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ETHICAL SUFISM IN IMAM AL-GHAZALI'S IHYA ULUM AL-DIN: ITS RELEVANCE TO ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the concept of ethical Sufism developed by Imam Al-Ghazali in Ihya Ulum al-Din and its relevance to Islamic Religious Education (IRE). It is driven by the growing phenomenon of moral decline and character deterioration among students, highlighting the urgent need to reinforce character education grounded in spiritual values. The research adopts a qualitative approach through library research, focusing on Al-Ghazali's works especially Ihya Ulumuddin as well as other relevant supporting literature. The results indicate that Al-Ghazali's ethical Sufism centers on the purification of the soul (tazkiyat al-nafs), self-discipline, consistent practice of virtuous actions, and the development of the heart as the core of moral consciousness. These principles are highly applicable to the advancement of Islamic Religious Education, particularly in fostering students' character through the internalization of values, the exemplary role of teachers, and the cultivation of spiritual habits. Accordingly, Al-Ghazali's ethical Sufism can be positioned as a foundational framework for strengthening moral education in contemporary Islamic Religious Education.

Keyword: Ethical Sufism, Ihya Ulumuddin, Islamic Religious Education, Character Education.

INTRODUCTION

Moral degradation and character crises among students have become major concerns in contemporary education, particularly within Islamic Religious Education (IRE). The rapid development of technology, globalization, and shifting cultural values have significantly influenced students' behavior, often leading to weakened spiritual awareness and ethical sensitivity. In this context, Islamic education is not merely expected to transmit religious knowledge, but also to cultivate noble character (*akhlaq al-karimah*) grounded in spiritual and moral values.¹

One of the prominent Muslim scholars whose thoughts remain relevant to contemporary moral education is Imam Al-Ghazali. As a theologian, philosopher, and

¹ Nur Aliya Widya Putri et al., "Pendidikan Karakter Menurut Al-Ghazali Dan Relevansi Terhadap Karakter Gen-Z," *Al-Iqro'* 2, no. 2 (2025): 168, <https://doi.org/10.54622/aijis.v2i2.520>.

Sufi, Al-Ghazali developed a comprehensive framework of ethical Sufism that integrates knowledge (*'ilm*), action (*'amal*), and spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). His monumental work, *Ihya Ulumuddin*, systematically discusses the purification of the heart, the control of desires, the cultivation of virtues, and the educational role of teachers in shaping moral individuals. For Al-Ghazali, true knowledge must lead to ethical transformation and spiritual refinement.²

Ethical Sufism in Al-Ghazali's perspective does not emphasize mystical practices detached from social life; rather, it promotes moral discipline, self-control, habituation of righteous deeds, and the development of inner consciousness as the foundation of character formation. These principles offer a conceptual basis for reconstructing moral education within Islamic Religious Education. In particular, the emphasis on internalizing values, teacher exemplification, and gradual spiritual training aligns closely with the objectives of IRE in fostering morally responsible and spiritually aware students.³

Several studies have examined Al-Ghazali's thought from various perspectives. Fasya analyzed the concept of Sufism according to Al-Ghazali and highlighted its spiritual and ethical dimensions as the foundation of moral and spiritual development.⁴ Fazillah examined Al-Ghazali's learning model in *Ihya Ulumuddin*, emphasizing its educational implications and contribution to character formation.⁵ Sabariah et al. explored the role of teachers in Islamic Religious Education from Al-Ghazali's perspective and its relevance to strengthening student character in the digital era.⁶ Furthermore, Yahya et al. discussed the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought to modern education, particularly concerning ethics, morality, and character development.⁷

Although these studies provide valuable insights into Al-Ghazali's educational and spiritual thought, discussions specifically focusing on ethical Sufism as elaborated in *Ihya Ulumuddin* and its direct relevance to Islamic Religious Education remain limited. Existing studies generally discuss Sufism, educational philosophy, teacher roles, or

² Syukri Kurniawan Nasution et al., "Pendidikan Karakter Dalam Kitab Ayyuhal Walad Dan Relevansinya Dengan Pendidikan Karakter Di Indonesia," *Kamaya: Jurnal Ilmu Agama* 9, no. 1 (2026): 108, <https://doi.org/10.37329/kamaya.v9i1.5199>.

³ Azzura Arum Ningtias et al., "Peran Akhlak Dalam Pengajaran Menurut Al-Ghazali: Perspektif Filsafat Pengajaran," *SURAU: Journal of Islamic Education* 2, no. 2 (2024): 122, <https://doi.org/10.30983/surau.v2i2.8711>.

⁴ Adib Aunillah Fasya, "Konsep Tasawuf Menurut Imam Al-Ghazali," *JOUSIP: Journal of Sufism and Psychotherapy* 2, no. 2 (2022): 153, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.28918/jousip.v2i2.824>.

⁵ Fazillah Fazillah, "Analsis Model Pembelajaran Imam Al-Ghazali Dalam Kitab *Ihya Ulumuddin*," *Al-Madaris Jurnal Pendidikan dan Studi Keislaman* 5, no. 1 (2024): 82, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.47887/amd.v5i1.176>.

⁶ Hayatun Sabariah et al., "PERAN GURU DALAM PENDIDIKAN AGAMA ISLAM PERSPEKTIF AL-GHAZALI DAN RELEVANSINYA TERHADAP PENGUATAN KARAKTER SISWA DI ERA DIGITAL," *AL-ADABIYAH: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 5 (2024), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35719/adabiyah.v5i1.1182>.

