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Al-Ghazali's Skepticism and Its Influence on Aqidah of Malaysian Muslims

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Abstract

Malaysia recognizes Islam as its official religion. Nevertheless, issues concerning faith ('*aqidah*), particularly challenges related to skepticism, continue to emerge within Malaysian society. Skepticism, a philosophical approach in the pursuit of truth, may lead to confusion when applied to matters of '*aqidah* concerning divine realities. Notably, al-Ghazali experienced a profound epistemological crisis, questioning certainty from rational and sensory sources. He ultimately resolved this through the spiritual path of Sufism. This article examines skepticism's implications for '*aqidah* from al-Ghazali's perspective and its manifestations in Malaysia. Employing the PRISMA framework, the study systematically reviewed 25 peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. Findings suggest that a spiritually grounded approach offers a coherent response to crises of faith. Since matters of the unseen transcend rational inquiry, integrating spiritual epistemology provides a comprehensive framework for resolving doubt. Al-Ghazali's model offers a relevant paradigm for addressing modern skepticism in contemporary Muslim contexts.

Keywords: Aqidah, Al-Ghazali, Malaysia, skepticism, sufism.

Introduction

In contemporary Malaysia, Islamic creed ('*aqidah*) faces significant challenges arising from modern forms of skepticism. Influenced by globalized discourse, secular

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rationalism, and unrestricted access to information, contemporary doubt often extends beyond constructive inquiry and risks undermining the foundational principles of religious belief. While skepticism has long been a central theme in philosophical discourse, its present manifestations pose a distinct challenge to *'aqidah* by privileging empirical verification and human reason over divine revelation and belief in the unseen (*al-ghayb*).

Skepticism, whether conscious or unconscious, emerges from questions concerning the sources and validity of human knowledge, particularly knowledge derived from sensory perception and experiential evidence. It encompasses both physical and metaphysical concerns, shaping individuals into what may be described as “confident doubters,” who may incline toward skepticism or agnosticism. Western philosophers have frequently argued that philosophy serves as a means of intellectual and moral refinement (Hume, 1963). Similarly, religion has been described as a practical way of life grounded in one’s understanding of reality (Stewart & Blocker, 1992). In this sense, philosophical reflection is not entirely foreign to religion. Indeed, in Western theological discourse, skepticism is sometimes regarded as a necessary stage in religious maturation, even contributing to a deeper understanding of God (Aijaz, 2023). Philosophy, as a product of rational and critical human inquiry, seeks to examine fundamental questions concerning the universe, humanity, and divinity (Ahmad Sunawari Long, 2006).

However, when Islamic creed becomes excessively dependent upon skeptical reasoning in approaching theological matters, it may lead to doctrinal confusion and deviation. This concern is exemplified in the intellectual journey of al-Ghazali, whose personal encounter with doubt and subsequent epistemological reconstruction offers a significant corrective framework (Muhammad Hazim et al., 2024). Al-Ghazali’s writings extensively address the sources of human knowledge and the limits of reason, making him an appropriate focal point for examining skepticism’s impact on Muslim faith. Accordingly, this study explores his philosophical and spiritual responses to skepticism and evaluates their relevance for contemporary challenges to *'aqidah* in Malaysia.

Imam al-Ghazali (Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali) was a prominent scholar in the fields of philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, and Sufism. Born in 450 AH/1058 CE in Tus, within the Khurasan region of Persia (present-day Iran), he later died in 505 AH/1111 CE in Tus, where he was buried (Azlan, 1991). He achieved widespread recognition in Baghdad through his scholarly writings and teaching circles. At the height of his intellectual career, he experienced a profound spiritual crisis that led him to abandon his prestigious academic position in favor of seclusion and spiritual retreat. After a period of withdrawal and reflection, he returned to teaching in Naysabur, where he remained until his death (Mohd Syahir, 2018).

Of Persian descent, al-Ghazali composed most of his works in Arabic, the scholarly lingua franca of his time. Orphaned at a young age, he and his brother Ahmad were entrusted to a guardian who facilitated their education. Despite financial hardship, al-Ghazali pursued his studies in various madrasas in Tus and later under distinguished scholars, including Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (Mohd Fauzi, 2005; Mahadi et al., 2023). His intellectual excellence eventually brought him to the

attention of Nizam al-Mulk, the Seljuk vizier, who appointed him professor at the prestigious Nizamiyyah College in Baghdad.

