

Worship Motivation in Islam: An Islamic Psychological Analysis of Paradise and Hell

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Abstract

This study examines worship motivation in Islam by integrating Islamic psychology with contemporary theories of motivation. The focus includes the validity of paradise-hell motivation, the stages of spiritual motivation evolution (*maqamat*), the dynamics of *khauf* (praiseworthy fear) and *raja'* (hope), and the pinnacle of this evolution, namely *mahabbah* (sincere love), which represents pure intrinsic motivation. The method employed is qualitative, using a library research approach to the Qur'an, authentic Hadith, and classical Sufi works, and analyzing them through content analysis and hermeneutics. The novelty of this research lies in integrating the Sufi concept of *maqāmāt* (*khauf*, *raja'*, *mahabbah*) with Self-Determination Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, revealing conceptual parallels between Islamic and Western psychology that have not been widely developed in prior Islamic psychology studies. This study offers a holistic perspective on the evolution of worship motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic, aiming to achieve inner well-being and Allah's pleasure, and to provide practical implications for the development of Islamic spiritual education.

Keywords: *Worship Motivation; Extrinsic; Intrinsic; Khauf and Rajā'; Mahabbah*

A. Introduction

Worship is the primary purpose of the creation of jinn and humankind (QS. Adh-Dhariyat: 56). In their spiritual journey, Muslims often face a fundamental question: "Why do we worship Allah?" The normative answer frequently given refers to two things: the desire to enter paradise and the fear of entering hell. This statement raises complex issues. On one hand, the Qur'an frequently mentions the promise of paradise (e.g., QS. An-Nisa' [4]: 57, QS. Ali 'Imran [3]: 133) and the threat of hell (QS. Az-Zumar [39]: 71, QS. Al-Mulk [67]: 10–11). On the other hand, Sufis and scholars of ethics call for a higher level of worship based on Allah's pleasure, love (*mahabbah*), and shyness (*haya'*) toward Allah, independent of the lure of paradise and hell (Al-Ghazali, 1965). This prompts the question: "Would we still worship Him if paradise and hell did not exist?"

Islamic psychology, which integrates the science of the soul with Islamic values, offers an appropriate perspective for analyzing this phenomenon. Previous studies, such as those by Al-Ghazali (1965), Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (2019), and Ahmad et al. (2024), have discussed sincerity, spiritual *maqāmāt*, and the relationship between Islamic values and contemporary motivation theories. However, few studies have specifically integrated the *maqāmāt* framework (*khauf*, *rajā'*, *mahabbah*) with Self-Determination Theory within an Islamic psychology perspective. Data from various studies indicate that extrinsic factors dominate worship motivation compared to intrinsic ones. This gap between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation requires comprehensive examination.

This research aims to: (1) Analyze the concepts of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in worship from an Islamic psychological perspective; (2) Examine the validity of worship motivated by paradise and hell; (3) Explain the stages of spiritual motivation (*maqāmāt*); (4) Provide a balanced perspective on the potential for shirk in worship motivation. The novelty lies in integrating Western psychological approaches (Self-Determination Theory) with Islamic psychological concepts (*khauf*, *raja'*, *mahabbah*) in analyzing the paradise-hell paradigm.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach using library research. Primary data sources include Qur'anic verses and authentic Hadith related to worship motivation, paradise, hell, *khauf*, *raja'*, and *mahabbah*. Secondary sources include classical Sufi texts (9th–13th centuries CE) recognized as primary references on *maqāmāt*, such as the works of Al-Ghazali, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, and Al-Ansari, as well as Scopus/SINTA-indexed Islamic psychology journal articles from the last 10 years and contemporary books on Islamic spirituality.

Source selection was based on scholarly authority, conceptual relevance, and direct connection to the theme of spiritual motivation. Data analysis involved content analysis to identify themes of worship motivation and a hermeneutic approach to interpret the psychological and spiritual meanings of texts in classical and contemporary contexts.

