

Reason, Revelation, and Sufism: The Epistemic Paradigm of al-Ghazali and Ibnu Taimiyyah

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Citation (CMS-fullnote):

Hamdan Maghribi, "Reason, Revelation, and Sufism: The Epistemic Paradigm of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taimiyyah," *Journal of Islamic and Occidental Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025): 171-188,
<https://doi.org/10.21111/jios.v3i2.79>

Submitted: 09 Sept 2025

Revised: 18 Nov 2025

Accepted: 14 Dec 2025

Published: 15 Dec 2025

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Abstract: This article examines the construction of Sufi epistemology according to two major Islamic thinkers: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Ahmad ibn Taimiyyah. These figures represent contrasting poles in Islamic intellectual history—al-Ghazali as a defender and reformer of *syarī'ah*-based Sunni Sufism, and Ibnu Taimiyyah as a sharp critic of Sufism influenced by speculative theology and philosophy. The study explores their views on the sources, methods, and validity of Sufi knowledge, particularly regarding *maqām*, *aḥwāl*, *kasyf*, *ilhām*, and *ma'rifah*, as well as their perspectives on the relationship between reason, revelation, and intuition (*dzawq*) as epistemic pathways. This research is qualitative in nature, with literature study, and historical-philosophical approach. The authors examine the primary works of both figures and compares them through a chronological and systematic framework. It allows for an exploration of the sociocultural and theological contexts that shaped their epistemological constructions. The study finds that al-Ghazali integrates rational inquiry (*syahādah al-'aql*) with inner illumination (*kashf*), framing *ma'rifah* as the product of synergy between *tazkiyah al-nafs* and *tajallī ilāhī*. He legitimizes intuitive knowledge as long as it remains within the bounds of the *syarī'ah*. Ibnu Taimiyyah, while acknowledging *ilhām* and *kasyf* among the saints (*awliyā'*), restricts their epistemic validity to the limits of *nash* and *fithrah*, rejecting any claim that spiritual experience can supersede revelation. Despite their differing approaches,

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both uphold *syarī'ah*-rooted spirituality and reject speculative excesses that threaten the foundations of *tawhīd*.

Keywords: Epistemology, al-Ghazali, Ibnu Taimiyyah, Sunni Sufism, Salafi Sufism.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji konstruksi epistemologi Sufi berdasarkan pemikiran dua tokoh besar Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali dan Ahmad ibn Taimiyyah. Kedua tokoh ini mewakili kutub yang berlawanan dalam sejarah intelektual Islam— al-Ghazālī sebagai pembela dan pembaru tasawuf Sunni berbasis syariat, sedangkan Ibnu Taimiyyah sebagai kritikus tajam terhadap penyimpangan tasawuf yang bercampur dengan teologi spekulatif dan filsafat. Studi ini mengeksplorasi pandangan mereka tentang sumber, metode, dan validitas pengetahuan sufi, khususnya terkait *maqām*, *aḥwāl*, *kasyf*, *ilhām*, dan *ma'rifah*, serta perspektif mereka tentang hubungan antara akal, wahyu, dan intuisi (*dzawq*) sebagai sarana epistemologis. Ini adalah penelitian kualitatif dengan metode studi kepustakaan dan pendekatan historis-filosofis. Pengulis mengkaji karya utama kedua tokoh tersebut dan membandingkannya melalui kerangka kronologis dan sistematis. Hal ini memungkinkan eksplorasi konteks sosiobudaya dan teologis yang membentuk konstruksi epistemologis mereka. Studi ini menemukan bahwa al-Ghazali mengintegrasikan penyelidikan rasional (*syahādah al-'aql*) dengan pencerahan batin (*kasyf*), menggambarkan *ma'rifah* sebagai hasil sinergi antara *tazkiyah al-nafs* dan *tajallī ilāhī*. Ia melegitimasi pengetahuan intuitif selama tetap berada dalam batas-batas *syarī'ah*. Sementara Ibnu Taimiyyah, meskipun mengakui *ilhām* dan *kasyf* bagi para wali, membatasi validitas epistemologisnya pada batas-batas nas dan fitrah, menolak klaim bahwa pengalaman spiritual dapat melampaui wahyu. Meskipun pendekatan mereka berbeda, keduanya memegang teguh spiritualitas yang berakar pada *syarī'ah* dan menolak eksekusi spekulatif yang mengancam fondasi tauhid.

Kata Kunci: Epistemologi, Ibnu Taimiyyah, al-Ghazali, Tasawuf Sunni, Tasawuf Salafi.

