

ORIGIN OF TASAWWUF (SUFISM) AND CRITIQUING THE THESIS OF TRANSITION FROM ZUHD

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Abstract

The origins of *tasawwuf* have long been a subject of debate in scholarly circles, with prevailing views suggesting that it emerged as a later development influenced by the concept of *zuhd*. This article challenges this commonly held view, arguing that such assertions are rooted in a superficial reading of Islamic sources and the earlier literature on *tasawwuf*. By probing deeper into the original sources and the accounts of classical Sufi masters, this article seeks to demonstrate that *tasawwuf* cannot simply be regarded as a transitional stage from *zuhd*, influenced by various internal and/or external factors. Instead, it is an integral part of the religion of Islam, embodied in the notion of *ihsan*, which is the spiritual ideal of Islamic faith and practice. In its discussion, the article will briefly touch upon what the author believes to be the factors that have led to the misreading and misrepresentation of the history of *tasawwuf* in both Western and many Muslim writings. Departures from unchecked preconceived notions, and the use of Western concepts and categorizations—belonging to a different cultural context—in studying *tasawwuf* are identified as some of these factors. By relying on original sources and employing a historical-critical method, this paper aims to clarify that *tasawwuf* is, in essence, the art of realizing *ihsan* in theory and

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practice. As such, it originated with Islam, though its nomenclature and organizational structures may have developed later.

Keywords: *Zuhd*; *tasawwuf*; asceticism; mysticism; *ihsan*.

Khulasah

Asal-usul tasawuf telah lama menjadi tajuk perdebatan dalam kalangan sarjana, dengan pandangan dominan menyatakan bahawa ia muncul sebagai perkembangan kemudian yang dipengaruhi oleh konsep zuhud. Artikel ini mencabar pandangan tersebut dengan berhujah bahawa dakwaan itu hanyalah berdasarkan analisis dangkal terhadap sumber-sumber Islam dan literatur awal mengenai tasawuf. Melalui penelitian secara mendalam terhadap sumber-sumber asal dan catatan karya tokoh sufi klasik, artikel ini berusaha untuk menunjukkan bahawa tasawuf tidak wajar secara mudah dianggap sebagai fenomena peralihan daripada zuhud yang dipengaruhi oleh pelbagai faktor dalaman dan/atau luaran. Sebaliknya, tasawuf adalah elemen teras dalam agama Islam yang wujud dalam konsep ihsan, iaitu tujuan spiritual tertinggi yang menyempurnakan konteks iman dan amal dalam ajaran Islam. Dalam perbincangannya, artikel ini akan menyentuh secara ringkas faktor-faktor, yang menurut penulis, telah menyumbang kepada salah tafsir dan salah pemahaman mengenai sejarah tasawuf dalam wacana penulisan Barat dan sebahagian karya sarjana Muslim. Antara faktor yang dikenalpasti dalam kajian mengenai tasawuf ialah kecenderungan untuk bergantung kepada andaian awal yang tidak diteliti secara kritis, dan penggunaan konsep dan kategori analitik Barat yang berasal daripada konteks budaya yang berbeza. Dengan berpandukan sumber-sumber Islam yang asal dan mengaplikasikan pendekatan sejarah-kritis, artikel ini berhasrat untuk menjelaskan bahawa tasawuf, pada asasnya, adalah seni merealisasikan ihsan, sama ada dalam dimensi teori mahupun praktis. Oleh itu, tasawuf telah wujud seiring

dengan kelahiran Islam, meskipun terminologi dan struktur institusinya mungkin berkembang pada era yang lebih kemudian.

Kata Kunci: Zuhud; tasawuf; kezuhudan; kerohanian; ihsan.

Introduction

One of the prevailing notions among Western scholars of *tasawwuf*, known as Islamic mysticism or Sufism, Muslim esotericism, or spirituality, is that its history in Muslim societies begins in the third/ninth century due to the influence of various religious, cultural, and philosophical factors. Until then, what prevailed among them was a simple ascetical piety or asceticism, which was influenced by various external elements such as Christian monasticism, the Indian sanyasi tradition, and similar practices. Additionally, a few teachings of Islam could be interpreted as encouraging a world-renouncing lifestyle.

From the beginning of organized Western interest in *tasawwuf* until well into the later part of the twentieth century, the idea of its foreign origin was widely accepted among the majority of scholars. Even prominent figures in the field, such as Reynold Nicholson, Louis Massignon, and others, who emphasized the Islamic origin of *tasawwuf* and expressed relative dissatisfaction with radical theories of foreign origin, were unable to articulate their positions unambiguously. Their hermeneutical interpretations of Sufi experiences, as seen in Louis Massignon's extensive work on al-Hallaj (309/922)¹ or in the theorization of Reynold Nicholson² (d. 1945) about the origin and various aspects of *tasawwuf* and Sufi experience, for example, were often confusing and alienating.

¹ See Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, trans. Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

² See Reynold Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921).

Moreover, the indifferent attitude of many writers, from both the East and the West, towards distinguishing between emergence and development on one hand, and growth and acculturation on the other, has added to the complexity of the issue and made it difficult for many to differentiate between the essence of *tasawwuf*, which lies at the heart of Islam, and its emergence as a distinct social movement.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, a new wave of writings on *tasawwuf* emerged in the West, coinciding with the widespread adoption of the term 'Sufism' to replace 'mysticism'. By now, the Islamic origin of *tasawwuf* had become a generally accepted theory among Western academia, albeit without completely excluding foreign elements. With the availability of more translations and studies of primary texts on *tasawwuf*, along with a shift towards more informed approaches grounded in original sources, serious scholarly writings began to proliferate, abandoning earlier Orientalist theories.

The works of scholars such as Carl Ernst, William Chittick, Vincent Cornell, Michael Sells, and many others exemplify this trend in Western literature. It is important to recognize the significant role played by many West-based Muslim and Arab intellectuals and academics in shaping contemporary Sufi studies through their monographs, translations, and editions. Moreover, the contribution of Arab and Muslim scholars pursuing postgraduate studies in Western universities should not be overlooked in this regard. They enrich Western libraries with their scholarly editions and accompanying studies, bringing forth hidden treasures of *tasawwuf* and providing invaluable sources of enrichment and inspiration for contemporary Sufi studies.

Despite these positive developments, significant ambiguity persists regarding the fundamentals of *tasawwuf*. Serious confusion continues regarding the understanding of its history and concepts. Christopher Melchert's statement

that "A transition from Islamic asceticism to Islamic mysticism has now become a scholarly commonplace"³ provides a notable example of this confusion. He confidently asserts that "the extant record is overwhelmingly ascetical, not mystical, until Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri (246/859)⁴," hence the title of his paper, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," which reflects his firm conviction of this transition thesis. This leads him to use 'asceticism' in contrast to 'mysticism'⁵, even 'as the opposite of Asceticism'.⁶ However, this state of affairs creates serious doubts regarding the essence of *tasawwuf* and its place within the structure of the religion of Islam. What Melchert considers a scholarly commonplace is a "largely unexplained topic" for Lloyd Ridgeon.⁷

Nevertheless, setting the mid-third/ninth century as the starting point of *tasawwuf* appears to be the accepted norm even among many contemporary Muslim scholars both in

³ Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," *Studia Islamica* 83(1) (1996), 51-70, republished in Lloyd Ridgeon ed., *Sufism: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008), 44-63. See also Peter J. Awn, "Sufism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed.-in-chief, Mircea Eliade, vol. 14 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 104-123.

