

RATIONALIZING THE PROPHETIC TRADITION: Muhammad al-Ghazâlî's Ethical Hermeneutics of the Sunnah

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Abstract

*The publication of *al-Sunnah al-Nabawîyyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Hadîth* (1989) by Muhammad al-Ghazâlî sparked major controversy in the modern Islamic intellectual landscape due to its bold critique of the prevailing tendency toward literalism in the understanding of hadith. The central problem underlying al-Ghazâlî's thought is the dominance of a textualist approach that rejects rationality and ethical considerations in interpreting the Prophet's Sunnah. Hadith literalism, he argues, has distanced Islamic teachings from the moral spirit and contextual sensitivity inherent in the objectives of the *maqâsid al-sharî'ah*. The present study aims to trace the rational and ethical foundations of Muhammad al-Ghazâlî's methodology of hadith criticism, and to understand the socio-historical conditions that shaped his views on the relationship between the Quran and the Sunnah. Employing a qualitative research design, this study relies on library-based inquiry into al-Ghazâlî's primary works and relevant secondary literature. It further applies an ethical-hermeneutical approach to uncover the moral orientation underlying his critique of the literalist tendencies within ahl al-hadith. The findings indicate that Muhammad al-Ghazâlî proposes a dynamic interpretive methodology for hadith interpretation grounded in reason, ethics, and contextual relevance, as part of an effort to revitalize the authority of the Sunnah so that it remains vibrant and capable of engaging with the challenges of modernity. This article contributes to contemporary hadith studies by situating Muhammad al-Ghazâlî's critique*

within ongoing debates on literalist interpretation and by reconstructing a more rational and ethically attuned understanding of hadith. By highlighting al-Ghazālī's epistemological approach, which evaluates the substance of hadith in light of Quranic values, the study enriches methodological discourse and underscores the dynamic role of the sunnah and its relevance for modern Muslim life.

Keywords: *ethics; hermeneutics hadith; literalism; rationality*

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Introduction

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Prophet Muhammad's authority has become a central issue for Muslim intellectuals. This period was also marked by the increase of Western hegemony, which was closely intertwined with the political and religious decline of Muslim societies. These circumstances prompted strong calls for institutional reforms in Islamic law and social life. The reformation demands ultimately generated pressure to re-examine the essential foundations of religious authority in Islam. Within this reassessment process, attention to the Prophet's hadith assumed a central position. Initiatives to reconsider the hadith as an instrument for adaptation to change had begun long before Muslims directly experienced the impact of Western hegemony (Nurdin 2021, 34).

Hadith studies in the modern era reveals two major approaches in ongoing dialogue and occasional tension: *textual literalism*, emphasizing strict adherence to the hadith text, and *liberal rationalism* (Syarifah 2014, 56), which advocates hadith reinterpretation by considering historical context, moral considerations, and contemporary relevance. The literalist approach views hadith (Zin 2025, 45) as a direct and immediate source of law, requiring little interpretation or contextual reconsideration. Meanwhile, the liberal rationalists argue that the former approach often neglects the ethical, social, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* dimensions, thereby presenting significant challenges to understanding the sunnah as a dynamic guide for modern societies. The primary challenge here lies in aligning the authority of hadith with social change, scientific advancement, and the demands of civility without dismissing the value of tradition or undermining the relevance of the text (Suardi, 2021, 110).

Within this discourse, Muhammad al-Ghazâlî emerges as a reformist-modernist thinker who seeks to mediate between the two opposing extremes. His well-known work, *Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawîyyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Hadîth* (1989), sparked widespread controversy because it openly questioned certain hadiths that had long been regarded as *sahih* (authentic) by many traditional scholars (Soebahar et al. 2015, 23). Al-Ghazâlî accuses some modern *ahl al-hadith* approaches of being overly textual and anti-rational, dismissing the role of reason and ethics in the interpretation of hadith. In this context, he offers a new methodological proposal: reading the sunnah through an ethical and rational lens, treating it as a living discourse capable of engaging with changing times, rather than as a rigid legalistic inheritance (Suardi 2021, 111).

Previous studies indicate that, unlike the tradition of *ahl al-hadith*, Muhammad al-Ghazâlî does not automatically accept *hadith Ahad* as a legal source. Suardi notes that al-Ghazâlî rejects certain *sahih* hadiths when they contradict the Quran or lack social relevance. Through four criteria—conformity with the Quran, corroboration by other hadiths, historical data, and scientific rationality—al-Ghazâlî shifts the interpretive approach from literalism toward a more contextual reading (Suardi 2021, 110).