This study is limited to textual analysis and does not involve empirical field data. Generalizations are conceptual and require further testing through quantitative or qualitative field research.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

Heaven and Hell as Legitimate Extrinsic Motivations

Allah SWT employs a reward-and-punishment approach as an effective method of guidance and education for humankind. The promise of paradise (QS. Ali 'Imran [3]: 133, QS. An-Nisa' [4]: 57) and the threat of hell (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 39, QS. Al-Maidah [5]: 72) motivate Muslims to do good and avoid prohibitions. The frequent repetition and diversity of promises of paradise and threats of hell in the Qur'an affirm the validity of such motivation in worship. In religious psychological terms, this falls under extrinsic motivation, driven by external incentives-hope of obtaining paradise through good deeds and avoidance of hell through refraining from sins (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Nevertheless, the orientation of worship still seeks Allah's pleasure, preventing it from falling into shirk. This concept is not intended to diminish the value or purpose of worship but serves as an approach aligned with human psychology (fitrah), which instinctively seeks benefit and avoids loss. It constitutes the initial stage toward achieving pure intrinsic motivation in Muslim worship (Al-Ghazali, 1965).

In QS. Al-Baqarah (2): 25 Allah Ta'ala says:

"Give glad tidings to those who believe and do righteous deeds that for them are gardens beneath which rivers flow. Every time they are given fruit from it, they say, 'This is what we were given before.' They have been given similar fruits, and there they have purified spouses. They will abide therein forever."

In QS. An-Nisa (4): 56 Allah Ta'ala says: "Indeed, those who disbelieve in Our verses, We will surely cast them into Hell. Every time their skins are roasted, We will replace them with other skins so that they may taste the punishment. Indeed, Allah is Almighty and Wise."

Paradise and hell are not independent entities that compromise the purity of worship to Allah Ta'ala; rather, they are part of Allah's creation. Paradise is the reward for those who do good in this world, and hell is the retribution for those who disbelieve and sin. They represent the justice of the Almighty. Paradise and hell are real, physical, eternal entities awaiting in the hereafter and must be believed in by every Muslim as part of faith in the Last Day (al-Ashqar, 1998; Taymiyyah, 1995). This perspective contrasts with contemporary metaphorical and psychological interpretations of eschatological realities that understand paradise and hell primarily as symbolic or cognitive constructs rather than objective postmortem realities (Prophet, 2025).

Worship motivated by hope of paradise and fear of hell serves as a psychospiritual entry point for ordinary Muslims (*awam*), consistent with human fitrah and loss aversion. However, if it remains stagnant, this motivation risks reducing the quality of ikhlas (sincerity). In parallel with Self-Determination Theory, this stage corresponds to external regulation.

Khawf and Rajā' in the Framework of Islamic Psychology

Khauf linguistically means fear (*al-faza'*) or anticipation of something unpleasant, which is the opposite of a sense of security (al-Asfahani, 1972; Manzur, 1990). In psychospiritual terms, khauf is defined as the pain or anxiety of the heart resulting from the anticipation of evil or danger in the future (Al-Ghazali, 1965; Sina, 1950), which triggers physical responses such as palpitations (al-Jawziyyah, 2019). Khauf is always future-oriented, taking the form of worry over losing something beloved or facing something dreaded (al-Naysaburi, 2007).

In Islam, khauf occupies a central position. Allah commands, "...fear Me, if you are truly believers" (QS. Āli 'Imrān [3]: 175). Khauf serves as a motivator for obedience, a purifier of the soul from arrogance (Al-Ghazali, 1965), and the foundation and gateway to obedience to Allah (al-Jawziyyah, 2019). It is a transcendental emotion oriented toward Allah, prompting urgency in repentance and righteous deeds (Jihadin & Suwandi, 2020), as exemplified by the prophets who supplicated with both "hope and fear" (QS. Al-Anbiyā' [21]: 90).

Scholars classify khauf into two categories: praiseworthy fear (*khauf maḥmūd*), which drives obedience, and blameworthy fear (*khauf madhmūm*), which leads to despair of Allah's mercy or abandonment of obligations due to fear of created beings (Al-Ghazali, 1965; al-Jawziyyah, 2019). In spiritual development, khauf has various levels. According to Ibn Qayyim, it begins with fear of punishment (*khauf 'āmm* – general fear), then progresses to *khashyah* (fear accompanied by veneration and awe), and reaches its pinnacle as a sense of shame arising from love (*maḥabbah*) (al-Jawziyyah, 2019). Al-Ghazālī divides it into: the fear of the common people (*khauf al-'awāmm*) of Hell's torment, the fear of the elite (*khauf al-khawāṣṣ*) that their deeds will not be accepted, and the fear of the elite of the elite (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*) of being veiled from Allah (Al-Ghazali, 1965). This highest level is illustrated in the hadith about righteous people whose "hearts tremble" lest their deeds not be accepted (Reported by al-Tirmidhi).