⁷ Akbar Idris Fazlurrahman and M. Slamet Yahya, "Studi Komparasi Pemikiran Tasawuf Imam Al-Ghazali dan Ibn Taimiyah Perspektif Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Kependidikan* 12, no. 2 (2024): 183, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24090/jk.v12i2.9742>.

character education separately without systematically examining ethical Sufism as an integrated framework that combines spiritual purification, moral discipline, and character formation within contemporary Islamic Religious Education. Therefore, this study differs from previous research by specifically analyzing ethical Sufism in *Ihya Ulumuddin* as a conceptual framework for strengthening character education in Islamic Religious Education, thereby bridging the gap between classical Sufi ethics and contemporary educational practice.⁸

Therefore, this study seeks to analyze Al-Ghazali's concept of ethical Sufism as articulated in *Ihya Ulumuddin* and to examine its relevance to strengthening character education within contemporary Islamic Religious Education. Through a library research approach, this study aims to contribute to the conceptual enrichment of Islamic Religious Education by offering a spiritually grounded framework for moral development.⁹

This article is organized into four sections. The first section presents the introduction, including the research background, literature review, research gap, novelty, and research objectives. The second section explains the research methodology employed in this study. The third section discusses Al-Ghazali's concept of ethical Sufism in *Ihya Ulumuddin* and its relevance to Islamic Religious Education. The final section presents the conclusion and recommendations for future research.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design. The primary source was Imam Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulumuddin*, while secondary sources consisted of books, journal articles, and other scholarly works related to ethical Sufism, character education, and Islamic Religious Education.

Data were collected through documentation techniques by identifying and reviewing relevant literature. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis through the processes of data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. An interpretative approach was also applied to understand Al-Ghazali's concept of ethical Sufism and its relevance to contemporary Islamic Religious Education.¹⁰

⁸ Dinda Anggraini and Surya Bakti, "Spiritual Intelligence as a Foundation for Student Character Development: An Analysis Based on the Thought of Imam al-Ghazali," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah* 11, no. 1 (2026): 73, [https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2026.vol11\(1\).27576](https://doi.org/10.25299/althariqah.2026.vol11(1).27576).

⁹ Rina Ariani and Mahyudin Ritonga, "Analisis Pembinaan Karakter: Membangun Transformasi Insan Kamil Menurut Pemikiran Imam Al-Ghazali," *Jurnal Inovatif Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 3, no. 2 (2024): 177, <https://doi.org/10.38073/jimpi.v3i2.1649>.

¹⁰ Edo Feri Irawan and Fathur Rohman, "Rekonstruksi Konsep Pendidikan Agama Islam Berbasis Etika Spiritual: Studi Kritis Atas Pemikiran Pendidikan al-Ghazali," *IQRO: Journal of Islamic Education* 8, no. 1 (2025): 170, <https://doi.org/10.24256/iqro.v8i1.6618>.

To ensure the validity of the findings, source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from the primary source with various secondary references. This procedure was intended to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Biography of Imam Al-Ghazali

Al-Ghazali, whose full name was Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, was born in Tūs, one of the cities of Khurasan (Persia), in the middle of the fifth century Hijri (450 AH/1058 CE). He was one of the greatest Muslim thinkers and was honored with the titles Hujjat al-Islam (The Proof of Islam) and Zayn al-Din (The Ornament of the Religion).¹¹

Al-Ghazali passed away in his hometown of Tūs on 14 Jumada al-Akhirah 505 AH (19 December 1111 CE). He initially studied religious sciences in Tūs, then continued his studies in Jurjan, and finally in Nishapur under the guidance of Imam al-Juwayni until the latter's death in 478 AH/1085 CE.¹²

Al-Ghazali was born into a relatively poor family. However, his father managed to set aside a sum of money which, shortly before his death, he entrusted to a Sufi friend he trusted to oversee the education of Al-Ghazali and his brother, Ahmad. Al-Ghazali made the most of this opportunity, striving to pursue the highest level of education possible.¹³

Al-Ghazali's parents were devoted to the study of Sufism. They earned their living solely from the work of their own hands, weaving wool, and refused to consume anything except what they had lawfully earned. His father was known as a lover of knowledge and constantly prayed that his son would one day become a distinguished scholar. However, he did not live to witness the fulfillment of his prayers.¹⁴ During his childhood, Al-Ghazali studied jurisprudence (fiqh) in his hometown under Shaykh Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Razikani. Around 465 AH/1073 CE, he traveled to Jurjan, where he studied under Imam Abi Nasr al-Isma'ili. After acquiring knowledge in that region, he continued his journey to Nishapur to study under Al-Juwayni, widely known as Imam al-Haramayn. There, his extraordinary intellectual sharpness began

¹¹ Syamsul Kurniawan, "Pendidikan Karakter Dalam Islam Pemikiran Al-Ghazali Tentang Pendidikan Karakter Anak Berbasis Akhlaq Al-Karimah," *Tadrib: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 3, no. 2 (2018): 199, <https://doi.org/10.19109/Tadrib.v3i2.1792>.

¹² Ahmad Zaini, "THE TASAWUF THOUGHT OF IMAM AL-GHAZALI," *ESOTERIK* 2, no. 1 (2017): 150, <https://doi.org/10.21043/esoterik.v2i1.1902>.

