

## Love as the Spiritual Foundation of Good Deeds: Al-Ghazali's Spiritual-Theological Framework

*Cinta sebagai Asas Rohani Perbuatan Baik:  
Rangka Kerja Rohani-Teologi Al-Ghazali*

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines Imam al-Ghazali's profound conception of good deeds (a 'māl ṣāliḥat) through the lens of his spiritual teachings, with a focus on maḥabbah (divine love) as the highest spiritual condition and ultimate motivator for ethical conduct. Rooted in classical Islamic theology and Sufism, al-Ghazali's ethical framework integrates outward religious acts with inward spiritual sincerity, emphasizing that good deeds must be grounded in pure love for God rather than driven by fear or the pursuit of reward. Employing bibliographic research and content analysis, this study identifies nine key spiritual conditions emphasized by al-Ghazali—including sincerity, humility, mindfulness, love and trust in God—which transform outward practices into meaningful acts of devotion. Its central contribution is the synthesis of these nine conditions into a practical framework, showing how maḥabbah transforms ethics from ritualistic conformity to spiritually enriched action. The findings indicate that for al-Ghazali, maḥabbah is not merely an emotional state but a transformative force that elevates ethical behavior from ritualistic conformity to spiritually enriched action. These nine spiritual conditions, drawn from his major works such especially Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn serve as a practical spiritual framework for achieving inner purification and moral excellence. The article further explores al-Ghazali's spiritual and psychological insights on love and good deeds, highlighting maḥabbah as a holistic model of ethical behavior that transcends religious boundaries. His spiritually grounded ethics, which fuse theological insight with practical moral transformation, remain profoundly relevant for promoting compassion, interfaith understanding, and social harmony in today's pluralistic world.*

*Keywords: Good deeds; love; inner condition; maḥabbah; fear; piety*

### ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini mengkaji pandangan Imam al-Ghazali mengenai konsep amal soleh (a 'māl ṣāliḥat) melalui lensa ajaran kerohanian beliau, dengan memberi tumpuan khusus kepada konsep maḥabbah (cinta Ilahi) sebagai syarat kerohanian tertinggi dan pemangkin utama kepada tingkah laku etika. Berakar umbi dalam teologi Islam klasik dan tasawuf, kerangka etika al-Ghazali mengintegrasikan amalan zahir agama dengan keikhlasan batin, menekankan bahawa amal baik mesti berpaksikan kepada cinta tulus kepada Allah dan bukan semata-mata kerana ketakutan atau mengejar ganjaran. Dengan menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan bibliografi dan analisis kandungan, kajian ini mengenal pasti sembilan syarat spiritual/kerohanian utama yang ditekankan oleh al-Ghazali—termasuk keikhlasan, rendah hati, kesedaran hati, cinta dan tawakal kepada Tuhan—yang mampu mengubah amalan zahir menjadi ibadah yang penuh bermakna. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa bagi al-Ghazali, maḥabbah bukan sekadar satu keadaan emosi, tetapi merupakan satu kuasa transformatif yang mengangkat akhlak daripada kepatuhan ritual kepada tindakan yang sarat dengan nilai kerohanian. Kesemua sembilan syarat kerohanian ini, yang diambil daripada karya-karya agungnya terutamanya Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn, berfungsi sebagai kerangka spiritual praktikal untuk mencapai penyucian jiwa dan keunggulan moral. Artikel ini turut meneroka pandangan kerohanian dan psikologi al-Ghazali tentang cinta dan amal baik, menekankan maḥabbah sebagai model etika yang menyeluruh dan melangkaui sempadan agama. Etika kerohanian yang dibangunkan oleh al-Ghazali—yang menyatukan pandangan teologi dengan transformasi moral praktikal—kekal sangat relevan dalam usaha memupuk kasih sayang, persefahaman antara agama dan keharmonian sosial dalam dunia yang majmuk masa kini.*

*Kata kunci: Amal baik; cinta; syarat batin; maḥabbah; takut; takwa*

## INTRODUCTION

Performing good deeds (*a'māl ṣāliḥat*) is central to Islamic practice, reflecting the inseparable connection between faith and righteous actions, a principle recognized since the early centuries of Islam. While Islamic teachings advocate a balance between the outer and inner dimensions of these deeds, contemporary practice often emphasizes external forms over inner spiritual qualities such as sincerity and humility. Al-Ghazali offers a distinctive and profound perspective on good deeds, particularly in *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din (Revival of the Religious Sciences)*, where he stresses their inner dimension. He articulates profound insights into the relationship between faith and good deeds, advancing a dynamic and integrative framework that underscores their inseparable connection. He maintains that authentic faith manifests in virtuous action, while righteous deeds, in turn, deepen and sustain faith insight (Mohd Rosmizi Abd Rahman et al., 2025b: 155-159). He elevates even lawful daily activities to the level of good deeds when infused with spiritual intention, arguing that actions without inner awareness are spiritually hollow—mere habits devoid of meaning (Quasem, 1974: 50). His holistic approach underscores the transformative power of integrating spirituality into every aspect of one's conduct, aiming to purify the soul and deepen one's connection with God.