Introduction

What constitutes reliable knowledge of God, and by what warrants may such knowledge claim authority over belief and practice? This article explores two eminent but often oppositional answers within the Sunnī tradition: those of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and Ahmad ibn Taimiyyah (d. 728/1328), to reconstruct how each thinker calibrates the relation between reason (*'aql*), revelation (*wahy/nash*), and spiritual intuition (*dzawq, kasyf, ilhām*). Our basic contention is that both scholars, notwithstanding stark rhetorical contrasts and different polemical horizons, advance a model of *syarī'ah*-governed interiority: they affirm the reality and value of spiritual states yet subordinate their evidentiary force to textual revelation interpreted through sound reason and ethical discipline. The difference lies less in whether they accept intuitive insight, and more in how they police its scope and public normativity.

Thus, the present study addresses a classical and contemporary problem. Classically, disputes over the epistemic status of unveiling (*kasyf*) and inspiration (*ilhām*) animated debates between Sufi ascetics, philosophers, and mutakallimūn. Theologically, claims of union (*ittihād*), indwelling (*ḥulūl*), or ontological monism (*waḥdah al-wujūd*) raised questions about the Creator–creation divide and the boundaries of tauḥīd. Juridically, charismatic assertions of spiritual privilege threatened to undermine the rule of law by elevating private revelations above public evidence. In modern settings, parallel questions return in new garb: Can spiritual experience guide collective ethical judgment? What weight should mystical reports carry in pedagogy, da‘wah, or social reform? And how might a classical Sunni epistemology speak to contemporary seekers who yearn for interior depth without suspending the discipline of the law?

The central challenge is to articulate a theory of warranted religious knowing that avoids both reductive legalism and unfalsifiable interiority. Al-Ghazali and Ibnu Taymiyyah offer two seminal calibrations of this balance. Al-Ghazali narrates an ascent from scepticism to certainty whereby God casts light into the heart; yet these luminous metaphors serve to perfect, not replace, reason and revelation, and only within a regimen of spiritual purification. Ibnu Taymiyyah rehabilitates reason through *fithrah*—the innate, God-given cognitive orientation—properly guided by revelation. Within this framework, he acknowledges *ilhām* and *karāmāt* while denying them the status of *ḥujjah ‘āmmah* (publicly binding proof). Intuitive cognition is real but non-legislative: spiritual experience may illuminate, but only revelation governs.¹

Reframing the contrast between these thinkers is important for at least three reasons. First, secondary literature often exaggerates their opposition: al-Ghazali is sometimes read through the lens of later monistic metaphysics, while Ibnu Taymiyyah is frequently depicted as a categorical opponent of Sufism. Closer readings reveal instead a substantial middle ground: al-Ghazali’s mysticism remains rigorously anchored in the *syarī‘ah*, and Ibnu Taymiyyah’s critique leaves intact a wide range of sober, ethical sufism, even as he rejects philosophical

¹ Muhammad Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm Al-Dīn* (Riyadh: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2005); Ahmad ibn ‘Abd al-Halim bin Taymiyyah, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Syaikh Al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah*, ed. ‘Abdurrahman bin Muhammad bin Qasim and Muhammad bin ‘Abdurrahman bin Muhammad bin Qasim (Riyadh: Mathābi’ al-Riyādh, 2004); Ibnu Taymiyyah, *Al-Furqān Bayna Auliyyā’ Al-Raḥmān Wa Auliyyā’ Al-Syaithān* (Damaskus: Maktabah Dār al-Bayān, 1985).

mysticism and antinomian tendencies.² Second, their respective linguistic and semantic sensibilities—al-Ghazali’s tiered metaphors of light and Ibnu Taymiyyah’s anti-equivocation program—form part of their epistemic architectures rather than mere stylistic choices; how one speaks about God and experience shapes what one may legitimately claim to know.³ Third, their models provide criteria for contemporary engagement with mystical claims: assessing reports of kashf, examining their moral “fruits,” and distinguishing between private edification and public obligation.

The research problem can be stated succinctly: What is the status of Sufi knowing in Sunni epistemology according to al-Ghazali and Ibnu Taimiyyah, and how do reason and revelation discipline, authorize, or delimit such knowing? Answering this requires an internal reconstruction of each thinker’s conceptual field; *naql* (transmission), *nazhar* (inference), *fithrah*, *dzauq*, *kasyf*, *ma’rifah*, and a comparative account of their conflict rules: what happens, in their view, when a reported unveiling seems to clash with a textual command or a rational deliverance? For al-Ghazali, the hierarchy runs from text and reason through purification toward an infused certainty that confirms rather than displaces obligation. For Ibnu Taimiyyah, *fithrah* and *nash* supply the outer bounds within which illuminations may edify the subject but never legislate for others.⁴

A brief survey of scholarship clarifies this article’s placement. Studies of al-Ghazali’s *al-Munqidz min al-Dhalāl*, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, and *Misykāt al-Anwār* emphasize his integration of law, ethics, and contemplative practice. The *Ihyā’* links ascetic disciplines and social virtues to a teleology of heart-illumination; the

² Muhammad Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidz Min Al-Dhalāl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d.); Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya: Makers of The Muslim World* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2020); Al-Thablawi Mahmud Sa’ad, *Al-Tashawwuf Fī Turāts Ibn Taimiyyah* (Kairo: Al-Hai’ah al-Mishriyyah al-Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1984).

³ Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Syaikh Al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taimiyyah*; Jules Janssens, “Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn Rushd in the Dar’ Ta’ārud. *Al-‘Aql wa al-Naql* (with Special Attention to His Quotations of Ibn Rushd’s Tahāfut Al-Tahāfut),” in *Contextualizing Premodern Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 147–78, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003309895-9>; Katja Krause, Luis Xavier López-Farjeat, and Nicholas A. Oschman, *Contextualizing Premodern Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003309895>.

⁴ Muhammad Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *Misykāt Al-Anwār Wa Mishfāt Al-Asrār*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ‘Izz al-Din Al-Sairawan (Kairo: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, n.d.); Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Syaikh Al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taimiyyah*; Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Al-Furqān Bayna Awliyā’ Al-Rahmān Wa Awliyā’ Al-Syaihān*.

Misykāt conceptualizes graded degrees of light that refine intellection without negating discursive knowledge.⁵ In the case of Ibnu Taymiyyah, recent scholarship highlights his *fithrah*-realism, his reconfiguration of reason within a revelatory horizon, and his nuanced evaluation of sufism: praise for the sober Junaidian tradition, critique of monistic metaphysics, and consistent rejection of private inspiration as a basis for suspending legal norms.⁶ Ibnu al-Qayyim's *Madārij al-Sālikīn* further elaborates these themes by examining the nature of *wāridāt* (incoming inspirations), their moral verification, and their subordination to scripture.⁷

Two gaps persist in the existing literature. First, comparative studies often reduce each thinker to a stereotype—"mystical enthusiast" versus "legal rationalist"—instead of recovering the shared Sunni logic by which both affirm spiritual states yet regulate their normativity. Second, analyses insufficiently integrate the semantics of God-talk and experience-talk into epistemology. For al-Ghazali, the metaphor of light mediates between intellect and unveiling; for Ibnu Taymiyyah, semantic precision regarding divine names and attributes prevents metaphor from hardening into ontological error.⁸ This study addresses both gaps by mapping convergences and divergences within a unified analytic frame and treating language as integral to epistemic method.

Methodologically, this article employs a qualitative, historical-philosophical approach grounded in close readings of primary texts: al-Ghazali's *al-Munqidz, Ihya'*, and *Misykāt*; Ibnu Taymiyyah's *Majmū' al-Fatāwā, al-Furqān bayna Awliyā' al-Rahmān wa Awliyā' al-Shaythān*, and relevant treatises on Sufism and innovation. These are triangulated with later Sunni pietistic writings, particularly those of Ibnu al-Qayyim, and with modern studies attentive to epistemology, language, and law. The comparative method is problem-centred (the epistemic status of *kasyf/ilhām*), concept-tracking (*fithrah, dzawq, ma'rifah*),

⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm Al-Dīn*; Al-Ghazali, *Misykāt Al-Anwār Wa Mishfāt Al-Asrār*.

⁶ Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya: Makers of The Muslim World*; Livnat Holtzman, "Human Choice, Divine Guidance and the Fithra Tradition: The Use of Hadith in Theological Treatises by Ibnu Taymiyya and Ibnu Qayyim Al-Jawziyya," in *Times*, n.d., 163–88; Thariq al-Sayyid Mushthafa Al-Bakri, *Ibn Taimiyyah Wa Mauqifuhu Min Al-Turāts Al-Shūfi* (Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Jauzī, 2020).

⁷ Ibnu Qayyim al-Jauziyyah, *Madārij Al-Sālikīn Fī Manāzil Al-Sā'irīn*, ed. Muhammad Ajmal Al-Ishlahi (Mekkah: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2019).

⁸ Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya: Makers of The Muslim World*; Al-Bakri, *Ibn Taimiyyah Wa Mauqifuhu Min Al-Turāts Al-Shūfi*; Ahmad bin Muhammad Banani, *Mawqif Al-Imām Ibn Taimiyyah Min Al-Tashawwuf Wa Al-Shūfiyyah* (Saudi Arabia: Umm al-Qurā, 1986).

and normatively oriented toward legal-ethical implications. Both thinkers ultimately affirm that public normativity belongs exclusively to revelation interpreted through sound reason, while private illuminations remain morally significant but non-legislative. Several guiding questions structure the analysis: How does each thinker define and rank the sources of knowledge? What constitutes the evidentiary scope of *kasyf* and *ilhām*? Under what conditions can intuitive deliverances be deemed knowledge rather than delusion? What linguistic and semantic disciplines prevent category mistakes and ontological inflation?

