

## Holistic Islamic Education: A Study of the Thought of Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh

Irfan Maulana Adnan<sup>1\*</sup>, Marsono<sup>2</sup>, Herawan Budi Prasetya<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Ridwan Faqih<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Islam Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

<sup>2,3</sup> Universitas Islam An-Nur, Lampung, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ahgaff University, Mukalla, Yemen

<sup>1</sup>[maherfanqis@gmail.com](mailto:maherfanqis@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[marsononatar@gmail.com](mailto:marsononatar@gmail.com), <sup>3</sup>[herawanbp@gmail.com](mailto:herawanbp@gmail.com),

<sup>4</sup>[fadawkas30@gmail.com](mailto:fadawkas30@gmail.com)

\*Correspondence

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### Abstract

Islamic education plays a crucial role in shaping a whole human being who is not only intellectually intelligent but also morally upright and spiritually profound. However, modern education often falls into a dichotomy between religious and secular sciences, resulting in moral decline and a weakened spiritual orientation among students. To address these challenges, this study examines the educational thought of Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh within the framework of holistic Islamic education. The aim is to compare Al-Ghazali's concept of spirituality with Abduh's rationalism and to explore their relevance in constructing a comprehensive Islamic education system. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method through library research, analyzing classical works of both scholars as well as secondary literature from books and academic journals. The findings reveal that Al-Ghazali emphasizes *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), moral formation, and the integration of knowledge with spirituality. Meanwhile, Abduh promotes educational reform, rationality, and openness to modern sciences through *ijtihad*. The synthesis of their ideas suggests that ideal Islamic education must harmonize intellect and spirituality, reject the dichotomy of knowledge, and cultivate individuals who are both critical and religious. The contribution of this study lies in offering a conceptual framework for developing a contemporary Islamic curriculum that balances intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions.

**Keywords:** *Imam Al-Ghazali, Muhammad Abduh, Islamic Education, Comparative Study.*

### INTRODUCTION

Education serves as a compass for character development, behavior, and mindset, enabling individuals to discern right from wrong, and equipping the younger generation

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to play a positive role in their social environment.<sup>1</sup> Education holds a profoundly important role in human life because, through it, humans can achieve a higher degree compared to other creatures of God.<sup>2</sup> The quality of education within the national context is a determining factor for a nation's progress. In other words, the level of progress or development of a nation can be gauged by the quality of its education.<sup>3</sup> Through education, humans are able to lead a more purposeful life, and education also serves as a foundation for human self-development and world civilization. Ibn Taymiyyah argued that Islamic education encompasses all types of knowledge that benefit the advancement and welfare of human life.

Spiritual intelligence is a crucial element that should not be overlooked in education. It functions as a foundation in forming a complete personality, balancing intellect and heart. Spiritual intelligence reflects a deep understanding of the meaning of life, interpersonal relationships, self-awareness, and harmony with nature. The core of spiritual guidance is to open opportunities for a person to express their personal experience in sensing the presence of God.<sup>4</sup> Education should not be limited to the development of the intellectual aspect alone; it must also include spiritual and moral cultivation, to purify the heart and shape the personality, so that students are not only academically intelligent but also possess noble character and ethics.

Muhammad Abduh asserted that reason holds a high position. Revelation cannot contain things that contradict reason, so the interpretation of revelation must be directed towards a meaning that is consistent with rationality. Generally, Islamic education develops intellectual (IQ), emotional (EQ), and spiritual (SQ) aspects, as spiritual intelligence plays a role in optimizing the effective use of intellectual and emotional intelligence. IQ does not include the measurement of creativity, emotion, spirituality, or social relationships, while *qalbiyah* (heart) intelligence predominantly forms a calm and balanced personality.<sup>5</sup>

Within the treasury of Islamic thought, one concept of soul purification, known as *Tazkiyatun Nafs*, has received attention from scholars, especially Imam Al-Ghazali, a prominent intellectual in Islamic thought who made profound contributions in explaining this spiritual process. Imam Al-Ghazali defines *Tazkiyatun Nafs* as the effort to purify oneself through the control, development, and empowerment of the soul. In his works, such as *Ihya' Ulumuddin* and *Kimya' As-Sa'adah*, he offers pathways and a framework

<sup>1</sup> Irfan Maulana Adnan, "Revitalisasi Metode Mudzakah dalam Meningkatkan Pembelajaran yang Interaktif," *Jurnal Kajian Penelitian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan* 3, no. 2 (2025): 23–35, <https://doi.org/10.59031/jkppk.v3i2.615>.

<sup>2</sup> Subaidi Subaidi et al., "Komparasi Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali Dan Muhammad Abduh Tentang Moral Peserta Didik," *Piwulang: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 5, no. 1 (2022): 01–23, <https://doi.org/10.32478/piwulang.v5i1.1166>.

<sup>3</sup> Irfan Maulana Adnan et al., "Konsep Tarbiyah Dalam Hadits Nabi: Pendekatan Tafsir Tematik Terhadap Pendidikan Kontemporer," *As-Sulthan Journal of Education* 2, no. 1 (2025): 14–27.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Evans, "Experience and Convergence in Spiritual Direction," *Journal of Religion and Health* 54, no. 1 (2015): 264–78.

