

AL-Ghazali's Influence on Islamic Philosophical Thought

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Abstract

This paper attempts to demonstrate that Al-Ghazali, a prominent figure in Islamic intellectual history, profoundly impacted the Islamic world's thought landscape. He merged Greek philosophical concepts with Islamic theology, addressing his era's internal divisions, instability, and intellectual discord. As a theologian, philosopher, mystic, and Sunni Islam jurist, Al-Ghazali's adoption of Sufism significantly influenced Islamic thought, securing his revered status in the Islamic intellectual heritage, especially in Iran. Works like Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din and Alchemy of Happiness showcase his lasting impact, having been widely read in the Muslim world for centuries. Al-Ghazali pioneered a philosophical movement bridging Islamic scholasticism and mysticism, integrating scholarship and Sufism to foster a holistic understanding of faith. His spiritual transformation in Baghdad (1095) deepened his commitment to Sufism, fuelling works that transformed Islamic thought and emphasized a direct connection with Allah. Al-Ghazali's mysticism revitalized Islamic spirituality, guiding individuals from superficial faith to a profound, experiential knowledge of God, inspiring seekers today.

Keywords

Mysticism, Sufism, Theology

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 10-12-25

Approved: 12-12-25

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Vol. XVI, No.2

Article No. 42, Pg. 373-380

Similarity Check: 01%

Online available at

<https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/jgv-vol-xvi-no2-july-dec-2025>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2025.v16i02.042>

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of JGV.*

Introduction:

Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Tusiyy Al-Ghazali was a renowned Muslim polymath. His seminal contributions to Islamic intellectual history were profound, revolutionizing Islamic scholarship through his integration of scholastic and mystical traditions. As a leading theologian, philosopher, jurist, and mystic of Sunni Islam, Ghazali's adoption of Sufism earned him recognition as the most influential Muslim thinker after the *Salaf al-Salihin*, or The Righteous Predecessors or Pious Ancestors. His mastery of Islamic knowledge's outer and inner dimensions was exceptional. Despite his significant impact, controversies surround Ghazali's philosophical and scientific credentials. To fully appreciate his contributions, it is essential to dispel common misconceptions about his stance on philosophy and science. Contrary to popular belief, Ghazali was not inherently opposed to philosophy; instead, he sought to integrate select Hellenistic elements, particularly Aristotelian thought, into Islamic philosophy, effectively naturalizing philosophy. Significantly, Ghazali's integration of Aristotelian philosophy into Islamic thought was instrumental in shaping the intellectual landscape. His meticulous examination of Aristotelian ideas in *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) ensured their enduring influence, paving the way for later philosophers to build upon and refine these concepts.

It is widely acknowledged that Ghazali is a well-known figure in many Muslim communities, respected for his scholarship and devotion. However, critics argue that his ideas had a profoundly negative impact on Muslim thought. Solomon Munk, a pioneering historian of Arabic and Islamic philosophy, critically assessed Ghazali's impact in his 1844 work. Munk contended that Ghazali's *Incoherence* dealt a lasting blow to philosophy in the Islamic world, from which "it never recovered in the Orient."¹ Yet, this perspective is contested. Ignaz Goldziher argues that Ghazali's critique was not the primary cause of philosophy's decline in Islamic thought. Instead, philosophy was already faltering, Islamic philosophy was declining before Ghazali, and Ghazali's work served as the final blow. As Goldziher observes, this led to the destruction of philosophical texts, which "we find now and then on the pyre."² Ghazali's impact on Muslim thought is undeniable. For instance, William M. Watt, a leading Islamic scholar, acknowledged Ghazali's groundbreaking synthesis of philosophy and theology, which united philosophical inquiry with Islamic theological perspectives. Watt argues that Al-Ghazali's compelling critique of philosophers led to a decline in philosophical inquiry in the eastern Islamic world, with no prominent philosophers emerging thereafter.³

There is no question of doubt that Imam Al-Ghazali's profound impact on medieval society and the broader Muslim world remains unmatched in its depth and

lasting influence. Through his magnum opus, *Ihya' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*, and its Persian counterpart, *Kimiya-i-Sa'adat*, Ghazali harmonized Greek philosophy with Islamic theology, cultivating a nuanced understanding of faith. His groundbreaking contributions integrated Islamic scholarship and mysticism, challenged Aristotelian philosophy and *Ismailis* or *Batiniyyah* doctrines, pioneered a philosophical movement reconciling reason and spirituality, and exemplified *spiritual transformation and authentic connection with Allah*. Thus, by sparking a new philosophical movement, Al-Ghazali embodied the renewer of faith prophesied by Muhammad (Pbuh), revitalizing the *tawhidic* mission for spiritual liberation, success and eternal bliss, here and hereafter. As a result, Ghazali's legacy extends far beyond his time, continuing to inspire and shape contemporary Muslim discourse, scholarship, and spiritual practices, leaving an indelible mark on Islamic intellectual history and the global Muslim community.

