

## Al-Ghazālī's Approach in Refuting Anthropomorphism

### Pendekatan Al-Ghazālī dalam Menolak Antropomorfisme

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#### ABSTRACT

*Anthropomorphism stands at the heart of many theological discourses and is among the most discussed issues by Muslim scholars. Anthropomorphic descriptions of God are mentioned in several Quranic verses and hadith for instance, God's hand, God's laughter, God's heavenly throne, God's hand and fingers and others. More often than not, anthropomorphic verses were interpreted in a different manner according to a scholar's theological affinity. Thus, this paper aims to examine al-Ghazālī's method in dealing with anthropomorphic verses. Imam al-Ghazālī was among the Asha'irah scholars who wrote extensively on theological and philosophical issues. By adopting document analysis method, this study explores al-Ghazālī's methods by analyzing his writings mainly in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah baina al-Islām wa al-Zindiqah, Iljām al-Awām 'an Ilm al-Kalām* apart from his other treatises such as *al-Iqtisād fī al-'Itiqād* and *Qānūn al-Ta'wīl*. It can be found that al-Ghazālī strongly affirms God's incorporeality by renouncing God's essence from any bodily figures, space, accidents and directions. Apart from that, al-Ghazālī offered two different approaches in understanding anthropomorphic verses for the learned and laymen. For the learned, al-Ghazālī allowed strict allegorical interpretation with its rules. As for laymen, al-Ghazālī suggested seven steps in understanding anthropomorphic verses in ensuring the sanctity of God's Essence from any figurative literal interpretation. In sum, this study demonstrates al-Ghazālī's holistic approach in refuting anthropomorphism that includes the learned and laymen and ensuring one's creed is preserved from any figurative understanding of God.*

*Keywords: Al-Ghazālī; Ash'arite; anthropomorphism; bodily figure; allegorical interpretation*

#### ABSTRAK

*Antropomorfisme berada di tengah-tengah wacana teologi dan merupakan antara isu yang paling banyak dibincangkan oleh sarjana Muslim. Gambaran antropomorfisme tentang Tuhan disebut dalam beberapa ayat al-Quran dan hadis misalnya, tangan Tuhan, ketawa Tuhan, takhta syurga Tuhan, tangan dan jari Tuhan dan lain-lain. Kerap kali, ayat-ayat antropomorfisme ditafsirkan dengan cara yang berbeza mengikut pertalian teologi seorang sarjana. Justeru, artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kaedah al-Ghazālī dalam menangani ayat-ayat antropomorfisme. Imam al-Ghazālī adalah antara ulama Asha'irah yang banyak menulis tentang isu teologi dan falsafah. Dengan menggunakan kaedah analisis dokumen, kajian ini meneroka kaedah al-Ghazālī dengan menganalisis tulisannya terutamanya dalam *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* dan *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah baina al-Islām wa al-Zindiqah, Iljām al-Awām 'an Ilm al-Kalām* selain daripada risalah beliau yang lain seperti *al-Iqtisād fī al-'Itiqād* dan *Qānūn al-Ta'wīl*. Adalah didapati bahawa al-Ghazālī sangat menegaskan ketakjaratan Tuhan dengan meninggalkan zat Tuhan daripada sebarang bentuk badan, ruang, sifat dan arah. Selain itu, al-Ghazālī menawarkan dua pendekatan berbeza dalam memahami ayat-ayat antropomorfisme iaitu untuk golongan alim dan orang awam. Bagi yang arif, al-Ghazālī membenarkan tafsiran kiasan yang ketat dengan peraturannya. Bagi orang awam, al-Ghazālī mencadangkan tujuh langkah dalam memahami ayat-ayat antropomorfisme dalam memastikan kesucian Zat Tuhan daripada sebarang tafsiran literal kiasan. Ringkasnya, kajian ini menunjukkan pendekatan holistik al-Ghazālī dalam menyangkal antropomorfisme yang merangkumi golongan terpelajar dan awam serta memastikan akidah seseorang terpelihara daripada sebarang pemahaman kiasan tentang Tuhan.*