Al-Ghazali challenges the common emphasis on the mere outward observance of devotional acts, arguing that such practices are insufficient without a corresponding inner spiritual dimension (Quasem, 1974). While upholding the importance of Islamic law (*Shari'ah*), he asserts that genuine spiritual fulfillment arises when the heart is filled with love for God. For al-Ghazali, good deeds are not simply legal obligations but outward expressions of an inner, heartfelt connection with the Divine. He emphasizes that devotional acts must meet specific spiritual conditions to be truly meaningful, noting that their inner essence is often neglected and only discernible to those with purified hearts and spiritual insight (Mohd Rosmizi Abd Rahman et al., 2025a: 80-84).

Al-Ghazali's lasting legacy, particularly through his *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, lies in his synthesis of theology, philosophy, and Sufism, where he highlights the central role of love (*maḥabbah*) and good deeds in the pursuit of spiritual and ethical life. He regards love for God (*maḥabbah Allah*) as the highest form of love—rooted in an appreciation of God's attributes such as mercy, beauty, and perfection—and as a transformative force that compels the believer toward moral purification and virtuous action (al-Ghazali, 1986). This divine love is not passive but active, shaping the believer's character and inspiring righteous deeds. Thus, for al-Ghazali, good deeds are not only acts of worship but concrete manifestations of divine love, aligning the believer with God's will and deepening the spiritual bond between the human soul and the Creator.

This study adopts a qualitative and theoretical research design grounded in bibliographic research and textual analysis. The primary sources consist of al-Ghazali's *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, supplemented by his other relevant works that address spiritual psychology, ethics, and the inner dimensions of religious practice. Given the breadth of al-Ghazali's corpus, a selective approach is employed, focusing specifically on texts that illuminate his understanding of love (*maḥabbah*), good deeds (*a'māl ṣāliḥat*), and the spiritual conditions underlying ethical action.

The research utilizes both descriptive and analytical methods, particularly content analysis. Through descriptive analysis, the study outlines al-Ghazali's key theological and ethical concepts, identifying recurring themes related to intention (*niyyah*), fear (*khawf*), hope (*rajā'*), piety (*taqwa*), and love (*maḥabbah*). Content analysis is then employed to examine relevant passages systematically, allowing for the identification, categorization, and interpretation of textual evidence that reveals the interconnections among these spiritual conditions.

Rather than treating these concepts as isolated virtues, the analysis reconstructs the implicit relationships within al-Ghazali's framework to demonstrate the coherent motivational model they collectively form under the overarching principle of divine love. This approach enables a systematic exposition of his spiritual-theological ethics, highlighting how inner states of the heart shape and sustain outward ethical conduct.

By engaging critically and contextually with al-Ghazali's writings, this study seeks to clarify his integrative vision of spirituality and morality. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary discussions on the relationship between inner transformation and ethical action, particularly in contexts where religious devotion and moral responsibility intersect.

Despite broad recognition of al-Ghazali's emphasis on inwardness and love, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the practical spiritual framework through which *maḥabbah* actually transforms ethical conduct. While previous studies have catalogued his spiritual conditions or analyzed the concept of love in isolation, there is a lack of systematic analysis that explicitly connects these discrete elements into a coherent model of ethical motivation. This article addresses that gap by undertaking a focused examination of how *maḥabbah* functions as the ultimate motivator within al-Ghazali's system.

Moreover, its specific contribution is the synthesis of nine key spiritual conditions—including faith, trust in God, sincerity, and love—from across the *Ihyā'* into an integrated framework. This framework demonstrates, with new clarity, the operative mechanism by which divine love elevates good deeds from ritualistic conformity to spiritually enriched action. By foregrounding *maḥabbah* not merely as a theological ideal but as the active, unifying core of a practical ethical system, this study offers a novel insight into the holistic and transformative logic of al-Ghazali's spiritually grounded ethics.

