

SPIRITUAL VALUES OF PRAYER IN AL-GHAZALI'S THOUGHT AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Prayer (ṣalāh) represents a central practice in Islamic spirituality that encompasses both ritual and transformative dimensions. Despite extensive studies on Al-Ghazali's thought, limited research has systematically integrated his spiritual framework with contemporary psychological constructs. This study aims to analyze the spiritual values of prayer in Al-Ghazali's perspective and to develop a conceptual integration model linking these values with modern psychological theories. This research employs a qualitative library research approach using thematic content analysis and interpretative (hermeneutic) methods. Primary data are derived from *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, while secondary data include recent scholarly works in psychology of religion. The findings indicate that key spiritual values—ikhlas (sincerity), khushu' (humility), dhikr (remembrance), and hudhur al-qalb (presence of heart)—can be conceptually mapped onto psychological constructs such as mindfulness, emotional regulation, and resilience. This study proposes a conceptual model in which prayer functions as a mediating process that transforms spiritual awareness into psychological well-being. The study contributes theoretically by bridging classical Islamic spirituality and contemporary psychology, while acknowledging that the proposed relationships require empirical validation.

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INTRODUCTION

Prayer (ṣalāh) represents one of the most fundamental acts of worship in Islam and serves as a central element in the daily religious life of Muslims. As one of the five pillars of Islam, prayer is obligatory and performed five times a day as a manifestation of submission and devotion to God. Beyond its ritual function, prayer embodies deep spiritual meanings that shape the moral and psychological dimensions of human life (Nasr, 2006).

Islamic scholars throughout history have emphasized that prayer is not merely a physical ritual but also a spiritual practice designed to cultivate inner awareness and moral discipline. In Islamic spirituality, prayer is understood as a moment of direct communication between humans and God, where the believer expresses gratitude, humility, and dependence upon divine guidance (Schimmel, 1975).

Among the classical scholars who explored the spiritual dimensions of worship, Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) occupies a prominent position. Al-Ghazali is widely recognized as one of the most influential thinkers in Islamic intellectual history, whose works integrate theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and mysticism into a comprehensive framework of religious knowledge (Chittick, 2007).

His masterpiece *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* offers an extensive discussion on the inner dimensions of religious practice, including prayer. According to Al-Ghazali, the essence of prayer lies not only in the outward performance of ritual movements but also in the presence of spiritual consciousness within the worshipper. Without sincerity and inner awareness, prayer risks becoming merely a mechanical routine devoid of spiritual impact (Al-Ghazali, 2010).

In contemporary Muslim societies, however, the spiritual meaning of prayer is often overshadowed by its ritualistic form. Many individuals perform prayer as a routine obligation without fully understanding its deeper spiritual significance. This phenomenon creates a gap between religious practice and ethical behavior, where individuals may maintain ritual observance while neglecting moral values in everyday life.

Modern psychological research suggests that spiritual practices, including prayer, play an important role in promoting emotional stability, mental health, and resilience (Koenig, 2012). Religious practices can serve as coping mechanisms that help individuals manage stress and maintain psychological balance. This perspective reinforces the importance of understanding the deeper spiritual dimensions of prayer. Despite the richness of previous studies on Al-Ghazali's thought, most existing research remains descriptive and focuses primarily on explaining spiritual concepts without developing a systematic analytical framework. Furthermore, there is still a lack of integration between Al-Ghazali's spiritual teachings and contemporary psychological theories, particularly in relation to constructs such as mindfulness, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being. This indicates a clear research gap in bridging classical Islamic spirituality with modern psychological discourse.

In addition, previous studies rarely provide a conceptual model that explains how spiritual values in prayer function as mechanisms influencing psychological processes. As a result, the potential contribution of Al-Ghazali's thought to contemporary interdisciplinary studies remains underdeveloped. Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by developing a conceptual integration between Al-Ghazali's spiritual values of prayer—such as *ikhlas* (sincerity), *khushu'* (humility), *dhikr* (remembrance), and *hudhur al-qalb* (presence of heart)—and modern psychological constructs including mindfulness, resilience, and emotional regulation. This integrative approach moves beyond descriptive analysis toward a more analytical and theoretical synthesis.