*Kata kunci: Al-Ghazālī; Ash'arite; antropomorfisme; susuk tubuh; tafsiran alegori*

## INTRODUCTION

In discussing the nature of anthropomorphism, it is undeniable that every religious expression is caught in the dilemma between, on one hand, the theological desire to emphasize the absolute and transcendental nature of the Divine, thereby relinquishing its vitality and immediate reality and relevance, and on the other hand, the religious need to conceive of the Deity and man's contact with Him in some vital and meaningful way. Al-Faruqi (2008) explains briefly on the emergence of the anthropomorphic as the scantiness of human thought in perceiving the Divine. The nature in recognizing one's God which was instilled in each individual, leads to the thinking and imagination of God. In perceiving the Divine, the limit of human's intellect has entailed to the degradation of God's quality that is supposedly to adapt qualities beyond humans' qualities and imagination which eventually leads to polytheism (Khairulnazrin Nasir 2021). Even the most eloquent person could never equate Qur'anic eloquence or *balāghah* that possesses the Divine presence in it. God in Qur'an originates in a Unitarian form and negates other godheads contradict to Judaism that was fused with monolatry in its early emergence (Mohd Farid Shahrān 2011; Nasr 1994). The proclamation of faith occurs 41 times with its verse of 'There is no God except Allah' (Al-Baqi' 1945). Consequently, the anthropomorphic way of thinking emerged in perceiving God. Moreover, Shahrastani argues that the Jewish influence towards Muslim upon anthropomorphizing God was obvious where hadīth (prophetic traditions) on the idea of Adam was created in the image of God had illuminated into Muslim thinking. This is as mentioned that Abdullah bin Saba' is a Jewish convert who is responsible in instilling anthropomorphic form of God into Islam. His ill disposition in conversion was apparent in deviating the religion by imposing the divinity of Ali which was later culminated in the Shiite's doctrine in some of its sects like al-Bayaniyyah, al-Mughīriyyah, al-Manşūriyyah, al-Yūnusiyyah, al-Hishāmiyyah and many others who were influenced with Ibn Saba's corporeal thought (Shah 1997). This is also agreed among other Muslim scholars namely al-Rāzī, al-Isfārāinī, al-Ghurabī, al-Naşşār and many others argue that the corporeal thought originates from the Jewish circle of Ibn Saba' to the extreme Shiite sects (al-Shahrastānī 2006; Abrahamov 1995).

The Qur'anic anthropomorphism demonstrates the limited capability of human in perceiving the

Qur'an as a whole. Qur'anic anthropomorphism is almost similar with the Jewish Bible in subsisting God with face, hand, and eye. His face is mentioned 11 times in Qur'an. Five verses referring to the 'face of Allah' 2: 115 & 272, 30: 38-39, 76: 9; once as 'the face of your Lord' 55: 27; once 'the face of his Lord' 92: 20 and three verses referring to 'His face' 6: 52, 18: 28 & 28: 88. Other organs such as feet, knee and fingers are also mentioned in Prophetic tradition. His actions that are similar to human is also mentioned in Qur'an such as descend, ascend and angry. Apart from that, sensual feeling like laugh and happiness is also mentioned in the Prophetic tradition.

Al-Ghazālī's different methodologies in interpreting *mutasyābihāt*, or anthropomorphic verses were written comprehensively for the layman and the learned man that includes consigning meaning to God and the application of the allegorical method (*ta'wīl*) (Mohd Abduh Abu Samah 2006). There were three main methods applied by al-Ghazālī in his treatise of *al-Iqtisād fī al-I'iqād*. It comprises *al-sabr wa al-taqṣīm*, *al-qiyās al-mantiqī* and *al-ilzām*. In comparing al-Ghazālī's methods to Abu Hasan al-Ash'arī and Ahmad ibn Hanbal who were from different generations, al-Ash'arī was reckoned to be inclined towards using the traditionalist method, similar to Ibn Hanbal. The traditionalist's method of proving the existence of God basically refers hugely to verses from the Quran and Hadith (prophetic traditions) (Mohd Fuad Mokhtar 2006). Whereas al-Ghazālī, in his defense against *ahl al-bid'* during his time, was more inclined to apply *al-qiyās al-mantiqī*. Thus, it can be observed that the anthropomorphic discussion in both studies is essential to this research in recognizing al-Ghazālī's comprehensive method.