¹³ Adib Aunillah Fasya, "The Concept of Sufism According to Imam Al-Ghazali," *JOUSIP: Journal of Sufism and Psychotherapy* 2, no. 2 (2022): 159

¹⁴ Atik Wartini, "Education Character In View Of Al-Ghazali And Its Relevance With The Education Character In Indonesia," *Ta'dib* 20, no. 2 (2016): 294, <https://doi.org/10.19109/td.v20i2.222>.

to manifest. He mastered several major disciplines of his time, including logic (mantiq), philosophy, and the Shafi'i school of law.¹⁵

Because of his exceptional intelligence and remarkable determination, al-Juwayni bestowed upon him the title *Bahrūn Mughriq* ("a vast ocean that drowns"). After al-Juwayni passed away in 478 AH/1085 CE, Al-Ghazali left Nishapur and later visited Nizam al-Mulk in the city of Mu'askar. He received great respect and honor there, and remained in the city for six years.¹⁶

Al-Ghazali was appointed to teach at the prestigious Nizamiyya. In 484 AH/1091 CE, he was officially inaugurated as a professor by the minister Nizam al-Mulk. He carried out his duties with remarkable success. During his time in Baghdad, in addition to teaching, he wrote refutations against the doctrines of the Batinis (esoteric sects), certain theological groups, philosophers, and others. After teaching in various places such as Baghdad, Syria (Sham), and Nishapur, Al-Ghazali eventually returned to his hometown of Tūs in 1105 CE. However, his teaching activities there lasted only about four years.¹⁷

B. The Works of Imam Al-Ghazali

Concerning the number of Al-Ghazali's works, scholars have reported differing accounts. Muhammad bin Al-Hasan Al-Wasithi, in *Al-Tabaqat Al-'Aliyyah fi Manaqib Asy-Syafi'iyah*, recorded 98 works. Meanwhile, Taj al-Din al-Subki, in *Tabaqat Asy-Syafi'iyah al-Kubra*, listed 58 works, and Kubra Zadeh, in *Miftah As-Sa'adah wa Misbah As-Siyadah*, estimated that his writings reached around 80 works. He further noted that Al-Ghazali's books and treatises are so numerous that they are difficult to count precisely, and it is not easy for anyone to identify all their titles. It is even reported that he authored as many as 999 works. This may be difficult to believe, but whoever truly knows him may find it possible." Meanwhile, Abdurrahman Badawi, in his book *Mu'allafat Al-Ghazali*, recorded that Al-Ghazali's works amounted to 457 titles.¹⁸

The following are some of them: *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin*, *Al-Adab fi Ad-Din*, *Al-Arba'in fi Ushul Ad-Din*, *Asas Al-Qiyas*, *Al-Istidraj*, *Asrar Mu'amalat Ad-Din*, *Al-Iqtishad fi Al-'Itiqad*, *Iljam Al-'Awamm 'an 'Ilm Al-Kalam*, *Al-'Imla 'ala Musykil Al-Ihya'*, *Ayyuha Al-Walad*, *Al-Bab Al-Muntahal fi 'Ilm Al-Jidal*, *Bidayah Al-Hidayah*, *Al-Basith fi Al-Furu'*, *Ghayah Al-Ghawr fi Dirayah Ad-Dawr*, *At-Ta'wilat*, *At-Tibr Al-Masbuk fi Nasha'ih Al-*

¹⁵ Igo Fadhli Sa'bani et al., "Pendidikan Untuk Kemandirian: Analisis Pemikiran Al-Ghazali Dalam Membangun Karakter Siswa," *Reflection: Islamic Education Journal* 1, no. 4 (2024): 117, <https://doi.org/10.61132/reflection.v1i4.175>.

¹⁶ Siti Shofiah et al., *The Concept of Islamic Religious Education in the Book Ihya'Ulumuddin (Study of the Figure of Imam Al-Ghazali)*, tt, 326.

¹⁷ Shofiah et al., *The Concept of Islamic Religious Education in the Book Ihya'Ulumuddin (Study of the Figure of Imam Al-Ghazali)*, 326.

¹⁸ Subhan Hi Ali Dodego, *Sufism al-Ghazali Perspective of Islamic Education*, (Jember: Guepedia, 2021), p. 35.

*Muluk, Tahsin Al-Ma'akhid, Talbis Iblis, At-Ta'liqah fi Furu' Al-Madzhab, At-Tafriqah bayna Al-Islam wa Az-Zandaqah, Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-'Azhim, Tahafut Al-Falasifah, Tahdzib Al-Ushul, Jawab Al-Ghazali 'an Da'wah Mu'ayyid Al-Mulk li Mu'awadah At-Tadris bi Baghdad An-Nizhamiyyah, Al-Jawahir Al-La'ali fi Mutsallats Al-Ghazali, Jawahir Al-Qur'an wa Duraruhu, Hujjah Al-Haqq, Haqiqah Al-Qur'an, Haqiqah Al-Qawlayn, Al-Hikmah fi Makhluqatillah 'Azza wa Jalla, Khulasah Al-Mukhtashar wa Naqawah Al-Mu'tasir, Ad-Durj Al-Marqum bi Al-Jadawil, Ad-Durrah Al-Fakhirah fi Kasyf 'Ulum Al-Akhirah, Ar-Risalah Al-Wa'zhiyyah, Zad Al-Akhirah, Sirr Al-'Alamayn wa Kasyf ma fi Ad-Darayn, Shifa' Al-Ghalil fi Al-Qiyas wa At-Ta'til, Fayshal At-Tafriqah bayna Al-Islam wa Az-Zandaqah, Qawashim Al-Bathiniyyah, Al-Kasyf wa At-Tabyin fi Ghurur Al-Khalq Ajma'in, Kimiya' As-Sa'adah, Lubab An-Nazhar, Mahk An-Nazhar fi Al-Fiqh, Al-Mustashfa fi 'Ilm Al-Ushul, Al-Mustazhiri fi Ar-Radd 'ala Al-Bathiniyyah, Al-Maqshad Al-Asna fi Syarh Asma' Allah Al-Husna, Al-Munqidz min Adh-Dhalal, Al-Wajiz, and Al-Wasith.*¹⁹

