THE INTELLECTUAL CONTROVERSY BETWEEN ABRAHAM GEIGER AND AL-GHAZALI IN INTERPRETING ISLAM

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Abstract

The differences in thought between Abraham Geiger and Al-Ghazali in understanding Islam reflect two contrasting approaches to the Qur'an and the influence of tradition in religious education. This study aims to analyze how their intellectual perspectives have shaped theological development within their respective traditions and their impact on the broader study of religion. The research employs a qualitative method, focusing on an in-depth analysis of Geiger's and Al-Ghazali's works, alongside a comprehensive literature review to contextualize the historical and philosophical dimensions of their arguments. The findings indicate that Geiger, through his historical-critical approach, presents a more flexible interpretation of sacred texts, whereas Al-Ghazali upholds the authority and wisdom of the Qur'an as the primary foundation of Islamic knowledge. This intellectual discourse highlights the tension between rationalism and traditionalism in Islamic studies while illustrating the dynamic interplay between radicalism and religiosity within the Muslim world. Furthermore, this controversy underscores internal debates across various religious traditions and offers valuable insights into how interfaith dialogue can enhance the understanding of Islam and spirituality in the modern era. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to a broader academic discourse on the interaction between religious tradition and critical thought in a global context.

Keywords: *Abraham Geiger, Al-Ghazali, Theological Thought, Controversy.*

Abstrak

Perbedaan pemikiran antara Abraham Geiger dan Al-Ghazali dalam memahami Islam mencerminkan dua pendekatan yang kontras terhadap Al-Qur'an serta pengaruh tradisi dalam pendidikan agama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana pemikiran kedua tokoh ini memengaruhi perkembangan teologi dalam konteks tradisi masing-masing serta dampaknya terhadap studi agama. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah analisis kualitatif terhadap karya-karya Geiger dan Al-Ghazali, serta kajian literatur yang relevan guna memahami konteks historis dan filosofis argumen mereka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Geiger, dengan pendekatan historis-kritisnya, menawarkan interpretasi yang lebih fleksibel terhadap teks-teks suci, sementara Al-Ghazali menegaskan otoritas dan kebijaksanaan Al-Qur'an sebagai fondasi utama keilmuan Islam. Pergulatan pemikiran ini mencerminkan ketegangan antara rasionalisme dan tradisionalisme dalam studi keislaman, sekaligus menggambarkan dinamika antara radikalisme dan religiusitas di dunia Islam. Kontroversi ini juga menyoroti perdebatan internal dalam berbagai tradisi keagamaan serta memberikan wawasan tentang bagaimana dialog antaragama dapat memperdalam pemahaman terhadap Islam dan spiritualitas di era modern. Diharapkan penelitian ini dapat berkontribusi pada kajian akademik yang lebih luas mengenai interaksi antara tradisi agama dan pemikiran kritis dalam konteks global.
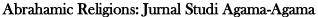
Kata Kunci: *Abraham Geiger, Al Ghazali, Pemikiran Teologis, Kontroversi*

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A. Introduction

The intellectual discourse between Abraham Geiger and Al-Ghazali regarding the interpretation of Islam presents a compelling subject for scholarly investigation. Geiger, a prominent orientalist known for his critical analysis of religious texts, asserted that the Qur'an exhibits significant influences from Jewish and Christian traditions. In contrast, Al-Ghazali, a distinguished Muslim scholar and philosopher (Pertiwi et al., 2023), defended the authenticity and divine origin of the Qur'anic revelation, rejecting any notion that it was shaped by external religious traditions. These contrasting perspectives represent two fundamentally different approaches to religious epistemology and their implications for Islamic identity.

Geiger employed historical and philological methodologies in his study of Islam, drawing comparisons between the Qur'anic teachings and those found in Jewish and Christian traditions, particularly in legal precepts and prophetic narratives. He argued that many aspects of Islamic doctrine reflect adaptations from pre-existing religious traditions, positing that Prophet Muhammad derived inspiration from Jewish and Christian communities in his milieu (Mahfudin, 2021). This approach led him to conceptualize Islam as part of the broader evolutionary trajectory of Semitic religions.

Conversely, Al-Ghazali refuted the assertion that the Qur'an is merely a product of cultural or religious syncretism. He maintained that the Qur'an constitutes a direct divine revelation, transcending historical contingencies. In his extensive theological and philosophical works, Al-Ghazali systematically defended the authority and authenticity

of the Qur'an, emphasizing that Islamic doctrine is founded upon absolute truth and cannot be fully comprehended solely through rational or historical analysis (Parwanto, 2019). He underscored the transcendence of divine revelation, arguing that it cannot be reduced to human intellectual constructs.

