



The Ideologization of Al-Ghazali's Sufi Exegesis: A Critical Analysis through Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics



Siti Nur Azizah

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author: nurazizah071001@gmail.com

Abstract

This article seeks to examine the ideological dimensions and interests embedded within Al-Ghazali's interpretation of the Qur'an through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Its significance lies in addressing the often-adversarial positioning of hermeneutic debates in Qur'anic studies vis-à-vis classical tafsir methodologies, which tend to create a dichotomy between traditional and modern approaches. Moreover, there exists a lacuna in scholarship concerning the influence of subjectivity, ideology, and historical context on Qur'anic interpretation in classical works, particularly within Al-Ghazali's thought. Employing a qualitative methodology, this research utilises descriptive-analytical and critical-comparative approaches. The data are analysed through Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which foregrounds historicity, prejudice, and the interpreter's subjectivity in the process of textual understanding. The findings indicate that Al-Ghazali applied the method of illumination to apprehend the objective meaning of God's message. Nonetheless, his interpretation also incorporates ideological elements that delimit the text to specific meanings, endorse his own group, and position others as objects within the interpretative discourse. Furthermore, the study suggests that hermeneutics should not be regarded as a threat to the authority of classical tafsir; rather, it may serve as a reflective instrument for recognising the dimensions of historicity, subjectivity, and social context in interpretation. The contribution of this research lies in its endeavour to establish a dialogical perspective between hermeneutics and classical tafsir, thereby situating debates on hermeneutics within the framework of open, critical, and proportionate academic ijihad, as opposed to a logic of exclusivism or mutual negation.

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan menganalisis ideologisasi dan kepentingan dalam interpretasi Al-Qur'an oleh Al-Ghazali melalui perspektif hermeneutika filosofis Hans-Georg Gadamer. Kajian ini penting karena perdebatan mengenai hermeneutika dalam studi Al-Qur'an sering kali diposisikan secara antagonistik terhadap metodologi tafsir klasik, sehingga menimbulkan dikotomi antara pendekatan tradisional dan pendekatan modern. Di sisi lain, masih terdapat kesenjangan kajian yang secara khusus menelaah bagaimana subjektivitas, ideologi, dan konteks historis memengaruhi penafsiran Al-Qur'an dalam karya-karya klasik, khususnya pada pemikiran Al-Ghazali. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif-analitis dan analisis kritis-komparatif. Data dianalisis melalui pendekatan hermeneutika filosofis Gadamer yang menekankan historisitas, prasangka, dan keterlibatan subjektivitas penafsir dalam proses pemahaman teks. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Al-Ghazali menggunakan metode iluminasi untuk memahami makna objektif pesan Tuhan. Namun, interpretasinya juga mengandung muatan ideologis yang membatasi teks pada makna tertentu, mendukung kelompoknya, dan memosisikan pihak lain sebagai objek wacana penafsiran. Temuan lain menunjukkan bahwa hermeneutika tidak harus dipandang sebagai ancaman terhadap otoritas tafsir klasik, melainkan dapat berfungsi sebagai perangkat reflektif untuk menyadari dimensi historisitas, subjektivitas, dan konteks sosial dalam penafsiran. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada upaya membangun perspektif dialogis antara hermeneutika dan tafsir klasik, sehingga perdebatan mengenai hermeneutika ditempatkan dalam kerangka ijihad akademik yang terbuka, kritis, dan proporsional, bukan dalam logika eksklusivisme atau saling menegasikan.

Keywords:

Philosophical hermeneutics; Al-Ghazali; Qur'anic Interpretation; Ideological Interpretation; Hans-Georg Gadamer

Kata kunci:

Hermeneutika filosofis; Al-Ghazali; Interpretasi Al-Qur'an; Ideologisasi tafsir; Hans-Georg Gadamer

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Introduction

One of the most enduring challenges faced by Muslims from historical times to the present day is the phenomenon of the so-called “judges of truth.” This term denotes the attitude adopted by certain individuals or groups who perceive themselves as the exclusive bearers of truth, thereby judging others as misguided or even heretical under the guise of religious authority.¹ A salient example of this can be observed in the positions held by various theologians and schools of Islamic theology, such as the Mu‘tazilah, Ash‘ariyyah, and Hanbali traditions, which frequently declared one another as unbelievers on the basis that opposing views were incompatible with their own doctrinal interpretations. Moreover, within the Indonesian context, certain groups or individuals have emerged who incite discord in the name of religion by branding others as apostates (murtadin), while simultaneously engaging in overt and vociferous denunciations of sacred symbols, including God, the Prophet, and the Muslim holy scripture.² Such individuals are not only condemned as unbelievers but are, in some cases, deemed legitimate targets for killing, thereby rendering their lives permissible to be taken.³

This article aims to offer a critical response to the emergence of actors who self-identify as the “Spokespersons of God” (including the Fatwa Commission of the Indonesian Ulema Council, interpreter communities, and certain religious sects). These actors tend to treat divine texts in an exclusive manner, presenting their rulings as valid, final, and absolute, as if they fully encapsulate God’s intent. Concurrently, they claim the authority to marginalise groups deemed ideologically divergent in the name of God. Khaled Abou El Fadl characterises such behaviour as interpretive despotism, which involves sealing off the text, enforcing a singular interpretation, and feeling compelled to exclude those outside one’s own community.⁴

Given the complexity of the issues encountered by communities in determining meaning, textual interpretation, according to Amin Abdullah, cannot be unilaterally monopolised either by the author or the reader. Instead, textual understanding should be conceived as the outcome of a dynamic interaction among the author, the text, and the reader. Ijtihad, in its authentic sense, embodies the notion of an active and evolving engagement among these three elements. Consequently, a balancing process occurs between the diverse interests represented by each party, resulting in a continuous and ongoing negotiation.⁵ To prevent individuals, groups, and particularly religious organisations from arbitrarily claiming to act on behalf of God, Khaled proposes five safeguards against authoritarian religious rulings: self-restraint, diligence, reasonableness,

¹ Fahrudin Faiz, “Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an Tema-tema Kontroversial”, (Yogyakarta: ELSAQ Press, 2005), 138-139.

² Saifuddin Ibrahim, “Alquran yang Bohong & Dongeng Purbakala”, accessed October 6, 2023.

³ Ahmad Bunyan Wahib, Questioning Liberal, Islam in Indonesia: Response and Critique to Jaringan Islam Liberal. *Al-Jami’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2006 M/1427 H, 25.

⁴ These characteristics have been synthesised by the author from several works by Khaled Abou El Fadl, including the following: *Speaking in God’s Name Islamic Law, Authority, and Women*. (London: Oneworld Publications, 2001); *And God Knows the Soldier: The Authoritative and Authoritarian Islamic Discourse*, (Boston: University Press of America, Inc, 2001).