The balanced counterpart of *khauf* is *rajā'* (hope). *Rajā'* means hope (al-amal) and is the opposite of despair (Manzur, 1990). It is the tranquility of the heart while awaiting something beloved after having exerted maximum effort, followed by complete trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) (Al-Ghazali, 1965; al-Jawziyyah, 2019). It differs from mere wishful thinking (*tamannī*), which is accompanied by laziness. Praiseworthy *rajā'* motivates righteous action, whereas *rajā'* al-ghurūr (delusional hope) is hoping for Allah's mercy without performing any deeds (Al-Ghazali, 1965). In *Manāzil al-Sā'irīn*, *rajā'* has three degrees: that which awakens the drive to do good, that which purifies worldly desires, and the hope of meeting the Creator.

Khauf and *rajā'* are like two wings that carry the servant toward the pleasure of Allah (Al-Ghazali, 1965). Both represent affective-spiritual dimensions that must exist in balance. Within the framework of Islamic psychology, they form a dual-system of spiritual emotional regulation: *khauf* functions as an avoidance system that prevents transgression and self-destruction, while *rajā'* functions as an approach system that encourages positive action and motivation (Brandão, 2025). Their balance produces steadfastness in worship, whereas imbalance-excessive *khauf* leading to despair, or excessive *rajā'* leading to false security-results in anxiety and failure in self-control (Al-Ghazali, 1965). This balance is beautifully described in the hadith: "If a believer knew the punishment of Allah, he would never be insolent; and if a disbeliever knew the mercy of Allah, he would never despair" (Reported by Muslim).

Mahabbah as the Peak of Intrinsic Motivation

Mahabbah etymologically carries the meaning of pure and profound love, affection, and heartfelt inclination (al-Jawziyyah, 2019; Manzur, 1990). In the Sufi tradition, mahabbah is understood as selfless and sincere love (Rabī'ah al-Adawiyyah, as conveyed by Al-Ghazali, 1965), which represents the heart's complete and total orientation toward Al-Mahbub-Allah SWT (al-Naysaburi, 2007).

In Al-Ghazali's hierarchy of spiritual motivation, mahabbah occupies the highest level. At this stage, worship is no longer driven by extrinsic motives-such as the hope of reward or the fear of punishment-but is motivated purely by intrinsic love for Allah Ta'ala. Love for anything other than Allah then becomes a secondary manifestation or reflection of this primary mahabbah. This concept represents the perfect embodiment of the tawhid declaration *lā ilāha illallāh*, which is not merely uttered by the tongue but proven through total obedience-

fulfilling all of His commands and abstaining from all that He has forbidden. This is affirmed in the word of Allah SWT:

“Say, [O Muhammad]: If you should love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.” (QS. Ali ‘Imran [3]: 31)

From a hermeneutic perspective and through content analysis of classical primary sources, mahabbah is not merely a historical description but a dynamic model of religious motivation. This concept aligns closely with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020), which emphasizes that intrinsic motivation emerges when the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled without external rewards. In Sufism, the element of “relatedness” is realized through the heart’s complete and intimate connection with Allah, making worship an autonomous and inherently fulfilling activity.

Similarly, mahabbah transcends Maslow’s hierarchy of needs at the stage of self-transcendence, where the individual no longer stops at self-actualization but reaches the pinnacle of spiritual attainment through total dissolution in divine love. This integration offers an original contribution to contemporary Islamic education. Rather than merely teaching moral values in a normative manner, it builds students’ character through a genuine intrinsic motivation approach. This method addresses the limitations of secular psychological models, which often overlook the transcendent dimension, while simultaneously providing a practical framework for religious educators to develop “mahabbah-based education” in the digital age, which is saturated with extrinsic distractions.

The Evolution of Spiritual Motivation

The spiritual journey in classical Sufism illustrates a profound evolution of motivation—from an initially extrinsic stage toward complete intrinsic motivation—with mahabbah (divine love) as its pinnacle and ultimate goal (Al-Ghazali, 1965). The initial motivation for worship, driven by the hope of Paradise and the fear of Hell, serves as a legitimate entry point for beginners (*awam*). This motivation then gradually develops through the successive stages (*maqāmāt*) of *taubah* (repentance), *zuhud* (asceticism), *tawakkal* (trust in God), *ridha* (contentment), and finally culminates in mahabbah (al-Jawziyyah, 2019). There are no shortcuts; this evolution demands a steady and methodical ascent.