Azwar's study demonstrates that the socio-historical context and the modernity pressures, including institutional reform within Islam, Western dominance, and the political decline of Muslim societies, prompted a re-evaluation of religious authority, particularly the Sunnah (Azwar et al. 2024, 42). Correspondingly, the bibliometric analysis presented by Zuhri reveals significant developments in international hadith research from 2013 to 2023, opening space for more critical approaches to the sunnah. In this evolving intellectual landscape, al-Ghazâlî emerges as a reformist figure seeking to “re-activate” the hadith corpus so that it remains relevant to social change, leading some scholars to describe his thought as a “perestroika of Islam”. His approach underscores that revising the sunnah is not merely methodological but also closely tied to social and intellectual transformations of the Muslim community (Zuhri 2015, 12).

The methodological dimension of al-Ghazâlî's thought tends to synthesize both *ahl al-hadith* and *ahl al-fiqh*. Through a hermeneutical approach, al-Ghazâlî implements three stages: grammatical analysis of the *matn*, historical-empirical reading, and Quranic verification as the highest authority. This approach reflects his effort to reformulate the

understanding of sunnah in accordance with contemporary needs (Hidayah 2015, 54).

Another study indicates that al-Ghazâlî refuses to treat all *shahih* hadiths as binding legal sources when they conflict with the Quran or social reality. This position has triggered polarization between textualist camps and proponents of hermeneutics and *maqâṣid*. In the context of *tashrî*, al-Ghazâlî prioritizes Quranic values, Sharia objectives, and socio-rational considerations as the principal criteria for hadith evaluation. These findings indicate that current debates over the sunnah extend beyond technical methodological issues. They are closely tied to shifting configurations of religious authority and ongoing processes of social change in the modern Muslim world (Hafiz et al. 2023, 72).

The central distinction of this study lies in its focus on the rational-ethical dimension and the hermeneutical character of al-Ghazâlî's thought—two components that have received limited scholarly attention, as prior research tended to emphasize textual criticism or socio-historical context. This research positions al-Ghazâlî as a transformative thinker who redirects the understanding of sunnah away from rigid literalism toward a hermeneutic-contextual model that integrates reason, ethics, and historical awareness. By foregrounding his rational-ethical framework, this article addresses a gap in the literature concerning the ways in which al-Ghazâlî negotiates theoretical authority and legal practice. It also demonstrates that interpreting sunnah involves more than verifying *sanad* (chains of transmission). It requires evaluating ethical relevance, Sharia objectives, and the moral responsibilities that accompany religious reasoning within a modern social landscape.

Research Method

This is a qualitative study conducted through a library research investigation (Creswell 2019, 45), emphasizing both textual inquiry and conceptual analysis. The primary focus of the study is an in-depth reading of Muhammad al-Ghazâlî's seminal work, *al-Sunnah al-Nabawîyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Hadîth*. It is the main corpus for examining his critique of conventional hadith scholarship (Afwadzi 2015; Suryadi 2015, 43; Zuhri, 2017, 41; Hasan 2019, 56).

Secondary materials consist of academic publications (books, journal articles, and research articles) discussing al-Ghazâlî's intellectual contributions. The authors also include relevant writings on modern

hermeneutic theory, including works by Muslim thinkers such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Western figures like Paul Ricoeur. The analytical process combines descriptive and analytical techniques to trace al-Ghazâlî's reasoning, interpretive strategies, and the broader socio-intellectual environment shaping his approach to hadith interpretation.

This study adopts an ethical-hermeneutical approach as formulated by Sahiron Syamsuddin. Within this framework, religious texts, including hadith are not treated merely as repositories of legal directives. Rather, they are approached as moral expressions calling for ethically attuned and context-sensitive interpretation (Syamsuddin 2017, 43). This study develops its hermeneutical orientation through engagement with the thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Paul Ricoeur. Reviews by Leaman (2022) and Mufid et al. (2023) highlight Abu Zayd's emphasis on the dynamic interplay between text, interpreter, and social reality. Meanwhile, Gonzalez (2006) outlines Ricoeur's key hermeneutical concepts, such as distanciation, the dialectic of explanation and understanding, and the role of narrative in meaning-making. Together, these frameworks offer complementary tools for examining religious texts through historical, critical, and contextual lenses.

In addition, the study incorporates discourse analysis to explore how al-Ghazâlî formulates his critique of hadith literalism. This includes examining his rhetorical and epistemic strategies to construct alternative discourse grounded in *maqâṣid al-sharī'ah* and ethical reasoning (Ahmadi et al. 2025, 43). Moreover, the attempt to assess his intellectual position within the broader discourse of modern hadith reform is also conducted.