⁵ Khaleed M. Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 278.

honesty, and the capacity for self-control.⁶

In accordance with this framework, the present article aims to undertake a critical examination of Al-Ghazali's theory of Qur'anic interpretation. Its objective is to investigate and assess the presence of elements of authoritarianism, ideological messaging, vested interests, and, in particular, the pursuit of objective meaning within the structure of his Qur'anic hermeneutics. While numerous studies have addressed Al-Ghazali's thought in the context of interpretation—primarily through descriptive and comparative analyses, as exemplified by the works of Iysa A. Bello,⁷ Ali Abdul Fatah al-Maghrib,⁸ Muhammad al-Raihani,⁹ Jorge J. E. Gracia,¹⁰ Mahbub Ghazali,¹¹ Ahmad Ubaidillah Ma'sum Al Anwari and Jannah,¹² and others—these contributions do not sufficiently explore the deeper dimensions underlying Al-Ghazali's interpretive framework, which Mohammed Arkoun characterises as the “unthinkable.”¹³

The significance of this research lies in its endeavour to elucidate the ideological dimensions of Al-Ghazali's thought within the discourse of textual interpretation, employing the analytical framework of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. The study aims to assess the extent to which this approach serves as an effective analytical tool, not only in critically revealing the process by which objective meaning is derived in Al-Ghazali's method of Qur'anic interpretation, but also in deconstructing the ideological structures inherent within it. For example, Al-Ghazali appears to make subjective determinations concerning both the interpretative methods considered legitimate and the qualifications of those permitted to act as interpreters (*mu'awwil*). From Al-Ghazali's perspective, the appropriate method for uncovering the inner meaning of the text is illumination (mystical intuition). Alternative methods, such as the dialectical and demonstrative approaches employed by philosophers, are rejected on the grounds that they are inadequate and limited in their capacity to reveal the ultimate truth concealed within the text.¹⁴

With regard to the subject as both an active reader and a passive recipient of interpretive discourse, Al-Ghazali asserts that only the learned elite—specifically the Sufis, the people of *ma'rifah*, and *haqiqah*—are entitled to uncover the esoteric meanings

⁶ Khaleed M. Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 142.

⁷ Iysa. A. Bello, *The Medieval Islamic Controversy between Philosophy and Orthodoxy: Ijma' and Ta'wil in the Conflict between Al-Ghazali and Ibnu Rusyd* (Leiden, New York: Kober Hovn, Koln: E.J. Brill, 1989).

⁸ 'Ali 'Abdul Fatah al-Maghrib, “At-Ta'wil Baina al-Asy'ariyah wa Ibnu Rusyd”, dalam Muhammad Atif al'Iraqi, *Ibnu Rusyd: Mufakkiran wa Raydan li al-Ittijah al-'Aqli* (Kairo: Al-Majlis al-'A'la li ats-Tsaqafah Lajnah al-Falsafah wa-al-Ijma', 1993), 53.

⁹ Muhammad al-Raihani, *Tafsir al-Imam Al-Ghazali*, (Kairo: Dar al-Salam, 2010), 128.

¹⁰ Jorge J.E. Gracia, “Interpretation and The Law: Averroes's Contribution to The Hermeneutics of Sacred Texts”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol.14, No.1, January 1997.

¹¹ Mahbub Ghazali, *Hermeneutika Sufistik al-Ghazali dalam Mishkat al-Anwar*. Mutawatir: *Jurnal Keilmuan Tafsir Hadith*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2015, 50-73. <https://doi.org/10.15642/mutawatir.2015.5.1>

¹² Ahmad Ubaidillah Ma'sum Al Anwari dan Safri Nur Jannah, “Kesahihan Hadis dalam Paradigma Bayani, Burhani, dan 'Irfani: Telaah atas Epistemologi al-Ghazali,” *Al-Qudwah: Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 3, no. 2 (2025): 130–148, <https://doi.org/10.24014/alqudwah.v3i2.37237>

¹³ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Question, Uncommon answers*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), 231.

¹⁴ According to Al-Ghazali, this perspective is well-founded. The scholarly community within this second category not only meets the essential criteria of intellect and character but also employs the illuminative method, which Sufis consider the highest form of knowledge.

embedded within the text. Others are categorised as ordinary people (al-‘awwam), whose role is confined to that of passive recipients of interpretive discourse and who are not permitted to engage in the interpretation of anthropomorphic (tajsim) Qur’anic verses or hadiths.¹⁵ In his work “*Iljam al-‘Awwam ‘an ‘Ilm al-Kalam*”, Al-Ghazali includes within the category of ordinary people philologists, grammarians, hadith specialists, Qur’anic exegetes, jurists, and theologians. These individuals are deemed unqualified in terms of intellectual capacity, character, and methodological competence to comprehend and reveal the vast ocean of esoteric meanings. Consequently, their role is restricted to receiving the discourse of ta’wil and understanding only the apparent, outward meanings of the text.¹⁶

This article utilises a qualitative methodology grounded in library research. Data are gathered through documentation techniques, drawing upon literature such as journal articles and other scholarly works pertinent to the subject under consideration. The data analysis method employed is descriptive-analytical research, which involves the description of various data and issues—specifically the ideological aspects within Al-Ghazali’s framework of Qur’anic interpretation—and their subsequent analysis through Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutic approach, with the aim of critically examining Al-Ghazali’s thought.

Results and Discussion

Ideologization within Al-Ghazali’s Framework for Qur’anic Interpretation

A significant aspect of Al-Ghazali’s theory of interpretation is his conceptualisation of the roles of the reader (interpreter) and the recipient (audience) in the process of deriving textual meaning. This aspect is introduced to examine whether elements of authoritarianism and ideological bias are embedded within Al-Ghazali’s framework for Qur’anic interpretation. The initial component of Al-Ghazali’s interpretive structure pertains to the subject positioned as the “active reader” and the “passive recipient” of the text. Although these classifications differentiate subjects based on their roles as readers and recipients of the discourse of ta’wil, they diverge notably in two respects: firstly, the conceptualisation of the reader and recipient from Al-Ghazali’s perspective; and secondly, the methodology employed to elucidate the meaning of the mutashabihat texts. These two issues will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent discussion.

To ascertain who is deemed worthy and authorised to assume the role of a reader, as opposed to those who should be regarded as recipients of interpretive discourse, it is essential to commence with Al-Ghazali’s own conceptual framework. The scholar known as Hujjat al-Islam sought to categorise society according to several criteria: intellectual capacity, character, and method.¹⁷ Consequently, he divided society into four distinct groups: firstly, those below the level of the common people; secondly, the common people themselves; thirdly, the learned class; and fourthly, the elite class above the learned community.¹⁸

¹⁵ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’an in Classical Islam*, (London: New York, Routledge, 2006), 61.

¹⁶ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 267.

¹⁷ Al-Ghazali, “al-Qistas al-Mustaqim”, dalam *Majmu’ah al-Rasa’il al-Imam Al-Ghazali*, (Kairo: al-maktabah al-Tawfikiah, t, th), 218-219.

¹⁸ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 267.