#### THE DYNAMIC AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF GOOD DEEDS IN AL-GHAZALI'S THOUGHT

Mohd Rosmizi et al. (2025a) highlight nine essential spiritual conditions of good deeds, drawn from al-Ghazali's profound insights. These conditions are not only integral to Islamic spiritual practice but also resonate with the ethical teachings of other major religions, making them common and universal principles across faith traditions. These conditions include:

1. Faith in God
2. Trust in God's wisdom
3. Piety or fear of God
4. Love for God
5. Sincerity
6. The purification of the heart and soul
7. The presence of the heart and mind
8. Humility or humbleness
9. Hope in God's mercy

Faith in God provides the foundation for all virtuous action, while trust in God's wisdom (*tawakkul*) encourages reliance on divine guidance. Piety reflects an awareness of moral responsibility before God, and love for God transforms good deeds into acts of devotion. Sincerity

ensures that actions are performed solely for God’s sake, supported by the continuous purification of the heart from pride, envy, and hypocrisy. The presence of heart and mind cultivates spiritual attentiveness, and humility reinforces human dependence on God. Finally, hope in God’s mercy sustains perseverance in doing good with confidence in divine compassion.

Together, these nine conditions elevate good deeds beyond outward compliance, framing them as conscious, spiritually grounded acts of worship and moral transformation.



FIGURE. 1. 9 Items of Spiritual Conditions of good deeds.  
Source: Adapted from Mohd Rosmizi Abd Rahman et al., 2025a.

According to al-Ghazali (1986), these spiritual conditions represent the inner core of good deeds and must accompany their external performance to give them true meaning and effectiveness. Among these conditions, piety—often referred to as the fear of God—is central in the Islamic tradition and is commonly associated with *taqwa*, or God-consciousness. While *taqwa* is widely emphasized in the Muslim world, al-Ghazali regards love (*maḥabbah*) of Allah as the peak of spiritual development. He asserts that performing good deeds motivated by love for God, rather than fear or obligation, reflects the highest spiritual stage. Love transforms the believer’s actions from mere rituals to acts of devotion and deep connection with the divine, thereby elevating the spiritual significance of good deeds. This underscores al-Ghazali’s belief that love is not only a moral virtue but the ultimate force that aligns human actions with divine will.

### THE IDEA OF LOVE FOR GOD

Al-Ghazali expounds that love for God (*maḥabbah*) or Divine love lies at the very heart of Islam, embodying its deepest essence and purpose. This love, as he describes it, is not simply a feeling but a profound state of the soul, a transformative condition that aligns the heart with the divine will and presence. To reach this exalted station, or *maqam*, of divine love, one must embark on a

path of rigorous self-refinement, nurturing specific virtues that prepare the soul for the intimacy of this connection. In elucidating the concept of love towards Allah, al-Ghazali underscores that this love represents the highest spiritual attainment and holds profound significance in one's faith. According to him, this love is rooted in self-awareness and the understanding of one's relationship with the Creator. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that a person who truly understands themselves will naturally come to know their Lord. He asserts that such self-awareness leads to the realization of one's dependence on Allah and the fundamental truth that, in essence, human existence is only possible through Allah's will and mercy (al-Ghazali, 1986; Ridzuan Masri, 2013).

Al-Ghazali emphasizes that *mahabbah* (love) for Allah is inseparable from absolute trust and faith in Him. True love, he argues, involves entrusting one's hopes, fears, and entire being to the Beloved—when directed toward Allah, this love becomes the highest and most complete form of devotion. It is not merely emotional but reflects a deep acknowledgment of Allah as the Creator and Sustainer of all existence. This divine love is unparalleled and infinite, surpassing all worldly attachments and grounded in unwavering faith. At the core of this love is faith in Allah alone, an undivided faith that embodies a boundless affection and reverence for Him. Al-Ghazali regards this absolute faith as the highest expression of love, a love that knows no limitations or conditions. For al-Ghazali, such love must surpass all other forms of affection, becoming the guiding force in a believer's life and leading to spiritual perfection by aligning one's actions and intentions with the divine will (al-Ghazali, 1986; Ebrahimi et al., 2021).