From these questions emerges the article's thesis: al-Ghazali articulates a constructive account of intuitive cognition as a divine grace that perfects intellection within the *syarī'ah*, whereas Ibnu Taymiyyah presents a guarded account that affirms *ilhām* while subjecting it to stringent controls through *fithrah* and *nash*. The two converge in endorsing a disciplined spirituality whose authenticity is tested by ethical fruits and fidelity to revelation; they diverge in their epistemic optimism and anxieties regarding semantic drift.⁹

The significance of this reconstruction is both scholarly and practical. It contributes to current reassessments of Ibnu Taymiyyah that move beyond reductionist portrayals by foregrounding his epistemology and selective engagement with Sufi materials. It likewise corrects readings of al-Ghazali that project later monistic developments onto his corpus. Practically, the study furnishes criteria for contemporary pedagogical and spiritual leadership: cultivating ethical-ascetic formation, evaluating experiences by scriptural fidelity and moral outcome, resisting the elevation of private inspiration into public law, and maintaining semantic discipline as a safeguard for *tawhīd*.

In sum, this article seeks to clarify how two major Sunni thinkers understood the grammar of religious knowledge—how one comes to know God, how such knowledge is cultivated and tested, and under what conditions it acquires authority. Their shared conclusion, though expressed differently, is clear: pursue illumination, but let revelation remain sovereign.

⁹ Carolyn Baugh, "Ibn Taymiyya's Feminism? Imprisonment and the Divorce Fatwās," in *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, ed. Ednan Aslan, Marcia Hermansen, and Elif Medeni (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 181–96; Yossef Rapoport, "Ibn Taymiyya on Divorce Oaths," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Ed Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 191–217.

Al-Ghazali's Epistemic Architecture: Intuition as the Perfection of Discursive Knowing

Al-Ghazali's writings interweave three registers of knowing, textual transmission (*naql*), rational inquiry (*nazhar/'aql*), and spiritual "tasting" (*dzāuq*), within a single moral-pedagogical program. At the centre of this program stands *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the self): ascetic discipline, ritual regularity, and cultivating virtues are not pious add-ons but the method by which cognition is healed. In the *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, knowledge is inseparable from the ethical reformation of the knower; acts of worship, companionship of the righteous, and vigilant self-accounting form a pedagogy that both prepares the heart and rectifies the intellect.¹⁰ Crucially, this pedagogy is not anti-intellectual. Instead, it posits that the intellect's clarity depends on moral health; spiritual light perfects discursive insight rather than replacing it.

This is why al-Ghazali's famous crisis and recovery, narrated in *al-Munqidz min al-Dhalāl*, does not end in quietism. He recounts that certainty (*yaqīn*) came as a light God cast into the heart; yet the practical outcome is a renewed obedience to the law and a disciplined life. The "light" is teleological: it orders the soul toward the ends revealed in the *syarī'ah*. In *Misykāt al-Anwār*, al-Ghazali develops a hierarchy of illumination that clarifies this teleology: sensory light yields to intellectual light; intellectual light is itself perfected by a superadded divine light, which does not abrogate rational form but suffuses it.¹¹ Al-Ghazali's luminous metaphors thus guard two borders simultaneously: (a) against reductionism, by insisting that discursive reason alone cannot consummate knowledge of God; (b) against antinomian inflation, by refusing to turn charismatic states into legislative warrants.

Within this structure, *ilhām* (inspiration) and *kasyf* (unveiling) play a personal-evidentiary role. They ground existential certainty for the one who tastes, yet they do not create public obligations for others. The social normativity of doctrine and law remains anchored in revelation interpreted through sound methods. Hence, al-Ghazali's polemical cautions against *ḥulūl/ittiḥād* (indwelling/union): such locutions, whether intended metaphorically or ontologically, are theologically perilous because they blur the Creator-creation

¹⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm Al-Dīn*.

¹¹ Al-Ghazali, *Misykāt Al-Anwār Wa Mishfāt Al-Asrār*.

distinction and undermine moral responsibility.¹² Conversely, the Junaydian sobriety he extols, effacement of ego through obedience, exemplifies the pedagogy that renders intuitive certainty safe: it “sweetens” the law, deepens humility, and bears moral fruit.