When further refined, these four categories, in their roles as “recipients” and “readers” of Qur’anic discourse, are consolidated within Al-Ghazali’s Sufi interpretive framework into merely two groups: the common people (al-‘awwam) as recipients, and the learned or elite community as readers or interpreters. The category of common people, as delineated by Al-Ghazali in his work “*Iljam al-‘Awwam ‘an ‘Ilm al-Kalam*”, encompasses philologists, grammarians, hadith specialists, Qur’anic exegetes, jurists, and theologians. According to Al-Ghazali, as cited by Kristin Zahra Sands, the common people are positioned solely as recipients of the discourse of ta’wil; they are required not to transcend the literal meaning and are prohibited from interpreting anthropomorphic (tajsim) verses or hadiths,¹⁹ owing to their perceived lack of qualification in intellect, character, and methodology necessary to apprehend and reveal the profound esoteric meanings. Consequently, their role is confined to passive reception of ta’wil discourse and comprehension of only the outward meaning of the text.²⁰

In his work “*Iljam al-‘Awwam ‘an ‘Ilm al-Kalam*”, Al-Ghazali delineates seven specific guidelines that the common people must observe when encountering anthropomorphic (tashbih) verses or hadiths.²¹ According to Al-Ghazali, the common people’s inability to comprehend the inner (haqiqi) meaning of the text does not stem from a lack of knowledge of “‘ilm al-kalam” nor from an incapacity to formulate arguments regarding metaphorical verses. Rather, it arises from their method of apprehending the inner meaning. Typically, the common people interpret textual meaning solely through reason and sensory perception—namely, visual cognition via the eyes and rational faculties—whether employing rational approaches such as dialectical and demonstrative reasoning or non-rational methods such as rhetoric. However, Al-Ghazali contends that the “light” derived from the eyes and rationality is subject to several weaknesses and limitations, which hinder it from apprehending the ultimate meaning intended by God.²²

The second category comprises the learned community, specifically those individuals among the Sufis who possess haqiqah and ma’rifah,²³ and who are considered entitled to uncover the esoteric meanings of the text based on the aforementioned qualifications. They are believed to hold the highest level of knowledge (*al-rasikhun fi al-‘ilm*), which, according to Al-Ghazali, denotes an elevated spiritual attainment.²⁴ Within this framework, Al-Ghazali transitions from rationalistic approaches to spiritual methodologies typically employed by a select group of Sufis. This shift is deliberate: the second category of society not only meets the requisite intellectual and moral qualifications but also engages in the illuminative or kashf method (mystical intuition),²⁵ regarded as the most suitable means of revealing the mysteries underlying the text. In Al-Ghazali’s perspective, the kashf method

¹⁹ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’an in Classical Islam*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 61.

²⁰ Frank Griffel, Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology.

²¹ Al-Ghazali, “Al-Iljam al-‘Awam ‘an ‘ilmi al-Kalam,” 320.

²² Muzayyin, “Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an Imam Al-Ghazali,” 236.

²³ Al-Ghazali, *al-iljam al-‘Awam ‘an ‘ilmi al-Kalam*, 326; Al-Ghazali, *Mishkat al-Anwar*, 41; lihat juga Richard M. Frank, *Al-Ghazali and the Ash’arite School*, 84-85.

²⁴ Al-Ghazali, “Iljam al-‘awam ‘an ‘ilm al-kalam,” 336.

²⁵ Menurut Abu al-Wafa’ al-Ghanimi al-Taftazani al-Ghanimi al-Taftazani, terkadang Al-Ghazali mengistilahkan iluminasi atau kashf dengan cahaya. Abu al-Wafa’ al-Ghanimi al-Taftazani al-Ghanimi al-Taftazani, *Sufi Dari Zaman ke Zaman*, terj. Ahmad Rafi Utsmani, (Bandung: Pustaka, 2003), 173.

epitomises the knowledge of the Sufis and represents the highest form of knowledge.²⁶

The classification of readers and recipients within Qur'anic interpretive discourse, along with the detailed distinctions articulated by Al-Ghazali, is fundamentally based on the division of society according to intellectual capacity, temperament, and habitual disposition.²⁷ From the standpoint of reasoning methods, the common people rely on non-rational approaches (rhetoric), as they depend primarily on sensory gratification. In contrast, the two rational methods—dialectical and demonstrative reasoning—are reserved for the learned individuals engaged in rational inquiry. However, the quality of these two methods is not equivalent; rather, they differ in accordance with the varying levels of the learned groups who employ them.²⁸

The Significance of Text: Exploring the Relationship Between Text and the Quality of Meaning

The discourse concerning the significance of texts is inextricably linked to the debate between the traditional Islamic approach and modern hermeneutics. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, Al-Ghazali established a framework for interpreting texts that encompasses not only linguistic elements but also spiritual and ethical dimensions. Conversely, in the Western tradition, scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur advanced hermeneutics as a method of understanding texts through the interplay between text, context, and reader.

From Al-Ghazali's perspective, the significance of a text arises from the dynamic interplay between the author, the historical context, and the reader. The author is not simply regarded as the producer of the text but as a subject endowed with a specific intention (*maqasid*). The historical context constitutes a crucial variable, as it shapes both the production and the contemporary understanding of the text. Simultaneously, the reader assumes an active role in realising the meaning of the text in accordance with their intellectual and spiritual capacities. Consequently, the meaning of the text is not fixed but remains open to continual enrichment.

This concept aligns with Gadamer's hermeneutics, particularly his notion of the fusion of horizons, which denotes the intersection between the horizon of the text and that of the reader. Nevertheless, a key distinction lies in the ultimate orientation. While modern hermeneutics generally situates meaning exclusively within a historical and dialogical context, Al-Ghazali transcends this paradigm by integrating a transcendental dimension. For Al-Ghazali, authentic meaning is assessed not only through rational coherence but also by its capacity to embody spiritual value. Additionally, Paul Ricoeur discusses the autonomy of the text, suggesting that a text can become detached from its author and generate novel interpretations. This perspective aligns with Al-Ghazali's acknowledgement of the reader's role, yet it diverges in terms of constraint. Al-Ghazali does not entirely liberate the text from the authority of its original meaning, as he continues to stress the importance of preserving harmony with the values of the shari'ah and its moral objectives.

From this perspective, the quality of meaning emerges as a crucial factor in

²⁶ Abu al-Wafa' al-Ghanimi al-Taftazani al-Ghanimi al-Taftazani, *Sufi Dari Zaman ke Zaman*, 173.

²⁷ Ali Harb, "Hermeneutika Kebenaran," Terj. Sunarwoto Dema, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003), 154.

²⁸ Ali Harb, 136.

determining the significance of a text. Within Al-Ghazali's framework, meaningful interpretation is characterised by the inclusion of spiritual, ethical, and wisdom-oriented values. This indicates that textual understanding should extend beyond the descriptive level to encompass self-transformation. In contrast, modern hermeneutics tends to prioritise the interpretive dimension without necessarily incorporating a normative or spiritual component. Consequently, the synthesis of textual relationships and the quality of meaning yield a more comprehensive understanding. The relational aspect of the text ensures that interpretation remains contextual rather than ahistorical, while the quality of meaning ensures that such interpretation holds relevant and transformative value. In this regard, Al-Ghazali's approach can be regarded both as a critique of and a complement to modern hermeneutics, particularly in its restoration of the spiritual dimension within textual studies.

