

# Imam Al-Ghazali's Critique of Modern Islamic Education in *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the critique of modern Islamic education through the perspective of Imam al-Ghazali's classic work, *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*. This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method, namely reviewing various literature relevant to al-Ghazali's thoughts and the development of modern Islamic education. The results of the study indicate that al-Ghazali put forward a fundamental critique of the education system that only emphasizes rational and material aspects without paying attention to the spiritual dimension and the formation of morals. In the context of modern Islamic education, this critique is relevant because many Islamic educational institutions tend to adopt Western educational patterns that are pragmatic and secular. Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of balance between worldly knowledge and the afterlife, between reason and intuition, and between intellectuality and spirituality. Thus, education should not only be oriented towards academic achievement, but also on the purification of the soul and the formation of character based on Islamic values. This study concludes that al-Ghazali's ideas in *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* can be a conceptual basis in formulating a holistic, integrative, and transformative Islamic education paradigm, which is able to answer the challenges of modernity without losing its spiritual and moral essence.

**Keywords:** Islamic Education, Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*, Modernity, Criticism of Education

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## Introduction

Modern Islamic education faces significant challenges in addressing the evolving needs of the times, particularly amidst globalization and digitalization. Modern education systems, often adopting Western approaches, tend to emphasize materialistic and utilitarian aspects, thus neglecting the spiritual and moral dimensions that are at the heart of Islamic education. (Harahap, 2023) Imam Al-Ghazali, through his autobiography *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*, offers a critical perspective on epistemological and educational approaches that prioritize the search for truth through spiritual and intellectual experience. This book reflects Al-Ghazali's spiritual journey, which not only seeks truth through rationality, but also through intuition and inner experience ( *dzawq* ). In the context of modern Islamic education, *Al-Munqidz* can serve as a basis for criticizing educational approaches that are too mechanistic and pay little attention to the formation of morals and human relationships with God. Al-Ghazali's approach emphasizes the importance of a balance between Islamic knowledge, reason, and spiritual experience, which is relevant to addressing the weaknesses of contemporary Islamic education (Renaldi, 2025).

This paper aims to analyze Al-Ghazali's critique of education through the perspective of *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* and its relevance to modern Islamic education. Using a literature study approach, this analysis will explore how Al-Ghazali's thoughts can serve as self-criticism of the education system that tends to neglect the spiritual dimension. Modern Islamic education is often trapped in formalism and market orientation, thus losing the essence of noble character formation ( *akhlak karimah* ). Through *Al-Munqidz*, Al-Ghazali shows that true education is a process of seeking truth that involves the heart, mind, and soul, not merely the transfer of technical knowledge. This paper will explore how Al-Ghazali's ideas can be an alternative solution to improve the Islamic education system in the digital era (Mumtaz, 2025).

The main focus of this analysis is how Al-Ghazali, through his spiritual experiences, criticized epistemological approaches that rely solely on reason without involving the inner dimension. Modern Islamic education, which often adopts Western models, tends to ignore aspects of Sufism and moral development, which are the core of education according to Al-Ghazali. By referring to *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*, this paper will discuss how Islamic education can be reformed to integrate the values of spirituality, intellectuality, and morality in a harmonious whole. This analysis will also highlight the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thoughts in facing the challenges of education in the digital era, where technology often dominates the learning process (Widyastuti & Dartim, 2025). This paper will consist of several main sections. First, a literature review will outline the theoretical foundations and references relevant to Al-Ghazali's thought and modern Islamic education. Second, the research method will explain the literature study approach used. Third, the discussion will analyze Al-Ghazali's critique of modern education in depth based on *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the main findings and provide recommendations for the future development of Islamic education. Thus, this paper is expected to make a significant contribution to the discourse on contemporary Islamic education (Basori et al., 2025).

## Literature Review

### 2.1 Al-Ghazali's thoughts in *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*

*Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* is a book that describes Al-Ghazali's intellectual and spiritual autobiography related to his life journey in search of truth. In this book, Al-Ghazali (2021) explains how he went through various phases of doubt (*syakk*) towards various schools of thought, such as kalam theology, philosophy, and esoteric teachings, before finally finding inner peace through Sufism. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that true truth cannot be achieved through reason alone, but also through inner experience (*dzawq*) and divine enlightenment (*kasyf*). This approach has major implications for education, because according to Al-Ghazali, education should aim to bring individuals to true truth, not just the mastery of worldly knowledge (Renaldi, 2025).

In the context of epistemology, Al-Ghazali criticized the excessive rationalist approach adopted by philosophers, as well as the formalism of kalam theology. He argued that knowledge that does not bring one closer to God is useless. In *Al-Munqidz*, Al-Ghazali explains that true education must encompass three main elements: ilmu syar'i (religious knowledge), ilmu aqli (rational knowledge), and ilmu laduni (knowledge gained through spiritual enlightenment). This approach differs from modern education, which tends to separate the spiritual from the intellectual (Nurdiana, 2025).

