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Reviewing the Approach of Contemporary Islamic Teachers: An Analysis of Spirituality in General Public Education

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Abstract

This study explores the approach of contemporary Islamic educators in delivering spiritual education to the general public, particularly in response to the challenges posed by modernity, including secularism, materialism, and hedonism. These trends have contributed to the erosion of religious authority, reducing it to a symbolic formality, and while religious affiliation has grown quantitatively, the depth of spiritual engagement has not shown corresponding development. This phenomenon is partly attributed to the inability of educators to engage the spiritual dimensions of their audiences effectively. Employing a qualitative-descriptive method grounded in literature review, this study examines the spiritual educational philosophy of al-Ghazālī as a foundational reference in Islamic pedagogy. Al-Ghazālī advocates for an integrative model of education that harmonizes reason, Islamic law (*sharia*), and Sufism, emphasizing the purification of the soul as a prerequisite for meaningful learning. The analysis reveals that al-Ghazālī's educational paradigm offers relevant solutions to contemporary spiritual disconnection, providing a framework capable of addressing the inner dimensions of individuals in modern society. Consequently, his approach presents a viable alternative for enhancing the spiritual quality of public religious education in the current era.

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Keywords: Al-Ghazālī; Contemporary Islam; Spiritual Education; Public Religious Instruction; Modern Society

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual education is an important aspect that needs to be taught to the general public. It is because education itself is a form of worship and the soul's approach to Allah SWT. As prayer is a physical worship that requires cleanliness from najis and hadas, the worship of the soul (education) must also be clean from hadas (bad morals) and najis (dirty nature) (Asbar & Setiawan, 2024). Therefore, spiritual education is the main requirement for knowledge to enter the heart or soul. It is in line with the words of the Prophet SAW that angels will not enter a house (heart) in which there is a dog (as a symbol of bad character) (Safira, 2024). The symbolic meaning of this hadith explains that angels, as the main intermediaries in imparting knowledge, will not be present in a heart filled with despicable traits (al-Ghazālī, 2004a).

The high level of religious participation in various regions of Indonesia is not always directly proportional to the increase in the spiritual quality of the community. Today, the level of spirituality in the islands of Indonesia has experienced a significant increase. Sulawesi Island occupies the highest position with a rise of 5.78%, followed by Kalimantan Island (3.36%), Bali and Nusa Tenggara Island (2.31%), Sumatra Island (1.63%), and Java Island as the lowest with an increased index of only around 0.47%(Badan Litbang & Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2024, p. 15). In fact, in fact, pengajian activities in various regions of Java show a high level of community participation and enthusiasm. For example, one pengajian in Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java, was attended by tens of thousands of worshipers from various circles (Pemerintah Kabupaten Sukoharjo Sukoharjo, 2024). It shows that the adjustments and materials delivered by educators have not been effective in providing a significant impact on the spirituality of the congregation. The discrepancy between the high participation of the congregation and the increase in spiritual quality emphasizes the urgency of a comprehensive evaluation of contemporary spiritual education methods. One approach that is worth studying is Al-Ghazālī's framework of thought that systematically integrates reason, *sharia*, and Sufism as a basis for fostering the inner dimension and strengthening morals in the context of modern society.

Al-Ghazālī views education as a combination of reason and revelation towards spiritual perfection. In his study of classical Islamic thought, Al-Ghazālī offers a theory of education rooted in the philosophy of Islamic idealism, which emphasizes reason as a means of understanding the truth but remains based on revelation. It means that the role of reason is not rejected but rather directed towards understanding the *Sharia* and nature so that the balance between rationality and spirituality becomes the main foundation in education. The goal of education, according to him, is *taqarrub ila Allah* and the formation of *akhlaq al-Karimah*, not for worldly purposes alone (Suhaimi, 2019, p. 363). Al-Ghazālī also emphasized that a rational cognitive approach must accompany spiritual education. Reason is the source of knowledge and light to know God. He noted that *taqarrub ila Allah* could not be achieved without a clear understanding because reason is the main tool to distinguish between right and wrong. With that, spirituality, according to Al-Ghazālī, is not just a ritual but the result of deep thought processes (al-Ghazālī, 2004b).

