



## Philosophical and Spiritual Experience of Ultimate Reality: Analyzing Ghazālī's Methodology with reference to Contemporary Religious Research Paradigm

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Islam, Philosophy, Spiritualism, Ultimate Reality, Al-Ghazālī



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**Abstract:** *This academic work encompassed a panorama of philosophical and spiritual experience of ultimate reality with respect to methodology of Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī. The systematic review of literature concluded that Ghazālī employed the rational and spiritual techniques to accomplish the ultimate truth. The research determined that he in the beginning of his journey, believed in two ways (logic & path of Sufis) to accomplish truth but later found that ultimate reality could only be attained by mystical experience which directly means to purify the lower self. Moreover, he shared his experience and opened a gateway for further research by providing rational foundations for mystical experience. The study in this context, presented a nexus between his methodology and contemporary research paradigm. Analytical research method was employed for the collection and analysis of data.*

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## Introduction

The quest of truth is as old as the philosophy itself is. Socrates and Plato began to search truth and laid the foundations for syllogism and geometry. They thought that they could prove the knowledge by proving the geometric deductions for which Aristotle used the logic but later found tiny cracks in his perfect system. While looking from Islamic perspective, we find the roots of reality in the Holy Qur'an in a very unique dimension as the Holy Qur'an stated that:

*“And worship your Lord until there comes to you the certainty.”<sup>1</sup>*

Allama Iqbal stated that academically, the search for the rational foundations in Islam might have begun by the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) as he used to pray continuously: “God! Grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things.”<sup>2</sup>

In Islamic history of philosophy, *Ghazālī* was the first philosopher who paid such special attention towards the ultimate truth and made it a particular subject in the discipline of philosophy. He applied several methods and techniques in order to accomplish the state of ultimate truth. The research therefore intended to uncover his rational and mystic experience in quest of truth. In this context, the basic aim of this research was to (a) explore the Philosophical and Spiritual Experience of Ultimate Reality, (b) analyses methodology of *Ghazālī* for the quest of ultimate truth, (c) find out the relevance of *Ghazālī*'s methodology with Contemporary Research Paradigm. A brief sketch of *Ghazālī*'s life is given below in table 1.

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1- Al-Qur'an, 15: 99.

2- Allama Iqbal, The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam (Moscow: Dodo Press, 1930), 2.

### A Glance at *Ghazālī's* life

Name	<i>Abu Hāmid Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Ghazālī</i>
Birth	450/1058, Tus, a city in <i>Khrāsān</i> , in Persia
Education	Early education in hometown and higher education in Neshapur from al-Juvayni (419-478AH) who earned the title of Imam al-Haramayn.
Title	<i>Hujjat ul Islam</i> (Proof of Islam)
Position	He was appointed as a chief professor by <i>Seljūq</i> vizier ( <i>Nizām al-Mulk</i> ) in the <i>Nizāmiyah</i> College of Baghdad in 484/1091.
Master piece	<i>Ihyā ulūm al-dīn</i> (the Revival of the Religious sciences)
Expertise	Philosophy, Theology, Sufism, Jurisprudence, Objectives of Shariah
Death	He passed away in 505/1111 in the age of 55.

**Table: 1**

#### Literature Review

*Ghazālī* was essentially a theologian, a mystic and a jurist, fought sharply against each sect to in quest of truth. He gave an ample amount of time and effort to attain the errorless knowledge. He described in his autobiographical work: *Almunqidh min al-dalāl* (Deliverance from Error), how much he suffered in seeking certain knowledge and truth in general (*Ghazālī*, 1340 A.H). *Ghazālī* was in quest of a method to achieve certain knowledge which he found in logic. It was an objective method and could be applied to every branch of knowledge. He also considered that there was another method or way to achieve certain knowledge, but that was subjective and only a few people could achieve certain knowledge by this way, i.e. the way of true Sufis.<sup>3</sup>