C. The Book *Ihya Ulum al-Din*

The book *Ihya Ulum al-Din* is the monumental work of Al-Ghazali, widely recognized as one of the greatest treasures of Islamic Sufism. *Ihya Ulum al-Din* is divided into four main sections, known as *rub'* (quarters): the *Rub' al-'Ibadat* (the quarter on acts of worship), the *Rub' al-'Adat* (the quarter on social customs and daily conduct), the *Rub' al-Muhlikat* (the quarter on destructive traits), and the *Rub' al-Munjiyat* (the quarter on saving virtues).²⁰

Many of the aforementioned scholars helped introduce and disseminate *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, contributing to its widespread fame especially given the renown of its author, Al-Ghazali.²¹ It is worth noting that the greatness of *Ihya Ulum al-Din* is such that it was reportedly first written by Al-Ghazali in Persian and later translated into Arabic by his students, as we know it today. Nevertheless, the essence and core content of the original *Ihya Ulum al-Din* have neither been diminished nor altered in the process.²²

The benefit of *Ihya Ulum al-Din* is not limited to the field of ethics (*akhlaq*), as the book also addresses various disciplines that are central to Islamic teachings. It discusses jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*'aqidah*), and even elaborates on

¹⁹Subhan Hi Ali Dodego, *Sufism al-Ghazali Perspective of Islamic Education*, (Jember: Guepedia, 2021), p. 36.

²⁰ Rahmad Syah Dewa et al., *The Concept Of Moral Education Curriculum From The Perspective Of Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali In The Book Of Ihya Ulumuddin*, 5, no. 1 (2023): 470.

²¹ Hafidul Muhsin and Imaduddin, "Implementasi Nilai-Nilai Pendidikan Akhlak Dalam Kitab Ihya' Ulumuddin Karya Imam Al-Ghazali Di Pondok Pesantren Assuniyah Kencong-Jember-Jawa Timur," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 12, no. 2 (2022): 46, <https://doi.org/10.38073/jpi.v12i2.989>.

²² Fazillah Fazillah, "Analysis Of Imam Al-Ghazali's Learning Model In The Book Ihya Ulumuddin," *Al-Madaris Journal of Education and Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2024): 87

educational models as previously mentioned.²³ However, the primary and central focus of *Ihya Ulum al-Din* is the field of ethics and spiritual refinement, reflecting Al-Ghazali's own position as a leading figure of Sufism in the Islamic world and a foremost authority in this discipline. Al-Ghazali composed *Ihya* in four volumes, divided into four *rub'* (sections).²⁴

The book *Ihya Ulum al-Din* is the principal reference for studying the Sufism of Al-Ghazali, particularly its third and fourth sections which, as noted by Carra de Vaux, were deliberately devoted to Sufism. The third section examines negative moral traits (*al-muhlikat*) that must be avoided, while the fourth section discusses positive virtues (*al-munjiyat*) that must be cultivated and practiced.²⁵

D. The Characteristics of Ethical Sufism as the Distinctive Feature of Imam Al-Ghazali's Thought

Ethical Sufism (*tasawuf akhlaqi*) is a way for a servant to draw closer to Allah by purifying oneself from actions that are forbidden by Him and by approaching Him through the fulfillment of all His commands.²⁶ Ethical Sufism is also commonly referred to as Sunni Sufism (*tasawuf sunni*). This form of Sufism aims at moral refinement, the realization of true human character, and the pursuit of ultimate truth. Its primary objective is to cultivate noble character among the Sufis and to prevent and eliminate blameworthy traits.²⁷

To gain a deeper understanding of ethical Sufism (*tasawuf akhlaqi*), Sufis must recognize several stages of spiritual training. This system of moral and spiritual development is aimed at controlling and disciplining one's lower desires (*hawa nafs*).²⁸ The following are the stages in the system of ethical Sufism development:

1. **Takhalli (emptying oneself of blameworthy traits);** *Takhalli* refers to a person's effort to rid oneself of negative moral qualities. Such blameworthy traits hinder a Sufi's success in attaining the level of ethical Sufism. One example of these vices is excessive attachment to worldly life—for instance, pursuing wealth to the extent of neglecting what is more essential, such as worship. In this regard, Sufis differ in their views. Moderate Sufis maintain that detachment from worldly life

²³ Arri Salaeh et al., "Character Education Concepts Based on Al-Ghazali's Perspective in *Ihya' Ulumuddin*," *Southeast Asian Journal of Islamic Education* 5, no. 2 (2023): 233, <https://doi.org/10.21093/sajie.v5i2.6398>.

²⁴ Fazillah Fazillah, "Analysis Of Imam Al-Ghazali's Learning Model In The Book *Ihya Ulumuddin*," *Al-Madaris Journal of Education and Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2024): 87

²⁵ Abdul Mukhlis, *The Thought Of Imam Al-Ghazali's Sufiscalism*, 2017, 42.

²⁶ Andika Dirsia and Intan Kusumawati, "Implementasi Pemikiran Imam Al-Ghazali Tentang Pendidikan Karakter," *Academy of Education Journal* 10, no. 02 (2019): 163, <https://doi.org/10.47200/aoej.v10i02.281>.

²⁷ Muhammad Ali, *Implementation Of Moral Sufism In Life*, 3, no. 01 (2024): 121.