Two methodological notes follow. *First*, al-Ghazali treats language about God with graded analogical care: his luminous imagery aims to express participatory knowledge without collapsing transcendence. *Second*, he constantly tests interior states by their ethical outcomes. Where a state produces disdain for obligations, sectarian arrogance, or hostility to the Prophet’s practice, it signals delusion rather than gift. The epistemic upshot is unambiguous: intuition confirms revelation’s trajectory; it does not chart a novel path.

Ibnu Taimiyyah’s Fithrah-Realism: Revelation as Rule, Illumination as Gift

Ibnu Taimiyyah’s alternative pathway begins with a rehabilitated account of reason. For him, sound *‘aql* is not an autonomous rival to revelation but the human *fithrah*; an innate, God-given cognitive orientation, rectified by *nash* (textual proof). In his view,¹³ The epistemic conflict alleged between reason and revelation is a product of corrupted reasoning or misread texts; when *fithrah* is morally and intellectually purified, it recognizes revelation’s truthfulness and coherence. This move is decisive: it honours rational inquiry and de-absolutizes it by locating its integrity inside the divine discourse that creates and guides the *fithrah*.

Ibnu Taimiyyah affirms the reality of *ilhām*, *kasyf*, and *karāmāt* (saintly marvels) within that frame. He cites Qur’anic and historical reports of God’s special aid to the righteous and acknowledges that purified hearts receive insights beyond ordinary inference. But he draws a boundary at *ḥujjiyyah ‘āmmah*: no inspiration, however luminous, can bind the community or override

¹² Al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm Al-Dīn*; Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidz Min Al-Dhalāl*.

¹³ Ibn Taimiyyah, *Majmū’ Fatāwā Syaikh Al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taimiyyah*; ‘Abdullah al-Baridi, *Ibn Taimiyyah Failasūf Al-Fithrah: Naḥwa Kabsalah Al-Failasūf* (Dammām: Dār Atsar, 2021); Daniel Jou, “Ibn Taymiyya on Human Nature and Belief in God: Using the Cognitive Science of Religion to Study the Fithra,” *Religions* 13, no. 10 (October 10, 2022): 951, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100951>.

a textual command.¹⁴ In *al-Furqān bayna Awliyā' al-Raḥmān wa Awliyā' al-Syaithān*, he sharpens the test: distinguish between divine allies and satanic dupes by textual fidelity and ethical fruits. True unveilings, he insists, increase obedience, humility, justice, and love of God; false unveilings breed vanity, law-breaking, and metaphysical confusion.¹⁵

This yields a graded evaluation of Sufism. Ibnu Taimiyyah praises early currents of *zuhd* (asceticism) and Junaydian sobriety that subordinate experiences to the law, while censuring philosophical mysticism where metaphor hardens into ontology. His sustained critique of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (ontological monism) is not a denial of spiritual intimacy but a defence of *tawḥīd* against semantic slide and ontological overreach. In his eyes, statements that erase the Creator-creation distinction empty worship and obligation of meaning; they tempt the soul into antinomian charisma and destabilize communal norms.¹⁶

Two further features shape his epistemic profile. *First*, he deploys a semantic discipline in God-talk: names and attributes are affirmed without likening (*tasybīh*) or negation (*ta'thīl*), and without equivocation that would mask contradiction. This discipline extends to experience-talk: the rhetoric of “union” or “indwelling” is policed because language steers ontology and ethics.¹⁷ *Second*, he insists on public criteria for private claims. The claim is self-discrediting if an illumination proposes a course of action contrary to established duties or permissions. If the sources underdetermine it, it may edify the subject, but cannot legislate for others. The result is an epistemic posture open to grace and guarded against theocracy of the self.

¹⁴ Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Majmū' Fatāwā Syaikh Al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taimiyyah*; Ibnu Qayyim al-Jauziyyah, *Madārij Al-Sālikīn Fī Manāzil Al-Sā'irīn*.

¹⁵ Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Al-Furqān Bayna Awliyā' Al-Raḥmān Wa Awliyā' Al-Syaithān*.

¹⁶ Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Majmū' Fatāwā Syaikh Al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taimiyyah*; Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Fiqh Al-Tashawwuf*; Ahmad Muhammad Salim, *Al-Falsafah Fī Fikr Ibn Taimiyyah: Jadal Al-Nash Wa Al-Tārīkh* (Riyādh: Kitāb al-Majallah al-'Arabiyyah, 2014); Alexander D Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Ibnu Taimiyyah, *Majmū' Fatāwā Syaikh Al-Islām Ahmad Ibn Taimiyyah*; Janssens, “Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn Rushd in the Dar' Ta'arud. *Al-'Aql wa al-Naql* (with Special Attention to His Quotations of Ibn Rushd's Tahāfut Al-Tahāfut)”; Krause, López-Farjeat, and Oschman, *Context. Premodern Philos.*

Convergences: Syarī'ah-Governed Interiority and the Non-Legislative Status of Unveiling

Having reconstructed both architectures, the authors can now describe their convergences with clarity. First, *Shared Pedagogy of Knowing*. Both locate reliable knowing inside a moral pedagogy. The heart must be cleansed for the intellect to see well; practices of worship, remembrance, and companionship dispose the knower toward truth. In the Ghazalian language, light heals and sweetens discourse; in the Taymiyyan language, *fithrah* is rectified by *nash* and ethical discipline. The metaphors differ, but the pedagogy matches.