Al-Ghazali authored numerous influential works across diverse disciplines, including *al-Mustasfa* (Usul al-Fiqh), *al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad* (theology), *Maqasid al-Falasifah*, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, and *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (Sunawari et al., 2001). For his formidable defense of orthodox Sunni doctrine against philosophical and esoteric deviations, he was honored with the title *Hujjat al-Islam* ("Proof of Islam") (Ridzuan Masri, 2012). Classical scholars such as Ibn al-'Arabi and Ibn Kathir recognized his intellectual stature, noting the extraordinary influence of his teaching and scholarship (Griffel, 2004).

Despite extensive scholarship on al-Ghazali's epistemology and separate analyses of contemporary Islamic issues in Malaysia, a significant gap remains in systematically connecting his resolution of skepticism to present-day challenges. This study addresses that gap by examining al-Ghazali's conceptualization of doubt, his methodological response to skepticism, and the applicability of his epistemological framework to contemporary 'aqidah concerns in Malaysia. It argues that al-Ghazali's model—one that critically engages reason while ultimately situating it within a higher framework of spiritual experience—offers a balanced and constructive paradigm for navigating modern faith crises. The study proceeds by first analyzing al-Ghazali's theory of doubt, then evaluating its manifestations within the Malaysian intellectual context, and finally proposing his Sufi-oriented epistemology as a viable framework for sustaining Islamic belief in a skeptical age.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. The SLR approach was selected due to its rigorous, transparent, and structured protocol, which enables the comprehensive synthesis of existing scholarship to develop a deeper understanding of conceptual and theoretical issues (Jasmi, 2012). Specifically, this method is well suited to examining the philosophical concept of skepticism, its implications for Muslim faith ('aqidah), and to strengthening the scholarly foundation of the study's conclusions.

Data Collection and Sources

The analysis is based on a critical examination of both printed and digital materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, and credible online resources. The study incorporates both primary and secondary sources:

- a. **Primary sources** consist of original, first-hand texts that directly address skepticism in philosophy and Islamic theology. Key primary works include *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (1971 edition) and *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (1955 edition) by al-Ghazali.
- b. **Secondary sources** comprise scholarly interpretations and analytical studies, including journal articles and books that discuss skepticism and Islamic theology from the perspective of al-Ghazali and other scholars.

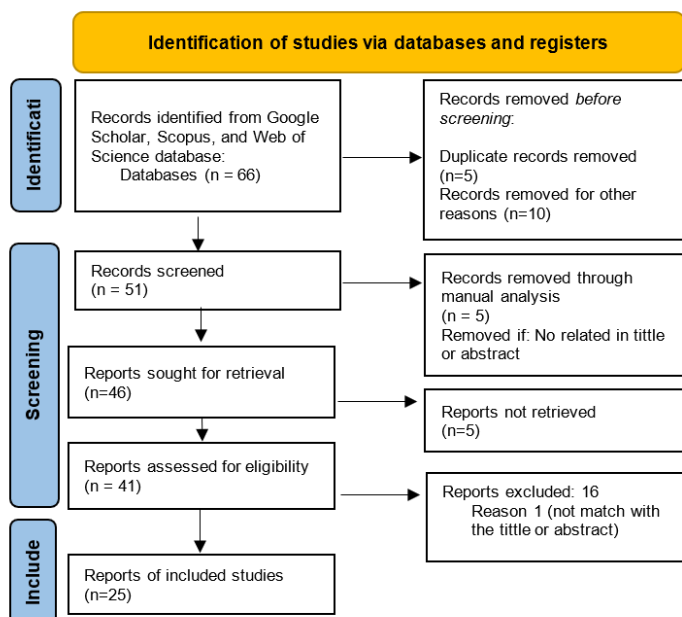
To ensure a systematic and replicable search process, this study adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Trifu et al., 2022). The literature search was conducted across four major academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, Mendeley, and Web of Science. A combination of keywords and phrases was employed, including ‘skepticism’, ‘aqidah’ (Islamic creed), ‘al-Ghazali’, ‘Sufism’, and ‘faith crisis’. The search was restricted to publications in English and Malay.

