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**IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ ON THE BALANCE OBSERVANCE OF 'IBĀDAH
(DEVOTIONAL ACT): AN ENDURING LEGACY TO THE MUSLIM
WORLD*****Imam al-Ghazali tentang Keseimbang Pelaksanaan Ibadah: Warisan Abadi
kepada Dunia Islam***

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Abstract

This article analyses Imam al-Ghazālī's theory of the balance observance of *ibādah* (devotional acts or good deeds) among Muslims. Performing *'ibādah*, is part and parcel of the Muslims' life. Nevertheless, the majority of Muslims—scholars and the public alike—place great emphasis only on the diligent outward performance of devotional acts, and on the observance of the outward requirements. However, Imam al-Ghazālī goes beyond this normative practice, arguing that a mere outward observance of devotional acts is still insufficient, and indeed is still at risk. This article is theoretical in nature, and it involves bibliographic research, employing descriptive and analytic methods. The article finds that Imam al-Ghazālī maintains devotional acts consist of outward and inward dimensions, and both need to be observed simultaneously and kept in balance. It is only through this balance observance that devotional acts will be transformed from mere physical motions of pure ritualistic observance to spiritually rich deeds, filled with real understanding, wisdom, and realisation.

Keywords: *ibādah*, good deeds, inward knowledge, *ilm al-bāḥīn*.**Abstrak**

Artikel ini menganalisa teori Imam al-Ghazali tentang keseimbangan pelaksanaan ibadah (termasuklah perbuatan baik) di kalangan umat Islam. Melaksanakan ibadah adalah sebahagian dari kehidupan umat Islam. Walau bagaimanapun, majoriti ulama-ulama dan orang awam sama-sama memberi penekanan yang besar hanya pada aspek luaran perbuatan ibadah dan pada pematuhan syarat-syarat luarannya.

Walau bagaimanapun, Imam al-Ghazali telah melangkaui amalan normatif ini, dan mengingatkan bahawa sekadar pelaksanaan aspek luaran ibadah semata-mata masih tidak mencukupi, dan sebaliknya masih berisiko. Artikel ini bersifat teori, dan ia melibatkan penyelidikan bibliografi yang menggunakan kaedah deskriptif dan analitik. Artikel itu mendapati bahawa Imam al-Ghazali menegaskan bahawa setiap ibadah mempunyai aspek luaran dan juga aspek dalaman, dan keduanya perlu dilaksanakan secara serentak dan seimbang. Hanya melalui keseimbangan pelaksanaan ini sesuatu perbuatan ibadah akan berkembang dari sekadar gerakan ritual fizikal semata-mata kepada perbuatan yang kaya dengan aspek rohani serta dihiasi dengan pemahaman, kebijaksanaan, dan kesedaran sebenar.

Kata kunci: ibadah, perbuatan baik, pengetahuan batin, ilmu batin.

INTRODUCTION

Performing *‘ibādah* (pl. *‘ibādāt*; devotional acts or good deeds), especially the prescribed religious acts of devotion (e.g., the five canonical prayers, fasting, alms giving, Qur’an-reading), is part and parcel of the life of Muslims. The close relationship between faith and good deeds have been acknowledged since early centuries of Islam Mohd Rosmizi Abd Rahman and Salih Yucel. (2016a). Thus direct relationship between the quantity as well as the outward performance of devotional acts and the various kinds and levels of eternal rewards has been firmly established within Muslim culture. It is therefore without surprise to see that the majority of Muslims—scholars and the public alike—place great emphasis only on the diligent outward performance of devotional acts, and on the observance of the outward requirements. In general, it seems that the Muslims emphasized the quantity of devotional acts, rather than its quality. This practice has not only become the norm in the daily life but is also taught as such in the formal education. Consequently, the deeper understanding and the balance observance between the outward and the inward part of devotional acts—which is the spiritual part—is not really emphasized; neither in the formal education, nor in the public life—except in certain traditional schools.