⁴ Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," 51-70. Although he, in his "Origins and Early Sufism" published in Lloyd Ridgeon ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3-23 refers to what took shape around the Baghdadi master al-Junayd (d. 298/911) as the beginning of *Tasawwuf* which he renders as "Sufism" widely referred to as 'Islamic Mysticism'.

⁵ Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," 45.

⁶ Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," 45.

⁷ See Lloyd Ridgeon, "The Origins of Sufism," *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London & New York: Routledge, 2021), 3-16.

the West and the Muslim world. For example, Ahmad T. Mustafa defines the period from 850 to 1200 CE as the era of early Sufism and refers to the emergence of several different modes of mystical piety around the Mediterranean and Central Asia between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries.⁸ However, what concerns me here is Mustafa's dating of the beginning of *tasawwuf* to the middle of the third century, exactly as Melchert did.⁹

This paper will contest the "transition thesis" and argue against it by highlighting its flaws, which I believe lead to a distorted understanding of the essential nature of *tasawwuf* and its history. By analyzing the term *tasawwuf* (translated by Melchert as 'mysticism'), encompassing both its theoretical and practical aspects, and its relationship to *zuhd* (renunciation), often referred to as asceticism,¹⁰ the paper will demonstrate that *tasawwuf* represents the inner dimension of Islam and is integral to the Islamic way of life. It is the Islamic spiritual quest, wherein the pursuit of moral and spiritual excellence is realized and manifested; this represents the state of '*ihsan*', meaning the "transcendental experience of living in the Divine presence."¹¹ Thus, *tasawwuf* is an inherent part of Islamic faith and practice, present from the inception of

⁸ See Ahmad K. Mustafa, "Antinomian Sufis," *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 101.

⁹ Although Melchert in his "Origins and Early Sufism", has taken the date further towards the end of the third century, i.e., the time of Junayd al-Baghdadi. See his "Origins and Early Sufism" published in Lloyd Ridgeon ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁰ In my opinion, asceticism is unacceptable as a translation for *zuhd* in the Islamic context.

¹¹ The renowned hadith Jibril defines *ihsan* in the words of the Prophet as "to worship God as if you were seeing him, if you were not seeing Him, He is seeing you." For an excellent study of this hadith, see Sachiko Murata & William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

Islamic life under the exemplary guidance of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and manifesting in multitude levels and forms among the companions, depending upon individual differences and social realities.

Sara Saviri has expressed concerns about the transition thesis earlier, suggesting that "the tapestry of early Islamic mysticism is more variegated than this paradigm allows for,"¹² ultimately rejecting it as a fallacy.¹³ However, her premises and perspectives overlook the heart of the issue and open the door to speculation regarding the dialectics of *tasawwuf* and *zuhd*. Her assertion that "asceticism and mysticism represent two separate and independent trends within Islam... and each one of these trends is itself versatile and can be broken down into various branches and typologies which may, or may not, be associated with one another"¹⁴ lacks support, as we shall see, in the classical and authentic tradition of the Sufis and in the recorded life experiences preceding the proposed transition period to mysticism, from the time of the Prophet to the middle of the third century. While acknowledging her stance on the transformation thesis, it is important to note a potential confusion she inadvertently creates regarding the meanings of both the concepts and the truths enshrined in them.

Gavin Picken does not fully embrace the transition thesis either. He refers to Melchert's transition theses and aptly notes that "these conceptualizations of 'ascetics' and 'mystics' do not fit very comfortably with several figures

¹² Sara Saviri, "Sufism: Reconsidering Terms, Definitions and Processes in the Formative Period of Islamic Mysticism," in *Les maîtres soufis et leurs disciples des IIIe-Ve siècles de l'hégire (IXe-XIe): Enseignement, formation et transmission*, eds. Gobillot, Geneviève, and Jean-Jacques Thibon (Damas; Beyrouth: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2012), 17-34.

¹³ Saviri, "Sufism: Reconsidering Terms, Definitions and Processes in the Formative Period of Islamic Mysticism", 33.

¹⁴ Saviri, "Sufism: Reconsidering Terms, Definitions and Processes in the Formative Period of Islamic Mysticism", 33.

of early Sufism."¹⁵ Furthermore, he asserts, as others have also observed, that "there is considerable evidence to suggest that change occurs well before Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri, with figures such as Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah (185/801) and Shaiq al-Balkhi (194/810) among others."¹⁶ Although Gavin undoubtedly expresses reservations about Melchert's thesis, he fails to adopt a clear position, instead offering the following statement:

"Indeed, the transition from asceticism to mysticism remains somewhat of a moot point, given that mere texts are our informant and that the personalities of that time tended towards caution while expressing their experiences during this era. In addition, a dedicated set of definitive criteria remains elusive regarding the type of experiences that are being expressed, and thus, this vexing question remains unanswered."¹⁷

In the following pages, I will address this issue of transition by examining the semantics of *zuhd* and *tasawwuf* on one hand and the psychological analysis of the principle of *ihsan* on the other. I believe this approach will help us move beyond the confines of methodological agnosticism and skepticism characteristic of the modern/post-modern era and enable us to dispel several unfounded speculations surrounding any idea or concept.

In my view, overcoming such confusion and uncertainty requires a methodological shift, which is much

¹⁵ Gavin Picken, "Al-Harith al-Muhasibi and Spiritual Purification between Asceticism and Mysticism." In *Routledge Handbook of Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 17-31.

¹⁶ Picken, "Al-Harith al-Muhasibi and Spiritual Purification between Asceticism and Mysticism", 17-31.

¹⁷ Picken, "Al-Harith al-Muhasibi and Spiritual Purification between Asceticism and Mysticism", 17-31.

needed in contemporary religious studies in general and Sufi studies in particular. This shift advocates approaching religious concepts and defining them based on their primary scriptural sources, principal texts, and the exemplary tradition of their history, in harmony with their own hermeneutics. Social or cultural anthropological methods seldom help in deciphering the meanings of these concepts and the truths they enshrine. One characteristic of modern methodological stands is that, while they adopt the methodologies of the social sciences in studying religions, they often disregard the original and authentic teachings of those religions as articulated in their respective traditions. This is a serious methodological flaw, granting scholars unwarranted freedom to construct their own presumptions about the subject matter at hand, in complete or partial disregard, even ignorance, of the authentic religious viewpoint concerned.

Any researcher may attempt to interpret or reinterpret any given idea, concept, or phenomenon in a religion. However, understanding a religion necessitates a positive attitude towards its tradition and its respective interpretational theories. The researcher can be critical of or dissatisfied with certain interpretations, but they should not have the right to overlook or ignore those provided by orthodoxy or represented by the concerned tradition. They are obliged to engage with them in accordance with methodological demands. No researcher should introduce an interpretative theory of a phenomenon before engaging with the existing alternatives available, especially when those alternatives represent the respective religion at hand. This, in my opinion, is a methodological demand beyond dispute.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a prominent Islamicist of the twentieth century, proposed a similar methodological paradigm to overcome the problems in understanding religions and their history when he declared, "anything that

I say about Islam as a living faith is valid only in so far as Muslims can say Amen to it."¹⁸ The same principle applies to the study of any religion. Even if the purpose is to conduct a critical analysis, the first step must be to accept the subject at its face value. A faithful description must precede. The representative argument must take precedence for critical analysis to follow. My discussion of the "transition thesis" serves as a good example to illustrate some weaknesses in modern methodological applications and to present an alternative paradigm.