Therefore, revisiting the teachings of classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali becomes essential for rediscovering the transformative power of prayer. By exploring Al-Ghazali's insights, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how prayer functions as a spiritual discipline that shapes both personal character and social ethics. Based on these considerations, this study aims (1) to analyze the spiritual values embedded in prayer according to Al-Ghazali's perspective, and (2) to develop a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between these spiritual values and contemporary psychological constructs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamic spirituality is closely related to the concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, which refers to the purification of the soul from negative traits and the cultivation of moral virtues. In Islamic teachings, spiritual development involves a continuous process of self-discipline aimed at achieving closeness to God (Nasr, 2006). Sufism represents the inner dimension of Islamic spirituality that emphasizes personal transformation through spiritual practices such as remembrance of God (*dhikr*), meditation, and prayer (Schimmel, 1975). Within this tradition, acts of worship are not limited to ritual obligations but also function as spiritual exercises that shape the inner life of believers.

Al-Ghazali played a crucial role in bridging the gap between formal religious scholarship and mystical spirituality. He argued that religious knowledge must be accompanied by spiritual experience in order to achieve true understanding (Chittick, 2007). While these classical perspectives provide a strong normative and spiritual foundation, they are often presented in a descriptive manner without systematic analytical engagement with contemporary scientific frameworks. This limitation has led to a lack of theoretical integration between Islamic spirituality and modern psychological discourse.

From a psychological perspective, spirituality has been widely recognized as an important factor in promoting mental health and well-being. Studies have shown that individuals who regularly engage in spiritual practices often experience higher levels of life satisfaction and emotional stability (Pargament, 2013). Religious practices such as prayer also provide individuals with a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection with a higher power. These elements contribute to resilience and help individuals cope with life challenges (Koenig, 2012).

However, contemporary psychological studies often approach spirituality in a general or secular framework, without adequately incorporating the depth of classical Islamic concepts such as *ikhlas*, *khushu'*, and *hudhur al-qalb*. As a result, important theological and spiritual dimensions are frequently overlooked or simplified. Recent studies (e.g., Kruk, 2024; Rofiqoh et al., 2025) demonstrate increasing interest in the relationship between religion and mental health. Nevertheless, these studies tend to focus on empirical correlations rather than developing a conceptual synthesis grounded in classical Islamic thought. This creates a gap between empirical psychological findings and the rich theoretical heritage of Islamic spirituality.

In this context, a critical comparison reveals both convergence and divergence between the two perspectives. For instance, the concept of *hudhur al-qalb* (presence of heart) can be associated with mindfulness in psychology, as both emphasize attentional awareness and present-moment focus. However, while mindfulness in modern psychology is generally self-oriented, Al-Ghazali's framework is theocentric, directing awareness toward God. Similarly, the concept of *khushu'* (spiritual humility and concentration) may be interpreted as a form of emotional regulation, where individuals consciously manage their internal states during prayer. This indicates that classical Islamic spirituality contains functional psychological dimensions that are comparable to modern theories, although framed within a different metaphysical foundation.

Therefore, this study argues that the integration of classical Islamic thought with contemporary psychological perspectives should not be limited to superficial comparisons but must involve

a deeper conceptual synthesis. Such an approach allows for the development of a more comprehensive framework that explains how spiritual values in prayer function as mechanisms influencing psychological processes. Based on this analysis, this study positions itself as an effort to bridge the gap by constructing a conceptual integration between Al-Ghazali's spiritual values and modern psychological constructs, thereby contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship in Islamic studies and psychology of religion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a library research method. Library research is appropriate for this study because it focuses on analyzing classical Islamic texts and scholarly literature related to the spiritual dimensions of prayer. To enhance methodological rigor, this study adopts a conceptual-analytical framework that combines thematic content analysis with an interpretative (hermeneutic) approach. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings embedded in Al-Ghazali's texts and their relevance to contemporary psychological discourse.