Results and Discussion

Al-Ghazâlî's Critique of Hadith Literalism

Al-Ghazâlî's critique of literalist tendencies in hadith studies stems from his concern that certain scholars interpret the Prophetic tradition solely at the textual level. They disregard its aims, historical setting, or ethical implications. In the foundational work that shapes his view, al-Ghazâlî argues that even authentic hadith are not automatically valid as legal bases. He opposes the literalist view that applies them directly in law and ritual, unless their alignment with Islam's ethical principles and the Quran as the primary sources is incorporated (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 34). He critiques the mindset that treats hadith as wholly equivalent to the Quran, yet lacks any process of moral or rational verification.

The first aspect of al-Ghazâlî's critique concerns the hierarchical relationship between authentic hadith and the Quran. In his assessment, the textual content of any hadith must be evaluated in line with Quranic teachings, especially those that articulate the core values of justice, mercy, and the promotion of human well-being. If one hadith opposes with the Quran's universal moral vision, it must be reinterpreted, or, if necessary, set aside altogether (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 42; Brown 1999, 32). This position underscores the Quran's supreme normative authority and rejects the rigid employment of hadith without substantive ethical and doctrinal scrutiny.

Al-Ghazâlî's second line of critique targets the limited attention literalist scholars give to the *maqâsid al-sharî'ah*. He argues that Islamic law is fundamentally oriented toward safeguarding essential human interests, namely religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Applying hadith without reference to these objectives reduces the law to a mechanical and potentially harsh system devoid of humane considerations. Al-Ghazâlî highlights cases in which certain hadiths that appear strict or exclusionary, yet in the lens of *maqâsid al-sharî'ah*, they must be interpreted through the moderation and public welfare principles. This, for him, justifies the necessity of integrating reason and ethical reflection in the interpretation of the sunnah (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 23).

The third criticism concerns the literalists' neglect of the historical and cultural milieu in which many hadiths emerged. Al-Ghazâlî states that numerous prophetic narrations were responses to very specific situations of the Arab social reality in the 7th century including its cultural, political, and psychological factors. Reading such texts in a strictly literal manner without considering their *asbâb al-wurûd* (contexts of narration) leads to serious blunders in legal application. He therefore rejects the assumption that the wording of every hadith possesses automatic and universal applicability. Instead, he asserts that its contemporary relevance must be critically assessed before employing it in legal or ethical reasoning (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 45; Brown 1999, 32).

The next critique from al-Ghazâlî concerns the reluctance of literalist scholars to engage ethical and rational deliberation. He insists that the Prophet's sunnah cannot be understood only through its verbal formulation, but must also be approached through the moral intent it embodies. When religious practice relies exclusively on a hadith's textual reading, the broader ethical and spiritual impulses of the tradition may be

overshadowed. For this reason, he rejects hadith interpretations that give rise to symbolic violence, gender injustice, or forms of social exclusion. In al-Ghazâlî's view, ethics constitutes an indispensable foundation that must accompany any reading of the sunnah.

The last criticism targets the literalists' absolute reliance on the authority of *sanad*. Classical hadith scholarship typically measures authenticity through an unbroken *sanad* and the reliability of its transmitters. Al-Ghazâlî, however, argues that the substantive content of a hadith (*matn*) holds greater weight than its formal *sanad*. A hadith supported by a strong *sanad* but conflicting with rationality, empirical reality, or the moral ethos of Islam cannot serve as a legitimate basis for legal or religious practice. At this point, al-Ghazâlî advances what he describes as a critique of substantive authenticity rather than mere formal validity (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 65; Brown 1999, 12).

Within a hermeneutical framework, al-Ghazâlî articulates an ethically oriented model of interpretation that unfolds in three stages. The first involves a textual-grammatical inquiry to establish the literal meaning of a hadith; the second consists of a psychological and historical analysis to uncover the socio-cultural setting in which the hadith emerged; and the third comprises a normative-ethical examination grounded in *maqâṣid al-sharī'ah* and Islam's universal moral principles. Through this multilayered structure, al-Ghazâlî rejects rigid, text-bound readings and proposes a more comprehensive method, one that is not only oriented toward the past but also remains practical for contemporary Muslims' needs.

Consequently, al-Ghazâlî's critique of literalism is not merely a technical intervention in hadith studies. It represents an epistemological and ethical challenge aimed at restoring the sunnah as a "living proof" (*al-ḥujjah al-ḥayyah*) within Islamic law. His integrative approach—linking the Quran, *maqâṣid*, contextual analysis, and ethical discernment—encourages Muslims to regard the sunnah as a dynamic, meaningful, and context-responsive spiritual guide. Such critique has re-emerged as significant for contemporary hadith studies, particularly as a response to extremism, legal rigidity, and forms of religious interpretation that insufficiently engage humanistic values (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 56; Brown 1999, 30).