²⁸ Mainuddin Mainuddin et al., "Pemikiran Pendidikan Karakter Al-Ghazali, Lawrence Kolberg Dan Thomas Lickona," *Attadrib: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* 6, no. 2 (2023): 285, <https://doi.org/10.54069/attadrib.v6i2.563>.

should be practiced in a balanced manner—without becoming so extreme that one neglects the true purpose of existence.²⁹

2. **Tahalli (adorning oneself with praiseworthy qualities)** refers to filling the heart, once emptied of blameworthy traits, with noble and commendable characteristics. This includes consistently performing good deeds solely for the sake of Allah, without any worldly motives. At this stage, Sufis strive earnestly to act in accordance with Islamic teachings, both inwardly and outwardly. Inward worship encompasses faith (*iman*), obedience, and a servant's love for his Lord, while outward worship includes acts such as prayer (*ṣalat*), almsgiving (*zakat*), fasting (*ṣawm*), and pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). Thus, *tahalli* represents the process of filling a purified heart with righteous actions and virtuous character.³⁰
3. **Tajalli (the unveiling of the unseen divine light to a purified heart, enabling it to perceive divine illumination);** *Tajalli* refers to the manifestation or disclosure of a hidden spiritual light. To perfect the second stage, namely *tahalli*, a Sufi must proceed to the third stage, which is *tajalli*, where the heart—having been cleansed and adorned with virtuous qualities—becomes capable of receiving and experiencing divine illumination.³¹

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali classifies morality (*akhlak*) into two categories, namely:

1. **Khuluq al-Hasanah / al-Mahmudah / al-Munjiyat (praiseworthy or virtuous morals)**, such as *al-Amanah* (trustworthiness, honesty, reliability), *as-Sidq* (truthfulness), *al-'Adl* (justice), *al-'Afw* (forgiveness), *al-Ulfah* (friendliness and being well-liked), *al-Wafa'* (fulfilling promises), *al-Haya'* (modesty), *ar-Rifq* (gentleness), and *al-Bisyar* (cheerfulness or a pleasant demeanor), and others.³²
2. **Khuluq as-Sayyiah / al-Madzmumah / al-Muhlikat (blameworthy or destructive morals)**, such as *an-Aniyyah* (selfishness or egoism), *al-Baghy* (immorality or sexual misconduct), *al-Buhtan* (false accusation or slander), *al-Khiyanah* (betrayal), *az-Zulm* (injustice or oppression), *al-Ghibah* (backbiting or gossiping), *al-Hasad* (envy), *al-Kufrān* (ingratitude for blessings), *ar-Riya'* (showing off or seeking praise), *an-Namimah* (slandorous tale-bearing or incitement), and others.³³

²⁹ Ali, *Implementation Of Moral Sufism In Life*, 123.

³⁰ Ali, *Implementation Of Moral Sufism In Life*, 123.

³¹ Ahmad Aziz Mashadi and Tasmuji Tasmuji, "The Role of Imam Ghazali in the World of Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2022): 286,

³² Ahmad Faisal Amin et al., "Role of the Sufism Perspective of Imam Al-Ghazali in Shaping Character Education at Student Cadres Ahlith Thoriqoh Al-Mu'tabaroh An-Nahdliyyah Nahdlatul Ulama University Cirebon," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Education* 1, no. 2 (2023): 46, <https://doi.org/10.31949/ijie.v1i2.7531>.

³³ Dewa et al., *Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Perspective Of Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali In The Book Of Ihya Ulumuddin*, 471.

Based on Al-Ghazali's Sufi thought particularly his emphasis on the purification of the soul as a means of drawing closer to Allah, the concept of *ma'rifah* (gnostic knowledge) as a way of attaining deeper awareness of the Creator, and his strong inclination toward ethical Sufism these ideas, in the researcher's view, have significant implications for Islamic education;³⁴

1. It can purify and cleanse the souls of students, bringing them closer to the Creator.
2. In relation to ethical Sufism, it can have a positive impact on students' behavior, as ethical Sufism emphasizes the practical application of spiritual values as a framework for carrying out righteous deeds in everyday life.
3. Concerning the theory of *ma'rifah*, within the educational context it can be implemented through religious subjects taught in every educational institution.³⁵

E. The Teachings of Sufism Taught by Imam Al-Ghazali

In the Sufism of Al-Ghazali, humanity is divided into three levels. First are the ordinary people (*al-'awam*), whose way of thinking is relatively simple. Second are those who think deeply and critically, known as the *khawas* (the elite or spiritually perceptive group). Third are the debaters (*ahl al-mujadalah*), who possess the ability to persuade others and refute arguments. Among these three levels, the most common are the first and second groups namely, the general public and ordinary thinkers. The general public often understands only the outward signs and explicit information, whereas the *khawas* are able to grasp implicit meanings and perceive the deeper ideas behind events.³⁶

In the Sufi concept of Al-Ghazali, before reaching the highest spiritual peak of Sufism, a seeker must pass through several stages. These stages include repentance (*tawbah*), patience (*sabr*), spiritual poverty (*faqr*), detachment from worldly life (*zuhd*), and contentment with God's decree (*rida*).³⁷

1. Repentance

According to Imam Al-Ghazali, repentance is an effort involving several actions of the heart. In short, according to the Sufis, repentance is the purification of the heart from all sins. Imam Al-Ghazali's teacher stated that repentance means no

³⁴ Syamsul Huda et al., "The Concept of Character Learning: A Comparative Study of Al-Ghazali and Thomas Lickona's Perspectives," *DAYAH: Journal of Islamic Education* 5, no. 1 (2022): 41, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jie.v5i1.11974>.