The second component of Al-Ghazali's theory of Qur'anic interpretation pertains to the significance of the text and its meaning. This issue holds a central position within the Qur'anic interpretive frameworks of both scholars, equalling in importance the previously discussed distinction between the roles of the reader and the recipient of the discourse of *ta'wil*. In essence, readers and recipients are rendered meaningless in the absence of the text itself. Similarly, the generation of meaning cannot occur without an interaction between the reader of the text and the audience as recipients of interpretive discourse.

The discussion of these two issues does not differ substantially between the two thinkers, either in terms of substance or scope. It is important to note that, although Ibn Rushd frequently criticised Al-Ghazali as his polemical adversary, the philosopher of Cordova also drew considerable inspiration from—or even replicated—elements of Al-Ghazali's Qur'anic interpretive theory. One such element concerns the concept of existence (*wujūd*) as a reference or referent of the Qur'an, alongside possibly other aspects.

From the earliest period, Qur'anic exegetes established stringent qualifications for those seeking to interpret the Qur'an. These criteria aimed to prevent arbitrary and irresponsible interpretations and to ensure that such interpretations were undertaken solely by individuals possessing adequate intellectual capacity and scholarly expertise, thereby maintaining alignment with the values and principles of the *shari'ah*. Within this framework, Al-Ghazali, consistent with the tradition developed among Qur'anic exegetes, emphasised the importance of carefully selecting the individual who acts as the reader of the Qur'anic text—that is, the party actively engaged in the process of reading and elucidating the meanings embedded within the text.

Opposition to the application of hermeneutics in Qur'anic studies is predominantly articulated by several contemporary Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia. Notable among these are Adian Husaini, through his work "Problem Teks Bible dan Hermeneutika"; Adnin Armas, in "Bahaya Laten Hermeneutika"; Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, in "Mewaspadaai Hermeneutika sebagai Worldview"; Hartono Ahmad Jaiz, in "Ada Pemurtadan di IAIN"; and Nashruddin Baidan, through "Tinjauan Kritis terhadap Konsep Hermeneutika". These scholars fundamentally regard hermeneutics as a product of Western tradition, particularly one that emerged within the context of Biblical criticism, which arose from Christian theological concerns regarding textual authenticity and ecclesiastical authority. Consequently, they contend that hermeneutics lacks epistemological relevance to the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as an authentic and

preserved revelation (mahfuz).

In addition to genealogical considerations, notably its Western origins, the opposing faction underscores that Islam already encompasses a well-established and comprehensive methodological framework within the discipline of ‘Ulum al-Qur’ān. This framework includes *asbāb al-nuzūl*, *nāsikh-mansūkh*, *qirā’āt*, ‘ilm al-balāghah, and the principles of Qur’ānic exegesis. Given the thoroughness of these methodological tools, they perceive no necessity to adopt external methodologies that might potentially compromise the sanctity of the text.²⁹

The rejection of hermeneutics is founded upon three principal arguments. Firstly, hermeneutics—particularly in its critical form—entails a sceptical stance towards the text (often termed the hermeneutics of suspicion). The text is perceived as never neutral but rather imbued with political, ideological, and cultural interests originating from its author. This approach is feared to relegate the Qur’an from its status as divine revelation to that of an object of critique comparable to ordinary human texts. Secondly, certain hermeneutic schools tend to regard texts as cultural artefacts. This perspective is deemed problematic within Islamic belief, as the Qur’an is understood to originate from God (*ilahiyah*) and thus cannot be reduced to a mere historical human construction. Thirdly, the plurality of hermeneutic schools—ranging from romantic and philosophical to critical hermeneutics—gives rise to the relativity of meaning. Consequently, the truth of interpretation risks becoming highly subjective and lacking clear normative standards, thereby engendering concern over the potential for uncontrolled liberalisation of interpretation.³⁰

The introduction of hermeneutics as a novel methodological approach should not be regarded in a simplistic manner, whether through uncritical acceptance or outright rejection. A balanced academic stance necessitates critical, selective, and dialogical engagement. Hermeneutics ought first to be comprehensively understood, its relevance assessed, and its compatibility with the foundational principles of Islamic epistemology carefully evaluated. Consequently, hermeneutics need not supplant ‘Ulum al-Qur’an but may serve as a supplementary analytical instrument, particularly in relation to contextualisation and historical consciousness.³¹ Within the framework of the ethics of disagreement, it is crucial to underscore that methodological debates must not culminate in accusations of unbelief (*takfīr*).³² Al-Ghazālī himself maintained that the declaration of unbelief is permissible only when an individual explicitly rejects the essential tenets of faith, such as belief in God, the Messenger, and the Hereafter. Regarding matters classified as *furu’* (subsidiary issues), differences should be addressed solely through *al-takhtī’ah* (judging an opinion to be mistaken), rather than through excommunication. Therefore, discussions concerning hermeneutics ought to be situated within the context of scholarly disagreement (*khilāfiyyah ‘ilmiyyah*), rather than devolving into exclusive and destructive theological conflict.³³

²⁹ Fahrudin Faiz, “Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an: Teori, Kritik dan Implementasinya,” (Yogyakarta: Dialektika, 2019), 4.

³⁰ Adian Husaini, “Hegemoni Kristen-Barat dalam Studi Islam di Perguruan Tinggi” (Yogyakarta: Gema Insani, 2006), 153-155.

³¹ Fahrudin Faiz, “Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an,” 44.

³² Nasarudin Umar, “Menimbang Hermeneutika sebagai Manhaj Tafsir”.

³³ Al-Ghazali, “Faishal Al-Tafriqoh dalam Majmu’ Ar-Rasail al-Imam al-Ghazali,” (Kairo: Maktabah

To ascertain who holds the appropriate qualifications and authority to serve as an interpreter of the text, and who is more suitably positioned as a recipient of interpretive discourse, the thought of Al-Ghazali may provide a valuable point of departure. The scholar known by the title *Hujjat al-Islam* categorised society according to three principal criteria: intellectual capacity, character or disposition, and the method of comprehension employed.³⁴ Based on these parameters, Al-Ghazali divided society into four strata: firstly, those below the level of the common people; secondly, the common people; thirdly, the learned class; and fourthly, a distinct class above the learned community.³⁵

When these four categories are considered specifically in terms of their roles as “recipients” and “readers” of Qur’anic discourse, Al-Ghazali’s Sufi interpretive framework effectively consolidates them into two primary groups. The first group comprises the common people (*al-‘awwam*), who are regarded as recipients of the discourse; the second consists of the learned or elite community, who hold the authority to function as readers or interpreters of the text. In his work “*Iljam al-‘Awam ‘an ‘Ilm al-Kalam*”, Al-Ghazali clarifies that the category of common people encompasses philologists, grammarians, hadith specialists, Qur’anic exegetes, jurists, and theologians.