Al-Ghazâlî's Rational Paradigm in Interpreting the Sunnah

Muhammad al-Ghazâlî positions reason as a central instrument in comprehending the sunnah. For him, rationality is not only an auxiliary

tool but also a moral and intellectual filter that must accompany any engagement with prophetic narrations. He rejects the assumption—commonly held by textualist scholars—that a sound *sanad* automatically renders a hadith suitable as a legal basis. In al-Ghazâlî's perspective, prophetic narrations must undergo critical scrutiny, by considering the principal values of the Quran, the sharia objectives (*maqâṣid al-sharī'ah*), and universal principles of justice. Through this role, reason safeguards the interpretive process from producing meanings that deviate from the ethical spirit of Islam.

In his critique of strict textualism, al-Ghazâlî challenges approaches that detach hadiths from its ethical and social contexts. He argues that a purely literal reading, one that excludes rational inquiry, can lead to flawed conclusions or even interpretations that contradict Quranic teachings. For al-Ghazâlî, a rigid understanding of the sunnah ignores the fact that the Prophet was not only a transmitter of divine guidance but also a moral educator whose statements were embedded in concrete historical situations and shaped by particular ethical aims. Neglecting the role of reason, therefore, risks stripping the sunnah of its lived, dynamic character (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 43; Ardiansyah & Firmansyah 2021, 24; Suardi 2021, 111).

One of the core principles in al-Ghazâlî's thought is that sunnah must never be interpreted apart from the Quran as it elucidates and reinforces the Quranic teachings. Accordingly, sunnah is not an independent text that can legitimize attitudes or practices that contradict divine revelation. When a hadith opposes the Quran's ethical orientation, such as its commitments to justice, moral equality, and compassion, it must be subjected to critical re-examination. At this juncture, reason becomes indispensable, serving as the mediator that links prophetic reports with the moral purposes underlying Islamic teachings. To substantiate his critique, al-Ghazâlî frequently highlights cases where a strictly literal application of hadith caused misinterpretations.

One of hadiths that receives particular scrutiny from al-Ghazâlî is a narration about the deceased suffers punishment because of his family's weeping. In *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Book of Funerals, Number 1206, 1208, and 1210, the text reads:

"Indeed, the dead person is punished on account of his family's lamentation over him."

Textualist scholars tend to interpret this narration verbatim, concluding that one may be punished for actions committed by others. In al-Ghazâlî's perspective, such an interpretation not only contradicts the Quranic principle of personal moral responsibility but also conflicts with basic rational judgment, which maintains that no person can bear the burden of another's wrongdoing (al-Ghazâlî, 1989, 49; Brown 1999, 32).

Al-Ghazâlî rejects a literal reading of this narration as it contradicts several Quranic verses, such as Q.S. al-An'am [6]:164,

"No bearer of sin shall bear the burden of another."

He also appeals to Q.S. Fussilat [41]:30 and Q.S. Ali-Imran [3]:170, which describe believers as receiving tranquility and glad tidings at the moment of death. A literal interpretation suggesting that a righteous person might suffer punishment due to the mourning of relatives is therefore inconsistent with the Quran's portrayal of the believer's state after death.

Al-Ghazâlî insists the hadith requires reinterpretation rather than uncritical acceptance of its surface meaning. Through rational and textual analysis, he proposes an alternative understanding. The hadith refers not to divine punishment, but to emotional discomfort of the deceased due to excessive mourning of his family members. In other words, the deceased is not punished by God, rather, he may be pained by the behavior of his loved ones. This comprehension, according to al-Ghazâlî, is both more reasonable and consistent with the principle that divine punishment stems from one's own actions, not from the deeds of others. In this framework, reason serves to preserve the moral coherence of Islamic teachings (al-Ghazâlî 1991, 42; Suardi 2021, 112; Akbar et al. 2025, 89).

Furthermore, al-Ghazâlî's analysis of the aforesaid hadith shows that rationality does not undermine the hadith tradition but reinforces it. He emphasizes that sunnah must be approached holistically, by comparing all relevant reports, examining their relationship to Quranic principles, and considering the Sharia objectives as well as the socio-historical context of the Prophet's actions. A strictly literal reading, without rational evaluation, may lead to flawed conclusions and even provoke the impression that Islam promotes injustice, lacks compassion, or contradicts universal moral values.

From the authors' standpoint, al-Ghazâlî's method remains highly appropriate for producing hadith interpretations that are not only methodologically sound but also aligned with justice and human dignity. His critique of strict textualism underscores that a hadith cannot be

comprehended on its own. Al-Ghazâlî's reading of the hadith about the deceased being affected by their relative's weeping demonstrates how rational inquiry can mediate between textual evidence and ethical values. This way, sunnah remains as a source of moral guidance rather than a justification for conclusions that defy sound judgment. This method suggests a significant model for contemporary hadith studies.