A researcher may encounter multiple interpretations of concepts within a single religion, and it is not logical to consider any opinion within a religion as authoritative simply because the proponent belongs to that particular faith. Moreover, the relationship between a particular religious tradition, interpretations held by the faith community, and personal convictions of believers on one hand, and the possible dichotomy of insider-outsider perspectives on the other, can turn out to be a thorny issue of serious methodological concern requiring careful reflection.

Nevertheless, a minimum requirement of grounding within the frameworks of the primary sources of the subject matter in defining its concepts and their nature must be admitted. The academic norm should always be to let the traditions speak for themselves, instead of imposing preconceived ideas on them, which result in endless interpretations and speculations about the concept under discussion. This is not a call to discredit or discontinue those decades-old Western traditions in the field of *tasawwuf*. Rather, it is a call to deconstruct the outcomes of

¹⁸ See W. C. Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?," in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, eds. Mircea Eliade & Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 43.

this long engagement and learn from it in order to reconstruct the premises and move forward.

My critique of the transition theory will be primarily based on the semantics of *zuhd* and *tasawwuf*, and will also involve, albeit briefly, key terms such as *al-nur*, *al-qurb*, *al-mahabbah* (love), *al-fana' wa al-baqa'* (extinction and subsistence), *al-qalb* (the heart), *al-ma'rifah* (gnosis), and *al-haqiqah* (the reality), which belong to the semantic field of *tasawwuf*. The prophetic ideal of *ihsan*, a concept central to the discussion of *tasawwuf*, will receive special attention here. Its unique significance lies in its structural pillars and as the third of the three dimensions of the religion of Islam on one hand, and its reference to one of the transcendentally transformative spiritual experiences of Islam on the other. Additionally, some examples from the first Muslim community will be introduced to the discussion to shed light on the nature of the religious experiences they lived. Their importance cannot be overlooked in the context of an informed understanding of the transition thesis and its problems.

To ensure clarity, I have structured the transition hypothesis into the following four points, around which our discussion will revolve:

- i. There are two phenomena: asceticism (rendered from the Arabic *zuhd*) and mysticism (rendered from the Arabic *tasawwuf*).
- ii. Spiritual expressions of earlier generations until the middle of the third/ninth century were predominantly ascetical, rather than mystical.
- iii. What could be considered mystical began with the prominent Egyptian Sufi, Dhu'l-Nun, and undoubtedly with the central figure of the Sufi school of Khurasan, Abu Yazid of Bistam, (234/848), i.e., towards the middle of the third century hijri.
- iv. Based on the above observations, it is around the middle of the third century when the transition from

asceticism to mysticism, or at least its beginnings, took place.

The importance of critiquing this hypothesis lies not only in what it reveals as a definite theory of transition, rather in its ramifications when it opens wide the doors of speculation about the origins of *tasawwuf* and the factors that made its emergence in Muslim culture possible. If this hypothesis of transition "has become a scholarly commonplace," it is not surprising to see debates over the foreign origin of *tasawwuf* continue in a cyclic manner even today. It seems that the rich scholarly contributions of Western scholars, orientalist or otherwise, throughout the past century have only succeeded in making the issue of origins a somewhat independent field of continuing research, characterized by competing theories that emerged in the line of a Hegelian dialectical pattern. Theories pioneered by those great names of the Western study of *tasawwuf* in the beginning of their interest in the history of *tasawwuf* still feature prominently in contemporary Sufi studies, in one way or another. Titus Burckhardt was correct when he said:

"They have indeed attributed the origins of Sufism to Persian, Hindu, Neoplatonic, or Christian sources. But these diverse attributions have ended by canceling one another, the more so because there is no adequate reason for doubting the historical authenticity of the spiritual 'descent' of the Sufi masters, a descent which can be traced in an unbroken 'chain' (*silsilah*) back to the prophet himself."¹⁹

It is widely acknowledged that *zuhd* and *tasawwuf*, despite some overlaps, are two distinct concepts, each with its own unique nature and characteristics. However, are

¹⁹ Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008), 4.

they inextricably distinct at the practical level? The history of religions, particularly the history of spiritual life within them, cautions against making sweeping statements in this regard and calls for a more cautious and informed reflection on the relationship between the two. As living realities of religious life, and as perceived by Sufis, they reveal a closer relationship than may initially seem apparent, to the extent that they are sometimes interchangeable. In essence, *zuhd* constitutes an integral element of Sufi life, and it manifests itself across different levels of hierarchy, often synonymous with *tasawwuf*, as will become evident from the discussion that follows.

It is important to recognize from the outset that these concepts, like others, are shaped within each religion's worldview and the principles of its sacred scriptures. They are understood, constructed, and practiced within the framework provided by those foundations. Therefore, a researcher, as a seeker of truth, is compelled – from a purely methodological standpoint²⁰ – to explore the initial meanings and definitions of these concepts within their specific contexts and based on their own sources. Any absolute claim of distinctiveness and independence between them is thus a conceptual error. A reasonable acquaintance with the original Sufi literature, coupled with familiarity with the Qur'an, Sunnah, and the history of early Muslim generations, is essential to avoid this error.

From this perspective, a thorough analysis of the semantics of both the terms *zuhd* and *tasawwuf*, based on the primary sources of Islam and the authentic classical theory and practice of the masters of *tasawwuf*, would be the most appropriate approach. Although lexical analysis and linguistic etymology may not play a significant role here, they should not be completely ignored, and any insights they offer should be utilized. Methodologically,

²⁰ Here I stand resolutely outside the hold of modernistic or post-modernistic epistemological frameworks.

considering the significant impact of analyzing key terms in their original language for their semantics and hermeneutics, I will adhere to using the terms *zuhd* and *tasawwuf* in Arabic, refraining from translating them into English as 'asceticism' and 'mysticism',²¹ respectively. The technical usage of these terms in the Sufi tradition warrants their use in their original language, rather than relying on popular translations from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

***Zuhd* in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and the Sufi tradition**

Sufis assert that the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) are the foundations of *tasawwuf*,²² with its tradition being a continuation of the exemplary practices of earlier generations.²³ Therefore, it is essential to begin with the Qur'an and the prophetic guidance to understand the place of *zuhd* in Islam and how it has been articulated by scholars of earlier generations before the presumed period of the suggested transition from *zuhd* to mysticism.

²¹ My use of asceticism and mysticism here as translation of *zuhd* and *tasawwuf* respectively is in keeping with the use of Melchert in his paper. I personally consider these translations inappropriate. Later in the paper I have used "detachment" for *zuhd* and "Islamic spiritual quest" for *tasawwuf* when there is a necessity to provide a translation. Otherwise, I have retained the Arabic words as they are, without translation, in order to avoid any possible misrepresentation of the concepts. Several Western scholars too have raised serious concerns over the use of mysticism to identify *tasawwuf*. In their view, it is a Christian concept and does not fit within the Muslim Sufi context. Lloyd Ridgeon expresses his reservations about using mysticism for Sufism and questions its suitability for non-Christian traditions. See his "Mysticism and Medieval Sufism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 125-149. It is instructive to know that the Sanskrit word "*sannyasin*" or the Tamil "*Turawi*," properly understood are considered deficient translations for *zuhd* in those languages too.