As noted by Kristin Zahra Sands, Al-Ghazali asserts that this category of common people is permitted only to engage with the discourse of *ta’wil* at the level of its outward meaning and is not authorised to extend beyond this boundary, particularly when interpreting verses or hadiths pertaining to anthropomorphism (*tajsim*).³⁶ This restriction is predicated on the assumption that they lack the requisite epistemological qualifications—whether in terms of intellectual capacity, moral character, or methodological rigor—to access the deeper, esoteric layers of meaning. Consequently, their role is confined to that of recipients of interpretive discourse, with their comprehension limited exclusively to the literal textual sense.³⁷

According to Al-Ghazali, Qur’anic verses can be categorised into three distinct types, namely:

a) Texts Exhibiting an Explicit Meaning

Firstly, there exist texts that unequivocally possess a singular meaning, which cannot be subjected to *ta’wil* (interpretation) and must therefore be understood solely according to their apparent, literal sense.³⁸ This is because their literal meaning constitutes the actual, inherent meaning, which must be accepted by all strata of society, encompassing both the general populace and the scholarly elite. Examples include the denial of happiness or suffering in the Hereafter, as well as the rejection of reports concerning God, the Prophet, the Day of Judgment, Paradise, Hell, and analogous matters. According to Al-Ghazali, all these realities exist independently and must be comprehended in accordance with their outward meaning, without

Al-Taufiqiyah), 265.

³⁴ Al-Ghazali, “*al-Qistas al-Mustaqim*”, dalam *Majmu’ah al-Rasa’il al-Imam Al-Ghazali*, (Kairo: al-maktabah al-Tawfikiah, t,th), 218-219.

³⁵ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 267.

³⁶ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’an in Classical Islam*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 61.

³⁷ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*.

³⁸ Ibnu Rusyd, “*Fashl al-Maqal*,” 47-48.

recourse to interpretative processes or diversion towards esoteric significations.³⁹

b) Texts Exhibiting Both Explicit and Implicit Meanings

Al-Ghazali similarly upholds the view that the shari'ah, or Qur'anic verses, encompass both an outward (zāhir) and an inward (bātin) meaning,⁴⁰ distinct from the first category of texts previously mentioned. The distinction lies in the fact that texts within the first category are to be understood literally by all members of society, whereas the true significance of the second category resides in its inward meaning rather than its outward form. In other words, the outward meaning serves merely as a symbol directing attention to the inward meaning and thus necessitates interpretation to reveal its essential reality. An example of this second category, within the conceptual framework of wujūd al-shibhī (analogical existence), includes terms such as anger, longing, joy, patience, and other expressions pertaining to the attributes and realities of God.

Accordingly, the true significance of this second category of texts resides in what is implied rather than what is explicitly articulated. It is the responsibility of the learned community—namely, the people of ma'rifah who engage in the method of mukashafah, as described by Al-Ghazali, and the philosophers who employ the demonstrative method, according to Ibn Rushd—to interpret such texts and elucidate their essential meaning as intended by the highest authority (God), or at least to approximate God's intended meaning. Ibn Rushd even considered it an act of unbelief or heresy when individuals, such as theologians and Sufis, who did not employ the demonstrative method, nonetheless attempted to interpret this second category of verses. As examples, Ibn Rushd cited the verse concerning al-istiwa' and the hadith of al-nuzul.

The first and second categories of texts engender distinct implications in the process of meaning-making. The first category is restricted to its apparent meaning, devoid of any interpretative engagement, thereby rendering it accessible to both the general populace and the scholarly community. Conversely, the second category necessitates an interpretative process, requiring the reader to engage actively in order to discern the underlying meaning of the text, whether it be the Qur'an or hadith. Within this context, a pertinent question arises: why did God choose to convey certain verses in metaphorical form? Would it not have been preferable for these verses to be articulated in a clear and direct manner, facilitating comprehension and minimising societal controversy? Al-Ghazali contends that this was God's deliberate intention: to convey metaphorical verses exclusively to specific groups endowed with the capacity to comprehend them, namely the learned community or the people of ultimate truth, thereby entrusting them with the responsibility of elucidating the inward meaning of the text.⁴¹ Similarly, Ibn Rushd observes that this divine act was undertaken with regard to the intellectual faculties of the learned class, specifically philosophers who utilise the demonstrative method, enabling them to interpret these

³⁹ Al-Ghazali, "Faysal al-Tafriqah," 258.

⁴⁰ Al-Ghazali, "Mishkat al-Anwar," 73; Al-Ghazali, "Ihya' Ulum al-Din," 341-342.

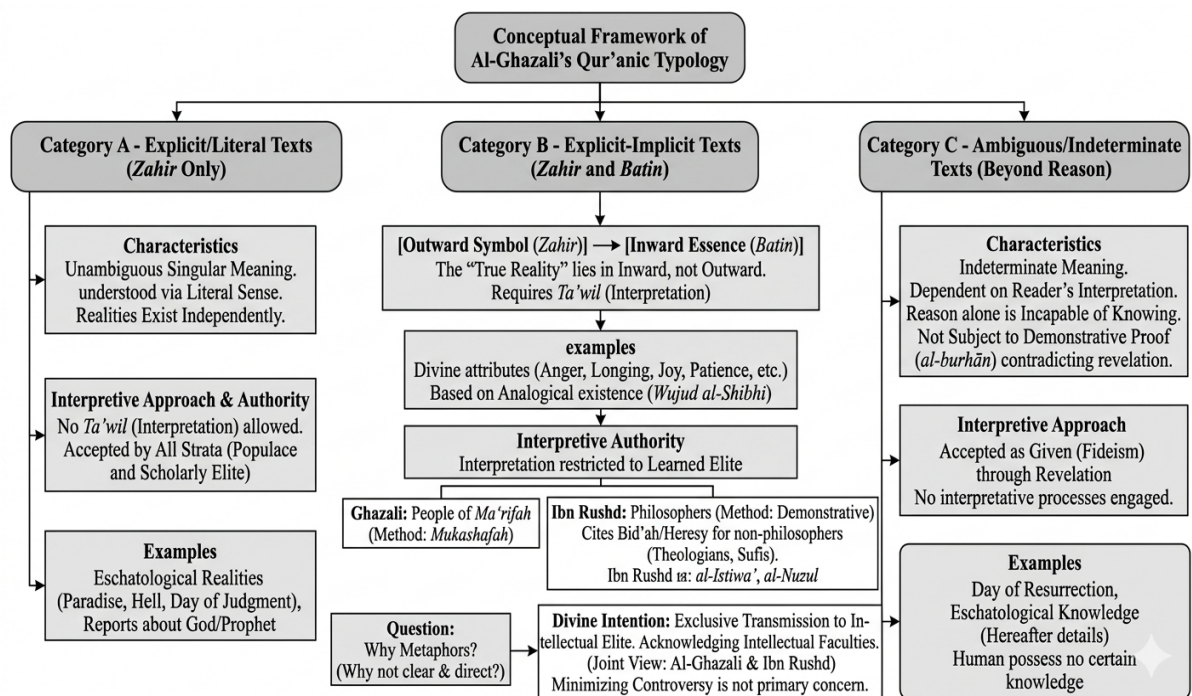
⁴¹ Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology," 114; Muzayyin, "Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an Imam Al-Ghazali," 153-154.