Al-Ghazali teaches that love, friendship, and brotherhood are powerful means of drawing closer to God. He emphasizes that true friendship arises from good character and virtuous behavior, fostering relationships grounded in kindness, patience, and integrity—traits that reflect divine qualities (al-Ghazali, 1986; Ebrahimi et al., 2021). Love for the sake of Allah, according to al-Ghazali, extends beyond familial ties to include neighbors, travelers, and even strangers, transforming everyday interactions into acts of devotion. This extensive view of *mahabbah* (divine love) positions it as both a spiritual and social force. Love for God inspires outward expressions of faith, such as humility through repentance, resilience through patience, and discipline through abstinence and contentment. These virtues, cultivated inwardly, radiate outward, enriching not only individual character but also the broader community. Al-Ghazali's model of divine love fosters a collective spirit of compassion and unity, making the believer a clear example of faith and a source of positive social transformation. In this framework, love becomes both a path to God and a means of uplifting others, nurturing a spiritually grounded and harmonious society (al-Ghazali, 1986; Ebrahimi et al., 2021).

From a psychological standpoint, al-Ghazali emphasizes that true love for God is an experiential and transformative journey rooted in human emotion and the soul's longing for the Divine. This love arises not merely from intellectual knowledge but from deep awareness and reverence that gradually intensify over time (al-Ghazali, 1986; Ridzuan Masri, 2013). Al-Ghazali describes this spiritual progression as a movement from knowledge (*ma'rifah*) to yearning (*shawq*), ultimately culminating in deep, enduring love. Such love reshapes character and inspires the cultivation of virtues like mercy, patience, and generosity, aligning one's actions with divine attributes. This inner transformation fosters personal growth while also manifesting outwardly in compassionate and ethical behavior. The believer, guided by divine love, becomes a source of support and inspiration to others, contributing to both personal fulfillment and broader social harmony. Al-Ghazali's model thus presents love as a holistic path that strengthens the individual's relationship with God and enriches the community through virtuous conduct (al-Ghazali, 1986; Ridzuan Masri, 2013).



## FROM FEAR (*KHAWF*) TO LOVE (*MAḤABBĀH*): THEIR ROLES IN MOTIVATING GOOD DEEDS

Al-Ghazali (1986) presents a structured account of the believer's inner journey toward God, emphasizing the interrelationship between piety (*taqwa*), fear (*khawf*), and love (*maḥabbah*). Good deeds, he argues, must be grounded in these inner spiritual conditions. Fear (*khawf*) serves as the initial foundation of spiritual growth, arising from awareness of God's omnipotence and one's moral shortcomings. This awareness motivates self-purification and ethical discipline, preparing the soul for higher stages of devotion. As spiritual refinement progresses, love for God (*maḥabbah*) emerges as the highest condition, transforming good deeds from fear-driven obligations into sincere acts of devotion and longing for closeness to the Divine.

While affirming the necessity of fearing God, al-Ghazali emphasizes the cultivation of a personal relationship with Him through divine love, a central theme in his thought and consistent with Sufi objectives. His interpretation of *taqwa* and *al-muttaqun* extends beyond conventional definitions by distinguishing levels and types of fear and piety. The highest form of fear is not fear of punishment, but fear of eternal deprivation from beholding God's Eternal Beauty (al-Ghazali, 1986: IV.33, 155ff; 1965: 25ff; 2010: IV.2, 185; Smith, 1983: 166). Similarly, he differentiates between outward piety and inward spiritual states, ranking inner piety as superior (Quasem, 1982: 135–148).

In *Ihyā'*, al-Ghazali situates fear and hope as foundational mystical virtues and describes spiritual development as a dynamic ascent through stations (*maqāmāt*), including *al-ṣiddīq* (the truly sincere) and *al-muqarrab* (those drawn near to God) (al-Ghazali, 1986). Fear is particularly crucial in the early stages of the path (*awā'il al-maqāmāt*), especially for the general Muslim community and spiritual novices, as it disciplines the soul and prepares it for sincere devotion (al-Ghazali, 1986: IV.33, 155; 1965: 26). However, actions motivated by love and hope are considered spiritually higher than those rooted primarily in fear.

As the believer advances, fear of divine justice gradually gives way to love grounded in awareness of God's mercy and beauty. At this higher stage, love becomes the primary motivation for good deeds, surpassing both fear of punishment and desire for reward. Nevertheless, fear remains an essential moral safeguard, preserving humility and consciousness of divine accountability. Genuine spiritual growth, therefore, requires balance: fear purifies and disciplines the soul, while love perfects and directs it.

Ultimately, al-Ghazali presents love (*maḥabbah*) as the culmination of the spiritual path and the highest inner condition of good deeds. Deeds performed out of love are more spiritually significant because love purifies intention (*niyyah*), deepens mindfulness, and nurtures humility (al-Ghazali, 1986). In this state, good deeds flow naturally from a heart aligned with God's will and are performed purely for His pleasure—not out of compulsion, fear of punishment, or desire for paradise, but out of gratitude, longing, and devotion to the Divine (al-Ghazali, 1986).