³⁵ Akbar Idris Fazlurrahman and M. Slamet Yahya, "A Comparative Study of the Sufi Thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taimiyah from the Perspective of Islamic Education," *Journal of Education* 12, no. 2 (2024): 202,

³⁶ Adib Aunillah Fasya, "The Concept of Sufism According to Imam Al-Ghazali," *JOUSIP: Journal of Sufism and Psychotherapy* 2, no. 2 (2022): 164

³⁷ Lidia Artika et al., "Biography of the Sufi Figure Al-Ghazali," *Journal of Educational and Cultural Research Studies* 1, no. 2 (2023): 44

longer committing the sins that were previously committed, nor any sins of the same kind, with the intention of glorifying Allah and fearing His wrath.³⁸

فان التوبة عن الذنوب بالرجوع إلى ستار العيوب وعلام الغيوب ، مبدأ طريق السالكين ، ورأس مال الفائزين ، وأول إقدام المريدين ، ومفتاح استقامة المائلين ، ومطلع الاصطفاء والاجتباء للمقربين³⁹

The meaning is: "Indeed, repentance (tawbah) from sin—by returning to the One who conceals faults and is All-Knowing of what is hidden—is the beginning of the path for the salik (spiritual seeker), the essential capital for the successful, the first step for the disciples (those seeking Allah), the key to guide those who have gone astray, and the starting point of choice and selection for those brought near to Allah.

*Repentance encompasses three aspects: knowledge, attitude, and action. Knowledge is the awareness of the dangers posed by major sins. This awareness gives rise to sorrow and regret, which in turn leads to the action of repentance. Repentance must be carried out with full consciousness of the heart, coupled with a sincere vow to oneself not to repeat the sinful act."*⁴⁰

2. Patience (*Sabr*)

Al-Ghazali mentions that there are three faculties in the human soul: the faculty of reason, the faculty that generates the impulse to do good, and the faculty that generates the impulse to do evil. If the faculty that drives good actions can influence and control the faculty that drives evil, then a person can be classified as patient (*sabr*).⁴¹

فالصبر عبارة عن ثبات باعث الدين في مقابلة باعث الشهوة ، فان ثبت حتى قهره واستمر على مخالفة الشهوة فقد نصر حزب الله والتحق بالصابرين وإن تخاذل وضعف حتى غلبته الشهوة ولم يصبر في دفعها التحق بأتباع الشياطين⁴²

The meaning is: "Patience (*sabr*) is the steadfastness of religious motivation in confronting the impulses of desire (*shahwah*). If one's religious resolve remains firm, overcoming and continuously resisting these desires, then one has aided the forces of Allah and belongs to the group of the patient. However, if one is weak and surrenders, allowing desire to dominate and failing to resist it, then one falls into the category of those who follow Satan."

3. *Fakr*

Fakr (spiritual poverty) involves striving to abstain from things that are necessary. This means that even if a prospective Sufi requires something, such as food, he must carefully examine whether it is *halal* , *haram* , or *shubhat* (doubtful in

³⁸ Siti Maemunah Rohmah et al., "Paradigma Pendidikan Karakter Menurut Pemikiran Imam Al-Ghazali Dalam Kitab *Bidāyatul Hidāyah*," *Atthulab: Islamic Religion Teaching and Learning Journal* 6, no. 2 (2021): 191, <https://doi.org/10.15575/ath.v6i2.12917>.

³⁹ Imām Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Juz IV, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1985, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Zaini, "The Tasawuf Thought Of Imam Al-Ghazali," 153.

⁴¹ Zaini, "The Tasawuf Thought Of Imam Al-Ghazali," 153.

⁴² Imām Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Juz IV, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1985, p. 60.

permissibility). If it is *haram* or *shubhat*, he must reject it, even if he is in great need. Additionally, the intention and motivation of the person providing it must also be considered.⁴³

اعلم أن الفقر عبارة عن فقد ما هو محتاج إليه أما فقد ما لا حاجة إليه فلا يسمى فقر أو ان كان المحتاج إليه موجودا مقدورا عليه لم يكن المحتاج فقيرا^{٤٤}

The meaning is: "Know that *faqr* (spiritual or material poverty) is the state of not possessing something that is truly needed. Losing something that is not necessary does not constitute *faqr*, and if what is needed is available or can be obtained, then a person is not considered *faqr*."

4. Zuhd

Al-Ghazali states that *zuhd* is the spiritual station of those who pursue the path of the Hereafter. Such a person is not attached to worldly traits and inclinations, but is instead primarily oriented toward the interests of the Hereafter.⁴⁵

اعلم أن الزهد في الدنيا مقام شريف من مقامات السالكين و ينتظم هذا المقام من علم و حال و عمل كسائر المقامات لأن أبواب الايمان هو عبارة عن انصراف الرغبة عن الشيء إلى ما هو خير منه فكل من عدل عن شيء إلى غيره بمعاوضة وبيع وغيره.^{٤٦}

The meaning is: "Know that zuhd from the world is a noble maqām (spiritual station) among the various stations of the salik (those who journey toward Allah). This maqām encompasses knowledge, spiritual states (ḥāl), and actions, just like other spiritual stations. Indeed, the doors of faith essentially involve turning one's desires away from something toward something better. Therefore, anyone who abandons one thing for another—whether through exchange, trade, or similar means—has, in essence, performed this act of turning away."