²² Abu Haf's 'Umar Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, '*Awarif al-Ma'arif*, ed. Samir Shams (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1431/2010), 50.

²³ Muhammad Mustafa, '*Ilm al-Tasawwuf* (Cairo: Dar al-Tiba'ah al-Muhammadiyah, 1403/1983), 205-247.

In the Qur'an, the word *zuhd* appears only once (Yusuf 12: 20) in its plural active noun form, meaning "disinterest in more" or valuing something less than what it deserves, or depreciation.²⁴ Although this may not precisely convey the technical meaning in the context of *tasawwuf*, it nevertheless captures the essence of the technical meaning, which is to be "disinterested too much in something". Here, in the context of spirituality, it refers to "disinterestedness in the worldly pleasure" or anything that diverts the believer's attention from Allah.

Indeed, the Qur'an, teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and the practices of earlier generations of Muslims explicitly convey the concept of detachment from worldly pursuits and attachment to Allah. Numerous verses in the Qur'an instruct believers to maintain spiritual detachment from the transient pleasures of this world while focusing on attachment to Allah. For instance, in Surah al-An'am 6:32, Allah says: "The life of this world is nothing but a sport and a past time, and the life of the hereafter is far better for those who seek to ward off their ruin. Will you, then, not understand?" Similarly, in Surah al-Ra'd 13:26, it is stated, "Allah grants the provision of whomsoever He wills abundantly and grants others in strict measure. They exult in the life of the world, although compared with the hereafter, the life of the world is no more than temporary enjoyment."

Surah Yunus 10:24 explains this as, "The example of the life of this world is that of water that we sent down from the sky which caused the vegetation of the earth, sustaining

²⁴ The Holy Qur'an (12: 20) and the rendering of the word in Seyyed Hossein Nasr et. al., *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2017), Mawdudi's *Toward Understanding the Qur'an: Abridged Version of Tafhim al-Qur'an*, translated and edited by Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2007) and Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary* (al-Madinah al-Munawwarah: King Fahd Holy Quran Printing Complex, 1405).

human beings and cattle, to grow luxuriantly. But when the earth took on its golden raiment and became well adorned and the owners believed that they had full control over their lands our command came upon them by night or by day, and We converted it into a stubble as though it had not blossomed yesterday. Thus, do we expound the signs for a people who reflect." In the same context, Surah al-Kahf 18:44 presents the following parable, "(O Prophet), propound to them the parable of the present life: it is like the vegetation of the earth which flourished luxuriantly when it mingled with the water that We sent down from the sky, but after that the same vegetation turned into stubble which the wind blew about. Allah alone has the power over all things".

Surah al-‘Ankabut 29:64 tells us, "The present life is nothing but sport and amusement. The true life is in the abode of the hereafter, if only they know." Additionally, Surah al-Hadid 57:20 describes worldly life as "Know well that the life of this world is merely sport and diversion and adornment and an object of your boasting with one another, and a rivalry in the multiplication of riches and children. Its likeness is that of rain: when it produces vegetation, it delights the tillers. But then it withers, and you see it turn yellow, and then it crumbles away. In the hereafter there is (either) grievous chastisement (or) forgiveness from Allah and (His) good pleasure. The life of this world is nothing but delusion."

This is how the Qur’an speaks of the world, and prophetic guidance further enriches this Qur’anic perspective, assisting both Muslims in general and those aspiring to higher levels of spiritual life in particular, in articulating the concept of *zuhd* as a distinguished and foundational virtue of Muslim life. The Prophet’s life and teachings abound with examples of this virtue in practice, as well as teachings urging Muslims to embody *zuhd*, maintain moderation, and beware of indulgence that may

lead them away from God.²⁵ The same holds true for the pious ancestors, companions, and their followers, who, like all believers, view the Prophet as the ultimate model to emulate (Surah al-Ahzab 33:21). Sufi sources simply elaborate on this concept, emphasizing detachment and attachment as essential aspects of Muslim spiritual life.

Al-Ghazali on *Zuhd*

According to al-Ghazali (504/1111), *zuhd* refers to the desire to detach oneself from this world and to attach oneself to the next, or from anything other than God to be solely attached to God. This represents its highest level.²⁶ Various expressions from the first century up to the period of al-Ghazali, or the fifth century of Islam when the foundational classics of *tasawwuf* appeared, confirm al-Ghazali's statement and highlight the levels of *zuhd* as a state of the spiritual wayfarer at each step of their journey.

Al-Ghazali explains the practice of *zuhd* (detachment) in view of its ultimate object as having three stages:

- i. The lower stage involves seeking deliverance from the hellfire and any other type of agony or torment. This is the *zuhd* of those who fear punishment, with the aim to rid themselves of pain through detachment

²⁵ Most of the *ahadith* collections have a chapter on *zuhd* and many hadith scholars have also produced exclusive compendiums on the topic. See for instance, al-Hasan al-Basri, *al-Zuhd*, ed. Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahim Muhammad (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1991); al-Waki' bin al-Jarrah, *Kitab al-Zuhd*, ed. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Faryawa'i (Madinah: Maktabat al-Dar, 1984); 'Abd Allah bin al-Mubarak, *al-Zuhd wa al-Raqa'iq*, ed. Ahmad Farid (Riyadh: Dar al-Mi'raj al-Dawliyyah li al-Nashr, 1995); Ahmad bin Hanbal, *al-Zuhd*, ed. Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Shahin (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1999). These works have collected most of the traditions on this subject. For a well-organized and detailed philosophical articulation on *zuhd* see al-Ghazali's, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, ed. 'Ali Muhammad Mustafa & Sa'id al-Mahasini (Damascus: Dar al-Fayha'/Dar al-Manhal, 1431/2010), 5: 431-474.

²⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 5: 422.

from anything that stands in the way of realizing this objective.

- ii. The second level entails detachment from this world in pursuit of God's promised rewards and blessings in the hereafter. This is the *zuhd* of those who renounce worldly pleasures for the rewards of the next life.
- iii. The third and highest stage involves complete detachment from everything except Allah. The practitioner does not seek to avoid pain or aspire to rewards; rather, they have detached themselves from all else and lost interest in anything but Allah. They live focused solely on God. This level is attained by lovers and Gnostics who comprehend the truth of *tawhid* and understand that those who experience living in God's presence²⁷ cannot find pleasure in anything else. This state is expressed in symbolic and ecstatic language: "Return to me, my beloved; he cannot bear being away from my presence."²⁸

Those familiar with *tasawwuf* will recognize *zuhd* at its highest level as reminiscent of the state of *fana'* and *baqa'* in the Sufi experience, and it can even be considered synonymous with it. Al-Ghazali further explains this third stage of *zuhd* as the "complete annihilation of desires of the carnal self." It is not surprising, then, to hear that many pious ancestors in the earlier periods of Islam, particularly in the second and third centuries, used the term *zuhd* synonymously with *tasawwuf*, and vice versa,²⁹ illustrating

²⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 5:431-432.

²⁸ Abu al-Fadl Muhammad bin 'Ali al-Sahljaji al-Bistami, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur" in *Shatahat al-Sufiyyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi (Kuwait: Wakalat al-Matbu'at, 1978).