### *Dimensions of Love: Between the Divine and Humanity*

Al-Ghazali views love as a multi-dimensional force, with its highest form being love for God. This love arises from a deep recognition and reverence for divine attributes such as mercy, justice, and wisdom, and transcends mere emotional attachment. It becomes transformative, shaping ethical conduct and motivating believers to perform good deeds with the sincere intention of pleasing God. In *Kimiya'-i-Sa'adat (The Alchemy of Happiness)*, al-Ghazali emphasizes that ethical behavior must arise from genuine devotion rather than self-interest, as only such devotion gives good deeds their true spiritual worth (al-Ghazali, 2001).

This divine love also naturally extends to humanity, rooted in Qur’anic principles that advocate compassion, kindness, and empathy. The Qur’an states: “And do good—to parents, relatives, orphans, the needy...for God does not like those who are self-deluding and boastful” (Qur’an, 4:36), highlighting good deeds as manifestations of one’s relationship with God. Al-Ghazali underscores that such actions—charity, generosity, and forgiveness—are not merely social responsibilities but religious duties. Their highest spiritual value is realized when they are performed with a pure heart and selfless intentions, marking essential steps toward spiritual growth and a virtuous life (al-Ghazali, 1986).

This dual dimension of love—directed towards both God and humanity—suggests a model of moral behaviour where love serves as the core motivator. Theologically, this creates a foundation for a holistic ethical framework that integrates vertical love (between the individual and God) with horizontal love (between individuals in society). In other religious traditions, such as Christianity, similar concepts are present. For instance, in the New Testament, Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 22:37-39 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart...and your neighbour as yourself” resonates with this dual focus, establishing love as a central ethical principle that governs both divine and human relationships.

This universal principle—that love for the divine inspires and necessitates love for humanity—can serve as a valuable foundation for intercultural and interfaith dialogue. It highlights a shared ethical ideal that transcends specific religious boundaries, offering common ground for promoting mutual respect and understanding across diverse cultural and religious contexts. Through such a model, individuals of different faith backgrounds can find commonality in viewing love as both a means of personal spiritual growth and a call to compassionate action in society.

#### GOOD DEEDS IN RELATION TO OTHERS: LOVE AND COMPASSION

Al-Ghazali’s ethical vision is deeply rooted in the reciprocal relationship between love for God and love for fellow human beings. For al-Ghazali, good deeds are not only acts of obedience but also manifestations of an intrinsic compassion inspired by divine love. He emphasizes that true love (*maḥabbah*) for God inevitably extends to God’s creation, as the created world reflects divine beauty and mercy. Al-Ghazali’s work, particularly his *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, draws heavily on the Prophetic traditions, where mercy (*raḥmah*) and kindness (*iḥsān*) are essential components of virtuous social interactions (al-Ghazali, 1986). For instance, al-Ghazali frequently cites the well-known *hadith*: “None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself,” which places the welfare of others as a reflection of one’s own faith and spiritual integrity.

In this framework, acts such as charity, caring for the marginalized, and offering compassion to those in distress are seen not only as moral obligations but also as pathways to a more profound spiritual connection with the divine (Nur Saadah Mohamad Aun, Zaenal Abidin, Nur Madihah Ili Idrus, 2025). Al-Ghazali argues that acts of compassion are infused with the intention (*niyyah*) of serving God, which elevates ordinary social interactions to acts of worship (*ibādah*). This intention transforms good deeds from mere social responsibilities to spiritual exercises that refine the soul and bring the believer closer to God. Through this perspective, al-Ghazali integrates a dynamic theological ethic where social responsibility and spiritual growth are inherently intertwined.

Moreover, al-Ghazali’s approach provides a unique view on the role of love and compassion in constructing a cohesive social fabric. His ethical model suggests that when good deeds are driven by sincere love, they contribute to the harmony and well-being of the community, fostering a sense of solidarity and empathy across socio-economic divides. He contends that

charity and kindness should not be limited to transactional gestures but should stem from a deeper, unconditional love, which he identifies as reflective of God's mercy (al-Ghazali, 1986). This orientation towards selfless love reinforces an ethical structure where individual and communal good are mutually reinforcing, highlighting a distinctive moral obligation to serve others as an extension of one's devotion to God.