Classical scholars consistently affirm this gradation. In *Manazil as-Sa’irin* by Abdullah al-Ansari, mahabbah is positioned as the seventh station out of ten. The first six stations serve as essential prerequisites for the ascent, while stations

seven through ten are manifestations emanating from mahabbah itself (al-Harawi, 1988). Ali bin Husain (Zayn al-Abidin) classified the motivations for worship into three categories: at-tujjar (the merchants-those who worship in pursuit of reward), al-'abid (the slaves-those who worship to avoid punishment), and al-ahrar (the free-those who worship purely out of love and reverence for Allah) (Ibn al-Jawzi, 2012).

Al-Ghazali, in the context of fasting, distinguished three levels: the general fast (restraining physical appetites), the special fast (refraining from sensory sins), and the special of the special fast (restraining the heart from anything that distracts it from Allah) (Al-Ghazali, 1965). Ibn Qayyim divided believers into mukmin 'awwam (ordinary believers who adhere to the Sharia with basic faith) and khawash (the elite, who practice complete sincerity, steadfastness, and adherence to the Sunnah) (al-Jawziyyah, 2019).

This evolutionary framework offers a powerful parallel with contemporary psychological theories, providing an original contribution to Islamic psychology and spiritual education. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the initial motivation (reward and punishment) corresponds to safety needs (security and protection). The subsequent ascent through zuhud and ridha fulfills psychological needs (love/belonging and esteem), progressing toward self-actualization, and ultimately reaching self-transcendence-a level Maslow added toward the end of his life-where the individual transcends the ego to connect with the transcendent (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 2017). Mahabbah, as the pinnacle of Sufism, aligns perfectly with this concept of transcendence, in which motivation is no longer ego-centric but becomes a complete dissolution into divine love.

Even more strikingly, this evolution closely mirrors the continuum of internalization in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposed by Ryan and Deci. The early motivations of at-tujjar and al-'abid correspond to external regulation (driven by external rewards and punishments) and introjected regulation (driven by the avoidance of guilt or the pursuit of ego enhancement). As divine values are internalized through the maqāmāt, motivation progressively shifts into identified regulation (personally recognizing the value of worship) and integrated regulation (fully aligned with one's sense of self). At its peak, mahabbah-manifested in the level of al-ahrar or khawash-represents the perfect embodiment of intrinsic motivation: worship is performed solely for the inherent satisfaction of closeness to Allah, free from any external contingencies (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

This integration is not merely an analogy; it offers a new framework for contemporary Islamic education. In an era where student motivation is often dominated by extrinsic rewards (grades, praise, or sanctions), the “spiritual motivation evolution” approach can inform curricula that foster gradual internalization—beginning with the understanding of basic Sharia and progressing toward the cultivation of mahabbah through the practices of zuhud and dhikr. This approach addresses the limitations of secular psychological models, which often fail to capture the transcendent dimension, while providing practical recommendations: religious educators can use the stages of maqāmāt as a guide to develop students’ intrinsic religious motivation, transforming worship into a source of autonomous and sustainable inner fulfillment.

2. Discussion

The concept of Heaven (as a reward) and Hell (as a punishment) constitutes a valid and effective form of extrinsic motivation in guiding servants to worship, in accordance with human nature that instinctively seeks benefit and avoids loss (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The Qur’an repeatedly emphasizes this dimension as a method of divine guidance. For instance, QS. Ali ‘Imran [3]:133 (encouragement toward Paradise for the pious), QS. An-Nisa’ [4]:57 (the promise of Paradise for the believers), as well as QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:39 and QS. Al-Maidah [5]:72 (warnings of Hell for the disbelievers or the disobedient). These verses demonstrate that extrinsic motivation serves as an initial entry point for beginners (the general public), before evolving toward an intrinsic level (Al-Ghazali, 1965).

Contemporary research strengthens the effectiveness of this model in encouraging righteous deeds, showing that reward-and-punishment systems significantly enhance the drive for religious behavior. For example, similar studies in the context of Islamic education indicate that spiritual rewards effectively motivate initial compliance. However, to avoid becoming trapped in extrinsic motivation alone—which can lead to external dependency or a decline in motivation once rewards are removed—a strategic transition toward the internalization of values is essential (Apip Rudianto et al., 2022). Sufi scholars have consistently affirmed these spiritual stages, explaining that extrinsic motivation can progress through the process of maqāmāt (spiritual stations) into sincere intrinsic ikhlas.