Due to the differences in interpretation among scholars of Islamic thought, the discourse on God's nature led to the emergence of major sects, namely the Mu'tazilite, Asharite and Hanbalites (Williams 2002). The Mu'tazilite were inclined towards more rational allegory compared to the Asharite (Keating 2011). The Asharite held a middle stance between accepting literal meaning while interpreting allegorically to avoid transgressing His Divinity. While the Mu'tazilite totally negated the verses from being associated with God similar to their negation of the attributes of God (Holtzman 2019). In comprehending and interpreting the Quran and Hadith, it is critical to emphasise a moderate (*wasatīyyah*) approach. (Ahmad Munawar 2020). As for the literalists, they are the Hanbalites and

Mujassimah. The Hanbalites accepted the verses in their literal form but nevertheless rejected that God is corporeal, possessing a body like humans (Umar Muhammad Noor 2021; Majid Fakhry 2009). Meanwhile, the Mujassimah accepted God in a bodily form, which is considered heretic in mainstream Islam.

The present article aims to comprehend al-Ghazālī's method in resisting anthropomorphic understanding of God through analyzing his approach from his writings mainly in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqah baina al-Islām wa al-Zindiqah, Iljām al-Awām 'an Ilm al-Kalām* apart from his other treatises such as *al-Iqtīṣād fī al-'Itiqād* and *Qānūn al-Ta'wīl*.

#### PROOFS OF GOD'S INCORPOREALITY ACCORDING TO AL-GHAZĀLĪ

In countering the anthropomorphism of God in Islam, al-Ghazālī initially highlighted the essence of God, which does not constitute a material body, substance, space or any form of accident. First, al-Ghazālī affirmed that God's essence should not be a substance that is required to consume space (*mutahayyiz*); rather, He should be sanctified from any space limitation, as space is inevitably associated with motion and rest. Motion and rest are both temporal and therefore God cannot be associated with space or temporal essence as He is eternal. Moreover, if substance is considered eternal, the universe's substance may also be deemed eternal, which would defeat the notion of God as the only eternal Creator (al-Ghazālī 2008a).

Secondly, al-Ghazālī further denied any bodily figure from God's essence, since a body is composed of different substances. If substances are linked to time, a body certainly expresses temporal essence, something impossible for God. Likewise, substance is inseparable from division, composition, motion, rest, form and quantity, all of which are characteristics of originated phenomena. Besides, the term body must comply with characteristics such as big, small, short and tall, which cannot describe God. His power as the Creator would be limited by designating a body unto Him within our restricted intellectual parameters (al-Ghazālī 2008a).

Next, al-Ghazālī emphasized the absurdity of associating accidents with God. A body is originated and therefore cannot be part of God. If God involves accidents and bodies, He would not be eternal whereas it is impossible for God to have been created. The conclusion is that God is a self-

existing being who is free from substance, accidents and bodies that resemble created beings (al-Ghazālī 2008a).

Finally, in affirming God's incorporeality, according to al-Ghazālī one should detach Him from being limited to any direction, because directions can only pertain to created beings that God created with extremities such as left and right. Al-Ghazālī denied directions from God in denying a bodily form of God that may lead one to think God has a figurative nature as humans do. Directions require positing God to a definite place, which is certainly impossible for God. Besides, directions were created by humans, because when God created humans there were no terms indicating directions. If God is said to reside above or below, it may somehow illustrate the existence of a head and legs, referring to a bodily figure (al-Ghazālī 2008a).

According to the propositions above, it can be deduced that al-Ghazālī renounced four basic categories from God's essence, namely space, body, accidents and directions. This is in parallel with his argument that God's existence is not limited to space or body and differs from other existences. Al-Ghazālī's elaboration on this proposition is mentioned in the beginning to demonstrate the importance of adopting a correct understanding of God's essence.

#### AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S APPROACHES IN UNDERSTANDING ANTHROPOMORPHIC VERSES

Al-Ghazālī addressed anthropomorphic verses that refer to acts of *istiwā'* and walking, and body figures like hands and fingers in several of his texts namely *Ihyā'*, *Iqtīṣād*, *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqah* and *Qānūn al-Ta'wīl*. This is due to the rising debate during his time on anthropomorphic verses, which subsequently led to the segregation of a number of sectarians (Majid Fakhry 2009).

In his discussion on anthropomorphism, al-Ghazālī strongly underscored God's incorporeality by repudiating that God's essence has weaknesses, dependencies and deficiencies. Alternatively, al-Ghazālī laid out three ways of interpreting the anthropomorphic aspects of God along with three groups of people respectively.

First is the literal way of understanding the verses without interpreting their meanings. This approach leads to understanding God in bodily form, as the Mujassimah believed.

The second way is to consign meanings of anthropomorphic verses to God without attempting

to interpret the verses or subjecting God to figurative forms. This is because since it was not practiced by the Prophet's companions, questioning meanings is impermissible. According to Malik bin Anas (711-795) regarding *istiwā'* (God being seated upon the throne), "*Istiwa'* is known, believing in it is compulsory, its way is unknown and asking about it is *bid'ah* (innovation, not practiced by the Prophet)." This group of believers includes the layman (al-Ghazālī 1993).

Third, al-Ghazālī explicated the method of allegorical interpretation for those who doubt verses and cannot resist questioning the original verses. Those categorized in this group are feared to be slipping away from their creedal belief if they do not apply allegorical interpretation to the anthropomorphic verses. However, there are regulations for practicing allegorical interpretations so as to avoid deviations in understanding the original meanings of verses (al-Ghazālī 1993).

This indicates al-Ghazālī's response to the anthropomorphic accounts in the Quran and Hadith was to accept the verses while holding to the idea of His incorporeality. Al-Ghazālī who was the Ashairite contemporary added the formula *bi-la-kayf*, like earlier traditionalists, but not in the straightforward traditionalistic sense of 'without asking how', but rather in the sense of 'without attributing physical characteristics' to God, thus applying transcendentalism (*tanzīh*) and eliminating *tashbīh* (Abrahamov 1995).

In his treatise *Ijām al-'Awāmm 'an 'Ilm al-Kalām*, al-Ghazālī stated there are seven steps to understanding anthropomorphic verses on God in their original form. First is exoneration (*taqdīs*), which is to purify God from any physical attachment. The second step is affirmation (*taṣdīq*), which entails affirming and truly believing the sayings of Prophet Muhammad. The third step is to acknowledge one's inability (*al-i'tirāf bi al-'ajz*), which is to admit one's weaknesses and limits in apprehending and interpreting verses as it is simply beyond one's capacity. Fourth is silence (*sūkūt*); that is, being silent and not questioning or obsessing over debating, which may eventually lead to serious risk to one's faith and vulnerability of creed. Fifth, abstinence (*al-imsāk*), is to not alter or replace expressions with other language. One is urged to maintain the original form without changing the verses by adding or removing parts or translating them into other languages (al-Ghazālī 2011).

Al-Ghazālī recommended six key things that should be avoided: i) explaining (*tafsīr*), ii) interpreting figuratively (*ta'wīl*), iii) altering (*taṣrīf*), iv) making logical assumptions (*tafrī'*), v) joining what is separated (*jam'*), and vi) separating what is joined together (*tafrī'*). The sixth stage in understanding anthropomorphic verses on God is restraint (*al-kaff*), meaning to abstain oneself from delving intensely into these verses and from pondering over them. Lastly, yield to those who specialize in this (*al-taslīm li ahlih*) leave the discussion to scholars due to the limited capacity of the layman's knowledge (al-Ghazālī 2011).