obscure symbols and parables until they attain a clear and manifest truth.⁴²

c) Ambiguous Texts

The third category comprises ambiguous texts that lack an intrinsic, clear meaning. Unlike the preceding two categories of verses, these texts do not convey either explicit or implicit meanings in a definitive manner. Their significance is inherently indeterminate and contingent upon the interpretation of the reader. Such verses do not necessitate demonstrative proof (*al-burhān*) that would contradict the information presented in revelation. Imam al-Ghazālī illustrates this category with discussions pertaining to the Day of Resurrection, asserting that reason alone is incapable of attaining knowledge about events in the Hereafter.⁴³ Human beings possess no certain knowledge concerning life after death except through revelation, which must be accepted as given, without engaging in interpretative processes.⁴⁴

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Al-Ghazali’s Qur’anic Typology



The table presents Al-Ghazali’s conceptual framework of Qur’anic typology, which categorises Qur’anic texts into three distinct groups. Category A comprises explicit and literal texts (*zāhir*) characterised by singular meanings that necessitate no interpretation and are universally comprehended. Category B encompasses texts that are both explicit and implicit, containing outward (*zāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*) meanings; these require *ta’wīl*, an intellectual and spiritual interpretative process, to reveal deeper realities. Category C pertains to ambiguous texts that transcend rational understanding and are accepted solely through faith and revelation. without recourse to interpretative analysis, particularly in relation to eschatological matters and divine mysteries.

⁴² Ibnu Rusyd, “Fashl al-Maqal,” 46.

⁴³ Ibnu Rusyd, 49-50.

⁴⁴ Frank Griffel, “Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theologi,” 115-116.

An Example of Imam Al-Ghazali's Sufi Interpretation of the Phrase "Fakhla' Na'layk" in Q.S. Ṭāhā [20]: 12

An individual endowed with intuitive faculties (al-ilhām, al-dhawq, and al-mukāshafah) is capable of accessing the realm of 'ālam al-malakūt (the unseen world), thereby discerning the intended meanings underlying the symbolic representations present within 'ālam al-mushāhadah (the visible world). This phenomenon is exemplified in Al-Ghazālī's exegetical interpretation (ta'wīl) of Surah Ṭāhā, verse 12, as presented in his work "*Mishkāt al-Anwār*", which addresses the narrative of the Prophet Moses. Upon reaching the fire he had observed from a distance, God called to him, as recorded in Q.S. Ṭāhā [20]: 12:

إِنِّي أَنَا رَبُّكَ فَاحْلَعْ نَعْلَيْكَ إِنَّكَ بِالْوَادِ الْمُقَدَّسِ طُوًى ﴿١٢﴾

*Verily I am thy Lord! Therefore (in My presence) Put off thy shoes: thou art in the sacred valley Tuwā.*⁴⁵

Al-Ghazali interprets this verse as embodying a metaphysical or metaphorical mode of existence, as it eludes comprehension through both *al-wujud al-khayali* (imaginal existence) and *al-wujud al-'aqli* (rational existence). He contends that the injunction to remove the sandals symbolises an exhortation to renounce attachment to both the worldly realm and the Hereafter. Consequently, Prophet Moses complied with this command by physically removing his sandals, whilst simultaneously detaching himself inwardly from both realms.⁴⁶

According to Al-Ghazali, this exemplifies a symbolic representation that is haqq (truth) in its outward form, while its actualisation within the concealed inner dimension constitutes the haqiqah (ultimate reality). Al-Ghazali maintains that every haqq corresponds to a haqiqah. In his perspective, this haqiqah is a hidden secret that must be revealed through spiritual ascension (mi'raj) and the knowledge of mukashafah, whereby the concealed mysteries of meaning are unveiled.⁴⁷

Al-Ghazali describes this as the transition from the realm of physical reality to the metaphysical domain—that is, from external meaning to internal significance (essential truth or hidden reality). He further elucidates that the outward act of removing one's sandals symbolically represents God's command to the Prophet Moses to detach himself from both worldly life and the Hereafter. According to Al-Ghazali, this symbolic act embodies haqq (truth), whereas delving into its inner dimension constitutes haqiqah (ultimate reality).

In accordance with the foregoing explanation, the outright rejection of the outward meaning characterises the perspective of esoteric (Batiniyah) groups. These groups perceive only one of the two realms in isolation and fail to acknowledge the equilibrium between them, thereby remaining unable to comprehend their multifaceted dimensions. Al-Ghazali likens this stance to that of the Hashawiyah sect, which tends to deny the hidden mysteries (asrār) due to its exclusive adherence to outward meanings. Conversely, those who

⁴⁵ Kementerian Agama RI, *Al-Qur'an dan Terjemahnya*, 441.

⁴⁶ Al-Ghazali, "Mishkat al-Anwar," 73.

⁴⁷ Al-Ghazali, 74.

concentrate solely on the inward meaning are identified as *Batiniah*. Al-Ghazali further emphasises that the truly complete individual is one who is capable of integrating both dimensions—the outward (*zāhir*) and inward (*batin*) meanings.⁴⁸

Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics as an Analytical Framework for Investigating the Derivation of Objective Meaning in Al-Ghazali's Sufi Exegesis

The methodology of Qur'anic exegesis is characterised by a considerable degree of complexity and intellectual sophistication. This is evidenced by the extensive corpus of exegetical works developed through a variety of approaches, ranging from the *tahlili* to the *maudhu'ī* methods. Such diversity indicates that 'Ulum al-Qur'an embodies a comprehensive framework that mediates the relationship between the exegete and the Qur'anic text, thereby fostering a rich tradition of interpretation. Consequently, particularly among those who reject hermeneutics, there is an assumption that 'Ulum al-Qur'an is sufficiently robust and does not necessitate supplementary methodologies such as hermeneutics. Nonetheless, a pertinent question arises: why do some Muslim scholars continue to employ hermeneutical approaches in Qur'anic studies? One reason lies in the presence of a critical element within hermeneutics that has not been adequately emphasised in classical exegetical methodologies, namely, the awareness of context and the process of contextualisation.

Traditional studies of exegetical methodology typically remain confined within two primary horizons, namely text and context. Consequently, as Amin Abdullah contends, the scope of analysis is often limited to the epistemological framework of *bayani*, without substantially engaging with the dimensions of *burhani*, let alone *'irfani*.⁴⁹ In contrast, hermeneutics provides a more expansive field of inquiry by extending beyond text and context towards contextualisation. This approach, on the one hand, reveals the methodological assumptions underpinning interpretation, including an acknowledgement of the plurality of understanding. On the other hand, hermeneutics does not solely concentrate on the content of the text itself but also considers its historical background, such as *asbāb al-nuzūl*. From this perspective arises the possibility of contextualising scripture so that its messages may be actualised in a relevant and operative manner across diverse temporal and spatial contexts, in accordance with the principle of the Qur'an as *salih li kulli zaman wa makan* (relevant for every age and place).⁵⁰

Whether consciously acknowledged or not, the theory of Qur'anic interpretation advanced by Al-Ghazali encompasses several constructive dimensions. Beyond its primary aim of mitigating the prevalent practice of *takfir* among the various theological sects of his era, his interpretive framework also serves as a guideline for all strata of society—both the learned elite and the general populace—to exercise prudence in understanding and interpreting *mutashabihat* verses, thereby avoiding misapprehensions of God's intended meaning. More specifically, within Al-Ghazali's Sufi interpretive theory, society, in its role as the “recipient” and “reader” of Qur'anic discourse, is essentially bifurcated into two

⁴⁸ Al-Ghazali, 73.