The relevance of Al-Ghazālī's thoughts in modern Islamic education has received widespread attention, but its implementation aspects are still rarely studied. Al-Ghazālī's thoughts on uniting intellectual and spiritual elements in modern Islamic education are very relevant to contemporary life, especially in the context of the curriculum and the role of teachers (Zamhariroh et al., 2024). Something similar was also said by Muhammad Fadillah, who stated that Al-Ghazālī's educational thinking is relevant in the modern era because it emphasizes the development of character, morals, and intelligence as a whole, as well as encourages the integration of religious values with technology and learning innovation (Fadillah et al., 2024). Al-Ghazālī's thoughts that emphasize moral education, the balance between worldly and afterlife knowledge, and the development of the heart and mind are very relevant in forming the growth mindset of Generation Z because they encourage adaptation, positive thinking, and resilience in facing learning challenges (Budiarti, 2022). It is because Al-Ghazālī emphasizes moral education, self-control, and the pursuit of knowledge as the path to perfection—all of which are in line with the principle of a growth mindset that develops through effort, habituation, and the intention to draw closer to Allah (Anam et al., 2024, pp. 76–77). However, previous studies have not specifically discussed the practical implementation of al-Ghazālī's spiritual approach in educational or preaching strategies that directly target modern society exposed to secularism, materialism, and hedonism. It shows that there is a gap in studies related to the concrete application of Al-

Ghazālī's values in building Islamic education that has a direct impact on the spiritual life of contemporary society.

Therefore, an in-depth study is needed so that the approach and material of Islamic spiritual education can be relevant and accepted by modern society so that it can be practiced properly. This study aims to discuss the problems and solutions in how Islamic educators educate modern society so that it remains relevant without ignoring its spiritual content. The approach and spirituality, based on the approach of Imam al-Ghazālī, are considered appropriate in facing the challenges of the modern era. For this reason, this study reveals that current education does not have a strong influence on the spiritual life of society, what are the challenges faced by Islamic spiritual education in the contemporary world, and how to make Islamic spiritual teachings accepted in the modern world.

METHODS

The researcher uses descriptive qualitative methods based on literature studies (Moleong, 2015), which begins with the identification of mindsets and factors causing spiritual problems in modern society through a review of journal articles and current research reports. Furthermore, the findings are compared with the approaches applied by general educators or contemporary preachers so that the advantages and disadvantages of the delivery methods and teaching materials can be revealed. The analysis is carried out descriptively analytically (Rukin, 2019) by grouping data based on Al-Ghazālī's spiritual concepts and educational framework to assess why contemporary approaches have not had a significant impact on the inner depth of the congregation. Finally, the results of this gap analysis are matched with the principles and steps of Al-Ghazālī's spiritual education, which integrates reason, *sharia*, and tasawuf as the basis for recommendations for an educational model that better touches the inner dimension and moral formation in the context of modern society.

RESULTS

Conditions of Society and Patterns of Approach to Preaching

Understanding the mindset of society is key to formulating a relevant approach to preaching. Before discussing the relevance of the spiritual approach, it is necessary first to

review the condition of society and the preaching patterns that have been applied so far, where currently, society has been polarized into two main cultures, namely modern culture and traditional culture. Urban society, in general, more often shows a tendency towards modern or analytical mindsets. Modern thinking itself has been influenced by a culture of rationality as well as a scientific and philosophical approach (Vliegenthart & Sajo, 2024, p. 80). As Al-Attas explains, modern thought, which is based on Western thought, often gives rise to confusion and skepticism because it elevates doubt to the level of scientific methodology (Al-Attas (interj. Karsidjo), 2021, pp. 195–196).

It also results in an autonomous mindset being formed in modern society, which makes individuals feel entitled to judge and choose experts who have the same understanding and reject those who do not (Worsnip et al., 2025, pp. 14–15). This modern thinking emerged due to the high complexity of the urban environment, such as traffic jams, pollution, intense and diverse social interactions, and demands for efficiency and work productivity that encourage people to think logically and quickly. It is also supported by easy access to information, high literacy rates, and a culture of rationality (Bramanwidyantari, 2022). Therefore, the approach to preaching needs to be directed more flexibly and rationally (Saputra, 2022, p. 155).

This adaptation effort has also been carried out by several preachers, such as Habib Ja'far, who has taken an approach by blending in and using basic logic that is easy for the general public to understand and is liked by modern society, especially urban society (Fitriansyah & Lubis, 2023, pp. 28–29). This approach can have a positive impact on spirituality by strengthening faith through logical reasoning, as well as making logic a tool to ensure that spirituality remains strong and by religious ethics (*sharia*) (Hairani & Putri, 2024, p. 4). However, the complexity of the way of thinking of modern society has encouraged educators or preachers to focus more on the method of delivery than the depth of the content. As a result, many individuals lose meaningful spiritual intake (Pimay & Savitri, 2021).