Al-Ghazâlî's Historical Paradigm in Interpreting the Sunnah

Muhammad al-Ghazâlî asserts that prophetic traditions cannot be interpreted in isolation from their historical setting, ethical aims, and coherence with the Quran. Every hadith, he said, appeared due to particular socio-historical circumstance. Consequently, a purely literal reading ignoring the background may oppose Islam's foundational commitment to justice. Therefore, when the wording of a hadith seems to contradict well-established historical realities, both the text and the interpretations built upon it must be re-examined. This historical orientation constitutes a central component of the rationalized approach to the sunnah that al-Ghazâlî advocates.

As an illustration of his rational-historical method, al-Ghazâlî critiques the hadith attributed to Umm Humaid concerning the prohibition of women attending congregational prayer in the mosque. The narration was transmitted by Ibn Khuzaimah in *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzaimah*, Vol. 3, states:

"The Messenger of God said: I know that you desire to pray with me. Yet your prayer in your own home is better than your prayer in the mosque; your prayer in your private chamber is better than your prayer in the main room of your house; and your prayer in your family's mosque is better than your prayer in my mosque."

He rejects a literal reading of this report because it conflicts with established historical evidence. For many years, the Prophet consistently allowed women to participate in congregational prayer, facilitated their presence by designating a separate entrance. He even shortened the prayer when he heard a child crying so as not to burden mothers. These historical details indicate that the Prophet never advanced a normative preference that women ought to pray at home. Rather, any restriction was context-specific, applying only in situations involving moral infractions such as *tabarruj* or conduct that could lead to social discord (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 45; Brown 1999, 23; Nurdin 2021, 56).

The purpose of his critique is not to reject the hadith, but to restore sunnah to rational and moral foundations that constitute its core. He underscores that interpreting hadith requires maintaining a balance between women's spiritual needs, their legitimate right to participate in public religious life, and the safeguarding of moral order. Through this lens, al-Ghazâlî refuses interpretations that could demean women or violate principles of justice, thereby ensuring that sunnah remains aligned with the *maqâsid al-sharî'ah*.

This example illustrates that al-Ghazâlî's rationalist approach to sunnah rests on three pillars: coherence with the Quran, consistency with historical reality, and faithfulness to justice and human dignity. Therefore, even when a hadith possesses an authentic *sanad*, if its literal reading contradicts ethical principles or historical evidence, it must be reinterpreted, contextually restricted, or understood figuratively. This constitutes the form of epistemic moderation that distinguishes al-Ghazâlî's thought from textualist approaches (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 43; al-Ghazâlî 1991, 46; Brown 1999, 23).

Al-Ghazâlî's Ethical Hermeneutics

Al-Ghazâlî's ethical hermeneutics model represents an interpretive approach to sunnah and hadith that places moral values, public welfare, and ethical purpose at the centre of textual understanding. In contrast to literalist approaches that rely primarily on the authenticity of *sanad* and the surface structure of the text, his ethical hermeneutics insists that the meaning of a hadith must be tested through three fundamental questions: first, is it consistent with the Quran's principles of justice? Second, is it historically and sociologically relevant? And the last, does it promote moral benefits?

In this framework, interpretation becomes a rational-ethical process that moves from text toward value, rather than simply reproducing the text in a literal form. Epistemologically, al-Ghazâlî's ethical hermeneutics rests on the principle that sunnah is a dynamic guide for life and inseparable from the moral objectives of the Sharia (*maqâsid al-sharî'ah*) (Hallaq 1997, 3). Consequently, a hadith cannot be deemed sufficient on the basis of its sound *sanad* alone. It must also meet ethical criteria such as justice, human dignity, and rational coherence. This approach is grounded in his belief that reason (*'aql*) has a pivotal role in discerning justice and rejecting interpretations that diminish human worth. Thus, al-

Ghazâlî's ethical hermeneutics constitutes a synthesis of reason, divine revelation, and moral value (Fadl 2001, 45).

Al-Ghazâlî proposes ethical criteria for evaluating a hadith's meaning: first, it must align with the Quran's universal principles, such as justice, compassion, and harm prohibition. Second, it should be consistent with historical facts and the Prophet's authentic practices. Last, it must be attuned with the *maqâsid al-sharî'ah*, including the preservation of life, intellect, lineage, and human dignity. When a hadith appears to contradict these foundations, it should be interpreted metaphorically, restricted to its specific context, or re-read through a broader ethical lens. This helps prevent legal rulings that are disproportionate or that inflict moral harm on particular groups.