<sup>5</sup> Moh. Safrudin dkk., "Tafsir Ayat-Ayat Kemasyarakatan" Implementasi Nilai-Nilai Kemanusiaan dalam Kehidupan Modern," *TAJID: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman dan Kemanusiaan* 7, no. 1 (2023): 135–48, <https://doi.org/10.52266/tajid.v7i1.1851>.

for spiritual growth that impacts both personal and social life.<sup>6</sup> Humans will achieve a sense of peace and tranquility if they can maintain a balance between various potentials within themselves, including physical, psychological, and spiritual needs. This is because the fusion of *ruh* (spirit) and *jasad* (body) in humans holds two tendencies: to become good and to become evil.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary Islamic education is demanded not only to instill cognitive aspects and technical skills but also spirituality. The problems currently emerging in the world of education are the decline in morality, as seen in the rampant bullying, fights, school brawls, and even students challenging teachers to fight. The most crucial choice in social life is the one that determines our attitude towards others and the quality of our interactions based on sound moral principles.<sup>8</sup>

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas states that the goal of education in Islam is to perfect the human being holistically, not just the intellectual aspect, but also the spiritual. This balance is the core of the true essence of Islamic education. To overcome these problems, the enhancement of Islamic religious education plays a crucial role in character formation.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the rational thought of Muhammad Abduh and the spirituality of Imam Al-Ghazali are expected to become the foundation for building a balanced and comprehensive Islamic education system.

Therefore, this paper aims to compare the thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh in the aspects of spirituality and rationality in Islamic education, and it is hoped that their similarities and differences in constructing a comprehensive concept of Islamic education can be identified. By examining the ideas of both, it is hoped that a more complete and relevant understanding of the Islamic education model will emerge, one that can answer the challenges of the times without losing its roots in spiritual values.

A number of previous studies have discussed the thoughts of both Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh in the context of Islamic education. For instance, Tambak (2018) emphasized that Al-Ghazali's concept of education is oriented towards the formation of morality and spirituality.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Arwen & Kurniyati (2019) examined the rationality of Abduh's thought which encouraged the renewal of the Islamic education system to be more adaptive to the developments of the time.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the research by

<sup>6</sup> Ma'muroh et al., "The Concept of Tazkiyatun Nafs by Al-Ghazali and Its Implementation at Pesantren Darut Tasbih Tangerang," *Edu Cendikia: Jurnal Ilmiah Kependidikan* 4, no. 02 (2024): 833–44, <https://doi.org/10.47709/educendikia.v4i02.4989>.

<sup>7</sup> Intan Fithriyyah and Hery Noer Aly, "Implementasi Metode Tazkiyatun Nafs Imam Al-Ghazali Perspektif Pendidikan Islam Dalam Mengembangkan Potensi Kecerdasan Spiritual Siswa MAN 1 Kota Bengkulu," *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Konseling* 5, no. 1 (2023): 5726–35.

<sup>8</sup> Ashraf M. Esmail et al., "The Impact of Culture on Crime," *Race, Gender & Class* 20, no. 1/2 (2013): 326–43.

<sup>9</sup> Nazila Mumtaza Zamhariroh et al., "Relevansi Pemikiran Pendidikan Al-Ghazali Dengan Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer Tentang Keseimbangan Intelektual Dan Spiritual," *Kariman: Jurnal Pendidikan Keislaman* 12, no. 2 (2024): 169–81, <https://doi.org/10.52185/kariman.v12i2.569>.

<sup>10</sup> Syahraini Tambak, "Pemikiran Pendidikan al-Ghazali," *Al-Hikmah: Jurnal Agama dan Ilmu Pengetahuan* 8, no. 1 (2018): 73–87.

<sup>11</sup> Desri Arwen and E Kurniyati, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam Muhammad Abduh," *Jurnal Kajian Islam Dan Pendidikan Tadarus Tarbawy* 1, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.31000/jkip.v1i1.1492>.

Fithriyyah & Aly (2023) highlighted the implementation of Al-Ghazali's *tazkiyatun nafs* for the development of students' spiritual intelligence.<sup>12</sup> These studies indicate that the focus of previous research has been predominantly on one figure individually or on a specific aspect of both their thoughts.

Different from those studies, this research places the thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh comparatively, emphasizing spirituality and rationality as two main pillars in Islamic education. This comparative analysis is important to show how the synthesis of classic and modern thought can result in a holistic concept of Islamic education. Thus, the novelty of this research lies in the effort to bring together the two major currents of thought—Al-Ghazali's spiritualism and Abduh's rationalism—to address the problems of morality and the challenges of modernization in the contemporary Islamic education system.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with a library research approach. Data are collected from secondary sources such as books, articles, and scholarly journals discussing the thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh, particularly those relevant to Islamic education. Data searching is conducted through various scientific databases and reputable journals, such as the *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, *Jurnal Kajian Islam*, as well as their classic works like Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' Ulumuddin* and Muhammad Abduh's *Risalah Tauhid*.

The collected data are then analyzed using content analysis, which involves examining the text's content to identify the main concepts related to spirituality and rationality in education. The analysis is carried out by comparing the thoughts of the two figures, identifying their similarities and differences, and highlighting their relevance to contemporary Islamic education. Through this step, the research aims to present a complete picture of the contribution of Al-Ghazali's and Abduh's thoughts in building a holistic Islamic education system. Thus, the literature study is part of the approach used to understand and delve into a research topic or problem by reviewing existing research or theories.<sup>13</sup>

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research indicate that ideal Islamic education requires a balance between spiritual and rational approaches. The approaches of Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh reflect two important streams in the treasury of Islamic thought: spiritualism, championed by Imam Al-Ghazali, and rationalism, advocated by Muhammad Abduh.

According to Zamhariroh, as quoted in Imam Al-Ghazali's work *The Revival of the Religious Knowledge*, ideal education is one that not only develops the intellect but

<sup>12</sup> Fithriyyah and Aly, "Implementasi Metode Tazkiyatun Nafs Imam Al-Ghazali Perspektif Pendidikan Islam Dalam Mengembangkan Potensi Kecerdasan Spiritual Siswa MAN 1 Kota Bengkulu."