On the other hand, the mindset of rural communities shows more conventional and holistic thinking. This holistic thinking tends to be more in line with an approach that is closer to culture and culture and is accompanied by a high level of social collectivism and intuitive tendencies (Rakuasa et al., 2024, pp. 80–85; Wong et al., 2021, pp. 3-4,7). Geertz noted that the abangan society in rural Java practices religion symbolically and intuitively

and does not rely on formal education but rather is passed on through collective customs such as slametan. This society relies heavily on intuitive spiritual experience and symbolic relationships with ancestors or supernatural powers rather than on logical rationality or formal religious institutions (Geertz, 2014, pp. 255,283,584-585). As a result, the level of intelligence of village communities tends to be low, so village communities, in particular, tend to think based on their conscience and personal beliefs rather than on the basis of logical reasoning (Alvita Izki Maulida, 2024). This thinking has a weakness, namely the tendency to rely on intuition and emotions, which are not always consistent, so in the context of spiritual communication, it can obscure the message that is intended to be conveyed (Lam, 2020). Therefore, the approach must be cultural and down to earth, emphasizing local wisdom and social solidarity (Wira, 2021).

The emotional and cultural approach in preaching is effective but is prone to losing spiritual substance. Real adjustments have been made by several educators, such as Gus Iqdam, who provides a down-to-earth approach and maintains local wisdom through the culture of the village community (Ike Widiya Ulfah, 2023). A strategy that relies on intuition and emotion is indeed effective in touching the spiritual side of society (Tyurina & Stavkova, 2019), but this approach can sometimes be unstable. For example, lectures delivered with humor are often enjoyed more as entertainment rather than as conveyors of spiritual values (Andayani Andayani & Santoso, 2023).

Thus, the approach taken by religious educators is quite wise and contextual. However, the complexity of people's ways of thinking often hinders the delivery of the substance of preaching in a complete and in-depth manner, which causes preachers to lean more towards a flexible approach than an impactful one, which ultimately results in people having low spiritual growth. In addition to psychosocial factors that shape people's ways of thinking, spirituality also faces serious challenges from the dominance of modern ideologies such as secularism, materialism, and hedonism, which systematically shift transcendental values in social life.

Causes of the Decline of Spirituality in Modern Society

The dominance of secularism, materialism, and hedonism erodes the spirituality of modern society. Behind the various approaches to preaching that have been carried out, there are fundamental factors that have contributed to the decline in the spirituality of

today's society, one of which is the spread of secular ideology in the era of modernization that frees individuals from religion and all metaphysical elements that regulate their reason and language. It is seen in the form of desacralization and deconsecration of values, which, according to Al-Attas, have been influenced by the views of Western science, which considers secularism as the evolution of human consciousness from a childish nature in the form of dependence on religion (Al-Attas (term. Karsidjo), 2021). The influence of secularism, which is a colonial legacy, can be seen clearly in the education curriculum. For example, religious studies in schools only get one to two hours per week. Meanwhile, in college, religious courses are only given a weight of two credits, and that too only in one semester (Jannah & Irawani, 2025, p. 279). In addition, the ideology of materialism and hedonism, which has spread through the currents of globalization, is one of the causes of the loss of spiritual meaning in society.

Most modern societies have a perspective that tends to be materialistic and individualistic, which results in the erosion of the spiritual dimension in contemporary life. Materialism is a view of life that seeks the basis of everything, including human life, only in the material world by ignoring everything that goes beyond the world of the senses (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2025). The strong influence of materialism has resulted in a mindset of society that views everything solely from the perspective of material ownership and achieving social existence. In this mindset, a person's success and life achievements are only measured based on how much wealth they have or how well they are known and respected by their social environment (Rahmawati et al., 2021, p. 157). The spread of this materialistic attitude is triggered by digitalization, especially through mass media, which indirectly encourages individuals to continue to compare themselves with others in order to assess their social position. Digital media provides unlimited space for anyone to observe other people's social lives, which often leads to frustration. This feeling then encourages many people to seek self-validation through wealth and ownership of luxury goods and instills the view that everything in life is measured by wealth and luxury (Ozimek et al., 2024, pp. 2–3). Modern materialism has weakened religious and social spirituality by shifting inner values towards worldly satisfaction alone. As a result, there is an emptiness of meaning in life, a distance from God, and a weakening of social ties, which gives rise to isolation and anxiety in society (Jenuri et al., 2025, pp. 1-2,8-9).