Some Sufis however, especially al-Ghazālī, go beyond this normative practice, arguing that a mere outward observance of devotional acts is still insufficient, and indeed is still at risk (Quasem, 1974; Mohd Rosmizi Abd Rahman, 2014, 2016). According to al-Ghazālī, devotional acts consist of outward and inward dimensions. Therefore, there are certain inward preconditions, which are the kernel of devotional acts, that need to be observed. In general, these inward dimensions of devotional acts, however, are not well expressed and appreciated within Muslims daily life. It is only visible to those whose hearts have been purified, and for whom the veils which prevent this insight opened. This paper attempts to analyse briefly some of al-

Ghazālī's penetrating and spiritual insights into the inward dimension of *'ibadah* (devotional acts or good deeds). Al-Ghazālī was able to express lucidly this inward dimension which was once inexpressible within the traditional Islam. His view of the issue will be able to improve the quality of devotional acts especially in the Muslim culture.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S SPIRITUAL INSIGHT

To begin with, al-Ghazālī advises Muslims to realise that devotional acts are filled with spiritual element. In fact, spirituality is the core of al-Ghazālī's endeavour. Mohd Rosmizi and Salih Yucel (2016b) have investigated the development of al-Ghazali's thought and spiritual journey through three main periods, namely, before, during, and after seclusion. There are intellectual and spiritual transformations in each of these periods.

Al-Ghazālī argues that devotional acts are among the means towards journeying to Allah (God). They are one of the essential *provisions* of a wayfarer or traveller in the path of Allah, which can also prevent him from worldly greed, leading towards spiritual attainment and eternal happiness (al-Ghazālī, 1986: III.6, 220-221; al-Ghazālī, 1993: III.6, 168). Good deeds should be able to strengthen the relationship between man and Allah, for they are the reflection of one's understanding, fear, and love of Him. The more one knows Allah, the more he will be engaged in his performance. Al-Ghazālī's spiritual insight of good deeds has been discussed in my previous article in which I argue that al-Ghazālī has formulated a unique spiritual model of good deeds (Mohd Rosmizi, et al. 2017). To summarize, al-Ghazālī relates good deeds to the concept of *Tawhid* (Oneness of God). Each good deed and daily activity should be performed only for God and therefore it should bring the doer closer to God. Thus his conception of good deeds is *Tawhidic*.

Therefore, throughout his writings al-Ghazālī reminds his readers not to be contented with their ordinary outward practices of devotional acts, or with a mere fulfilling the basic outward preconditions, for—whether they realise or not—these kinds of devotional acts are still at risk, and indeed, are not free from various defects. He argues that devotional acts which are performed accordingly will be able to leave a positive effect on the soul. Thus, he insists that devotional acts without the inward spiritual dimension will not be able to leave the desired effect on the soul. Indeed, such an observance will only pave the way to pure ritualism and legalism that form the barrier towards spiritual experience. For this reason, al-Ghazālī encourages his readers to also acquire and understand the inward knowledge of devotional acts, and to observe some of their inward preconditions (*al-shurūṭ al-bāṭinah*). Accordingly, he advises readers to ponder upon the real inward knowledge

(*‘ilm al-bāṭin*) of things beyond the teachings of common jurists and the ordinary perception of the general Muslim society. It is through the understanding of these elements and the balance observance between the outward and inward dimensions that one will be able to realise some wisdom, reality, and secrets or mysteries of certain kind of devotional acts, and consequently, they will have a positive impact on one’s soul.

One of the great contributions of al-Ghazālī is that he breathes spirituality into almost all kinds of devotional acts that he addresses. He analyses certain mystery and wisdom of devotional acts and presenting them in such a way that is understandable by different level of readers. Providing a large quotations from the Qur’ān, the prophetic traditions, as well as other reports, and added with some practical examples and stories, he earnestly advises readers to reflect and act upon them, so that their devotional acts will transform from mere physical motions of pure ritualistic observance to spiritually rich deeds, filled with real understanding, wisdom, and realisation.