Objectives: The main objectives of the present paper are outlined below:

- i. This study challenges misconstrued and oversimplified interpretations of Al-Ghazali's philosophy, highlighting Islamic philosophy's development, evolution and diversification preceding his work.
- ii. To examine how Al-Ghazali's seminal works effectively countered the *Ismailis* or *Batiniyyah* movement's challenges to Sunni theology and its opposition to the Abbasid Caliphate.
- iii. To explore the dynamic intellectual context of Al-Ghazali's era, characterized by Islamic madrasas, diverse scholars, and a fervent pursuit of knowledge in *Fiqh*, *Usul-i-Fiqh*, *Hadith*, *Kalam*, and philosophical sciences (*Hikmah-i-Ilahiyah*).

Methodology: This study employs a descriptive approach, examining Al-Ghazali's influence on Islamic thought through historical, philosophical, and theological perspectives. It involves a thorough literature review, contextual analysis of his era, examination of Al-Ghazali's philosophical critiques and syntheses, comparison with other scholars, and assessment of his lasting impact, aiming to elucidate his contributions to Islamic intellectual traditions.

Discussion and findings:

Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, a renowned Muslim theologian, philosopher, logician, jurist, legal theorist, and mystic, was born in Tus, present-day Iran, around 1058 CE (or possibly 1059 CE) and passed away in 1111 CE (505 AH). Born into a family of distinguished scholars, al-Ghazali's father and grandfather were prominent figures in the scholarly community. He received

his early education in Tus, where he excelled in the Arabic language, Quranic studies, and Islamic jurisprudence. Recognizing his son's exceptional intellectual abilities, al-Ghazali's father sent him to Nishapur, a nearby city celebrated for its scholars and intellectuals.

Al-Ghazali had the privilege of studying under the esteemed Imam al-Haramayn 'Abd al-Malik al-Juwani in Nishapur, where he demonstrated exceptional intellectual gifts, prompting his teacher to remark that he possessed encyclopedic knowledge. As fate would have it, the student eventually surpassed his teacher, mastering various disciplines, including law, theology, and philosophy, while developing a keen interest in logic and metaphysics, which would later become prominent themes in his philosophical works. Al-Ghazali's intellectual prowess earned him recognition not only as a genius but also as one of the most influential scholars of Sufism. After completing his studies in Nishapur, he returned to Tus, where he worked as a teacher and jurist before being appointed as a professor at the prestigious Nizamiyyah Madrasa in Baghdad. There, he taught Islamic jurisprudence and theology for several years. As his reputation continued to grow, he was invited to serve as a judge in Tus for a brief period. Having achieved the highest academic post in the Muslim world as the rector of the Nizamiyyah College in Baghdad, he abandoned this position to embark on a life of seclusion, spending over a decade in solitary meditation and contemplation. However, al-Ghazali soon realized that his services were needed to address the challenges facing the Muslim Ummah, observing that many had lost faith, conviction, and meaningful religious practices. As he reflected, "I realized that I could easily dispel their doubts. I saw myself as fully capable of exposing the hollowness and implausibility of their philosophical convictions due to my deep knowledge of speculative sciences. I therefore felt an ardent desire to take up this work, as it seemed to be the pressing need of the time. I asked myself, 'How can you sit in seclusion when it is an epidemic spreading like wildfire, and even the learned have fallen victim to the same disease? The servants of Allah are on the brink of destruction.'"⁴ Moved by this sense of responsibility, al-Ghazali returned to teaching in 499, joining the Nizamiyyah College in Nishapur, where he resumed his revival efforts, producing several enduring works.