Al-Ghazâlî's ethical hermeneutics is evident in his examination of hadiths that may potentially generate gender bias, discrimination, or injustice (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 45; Brown 1999, 21). He rejects the uncritical acceptance of traditions such as those used to prohibit women from attending mosques or to justify domestic violence. He argues that such readings conflict with both historical realities and the Quran's commitment to justice. Through historical analysis, contextualization of the Prophet's daily practices, and the application of *maqâsid*, al-Ghazâlî restores the ethical spirit of the sunnah as a guide to liberation rather than a tool for legitimizing oppression. His ethical framework thus functions as a corrective mechanism against distortions produced by literalist interpretations.

In contemporary settings, al-Ghazâlî's ethical hermeneutics holds significant relevance for Islamic legal reform and gender studies, as well as religious moderation discourses. This methodology opens space for rethinking sunnah in ways that are inclusive, humane, and responsive to modern social transformations. Within academic field, his framework parallels modern interpretive theories such as ethical hermeneutics and value-oriented interpretation, positioning his thought in close dialogue with global intellectuals (Brown 2011, 43).

Al-Ghazâlî's moral-ethical interpretive framework shares significant convergences with Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's hermeneutics, particularly in the view that religious texts cannot be separated from their historical setting. Abu Zayd conceptualizes scripture as a *muntaj thaqâfi*, a cultural product whose meaning emerges through the interaction between the text, social realities, and human reasoning. Although al-Ghazâlî does not

explicitly employ the language of hermeneutics, he applies comparable principles: a hadith cannot be understood solely through the verified *sanad*, but must also be assessed through *maqâsid al-shari'ah*, demands of justice, and its sociocultural relevance. In this respect, both thinkers reject forms of literalism that constrains meaning and overlooks the moral dynamic of society. The distinction lies in what each emphasizes. Abu Zayd centers the text's linguistic and historical development, while al-Ghazâlî focuses on ethical criteria (reason, Quranic justice, and the aims of law) as the primary standards for hadith interpretation (Leaman 2022, 43; Mufid et al. 2023, 13).

Meanwhile, the resonance between al-Ghazâlî's thinking and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics is visible through the concepts of distanciation and appropriation. Ricoeur argues that a text requires some distance from its literal meaning so it can be reinterpreted within a new ethical horizon. Al-Ghazâlî employs a comparable move by rejecting the readings of hadith that conflict with justice or historical evidence and reformulating their meaning in accordance with Islamic moral principles.

Ricoeur's notion of appropriation is reflected in al-Ghazâlî's attempt to reactivate the ethical force of the *sunnah* in contemporary life. He does it by emphasizing the *maqâsid*, allowing the text not only as it stands, but as something that can be renewed, in a more humane context. In this sense, al-Ghazâlî's ethical hermeneutics occupies a meeting point with Abu Zayd's socio-historical textual critique. It also echoes Ricoeur's reflective-ethical hermeneutics, producing a model of interpretation that is integrative, historically informed, and grounded in moral justice (Ricoeur 1981, 87).

Contextualizing the Sunnah in al-Ghazâlî's Thought

This idea is closely tied to the practice of *matn* criticism, a method that is by no means unprecedented. Al-Ghazâlî himself acknowledges that earlier scholars had already undertaken similar efforts. For him, however, the crucial task lies in how these theoretical principles are actually applied to the diverse corpus of prophetic traditions. In this regard, the current authors view the significance of Muhammad al-Ghazâlî's contribution as residing in the "spirit of transformation" he introduces, particularly within the field of hadith studies.

His work reflects the intellectual struggle of modern Muslim discourse in interpreting and negotiating "religious authority." Since the

mid-20th century, debates on renewal have largely revolved around the authority of the sunnah, the authenticity of hadith, and their relationship to the Quran. Al-Ghazâlî's writings represent a continuation of this trajectory, embodying a broader movement of revival within contemporary Islamic thought.

His most substantial contribution in this regard is the spirit of contextualizing the sunnah, a commitment to rejuvenate hadith as a moral guide that speaks meaningfully to contemporary realities. For al-Ghazâlî, debates surrounding hadith are not merely theological abstractions but practical concerns tied to the implementation of law, social justice, and public ethics. Therefore, *matn* criticism is not, in his view, a "novel undertaking," but an urgent necessity to prevent the sunnah from being confined within the rigidity of literalism.