The dichotomy between Geiger's and Al-Ghazali's perspectives illustrates two predominant paradigms in the study of religion. Geiger epitomizes the critical-rational approach, which contextualizes Islam within human history and seeks to interpret its development through socio-cultural frameworks. This methodology continues to underpin contemporary Islamic studies in Western academia. In contrast, Al-Ghazali represents a normative theological stance, positioning revelation as an absolute and independent source of truth, impervious to historical and cultural influences. His intellectual legacy remains a cornerstone in Islamic theological discourse, particularly in affirming the divine authority of revelation.

The relevance of this discourse persists in contemporary religious studies and interfaith dialogues (Taufikurrahman, 2020). The critical approach pioneered by Geiger continues to evolve within academic Islamic studies, particularly in Western institutions. Simultaneously, Al-Ghazali's theological framework retains significant influence within the Muslim world, particularly in defending the primacy of revelation as the ultimate source of religious authority. This ongoing discourse remains integral to contemporary debates on the intersection between religion and epistemology.

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the intellectual divergence between Abraham Geiger and Al-Ghazali and its implications for the development of Islamic studies. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in literature-based analysis, this research explores the extent to which their respective arguments have shaped intellectual discourses on Islam, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Furthermore, this study examines how their philosophical and theological perspectives continue to inform academic discourse and shape contemporary perceptions of Islam.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive analysis method to examine the intellectual divergence between Abraham Geiger and Al-Ghazali in their interpretation of Islam. The analysis is based on two types of data: primary and secondary sources (Taufik Abdullah dan M. Rusli Karim, 2004). Primary sources include Geiger's works, which explore the influence of Jewish traditions on the Qur'an, as well as Al-Ghazali's writings, which emphasize the authenticity of divine revelation in Islam. Secondary sources comprise books, journals, and academic articles that provide historical and philosophical contexts for the arguments presented by both scholars.

Data collection is conducted through a literature review and document analysis. The research process begins with the identification and examination of the principal works of both thinkers, followed by a comparative analysis with relevant academic literature (Danandjaja, 2014). This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding

of the evolution of Geiger's and Al-Ghazali's thoughts and their contributions to Islamic studies, both in historical contexts and in contemporary academic discourse.

C. Result and Discussion
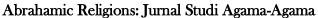## 1. Abraham Geiger's Perspective

Abraham Geiger, a Western scholar of Jewish faith, conducted a study on Islam and compared it with Jewish teachings. In his view, Islam is not an entirely new religion nor one derived from divine revelation; rather, it is the result of an individual following Jewish teachings and subsequently forming a new sect distinct from its parent religion. As the earlier religion within the Semitic tradition, Geiger regarded Judaism as having greater authority and the right to evaluate other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which he considered deviations from Jewish teachings (Labib Jalaluddin, 2021).

Geiger strongly advocated for the comparative study of sacred texts, particularly between the Torah and the Qur'an. He argued that numerous teachings in the Qur'an exhibit significant influences from Jewish traditions. According to him, several words in the Qur'an have origins in Jewish language and concepts that were previously unknown or not understood by Arab society before the emergence of Islam. These words include sakinah, taghut, furqan, ma'un, masani, malakut, darasa, tabut, jannatu adn, taurat, jahannam, rabbani, sabt, and ahbar (Arifinsyah, 2014).

Furthermore, Geiger highlighted doctrinal similarities between Islam and Judaism, one of which pertains to the creation of the universe. The Qur'anic concept of creation occurring over six phases closely resembles the teachings of the Torah in the Book of Genesis (Sefer Bereshit), which also describes the creation of the heavens and the earth in six days. However, a notable difference lies in the concept of the sacred day. Unlike Judaism, which sanctifies the Sabbath (Saturday), Islam designates Friday as the primary day of worship (Armas, 2003).