²⁹ See Muhammad A. Mustafa, *al-Maqamat wa al-Ahwal* (Cairo: Dar al-Tiba'ah al-Muhammadiyah, 1408/1988), 57, where he categorically states that the term *zuhd* had been used by many people as synonymous to *tasawwuf*. One must bear in mind that the term "*sufi*"

the inseparable connection between the two. Many great figures of *tasawwuf*, in whose lives and teachings the technical definitions of *tasawwuf* are exemplified in their entirety, such as Shaiq al-Balkhi, were popularly referred to as *zuhhad* (plural of *zahid*), as well as Sufis. It appears that the term "Sufi" was among the names by which people of the spiritual path were identified, and it may have become more popular to the exclusion of others later on.³⁰

Here I must reiterate the fact that Sufi masters unanimously regard *zuhd*, whose essence is captured in the fundamental idea of "detachment and attachment", as one of the foundational stations of the spiritual journey. The entire process of wayfaring can be explained through the various levels of this single concept of *zuhd*. A Sufi who embodies this concept can be referred to as a *zahid* (one who practices detachment), and the essence of *tasawwuf* can be recognized in them. Figures such as al-Basri and his disciple 'Abd al-Wahid bin Zayd (150/767), Malik bin Dinar (131/748), and many others were commonly referred to as *zuhhad*, despite their teachings and practices explicitly indicating their prominent roles as Sufis on the path of spiritual realization. Ibn Zayd, who was acclaimed as a great *zahid*, is known to have established a lodge, possibly the first one, for Sufis in Basrah.

However, it is not necessary for a *zahid* to always be a Sufi in the technical sense if they remain within the

itself, which embodies the characteristics of *tasawwuf*, has been in use around the end of the first century of Islam itself. Al-Hasan al-Basri's (d.110 AH) report that he met a Sufi during *tawaf* (circumambulation around the Ka'ba), is the cornerstone on which al-Tusi categorically denies the opinion that the term *Sufi* was later arrival invented by the people of Baghdad. See Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi, *al-Luma' fi al-tasawwuf*, ed. Reynold Nicholson with Arberry's addition and completion translated by 'Adnan Hasan (London: Al Warrak Publishing Ltd., 2018), 241-242.

³⁰ The reader is referred to Sufi classics for more variant expressions by Sufi sages which authenticate the conclusion I am advocating here.

confines of the basic level of *zuhd*. It is interesting that the term *faqih* was understood by the intellectual and spiritual leaders of the early Islamic era as equivalent to *tasawwuf* in its comprehensive outlook. When someone remarked in front of al-Hasan al-Basri (110/728) about another individual, saying, "The man is a *faqih*," al-Basri responded by saying, "Have you ever seen a *faqih*? A true *faqih* is one who is detached from this world, seeks the hereafter, and is 'cognizant' (*basir*) of the matter of his religion."

Undoubtedly, this reflects the spirit of Islam and its perception of knowledge, where no separation between knowledge and righteous conduct can be envisaged. A pause on the word 'cognizant' (*basir*), can unveil profound spiritual insights and illuminate a deeper understanding of the term *zuhd*. In light of the above, we can conclude that:

- i. In the early period of Islam, from the very first century, the term *zuhd* was popular, sometimes synonymous with or closely related to *tasawwuf*, which would later gain popularity.
- ii. *Zuhd*, as detachment and attachment, is an independent concept but intrinsically linked to *tasawwuf* as a pillar in the process of the realization of spiritual excellence.
- iii. Defining *zuhd* as a mere renunciation or rejection of the world, devoid of its experiential dimension, is unwarranted.
- iv. *Zuhd* is best translated as 'detachment', with varying levels and manifestations that express different stages of the Sufi experience.
- v. *Zuhd*'s relation to the ideal of living in the presence of God finds its guidance in the prophetic example of practicing *zuhd* itself.³¹ This connection between *zuhd* and experiencing Divine Presence was

³¹ See the chapter entitled *Kitab al-Faqr wa al-Zuhd*, particularly the section on Elucidating the virtues of *zuhd*, in al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1998), 4: 192-194.

intrinsically evident during the emergence of *tasawwuf* as a vibrant social movement. An anecdote about al-Bistami illustrates this well: One night, he found himself in a state of unrest, feeling disconnected from God. After reflecting on possible causes, he finally realized that some food remained in his home. Upon discovering this, he called for his servant to give it away as they distracted him from savoring the sweetness of being in God's presence."³²

- vi. Rendering *zuhd* as asceticism is untenable, as *zuhd* is not an 'ism' and the juridical and spiritual guidelines that govern its practice in Islam are different from those found among followers of other religions or spiritualities.

Semantics of *Tasawwuf*

Moving to the term '*tasawwuf*', classical Sufi works have dealt with it etymologically and also from the point of view of its Sufi usage. For more than a millennium, these etymological and linguistic findings remained unchanged, and nothing more was added to them, which means that the classical treatment of the subject had been quite exhaustive. Between the Arabic '*suf*' and Greek '*sophia*', various etymological origins have been proposed, and all of them, except for one which stood the grammatical challenge though was not successful in explaining *tasawwuf*, were written off as invalid from the point of view of linguistic etymology.

In case of their acceptability for one reason or another, they do not go beyond explaining some ordinary external aspects of *tasawwuf*. As such, they, too, were labeled as unhelpful³³ in deciphering the essence of the experience

³² Al-Sahlaji, "Al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 91.

³³ See for example Mark Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials* (Cairo; New York: American University Press, 2003), 5.

called *tasawwuf*. No wonder al-Qushayri concluded his etymological discussion of the subject by stating, "In all, however, this group is too renowned to need any justification by attributing itself to any particular word or etymology" and added, "it is more likely a nickname of sorts."³⁴ Nevertheless, those explanations provided by other early historians of *tasawwuf* before and after al-Qushayri carry useful insights that merit some reflection.

Al-Kalabadhi (380/990), for example, so far, the earliest historian of *tasawwuf* known to us and a Sufi himself, had listed in his *al-Ta'arruf* the following suggested derivations with reasons behind them:

1. *Safa* because of the purity of their heart and the cleanliness of their acts.
2. *Saff* because they are in the first rank (*saff*) before God through the elevation of their desires towards Him and turning their hearts unto Him and the staying of their secret parts before Him.
3. *Suffah*, because their qualities resembled those of the people of the bench (*ahl al-suffah*).
4. *Suf* because of their habit of wearing wool (*suf*).

And then he goes on to explain how and why they were also called by different names in different localities, concluding with a categorical statement:

"Even though these words vary in outward appearance, yet the meanings behind them are identical. If the term (*sufi*) were derived from *safa* (purity) or *safwah* (choice), the correct form would be *safwiyah*; while if it were referred to as *saff* (rank) or *suffah* (bench), it would be *saffiyyah* or *suffiyyah*. It is, of course, possible (in the former case) that the *waw* has been transferred to come before the *fa*, so giving *sufiyah*; or (if the latter derivation is accepted),

³⁴ Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials*, 288.

that it is simply redundant, being inserted into the word through common practice. If, however, the derivation from *suf* (wool) be accepted, the word is correct and the expression sound from the grammatical point of view, while at the same time it has all the (necessary) meanings, such as withdrawal from the world, inclining the soul away from it, leaving all settled abodes, keeping constantly to travel, denying the carnal soul its pleasures, purifying the conduct, cleansing the conscience, dilation of the breast, and the quality of leadership."³⁵

This aligns closely with the conclusion reached by 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud (1398/1978), former rector of al-Azhar University and a renowned Sufi himself, in his extensive study of *tasawwuf*:

"If the term is ascribed to *suf* that is indeed a fortunate one. It should be Divine providence that has had this emerge and proliferate. The word *suf* really enjoys a beautiful rhythmic connection with many words that refer to meanings closely connected to *tasawwuf*, such as *safa* and its relation to *tasawwuf* which is evident; *saff* which refers to the first row in Jihad, fight against enemy and against self, *suffah* which refers to the bench in the Mosque of the Prophet (PBUH), and where a group of people who dedicated themselves for jihad used to live, *al-sifah* which means beautiful character traits, and the Greek '*sophia*' which indicates the knowledge of the unseen in particular. This

³⁵ Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi, *Kitab al-Ta'arruf li Madhhab Ahl al-Tasawwuf*, trans. Arthur John Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 9. It would be to the reader's advantage to follow the author from page 7. See also al-Tusi, *al-Luma' fi al-Tasawwuf*, 239-242.

confusion itself around the origin of the term has been a matter of good fortune. No doubt that the difference in opinion and ideas concerning the origin explains many aspects of *tasawwuf* and its meanings".³⁶

As we can observe, none of these proposed derivations can definitively provide readers with the meaning of *tasawwuf* as a concept and an experience. They, nevertheless, successfully point to a few characteristics that help readers to have a basic idea about the nature of Sufi life. However, if the lexical and etymological discussions fail, it becomes necessary to turn to the Sufis themselves to understand the meaning and essence of *tasawwuf* through spiritual semantics. This understanding is established on guidance provided by the primary sources of Islam and inspirations gained from experience. Despite individual differences, these experiences display a unity that makes it easy to grasp the essence of *tasawwuf*, which lies at the pinnacle of "realizing the spiritual quest".

When exploring the meaning of *tasawwuf* according to the Sufis themselves, we encounter numerous explanations from classical masters. Early Sufi historians like Abu Talib al-Makki (386/996), al-Tusi (378/988), al-Kalabadhi (380/990) and al-Sulami (412/1027), al-Qushayri (465/1073), and al-Hujwiri (465/1073) from the second generation of Sufis cum Sufi historians have recorded many definitions. Additionally, there are several unpublished manuscripts³⁷ dedicated exclusively to defining *tasawwuf*

³⁶ 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, "Abhath fi al-Tasawwuf wa Dirasat 'an al-Imam al-Ghazali", in his edition of al-Ghazali, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Hadithah, n.d.), 178-179.

³⁷ Mentions must be made to the manuscript by the name *Mi'yar al-Tasawwuf* ascribed to none, Leaf 88b-133a, Kastamonu, Yazma Eser Kutuphanesi, MSS 02713/7. The significance of this manuscript is that all the definitions of *tasawwuf* which it contains belong to the early masters.

by renowned figures of the golden age of the Sufi movement; these include al-Kharraz (286/899), al-Tustari (283/896), and al-Susi (300/913). Here are a few quotations to shed light on what *tasawwuf* meant for them:

1. *Tasawwuf* is to "spend the days in contemplation and nights in recollection with complete detachment from all that is other than God" - Bakr bin 'Abd Allah al-Muzani [108/726].³⁸
2. It is hurling oneself into God's slavery, attaching the heart to His Lordship, practicing all exalted virtues, and beholding Allah in Totality - Abu Yazid al-Bistami [234/847].³⁹
3. *Tasawwuf* means assuming every sublime moral character trait and giving up every lowly one - Abu Muhammad al-Jurayri [311/923-924].⁴⁰
4. It is but good morals; whoever surpasses you in good morals surpasses you in purity - al-Kattani [322/934].⁴¹
5. It means that God causes you to die for yourself while endowing you with life in Him - al-Junayd [298/910].⁴²
6. Remaining with God Most High without any physical attachment - al-Junayd.⁴³

³⁸ He was a disciple of al-Hasan al-Basri. This is the earliest definition of *tasawwuf* that I have been able to trace in the classical Sufi literature that has reached us so far.

³⁹ Al-Sahlahji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 138. In my paper entitled "Some Early Definitions of *Tasawwuf*: Exploring the Centrality of Abu Yazid al-Bistami in its History," *AFKAR: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 23(1) (2021), 197-250, I have studied thirteen definitions of *tasawwuf* provided by Abu Yazid alone. They refer to different aspects of *tasawwuf* and levels of the spiritual journey.

⁴⁰ Al-Sahlahji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 289.

⁴¹ Al-Sahlahji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁴² Al-Sahlahji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 289.

⁴³ Al-Sahlahji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 289.

7. It means that you own nothing and nothing owns you - Sumnun al-Muhib [298/910-911].⁴⁴
8. Turning yourself over to God Most High, so that He may do with you what He wants - Ruwaym al-Baghdadi [303/915-916].⁴⁵
9. It rests on three characteristics: sticking to poverty and needing God alone; achieving perfection in generosity and altruism; relinquishing resistance and free choice - Ruwaym al-Baghdadi.⁴⁶
10. Grasping divine realities and despairing of what the hands of men hold - Ma'ruf al-Karkhi [200/815].⁴⁷
11. It is a vigil at the door of the beloved, even when you are being chased away - Abu 'Ali al-Rudhbari [322/933-4].⁴⁸
12. It is the purity of nearness to God after the filth of banishment.⁴⁹
13. It is an empty hand and a beautiful heart.⁵⁰
14. It is to sit with God unperturbed by any concern - al-Shibli [334/946].⁵¹
15. The Sufi is one who cuts himself off from creatures to attach himself to God - al-Shibli.⁵²
16. It is a state in which human attributes are dissolved - Abu Ya'qub al-Mazayili [3rd/4th century Hijri-9th/10th century CE].⁵³

Reflecting on these definitions/saying, one can assert the following:

⁴⁴ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁴⁵ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁴⁶ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁴⁷ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁴⁸ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁴⁹ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁵⁰ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁵¹ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁵² Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 290.

⁵³ Al-Sahlaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 291-2.

- i. Al-Qushayri's statement regarding the general characteristic of Sufis, "People (i.e., Sufis) have had much debate over the meaning of 'Sufism' and 'Sufi'. Each one of them has spoken from his own experience,"⁵⁴ is applicable to all of them. They cannot be taken as objective logical definitions but rather as helpful insights to understand the Sufi experience with each saying referring to one or more states of that experience.
- ii. The essence of all these sayings on *tasawwuf* (the so-called definitions) seems to be contained in the idea of "detachment and attachment" at all levels. This implies that *zuhd*, which I translated earlier as "detachment", cannot be separated from *tasawwuf* at any level. *Tasawwuf* is a living experience consisting of states and stations, each demanding a kind of detachment and corresponding attachment.
- iii. If we recall al-Ghazali's classification of the stages of *zuhd*, we can see that the first stage corresponds to the preparatory or beginning of the path of *tasawwuf*, the journey toward spiritual excellence. The third stage points to the highest stage, which is living in the presence of God, complete detachment from the self and the world, and being absorbed in *shuhud* (witnessing divine theophanies). This can also be called a state of absolute *fana'* and *baqa'* (annihilation of self and subsistence in God). This is the quintessence underlying all these sayings.