Al-Ghazâlî begins with a methodological problem widely faced by modern Muslim scholars: how to approach hadith narrations that are inconsistent with reason, historical evidence, *maqâṣid al-sharī'ah*, or the ethical impetus of the Quran. For him, a sound *sanad* does not automatically render a hadith suitable as a legal foundation. The sunnah must be interpreted through the lens of *hikmah* (underlying wisdom), rather than reduced to its surface wording alone. In this way, the sunnah authority is preserved without closing the door to critical reasoning or the prioritization of Islam's higher moral values (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 56; Brown 1999, 43)

One of the clearest illustrations of how al-Ghazâlî contextualizes the Prophet's tradition can be seen in his treatment of the hadith, "*A woman's prayer at home is better than her prayer in the mosque.*" Although some scholars consider the *sanad* acceptable, al-Ghazâlî refuses to treat it as a universally binding rule. He argues that the narration contradicts the historical realities in the Prophet's period. When women regularly took part in congregational worship, the Prophet designated a separate entrance for them. He even shortened the prayer when he heard a baby crying so the mother would not feel distressed. Such historical evidence provides a rational indicator that Islam never intended to limit women from religious public spaces.

In al-Ghazâlî's perspective, this prohibitive hadith must be understood within a specific social frame. It refers to situations where women left their homes in ways that drew unnecessary attention, or where the broader social environment created the risk of moral disturbance.

Through this reasoning, al-Ghazâlî proposes a balanced approach: the hadith serves as a situational ethical reminder rather than a permanent legal restriction on women's mobility. This captures the essence of contextualizing the sunnah: distinguishing guidance meant for all times from guidance tied to particular circumstances (al-Ghazâlî 1989, 56; al-Ghazâlî 1991, 54).

Al-Ghazâlî's approach to contextualizing the sunnah also highlights a methodological division between *ahl al-hadith* and *ahl al-fiqh*. Examining *sanad* remains valuable, but determining whether a text is suitable as a legal basis lies with jurists who have profound understanding of the *maqâṣid al-sharī'ah*, social conditions, and human realities. The sunnah, therefore, should not be applied in a rigidly literal fashion when such an application would conflict with foundational Islamic values such as justice, human dignity, or compassion. This allows al-Ghazâlî to bring reason back into the Sunnah interpretation, viewing it not as something static, but as an ethical tradition with ongoing relevance.

Ultimately, his method presents a contextual model of sunnah interpretation that is adaptive, historically aware, and morally grounded. He rejects an uncritical absolutism of hadith, but he also refuses a relativism that diminishes their religious weight. Drawing on a contextual method rooted in the Quran, the *maqâṣid*, historical evidence, and ethical judgment, al-Ghazâlî formulates a hermeneutic framework, allowing sunnah to remain meaningful in addressing contemporary issues without sacrificing its religious authoritative character. This balanced contribution explains why his ideas continue to be influential in modern discussions of Islamic legal reform.

Contributions and Implications of the Study

This study contributes academically by clarifying the intellectual position of Muhammad al-Ghazâlî within contemporary debates on the renewal of hadith studies. His critique of literalist readings serves as a main point in this discussion. The study shows that al-Ghazâlî does not simply replicate classical scholars' methods but sharpens them through an epistemological move. By assessing hadith substance in consideration of Quranic values, the study reinforces that the sunnah cannot be treated as a static body of texts. This is considered significant because it demonstrates that his critique is beyond technical scrutiny of *sanad* and *matn*. Its

methodological reconstruction aims at ensuring that hadith remain a relevant, adaptable, and justice-oriented source of law.

In addition, this work enriches discussions on the rational interpretation of the sunnah by presenting concrete cases examined by al-Ghazâlî. It appears in his hadith critique about the deceased being punished due to the family's weeping and the one advising woman to pray at home. Through these interpretations, the study shows that al-Ghazâlî applies a rational-historical framework to test a hadith's coherence with the Quran, reason, and historical facts. His approach highlights that the use of intellect is in accordance with hadith tradition. It also functions as an ethical tool for preserving Islam's moral integrity. Overall, this contribution illustrates how al-Ghazâlî formulates evaluative criteria for hadith that resist rigid literalism while safeguarding the authority of the sunnah.

This study also affirms that hadith scholarship cannot stop at verifying the *sanad* authenticity. It must continue toward examining meaning, significance, and relevance for modern society. Rather than treating al-Ghazâlî's ideas merely as historical material, this article presents them as a methodological proposal for addressing questions of religious authority in a globalized era. Such a reading produces a more dynamic understanding of the sunnah not as a set of binding textual commands, but as a living discourse that must remain in line with the universal values of the Quran, *maqâsid al-sharî'ah*, and social-scientific realities faced by Muslim communities. In this sense, the study's novelty lies in reimagining the sunnah as a space where theory and practice meet, and the normativity of divine revelation engages the demands of the modern age.