The primary data source is the work of Imam Al-Ghazali, particularly *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, which contains extensive discussions on the inner dimensions of worship. Secondary sources include academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles related to Islamic spirituality, philosophy, and psychology of religion. The selection of sources is based on relevance, academic credibility, and recency (especially for contemporary psychological literature from the last 5–10 years). Classical sources are used to establish the theoretical foundation, while modern studies are employed for comparative and integrative analysis.

Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques by identifying relevant literature related to the research topic.

The data analysis process was carried out through several systematic stages:

1. Concept identification: extracting key spiritual concepts from Al-Ghazali's works (e.g., *ikhlas*, *khushu'*, *dhikr*, *hudhur al-qalb*)
2. Thematic categorization: organizing these concepts into broader spiritual dimensions
3. Interpretative analysis: examining the meanings and functions of these concepts within Al-Ghazali's spiritual framework
4. Conceptual mapping: linking the identified spiritual values with contemporary psychological constructs such as mindfulness, emotional regulation, and resilience
5. Comparative analysis: relating findings to recent empirical and theoretical studies in psychology of religion

To ensure the validity of the analysis, this study applies source triangulation by comparing classical Islamic texts with contemporary academic literature. In addition, interpretative consistency is maintained by systematically aligning textual analysis with established theoretical frameworks. Thus, this methodological approach enables the study not only to describe spiritual concepts but also to develop a conceptual integration between classical Islamic thought and modern psychological perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Prayer in Al-Ghazali's Thought

Prayer (*ṣalāh*) occupies a central place in Islamic teachings and represents one of the most essential acts of worship in the life of a Muslim. In Islamic jurisprudence, prayer is defined as a structured ritual consisting of specific physical movements and recitations performed at designated times throughout the day. However, reducing prayer solely to its juridical and ritualistic dimensions fails to capture its broader spiritual and transformative significance. This limitation has been critically addressed by classical Muslim scholars, particularly within the tradition of Islamic spirituality.

Among these scholars, Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali provides one of the most comprehensive discussions regarding the spiritual significance of prayer. In his monumental work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali describes prayer as a spiritual encounter between the servant and God. This conceptualization redefines prayer not merely as an obligation (*taklif*), but as an experiential process (*tajribah ruhiyyah*) that actively shapes the inner consciousness of the believer.

According to him, prayer is not merely a ritual obligation but a form of intimate communication with the Creator. Through prayer, the believer expresses submission, gratitude, humility, and dependence upon divine guidance. Therefore, prayer functions as a spiritual bridge that connects human beings with God and reinforces the awareness of divine presence in everyday life (Al-Ghazali, 2010). Al-Ghazali argues that the essence of prayer cannot be reduced to external movements such as standing (*qiyam*), bowing (*ruku'*), and prostration (*sujud*). Rather, these physical actions operate as symbolic embodiments of inner states, indicating that the validity of prayer is not only legal-formal but also existential-spiritual.

Without the presence of sincere intention and spiritual awareness, the ritual performance of prayer risks becoming an empty routine that fails to produce meaningful spiritual transformation. This critique is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts, where ritual compliance is often detached from ethical and spiritual outcomes. This perspective reflects a broader understanding of worship within Islamic spirituality. According to Nasr (2006), Islamic acts of worship are designed not only to fulfill religious obligations but also to cultivate spiritual awareness and ethical discipline.

Thus, prayer can be understood as a mechanism of continuous moral internalization, reinforcing ethical consciousness through repetitive spiritual engagement. Furthermore, Al-Ghazali highlights the transformative potential of prayer in shaping moral character. This indicates that prayer functions not only as a vertical relationship (*ḥabl min Allah*) but also as a foundation for horizontal ethical behavior (*ḥabl min al-nas*). From a contemporary perspective, the conceptual framework developed by Al-Ghazali remains highly relevant.