The initial database searches yielded 66 articles. The selection process, detailed in Figure 1, was conducted as follows:

- a. Identification: Duplicate records were removed automatically and manually.
- b. Screening: The titles and abstract of the remaining articles were screened independently by all authors against the inclusion criteria. Studies were eligible if they mentioned al Ghazali and skepticism, skepticism in Islam, or issues of misguidance among Muslims in Malaysia. Discrepancies in screening decision were resolved through discussion among authors.
- c. Eligibility: The full text of potentially relevant articles was retrieved and assessed for eligibility. Articles were included if they provided direct reporting or analysis on the core topics of this view. Studies based on previously collected or administrative data were included if they satisfied the thematic criteria.
- d. Inclusion: Literature that was not peer-reviewed, published in non-indexed journals, or did not match the title and abstract focus were excluded.

Following this rigorous screening process, a final corpus of 25 articles was selected for in-depth analysis. This multidimensional approach, combining primary textual analysis with a systematic review of contemporary scholarship, ensure a holistic and robust exploration of the subject matter.

Figure 1: Flowchart of the Article Selection Process



Results

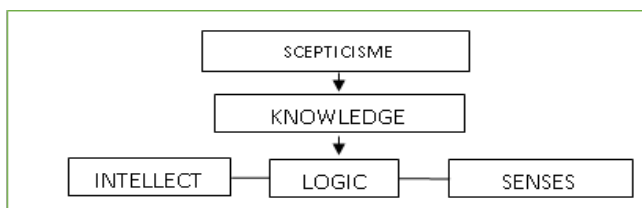
Al-Ghazali is widely recognized as a prominent Muslim theologian and philosopher who articulated a systematic method of doubt in the pursuit of certain knowledge (Rahman, 2010: 102). In his early intellectual development, he adhered to the teachings of his instructors and the dominant schools of thought of his time. However, he later adopted a critical stance toward various sources of knowledge, including sensory perception and rational inquiry, which eventually led him to a profound state of skepticism. This intellectual crisis ultimately culminated in his attainment of certainty through the spiritual path of Sufism.

It is important to note that Al-Ghazali did not reject reason altogether. On the contrary, he acknowledged the value of rational inquiry and philosophical engagement in strengthening theological understanding and defending Islamic doctrine. His deep study of philosophy enabled him to master logical methods and critically evaluate philosophical arguments. Through this engagement, he refuted several philosophical doctrines that he considered incompatible with Islamic teachings (Mohd Fauzi, 2005). Nevertheless, he maintained that the ultimate truth, particularly in matters of divinity, cannot be attained through philosophical reasoning alone. Rather, such truth must be guided and completed by spiritual experience, as genuine certainty can only be achieved through inner illumination.

In philosophical discourse, skepticism derives from the Greek term referring to doubt or critical examination. It denotes the view that the human mind is incapable of attaining absolute certainty, or that it can only reach limited and provisional conclusions (Andi N., 2015). When applied to matters of Islamic creed (aqidah), a purely philosophical approach may give the impression that there is insufficient empirical or rational proof for the existence of Allah (SWT). This perception has generated debates among Muslim scholars as well as non-Muslim thinkers. The absence or misinterpretation of evidential foundations for belief in God may weaken a Muslim's conviction (Chouhoud Y., 2007). A similar phenomenon can be observed in contemporary Malaysia, where discussions on faith are sometimes conducted solely on the basis of logical reasoning without adequate reference to primary sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith (Muhammad Hazim et al., 2024).

Al-Ghazali's intellectual crisis emerged when he was at the height of his academic career. In his autobiographical work, he recounts being afflicted by a mysterious illness that led him to question the reliability of knowledge and the nature of reality for nearly two months (al-Ghazali, 1986). This crisis was triggered by his intense search for certain knowledge (al-'ilm al-yaqin), defined as knowledge free from error, doubt, or illusion. The "illness" he describes symbolizes an inner conflict between rationalism and spiritual intuition, reflecting his struggle to reconcile intellectual reasoning with transcendent truth. This period of confusion ultimately shaped his epistemological framework, in which skepticism functioned not as an end in itself but as a methodological tool leading to certainty. Al-Ghazali's journey through doubt toward knowledge can be further illustrated in the diagram below.

Diagram 1: Al-Ghazali's Skepticism in the Context of Knowledge



Furthermore, it is also stated in his book that his health gradually improved when his understanding of semi-rational matters that caused skepticism was healed with the help of Allah. In this way, all doubts and skepticism were answered. It also proves that the light (*Nur*) from Allah is the key to all knowledge (Taylan, 2018).