Primarily, al-Ghazālī’s discussion of devotional acts can be divided into two main principles, specifically, [the right] knowledge (*al-‘ilm*) and [the right] action (*al-‘amal*). The former is theoretical, the latter practical. Part of this has been discussed in Mohd Rosmizi et al. (2017) and Mohd Rosmizi & Mohamed Mihlar (2017). The right knowledge of devotional acts includes an understanding of their deeper meaning, real purpose, and significance. The right action on the other hand pertains to the practical aspect of how to perform devotional acts. Accordingly, each of these principles has two dimensions, namely, the outward and inward. The primary focus of this paper, however, is on the inward knowledge (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*) of devotional acts, specifically those that address their inward meanings (*al-ma‘ānī al-bāṭinah*).

THE INWARD KNOWLEDGE (*‘ILM AL-BĀṬIN*) OF DEVOTIONAL ACTS

In addition to discussing the standard outward knowledge of relevant devotional acts, al-Ghazālī introduces one important aspect, namely, inward knowledge (*‘ilm al-bāṭin*), or the knowledge of the essence. Mohd Rosmizi & Mohamed Mihlar (2017) has analysed al-Ghazālī’s theory of inner knowledge of good deeds and found that Al-Ghazālī’s discussion of various elements of inner knowledge are “profound, practical and indeed critically important to Muslims in this modern time” (Mohd Rosmizi & Mohamed Mihlar (2017): 225). In this context, al-Ghazālī invites readers to understand the inward meaning (*al-ma‘ānī al-bāṭinah*), real purpose, and the significances of devotional acts. In doing so, al-Ghazālī describes the significance and wisdom of devotional acts that he addresses, as well as their different grades and real purpose. He is also able to scrutinise their deeper or inward meanings and mysteries.

As argued above, al-Ghazālī is able to breathe spirituality into almost all kinds of devotional acts that he addresses. Throughout his relevant writings, he emphasises the crucial need to understand and reflect upon the real or the inward knowledge of devotional acts. It is through this deeper understanding that a person will be able to realise the real inward meaning, significance, and purpose of an act, as well as able to relate it to the spiritual realm. The realization of the inward knowledge can certainly increase one's desires to improve the quality of his devotional acts, assisting him to be more attentive in his observance. Because of this, al-Ghazālī advises Muslims not to ignore the inward aspect of devotional acts, but to retain the balance between them in their observance. It is only through the balance observance of the outward and inward aspects that devotional acts will produce the desired effects, hence achieving their real purposes.

Taking for example the issue of purification (*al-tahārah*) where unlike the ordinary understanding—which is limited to the purification of the physical body and clothes from excrements and impurities—he argues that there are indeed three other stages of purification which go beyond than a mere outward purification. He argues that the second stage of purification that should be observed is to purify the bodily senses from crimes and sins. At the third stage, Muslims should purify their hearts from blameworthy traits and reprehensible vices. The fourth stage, however, belongs to the Prophets and saints, which refer to “the purification of the inmost self (*sir*) from everything except God” (al-Ghazālī, 1986: I.3, 126; al-Ghazālī, 1993: I.3, 122. See also al-Ghazālī, 2001: 161-163; al-Ghazālī, 2003: II.1, 43-44; al-Ghazālī, 2010: II.1, 24).

These profound understanding of purification have been generally ignored or even unknown to the majority of jurists and the general society. For al-Ghazālī the outward purification is not sufficient, and indeed is useless if the inward self is filled with dirt and filth. Because of this he reminds readers to always watch their inner state, specifically the heart or the soul, which is the central focus of inward purification.

Another interesting example is al-Ghazālī's discussion of ritual prayer, in which he offers his spiritual insight by revealing its inward dimension. While the standard jurists definition maintains that prayer is certain recitation and action that began with *al-takbīr* (declaration that Allah is great) and ended with *al-taslim* (salutation) (For a brief definition of prayer according to the Shafi'ites al-Shafi'i, 1997: 159), al-Ghazālī argues that the purpose of prayer is “to give lustre to the heart, and to renew the remembrance of Allah, and in order that the bond of faith in Him may be established” (al-Ghazālī, 1986: I.4, 160; al-Ghazālī, 1992: 40). From this aspect, we

can see that al-Ghazālī’s view of prayer is quite extensive and furnished with spiritual insight as compared to limited standard view.