Inquiring things and reaching the reality by rational proofs was the nature of *Ghazālī*. He never accepted any idea, thought and dogma without

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3- Azmi T. *al-Sayyed Ahmad, Al-Ghazālī's* views on logic (UK: PhD Thesis at University of Edinburgh, 1981), 61.

rational or empirical proof. He writes about this quality that he was so eager in the quest of knowledge and real understanding of things. He was bestowed this quality in his instinct by Allah Almighty and not by his own effort or choice.<sup>4</sup> One can see his quest for truth that once he had a heart attack due to getting confused in a matter of knowledge and could not talk for a long time.<sup>5</sup>

To accomplish the goal of certainty, he studied the human nature when he tried to differentiate the natural beliefs and the beliefs which are imposed on an individual by external impact whether from his parents, teachers or society. He argued with the hadith of Holy Prophet (PBUH) that:

«ما من مولود إلا يولد على الفطرة<sup>6</sup> وفي رواية: ما من مولود يولد إلا على الفطرة<sup>7</sup> فأبواه يهودانه وينصرانه ويمجسانه»<sup>8</sup>.

“Every child is born on nature (with a true faith of Islam i.e. to worship none but Allah Alone) and his parents convert him to Judaism, Christianity or Magianism”.

Ghazālī in this connection, tried to investigate the factors which make a man unbeliever whether he has born at *Fitrah* which is Islam according to above mentioned Hadith of Holy Prophet (PBUH). He wrote that he realized an internal quest of knowing the meaning of nature “*Fitrah*” and beliefs which were developed by the parents and teachers. He started analyzing these beliefs critically.

By careful review of literature, Ghazālī’s journey for the search of

4- Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, translation: Richard J. McCarthy (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1980), 3.

5- Ibid, 20.

6- *Muhammad b. Isma‘il al-Bukharī, al-Jami‘ al-Sahhīh, Kitāb ul Janāiz, Bāb manintaza hatta yudfan* (Beirut: Dar tuqu Najah, 1422 A.H), *Ḥadīth*: 1358.

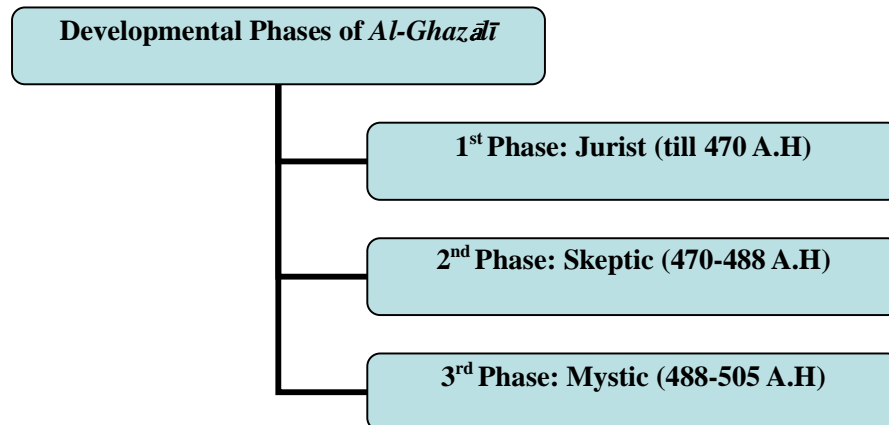
7- Ahmad bi Hanbal, *al-Musnad* (Beirut: Moassisah al-Risalah, 199), *Ḥadīth*: 10241.

8- Muslim bin Hajjaj Neshapuri, *al-Jami‘ al-Sahhīh, Kitāb ul Qadar, Bāb Mana Kulu Molūd*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya ul Turāth al-‘arabī, n.d), *Ḥadīth*:2658.

truth could be wisely divided into three phases.