Second, *Experience is Real, but non-Legislative*. Both affirm that God grants extraordinary insight to some servants, and both deny that such insight can establish binding norms or cancel textual directives. This double affirmation/denial is the signature of *syarī'ah*-governed interiority: experience confirms revelation rather than creates a rival source.

Third, *Ethical Fruits and Textual Fidelity as Tests*. For both thinkers, a state's moral consequences and scriptural conformity are decisive marks of its authenticity. Pride, contempt for obligations, and innovation that displaces the Prophet's path are warning signs; humility, justice, and intensified obedience mark true grace.

Fourth, *Sober Sufism vs. Philosophical Monism*. Both are sympathetic to a Sufism of sobriety and wary (for different reasons) of metaphysical programs that risk erasing the Creator-creation boundary. Al-Ghazali's luminous analogies risk misreading by later monists, a risk he hedges against by insisting on legal discipline; Ibnu Taimiyyah starves the risk by lexical rigour and theological policing.

These convergences matter because they dismantle an inherited caricature: the "mystic enthusiast" versus the "legal rationalist." We find two versions of disciplined spirituality: one expresses epistemic ascent as degrees of light, the other as the rectification of *fithrah*; both embed ascent within the law.

Fault Lines

Differences emerge along three axes: optimism vs. caution, metaphor vs. anti-equivocation, and the scope of personal certainty. First, *Epistemic Optimism (al-Ghazali) vs. Epistemic Caution (Ibnu Taimiyyah)*. Al-Ghazali assigns a constructive role to *kasyf* in perfecting intellection; he is confident that, within *syarī'ah*, properly disciplined intuition elevates understanding and strengthens certainty. Ibnu Taimiyyah, while recognizing similar graces, is more wary about their epistemic yield, emphasizing their susceptibility to self-deception and incapacity to bind others.

Second, *Metaphorical Abundance vs. Semantic Policing*. Al-Ghazali's light imagery supports a participatory epistemology at the cost of interpretive risk: later receptions might reify metaphor into ontology. Ibnu Taimiyyah's strategy is to pre-empt that risk through semantic austerity; affirming divine names and attributes without equivocation, and vehemently rejecting language that courts ontological confusion.

Third, *Public Theology of Experience*. Al-Ghazali more readily valorizes the personal evidentiary force of mystical cognition for the subject who tastes, trusting the disciplining force of law and ethics to keep it within bounds. Ibnu Taimiyyah tends to minimize that valorization, not to deny grace but to curtail the social authority the subject might infer from it.

These fault lines do not cancel convergence; they calibrate it. They show how the same Sunni grammar, "experience is real; revelation rules", can be voiced with different emphases, each with distinct safeguards and vulnerabilities.

Conflict Rules: What Happens When Experience and Text Seem to Clash?

A comparative theory of conflict resolution emerges from both projects. First, *Prima Facie Authority of Text*. Where a reported unveiling appears to contradict a clear *nash*, the text prevails. For al-Ghazali, true *kasyf* cannot negate the Prophet's path; for Ibnu Taimiyyah, a claim that derogates a command discredits itself. Second, *Hermeneutic Patience and Moral Testing*. If the relation between an experience and a text is opaque, both deploy hermeneutic patience: interpretive charity seeks a reading in which the experience confirms what the law already directs. Simultaneously, the experience is tested by its fruits: does it

deepen prayer, justice, humility, and service, or does it inflate self and loosen obligation?

Third, *Private Edification vs. Public Proof*. Even when benign, an experience remains privately evidentiary; it may edify the knower, but cannot burden others with duties or permissions. This principle prevents the privatization of legislation under the banner of charisma. Fourth, *Semantic Discipline*. For Ibnu Taimiyyah, verbal formulations are primarily policed to prevent category mistakes. “I am He” is treated as either a deluded claim or an unsafe metaphor; if the intent is innocent intimacy, language should be rephrased to respect ontological difference.

Together, these rules operationalize the shared grammar. They do not deny that God grants exceptional understanding; they deny that such understanding renegotiates the covenant of law.

