Ghazali played a significant role in promoting the theological ideas of the Ash'ari school, which later became known as *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*. It is not an exaggeration to conclude that al-Ghazali helped establish the Ash'ari doctrine as the official or orthodox theological doctrine adopted by most Muslims. When a doctrine or belief is regarded as official or orthodox, it tends to be seen as final and beyond questioning. However, it is essential to recognize that Islamic theology, or doctrine in the realm of *kalam*, should be positioned as an intellectual endeavour to discover relevant theological doctrines in synergy with modern and contemporary issues.

Regardless of such considerations, it is clear that al-Ghazali was a controversial thinker who had real impacts, implications, and contributions to the lives of Muslim communities, particularly in the fields of Islamic knowledge and thought. Anyone can form their judgments about al-Ghazali, and this article concludes that al-Ghazali exemplifies the wise use of reason or rationality. His critique of *kalam* or, especially, the thoughts of philosophers seem more like a preventive action to spare other Muslims from undergoing similar experiences as his own

Conclusion

Al-Ghazali is undoubtedly one of Islamic thought's most controversial, ambivalent, and polymathic figures. Calling him the greatest Islamic thinker in history would not be an exaggeration. Throughout his lifetime, he authored numerous books that continue to be studied and referenced by both Muslims and non-Muslims. His critiques of philosophers can be broadly categorized into two major areas of philosophy: metaphysics and physics. In metaphysics, al-Ghazali critiqued the notions of the eternal nature of the world,

resurrection, and God's knowledge, while in physics, he challenged the concept of causality. Furthermore, al-Ghazali opposed intellectual stagnation and blind adherence to tradition, advocating for a more rational approach. In other words, he did not entirely reject philosophy but questioned its specific aspects. As a prominent scholar, his influence extended throughout the Islamic world of his time. His influence, particularly in ethics and Sufism, changed post-critique Islamic philosophy, particularly in response to philosophers like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. However, these changes should not be mistaken as the death of philosophy within Islam. Instead, the truth is that Islamic philosophy is highly dynamic and evolves in response to the needs of Islamic society.

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