, اعلم أنه قد يظن أن تارك المال زاهد وليس كذلك فان ترك المال وإظهار الخشونة سهل على الأئمة من أحب للذبح بالزهد فكم من الرهابين من ردوا أنفسهم كل يوم إلى قدر يسير من الطعام اخذ ولازموا ديرا لآبَاب له⁴⁷

The meaning is: "Know that someone might assume that a person who abandons wealth is a zahid (one who practices zuhd), but this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, renouncing wealth and displaying an outwardly simple or austere lifestyle is easy, because sometimes it is done to gain a reputation as someone who is detached. Many monks restrain themselves daily, eating only a small amount of food and residing in monasteries without doors—but all of this does not constitute the true essence of zuh."

⁴³ Zaini, "The Tasawuf Thought Of Imam Al-Ghazali," 154.

⁴⁴ Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Juz IV, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1985, p. 186

⁴⁵ Muhammad Natsir Tarani et al., "Ethical Sufism in Education: Reconstruction of the Concept of *Zuhd* According to Al-Ghazali and Its Model of Actualization in Pesantren Communities," *Jurnal Ilmu Agama: Mengkaji Doktrin, Pemikiran, Dan Fenomena Agama* 27, no. 1 (2026): 90, <https://doi.org/10.19109/jia.v27i1.33470>.

⁴⁶ Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Juz IV, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1985, p. 211

⁴⁷ Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Juz IV, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1985, p. 236

فأذن معرفة الزهد أمر مشكل بل حال الزهد على الزهد مشكل وينبغي أن يقول في باطنه على ثلاث علامات : العلامة الأولى أن لا يفرح بم وجود ولا يحزن على مفقود بل ينبغي أن يكون بالضد من ذلك وهو أن يحزن بوجود المال ويفرح بفقده . العلامة الثانية أن يستوى عنده ذامه ومادحه فالأول علامة الزهد في المال والثاني علامة الزهد في الجاه . العلامة الثالثة أن يكون أنسه بالله تعالى والغالب على قلبه حلاوة الطاعة إذ لا يخلو القلب عن حلاوة المحبة إما محبة الدنيا وإما محبة الله وهما في القلب كالماء والهواء في القدح فالماء إذا دخل خرج الهواء ولا يجتمعان.^{٤٨}

The meaning is:

“Know that understanding the essence of zuhd (ascetic detachment) is a difficult matter; indeed, even comprehending one’s own state of zuhd is challenging. A servant who is truly detached should observe three signs within the heart:

a) One does not rejoice over what is possessed nor grieve over what is lost. In fact, one should feel sorrow when acquiring wealth and joy when losing it, because the heart is free from attachment to it.

b) One remains indifferent to both human praise and blame. Indifference to criticism indicates detachment from wealth, while indifference to praise signifies detachment from status and reputation.

c) One’s true delight is only with Allah Ta’ālā, and the heart is governed by the sweetness of obedience. The human heart is never empty of love—whether for the world or for Allah—and these two cannot coexist in the same heart, much like water and air in a glass; when water enters, the air is displaced, and the two cannot occupy the same space together.”

5. Rida

In Indonesian, *ridho* is often interpreted as willing, pleased, content, approval, or mercy. However, when examined more deeply in its original language, it carries a more nuanced and complex meaning with a richer spiritual character.

اعلم أن من قال ليس فيما يخالف الهوى وأنواع البلاء إلا الصبر فأما الرضا فلا يتصور فانما أتى من ناسية إنكار المحبة فأما إذا ثبت تصور الحب لله تعالى واستغراق الهم به فلا يخفى أن الحب يورث الرضا بأفعال الحبيب.⁴⁹

The meaning is :

Know that rida (contentment) is a lofty rank among those who are close to Allah.

Rida is the joy and serenity of the heart in accepting all of Allah’s decrees—whether sweet or bitter—and the absence of any inner resistance toward whatever He has ordained.

Rida (contentment) is a person’s sincere acceptance of everything that has been decreed by Allah (qada’ and qadar). A person who possesses rida feels at peace

⁴⁸Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Juz IV, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1985, p. 236

⁴⁹Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Juz IV, Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1985, p. 276

with all of Allah's decisions and does not complain about whatever befalls him, including trials or calamities.⁵⁰

From the explanations above, it can be understood that Al-Ghazali classifies human beings in Sufism into three levels: the common people (*al-'awam*), who understand only outward signs; the *khawas*, who are able to perceive the inner meanings behind events; and the debaters (*ahl al-mujadalah*), who are skilled in articulating and defending arguments.

To attain spiritual perfection, a *salik* (spiritual seeker) must undergo several essential stages, as emphasized by Al-Ghazali: repentance (*tawbah*), patience (*sabr*), spiritual poverty (*faqr*), detachment (*zuhd*), and contentment (*rida*). Repentance is the initial step, requiring awareness of the dangers of sin, sincere remorse, and firm resolve to abandon wrongdoing. Patience represents the steadfast strength of faith in resisting base desires. Spiritual poverty does not merely signify the absence of wealth; rather, it reflects an inner attitude of non-attachment to worldly matters and careful discernment regarding what one allows into oneself, especially in matters of lawful and unlawful sustenance.

According to Al-Ghazali, *zuhd* is not simply the outward abandonment of possessions, but the turning of the heart away from love of the world toward love of the Hereafter. It is characterized by moderation in responding to gain and loss, indifference to praise or blame, and the experience of sweetness in obedience to God. The culmination of these stages is *rida*, the heartfelt acceptance of all that Allah decrees without resistance, born out of profound love for Him. By passing through these stages, a servant is guided to purify the heart, subdue the lower self, and attain true closeness to Allah in its deepest and most authentic sense.