Al-Ghazali's vision also has significant implications for contemporary interfaith and intercultural dialogue. By framing good deeds as expressions of love and compassion toward others, he promotes a universally accessible ethic that transcends religious boundaries. This perspective aligns with broader humanistic principles, suggesting a spiritual common ground where people of diverse beliefs can engage in meaningful acts of kindness and solidarity. Al-Ghazali's emphasis on love-infused ethics offers a model for fostering mutual respect and understanding, encouraging individuals to view compassionate action as both a spiritual duty and a means to contribute to social unity. Thus, al-Ghazali presents a holistic ethical framework where love for God translates into tangible acts of service and compassion toward others. His integration of love into good deeds provides an enriched understanding of moral behaviour, one that acknowledges the divine in each human interaction and strengthens the individual's relationship with God while enhancing the collective welfare.

#### LOVE AS THE FOUNDATIONS OF GOOD DEEDS

The above discussion shows that in al-Ghazali's spiritual-theological framework, love serves as the foundation of good deeds, but this love is connected to fear and awe of God. Al-Ghazali views fear (*khawf*) as an essential precursor to developing a deep sense of reverence, which ultimately leads to love (*maḥabbah*) for the Divine. This relationship between fear and love is particularly evident in the ritual practices of Islam, such as prayer and the recitation of the Qur'an. When discussing the ritual of prayer, al-Ghazali emphasizes the necessity of fearing God and maintaining a state of awe (*al-ḥibah*) toward Him (al-Ghazali, 1986: I.4, 161-162; 1992b: 44-45; 1993: I.4, 141-142).

When it comes to love, it stands as the most crucial spiritual condition for those aspiring to attain true eternal happiness. For al-Ghazali, love represents the highest spiritual station on the path to God, serving as the ultimate objective for Sufis and anyone seeking to cultivate a deeply personal and intimate relationship with the Divine (Smith, 1983: 173-197; Simon, 1956: 305-321; 'Umaruddin, 1996: 174-185). This state of love is reached when individuals act purely out of their affection for God, without seeking rewards or trying to evade punishment. Al-Ghazali is particularly critical of those who perform good deeds with the expectation of divine rewards or as a means of avoiding God's wrath. He believes that genuine lovers of God engage in righteous actions solely out of sincere devotion, desiring nothing in return for their piety and good works. This selfless approach reflects the essence of true love, which transcends transactional motivations.

#### SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INSIGHTS ON LOVE AND GOOD DEEDS

Al-Ghazali's distinctive contribution to Islamic ethics lies in his integration of spiritual psychology with moral action. He portrays the soul as engaged in a continuous struggle between the lower self (*nafs*) and the higher spirit (*ruh*), a tension comparable to the conflict between base desires and the aspirational self in modern psychology. Within this framework, love for God functions as a



transformative force that elevates the soul, weakens worldly attachments, and reorients action toward sincerity and devotion (al-Ghazali, 1986). Love is therefore not passive sentiment but an active motivational power that reshapes the psyche and converts good deeds from obligation into joyful expressions of inner commitment.

This transformative love purifies the inner self and aligns behavior with the divine will. As believers progress spiritually, their conduct moves from external observance to heartfelt sincerity (al-Ghazali, 1986). Al-Ghazali also highlights the broader psychological and social implications of love-driven action: devotion rooted in love generates compassion, justice, and empathy, thereby contributing to a more ethical society (Quasem, 1974). Such love fosters inner peace and psychological fulfillment beyond material concerns, and it carries ethical implications for leadership. In his letters to rulers, al-Ghazali stresses the centrality of intention, urging leaders to act from sincere love for God rather than ego-driven motives, thereby promoting moral integrity and emotional regulation in governance (al-Ghazali, 1992a: 11:58, 12:67).

Within the mystical path, al-Ghazali positions love as the highest spiritual station, surpassing earlier stages of fear and hope (al-Ghazali, 1986: IV.33, 155; 1965: 25–26; 1993: IV.33, 121). At this level, religious duties are no longer externally reinforced but internally driven by intrinsic motivation and longing for closeness to the Divine. Love thus becomes a psychological anchor that enhances well-being, deepens empathy, and encourages altruistic behavior. While rooted firmly in Islamic tradition, al-Ghazali's understanding of love also resonates with broader philosophical currents, including Neo-Platonism, and reflects a universal insight into love as a fundamental human drive (Smith, 1983: 105–132; Simon, 1956: 305–321). Genuine love naturally manifests in intentional and mindful action, motivated solely by the desire to please God (al-Ghazali, 1986: IV.36, 329–338; 1993: IV.36, 277–289).