This intellectual journey, as described in his autobiography, was marked by a relentless pursuit of truth, navigating through various intellectual traditions, including *Ash'ariyah* scholars, Neo-Platonic philosophers, and Sufi Islamic mystics. Initially dissatisfied with the rationalism of theologians, he eventually turned to mysticism, which emphasized the development of the inner spirit, to satiate the longing of his soul. This intellectual progression is evident in his works, as he first

embraced the philosophy of the *Ash'ariyah*, articulating his own philosophical concepts, including his proof for the existence of God, in his seminal work, *The Golden Mean in Belief*. He then delved into the Neo-Platonic writings of Islamic philosophers al-Farabi and Avicenna, initially producing a synopsis of Avicenna's thought, but later critiquing his religious views in *The Inconsistency of the Philosophers*, specifically challenging Avicenna's theories on the resurrection of spirits, God's knowledge of universals and particulars, and the eternity of the world. Underlying his work is the conviction that earlier philosophers had failed to prove their views through logic, prompting him to reject their approach and ultimately turn to mysticism. Nevertheless, he continued to employ logic in defense of doctrine, as evident in his later mystical work, *Ihya Ulum ad-Din (The Revival of Religious Sciences)*, which showcases the enduring influence of *Ash'ariyah* philosophy.

Again, this complex intellectual journey can be seen as a reflection of al-Ghazali's life, which was marked by four distinct stages: *involvement in philosophy*, *Islamic philosophy or ilm al-kalam*, *Baatiniyyah or esotericism*, and ultimately, *Sufism*. Initially, he delved into philosophy but later rejected it, then excelled in *ilm al-kalam* before rejecting it due to its contradictions, earning him the title of *Hujjat al-Islam* after refuting philosophers' arguments. He then turned to *Baatiniyyah*, only to reject it and expose its false beliefs, writing seven books to refute it, with two completed in Baghdad and the rest in Hamadan and Tus. Throughout his life, al-Ghazali continued to condemn the *Ismailis and Baatiniyyah*, a movement against Sunnis, as evident in his works, including *al-Mustazhari*, written at the behest of Caliph al-Mustazhar Billah. Ultimately, al-Ghazali embraced Sufism, which allowed him to express his philosophical inclinations through Islamic ideas, despite being refuted by scholars like Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi. Al-Ghazali's expertise spanned multiple fields, including *fiqh*, *Sufism*, *ilm al-kalam*, and *usool al-fiqh*, although he had limited knowledge of hadith and its sciences, which drew criticism from scholars like ibn Taymiyah. Nonetheless, al-Ghazali's education and early career provided him with the necessary knowledge and skills to become a profoundly influential figure in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, with his mastery of Islamic jurisprudence enabling him to engage with and critique other scholars' works, and his interest in metaphysics and logic allowing him to develop his unique philosophical system.

As a testament to his profound influence, al-Ghazali's written works continue to be widely studied and revered. Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that al-Ghazali was a prolific writer whose works had a significant impact on Islamic philosophy, theology, and mysticism. Al-Ghazali is known for his deep understanding of Islamic teachings and his contributions to various fields, including theology, philosophy, and mysticism.

He is considered one of the most influential thinkers in Islamic history, and his writings continue to inspire and influence people to this day. Even his reverence for the Qur'an is a source of wisdom and guidance for everyday life. Al-Ghazali's notable works, among his approximately 400 books, include "The Revival of Religious Sciences" (*Ihya' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*), which covers various Islamic sciences, "Jewels of the Qur'an" (*Jawaharul Qur'an*) is a commentary on the Quran, and "The Incoherence of the Philosophers" (*Tahâfut al-Falâsifa*), which critiques philosophers such as Aristotle and Avicenna. His other notable works are "The Alchemy of Happiness" (*Kimiya-yi sa'adat*), "The Moderation in Belief" (*Al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad*), "The Aims of the Philosophers" (*Maqasid al-Falasifa*), and *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* ("The Deliverer from Error"), an autobiography that details his spiritual journey. In summary, it can be said that the life and works of al-Ghazali offer valuable lessons for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of Islam and their personal spiritual growth.

Contribution of al-Ghazali to Islamic Philosophy:

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that al-Ghazali, a towering figure in Islamic intellectual history, is universally regarded as "the proof of Islam."⁵ This distinction is a testament to his profound contributions to Islamic philosophy, which continue to shape the contours of Islamic thought to this day. At the heart of al-Ghazali's intellectual legacy is his conscious synthesis of three main aspects of the Islamic conception of rationality: theoretical and philosophical inquiry, juridical legislation, and mystical practice.