<sup>13</sup> Lexy J Meolong, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif* (PT. Remaja Rosdakarya, 2017).

also strengthens spirituality and morality. Imam Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of holistic education that integrates intellectual knowledge with spiritual and moral values. Al-Ghazali offers a comprehensive educational approach, stressing that the development of knowledge must go hand-in-hand with spiritual cultivation to achieve complete self-perfection.<sup>14</sup>

According to Zaman in his research, *The Revival of Islam: The Central Role of Islamic Education System*, the foundation of Islamic knowledge is built partly upon revelation and inspiration, and partly sourced from the personal experience of individuals who have progressed through the stages of self-purification and spiritual development through the control of the *nafs* (soul/ego).<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Muhammad Abduh introduced reforms to the aims of education towards a more dynamic and progressive direction, emphasizing that Islamic education aims to educate the intellect and the soul, and guide humans towards achieving the highest happiness in both this world and the hereafter.<sup>16</sup> Abduh's main goal was to bridge the widening gap between the traditional educational system and the influx of modern rationalism coming from outside the Islamic world (Khalid, 1970). Both figures agree that education does not merely aim to transfer knowledge, but also to shape character and build a comprehensive understanding.

### **Brief Biographies of Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh**

#### **1. Al-Ghazali**

Al-Ghazali was the most famous Muslim scholar and teacher of his time, the pride of the Nizamiyah Academy in Baghdad, a person of great intellect whose advice was sought by fellow theologians, scientists, and princes, as well as a thinker on Islam and humanity.<sup>17</sup> Throughout his life, he mastered various branches of Islamic knowledge, although he did not comprehensively delve into the science of *hadith*. Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, al-Tusi, more widely known as al-Ghazali, was an Islamic intellectual figure who served as a jurist (*faqih*), philosopher, theologian, Sufi, and expert in the principles of *aqidah* (creed) and Islamic law. He was born in the year 450 H (1058 CE) in the city of Tus, which is now Mashhad in northeastern Persia.

Al-Ghazali's early education took place in the local village *madrassa* (school), before he continued his studies at the Nizamiyah Madrasa in Nishapur, one of the most prestigious educational institutions of that era. From a young age, al-Ghazali was known as a bright and diligent student with broad interests in various disciplines. His brilliance attracted the attention of the court, and the Grand Mufti specifically monitored his academic progress, encouraging al-Ghazali to dedicate himself fully to

<sup>14</sup> Mumtaza Zamhariroh et al., "Relevansi Pemikiran Pendidikan Al-Ghazali Dengan Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer Tentang Keseimbangan Intelektual Dan Spiritual."

<sup>15</sup> Asad Zaman, "The Revival of Islam: The Central Role of Islamic Education System," *Policy Perspectives* 21, no. 2 (2025): 109–31.

<sup>16</sup> Arwen and Kurniyati, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam Muhammad Abduh."

<sup>17</sup> Tamara Albertini, "Crisis and Certainty of Knowledge in Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) and Descartes (1596-1650)," *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 1 (2005): 1–14.

the mastery of knowledge.<sup>18</sup> His works are highly recognized and influential in Islamic civilization, leading him to be given the title Hujjatul Islam (Proof of Islam).

Al-Ghazali received his initial education in the city of Tus. Al-Ghazali's father passed away when he was young, but before his death, he entrusted the education of his two sons to a friend who was a Sufi. This friend cared for and educated them until the inheritance from their father was depleted. After that, he suggested that the two brothers continue their education at a *madrasa*, where they could receive instruction and lodging. Al-Ghazali began learning around the age of seven, focusing on Arabic, Persian, the Qur'an, and religious fundamentals.

Al-Ghazali later became known as a central figure in three major debates involving politics and intellectualism in the Islamic world of his time. One of the most prominent was the conflict between philosophy and religion, which reflected the tension between the Greek intellectual tradition and Islamic teachings. In this regard, al-Ghazali took a position in support of religion over philosophy. The main problem he faced was how to reconcile philosophy with religion. He resolved this conflict by stating that philosophy could be accepted as long as it did not contradict the principles of Islam, and must be rejected if it did.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Ghazali was not an absolute opponent of philosophy, unlike some Muslim scholars of his time, but neither was he a passive recipient of philosophical teachings. He selectively rejected aspects of philosophy he deemed dangerous or misleading, while still accepting and retaining the parts considered beneficial for spiritual development. His work, such as *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), had a profound influence on various disciplines, including theology, law, Sufism, ethics, and others. Al-Ghazali's works are not merely considered books but rather a foundation for renewal in Islamic thought. His writings opened the perspectives of the Muslim community, not only in aspects of general knowledge but also in the practice of worship, ethics, morality, behavior, purification of the soul, as well as actions and conditions that can damage spirituality.

Al-Ghazali is a truly exceptional figure in history because no other Muslim scientist has been able to produce work with such great influence, both in the Islamic world and the West. He deeply studied the crucial problems faced by Muslims of his era, then analyzed them and offered solutions. His work became a primary reference for subsequent generations of scholars, including Qur'anic exegetes (*mufasssirun*), theologians, philosophers, and Sufis.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Tijani Ahmad Ashimi, "The Classification of Knowledge in Islam by Imam Al-Ghazali and Al-Farabi: A Comparative Study," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Islamic and Humanities*, ahead of print, November 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.55057/ijarih.2022.4.3.7>.