When divine love becomes central to the believer's consciousness, it reshapes cognition, emotion, and behavior. Voluntary acts of worship such as *tahajjud* prayer and *dhikr* are performed with joy rather than compulsion, reflecting a state of psychological immersion and fulfillment (al-Ghazali, 1986: IV.36, 329–338; 1993: IV.36, 277–289). Constant remembrance of God integrates thought and emotion, cultivating a value-driven life marked by compassion and selflessness.

At the same time, al-Ghazali recognizes psychological obstacles to devotion. Distraction in prayer, he argues, often stems from unresolved attachments and unregulated desires, anticipating insights from cognitive psychology regarding attention and affective interference. True devotion requires a hierarchy of love in which God is placed above all else; otherwise, worldly attachments will dominate one's thoughts during worship (al-Ghazali, 1986: I.4, 161; 1992b: 44; 1993: I.4, 141). Spiritual attentiveness therefore demands emotional discipline and cognitive focus.

Acts such as almsgiving and pilgrimage further illustrate the integration of spiritual and psychological transformation. Almsgiving symbolizes detachment from possessions and the reordering of internal values toward transcendence (al-Ghazali, 1986: I.5, 212–213; 1980: 25–29; 1993: I.5, 166–167). Pilgrimage likewise entails psychological resilience and obedience, as believers leave behind family and worldly concerns in a profound expression of love for God (al-Ghazali, 1986: I.7, 265–270; 1975: 104–108, 117–118; 1993: I.7, 203–207).

Ultimately, the cultivation of constant remembrance (*dhikr*) reinforces identity, intention, and emotional regulation while sustaining divine love. Acknowledging varying cognitive capacities among individuals, al-Ghazali advocates consistent practice of good deeds and remembrance to build spiritual stamina and resilience (al-Ghazali, 1986: I.9, 301–302; 1993: I.9, 236–237). Through this disciplined process, believers gradually transcend worldly distractions,

allowing divine love to transform consciousness, refine moral character, and deepen intimacy with God.

## LOVE AND GOOD DEEDS: UNIVERSALITY IN THE MODERN WORLD

Al-Ghazali's teachings on love and good deeds offer enduring relevance for contemporary spiritual seekers. In a world often dominated by materialism and self-interest, his view of love as the foundation for moral action presents a compelling spiritual alternative. By framing good deeds as acts of love, al-Ghazali shifts focus from legalistic or transactional religious practices to a more heartfelt, ethical life. His perspective underscores that love and good deeds are central to daily ethical conduct, resonating with universal values across cultures.

A modern discipline that closely resonates with al-Ghazali's emphasis on love (*maḥabbah*) and good deeds (*a'māl ṣāliḥat*) is positive psychology. Grounded in the study of human flourishing and well-being (Seligman, 2011), positive psychology identifies prosocial behaviors—such as love, kindness, compassion, and altruism—as central to both individual and societal well-being. Empirical studies demonstrate that daily acts of kindness enhance life satisfaction, reduce stress, and strengthen social cohesion (Bialobrzska et al., 2023; Cregg & Cheavens, 2022). This empirical evidence parallels al-Ghazali's view that sincere good deeds, when motivated by divine love, transform ordinary actions into spiritually and ethically meaningful practices.

Al-Ghazali's love-based ethical framework offers significant contemporary applications. In moral education, particularly within plural societies such as Malaysia, his emphasis on inner intention (*niyyah*) and love-driven virtue shifts the focus from mere rule compliance to character formation. Education informed by *maḥabbah* encourages empathy, self-discipline, and intrinsic moral motivation rather than external reward or punishment. In psychology, his model anticipates eudaimonic (meaning-centered) well-being by prioritizing inner virtue, purpose, and self-transcendence over material success, aligning with contemporary perspectives that emphasize human flourishing (Seligman, 2011).

Furthermore, in interreligious relations, al-Ghazali's framework underscores love as a universal moral principle that transcends formal religious boundaries. When good deeds are rooted in sincere love for God, they naturally manifest as compassion, justice, and respect for others—values shared across religious traditions. In multicultural contexts like Malaysia, this inwardly grounded ethics can nurture social harmony by promoting moral responsibility and empathy beyond communal divisions. Thus, al-Ghazali's integration of love, intention, and action not only anticipates insights in positive psychology but also provides a spiritually grounded ethical model capable of addressing contemporary challenges in education, mental well-being, and interfaith coexistence.