From the seven steps demonstrated above, it can be observed that al-Ghazālī's argument on perceiving anthropomorphic verses without interpretation is clear and comprehensive. In fact, these steps serve a very concise guideline for laymen.

Despite having affirmed methods of understanding verses in their original form, al-Ghazālī nevertheless mentioned the need to interpret several Quranic verses metaphorically. However, al-Ghazālī affirmed that not just any verse can be simply interpreted. Thus, he proposed five levels of existence that one needs to comprehend before deciding to interpret a verse analogically.

The five levels of existence are mentioned in *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah* and are known as the ontological (*wujud al-dhātī*), sensorial (*hissī*), imaginative (*khayālī*), noetic (*'aqlī*) and analogous (*shabahī*) existences. Ontological existence refers to existences that are clear and concise and do not require any interpretation. Sensorial existence requires one to feel with their senses. Meanwhile, imaginative existence may have happened in the past and requires using one's imaginative faculty to perceive it. Noetic existence is where one needs to use their intellectual faculty to perceive the meaning of something, such as when a verse mentions 'hand' in reference to God and it is not possible to perceive it ontologically or through the senses or imagination. Thus, the intellectual faculty must be applied in order to understand the meaning behind 'God's hand.' Analogous existence is when for instance one attributes anger to God. In reality, anger causes increased blood pressure and potentially sickness to a person. However, this is impossible for God. Thus, God's anger must be interpreted differently from human anger, such as God's wrath serving as punishment of His servants (al-Ghazālī 1993).

It is only allowed to initiate interpretation if a verse cannot be understood at the first three levels.

This suggests that al-Ghazālī encouraged interpreting underlying meanings of anthropomorphic verses that cannot be attributed to God in a literal sense only by those who possess the appropriate knowledge. Therefore, al-Ghazālī affirmed that it is important to renounce (*tanzīh*) weaknesses and deficiencies from God's essence and attributes and hold a firm stance on God's incorporeality (Sulaiman Dunyā n.d).

In *Ihyā'*, al-Ghazālī (2008a) mentioned that if certain verses were to be understood in a literal sense, it would entail impossibility (for instance figurative forms of God). Thus, whatever indicates impossibilities regarding God is impossible to be left un-interpreted. Al-Ghazālī interpreted *istiwā'* in the Qur'an as the notion of dominion and power.

"Then He directed Himself to the heaven and it a vapor, so He said to it and to the earth, 'Come both willingly or unwillingly. They both said, 'We come willingly.'" (Qur'an 41: 11)

He emphasized that it does not rest upon a body, as a body constitutes substance and accidents, which are impossible of God. If the position of God is postulated in '*arsy*' as mentioned in the verse of *istiwā'*, it must be concluded that God resides in a specific place and it contradicts other verses in the Quran. In other verses, al-Ghazālī demonstrated that God's position is undeterminable, e.g. "and wherever ye are He is with you." Thus, the verse above denotes the meaning of comprehension and knowledge (al-Ghazālī 2008a).

Another anthropomorphic verse mentioned in the prophetic tradition that carries a meaning is "The heart of a believer lies between two fingers of the Merciful (God)." It is impossible to relate fingers to God, as God will consequently be associated with having a bodily nature. A further account of the prophetic tradition mentions the hand of God: "The right stone (*al-hajar al-aswad*) is the right hand of God on earth," which connotes the meaning of veneration and honor (al-Ghazālī 2008a). One hadith mentions,

Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger as saying that Allah, the Exalted and Glorious, thus stated: "I am near to the thought of My servant as he thinks about Me, and I am with him as he remembers Me. And if he remembers Me in his heart, I also remember him in My Heart, and if he remembers Me in assembly I remember him in assembly, better than his (remembrance), and if he draws near Me by the span of a palm, I draw near him by the cubit, and if he draws near Me by the cubit I draw near him by the space (covered by) two hands. And if he walks towards Me, I rush towards him."

The above hadith appears to reveal the act of God walking and the intimacy between God and humans over distance. Nonetheless, al-Ghazālī interpreted God's intimacy in terms of His blessings on humans (al-Ghazālī 2008b).