⁴⁹ Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi: Paradigma Integratif- Interkoneksi*, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, Cet II, 2010), 244-245.

⁵⁰ Fahrudin Faiz, “Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an,” 23.

groups: the common people (al-‘awwam) as recipients, and the learned or elite community as readers or interpreters. Notably, the category of common people referenced by Al-Ghazali in his work *Iljam al-‘Awwam ‘an ‘Ilm al-Kalam* encompasses philologists, grammarians, hadith specialists, Qur’anic exegetes, jurists, and theologians.

Nonetheless, this does not imply that Al-Ghazali’s theory of Qur’anic interpretation is entirely devoid of difficulties. A significant issue arises when this prominent thinker endeavours to comprehend the divine message objectively by relying solely on the methods he deems valid, while concurrently excluding those employed by rival schools. This raises the question: can they genuinely achieve an objective understanding of God’s intent, which ultimately remains enigmatic? Another concern pertains to the potential presence of ideological biases within their interpretive frameworks. This is evident, for example, in the discursive strategies utilised to “elevate” certain groups aligned with their ideology and to “exclude” those outside their circle. A further question follows: whose ideological perspective is ultimately being promulgated through the construction of these interpretive theories? These two critical questions constitute the central focus of the present analysis in its critical examination of Al-Ghazali’s interpretive approach.

Al-Ghazali endeavoured to ascertain the objective meaning of God’s message in the Qur’an by employing the methods he deemed valid and reliable. Concurrently, he dismissed the approaches of other groups or schools, considering them doubtful or insufficiently trustworthy for uncovering the divine message. For instance, to elucidate God’s essential message, Al-Ghazali advocated the illuminative method (mystical intuition), a technique commonly utilised by Sunni Sufis,⁵¹ the people of ma‘rifah, or what he refers to as *Khawash al-Khawash* (the elite among the elite).⁵² The rationale for favouring the illuminative method lies in the belief that illumination, attained through the highest level of spirit—*Rūḥ al-Quds al-Nabawī* (the holy prophetic spirit)—enables access to intuitive forms of knowledge such as *al-kashf*, *al-ilhām*, and *al-dhawq*. Through this process, individuals are thought capable of transcending boundaries and veils, perceiving unseen realities, comprehending the laws of the Hereafter, and acquiring knowledge of the *malakūt*, including the capacity to apprehend the essential meaning concealed within the text.

Based on the foregoing explanation, Al-Ghazali’s model of Qur’anic interpretation

⁵¹ This illuminative method was principally practised by two Sufi schools, namely Sufi Nazari and Sufi Ishari. Although both employ the illuminative approach, they differ in a fundamental respect. The first school, exemplified by Ibn Arabi with his doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), tends to prioritise the search for inward meaning while neglecting the outward meaning. In contrast, the second school, represented by Sunni Sufism—particularly Al-Ghazali—aims to maintain a balance between the pursuit of both outward and inward meanings. Within this context, a pertinent question arises: why did Al-Ghazali adopt *tafsīr ishārī*? The answer lies in the fact that Sufi *ishārī* exegesis was regarded as consistent with the spirit of Sunni Sufism, which predominated within the *Ash‘ariyyah* tradition. This mode of interpretation was considered harmonious with the teachings of the *sharī‘ah* and rejected doctrines such as *ittihād* (unionism), *hulūl* (incarnationism), and other teachings developed within the framework of *tafsīr Sufi Nazari*. Moreover, this interpretive approach progresses from an understanding of outward meaning towards inward meaning through the process of unveiling (*mukāshafah*) undertaken by a *sālik* (spiritual wayfarer). According to Al-Ghazali, the integration of both outward and inward meanings in this manner constitutes the defining characteristic of the *insān kāmil* (the perfect human being). See: Al-Ghazali, *Mishkat al-Anwar*, 73.

⁵² Al-Ghazali, “*Mishkat al-Anwar*”.

can be situated within the framework of theoretical hermeneutics when considered alongside the three principal classifications of hermeneutics in the Western tradition: theoretical, philosophical, and critical hermeneutics. This model endeavours to comprehend the text accurately in accordance with the author's intended meaning, a position exemplified by scholars such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. In essence, this hermeneutic approach presupposes that the reader or interpreter is capable of apprehending the objective message of the author, who is regarded as the proprietor of the text.⁵³ However, from the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics, particularly as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, the principal limitation of theoretical hermeneutics lies in the impossibility of fully attaining the objective meaning originally intended by the author, given that each individual is shaped by distinct historical experiences and existential conditions.⁵⁴ Consequently, philosophical hermeneutics asserts that achieving existential equivalence between reader and author in the pursuit of objective meaning is unattainable. What remains feasible is the generation of subjective truth by the reader of the text.

To achieve this objective, the three horizons of text, context, and contextualisation must be operationalised in a dialectical and continuous manner. Through the interplay of these three dimensions, the exegete is expected not only to comprehend the fundamental aims and normative spirit of the text, thereby avoiding ahistorical interpretations, but also to actualise the interpretative outcomes within contemporary, local, and future realities. This ensures that interpretation remains anchored in time and place.⁵⁵ Such an approach enables the Qur'an to function effectively as a guide capable of addressing the increasing complexity and dynamism of the challenges faced by the Muslim community.

Within this framework, it is possible to discern a fundamental weakness in certain classical exegetical works, particularly concerning the dialectic between text, context, and contextualisation. Some exegetical approaches place undue emphasis solely on the text, resulting in highly literal interpretations. Others concentrate primarily on the historical context, leading to readings that are confined to an idealisation of past meanings. Additionally, there are interpretations that overemphasise contextual application to such an extent that they become detached from the original purpose and objectives of the

⁵³ This school of thought typically upholds two primary perspectives. Firstly, a text is not autonomous but is intrinsically linked to its author. Consequently, the meaning of a text is closely associated with the author's intended message. Secondly, as a direct implication of the first perspective, the interpreter's role is to reconstruct the meaning intended by the author of the text under analysis. See Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*, (Yogyakarta: Pesantren Nawesea Press, 2017), 72.

⁵⁴ The principal theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics have been synthesised by Sahiron Syamsuddin from various books and writings of Gadamer, as outlined below. Firstly, the theory of historically effected consciousness posits that every interpreter inevitably exists within a specific context that influences their understanding of the text under interpretation. Gadamer terms this context "effective history," which encompasses tradition, culture, and life experience. Secondly, the theory of pre-understanding emphasises the significant role of prior knowledge in the interpretive process. According to Gadamer, pre-understanding is shaped by the traditions and preliminary ideas within which the interpreter is situated and must be present before engaging with the text. Thirdly, the theory of fusion concerns the interaction of two horizons: (1) the horizon of knowledge contained within the text, and (2) the horizon of the interpreter's understanding. Gadamer asserts that these horizons must be brought into dialogue to resolve the tension between them. Fourthly, the theory of application highlights that reading a sacred text involves not only understanding and interpretation but also the process of "application," whereby the messages and teachings of the text are applied to the historical context in which it is interpreted. Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*, 77-84.