Al-Ghazali teaches that true love for God is reflected in ethical actions toward others. One's relationship with God, he argues, is mirrored in how they treat fellow beings, making ethical behavior an expression of divine love (al-Ghazali, 1980). Helping others fosters positive emotions and reinforces prosocial behavior (Hui et al., 2020; Seligman, 2011). According to both classical thought and modern research, human beings possess an inherent capacity for virtue and goodness, making them naturally inclined toward good deeds (Rothman et al, 2024; Ghalib et al., 2022; Rothman & Coyle, 2018,). Studies show that altruistic acts not only benefit recipients but also enhance the giver's well-being, life satisfaction, and sense of connectedness (Khan & Imran,

2023). This mutual reinforcement between inner virtue and outward action supports al-Ghazali's view that love and good deeds enrich both self and society.

Al-Ghazali sees love for God as the highest source of purpose, motivating acts of compassion and service that build communal bonds. This aligns with insights from positive psychology, which links meaningful engagement and positive relationships to well-being. The interconnectedness of love and good deeds serves both spiritual and social functions. In today's multicultural and multi-religious world, al-Ghazali's ideas contribute meaningfully to interfaith dialogue (Parrott, 2018). His emphasis on love as a motivator for ethical behavior resonates with universal religious principles (Greenberg, 2008), promoting compassion and mutual respect across faiths (Albab, 2019). This inner orientation resonates with universal ethical principles found across the world's religious traditions and aligns with core values invoked in modern interfaith dialogue, such as empathy, respect, and the Golden Rule ("do unto others..."), which al-Ghazali applies as a normative axis around which justice, compassion, and fraternity revolve. By emphasizing love as a primary motivator for moral conduct, his work transcends sectarian boundaries, resonating with global ethical imperatives like the "Golden Rule" (Parrott, 2018). Though rooted in Islamic theology, his teachings can transcend religious boundaries by focusing on sincerity, intention, and shared human values. This makes al-Ghazali's ethical model adaptable to various cultural and religious contexts. By promoting values like compassion and altruism, al-Ghazali's teachings foster unity and social harmony in diverse societies. His approach encourages individuals to rise above divisions and work together for the common good, aligning with the aims of interfaith dialogue (Kamar Oniah, 2001; Shafik & Abu-Nimer, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

The analysis presented indicates that al-Ghazali contributes unique theoretical and practical aspects to the inner dimension of good deeds within traditional Islam. He injects spirituality not only into the potentially dry body of theology, as observed by McDonald (1899), but also into jurisprudence, formal religious observance, and other disciplines of knowledge. His conception of good deeds is *Tawhidic*, suggesting that each good deed, including daily activities, should be performed solely for God and should draw the doer closer to Him. This dynamic understanding of good deeds extends to other religious traditions. The concept of *Tawhid* can serve as a foundation for fostering harmonious coexistence in multi-religious societies (Deniz, 2025; Nur Farhana, 2012). Thus, al-Ghazali's approach and spiritual insights regarding good deeds can serve as a key theme for interreligious dialogue. In the Malaysian context, such dialogue and engagement are crucial for maintaining harmonious inter-religious relations (Mohamed et al, 2023; Suraya Sintang et al., 2012; Nur Farhana et al., 2013).

Furthermore, al-Ghazali's work not only revitalizes a deep spirituality that has often been overlooked by many Muslims—especially since the early centuries of Islam—but also bridges the gap between various social classes, unites the heart (spirituality) and the mind (reason), and harmonizes Sufism with formal religious observance. This balance addresses the unequal emphasis placed on the outward and inward dimensions of good deeds.

Al-Ghazali's vision of love as the foundation for good deeds offers a transformative approach to spirituality. For him, love for God (*maḥabbah*) represents the highest form of devotion, inspiring believers to perform good deeds with sincerity and purpose. By positioning love as the central motivation for ethical behaviour, al-Ghazali provides a powerful framework for

understanding the spiritual significance of good deeds in both personal and communal contexts. His insights continue to inspire individuals seeking a deeper, more meaningful connection to God through the practice of love-infused good deeds.

Additionally, al-Ghazali's teachings on love and good deeds provide a profound ethical and spiritual model. By prioritizing the inner dimensions of good deeds and elevating love as the ultimate motivator, he challenges believers to move beyond mere ritualism and embrace a more sincere form of devotion. His insights into the transformative power of love deliver a timeless message that resonates across cultures and religious traditions, promoting compassion, justice, and spiritual fulfilment.

Ultimately, al-Ghazali's interpretations of inner dimension of good deeds especially spiritual conditions such as love are critically important for Muslims today. His exposition on the psychology or inner dimension of good deeds serves as a spiritual model aimed at awakening souls and guiding individuals on their journey toward Allah. This practical model encourages Muslims to enhance the quality of their good deeds and aspire for a higher degree of eternal happiness.

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