Modern psychological theories, particularly in the psychology of religion, support the view that structured spiritual practices contribute to self-regulation, meaning-making, and psychological resilience (Pargament, 2013). Therefore, Al-Ghazali's understanding of prayer as a holistic spiritual discipline continues to provide valuable insights into the relationship between religious devotion and human well-being.

Inner Dimensions of Prayer: *Hudhur al-Qalb* and *Khushu'*

One of the most distinctive aspects of Al-Ghazali's discussion of prayer is his emphasis on the inner dimensions of worship. While fiqh-oriented approaches focus on external validity, Al-Ghazali shifts the focus toward internal authenticity, thereby expanding the epistemology of worship from legal compliance to spiritual realization. Two key concepts in this discussion are *hudhur al-qalb* (presence of the heart) and *khushu'* (spiritual humility and concentration).

The concept of *hudhur al-qalb* refers to the ability of the worshipper to maintain full awareness during prayer.

In analytical terms, this concept closely aligns with the modern psychological construct of mindfulness, particularly in its emphasis on present-moment awareness and attentional control. According to Al-Ghazali, the presence of the heart means that the individual consciously understands and reflects upon the words recited and the actions performed during prayer. Thus, prayer becomes a cognitively engaged process rather than a passive ritual activity.

Achieving *hudhur al-qalb* requires discipline and spiritual training.

Al-Ghazali's acknowledgment of cognitive distraction demonstrates an early recognition of what contemporary psychology identifies as attentional instability and mental wandering. Closely related to this concept is the notion of *khushu'*, which describes a state of humility, reverence, and deep concentration in the presence of God. This state reflects an integration of emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions, making it a holistic psychological condition rather than a purely theological concept.

Schimmel (1975) notes that the experience of humility and reverence in worship reflects the deeper mystical dimension of Islamic spirituality. From a psychological perspective, the concepts of *hudhur al-qalb* and *khushu'* can be understood as forms of mindfulness and emotional regulation. Empirical studies indicate that mindfulness-based practices significantly reduce stress and improve emotional stability (Haque, 2018), thereby reinforcing the relevance of Al-Ghazali's insights in contemporary contexts. Therefore, the inner dimensions of prayer described by Al-Ghazali highlight the importance of integrating spiritual awareness into religious practice. Without this integration, ritual acts risk losing their transformative capacity and becoming spiritually ineffective.

Spiritual Values in Prayer According to Al-Ghazali

In addition to emphasizing the inner dimensions of prayer, Al-Ghazali also identifies several spiritual values that must accompany the performance of prayer. These values function as an ethical-spiritual framework that transforms ritual practice into character formation. Among the most important values are sincerity (*ikhlas*), presence of heart (*hudhur al-qalb*), humility (*khushu'*), remembrance (*dhikr*), and balance between fear (*khauf*) and hope (*raja'*).

The first and most fundamental value is sincerity.

From an analytical perspective, sincerity represents the motivational core of spiritual action, ensuring that behavior is internally driven rather than socially constructed. Without sincere intention, acts of worship lose their spiritual value and become mere outward displays of religiosity.

Another essential value is remembrance of God (*dhikr*).

Dhikr can be interpreted as a form of continuous cognitive anchoring that stabilizes human consciousness in relation to transcendental awareness. Al-Ghazali also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between fear and hope. This balance reflects a psychologically adaptive mechanism, preventing both excessive anxiety (due to fear) and complacency (due to over-optimism).

Furthermore, prayer fosters humility and self-reflection.

This process contributes to the development of moral metacognition, where individuals critically evaluate their own behavior and intentions. These spiritual values illustrate that prayer serves not only as a ritual obligation but also as a comprehensive spiritual training that shapes the ethical character of believers.