⁵⁵ Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an," 21.

Qur'anic revelation. Consequently, proponents of this approach argue that the most significant contribution of hermeneutics to the development of Qur'anic exegesis lies in its provision of new theoretical and conceptual perspectives. These perspectives are derived from philosophical hermeneutic thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, as well as from critical hermeneutics developed by Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault.⁵⁶

Al-Ghazali's assertion that the inward (haqiqi) meaning of the Qur'an can only be accessed by the learned Sufi elite—namely, the people of ultimate truth through the illuminative method and philosophers through the demonstrative method—thereby designating them as the sole active interpreters of mutashabihat texts, presents a problematic stance that warrants critical scrutiny. This position is contestable because God, as the supreme authority over the Qur'an's meaning, does not confine understanding exclusively to Sufi mystics and philosophers, as Al-Ghazali suggests. Instead, the Qur'an is addressed to all strata of society, affording every individual the opportunity to engage with and interpret its message, provided they possess intellectually responsible capacities. This inclusivity reflects God's tolerance towards humanity.

From the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics, the endeavour by prominent thinkers to ascertain the objective meaning of God's message is fraught with difficulty, owing to their inability to access the psychology of God, let alone discern God's actual intention, given the existential gulf between Creator and interpreter. Philosophical hermeneutics posits that what transpires is the generation of subjective meaning by the reader of the text, which may be either accurate or erroneous. Consequently, as objective meaning remains ultimately unattainable, no individual should assert the authority to possess the definitive meaning of God's message in the Qur'an, nor should the text be confined exclusively to a single interpretation that elevates certain groups while marginalising others outside their ideological community.

The unilateral appropriation of divine authority by individuals who regard themselves as fully authorised spokespersons of God, thereby terminating the role of the Author (God) in determining the meaning of the Qur'anic text, constitutes an authoritarian stance. This stance is authoritarian because such individuals tend to adopt an exclusive position, effectively “locking” the meaning of the text by imposing a singular interpretation and asserting that their conclusions are absolute and wholly representative of God's intent.⁵⁷ Such an approach, employing the terminology of Khaled Abou El Fadl, ultimately undermines the integrity of the authoritative text.⁵⁸

Interpretative practices of this nature are exemplified by authoritarian figures who perceive themselves as the most knowledgeable and correct, often asserting: “I fully understand what God intended; my knowledge regarding it is certain, absolute, and beyond

⁵⁶ The contribution of these thinkers generally resides in their recognition of the diverse determinants that influence the process of understanding, whether these determinants arise from social, cultural, political, or psychological dimensions. This recognition ultimately challenges any form of understanding and interpretation that purports to be “objective,” “free of interests,” or “absolutely correct.”

⁵⁷ Khaled M. Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name Islamic Law, Authority, and Women*, 200.

⁵⁸ Khaled M. Abou el Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldier: The Authoritative and Authoritarian Islamic Discourse.*, 84; See Khaled M. Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 200.

question.”⁵⁹ Such declarations suggest that these individuals regard themselves as possessing the authority to conclude the interpretative process of both the Author and the text.⁶⁰ Whether consciously or unconsciously, they effectively equate themselves with the Author of the text (God), as if they alone hold absolute authority over truth. It is at this juncture, as Amin Abdullah highlights, that an “instant transformation” occurs, characterised by the fusion of the authoritarian interpreter with the Author.⁶¹ Consequently, a text originally open to interpretation is rendered closed and inaccessible to others, as the authoritarian interpreter encloses the text within their own ideological framework. Thus, an initially open text becomes a closed one—exclusive and accessible only to a select few. Such acts of restricting textual meaning through the imposition of a singular interpretation risk compromising the integrity of the Author (God).

In accordance with the preceding discussion, I posit that Al-Ghazali engaged in subjective decision-making within his interpretive framework, whether concerning the derivation of objective meaning, the selection of readers, or the methodologies employed. In essence, the processes of privileging certain groups while marginalising others reveal mechanisms of ideological construction, such that the production of textual meaning becomes profoundly imbued with the interpreter’s own ideological perspectives. Consequently, exclusive approaches to textual interpretation risk compromising the integrity of the Author (God). To mitigate authoritarianism in the interpretive process and the exclusive determination of textual meaning, it is therefore imperative to adopt Khaled Abou El Fadl’s proposal of five primary conditions as criteria for assessing interpretive validity. The aim is to prevent individuals from succumbing to authoritarian tendencies in the determination of textual meaning. These five conditions are self-restraint, diligence, comprehensiveness, reasonableness, and honesty.⁶²

Conclusion

The framework of Al-Ghazali’s Qur’anic exegesis is inextricably linked to the ideological messages and interests of the group he represented. This is evident, for instance, in the subjective decisions he made within his interpretative framework, particularly concerning the extraction of objective meaning, the role of the reader, and the interpretative methodology itself. These subjective choices constituted a discursive political strategy through which Al-Ghazali elevated certain interpreters—specifically those of the Ash‘ari school employing the illuminative method—while concurrently excluding other groups from the domain of Qur’anic interpretation on the basis that they lacked the requisite qualifications to serve as *mu’awwils* (interpreters). Such actions ultimately shaped the process of meaning production, rendering it heavily imbued with Al-Ghazali’s ideological perspectives as an interpreter. This stands in marked contrast to the original purpose of interpretation, namely, to uncover or generate new meanings from the text in an objective manner, as intended by the text’s originator (God).

⁵⁹ Khaled M. Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God’s*, 200.

⁶⁰ Foreword Amin Abdullah, Mendengarkan “Kebenaran” Hermeneutika, Dalam Fahrudin Faiz., *Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an Tema-Tema Kontroversial*, xx.

⁶¹ Khaled M. Abou el Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldier*, 41-42.

⁶² See Khaled M. Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name*, 142.

At this juncture, the necessity of employing philosophical hermeneutics becomes evident for the critical examination of Al-Ghazali's interpretive methodology. This approach contends that Al-Ghazali's assertion of objective discovery is problematic, not only due to the interpreter's incapacity to access the psychology of God, but also because of the existential divide between the interpreter and God as the originator of the text—an existence that remains ultimately inaccessible. Consequently, philosophical hermeneutics posits that the process of meaning extraction is inherently subjective, and its outcomes may be either accurate or erroneous. Given that objective meaning can never be fully attained, no individual possesses the authority to claim ownership of God's objective message, nor to confine the text exclusively to a single interpretation. Such actions ultimately compromise the integrity of the text, which is originally open-ended, by transforming it into a closed text through the interpretive 'locking' imposed by a mufassir or mu'awwil such as Al-Ghazali. The academic contribution and significance of this research reside in its endeavour to introduce a novel perspective to the discourse and advancement of contemporary Qur'anic interpretive methodology. It aims to guide Qur'anic interpretation towards a more refined and sophisticated approach, whilst concurrently deconstructing the entrenched paradigms that have historically dominated the field of Qur'anic exegesis.

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