## 2.2 Modern Islamic Education

Modern Islamic education in Indonesia and the world at large faces the challenge of balancing Islamic values with the demands of the times. Many Islamic educational institutions adopt Western curricula without considering the spiritual values at the heart of Islamic teachings. As a result, Islamic education often falls into formalism, with the primary focus being on mastering academic material without attention to character development and a relationship with God. This contradicts Al-Ghazali's vision, which emphasized the importance of holistic education that integrates the mind, heart, and soul (Mumtaz, 2025).

According to Basori et al. (2025), Islamic education according to Al-Ghazali should aim to form a perfect human being, namely an individual who is not only intellectually intelligent, but also possesses noble morals and closeness to God. In *Al-Munqidz*, Al-Ghazali criticized educational approaches that only focus on external aspects, such as mastery of worldly knowledge, without paying attention to the inner aspects. This approach is relevant to the challenges of modern Islamic education, which often prioritizes academic achievement over character building (Basori et al., 2025).

## 2.3 Sufism and Education

Sufism, as the core of Al-Ghazali's thought, plays a crucial role in education. In *Al-Munqidz*, Al-Ghazali explains that Sufism is a path to attaining true truth through purification of the heart and spiritual experience. This approach can be a solution to address the spiritual crisis in modern Islamic education. According to Majdi (2025), Al-Ghazali's Sufism education can help students develop spiritual awareness and noble morals, which are often neglected in the modern education system (Majdi, 2025).

Furthermore, Sholeh and Mudlofir (2024) argue that Sufism education from a neuroscience perspective can enhance the spirituality of modern society. This approach aligns with Al-Ghazali's vision, which emphasizes the importance of inner experience in the learning process. By integrating Sufism into education, students can be taught to balance worldly and spiritual needs, thereby creating harmony in their lives (Sholeh & Mudlofir, 2024).

## 2.4 Critique of Philosophy and Its Relevance to Modern Education

Al-Ghazali is known as a critic of philosophy, especially in *Tahafut al-Falasifah*. In *Al-Munqidz*, he also criticized philosophical approaches that rely too much on reason without considering revelation. According to Al-Fuadi and Ulum (2024), Al-Ghazali's critique of philosophy has major implications for education, as it shows that a rationalist approach alone is insufficient to achieve true truth. In the context of modern Islamic education, this critique is relevant to addressing secular tendencies in the educational curriculum (Al-Fuadi & Ulum, 2024).

Modern education often adopts a Western rationalist approach, which separates knowledge from religious values. Al-Ghazali, through *Al-Munqidz*, offers an alternative by integrating reason and revelation into the learning process. This approach can be a solution to the identity crisis in Islamic education, where many Islamic educational institutions have lost their roots in Islamic values (Rahim, 2025).

## Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method. The primary data comes from Imam Al-Ghazali's book *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*, which was analyzed to understand Al-Ghazali's views on education and epistemology. In addition, secondary data was obtained from academic journals, books, and dissertations relevant to Al-Ghazali's thoughts and modern Islamic education. The analysis process was carried out by identifying the main themes in *Al-Munqidz*, such as epistemology, Sufism, and criticism of the rationalist approach, and connecting them to contemporary Islamic education issues. This approach allows researchers to understand in depth how Al-Ghazali's thoughts can be used as self-criticism of modern Islamic education (Nurdiana, 2025).

Data were collected through reading and analyzing the text *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* and secondary references such as the aforementioned journals and dissertations. The analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic method, interpreting the text within its historical and contemporary context to understand its relevance to modern Islamic education. Thus, this study not only explores Al-Ghazali's thoughts but also relates them to the challenges of education in the digital era (Widyastuti & Dartim, 2025).

## Results

### 4.1 Al-Ghazali's Critique of Rationalist Epistemology

In *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*, Al-Ghazali describes the epistemological crisis he experienced when questioning the truth of various schools of thought. He rejected the excessive rationalist approach, as adopted by philosophers, because he believed that reason alone was insufficient to achieve true truth. According to Al-Ghazali, true truth can only be achieved through a combination of reason, revelation, and spiritual experience (*dzawq*). In the context of modern Islamic education, this approach is relevant to criticize curricula that prioritize intellectual aspects without considering the spiritual dimension (Renaldi, 2025).

Modern Islamic education often adopts Western educational models, which emphasize mastery of worldly knowledge and technical skills. While this is important, Al-Ghazali emphasized that true education must bring individuals closer to God. In *Al-Munqidz*, he explained that knowledge that does not bring spiritual benefits is useless. Therefore, modern Islamic education needs to reform its curriculum to integrate Sufism and moral development, so that students are not only intellectually intelligent but also possess spiritual depth (Mumtaz, 2025).