Research on Muhammad al-Ghazâlî's thought also offers significant inspiration for the development of contemporary hadith studies. It shows that, no matter how rigorous the intellectual structure of *ulum al-hadith* formulated by scholars of the third and fourth Islamic centuries, it cannot be entirely free from anomalies or paradigm gaps when confronted with new historical contexts. For this reason, Muslims should not overlook the provisional nature of scholarly constructs. This intellectual tentativeness requires ongoing reassessment, revision, and reconstruction of the epistemological foundations of hadith science. Through this lens, hadith studies need not remain repetitive, instead, they can become a productive field that embraces diverse approaches and ideas, maintaining an open framework continually tested by theoretical cross-examination.

The discourse advanced by al-Ghazâlî particularly his return to the earlier debates between *ahl al-hadith* and *ahl al-fiqh*, suggests that engaging with religious texts, especially the sunnah and hadith, demands a holistic and integrated understanding. Such engagement cannot be carried out in a fragmented manner, especially in today's modern context. The historical conflict between these two intellectual camps produced competing truth claims that eventually fostered dogmatic patterns of Islamic thought, a tendency still strongly felt in hadith studies.

This situation, however, can be addressed by fostering awareness within the Muslim community of the clear distinction between *al-dîn* (religion itself) and *al-fikr al-dîni* (religious thought). Religion remains sacred and unchanging, whereas religious scholarship including hadith studies is a human, interpretive effort that is open to transformation. A proper grasp of this distinction is expected to encourage more forward-looking modes of reasoning and a dynamic approach to Islamic studies. It moves beyond regressive attitudes that rely solely on past authorities as an expression of *taqdîs al-afkâr al-dîniyah*, the sanctification of inherited ideas.

Whether by accident or by design, hadith was originally *a living tradition* associated with Prophet Muhammad. It has gradually shifted into *a literary tradition*, taking written form in the second and third Islamic centuries through compiled hadith collections. This development effectively standardized both the understanding and interpretation of the sunnah. The shift marks a major transformation: the move from a fluid, oral, and socially embedded tradition to a fixed written corpus. Consequently, the broader discourse and socio-cultural context that once shaped and accompanied the sunnah became increasingly obscured.

Therefore, when viewed from an epistemological standpoint, the institutionalization of hadith texts is the result of a long and distinctly historical process. This point is often overlooked by many Muslims. This neglect frequently leads to rigid attitudes toward the sunnah, approached through historical, overly literal, and fragmentary methods. Such approaches detach the sunnah from its own historical setting and reduce it to a compilation of isolated textual units. It is precisely at this point that hermeneutics, as the art of interpretation, becomes deeply relevant and necessary within contemporary hadith studies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Muhammad al-Ghazâlî's critique of hadith literalism constitutes a principled response to rigid readings of the sunnah that overlook its ethical purposes, historical context, and Qur'anic moral vision. By emphasizing the linkage between hadith and revelation, the function of *maqâṣid al-sharī'ah*, and the need for ethical reasoning, al-Ghazâlî rejects accepting hadith on the basis of sanad alone. His approach shows that substantive meaning and moral coherence outweigh mere formal authenticity in Islamic legal reasoning, thereby reviving the tradition of matn criticism and challenging forms of textual authoritarianism that ignore Islam's ethical commitments.

Furthermore, the study reveals that al-Ghazâlî's rational re-reading of the sunnah is not a dismissal of the hadith tradition, but an effort to reinforce its moral foundations. Through concrete examples, such as the reports on post-mortem punishment due to lamentation and women's participation in the mosque, he demonstrates how rational analysis, historical awareness, and Quranic values function as essential criteria for evaluating hadith meaning. This method restores coherence between the sunnah and the principle of justice, preserving its authority while steering it away from harsh or dehumanizing literalism.

The study concludes that al-Ghazâlî's ethical hermeneutics offers an interpretive framework that situates hadith within the spheres of morality, public welfare, and reason. Through the integration of textual analysis, historical inquiry, and normative ethics, he reorients the reading of the sunnah toward justice, compassion, and human dignity. When placed in dialogue with the hermeneutical perspectives of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Paul Ricoeur, al-Ghazâlî's epistemic orientation emerges as one that resists textual absolutism and promotes contextual meaning-making within the Islamic tradition.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that al-Ghazâlî's call for contextualizing the sunnah provides a constructive pathway for renewing Islamic law. By differentiating the Prophet's universal teachings from context-specific directives, he rejects rigid interpretations that impede social justice and opens space for legal reform responsive to contemporary conditions, particularly concerning gender, social relations, and public ethics. His contribution thus extends beyond technical hadith criticism to the formulation of a contextual methodology that preserves the sunnah's relevance and alignment with universal human values.

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