

AL-GHAZALI'S PERSPECTIVE ON UNION WITH GOD

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to explain al-Ghazali's concept of Union with God, which embodies a profound spiritual aspiration where seekers strive for a deep, heartfelt connection with the Divine. Central to Islamic mysticism (Sufism), this mystical union is cultivated through spiritual practices, self-purification (tazkiyah), and divine love. By transcending intellectual understanding, one experiences God's presence, aligning their heart with God's will. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that self-purification cleanses the soul of worldly attachments, while practices like prayer, meditation, and contemplation facilitate inner growth. Divine love dissolves ego boundaries, enabling individuals to merge with God's presence, realizing their true self in relation to God. This transformative journey yields inner peace, wisdom, and a sense of unity with the universe. As outlined in Ihya-al-Ulum al-Din, al-Ghazali views union with God as the purpose of the Sufi path, beginning with repentance (tawba) and culminating in union, where the soul is freed from veils hindering direct access to God.

Key words

al, ghazali, god, love, union.

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Introduction

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Ta'us Ahmed al-Tusi, al-Shafi'i al-Ghazali (1058-1111) is a towering figure in Islamic thought, leaving an indelible mark on the spiritual, philosophical, and mystical landscapes. He was a true synthesis of his time, absorbing and distilling the intellectual and spiritual currents swirling around him. Al-Ghazali's insatiable thirst for knowledge propelled him into the depths of diverse disciplines, where he dissected creeds, unraveled doctrines, and sought the essence of spiritual practices. He fearlessly ventured into the realms of philosophy, theology, and Sufism, engaging with thinkers across the spectrum, including those who challenged his beliefs. This relentless pursuit of truth not only deepened his understanding of Islam but also shaped the trajectory of Islamic thought, cementing his place as a luminary in the spiritual firmament.

Al-Ghazali's spiritual odyssey led him to question the rigid structures of canon law, the intellectual acrobatics of scholastic theology, and the arid rationalism of philosophy. Yet, it was his encounter with Sufism that truly transformed him, infusing his life with a vibrant, pulsing sense of the divine. As he exclaimed, "It is the mystical element in religion, which is most vital and makes religious life a reality."¹ He was captivated by the sufis' emphasis on lived experience, their seamless blend of action and devotion. Al-Ghazali's own journey echoed this, as he confessed, "the theory of it was easier to me than its practice... It was plain to me that it was impossible to reach its most characteristic elements by study. These called for expertise and state and change in one's quality."² This epiphany marked a profound shift in his life, as he traded the pursuit of knowledge for the pursuit of God.

Al-Ghazali's subsequent writings, particularly from 1096 onwards, radiated a deep, mystical glow. He ardently championed the mystical element as the heartbeat of religion, the key to unlocking a life of authentic devotion. For him, the Sufi path was a liberating journey, freeing the soul from the veils that shroud God's presence. As he wrote, "The purpose of the sufi path is to enable the soul to free itself from the veils which hinder it from seeing God or having direct access to Him. It begins with repentance (tawba) and ends with union or wisdom."³ Al-Ghazali's own quest culminated in a breathtaking vision of "the union with the Lord of the universe, God of predecessors and successors, without any states, Exalted in His Majesty."⁴ This, he believed, was the ultimate prize, a transcendent reward that eclipsed the fleeting concerns of the mundane world.

Objectives: The main objectives of this paper are:

- i. To explore the essence of al-Ghazali's concept of Union with God, delving into the nature and significance of this mystical union within Islamic mysticism (Sufism).
- ii. To investigate the spiritual practices that facilitate Union with God, analyzing how prayer, meditation, self-purification (tazkiyah), and divine love foster inner growth and spiritual transformation.
- iii. To map al-Ghazali's Sufi path to divine union, tracing the journey from repentance (tawba) to union, where the soul gains direct access to God and discovers its true identity in relation to the Divine.

Methodology: This study employs a qualitative methodology, scrutinizing al-Ghazali's seminal work (*Ihya-ul-Ulum al-Din*) alongside pertinent Sufism texts. The approach encompasses a three-pronged analysis: textual examination of primary sources, a comprehensive review of secondary literature, and an in-depth exploration of pivotal concepts such as tazkiyah, tawba, and divine love, thereby yielding a nuanced comprehension of al-Ghazali's Sufi philosophy and its implications for Islamic spiritual discourse.

Discussion and findings

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that understanding al-Ghazali's doctrine of vision or union with God requires insight into his views on God, soul and knowledge. His concept of God, as outlined in *Ihya-al-Ulum al-Din*, describes God as "One, without a partner, Unique; there is none like unto Him. Eternal, none resembling Him, set apart and having no equal."⁵ Al-Ghazali emphasizes God's eternal nature, stating, "He is One, Eternal, without prior, eternal having no beginning, Everlasting, having no end, continuing for evermore."⁶ For him, the vision of God involves three factors: the object (God), the agent (physical eyes and heart), and the act of vision. Al-Ghazali's description of God as the ultimate object of vision highlights the significance of understanding His nature in achieving spiritual insight.

It is interesting to note that al-Ghazali consistently emphasizes the unity of existence, portraying God as both transcendent and immanent – the creator, prime mover and ultimate reality. According to al-Ghazali, God is wisdom, beauty, and the source of all, manifesting as unclouded light visible only to enlightened minds. His attributes are reflected in His works, and His beauty and majesty make Him the sole object of love. This makes it apt to say that unlike the philosophers' detached absolute; al-Ghazali's God is personal and interactive, inviting creatures to connect through prayer, contemplation, and mystical experience.