It is important to note that al-Ghazali's intellectual journey, which spanned various disciplines, including theology, philosophy, and mysticism, was marked by a deep commitment to understanding the intricacies of Islamic thought. His critique of Aristotelian philosophy, as represented by Avicenna and other Islamic philosophers, is a notable example. In his seminal work, *Tahâfut al-Falâsifa*, Al-Ghazali challenged the views of philosophers on various issues, including the nature of God, the universe, and humanity. He argued that philosophical inquiry, when divorced from revelation and prophetic guidance, can lead to heretical and misguided conclusions. At this juncture, it is worth noting that one of al-Ghazali's most significant contributions to Islamic philosophy is his synthesis of theology, philosophy, and mysticism. In his magnum opus, *Ihya' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*, al-Ghazali presented a comprehensive and systematic exposition of Islamic theology, philosophy, and spirituality. He integrated the rational inquiry of philosophy with the spiritual insights of mysticism, demonstrating that these disciplines are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. This synthesis has had a profound impact on Islamic thought, shaping the

development of subsequent Islamic philosophical and theological traditions. Furthermore, al-Ghazali's other notable work, *Jewels of the Qur'an*, is a commentary on the Quran, focusing on its spiritual and mystical aspects.

Accordingly, al-Ghazali's emphasis on the importance of spiritual experience and inner purification also constitutes a significant contribution to Islamic philosophy. In his works, he stressed the need for individuals to cultivate spiritual virtues, such as compassion, humility, and self-awareness, in order to attain true understanding and wisdom. This emphasis on spiritual experience and inner transformation has influenced the development of Sufism, a mystical tradition within Islam that emphasizes the inner dimension of faith and the pursuit of spiritual growth.

The impact of al-Ghazali's philosophical ideas extends beyond the Islamic world. His works were translated into Latin and studied by European scholars, influencing the development of Scholasticism and the thought of philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas. This cross-cultural exchange is a testament to the enduring relevance of al-Ghazali's ideas and their ability to transcend cultural and religious boundaries. Thus, in a nutshell, it can be said that al-Ghazali's contributions to Islamic philosophy have been profound and far-reaching. His synthesis of theology, philosophy, and mysticism, critique of Aristotelian philosophy, emphasis on spiritual experience and inner purification, and influence on Western philosophy have all left an indelible mark on the intellectual landscape of the Islamic world. As a testament to his enduring influence, al-Ghazali's works continue to be studied and revered by scholars and seekers of wisdom around the world.

Imam al-Ghazali's spiritual crisis at the peak of his career led to a transformative ten-year exile, during which he penned *Ihya' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*, a comprehensive guide to Islamic spirituality, ethics, and morality. This masterpiece revitalized the path of early Muslim sages, removing obstacles to acquiring beneficial knowledge. Ghazali's crisis, marked by feelings of emptiness despite outward success, prompted a re-evaluation of his life and a deeper pursuit of Islamic understanding. In *Ihya'*, he sought to counter intellectualism's excesses, provide practical guidance for virtuous living, and share his personal spiritual journey, blending autobiography, theology, and spirituality to create a timeless work.

Imam al-Ghazali's seminal work, *Ihya' 'Ulûm ad-Dîn*, is a thorough exploration of Islamic philosophy, spirituality, ethics, and morality. The text is structured into four volumes: *The Book of Worship*, *The Book of Worldly Usage*, *The Book of Destructive Evils*, and *The Book of Constructive Virtues*. Each volume contains ten detailed chapters, collectively providing a comprehensive guide for individuals seeking spiritual growth, moral guidance, and salvation. This expansive

work addresses various aspects of a person's life, offering insights into successful obedience in this world and the hereafter.

Conclusion:

In view of the above, it can be said that Imam Ghazali, a luminary from Iran, left an indelible mark on Islamic thought by countering the Batiniyyah movement and initiating a new philosophical era, which was later advanced by Ibn Rushd and Ibn Tufail. His literary legacy, particularly *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, resonates with profound understanding and urgency, offering practical, holistic guidance rooted in the hereafter. Ghazali's work nurtures a perfect slave of God and a genuine sense of human responsibility, weaving Qur'anic verses, prophetic narrations, anecdotes, and sage counsels into a comprehensive framework. He emerges as a multifaceted expert – a psychologist, sociologist, theologian, philosopher, and spiritual guide – addressing diverse audiences with uncompromising eloquence. The *Ihya'* 's enduring influence attests to its significance, with scholars praising it as Islam's foremost literary composition, capable of reviving lost sciences. Ghazali's contributions cement his status as the renewer predicted by the Prophet, earning him the title "Proof of Islam". His work underscores the importance of personal growth, introspection, and spiritual pursuit, offering timeless wisdom that continues to inspire and guide seekers of knowledge.

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