Case Studies: Applying the Criteria

To show how these conflict rules function, consider three stylized cases. *Case A: The “Beyond Prayer” Claim*. A charismatic teacher asserts that he has attained a station where formal prayer is no longer necessary, claiming a direct, continuous presence with God. *Al-Ghazali’s response*: the claim is self-refuting. The Prophet’s model is the apex of proximity; any “station” that subtracts obligations is deception. Law is not scaffolding to be discarded; it is the form of love. *Dzawq* that dissolves form is counterfeit. *Ibnu Taimiyyah’s response*: ditto, but with sharper language: the claim is a satanic delusion. No *ilhām* can abrogate a textual command; appeals to union or indwelling reveal semantic and theological corruption.

Case B: Moral Intuition vs. Positive Law. A devotee reports a powerful unveiling that seems to sanction an otherwise impermissible act in pursuit of compassion (e.g., misusing endowment funds “for the poor” contrary to stipulated conditions). *Al-Ghazali*: compassion is integral to the law’s telos, but *min dūn al-nash* (without textual warrant), intuition cannot authorize exceptions that violate trusts. The proper path is to consult juristic tools (necessity, public interest) within the law’s grammar. *Ibnu Taimiyyah*: public interest (*mashlahah*) is genuine but text-bounded; private inspirations cannot reshape property rights.

Where the law gives latitude (e.g., under necessity with safeguards), the law, not inspiration, warrants the act.

Case C: Contradictory Dreams. Two pious figures dream opposite “instructions” about a communal matter. *Both:* dreams have no legislative force; they may console or warn, but the community’s course must be set by consultation (*syūrā*), textual proofs, and objective reasoning. At most, dreams are admonitions to intensify prayer and consult wisdom; they never supply the rule of action.

In all three cases, the shared criterion (“experience is real; revelation rules”) yields concrete guidance: experiences are interpreted within the law’s horizon, tested by ethical fruits, and quarantined from legislating.

The Place of Reason: From Luminous Cognition to Fithrah-Realism

A comparative insight that often goes unnoticed is how both thinkers reclaim reason by moralizing it. Al-Ghazali’s luminous “superaddition” does not humiliate the intellect; it heals it by rightly ordering desire and attention. Reason at its apex is devotional, not detached: capable of recognizing the law’s beauty because the will has been trained to love the Good. Ibnu Taimiyyah’s *fithrah*-realism performs a similar manoeuvre: it rescues reason from both voluntarism and speculative absolutism by embedding it within the created orientation of the human toward truth and goodness, an orientation that revelation activates and confirms.¹⁸

This shared moralization of reason matters for our question about intuition. If reason’s health depends on the virtues, then spiritual practices are not alternative routes to knowledge but conditions for the intellect’s clarity. Intuition, in this light, is not a rival faculty but the fruit of rightly ordered reason and desire. The divergence is again one of confidence: al-Ghazali leans into the constructive epistemic role of such fruit; Ibnu Taimiyyah honours it but fastens it firmly to public, text-governed criteria.

Language as Method: Guarding Tawḥīd by Rhetoric and Semantics

¹⁸ Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya: Makers of The Muslim World*.

Language is not cosmetic in either project. Al-Ghazali's luminous rhetoric lets him speak of participatory knowledge without ontological collapse; it guards transcendence by analogy and gradation. Yet because imagery can be misread, his rhetoric requires the anchoring practice of law and ethics. Ibnu Taimiyyah, sensing the same risk, addresses it upstream by restricting the lexicon: he rejects equivocations and insists that predicates about God be affirmed in a manner fitting His majesty, without importing creaturely modes or collapsing distinctions.¹⁹

Both strategies aim at the same goal: to say intimacy without being pantheist; to value experience without letting it legislate. For contemporary discourse, the lesson is methodological. We must choose words that respect ontological boundaries and moral consequences. "Intoxication," "union," and "annihilation" can function within a trained grammar; untrained, they redirect attention from worship to self-authorship.

An Integrative Model: A Sunni Grammar of Warranted Spiritual Knowledge

Based on the foregoing, we can sketch an integrative model, a Sunni grammar of warranted spiritual knowledge that synthesizes the convergences and accommodates the fault lines. First, *Source Hierarchy*. Revelation (*nash*) remains the supreme public norm; reason (*'aql/fithrah*) discerns and applies its meaning; intuition (*dzauq/kasyf/ilhām*) edifies the subject and may confirm insight but does not create public proof. Second, *Pedagogy*. The path to reliable knowing runs through *tazkiya*: ritual discipline, remembrance, and virtue cultivation. Without these, both discursive reasoning and intuitive states are vulnerable to corruption.