Geiger also compared the concepts of heaven and hell in Islam and Judaism. He identified similarities between the understanding of paradise in the Talmud (Chagiga 9:2) and in the Qur'an, particularly in Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 29. Additionally, the concept of the afterlife in Islam bears resemblance to doctrines in Judaism and Christianity. Geiger posited that the term Jahannam in Islam originates from the Hebrew Gehinnom in the Talmud. Similarly, the Qur'anic term Jannatul Adn parallels references in the Tanakh, which depict the Garden of Eden as the dwelling place of the righteous (Ulfahadi & Surya, 2020). From Geiger's perspective, Islam could be considered a major branch of Judaism in the modern era. He portrayed Prophet Muhammad as an individual deeply familiar with Jewish teachings and engaging in scholarly study of rabbinic teachings before formulating the tenets of Islam.

The notion of a strong connection between Islam and Judaism was also put forth by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. They noted that certain principles in Islam are linked to Syriac legal traditions. Crone further developed the "Hagarism" theory, positing that Muhammad originated from the Banu Hajar (descendants of Ishmael) in the Hijaz region

and was part of the Judeo-Hagarite group. This community was referred to as Mhaggraye, which later became associated with the term Muhajirun (Muhammad Ghifari, 2020). In Crone's analysis, Muhammad was seen as part of the Jewish-Hagarite community that held a messianic aspiration for Jerusalem, a concept also prevalent in Byzantine Christian traditions.

Following the Palestinian emancipation by the Hagarite group, a transition occurred between this community and Judaic teachings. Crone argued that they subsequently established a sacred land apart from Jerusalem while maintaining reverence for Jesus, despite rejecting the crucifixion doctrine. Eventually, Mecca became their holy city, and the Kaaba was recognized as their central place of worship, bearing similarities to Samaritan practices that venerated Shechem and Mount Gerizim as sacred sites. Later, Prophet Muhammad's writings were compiled into the Qur'an and formally standardized during the reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, under the central role of Governor Hajjaj ibn Yusuf.
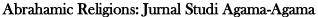
The perspectives proposed by Geiger, Crone, and Cook have sparked considerable debate among scholars, particularly due to their approaches, which often disregard the spiritual aspects and religious experiences of Muslims in understanding revelation. Nonetheless, their research offers intriguing insights within the field of comparative religious studies.

2. Al-Ghazali's Perspective

Al-Ghazali, a prominent Muslim scholar who lived in the 11th century, is one of the most influential figures in the history of Islamic thought (Asmaran, 2020). He critically responded to philosophers who relied solely on reason to understand the truth without considering the role of divine revelation. According to him, revelation is a form of knowledge directly granted by God to the prophets, serving as a bridge between the Divine and humankind. He emphasized that the Qur'an possesses uniqueness and authenticity that cannot be matched by other scriptures (M. Quraish Shihab, 1998).

As a great thinker in Islam, Al-Ghazali provided profound arguments regarding the authenticity of the Qur'an, which can be used to counter critiques such as those put forward by Abraham Geiger. Geiger, a 19th-century Jewish orientalist, argued that the Qur'an contains numerous elements derived from Jewish traditions. Although Al-Ghazali lived centuries before Geiger, his views and arguments remain relevant in refuting the claim that the Qur'an is merely an adaptation of previous teachings. Through a logical, philosophical, and theological approach, Al-Ghazali asserted that the Qur'an is a pure revelation from God, not a product of cultural assimilation.

According to Al-Ghazali, revelation is a form of divine communication that gradually enhances human understanding (Muhamad Ahdor Daenuri, 2021).He explained that the Qur'an, as the word of God, possesses distinct characteristics that cannot be disregarded by humans, including Prophet Muhammad. The beauty and depth of its meaning serve as strong evidence that this scripture originates from God, rather than

being an adaptation of Jewish or Christian teachings. Prophet Muhammad, who was known to be ummi (illiterate), had no direct access to Jewish and Christian texts; therefore, the notion that he imitated prior teachings is baseless.
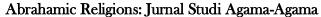
The uniqueness of the Qur'an, according to Al-Ghazali, is not only found in its content and meaning but also in its structure and linguistic style. The Arabic language of the Qur'an exhibits distinctive characteristics that cannot be replicated by humans. The Qur'an challenges anyone to produce even a single chapter like it (QS Al-Baqarah: 23), demonstrating its linguistic superiority. For Al-Ghazali, this linguistic miracle is a divine sign that cannot be created by humans. The structure of the Qur'an, which integrates legal, ethical, historical, and spiritual aspects into a harmonious whole, has no equivalent in other texts, including Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali discussed the concept of tawhid (monotheism) as taught in the Qur'an, which he considered uniquely unparalleled (Muhammad Djakfar, 2012). In Judaism, monotheism is often associated with an exclusive relationship between God and the Israelites, while in Christianity, the doctrine of the Trinity remains a debated aspect within monotheism. In contrast, the Qur'an asserts the absolute oneness of God, as explicitly stated in QS Al-Ikhlas: 1-4. According to Al-Ghazali, this tawhid concept is not merely a theological belief but also forms the foundation of the Islamic social, ethical, and moral system.