Again, unlike the standard jurists who are mostly focusing only on the external requirements of prayer, al-Ghazālī maintains that prayer should have certain inward qualities or inward preconditions such as the presence of the heart, apprehension, magnifying, awe, and others (al-Ghazālī, 1986: I.4, 161; al-Ghazālī, 1992: 44). He perceives invocation as “conversation and communion with Allah,” therefore, it should be done mindfully (al-Ghazālī, 1986: I.4, 160; al-Ghazālī, 1992: 39). Because of this deeper perception of the inner aspect of prayer, al-Ghazālī considers unmindful invocation and recital as useless and even invalid. Among the reason given is that such unmindful invocation is nothing but a mere physical movement of tongue (al-Ghazālī, 1986: I.4, 160-161; al-Ghazālī, 1992: 39-44).

Al-Ghazālī’s discussion of prayer is also relevant to other kind of devotional acts which involves recitation, praises and invocations such as the Qur’ān-recitation, praise or recollection of God (*dhikr*), and invocation (*du‘ā*). All of these acts require deep understanding of what is recited, and the presence of the heart, without which the recitation would only be considered as a mere physical movement of tongue. Al-Ghazālī even considers heedless or unmindful recitation or performance of devotional acts as a humiliation to Allah which deserves punishment. This is equated to a person who offers a dead servant to a great king (al-Ghazālī, 2003: II.1, 46; al-Ghazālī, 2010: II.1, 26. Cf. the Qur’an 107: 4-5).

Thus, al-Ghazālī reminds Muslims to present their minds and hearts, and to engage in their recitation. Besides that he also advises Muslims that their physical body should also *understand* and *testify* what the tongue is reciting. For example, Muslims should be joyful when the praises or recital contain rewards and salvation. On the other hand, they should be in fear when the praises or recital contain threats and punishments.

With this deeper understanding of the reality of devotional acts, al-Ghazālī maintains that devotional acts have different stages. Again, taking the ritual prayer as example, he contends that there are stages in prayer. These stages are represented by the prayer of the body and the prayer of the soul. In fact, he believes that all kinds of devotional acts consist of these different states, namely, the physical and the spiritual; the outward and the inward; the body and the soul.

Having this profound understanding in his mind, he thus criticises the jurist’s ordinary understanding of prayer, which only emphasises the outward performance and the observance of outward preconditions. The majority of jurists do not regard

the supererogatory actions as the requirement for the validity of a prayer. For them, a prayer is already considered valid with a mere observance of the primary outward preconditions. For al-Ghazālī a mere outward observance, however, is incomplete and is regarded as imbalanced performance. He also emphasises the crucial need of supererogatory actions in prayer.

In addition, al-Ghazālī regards devotional acts as offerings to a great king. Thus, the imbalanced performance of devotional acts is likened to a doctor's statement which claims that the handicapped servant offered to a king is alive and not dead, and therefore, is sufficient for the offering. Al-Ghazālī believes that such an offering—which is incomplete and devoid of spiritual element (which is its soul)—is deficient, and consequently deserves punishment. It is afraid that such deficient *offering* is regarded as a humiliation to the greatest King (i.e., God) (al-Ghazālī, 2003: II.1, 46-47; al-Ghazālī, 2010: II.1, 27). This spiritual insight is applicable to the other kinds of devotional acts.