Hedonism is one of the main causes of the weakening of people's spirituality. Hedonism itself is a view that considers pleasure and material enjoyment as the main goal

in life (Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, 2025). Life orientation that focuses on consumption, trends, and momentary pleasure has fostered hedonistic values and shifted religious values that were previously the foundation of life. In a consumer society, happiness is no longer associated with the fulfillment of basic needs but rather with the increasing volume and intensity of desires, as well as the use of goods quickly and instantly (Bauman, 2007, p. 35). This lifestyle not only encourages consumer behavior but also erodes spiritual awareness, both individually and collectively (Sholihah et al., 2023). Popular cultures, such as social media, music, and entertainment, have changed social norms and created space for a realistic meaning of life, but based on empirical logic, with the main goal of pursuing instant pleasure (Soleh, 2023, pp. 35–41). The hedonism that develops through this culture brings negative impacts, such as pleasure that is no longer in line with religious and moral values and neglect of the spiritual dimension because one is too busy enjoying physical pleasures. The loss of control over the hedonistic urges themselves ultimately distances humans from the true values of life (Amalia, 2024, p. 65).

Al-Ghazālī responded to the above phenomenon through an Islamic epistemological approach, the concept of *zuhud*, and self-control. According to al-Ghazālī, science should be oriented and directly connected to divinity and religious values. He emphasized that science that ignores the spiritual aspect cannot be categorized as genuine and useful science (al-Ghazālī, 2004b). This epistemological approach emphasizes the importance of balance between reason and spirituality. He views knowledge as the main foundation for good deeds and places rational knowledge, such as logic and mathematics, as an important part of understanding reality. In this way, al-Ghazālī offers a view of education that not only forms morals but also strengthens the ability to think. Therefore, this approach is very relevant in responding to the challenges of the modern world, which often ignores religious values (Ilham & Muflicha, 2024, pp. 3–5).

Al-Ghazālī also emphasized the importance of self-control through a cognitive approach that is tailored to the individual's condition in order to balance reason, lust, and anger. This approach aims to stem the dominance of lust and hedonistic urges that have the potential to damage the moral order and submission to *sharia* (al-Ghazālī, n.d., p. 282). This approach is relevant because it teaches the wise use of wealth without making it the goal of life. *Zuhud* functions as a spiritual path that calms the heart and restores the meaning of life amidst the dominance of worldly values (Defriono et al., 2023, pp. 157–160). Al-Ghazālī emphasized the importance of self-control through a cognitive approach

that is tailored to the individual's condition to balance reason, lust, and anger. This approach aims to stem the dominance of lust and hedonistic urges that can damage the moral order and submission to the *sharia* (al-Ghazālī, 2004c, p. 76). Al-Ghazālī's approach has proven effective in dealing with hedonism because it emphasizes self-control through the balance of reason and soul. It forms an inner consciousness that can restrain worldly urges without having to rely on external prohibitions. This approach is especially relevant in the context of adolescent hedonism because it can help prevent destructive behavior by forming an inner consciousness that is in line with positive values (Bahri, 2022, pp. 65–72).

As a result, the decline in the spirituality of modern society is rooted in secularism, which reduces religion to formal rituals; materialism, which measures the success of life from worldly wealth; and hedonism, which places pleasure as the main goal, all three of which reinforce each other to create a void of meaning, distance humans from God, and weaken social ties. For this reason, Al-Ghazālī's thoughts that emphasize the balance of reason and heart, the practice of *zuhud* as liberation from worldly attachments, and self-control as a spiritual foundation are worthy of being studied as contemporary solutions.

DISCUSSION

The Relevance of Al-Ghazālī's Spiritual Approach in the Contemporary Era

Al-Ghazālī combines reason and heart as the foundation for understanding religious truth. He is known as an Islamic thinker who combines analytical and intuitive approaches in formulating his spiritual teachings without departing from the principles of *Sharia*. Al-Ghazālī views reason and heart as two main elements that complement each other: reason as a source of knowledge that leads to the truth, and the heart as the spiritual core where a person can know and understand the truth. He likens the heart to a leader and reason to a minister who guides it so that it does not slip away due to lust (al-Ghazālī, 2004b, 2004c).