In addition to the concept of divinity, Al-Ghazali also examined the Qur'anic teachings on the afterlife. The Qur'an presents a clear depiction of the afterlife, including descriptions of paradise, hell, and divine justice. In Jewish tradition, belief in the afterlife is not emphasized, whereas in Christianity, salvation is often linked to the concept of atonement. The Qur'an, however, underscores the importance of human deeds in determining one's fate in the hereafter. Verses such as QS Al-Zalzalah: 7-8 affirm that every action, no matter how small, will be rewarded accordingly. For Al-Ghazali, this teaching provides a profound moral dimension to human life.

From a social perspective, the Qur'an introduced significant transformations that cannot be explained merely as influences from Jewish or Christian traditions. Prophet Muhammad lived in an Arab society dominated by paganism, social injustice, and discriminatory practices. The Qur'an introduced concepts of justice, equality, and respect for individual rights. For instance, its regulations on women's rights, the prohibition of usury, and the enforcement of social justice reflect a vision more advanced than previous teachings. According to Al-Ghazali, these profound societal changes further prove that the Qur'an is a divine revelation offering practical solutions to human civilization.

Al-Ghazali also addressed the similarities between the Qur'an and previous scriptures with a different approach. He acknowledged certain similarities but did not consider them evidence of plagiarism. Instead, these parallels indicate that revelation originates from the same divine source—one God. However, the Qur'an does not merely confirm previous revelations; it also corrects distortions that may have occurred in their

transmission by human intermediaries. For instance, the Qur'an refines the concept of tawhid and provides clearer legal guidelines than earlier scriptures.

The authenticity of the Qur'an was further emphasized by Al-Ghazali in his discussion on the context of revelation. The Qur'anic revelation is not limited to spiritual guidance; it also addresses social, political, and economic issues relevant to its time. Each verse was revealed in a specific historical context, making it applicable to the challenges of its era. Nevertheless, its teachings retain a universal quality that remains relevant across all ages.
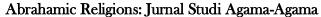
Overall, Al-Ghazali's thoughts provide a comprehensive response to critiques such as those posed by Abraham Geiger. He refuted the claim that the Qur'an is merely an adaptation of earlier traditions by demonstrating its unique content, linguistic miracle, and profound social and spiritual impact. For Al-Ghazali, the Qur'an is a pure revelation from God that not only rectifies distortions in prior scriptures but also offers a perfect guide for all of humanity. Its authenticity, as he argued, serves as undeniable evidence that this scripture is not a human cultural product but the eternal and divine word of God.

3. The Impact of the Controversy Between Abraham Geiger and Al-Ghazali

The controversy sparked by the thoughts of Abraham Geiger and Al-Ghazali has had a profound and significant impact on theological and intellectual discourse within two highly influential religious traditions: Judaism and Islam (Armas, 2003). Both figures challenged established doctrines within their respective religions, provoking discussions that led to intense debates among intellectuals and religious communities alike. Their influence manifested in diverse ways, shaping intellectual developments differently and eliciting both positive and negative reactions from society and religious scholars.

a. The Positive Impact of Abraham Geiger

Abraham Geiger, recognized as one of the key figures in the Jewish Reform movement, introduced a critical analytical method for examining religious texts, particularly within the Jewish tradition. One of Geiger's major positive contributions was his advocacy for understanding religion through a more historical and scientific approach. He emphasized that sacred texts should not be treated as documents detached from their historical and cultural contexts. Geiger introduced the idea that religious texts must be interpreted within the framework of the social and historical circumstances surrounding their formation. This perspective fostered a new paradigm in religious studies, particularly in the interpretation of sacred scriptures such as the Torah, which came to be seen not only as an eternal revelation but also as a document shaped within a specific historical context that could be better understood through historical and archaeological studies. Although this perspective was controversial, Geiger successfully paved the way for an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theology, history, and cultural studies an approach that continues to influence contemporary religious scholarship.