Another legacy of al-Ghazālī is that he is able to establish the special spiritual relationship between the outward and inward dimensions of devotional acts. For instance, he relates the call for prayer to the call on Resurrection Day, outward facing the *qiblah* (the direction of Muslim's ritual prayer) with the turning towards the face of Allah, intention as the resolve to respond and to obey Allah's command, bowing and prostration as sign of humbleness, and many others (al-Ghazālī, 1986: I.4, 165-171; al-Ghazālī, 1992: 54-70). This profound spiritual insight can also be seen in his other discussions of different kinds of devotional act, such as on Qur'ānic-reading and pilgrimage.

Al-Ghazālī's spiritual insight and his persistent reminder for the need of balance observance are not to be limited to several kinds of devotional acts that he addresses, for he only wants to set an example through his discussions. Indeed, he does discuss different customary practices—such as eating, marriage, and travelling—and different kinds of virtues or moral (and immoral) actions, where he also breathes the spirituality into those discussions. Thus, his argument for the need of balance observance between the outward and inward dimension of an act is applicable to a wider context, such as to everyday activities, for Islam teaches that an ordinary act performed with sincerity and accordingly will be considered as an act of devotion which will be rewarded.

The above discussion of the inward knowledge is among the various examples of al-Ghazālī's profound insight into the spiritual theoretical aspect of devotional acts. In addition to instilling spirituality into the theoretical dimension of devotional acts, he

also infuses spirituality into their practical aspect. Thus, apart from urging Muslims to understand the inward knowledge of good deeds, al-Ghazālī also encourages Muslims to observe certain inward actions (*al-a‘māl al-bā‘īnah*), which can be regarded as the inward spiritual practical aspect of devotional acts.

These inward preconditions, which are also inward qualities, are the essence of devotional acts. In al-Ghazālī’s mind, devotional acts performed without observing certain inward preconditions, or oppose them, might be considered fruitless or useless, void, and even harmful. Since it is not the focus of current paper to discuss these inward preconditions in details, I will only lists some of them which are common to the majority of devotional acts that he addresses. These common inward preconditions of devotional acts can be grouped as follows:

1. Purification of the Heart and Sincerity
2. The Presence of the Heart & Mind
3. Humbleness and Adoration of God
4. Fear (or piety) and Love
5. After Completing Devotional acts: Shame, Hope, and Trust in God

CONCLUSION

The above brief analysis suggests that al-Ghazālī offers unique theoretical and practical aspects of the inner dimension of good deeds into traditional Islam. He injects spirituality not only into the dry body of theology as observed by McDonald (1899), but also into jurisprudence, formal religious observance, and other disciplines of knowledge. His conception of good deeds is also *Tawhidic*, in which each good deed and even daily activity should be performed only for God and it should bring the doer closer to God. This dynamic conception of good deeds is also applicable to other religious traditions, and as Nur Farhana (2012) has observed that the conception of *Tawhid* can become the basis for building harmonious coexistence in multi-religious society. Thus, al-Ghazali’s approach and spiritual insight of good deeds can be taken as among the theme for interreligious dialogue. In Malaysia context, interreligious dialogue and engagement is very important in order to maintain harmonious inter-religious relation (Suraya Sintang, Azizan Baharuddin and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2012; Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2013).

Therefore, al-Ghazālī does not only able to rediscover deep spirituality which has been neglected by the majority of Muslims—especially after the early centuries of Islam—but he also bridges the gap between various classes of people, fills in the lack of the spirituality, unites the heart (spirituality) and the mind (reason), harmonises and combines Sufism and the formal religious observance, and thus

balances the unequal observance of the outward and inward dimensions of good deeds.

His spiritual insight into devotional acts, as well as his advice of the need for balance observance between their outward and inward dimensions are not only suitable and practical to the Muslim world, but are also important. This paper suggests that some spiritual insights of al-Ghazālī—as well as other spiritual teacher—should be introduced and taught properly in the formal education. Thus, from now, the religious text books should not only cover the outward, dry, and literal discussion of religious matters, but it should be accompanied and infused with rich spiritual insights of the previous spiritual master like al-Ghazālī. Hence, in the context of the Muslim world, al-Ghazālī's spiritual insights could be regarded as the everlasting legacy.

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