### Development of Ghazālī's Thought

#### Diagram:1



**Firstly:** Ghazālī started his academic career as a theologian and jurist. In this phase, he discarded his presuppositions and made himself impartial by getting rid of previous beliefs and then started to inquire the truth. He wrote about himself that he was daring in mounting from the lowland of servile conformism to the highland of independent investigation. Moreover “the fetters of servile conformism fell away from him, and inherited beliefs lost their hold on him, when he was still quite young”.<sup>9</sup>

**Secondly:** From the age of twenty, he started to “scrutinize the creed of every sect and seek to lay bare the secrets of each faction’s teaching with the aim of discriminating between the proponent of truth and the advocate of error, and between the faithful follower of tradition and the heterodox innovator”.<sup>10</sup> He remained in the state of skepticism for two months and could not solve this mystery as he wrote that “During that time I was a skeptic in fact, but not in utterance and doctrine. At length

9- *Al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, 3.

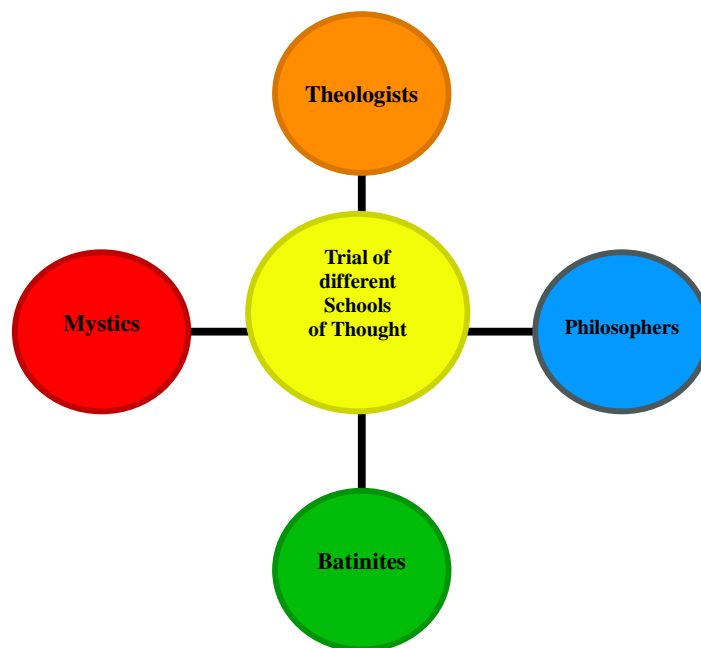
10- *Ibid*, 2.

God Most High cured me of that sickness.” Now he relied upon the reasoning with certainty not by constructing the proof but by the effect of a light which Allah Almighty cast into his breast.<sup>11</sup>

**Thirdly:** He started to practice mysticism. He travelled a lot and practiced the traditional mysticism. In this period, he also wrote his master piece “Ihya ulum al-din” (the revival of religious sciences).

### **Trial of Existing Schools of Thought**

**Diagram: 2**



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11- Ibid, 5.

When *Ghazālī*'s ailment was cured, he once again started his mission and assumed that the “categories of those seeking the truth were limited to four groups”:

1. The *Mutakallimīn*, who allege that they are men of independent judgment and reasoning.
2. The Philosophers, who maintain that they are the men of logic and apodictic demonstration.
3. The *Batinīs*, who claim to be the unique possessors of *al-ta'lim* and the privileged recipients of knowledge acquired from the Infallible *Imām*.
4. The Sufis, who claim to be the familiars of the divine presence and the men of mystic vision and illumination.