<sup>19</sup> Nofal Nabil, "AL-GHAZALI," *UNESCO: International Bureau of Education* 23, no. 3/4 (1993): 519–42.

<sup>20</sup> Mohd Rosmizi Bin Abd Rahman and Salih Yucel, "The Mujaddid of His Age: Al-Ghazali And His Inner Spiritual Journey," *UMRAN - International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies (EISSN: 2289-8204)* 3, no. 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.11113/umran2016.3n2.56>.

## 2. Muhammad Abduh

Muhammad Abduh was born in 1849 in the Lower Egypt region and spent his childhood in the village of Marhalat. He was raised in a religious family, with parents who strictly adhered to religious values. Muhammad Abduh's father, named Abduh Hasan Khairullah, was of Turkish descent and had long settled in Egypt. Muhammad Abduh's mother, named Junainah binti Utsman al-Kabir, was of Arab descent, with a lineage traced back to Umar bin Khattab.

In 1863, Muhammad Abduh was sent by his parents to Tanta to study *nahwu* (Arabic grammar) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) at the Al-Ahmadi Mosque. However, during his studies there, he felt dissatisfied with the teaching methods used, which he considered monotonous. The teachers merely demanded students memorize texts without deeply understanding their meaning. This dissatisfaction led Muhammad Abduh to discontinue his studies.<sup>21</sup> After a temporary halt in his education, Muhammad Abduh resumed his studies in Tanta thanks to the encouragement of his uncle, Syaikh Darwisy. After completing his education there in 1866, he continued to Al-Azhar University. At Al-Azhar, he became acquainted with Jamaluddin al-Afghani, a figure with radical ideas and extraordinary intelligence who greatly influenced him, especially his spirit of struggle. Under al-Afghani's guidance, Abduh began studying philosophy and writing articles for the newly founded newspaper, *al-Ahram*. In 1877, he successfully completed his education at Al-Azhar and was subsequently appointed as a lecturer at the institution.

### Spirituality as the Foundation for Moral Formation

In the framework of Imam Al-Ghazali's thought, spirituality holds a central position in moral formation (*akhlak*). A study by Hanefar et al., cited in Covey, suggests that spiritual intelligence occupies the most fundamental and primary position among various types of intelligence because of its role as a source of direction for others. It also functions as the intelligence that unites and bridges rational and emotional intelligence.<sup>22</sup> Al-Ghazali also emphasizes that education is insufficient if it only shapes the intellectual aspect; it must touch the deeper spiritual dimension (*ruhani*). However, Al-Ghazali believed in the superiority of reason (*akal*) as the best means to achieve certainty and knowledge of God, although he acknowledged that this could only be attained by certain individuals.<sup>23</sup> In education, spirituality serves as the foundation for the process of soul purification (*tazkiyatun nafs*), which ultimately forms a personality with noble character.

*Akhlak* is the plural form of *khulq*, which etymologically means habit, behavior, basic nature, and disposition. According to Al-Ghazali, *akhlak* is not merely an action, nor is it just the potential to act, and it is not sufficient to be just knowledge. *Akhlak* must be inherent in a stable state of the soul that consistently drives the emergence of actions,

<sup>21</sup> Arwen and Kurniyati, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam Muhammad Abduh."

<sup>22</sup> Shamsiah Banu Hanefar et al., "A Synthesis of Spiritual Intelligence Themes from Islamic and Western Philosophical Perspectives," *Journal of Religion and Health* 55, no. 6 (2016): 2069–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-016-0226-7>.

<sup>23</sup> Binyamin Abrahamov, "Al-Ghazali's Supreme Way to Know God," *Studia Islamica*, no. 77 (1993): 141–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595793>.

so that the behavior is not temporary but becomes a habit in daily life.<sup>24</sup>

Every individual must first understand what is good and what is bad, then instill that understanding in the heart so that it becomes a driver for goodness, and finally manifest that goodness in daily actions. In other words, spirituality becomes the catalyst that guides this process, ensuring that every piece of knowledge acquired and every action taken is in alignment with the values of virtue and religious guidance, so that the *akhlak* formed is truly pure and steadfast.

### **The Balance Between Intellect and Heart in Islamic Education**

In understanding the balance between intellect (*akal*) and heart (*qalb*), it is important to first trace how scholars define the essence of both. In his work *Ihya' 'Ulumuddin*, Al-Ghazali explains two meanings of the heart. First, physically, the heart is a lump of flesh resembling an elongated fir cone (*shana'u bar*), located on the left side of the chest, containing cavities filled with black blood, and functioning as the center of human life. Second, spiritually, the heart is understood as a subtle element (*lathifah*) that is divine (*rabbaniyyah*), reflecting the metaphysical dimension within the human self.

Al-Ghazali deepened his study of Sufism by emphasizing the purification of the heart through spiritual experience. His work, *Sawānīḥ* (508/1114), written in Persian, describes reality as a manifestation of love (*'ishq*) that connects the lover (*'āshiqī*) and the beloved (*maḥbūbī*), both originating and ending at the eternal source of love.<sup>25</sup> This subtle element is the essence of humanity and cannot be grasped by the intellect alone, but is enveloped by feeling and bound to the Qur'an and Sunnah, meaning not just technically replacing words, but also conveying meaning with a heart submissive to divine truth.

Meanwhile, Muhammad Abduh, in *Risalah Tauhid*, states that reason and religion are placed on equal footing. He emphasizes that the Qur'an directly unites rationality and faith, especially through the straightforward language of the Prophet as God's messenger, without requiring complex interpretation. According to Abduh, even if some articles of faith are not fully understood by reason, they do not contradict it. In fact, reason becomes a tool to accept and understand principles of belief like the existence of God and prophethood. Thus, reason and heart are not placed in opposition but are intertwined as a means of drawing closer to divine truth.