In light of what I have presented thus far about the technical meaning of *zuhd* and *tasawwuf* as understood by Sufis, it is clear that the postulation of a transition from *zuhd* to *tasawwuf* is untenable. Both have been instituted by the Qur'an and prophetic guidance and have been among the supreme ideals of the Islamic way of life in its most

⁵⁴ Al-Sahljaji, "al-Nur min Kalimat Abi Tayfur", 289.

advanced manifestation. This fact alone makes the transition thesis utterly untenable.

In addition, two important factors are worth considering here:

- i. What we identify as the highest levels of Sufi experience and as extremely mystical expressions in the third/ninth century have their existence in the extra-prophetic sayings from the very beginning, as well as in what the Qur'an alludes to regarding the experimental dimension of the life of piety.
- ii. The dimension of *ihsan*, which is often ignored whenever the idea of transition from asceticism to mysticism in the third century of Islam or the roots of *tasawwuf* is discussed. These two factors require some emphasis here.

Regarding *Tasawwuf*, Qur'anic Allusions, and the Extra-prophetic Sayings

As for the allusions of the Qur'an, I will just highlight the following in brief.

- a. The Qur'an provides key terminologies that describe the spiritual states, stations, and experiential aspects of spiritual life. The most outstanding of those, to mention a few, include: *al-ghayb* (the unseen), *al-taqwa* (piety, i.e. faith and practice), *al-zuhd* (detachment), *al-tawbah* (repentance), *al-ikhlas* (sincerity), *al-sidq* (truthfulness), *al-tawakkul* (trust in God and dependence on Him), *al-dhikr* (remembrance of God), *al-faqr* (spiritual poverty), *al-suhbah* (spiritual companionship), *al-wilayah* (friendship with God), *al-sabr* (patience), *al-yaqin* (certainty), *al-'ubdiyyah* (servanthood), *al-rida* (satisfaction), the classification of the self into *al-nafs al-mutma'innah* (the content soul), *al-nafs al-ammarah* (the commanding soul [to do evil]), and *al-nafs al-lawwamah* (the blaming soul), *al-inabah* (penitence) *al-ikhbat* (humbleness), *wajl al-qulub*

(trembling of the heart), *al-khawf wa al-raja'* (fear and hope), and the like.⁵⁵

- b. Qur'anic emphasis on the idea of opening of the heart (*sharh al-sadr*) and the consequent divine light and its relation to the practice of *dhikr* and its stages (see al-Zumar 39: 22 and Ali 'Imran 3: 191).
- c. Qur'anic descriptions of some spiritual states of the faithful (al-Anfal 8: 2).

Added to these are the Prophetic narrations on the authority of God, known in Islamic tradition as Hadith Qudsi, where the Messenger of God has said:

"Whoever is an enemy to one of my friends, I have declared war against him. My servant cannot come close to Me with anything dearer to Me than what I have made incumbent upon him. And My servant continues to draw nearer to Me by giving more and more without expectation so that I shall love him, and when I love him, I shall be the hearing with which he hears, the sight with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks. If he asks from me, I shall certainly give him, and if he seeks refuge in Me, I shall certainly give him refuge. I have not hesitated about anything I do as I hesitate about taking the soul of a believer who dislikes death, for I dislike grieving him."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ It is worth here to compare with the list of spiritual stations and states enumerated by al-Harawi in his famous treaty on the topic. See Nahid Angha, *Stations of the Sufi Path: The One Hundred Fields (Sad Maydan) of Abdullah Ansari of Herat* (Cambridge: Archetype, 2010). Also see al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, chapters 2 & 3 (75-416); and al-Kalabadi, *al-Ta'arruf*, 80-167.

⁵⁶ Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari, *al-Jami' al-Sahih*, ed. Mustafa Dib al-Bagha (Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1993), 5: 2384, hadith no. 6137.

Reflecting on the key ideas such as "drawing nearer to God," "special love from God," exchange of love between God and His close servants, and God becoming His servant's hearing, sight, hand, and foot, which are the result of special love beyond any comprehension, undoubtedly refer to a state of spiritual proximity that can be described, at least, as the state of union. This is a state where the servant, who has become nearer to his beloved, experiences the real meaning of living in the Divine presence (*shuhud*) and becomes a passive subject of Divine theophanies. Although it is generally identified as a "spiritual Union," there is an agreement among the Sufis on its ineffability.

In fact, all those expressions of the Sufis, explained by al-Qushayri in chapter two of his *Rasa'il*⁵⁷ are but attempts to bring these transcendentals, yet paradoxical, experiences closer to the understanding of those who seek to comprehend them or have a glimpse of their nature. It is the state where the wayfarer becomes "Godly" in its whole meaning and lives the full application of the experience of what Sufis call *fana'* and *baqa'* (annihilation and subsistence in God)⁵⁸, which is a state of anxiety and perplexity. This is where man becomes the theatre of contradicting states such as absence and presence, sobriety and drunkenness, concealment, and manifestation, and the like, about which classical Sufi masters have written. This also can be the reflective state where the truth of the saying, popular among the Sufis, "the heart of the faithful is the throne of God," is realized.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, 75-110.

⁵⁸ Alexander Knysh's translation.

⁵⁹ This is the context in which we must understand the couplet that has been ascribed to al-Hallaj:

"I saw my Lord with the eyes of my heart;

I asked Him, Who art Thou? He said, Thou."

See Seyyed Hussein Nasr, "The Heart of the Faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful," in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian*

In my view, neither the *mi'raj* of Abu Yazid and his 'ecstatic utterances', nor those of Dhu'l-Nun or al-Nuri (295/908), among many others whose sayings are termed extremely mystical, can reveal anything more than what these key phrases of the "divinely saying" reveal. Any attempt to describe this transformative experience in ordinary human language will inevitably fail. Allah, through His mercy and love, attracts His sincere servants and enables them to experience the realities of "if I love him" and "I become," as mentioned in the above *hadith qudsi*. It is beyond the scope of ordinary human intellect to grasp the reality of this "becoming," which represents the highest possible spiritual state called *qurb* (proximity).

Pondering over the experience of spiritual encounter between God and man and its ramifications within the framework of the above *hadith qudsi*, it is perhaps befitting to quote Seyyed Hossein Nasr here. Although he was writing in the context of quintessential prayer, I see his words can elegantly describe the wayfarer's state in his proximity to God. He says:

"In that state his heart becomes the eye with which he sees God and also the eye with which God sees him. In that presence he is nothing in himself, as a separate existence. He is but a mirror whose surface is nothing, and yet reflects everything. In the heart the spiritual man lives in intimacy with God, with the Origin of all those theophanies whose outward manifestations constitute all the beauty that is reflected in the world around us. He lives in that inner garden, that inner paradise, constantly aware of the ubiquitous Gardener. On the highest level of realization, man becomes aware that all theophanies are nothing but the Source

East, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc. 2004), 32-45.

of those theophanies, that the house itself is nothing but the reflection of the Master of the house, that there is in fact but one Reality which, through its infinite manifestations and reflections upon the mirrors of cosmic existence, has brought about all that appears to us as multiplicity and otherness, and all the apparent distinctions between I and thou, he and they, we and you."⁶⁰

Upon reflecting on the implications of the HADITH I cited earlier, one inevitably concludes that the emergence of a profound spiritual life and experience, known as *tasawwuf*, is intertwined with the birth of Islam itself and enriched by the teachings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Attempts to portray it as a belated arrival, emerging only by the middle of the third century, or to propose a transition from *zuhd* to *tasawwuf*, lack credibility and cannot be sustained.