### 4.2 Sufism as a Solution for Modern Islamic Education

Al-Ghazali, through his spiritual experience in *Al-Munqidz*, shows that Sufism is a path to achieving true truth. Al-Ghazali (2021) said: “*Then when I had finished with these sciences, I turned with all my attention to the path of the sufis. I came to know that their path can only be completed through knowledge and action.*” Sufism, according to Al-Ghazali, involves cleansing the heart (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and developing a close relationship with God.

In an educational context, a Sufism approach can help students develop spiritual awareness and noble morals, which are often neglected in modern education. According to Majdi (2025), Al-Ghazali's Sufism education can be a solution to overcome the spiritual crisis in modern Islamic education, where many students lose their moral and spiritual orientation (Majdi, 2025).

Sufism education is not only relevant for character building but also for improving students' psychological well-being. According to Sholeh and Mudlofir (2024), the Sufism approach in education is correlated with neuroscience, where spiritual practices such as dhikr and meditation can improve mental and spiritual health. In the digital age, where students are often exposed to information overload and social pressures, a Sufism approach can be a tool to help them find inner peace and focus on higher life goals (Sholeh & Mudlofir, 2024).

### 4.3 The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Thought in the Digital Era

The digital era brings new challenges to Islamic education, such as the dominance of technology and information, which tends to marginalize spiritual values. According to Widyastuti and Dartim (2025), Al-Ghazali's thoughts can serve as a foundation for developing an Islamic education curriculum relevant to the digital era. Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of education oriented toward the pursuit of truth, which can be adapted to the context of online learning and the use of technology. By integrating Sufism values, Islamic education can remain relevant amidst changing times (Widyastuti & Dartim, 2025).

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali also emphasized the importance of work ethic in education, as outlined in *Ihya Ulumuddin*. According to Wahyuni (2025), Al-Ghazali's concept of work ethic can be applied in modern education to instill the values of discipline, sincerity, and orientation towards truth. This is relevant to the challenges of modern Islamic education, which is often trapped in market orientation and materialism. By implementing Al-Ghazali's work ethic, Islamic education can produce individuals who are not only academically competent but also possess moral and spiritual integrity (Wahyuni, 2025).

### 4.4 Critique of Formalism in Education

In *Al-Munqidz*, Al-Ghazali also criticized formalism in education, namely an approach that only focuses on the external aspects without paying attention to the spiritual essence. Modern Islamic education is often trapped in formalism, where the main focus is on mastering academic material without paying attention to character building and relationships with God. According to Basori et al. (2025), Islamic education according to Al-Ghazali should aim to form a perfect human being, namely an individual who is not only intellectually intelligent, but also has noble morals and closeness to God. This approach is relevant to address the weaknesses of modern Islamic education, which often prioritizes academic achievement over character building (Basori et al., 2025).

Al-Ghazali emphasized that true education must encompass three main elements: Islamic knowledge, intellectual knowledge, and spiritual knowledge. In the context of modern education, this approach can be implemented by integrating religious studies, science, and spiritual development into the curriculum. Thus, Islamic education can produce individuals who are intellectually, morally, and spiritually balanced, as emphasized by Al-Ghazali in *Al-Munqidz* (Nurdiana, 2025).

### 4.5 Implications of Al-Ghazali's Critique for Modern Islamic Education

Al-Ghazali's critique of rationalism and formalism has profound implications for modern Islamic education. First, Islamic education needs to reform its curriculum to integrate Sufism and morality. Second, Islamic education must adopt a holistic approach encompassing intellectual, moral, and spiritual aspects. Third, Islamic education needs to adapt to the challenges of the digital era by utilizing technology wisely without neglecting spiritual values. By applying Al-Ghazali's thinking, Islamic education can return to its roots as a process of seeking truth that leads individuals to a closer relationship with God (Mumtaz, 2025).

### Conclusion

Al-Ghazali's thought in *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal* offers a profound critique of educational approaches that rely too heavily on rationalism and formalism. Through his spiritual journey, Al-Ghazali demonstrates that true education must encompass a balance between Islamic knowledge, intellectual knowledge, and spiritual knowledge. In the context of modern Islamic education, this thinking is relevant for addressing the spiritual and moral crisis facing many educational institutions. By integrating Sufism, work ethic, and a holistic approach, Islamic education can produce individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also possess noble character and a closeness to God.

To face the challenges of the digital era, Islamic education needs to adopt technology wisely without neglecting spiritual values. Al-Ghazali's thoughts can serve as a foundation for developing an Islamic education curriculum that is relevant to the times, yet remains rooted in Islamic values. Thus, Islamic education can once again become a means to attain true truth, as emphasized by Al-Ghazali in *Al-Munqidz min al-Dhalal*. This study recommends that Islamic educational institutions reform their curriculum by integrating Sufism values and moral formation, thereby producing a generation that is intellectually, morally, and spiritually balanced.

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