The deep understanding of the essence of reason and heart explained by Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh is an important foundation for formulating a balanced compass for Islamic education. Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of developing a good relationship between teacher and student, moral excellence, and spirituality in the world of education. The developments in Al-Ghazali's thought remain highly relevant to modern-era education. Part of the application of Al-Ghazali's concept in the modern

<sup>24</sup> Yoke Suryadarma and mad Hifdzil Haq, "Pendidikan Akhlak Menurut Imam Al-Ghazali," *At-Ta'dib* 10, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>25</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, "The Development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 345–85.



context is by integrating the educational curriculum with spiritual learning.<sup>26</sup> All of Al-Ghazali's concepts can be implemented by integrating faith reflection, self-evaluation, and meditation into the learning process. By integrating these elements into the curriculum, students not only gain academic knowledge but can also develop a deeper self-awareness and strengthen their spiritual connection with God.

Meanwhile, Muhammad Abduh's approach focuses on rational educational reform and openness to the increasingly modern changes of the time. In line with this, Abduh's reliance on Sunni sources facilitated the adoption of a strong rationalistic approach, which then became the basis of Modernism among traditional reformists.<sup>27</sup> According to Muhammad Abduh, education must be able to develop reason as a divine gift that enables humans to understand revelation and social conditions critically.

The main value of Muhammad Abduh's idea lies in his ability to arouse emotion and touch the hearts of readers, which he places above knowledge and reason. In the process, his approach was deeply influenced by the essential nature of religion.<sup>28</sup> With the gift of reason, an individual can understand knowledge about God and revelation, while revelation comes to strengthen the understanding of reason and can convey something beyond human logic. Thus, Al-Ghazali presents Islam as a teaching rich in moral and spiritual values but open to new intellectual pursuits and breakthroughs against tradition. Therefore, he played an important role in shaping the young Abduh's perspective that Islam is a progressive, rational religion, and in harmony with contemporary science and technology.<sup>29</sup>

### **Criticism of the Islamic Education System**

Education based on *taqlid* (blind imitation), which only copies without understanding, is a major highlight in Muhammad Abduh's thought and should be freed from the shackles of *taqlid*. He encouraged Muslims to review and critically evaluate the Islamic education system as implemented by the early generations of scholars, before the emergence of sectarian divisions or schools of thought, and to refer directly to the primary sources of Islamic teachings. Similarly, Al-Ghazali criticized the method of imitation (*taqlid*) because it was considered a curtain that prevents a person from seeing the truth as it is. Al-Ghazali only accepted certain knowledge, making certainty the measure of truth, so knowledge is considered valid if it is free from doubt.<sup>30</sup>

Muhammad Abduh highlights that the dominance of *taqlid* and the habit of

<sup>26</sup> Nur Asyikin et al., "Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam Menurut Al-Ghazali: Mengembangkan Kearifan Spritual Dalam Proses Pembelajaran," *MESIR: Journal of Management Education Social Sciences Information and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2024): 227–34.

<sup>27</sup> Itzhak Weismann, "Between Sufi Reformism and Modernist Rationalism: A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafiyya from the Damascene Angle," *Die Welt Des Islams* 41, no. 2 (2001): 206–37.

<sup>28</sup> Detlev Khalid, "Ahmad Amīn And The Legacy Of Muḥammad 'Abduh," *Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University* 9, no. 1 (1970): 1–13.

<sup>29</sup> Oliver Scharbrodt, "The Salafiyya and Sufism: Muhammad 'Abduh and His Risalat al-Waridat (Treatise on Mystical Inspirations)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 70, no. 1 (2007): 89–115.

<sup>30</sup> Sobhi Rayan, "Al-Ghazali's Method of Doubt," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 38, no. 2 (2004): 162–73.

passive thinking can trigger a decline in trust towards scholars; students lose respect and even tend to mock them. He emphasizes that the legacy of knowledge from predecessors and information passed down by family, if not supported by strong evidence, risks being influenced by heretical teachings, contradicted by outsiders, and gradually weakening the structure and essence of the knowledge itself.<sup>31</sup> At that time, the Muslim community was marked by stagnant thinking, *taqlid*, and belief in *bid'ah* (innovation) and *khurafat* (superstition). Muhammad Abduh denounced scholars who maintained the culture of *taqlid* in society.<sup>32</sup> As a solution to the danger of *taqlid* in Islamic education, Abduh called for the gate of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to be opened as widely as possible until the Day of Judgment. He emphasized the importance of independent interpretation (*ijtihad*) of Islamic texts, using reason and rational consideration according to the context of the time.

In addition to criticizing *taqlid* and the spread of *bid'ah* and *khurafat*, Muhammad Abduh also highlighted the Typology of education in the 20th Century. There were two forms of educational systems. First, religion-based education represented by high institutions like Al-Azhar. Second, modern education established by the Egyptian government or foreign parties. These two systems developed separately without any connection, either in terms of need orientation or educational goals. Religious schools adhered to a traditional approach, both in terms of curriculum and teaching methods. They did not teach Western sciences, so religious education at that time paid little attention to intellectual development. Yet, in Islam, the development of the intellectual aspect should be balanced with other aspects.

According to Al-Ghazali, true education is a means of drawing closer to Allah SWT (God). Its main goal is to form individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also devout and practice the knowledge they possess in daily life.<sup>33</sup> Al-Ghazali's opinion reminds that education should be able to uphold character, spirituality, and earnestness in practically applying knowledge.<sup>34</sup> It can be understood that the main goal of education has two aspects. First, the achievement of human perfection that culminates in closeness to Allah SWT. Second, the achievement of human perfection that leads to happiness in this world and the hereafter.