Al-Ghazālī's approach in addressing anthropomorphic verses demonstrates how al-Ghazālī employed two main approaches within the Ash'arite tradition namely *tafwīd* and *ta'wīl*. The first, *tafwīd* is to avoid any kind of elaboration and assign its definite meaning to God while maintaining God's incorporeality. Secondly, *ta'wīl* is to provide a suitable interpretation based on core Islamic beliefs (Rahman 2018). According to al-Buti (1998), both *tafwīd* and *ta'wīl* applications avoid anthropomorphism by avoiding literal meanings. The *tafwīd* solution according to the Ash'arite is the subtle version of interpretation. It can be observed that al-Ghazālī combined the two ways to meet the needs of various people such as the learned and laymen.

Despite making allegorical interpretations of verses, al-Ghazālī affirmed the Hanbalite and Ash'arite's affirmative approach of interpreting verses, who maintained that the verses are as intended by God Himself (Abrahamov 1995). Moreover, he was seen to follow the steps of traditionalists in sustaining the attributes of God, namely power (*qudrah*), will (*irādah*), knowledge (*'ilm*), life (*hayy*), hearing (*sama'*), seeing (*baṣar*) and speaking (*kalām*). Understanding anthropomorphism also led al-Ghazālī to highlight the importance of distinguishing the attributes of God and humans in contrast to the Mu'tazilite who negated attributes.

It can be summed that al-Ghazālī only accepted two interpretations out of the three he laid out. He acknowledged the second and third approaches and rejected the first, which affirms an anthropomorphic understanding of God. Meanwhile, the first two approaches that consign meaning to God and employ allegorical interpretation are suggested for the layman and the learned, respectively. The bottom line, al-Ghazālī strongly affirmed the importance of renouncing God from any figure, distance or direction. This category pertains to the layman and the followers of the early companions. They should not question the meaning of each verse but rest it upon God as is. In contrary, the other group regarded people who are compelled to question the literal connotations. To avoid falling into understanding things figuratively, it becomes

essential for these people to perceive allegorically according to scholars' interpretations.

### CONCLUSION

In proving God's incorporeality, al-Ghazālī strongly emphasized sanctifying God's essence from possessing a bodily form. He negated ascribing God's essence to substance, accidents, space and directions, which would entail perceiving God in figurative forms. This was also demonstrated in the proof of God's existence, where according to al-Ghazālī, God's existence is not attached to space or body, and thus He is free from any form of substance like other contingencies.

Meanwhile, in interpreting anthropomorphic verses, al-Ghazālī clearly distinguished three different approaches. First is to understand verses literally, which al-Ghazālī believed leads to anthropomorphic understanding. Second is the layman approach, which is through consigning meaning to God. Besides, he also presented seven steps to follow in comprehending anthropomorphic verses. Third is the learned man's approach to allegorical interpretation. However, in making allegorical interpretations, al-Ghazālī placed boundaries. Not all verses should be interpreted allegorically. Only those verses that cannot be understood through ontological, sensorial and imaginative approaches may be interpreted allegorically, for instance the hands of God, which al-Ghazālī interpreted as honor and veneration.

Overall, al-Ghazālī appears to strike a middle ground in the theological views between the literalists and those who completely disproved God's verses. Al-Ghazālī's approach also include the traditionalist's *tafwīd* which were adopted explicitly among Hanbalite scholars. Future study may also include the comparison between the application of *ta'wīl* and *tafwīd* among Ashairite and the Hanablite scholars in resisting anthropomorphism.

In sum, this study concludes that al-Ghazālī embraced the method of avoiding any form of elaboration and consigning its definite meaning to God while fully believing in God's incorporeality. This category includes the layman and the followers of the early companions of the Prophet, who would not dispute the meaning of each verse, but rather leave it to God. In contrary, the other group comprises the learned who possess the capability to interpret these verses with the appropriate interpretation according to the fundamental Islamic belief. Thus, it can be deduced that both approaches explicitly indicate al-

Ghazālī's effort in resisting anthropomorphic beliefs and holding God's incorporeality.

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