Moreover, Geiger played a crucial role in fostering a more open interpretation of religion, creating space for reform and modernization within Judaism. This reform led to changes in worship practices, such as the reduction of traditional rituals deemed less relevant to modern life. Such reforms not only allowed for modifications in religious rituals but also promoted a more flexible understanding of religious laws, ultimately enabling Judaism to adapt to changing times. Additionally, Geiger significantly contributed to interfaith dialogue, encouraging comparative studies between Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. This approach expanded the horizons of interfaith understanding and promoted mutual respect and tolerance among different religious communities.
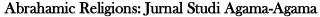
b. The Negative Impact of Abraham Geiger

However, not all the impacts of Geiger's views were well received, particularly among those who believed that a historical and critical approach to religion would undermine the integrity of religious doctrine. Within conservative Jewish circles, Geiger was perceived as a threat to religious authority. By emphasizing that sacred texts were products of a dynamic historical process, Geiger was seen as reducing revelation to something merely historical rather than divine and timeless. This conservative perspective holds that religion should be understood as an unchanging revelation, independent of social or cultural transformations.

This negative impact further exacerbated divisions within the Jewish community, as more traditional segments responded with outright rejection of the changes proposed by the Reform movement. As a result, tensions arose within Jewish religious discourse, leading to ideological and theological conflicts between progressive and conservative factions. These internal divisions reflected broader debates on the role of religious adaptation in the face of historical and cultural shifts, highlighting the enduring struggle between tradition and reform in religious thought.

c. The Positive Impact of Al-Ghazali

Meanwhile, Al-Ghazali, a prominent theologian and philosopher within the Islamic tradition, had a profound positive impact on the intellectual landscape of Islam, particularly through his renowned work, Tahafut al-Falasifah (The Incoherence of the Philosophers). In this seminal text, Al-Ghazali critically examined Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelianism, which had been widely embraced by Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. His critique of philosophy initiated a renewal of thought within Islam, emphasizing the primacy of divine revelation and religious principles in comprehending reality rather than relying solely on human reason. Al-Ghazali underscored the inherent limitations of human intellect in attaining absolute truth, asserting that such truths could only be fully grasped through revelation and spiritual experience.

Another significant positive impact of Al-Ghazali's work was the reinforcement of a more inclusive and profound Islamic theology. His writings contributed to bridging various schools of thought within Islam and played a pivotal role in integrating tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism) as an essential component of religious life (Bagir, 2006). By focusing on spirituality, Al-Ghazali enabled Muslims to explore their relationship with God through direct experience rather than relying solely on rational comprehension. This approach fostered a richer religious intellectual tradition, allowing for a more holistic engagement with faith that combined reason, spirituality, and divine revelation.

d. The Negative Impact of Al-Ghazali

However, Al-Ghazali's highly critical stance toward philosophy also had significant negative repercussions on intellectual development in the Islamic world (Hamzah, 2024). By asserting that philosophy, which prioritizes rationality, was in conflict with religious teachings, Al-Ghazali indirectly restricted further advancements in science and philosophy within Islamic civilization. His views triggered tensions between rationalism and religiosity in the Islamic world, ultimately creating barriers to a more open intellectual progress. One of the consequences was the decline in the development of scientific knowledge based on experimentation and rationality, which had once been a hallmark of the advanced medieval Islamic civilization.

The reluctance to embrace philosophy and Western scientific thought—perceived as being in opposition to Islam—led to stagnation in adopting scientific reasoning and modern technology, while Europe moved forward with the Scientific Revolution. Another negative impact was the fragmentation within the Islamic intellectual sphere. Although Al-Ghazali's emphasis on revelation and spirituality strengthened religious enlightenment (Muniroh, 2018), it also contributed to the neglect of scientific rationality among many scholars. This further deepened the divide between orthodox theology and philosophy, ultimately hindering critical thinking and intellectual reflection within the Islamic world.

D. Conclusion

The differences in perspective between Abraham Geiger and Al-Ghazali reflect two contrasting approaches to understanding the Qur'an and religious tradition. Geiger, through his historical and critical methodology, traced the historical background of religious texts and the possible influence of preexisting traditions in their formation. In contrast, Al-Ghazali asserted that the Qur'an is an authentic divine revelation, uninfluenced by changing traditions or external elements. This study opens broader opportunities for comparative research on religious thought in the interpretation of sacred texts while highlighting the importance of historical context in religious studies.

As a recommendation, future research could further explore the relationship between these perspectives and the development of religious studies in the modern era, particularly in relation to textual criticism methodologies and the interpretation of revelation across various religious traditions.

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