The educational ideas put forward by Al-Ghazali can be understood by examining his views related to various aspects of education, such as the purpose of education, curriculum content, the role of the educator, the character of the students, and teaching

<sup>31</sup> Indira Falk Gesink, "Islamic Reformation: A History of Madrasa Reform and Legal Change in Egypt," *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): 325–45, <https://doi.org/10.1086/503878>.

<sup>32</sup> Falasipatul Asifa, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Muhammad Abduh Dan Kontribusinya Terhadap Pengembangan Teori Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 15, no. 1 (2018): 88–98, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jpai.2018.151-06>.

<sup>33</sup> Widia Putri, "Pemikiran Al-Ghazali tentang Pendidikan dan Relevansinya dengan Dunia Pendidikan Modern," *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai* 9, no. 1 (2025): 8814–25.

<sup>34</sup> Putri, "Pemikiran Al-Ghazali tentang Pendidikan dan Relevansinya dengan Dunia Pendidikan Modern."

methods.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of forming the complete human being through an educational process that is not only oriented towards intellectual output but also the strengthening of *akhlak*, spirituality, and the real-life application of knowledge, in order to attain happiness in the world and the hereafter and draw closer to Allah SWT.

Both criticisms—from Muhammad Abduh regarding the culture of *taqlid* and the dichotomy of the educational system, and from Al-Ghazali regarding education that has lost its spiritual value—are still highly relevant in the context of contemporary Islamic education. In the modern era, educational challenges are not only a tension between religious and secular sciences but also the weakening of education's orientation towards character and spiritual formation. Many educational institutions are still trapped in the pursuit of academic achievement alone, without paying attention to the moral integrity of the students. Therefore, the thoughts of Muhammad Abduh and Al-Ghazali become important: that Islamic education must be able to create human beings who are critically thinking, open to *ijtihad*, yet also of noble character and committed to practicing spiritual values.

**Implications for Contemporary Islamic Education Curriculum**

Al-Ghazali classifies knowledge into two types: as an object and as a process. He groups knowledge into six types:<sup>36</sup>

**Table 1. Classification of Knowledge (Al-Ghazali's Perspective)**

No.	Type of Knowledge	Description
1	Knowledge from Revelation	Sourced from the Qur'an and Sunnah.
2	Knowledge from Reason, Senses, and Experience	Acquired through the process of thinking, observation, and experience.
3	Praiseworthy Knowledge	Brings worldly benefit such as medicine and agriculture.
4	Knowledge of Fardhu 'Ain and Fardhu Kifayah	Knowledge that must be learned according to the obligations of each individual and community.
5	Blameworthy Knowledge	Such as sorcery and astrology.
6	Permissible Knowledge	Such as history and literature.

This classification reflects Al-Ghazali's effort to balance the religious and rational dimensions in Islamic education. Furthermore, according to him, the Islamic education curriculum is divided into three main aspects: (1) level of obligation, (2) source of knowledge, and (3) social function.<sup>37</sup> Here is a brief explanation:

1. Level of Obligation

Based on the level of obligation, knowledge is divided into two categories:

<sup>35</sup> Widad Sef and M. Yunus Abu Bakar, "Relevansi Pendidikan Perspektif Al-Ghazali Terhadap Paradigma Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia," *Al-Hikmah: Jurnal Agama dan Ilmu Pengetahuan* 21, no. 1 (2024): 93–107, [https://doi.org/10.25299/al-hikmah:jaip.2024.vol21\(1\).14705](https://doi.org/10.25299/al-hikmah:jaip.2024.vol21(1).14705).

<sup>36</sup> Sef and Abu Bakar, "Relevansi Pendidikan Perspektif Al-Ghazali Terhadap Paradigma Pendidikan Islam di Indonesia."

<sup>37</sup> Imam Hanafie and Khojir Khojir, "Kurikulum dalam Perspektif Imam al-Ghazali dan Relevansinya dengan Capaian Pembelajaran Mata Pelajaran PAI pada Kurikulum Merdeka," *DAYAH: Journal of Islamic Education* 6, no. 1 (2023): 60, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jie.v6i1.15947>.

*Fardhu 'Ain* (individual obligation), which must be performed by every individual, such as the five daily prayers required for every Muslim; and *Fardhu Kifayah* (collective obligation), which, if carried out by some members of the community, the obligation falls away for the others.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Source of Knowledge

Knowledge is generally classified into two main categories: (1) Islamic Sciences (*syar'i*), which include core sciences (*ushul*) like basic Islamic knowledge; branch sciences (*furu'*) like *fiqh* (jurisprudence), heart science, and *akhlak* (morality); introductory sciences (*muqaddimah*) like Arabic language and grammar; and supplementary sciences (*mutammimah*) like *Ilmu Qira'at*, *Ilmu Hadith*, *Ilmu Tafsir*, and the science of the companions' narratives (*atsar sahabat*). (2) Non-Islamic Sciences (*non-syar'i*), which are knowledge not directly sourced from religious teachings but still hold practical or intellectual value and are considered praiseworthy, covering fields such as medicine, mathematics, and business management. These sciences are further classified into primary and fundamental knowledge, encompassing agriculture, the weaving industry, building construction, and government administration.

## 3. Social Function

Based on its social function, knowledge is divided into three: (1) Praiseworthy Knowledge, which contains communal benefit and cannot be disregarded because of the dependence of life activities; (2) Cursed Knowledge, which can lead to harm; (3) Knowledge whose position is between good and evil, which is influenced by the extent to which it has been studied, such as naturalist philosophy.