After making these four categories, *Ghazālī* took all of them on trial one after another. He started to inquire the foundations of their beliefs, methodology, and compatibility of their claim with the truth. He keenly examined the science of *Kalām*, the way of philosophy, teachings of *Batinīs*, and finally the path of Sufis respectively. <sup>(12)</sup>

### **Analysis of Existing Religious Schools of Thought**

*Ghazālī* began with the science of *Kalām* and found that '*Ilm-e-kalām* was invented to preserve the creed of orthodox and to save from the confusions created by innovators. Moreover, it was adequate to fulfill its own aim, but not for him. During his criticism on '*Ilm-e-kalām*, *Ghazālī* determined that the theologians accepted the premises either by uncritical acceptance or due to the public consensus. Most of them were engaged to expose the inconsistency of their adversaries. For that the *Kalām* did not

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12- Ibid, 5.

fulfill his requirement as it could not be the cure of his ailment. Furthermore, it had no ability to dispel the darkness due to bewilderment about the differences dividing men”.<sup>13</sup>

After finishing the task of *‘Ilm-e-kalām*, *Ghazālī* started to study philosophy without taking help from someone and became expert in less than two years. He critically studied philosophy about three years and became so familiar with the measure of its deceit and deception, and its precision and delusion, that he had no doubt about his thorough grasp of it. Furthermore, he found that the discipline of philosophy has several divisions. Despite this diversity in classification, all of them had the stigma of unbelief and godlessness. After dealing with the discipline of philosophy *Ghazālī* pointed out its errors and found it inadequate for himself as it could not satisfy him. *Ghazālī* has also written a particular book on the inconsistencies of philosophy named “Incoherence of philosophy (*Tahafat-ul-Falasifa*)” in which he took 20 issues about which Muslim philosopher fell into delusion. He criticized the methodology of the philosopher where in logic they bring together, for apodictic demonstration, and conditions known to lead undoubtedly to certain knowledge. But when, in metaphysics, they finally come to discuss questions in connection with religion, they cannot satisfy those conditions, but rather are extremely slipshod in applying them. After getting aware of ups and downs in philosophy he demonstrated its contradictions and argued that “it cannot assure the truth because it does not produce certainty”.<sup>14</sup>

After examining the creed of philosophers, he took *Ahl-e-T’alūm* on trial and showed the wrongness of their dogmas which he had also mentioned in several books: *al-Mustāzhir*; The Proof of the Truth, The Detailed Exposition of the Disagreement, *al-Durj al-marqūm bil-jadāwil*, and The Correct Balance. He, after studying the beliefs and main tenets of *Ahl-e-T’alūm*, established that *Ta’līmītes* have no cure which saves anyone

13- Ibid, 6.

14- Syed Hussain Nasr, *Al-Ghazālī*, Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2002), 258.



from the darkness of conflicting opinions. They were incapable of having a sound proof for the existence of infallible *Imām* from whom they take guidance. When *Ghazālī* asked several questions to *Batinīs* about infallible *Imām* they could not answer a single question and referred him to the hidden *Imām* by saying that: “There is no alternative to make the journey to him.” In fact they wasted their time and lived in search of infallible *Imām* but could not get anything.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, *Ghazālī* started his journey on the path of Sufis. Allama Iqbal wrote about the experience of *Ghazālī* that his finding no hope in analytic thought, moved to mystic experience, and there found an independent content for religion (Iqbal, 2009). He found that Sufis’ path is combination of theory and practice as they do only focus not upon knowledge but equally on actions. The core objective of their knowledge was the purification of lower self from wrong wishes and desires and to get rid of disgraceful habits in order to attain spiritual purification. For this, *Ghazālī* consulted the famous books of mysticism, such as *The Food of Hearts* by *Abu Tālib al-Makkī* (d. 998 A.D), writings of *al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī*, *al-Junaid* (d. 857 A.D), *al-Shiblī* (d. 946 A.D), *Abu Yazīd al-Bistamī* (d. 874 A.D), and others of their masters. After studying the literature of Sufis, it was exposed to him that the objective of Sufis cannot be accomplish by study only, but rather by experience, state of ecstasy and the exchange of qualities.<sup>(16)</sup> He, knew without any doubt that there is an immense weight of practicing knowledge to achieve the state of certainty as he argued with the tradition of Holy Prophet (ﷺ):

"من عمل بما علم، أورثه الله علم ما لم يعلم"

“Who will act upon his knowledge, God will bestow him such knowledge which he does not know”.<sup>17</sup>

15- *Al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, 17.