In the work *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Al-Ghazālī integrates *Shari'a*, philosophy, and Sufism, which, according to Professor Badawi Taban, in the book, Al-Ghazālī explains various concepts through the Shari'a, philosophical (rational) and Islamic spiritual (*tasawuf*) mindset (al-Ghazālī, 2004b). Al-Ghazālī's approach appears in many parts of the Ihya', one of which is when he discusses the issue of materialism. This *Sharia* approach is seen in the use of the hadith: "The world is the prison of the believer and the paradise of the unbeliever" (HR.

Muslim No. 2956). His philosophical approach is evident in the explanation of the differences in the world, both externally and internally, through the analogy of an old woman who dresses up excessively to deceive people with her appearance. His intuitive approach is evident in the way al-Ghazālī categorizes materialism as the source of the birth of despicable traits, such as arrogance, envy, showing off, seeking popularity, suspicion, being two-faced, loving praise, loving luxury, and being proud (al-Ghazālī, 2004c).

Al-Ghazālī's holistic and rational approach is relevant to dealing with the complexity of modern thought patterns. This thinking is considered appropriate in dealing with the complexity of contemporary thought patterns because it not only touches on holistic aspects but also opens up space for analytical thinking that prioritizes logic through a philosophical approach that remains based on *Sharia* principles. This approach shows that the integration of religious values within a rational framework has proven effective and can create a strategy that has a consistent impact according to psychological aspects (de Abreu Costa & Moreira-Almeida, 2022). This approach is also considered very relevant when applied in the context of Indonesian society, which is known for its diversity and high demands for adaptability (Milli et al., 2021).

The rational, intuitive, integrative approach has been proven to be effective in bridging moderate and conventional thinking. This mindset is considered more effective in dealing with both mild and conventional thinking because this approach is considered to combine rational and intuitive elements, which is more easily accepted than a purely logical approach (Şeker et al., 2025). In addition, this approach is suitable for conventional, holistic life because of its comprehensive nature, where knowledge is not merely cognitive but also makes humans aware of the purpose of life, social relations, and their relationship with God while remaining based on logic so that it has a good impact (Gyagenda, 2021).

In his spiritual approach, al-Ghazālī presents a structured and flexible system of knowledge to guide the inner consciousness of the people. He emphasizes the importance of delivering da'wah wisely and touchingly, adjusting the approach to make it easier to accept without reducing the meaning of the teachings. For him, da'wah needs to be done with gentleness and affection so that it can move the heart to abandon reprehensible morals because the core of religious learning is the purification of the heart and closeness to Allah Swt (al-Ghazālī, 2004b).

This idea is seen in *Bidayat al-Hidayah*, which is intended as an initial guide through an external approach so that the reader can reflect on the inclination of his heart towards spiritual truth (al-Ghazālī, 2004a, pp. 20–21). This idea is seen in Bidayat al-Hidayah, which is intended as an initial guide through an outward approach so that the reader can reflect on the inclination of his heart towards spiritual truth (al-Ghazālī, 2004b). As a result, a complete and structured spiritual approach was formed. Dogmatic thinking that tends to be dominant in the Asian region also makes spiritual knowledge more acceptable. It provides an opportunity for rational thinking to enter conventional society by loosening rigid doctrines, which, in the end, actually strengthens the faith and principles of life in society (Patrícia Araújo & Rodrigues, 2019).

Thus, al-Ghazālī's approach can be considered very relevant to answering the challenges of the complexity of the era because it successfully combines the conventional mindset of rural communities and the moderate thinking of urban communities and has an approach that uses an intellectual, cognitive approach. This approach can be applied by following the example of the da'wah approach implemented by Gus Baha' (KH. Bahauddin Nur Salim), who, in his lectures, often emphasizes the importance of common sense in understanding religion but remains balanced with the heart as the center of spiritual refinement. This mindset gives the impression of not being rigid or merely structural but rather united with the feeling and gentleness of the heart (Himam, 2021). His approach is often spiced with scientific humor so that his lectures are received warmly and well but still have an impact (Qudsy & Muzakky, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In the modern era, the influence of Western culture that brings the ideology of secularism, materialism, and hedonism has created complexity in the approach to preaching. As a result, many educators and preachers emphasize the method of delivery rather than the depth of spirituality in education. Even when the spiritual dimension is included, it often does not have a significant impact on the audience. In this context, al-Ghazālī's educational approach is considered efficient because it is able to combine rational and intuitive elements in the spiritual realm based on *sharia*. This approach is not only relevant but also has the potential to answer the spiritual challenges of modern society.

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