Meanwhile, Muhammad Abduh believed that one of the causes of the stagnation of the Muslim community was the traditional Islamic culture and the decline of Muslim society. In addition to being active in publishing influential Islamic journals to promote his reformist ideas, he was also tasked with modernizing the curriculum. Muhammad Abduh formulated an education curriculum structured by level: primary, secondary, and higher education. This grouping was based on the division of society according to the professional fields they would pursue. The subjects established by Abduh for each level are as follows:<sup>39</sup>

### 1. Primary Education

#### a. Islamic *Aqidah* (Creed)

This subject presents a summary of Islamic *aqidah* agreed upon by the *Ahlus Sunnah*, without including meanings that contradict between groups. The material must be sourced from the Qur'an and Hadith. In addition, Christian creed is also taught for comparison, highlighting the disorder and inconsistency present in its teachings.

<sup>38</sup> Mohammad Azis Shah et al., "Construction, Validity and Reliability of the Inventory of Basic Religious Knowledge (IBRK)," *International Journal of Assessment and Evaluation in Education* 2 (2012): 86–94.

<sup>39</sup> Asifa, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Muhammad Abduh Dan Kontribusinya Terhadap Pengembangan Teori Pendidikan Islam."

b. *Fiqh* and *Akhlak*

*Fiqh* lessons cover discussions about *halal* and *haram*, valid forms of worship and *bid'ah* (innovation), as well as obligatory (*wajib*) and recommended (*sunnah*) matters. All material is based on the Qur'an, Hadith, and the opinions of the companions. In *akhlak* lessons, students are introduced to praiseworthy morals and distanced from blameworthy morals.

## c. Islamic History

This subject presents a summary of Islamic history, providing an understanding of the development of the Islamic religion and its civilization throughout time.

## 2. Secondary Education

Curriculum development at the secondary and vocational levels involved the inclusion of previously forbidden subjects, such as logic and philosophy. In addition, the subject of Islamic civilization history was introduced with the aim of enabling Muslims to understand the various advances and achievements once attained by the Muslim community. Other subjects such as Sharia law, military studies, and government administration were also adjusted to the goals and professional fields chosen by the students.<sup>40</sup> Religious studies at this level are intended for individuals prepared to become educators, who are called '*Urafa' al-Ummah*'. The learning material includes:

Table 2. '*Urafa' al-Ummah* (Educators)

No.	Subject	Learning Focus
1	Tafsir (Exegesis)	Study of Qur'anic interpretation.
2	Hadith	Selected authentic Hadiths.
3	Arabic Language	All branches of the Arabic language.
4	Akhlak (Morality)	Detailed discussion, such as in <i>Ihya'</i> .
5	Ushul Fiqh	Basis of Islamic legal methodology.
6	Islamic History	Prophets, companions, kingdoms, progress & decline.
7	Rhetoric	Effective speaking practice.
8	Ilmu Kalam (Theology)	Theological schools and their respective arguments.
9	History (repetition)	Morality of the Prophet, companions, Ottoman Caliphate.

Thus, Al-Ghazali's thought on the classification of knowledge and curriculum based on obligation, source, and social function provides an important contribution to formulating a contemporary integrative Islamic education curriculum. This approach opens opportunities to build an education system that not only emphasizes the intellectual aspect but also the spiritual and moral, thereby creating a balance between revelation-based and rational knowledge. Meanwhile, Abduh's idea of educational reform was born not only from social needs but also influenced by the Enlightenment discourse. He stressed the importance of a rationalist approach and individual *ijtihad*, and rejected consensus that closed the door to *ijtihad*. Thus, his reform aimed to harmonize Islam with

<sup>40</sup> Arwen and Kurniyati, "Pemikiran Pendidikan Islam Muhammad Abduh."

rationality and modernity.<sup>41</sup> If combined with reforms such as those advocated by Muhammad Abduh, which emphasize the importance of *ijtihad*, critical thinking, and openness to modern science, a comprehensive Islamic education curriculum will be formed. This is so that students are willing to practice religious teachings in their daily lives, both for personal and community interests. This curriculum can integrate character education based on *tawhid* (monotheism) and reason, which is relevant to the challenges of the time and remains rooted in Islamic values.

### **The Role of the Teacher: Al-Ghazali's and Abduh's Perspectives**

The teacher (*guru*) is a key figure in the educational process and plays a vital role in shaping the students' character, morality (*akhlak*), and intellect. More than just teaching, the teacher is a central figure in developing students' competencies, character, and spirit of learning. Therefore, the presence of the teacher can be considered the main factor determining the overall quality of the educational process.<sup>42</sup> Al-Ghazali held an idealistic view of the teaching profession, believing that a teacher is a figure who not only possesses knowledge but also practices it and conveys it to others. Al-Ghazali did not use the term "teacher" in a purely academic sense; in his view, a person can be called a teacher if they transmit knowledge to others.<sup>43</sup>

A teacher must meet three main requirements: possess broader knowledge than the students, have authority (*kewibawaan*), and show compassion toward the students. In line with the importance of the teacher's role, the selection of a teacher is also something that needs attention, as found in the book *Ta'lim Muta'allim*, which suggests choosing the most learned (*alim*), pious (*wara'*), and experienced person, as exemplified by Abu Hanifah when he carefully chose Hammad bin Sulaiman.