16- *Ibid*, 18.

17- *Abu Noaem, Ḥilyat ul 'Auliya*, (Cairo: *Dar ul 'Ilm*), 14-15; *Ibn e Tamiyya, al-Imān*, (Barut: *Al-Maktab al-Islamī*, 1993), 123.

In this connection he changed his way of living, spent about ten years on the path of Sufis and knew with certainty that Sufis followed the path of Allah, their way of live is the best amongst all categories, they are on the right and direct path, their ethics are best and no one can compete them in terms of intellect, wisdom and ethics. Due to the purification of soul, they attain certain and errorless knowledge and see the angels and souls of prophets, hear voices coming from them and learn the knowledge of useful things from them.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps *Ghazālī* made a unique and matchless contribution in the field of Islamic mysticism by observing, criticizing, analyzing and laying rational foundations for mysticism by breaking the concept of blind following in Islamic tradition. He presented the series of arguments with respect to '*aqal* and *naql* to prove the validity and authenticity of Sufis' goals, their methodology, and multidimensional effects on mind, spirit, morality and other aspects of life.

### Research Methodology

According to the nature of subject, descriptive and qualitative research method was employed for collection and demonstration of data. Qur'anic verses and traditions of Holy Prophet (ﷺ) were also quoted to endorse the argument. Primarily, the famous book of *Ghazālī* "*al-Munqidh min Dalāl*" was consulted in which he has explained different phases of his journey for the quest of truth. Moreover, secondary sources including research papers, theses, periodicals, were also pulled in as a supportive material which helped in leading towards conclusions. Relevant literature was also taken from Internet after careful assurance of its validity and authenticity. Tables and diagrams were drawn where required.

### Conclusions

In the light of cited literature, the study established that *Ghazālī* made extreme efforts and utilized his maxim potential in the quest of truth and certain knowledge. He faced numerous obstacles and challenges but

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18- *Al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, 21.

he had not felt shame and disappointed at any stage. Every challenge made him more powerful and gave him a new spirit to do his task efficiently. In his journey in the quest of truth, first he got rid of presuppositions, later studied prevailing schools of thought of his time and critically analyzed their main tenets and doctrine. *Ghazālī* research for the attainment of certainty was not limited to a particular class but he extended the scope of his research to every educated class including *Mutakallimīn*, philosophers, *Bātinīs*, Sufis, worshipers, and even to irreligious nihilist. He, after ten years of research established that Sufis are the only people who have certain and errorless knowledge and they are most pious and intelligent on the surface of the earth. Moreover, certain and error free knowledge can only be accomplished by following the path of Sufis and rest of the ways are failed in this regard. *Ghazālī*'s work is very unique from others in a way that he provided rational foundations for the mystical experience, uncovered the methodology of Sufis, revealed benefits he received during his experience, and disclosed superiority and different levels of their knowledge.

### **Recommendations**

By keeping in view the above findings and conclusions the study found that there is a strong relevance of methodology of *Ghazālī* with contemporary paradigm of research. In this connection, following few points are given below;

- ❖ The research should not be conducted only on the basis of literature but it is also important to observe on ground practices by taking in consideration existing patterns of thought and behaviour.
- ❖ Both: theoretical and practical approaches should be employed into research and these must be applied and objective.
- ❖ The researchers should be the symbol of passion, sympathy, and humbleness. Furthermore, they should take guidance from the attitude of *Ghazālī*, face every challenge bravely in the quest of

truth and must not give up in any situation. Moreover, they should utilize their utmost energy to improve the quality of work and get accurate results.

- ❖ The researcher should spare himself from all kinds of presuppositions and be impartial from beginning to the findings and conclusions.
- ❖ Last but not least, it is very important to work from the rational point of view on the mystical experience as *Ghazālī* laid foundations for it.

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