F. The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Moral Education to Islamic Religious Education

Al-Ghazali's concept of moral education remains highly relevant to contemporary Islamic Religious Education (IRE), particularly in addressing moral and spiritual challenges among students. His educational thought emphasizes that the ultimate goal of learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but the formation of virtuous character through the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and the cultivation of ethical behavior.⁵¹

First, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on character formation supports the current orientation of IRE toward strengthening students' moral and religious competencies. In practical terms, PAI learning should not be limited to cognitive mastery of Islamic teachings but should also encourage the habituation of honesty, responsibility, discipline, and respect through reflective learning activities and daily practice.

⁵⁰ ali, *Implementation Of Moral Sufism In Life*, 133.

⁵¹ Fazillah, "Analisis Model Pembelajaran Imam Al-Ghazali Dalam Kitab *Ihya Ulumuddin*," 82–94.

Second, Al-Ghazali's view of teachers as moral exemplars (*murabbi*) is highly relevant to contemporary educational settings. The implementation of this principle requires PAI teachers to demonstrate ethical conduct, religious commitment, and positive interpersonal relationships, thereby enabling students to learn moral values through observation and imitation as well as formal instruction.⁵²

Third, Al-Ghazali's emphasis on value internalization can be applied through student-centered learning approaches that encourage reflection, self-evaluation, and moral reasoning. Activities such as reflective journals, discussions of ethical dilemmas, and community service projects may facilitate the integration of Islamic values into students' daily lives rather than treating morality as merely theoretical knowledge.⁵³

Finally, the concept of ethical Sufism offers a framework for integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning. In the context of contemporary IRE, this framework can be implemented through curricula that combine religious understanding, spiritual development, and character education.⁵⁴ Such an approach enables learners to develop not only intellectual competence but also moral responsibility and spiritual awareness, which are essential for responding to contemporary moral and social challenges.⁵⁵

In summary, Al-Ghazali's ethical Sufism (*tasawuf akhlaki*) offers a holistic framework for Islamic Religious Education by integrating knowledge, spiritual purification, and moral practice. He emphasizes that true education goes beyond cognitive learning, requiring the internalization of virtues through self-discipline, reflection, and habituation of good deeds, with the heart (*qalb*) serving as the center of moral formation.⁵⁶ Teachers play a crucial role as moral exemplars (*murabbi*), guiding students not only intellectually but also spiritually. The progressive internalization of values ensures that character development becomes a continuous and transformative process. Consequently, the application of these principles in contemporary Islamic Religious Education may encourage curricula that integrate ethical reflection, moral reasoning, character habituation, and spiritual practice, thereby fostering learners who are knowledgeable, morally responsible, and spiritually aware in responding to contemporary social and moral challenges.⁵⁷

⁵² Sabariah et al., "PERAN GURU DALAM PENDIDIKAN AGAMA ISLAM PERSPEKTIF AL-GHAZALI DAN RELEVANSINYA TERHADAP PENGUATAN KARAKTER SISWA DI ERA DIGITAL," 72.

⁵³ Sheilda Nurgenti, "Revitalisasi Nilai Pendidikan Islam Imam Al-Ghazali dalam *Ihya' Ulumuddin*," *Ngaji: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 4, no. 2 (2025): 111, <https://doi.org/10.24260/ngaji.v4i2.83>.

⁵⁴ Fasya, "Konsep Tasawuf Menurut Imam Al-Ghazali," 2022, 153–66.

⁵⁵ Muhammad Yahya et al., "The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Thought to Modern Education: A Literature Review on Ethics, Morals, and Character Development," *Journal of Education and Learning* 3, no. 2 (2025): 72.

⁵⁶ Fasya, "Konsep Tasawuf Menurut Imam Al-Ghazali," 2022, 153–66.

⁵⁷ Yahya et al., "The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Thought to Modern Education: A Literature Review on Ethics, Morals, and Character Development," 72.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that Imam Al-Ghazali's ethical Sufism provides a comprehensive and practical framework for moral education within Islamic Religious Education (IRE). By emphasizing the purification of the heart (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), cultivation of virtues, and progressive spiritual training, Al-Ghazali demonstrates that true education extends beyond the transfer of knowledge to include ethical transformation and spiritual refinement. His approach underscores the central role of teachers as moral exemplars (*murabbi*) and the importance of internalizing values through disciplined practice, reflection, and habituation of righteous deeds. The findings indicate that Al-Ghazali's concept of ethical Sufism remains relevant to contemporary Islamic Religious Education, particularly in strengthening character education, promoting moral responsibility, and fostering spiritual awareness among students. Thus, Al-Ghazali's educational framework offers a valuable foundation for addressing contemporary moral challenges through a holistic integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, curriculum developers are encouraged to integrate the values of ethical Sufism into Islamic Religious Education, particularly through character education programs that emphasize self-discipline, moral reflection, and spiritual development. Islamic Religious Education teachers should strengthen their role as moral exemplars (*murabbi*) by fostering ethical behavior and value internalization through both instruction and practice. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct empirical studies examining the implementation and effectiveness of Al-Ghazali's ethical Sufism in contemporary educational settings.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study is limited to a library research approach focusing primarily on Imam Al-Ghazali's *Ihya Ulumuddin* and related literature. Therefore, the findings are conceptual and interpretative in nature and have not been empirically tested within actual Islamic Religious Education contexts. Future studies may expand this research through field-based investigations involving teachers, students, and educational institutions to examine the practical application of Al-Ghazali's ethical Sufism in contemporary learning environments.

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