At the beginning, when al-Ghazali tried to understand philosophy, he studied and read Aristotle's books on his own. It should be remembered that Ibn Sina had read Aristotle's metaphysics up to 40 times without understanding it, except after reading the commentary written by al-Farabi (Ahmad Sunawari et al. 2001). This caused him to experience a state of confusion in his mind. For this reason, al-Ghazali encouraged Muslims to seek the truth by making the Quran their primary source rather than relying solely on reasoning and intellect. According to him, Islamic philosophy must be based on the Quran and Hadith. This contrasts with the Greek philosophers who relied solely on logic and human reasoning. In fact, al-Ghazali's prominence in the field of philosophy led him to produce very famous books such as (*Maqasid al-Falasifah*), (*Munqidh min al-Dhalal*), and (*Tahafut al-Falasifah*). In the pursuit of truth, he stated that it is from doubt that truth will emerge. As found in the final verse of his book (*Mizan al-Amal*), he said:

All doubts are what will lead to the truth. Whoever does not have doubts, does not think; whoever does not think, will not be alert; and whoever is not alert, will remain blind and lost.

Through his book titled (*al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal*), Al-Ghazali (2001) extensively discusses his epistemological experiences and the doubts he faced throughout his search for true knowledge. In the book (*Maqasid*), which he produced in the year 488H/1095M, the book aims to explain summaries of philosophical knowledge (peripatetic philosophy) that were the foundation of earlier philosophers, such as logic, metaphysics, and physics. The commentary on these sciences is based on the foundational thoughts of Aristotle, which had previously been analyzed by famous Islamic philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.

After completing his monumental work (*Maqasid*), he also wrote the book (*Tahafut al-Falasifah*), which explains the fundamental philosophical ideas that he interpreted as being in conflict with Islamic teachings. In the final section of (*Maqasid*), he explains that anyone who wants to understand what is false and what is true in philosophy should study (*Tahafut*). Al-Ghazali states that factors such as the disturbance of Satan, desires, and sins can corrupt the clarity of the human soul, thereby hindering the process of acquiring knowledge (Al-Ghazali: 1986). These

things can cause the heart, mind, and soul of a person to become dark. This condition can also be observed in philosophers when they experience a corruption of their faith. The corruption of a philosopher's faith stems from three things. These are as follows:

- i. The world and everything in it is eternal.
- ii. Allah does not know the particular details of what happens in the world.
- iii. There is no resurrection of humans with their physical bodies.

To answer the first issue, al-Ghazali states that Allah exists first, and then by the power of Allah, the world was created. As for the second issue, the answer is that Allah knows both the particulars and the universals. This is based on the verse 61 from Surah Yunus: *"Nothing is hidden from Your knowledge, even as small as an atom on the earth or in the sky. Nothing is smaller or larger than that, except (everything is recorded) in the clear book."*

Therefore, Allah knows everything that is specific or general. To answer the third question, Al-Ghazali adheres to the promise of Allah SWT, which is a fusion of the physical and spiritual, as stated in a Hadith Qudsi, *'I have prepared for My righteous servants what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and what has never crossed the heart of man.'*

These three issues contradict the beliefs of the Muslim community and are viewed as a denial of the messengers of Allah. They constitute a rebuttal that pertains to matters of divinity, linked to the fields of physics, logic, and metaphysics.

Skepticism in the Malaysian Muslims Aqidah

While al-Ghazali's epistemological skepticism played a historically pivotal role in safeguarding Islamic creed (*'aqidah*), contemporary scholars such as Syarifuddin (2022) contend that engagement with modern philosophical challenges requires a more robust rational framework. This perspective underscores the necessity of balancing faith and reason within contemporary Islamic discourse. Such a balance is particularly pertinent in Malaysia, where debates surrounding Islamic theology and intellectual thought have grown increasingly complex (Mohd Zaidi et al., 2023).