According to Al-Ghazali, there are several duties of a teacher that must be observed:<sup>44</sup> (1) A teacher must have compassion for the students and treat them like their own children. (2) Not expect payment, but seek God's pleasure (*ridho Allah*). (3) Adjust the material and manner of speech to the children's level of understanding. Avoid conveying things that exceed their rational capacity, as this can make them lose interest in the lessons. The essence is to be able to adapt the language for them. (4) The teacher must be able to prevent students from bad behavior and do so with a gentle approach. Al-Ghazali also suggests that criticism be delivered through subtle insinuation, not open reprimand. (5) The teacher must consistently practice their knowledge, so their behavior does not contradict the teachings they convey.

Al-Ghazali's view of the teacher's role does not just emphasize the aspect of teaching knowledge but also the formation of students' character and morality through an approach full of compassion, wisdom, and consistency in action. These principles form

<sup>41</sup> Mansoor Moaddel, "Discursive Pluralism and Islamic Modernism in Egypt," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2002): 1–29.

<sup>42</sup> Marilyn Cochran-Smith, "The Multiple Meanings of Multicultural Teacher Education: A Conceptual Framework," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2003): 7–26.

<sup>43</sup> Subakri Subakri, "Peran Guru dalam Pandangan Al-Ghazali," *Jurnal Pendidikan Guru* 1, no. 2 (2020): 63–75, <https://doi.org/10.47783/jurpendigu.v1i2.165>.

<sup>44</sup> Subakri, "Peran Guru dalam Pandangan Al-Ghazali."

an essential foundation for guiding educators to create a learning environment that prioritizes not only knowledge but also the formation of moral personalities.

Meanwhile, Muhammad Abduh's thought also made a significant contribution to the development of Islamic education. As a reformist figure, Abduh had a more modern approach to understanding the role of the teacher and education. According to Muhammad Abduh, a Muslim educator has not fully demonstrated their dedication to Islam in various aspects of modern life unless they master at least one of the sciences from the West. By doing so, educators will be able to understand the works of European scholars about Islam, whether appreciative or critical.

In formal education, educators are required to be role models for students through their attitudes and speech during the learning process. Additionally, they play a role in fostering discipline and correcting inappropriate student behavior. In non-formal education, the educator's role model quality is reflected in their morality and speech outside of class hours and the school environment.<sup>45</sup>

The concept of the ideal teacher provided by Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh remains relevant and important for the foundation of the current education system. Al-Ghazali's view emphasizes the teacher's personal integrity, mastery of knowledge, moral role modeling, and a compassionate approach in guiding students. Meanwhile, Abduh's thought highlights the necessity of openness to modern knowledge and the teacher's important role as a role model both inside and outside the classroom. Both figures place the teacher as the main figure in shaping the students' character, intellect, and morality. In facing the constantly evolving challenges of the times, their ideas become a solid foundation for building an education system that is rooted in values and avoids stagnation.

### **Comparison of Imam Al-Ghazali's and Muhammad Abduh's Thoughts in a Contemporary Context**

Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh are two Islamic thinkers who lived in vastly different historical contexts but shared a commonality in reforming Islamic thought. In the contemporary context, their thoughts offer important contributions in facing the challenges of modernization, globalization, and the identity crisis of the Muslim community. Al-Ghazali emphasizes the importance of soul purification (*tazkiyatun nafs*) and the integration of *syar'i* (religious) and rational knowledge. Al-Ghazali's spiritual and moral approach is highly relevant for shaping character and ethics today. Al-Ghazali's thought underscores that intellectual advancement without a spiritual foundation will lead to emptiness and moral decay.<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, Muhammad Abduh highlights the importance of rationality and renewal (*tajdid*) in religion. In facing modern challenges such as education, law, and politics, Abduh proposes a contextual approach to Islamic teachings. He prioritizes *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) as a tool to respond to the dynamics of the era, which can

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<sup>45</sup> Juni Prasetya, "Konsep Pendidikan Islam Muhammad Abduh Serta Implikasinya Terhadap Pendidikan Islam Modern," *KORDINAT: Jurnal Komunikasi Antar Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam* 18, no. 2 (2019): 440–65.

<sup>46</sup> Putri, "Pemikiran Al-Ghazali tentang Pendidikan dan Relevansinya dengan Dunia Pendidikan Modern."

encourage the education, legal, and government systems to be in accordance with the current needs of the Muslim community.

In comparison, Al-Ghazali focuses more on the internal religious dimension and spiritual cultivation, whereas Abduh focuses on the external and social religious dimension. The synthesis of their thoughts can serve as a foundation for contemporary Islamic renewal that remains rooted in tradition yet is open to the changes of the time.

## CONCLUSION

The thoughts of Imam Al-Ghazali and Muhammad Abduh illustrate the dynamic evolution of Islamic education through both traditional and modern lenses. Imam Al-Ghazali emphasized the critical integration of religious knowledge (*ilmu agama*) and reason (*akal*) to achieve happiness in this world and the hereafter. In contrast, Muhammad Abduh highlighted the necessity of intellectual and educational reform to address the challenges of the modern era. Both made immense contributions to Islamic thought: Al-Ghazali represents the completeness of spiritual and ethical values in education, while Abduh offers a rational and reformist approach to the Islamic education system.

The integration of Al-Ghazali's spiritual approach and Muhammad Abduh's modern rationality can serve as the foundation for developing a holistic Islamic education curriculum. This curriculum would not only focus on the transfer of knowledge but also on character formation, the strengthening of moral values, and the development of students' critical and adaptive abilities. Thus, contemporary Islamic education is expected to produce a generation that is not only excellent in knowledge but also committed to Islamic values, ready to face global challenges, and able to contribute positively to the welfare of the *Ummah* and civilization.

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