Third, *Tests of Authenticity*. Evaluate claims by (a) textual fidelity (no contradiction of clear *nash*), and (b) ethical fruits (humility, justice, love, constancy in worship). Failing these tests discredits the claim irrespective of its phenomenological intensity. Fourth, *Conflict Resolution*. In apparent clashes, textual authority prevails; interpret experiences charitably to conform with the

¹⁹ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, 2020); Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazali and the Qur'an* (London: Routledge, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203964651>.

law; where conformity cannot be found, treat the experience as non-normative and seek rectification through repentance and counsel. Fifth, *Public/Private Distinction*. Private experiences cannot impose duty or confer immunity. Public teaching, policy, and adjudication must proceed by shared warrants—texts, reasons accessible to all, and procedural justice. Sixth, *Semantic Discipline*. Speak of God and experiences with trained care; avoid terms that risk ontological confusion or ethical license unless carefully contextualized within transmitted grammar.

This grammar honours al-Ghazali’s insistence that intuition perfects the intellect’s ascent and Ibnu Taimiyyah’s insistence that revelation rules the space of public meaning. It also furnishes operational criteria for communities navigating claims of charisma.

Contemporary Implications: Pedagogy, Leadership, and Research

First, *Pedagogy*. Teaching curricula that juxtapose *Ihyā’*-style virtue pedagogy with Fithrah-oriented rational formation can inoculate seekers against two opposite diseases: dry formalism and lawless mysticism. Courses in ethics, Qur’anic hermeneutics, and Sufi psychology should explicitly include the tests of authenticity, textual fidelity and moral fruits, and staged exercises in semantic discipline.

Second, *Leadership and Institutions*. Sufi orders and educational institutions can adopt charisma governance policies: (a) affirm the edifying value of dreams and inspirations; (b) forbid their use as warrants for institutional decisions; (c) require *shūrā* and scriptural reasoning for public actions; (d) evaluate leaders by virtues and service, not by the spectacle of marvels. Such policies translate the shared grammar into organizational safeguards.

Third, *Research*. Scholars can refine our comparative map by (a) charting how al-Ghazali’s luminous metaphors were received across centuries and whether legal discipline constrained drift toward monism in practice; (b) studying how Ibnu Taimiyyah’s semantic program influenced later Sunni discourse on attributes and on experience-talk; (c) examining Ibnu al-Qayyim as a bridge, where experiential psychology is richly elaborated within Taymiyyan constraints.

In a climate where personal authenticity often trumps tradition, a Sunni grammar that welcomes experience yet refuses its privatization of law offers an alternative modernity: interiority without antinomianism, charisma without theocracy of the self, reform without amnesia.

Re-reading Both Thinkers Beyond Caricature

A final interpretive gain of this comparative analysis is a more nuanced portrait of both figures. Al-Ghazali is neither a proto-monist nor a mere reconciler; he is an ascetical theologian whose luminous epistemology depends on law-governed practice. Ibnu Taimiyyah is not a desiccated legalist; he is a theorist of *fithrah* who sees in revelation the rectifier of reason and a repository of spiritual pedagogy in sober Sufism. Their differences remain, but the larger frame is the shared project to govern interiority by revelation.

By interpreting each on his own terms and then comparing, we discover that the significance of their models lies not simply in their historical influence but in their methodological clarity. Each offers a toolkit to discern truth from delusion, where the phenomenology of experience is often persuasive, sometimes overwhelming. Each helps us translate the urgencies of spiritual yearning into publicly accountable life forms. When read together, they answer the perennial question: what counts as knowledge of God, and by what warrant?, with a disciplined, hope-filled counsel: seek illumination; let revelation rule.

Conclusion

This study shows that al-Ghazali and Ibn Taimiyyah, despite distinct emphases, converge on a Sunni framework in which spiritual experience is acknowledged but remains subordinated to revelation. Both affirm *kasyf*, *ilhām*, and *dzawq* as personally meaningful, yet insist that public normativity arises only from *nash* interpreted through sound reason and embodied in ethical discipline. Al-Ghazali views intuition as perfecting intellect within the law, while Ibnu Taimiyyah restricts its authority through *fithrah*-realism and precise theological language to safeguard *tawhīd*.

This shared grammar yields practical criteria: revelation governs, reason discerns, intuition edifies; authenticity is tested by textual fidelity and moral fruits; experiential claims never suspend the Prophet's path. These principles

offer guidance for contemporary pedagogy, leadership, and public discourse, ensuring that spiritual yearning is nurtured without eroding communal norms.

The analysis also corrects common caricatures: al-Ghazali is not a monist, nor Ibnu Taimiyyah an enemy of the inner life. Rather, both operate as complementary correctives within a unified Sunni horizon. Their models illuminate a balanced spirituality—interiority without antinomianism, charisma without destabilization. Ultimately, their combined counsel is timely: seek illumination, but let revelation rule, enabling spiritual depth grounded in theological clarity and ethical responsibility.[]

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