Among the prominent challenges that generate doubt and potentially lead to deviations in belief are the following. First, the issue of theodicy and the problem of evil raises the argument that if both good and evil ultimately originate from Allah, the existence of evil appears to imply divine injustice in permitting its occurrence and human enactment. Second, the tension between divine decree (*qadar*) and human agency prompts the claim that belief in predestination undermines genuine human freedom and fundamental moral responsibility, thereby questioning why actions are considered sinful if human autonomy is not absolute. Third, the demand for empirical proof of God reflects a philosophical difficulty in providing physical or scientific evidence for God's existence in accordance with modern empiricist standards. Fourth, naturalistic explanations of causality attribute outcomes exclusively to human effort—such as medicine curing disease—without acknowledging God as the ultimate cause behind all secondary causes.

These strands of skepticism have generated confusion and, in certain cases, contributed to religious deviation among segments of Malaysian Muslims

(Muhammad Hazim et al., 2024). They have also facilitated the growing influence of ideologies such as atheism, liberalism, secularism, and scientism in matters of faith. Significantly, many of these contemporary challenges mirror the fundamental issues al-Ghazali himself confronted during his intellectual crisis. He addressed them extensively in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, wherein he delineated the epistemological boundaries between philosophy and revelation. Importantly, al-Ghazali did not repudiate reason; rather, he subordinated it to revelation, thereby permitting rational disciplines—such as logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences—to flourish within a metaphysical framework anchored in divine truth (Azmil Zainal Abidin, 2024). This historical precedent offers a valuable and conceptually grounded model for responding to contemporary forms of skepticism.

Discussion

In addressing issues of doctrinal deviation and misunderstandings of faith in Malaysia—particularly those arising from an overreliance on rationalistic reasoning—it is instructive to revisit the epistemological framework articulated by al-Ghazali. He maintained that knowledge pertaining to belief and faith, which originates from the heart, constitutes an essential dimension of human understanding. Although al-Ghazali initially held that human knowledge is derived primarily from sensory perception, this position demonstrates that he did not reject the epistemic validity of the senses. Rather, he acknowledged their foundational role in cognitive development. However, his critical examination of sensory and rational knowledge ultimately led him into a profound intellectual and spiritual crisis.

This epistemological uncertainty prompted al-Ghazali to adopt the Sufi path as a means of resolving his skeptical doubts. Through this spiritual transformation, he concluded that divine illumination (*nūr ilāhī*) is the ultimate source of true knowledge and the decisive factor in strengthening faith (al-Ghazali, 1955; Sidi Gazalba, 1974). He further asserted that when individuals experience doubt—whether arising naturally or influenced by external intellectual currents—they must actively seek authentic knowledge capable of dispelling such uncertainty (Andi N., 2015).

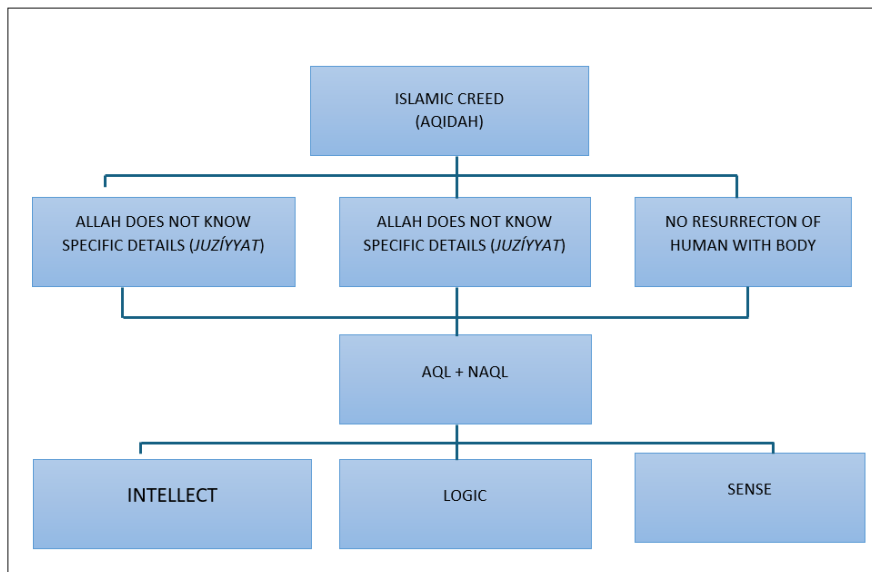
As illustrated in Diagram 2, theological matters such as the existence of God, the afterlife, heaven, and hell belong to the realm of the unseen (*al-ghayb*), which lies beyond the full grasp of ordinary human intellect. Al-Ghazali maintained that all knowledge ultimately originates from Allah. While he critically engaged with Greek philosophy, his opposition was not a wholesale rejection of reason but rather an effort to safeguard Islamic monotheism (*tawhīd*) from metaphysical assumptions he deemed incompatible with revelation. He affirmed that both sensory perception and rational cognition possess relative epistemic validity. Nevertheless, he argued that these faculties alone cannot attain ultimate certainty through purely systematic or discursive reasoning (al-Ghazali, 1983). Instead, genuine certitude emerges through divine illumination, by which God discloses deeper truths and opens the pathways to higher knowledge.