Prayer as a Means of Spiritual Purification

One of the central objectives of prayer in Al-Ghazali's thought is the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). This concept represents a dynamic process of psychological and moral transformation rather than a static spiritual state. According to Al-Ghazali, acts of worship such as prayer play a crucial role in disciplining the soul and guiding it toward spiritual refinement. This disciplinary function can be interpreted as a form of behavioral regulation, where repeated ritual practices reinforce positive habits and weaken negative tendencies.

Prayer also cultivates self-control and emotional regulation.

In contemporary psychological terms, this aligns with self-regulation theory, which emphasizes the role of structured practices in controlling impulses and maintaining goal-directed behavior. Modern research supports the idea that spiritual practices contribute to personal transformation. Empirical findings indicate that regular religious engagement is associated with higher emotional resilience, reduced stress levels, and improved psychological well-being (Koenig, 2012). Thus, the concept of prayer as a means of spiritual purification highlights its broader significance in human development. It integrates moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions into a unified process of self-improvement.

Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Thought for Contemporary Psychological Well-Being

The spiritual insights of Al-Ghazali regarding prayer remain highly relevant in contemporary discussions about mental health and psychological well-being. In modern societies characterized by psychological stress and existential disorientation, spiritual practices offer an alternative framework for achieving inner balance and meaning. Research in the psychology of religion demonstrates that spirituality plays a significant role in promoting mental health. Religious involvement has been empirically linked to lower depression rates, stronger coping mechanisms, and greater life satisfaction (Koenig, 2012; Pargament, 2013).

The teachings of Al-Ghazali reflect principles closely related to modern psychological constructs such as mindfulness, emotional regulation, and meaning-making. This indicates a strong conceptual convergence between classical Islamic spirituality and contemporary

psychological science. Furthermore, prayer provides individuals with a structured opportunity for reflection and spiritual connection.

This structure is particularly important in maintaining psychological stability, as it creates regular intervals of cognitive and emotional reset. In addition, the communal aspect of prayer strengthens social bonds within Muslim communities. Social connectedness derived from collective worship functions as a protective factor against psychological distress. Therefore, the spiritual framework developed by Al-Ghazali offers valuable insights for addressing contemporary moral and psychological challenges. His integrative approach demonstrates that religious practices, when understood deeply, can serve as powerful tools for holistic human development—encompassing spiritual, ethical, and psychological dimensions.

CONCLUSIONS

Prayer in the perspective of Al-Ghazali possesses profound spiritual significance that extends beyond mere ritual performance. This study demonstrates that prayer, according to Al-Ghazali, should be understood as an integrative spiritual system that combines outward ritual actions with inward consciousness, ultimately functioning as a transformative process in human life. Prayer functions as a spiritual discipline that purifies the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and strengthens the relationship between humans and God.

More importantly, the findings reveal that the effectiveness of prayer is highly dependent on the presence of inner dimensions such as *hudhur al-qalb* (presence of the heart) and *khushu'* (spiritual humility), which transform prayer from a mechanical routine into a meaningful spiritual experience. The spiritual values embedded in prayer—such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), remembrance (*dhikr*), humility (*khushu'*), and the balance between fear (*khauf*) and hope (*raja'*)—demonstrate that Islamic worship integrates faith, knowledge, and ethical action.

These values function not only as theological principles but also as psychological mechanisms that contribute to self-regulation, emotional stability, and moral development. Furthermore, this study highlights a strong conceptual convergence between Al-Ghazali's spiritual framework and contemporary psychological theories, particularly in areas such as mindfulness, emotional regulation, and meaning-making. This indicates that classical Islamic thought remains highly relevant in addressing modern psychological challenges.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that enhancing the quality of prayer through spiritual awareness can contribute to improving individual well-being, strengthening moral character, and fostering social harmony. Therefore, this study contributes to the academic discourse by bridging classical Islamic spirituality with modern psychology, offering an integrative framework for understanding the role of prayer in holistic human development. Future research is recommended to explore empirical approaches to measuring the psychological impact of spiritually conscious prayer, particularly through interdisciplinary studies combining Islamic studies and psychology.

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