A careful examination of the primary sources of Islam reveals that the Muslim spiritual quest has always been an integral aspect of Muslim life and consistent across Muslim societies throughout history. It unequivocally establishes that *tasawwuf* is an intrinsic part of the Islamic faith that cannot be postponed for two and a half centuries. The teachings and actions of the Prophet himself direct Muslims towards the endless possibilities of the spiritual path, contrasting starkly with the implications of the transition theory.⁶¹ Can any serious researcher entertain the notion

⁶⁰ Nasr, "The Heart of the Faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful", 32-45.

⁶¹ It has been reported about the companion of the Prophet (PBUH), Harithah al-Ansari that the Prophet (PBUH) met him in a morning and asked him about the reality of his faith. Harithah responded, "I am a true believer this morning" The Prophet said: 'Every claim has a reality, so what is the reality of your claim'? He replied: 'Since this morning, I have distanced myself from the world and as a result I fast during the day and spend my night awake (in worship); it is as if I can

that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did not personally experience what the *hadith al-wali* conveys, if not more?

While a detailed analysis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in this context⁶² would be valuable, space constraints necessitate a focus on the concept of *ihsan* alone. This concept, constituting the third dimension of Islam, illustrates that the highest manifestation of the *tasawwuf* experience lies at its core and is inherently present within Islam.

Tasawwuf* and *Zuhd* in Their Relation to *Ihsan

As defined categorically by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), *Ihsan* entails "worshipping God as if you were seeing Him; if you are not seeing Him, He is seeing you."⁶³ This implies two levels of living in God's presence or being with God. The first level can be identified as experiencing God or realizing the state of 'witnessing', as Sufis would later call it, while the second level could be termed as being God-conscious.

The former can be termed as 'union with God' where the servant (*'abd*) becomes absorbed in God's theophany, leading to the complete annihilation of the self, as alluded to in the aforementioned *hadith* of the *wali*. The latter may

see the eminent throne of my Lord; it is as if I can almost see the inhabitants of paradise enjoying its blessings, and as if I can see the inhabitants of hell being punished.' The Prophet said: You have realized it so remain steadfast. [You are] a believer whose heart Allah has been filled with light.'" See Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, *Majma' al-Zawa'id wa Manba' al-Fawa'id*, ed. Husam al-Din al-Qudsi (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsi, 1994), 1: 57.

⁶² The earliest Sufi classics such as al-Makki's *Qut al-Qulub* and al-Tusi's *al-Luma'* can be consulted in this regard. From the modern writings see the articles from the first part of volume one of Seyyed H. Nasr's ed., *Encyclopedia of Islamic Spirituality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

⁶³ See for a comprehensive study of this prophetic tradition in English see Sachiko Murata & William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

serve as the initial preparatory step towards this union. Both levels signify a transformation of life and human personality resulting from the transcendental experience of God. This represents the zenith of spiritual experience as understood in *tasawwuf*, where man becomes entirely influenced by the living reality of multiplex theophanies of divine unveilings. Self-annihilation of the experiencer in the encounter between the infinite and the finite is considered normal here. Any manifest state of intoxication would also seem in order.

This state, referred to by Sufis as *Jam' al-Jam'* or the unification of unification, eloquently described by al-Qushayri as "when through the appearance and under the complete domination of the power of the Divine Reality one is rendered incapable of contemplating the created world, barred from one's own self, and taken in one's entirety from sensing anything else"⁶⁴ and "the unification of unification is total self-dissolution [in God] and the loss of perception of anything other than God as a result of the onslaught of the irresistible powers of the Divine Reality".⁶⁵ It thus entails total absorption in the Divine Reality, to the extent that one is incapable of contemplating anything other than God.

The realization of *ihsan* demands the believer to have the ability to live in a state of witnessing God. However, can this occur while the servant still retains his sense of self, without undergoing the psychological and spiritual transformation encapsulated in the Sufi concept of *fana'* and *baqa'*. In other words, "he (the experiencer) is oblivious of everything other than God and capable of perceiving neither his self nor the creature," as al-Qushayri states.⁶⁶ After a brief discussion of the levels of annihilation, al-Qushayri says, "You can only imagine the

⁶⁴ Al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, 88.

⁶⁵ Al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, 88.

⁶⁶ Al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, 90.

man to whom the sight of God – glory be to Him – were disclosed! If he were to lose the sense of himself and his fellow human beings, would there be any surprise in that?"⁶⁷ While commenting on Surah al-A'raf 7: 143, *The Study Qur'an* says, "the vision of God in this life is only possible after the death of the ego when one has completely died to the passions and desires of the soul. The annihilating power of God's self-manifestation is similarly suggested in the saying attributed to the Prophet; His veil is light. Were He to remove it, the Glory of His face would burn up everything His Sight reached."⁶⁸ Again, al-Qushayri adds, "When the power of the true reality takes possession of someone, he no longer notices the essences, effects, traces, or vestiges of anything other than God. they (Sufis) say of such person: "He has been annihilated from God's creatures and now subsists in God."⁶⁹

Suppose *ihsan* represents the lived experience of God or dwelling in the presence of God. In that case, *tasawwuf* serves as the pathway to realizing this experience, with *zuhd* playing a central role in this journey. Similarly, if annihilation, with its various levels, is intrinsic to the Sufi experience, *zuhd* becomes foundational for its realization, as each stage demands a corresponding detachment.

The Prophet's prayers, practices, and instructions provide ample evidence of the essentiality of *zuhd* for those aspiring towards God. Additionally, the Qur'an explicitly emphasizes the importance of detachment from the world as a pillar of its worldview. Thus, *zuhd* and *tasawwuf* form the foundational elements upon which *Ihsan* rests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it's important to note that the aim here is not to delve into the details of annihilation or other related

⁶⁷ Al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, 91.

⁶⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr et. al., *The Study Qur'an*, 453.

⁶⁹ Al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah*, 90.

concepts within *tasawwuf*, rather, to underscore that the spiritual experience at the core of *tasawwuf*—referred to by scholars like Christopher Melchert and others as mystical experience—is deeply rooted in Islam’s foundational sources.

Is it tenable from a purely historical and realistic perspective to believe that the Prophet himself directed Muslims towards the state of *ihsan*, encouraging the realization of the highest level of spiritual experience as an integral dimension of the ideal religious life, while simultaneously holding that it was a later development in the religious culture of Muslims? This would imply that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), his companions, their successors, and Muslims thereafter until the middle of the third century disregarded a fundamental aspect of Islam and distanced themselves from it, until some Muslims in the third century emerged to reaffirm it.

Such postulations and the idea of a transition from asceticism to mysticism are fallacious, as evidenced by the Qur’anic and prophetic prescriptions of the spiritual characteristics of Islamic life and its devotional practices. Even a cursory glance at Sufi classics, especially those discussing spiritual stations and states,⁷⁰ such as the significant work of al-Harawi al-Ansari (481/1089),⁷¹ reveals that the Qur’an and the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad were their sole sources.

As evidenced by historical records, spiritual life and experiences among early Muslim communities were commonplace and integral to their way of life. *Tasawwuf*, therefore, is not a departure from Islam but rather the articulation of the ideal of *Ihsan* and the practical process of its realization.

⁷⁰ For stations of *Tasawwuf* see al-Qushayri, *al-Risala*, 111-416.

⁷¹ See al-Harawi’s work mentioned above in foot note 57.

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