Al-Ghazali played a pivotal role in addressing and correcting what he regarded as the errors of certain philosophers and theologians. He argued that faith should not rest upon unfounded or speculative assumptions, but must instead be grounded in firm

and coherent principles. Through his critical engagement with Greek philosophy, he significantly curtailed its influence within Islamic intellectual traditions (Al-Ghazali, 1955). The impact of his critique extended beyond the Muslim world to Europe, where it indirectly contributed to shaping subsequent intellectual developments and the emergence of a more rigorous culture of inquiry, often associated with the Enlightenment.

According to al-Ghazali, disbelief stemmed partly from the uncritical study of Greek philosophy in isolation from revelation. Many scholars, he observed, became deeply captivated by prominent Greek figures such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, admiring their intellectual achievements in disciplines including mathematics, logic, theology, and cosmology. This admiration sometimes led to the glorification of their methods and principles. Matters became more serious when certain philosophical positions appeared to elevate human reason above divine revelation, resulting in the rejection of religious laws and doctrines, at times even portraying them as illusory or misleading (al-Ghazali, 1971).

Diagram 2: Al Ghazali's Perspective on the Relationship Between Human Reason (*Aql*) and Revealed Texts (*Naql*) in Forming Islamic Faith



In matters of religion and divinity, al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of spiritual experience in complementing rational inquiry. He maintained that philosophers—particularly skeptics—must address the spiritual void within the human soul through authentic religious experience. This perspective remains relevant for contemporary Muslims, whether in Malaysia or elsewhere. Without spiritual insight, he argued, individuals cannot fully discern moral truth. Al-Ghazali highlighted the Sufi path as an example, where metaphysical and theological concerns are resolved through direct experiential knowledge of God, accompanied by adherence to prophetic teachings and the Hadith (Azlan, 1991).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that al-Ghazali's engagement with skepticism constitutes a profound epistemological undertaking rather than a mere repudiation of philosophy. His intellectual transformation—from radical doubt to spiritual certitude—articulates a paradigm in which rational inquiry (*'aql*) and transmitted knowledge (*naql*) achieve their fullest integration through Sufi experiential insight (*dhawq*). Al-Ghazali's critique was directed specifically at three philosophical doctrines he regarded as incompatible with Islamic creed: the eternity of the world, the denial of God's knowledge of particulars, and the rejection of bodily resurrection.

The contemporary relevance of al-Ghazali's epistemological framework is particularly apparent in contexts such as Malaysia, where analogous intellectual challenges—manifested in secularism, scientism, and rigid literalism—continue to influence Muslim belief systems. His distinction between constructive doubt, which leads to deeper conviction, and destructive skepticism, which results in doctrinal deviation, offers a valuable analytical lens for addressing modern crises of faith. Ultimately, al-Ghazali's intellectual legacy underscores that authentic faith demands both disciplined rational reflection and spiritual refinement, presenting a balanced model for safeguarding *'aqidah* amid competing philosophical and ideological worldviews.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. All contributions were made objectively without any personal, financial, or institutional influence that could compromise the integrity of the work.

Author's Contribution Statement

All authors have contributed significantly to the work and approved the final version of the manuscript. We believe that the findings of this study will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in Islamic thought and will be of interest to the readership of the journal.

1. **Mohamad Hidayat Mahadi**: conceptualized the research idea, designed the study, performed data analysis and interpreted the findings.
2. **Siti Nur Husna Abd Rahman & Nursafra Mohd Zhaffar**: revised the manuscript critically for intellectual content, provided final editing, and coordinated the submission process.
3. **Nur Izzaty Mohamad**: conducted the literature review, collected the data.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles and academic integrity. All procedures were carried out responsibly, with informed consent obtained from participants (when applicable) and strict confidentiality maintained.

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