However, al-Ghazali's concept of the soul is complex, involving four terms: *qalb*, *ruh*, *nafs*, and *aql*. Each term has dual meanings, as he mentions in *Rawat al-*

Talibin.⁷ While they differ in their primary sense, they converge in a secondary sense. The dual meaning of the four terms is discussed below.

For al-Ghazali, the term '*qalb*' refers to a spiritual essence linked to the physical heart, much like an attribute relates to its bearer. This essence is the core of human identity, the perceiving self. Similarly, '*ruh*' (spirit) denotes a knowing, perceiving subtlety akin to one aspect of '*qalb*'. '*Nafs*' conveys the essence of a person, while '*aql*' can signify the knowing self, aligning with the subtle essence of human nature. But al-Ghazali finds these terms inadequate for grasping the soul's nature, citing God's words, "Say O' Muhammad, the spirit is my Lord's affair."⁸ He notes many intelligent individuals have struggled to comprehend it. However, for those attuned to the soul's subtlety, its nature is straightforward: it exists independently, unbounded by space or direction, neither accident nor substance. The soul, like God, is transcendent and immanent, a unified entity rooted in will, mirroring al-Ghazali's conception of God.

Moreover, al-Ghazali's framework includes two realms: the world of command (*amr*) and the created world (*khalq*)⁹, with the soul belonging to the former, originating from God's command. He also posits that God and the soul share key characteristics: they are invisible, indivisible, and unconstrained by space, time, quantity, or quality, rendering attributes like shape, color, or size inapplicable to them. It is worth mentioning that al-Ghazali situates the soul in the celestial realm (*'alam al-jabarut*), a domain connecting the intelligible and physical worlds, reflecting a neo-Platonic cosmic hierarchy.

Furthermore, al-Ghazali proposes that humans possess dual souls: an animal soul and a spiritual soul. The spiritual soul is angelic in nature, while the animal soul is more primal. The spiritual soul represents the pinnacle of human essence, being the highest and most distinctive aspect of a person. As the essence of a creature lies in its highest, unique attribute, human essence is rooted in the spiritual soul.

Besides, al-Ghazali views human nature through another lens, describing the soul's five faculties: *sensory, imaginative, intelligent, rational, and divine* (or prophetic). Only the divine faculty grants knowledge of God, according to him. His soul theory hinges on the soul's eternity and immortality, a Platonic notion. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that without an immortal soul, spiritual experiences and teachings are rendered futile, as he says, "If the soul is not immortal, all we have discussed and experienced is in vain."¹⁰ For al-Ghazali, knowledge, heart purification, and the vision of God form an interconnected path, where he begins with knowledge, progresses through heart purification, and culminates in the vision of God.

Al-Ghazali breaks down religion into three parts: belief, conduct, and experience of spiritualities. The latter two constitute formal religion, but this isn't enough for a complete grasp of truth or to attain life's highest joys, according to al-Ghazali. It can't guarantee deliverance from hell or union with God. The third part, experience of spiritualities, is the Sufi path. However, al-Ghazali stresses that true Sufism must be grounded in revealed religion, with a foundation in divine revelation. He says, "He who knows himself knows God,"¹¹ highlighting the link between self-knowledge and knowing God. As the Quran states, "We will show them our signs in the world and in themselves."¹² Al-Ghazali emphasizes understanding one's soul's mystery to know God, asking, "What art thou thyself and from whence hast thou come? Whither art thou going...?"¹³ This reveals that the first step to self-knowledge is recognizing one's body and soul.

If we delve into al-Ghazali's philosophical writings, it becomes clear that he identifies two knowledge sources: *human teaching* and *Divine teaching*. Human teaching falls short of exact divine knowledge, which only Divine teaching can provide. This has two grades: inspiration and enlightenment. Inspiration was God's way of teaching the Prophet, but this door closed after Muhammad (S). Enlightenment remains, awakening the human soul through the universal soul, proportionate to the soul's purity and receptivity. The soul is like a mirror reflecting lights of light, but can be hindered by factors like unpolishedness, dirt (sin), wrong direction (away from truth), veils (traditional prejudices), or ignorance about seeking the vision.

It is important to note here that al-Ghazali emphasizes nurturing the soul (*qalb*), urging prioritization of its well-being and devotion to its betterment. The soul's at greatest risk of corruption, has the highest impact, is subtlest in its makeup, toughest to improve, and most challenging to manage - making it a crucial focus.

In discussing union with God, al-Ghazali sees the heart as a treasure house of precious jewels and essences, with knowledge of God as the most precious treasure, ensuring happiness in both worlds. The heart or soul, like the body, has health and sickness, needing treatment - prayer, worship, dhikr, and meditation are its medicine. Without proper treatment, it'll be destroyed. Perfect saints and prophets are the heart's physicians. A polished, disease-free soul attains God's knowledge, revealing Him as light of lights, perfect goodness, beauty, and supreme love object - summing up al-Ghazali's view on union with God

Conclusion

In view of the above, it can be said that al-Ghazali's view is that union or vision of God is possible only for those with a polished, sin-free soul or heart, made pure through knowledge, prayer, worship, *dhikr*, and meditation. As the soul becomes

pure, God reveals Himself as perfect beauty and supreme love. Al-Ghazali outlines five kinds of love - self-love, love for benefit, love for love's sake, love for goodness and beauty, and love due to affinity - all converging in God, the real object of love, fully realized in *Ishq*. The spiritual love of God, exemplified in Hallaj, is marked by sacrifice, remembrance, and absorption in the beloved's thought, characterizing the gnostic or *arif*. A true gnostic abandons worldly concerns, intoxicated by love's wine, dwelling in God's light, knowing Him as if seeing Him. Thus, al-Ghazali says gnostics see God with faith and intuition now, and face-to-face later, experiencing constant nearness, with subtlety and favor growing in the afterlife, given to those with purified hearts.

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