In Islamic psychology, *khauf* (fear of divine punishment) and *raja’* (hope in divine mercy) serve as two complementary affective-spiritual dimensions that

ensure emotional and spiritual stability, as illustrated in QS. Al-Anbiya' [21]:90 and Hadith Sahih Muslim No. 2755. Together, they function as a dual regulatory system: *khauf* as an avoidance system (preventing sin) and *raja'* as an approach system (promoting obedience). This creates a healthy balance between optimism and dutifulness (Al-Ghazali, 1965; al-Jawziyyah, 2019). Al-Ghazali and Ibn Qayyim further distinguish praiseworthy *khauf* (that which spurs righteous action) from blameworthy *khauf* (that which leads to despair), and praiseworthy *raja'* (accompanied by effort and trust in Allah) from *ghurur* (delusion that leads to passivity and the postponement of repentance).

Mahabbah (divine love) represents the pinnacle of motivational evolution—from the stage of *al-tujjar* (merchants) and *al-'abid* (worshippers) to *al-ahrar* (the truly free) paralleling the peak of modern psychological hierarchies. In Self-Determination Theory (SDT), motivation initially based on reward and punishment (external and introjected regulation) evolves through identified and integrated regulation into full intrinsic motivation. At this stage, worship is performed out of the inherent satisfaction derived from closeness to Allah (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Recent studies applying SDT to Islamic religious motivation have demonstrated that the internalization of spiritual values significantly enhances inner well-being. In line with this perspective, Febrianty et al. (2025), found that the concept of mahabbah contributes positively to self-acceptance and psychological well-being. Their findings suggest that a deep spiritual attachment to Allah enables individuals to develop greater self-acceptance, emotional stability, and a stronger sense of meaning in life.

Similarly, the motivation derived from Heaven and Hell aligns with Maslow's safety needs (security and safety), while the ascent through the *maqāmāt* fulfills the needs for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization, ultimately reaching self-transcendence—the level Maslow added in the later stage of his work. At this level, the individual transcends the ego to achieve transcendent connection (Firdaus, 2022; Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 2017).

This integration offers an original contribution: in contemporary Islamic education, teachers can utilize reward-and-punishment mechanisms as an initial stage, followed by strategies such as *dzikir*, *muhasabah* (self-accounting), and the learning of *maqāmāt* to foster internalization leading toward mahabbah. This approach addresses the limitations of secular models, which often fail to capture the transcendent dimension, while simultaneously minimizing the risk of stagnation in extrinsic motivation by building sustainable intrinsic religious motivation.

D. Conclusion

Worship motivation in Islam encompasses both extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions that are deeply interconnected throughout a Muslim's spiritual journey. Worship motivated by the hope of Paradise and the fear of Hell (extrinsic motivation) serves as a legitimate and valid tool of spiritual education that aligns with human nature. This is affirmed in the Qur'an (for example, QS. Ali 'Imran [3]: 133, QS. An-Nisa' [4]: 57, and QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 39) and is consistent with the psychological tendency of human beings to seek benefit and avoid harm. Such motivation does not constitute shirk (polytheism) as long as the ultimate object of hope and fear remains Allah Ta'ala.

However, this form of motivation is considered an initial stage that should gradually evolve toward higher levels, namely *khauf* (praiseworthy fear), *raja'* (hope accompanied by sincere effort), and *mahabbah* (pure and genuine love for Allah). *Khauf* and *raja'* function as a dual system for regulating spiritual emotions, maintaining a healthy balance between caution and optimism in one's obedience to Allah. *Mahabbah*, as the pinnacle of intrinsic motivation, reflects worship performed purely out of sincere love for Allah Ta'ala. This aligns closely with the concepts of self-actualization and transcendence found in modern psychological theories, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-Determination Theory.

The integration of Islamic psychology with contemporary theories reveals an evolutionary progression of motivation—from extrinsic to intrinsic—which ultimately leads to *ikhlas* (sincerity) and inner well-being. This study offers a fresh perspective by synthesizing classical Sufi stations (*maqāmāt*)-namely *khauf*, *raja'*, and *mahabbah*-with Western psychological approaches. It provides a robust conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of worship motivation in a holistic manner, free from any potential elements of shirk, while simultaneously underscoring the importance of spiritual emotional balance in attaining the pleasure of Allah.

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