



The Role and Significance of *Taşawwuf* in Modern-Day Crisis

Niyaz Ahmad Lone^{1*}

¹ Ph.D. Scholar at Islamic Studies Department, School of Social Science, Islamic University of Science and Technology, Awantipora Kashmir, India

* Corresponding author: niyazahlone@gmail.com

Article History:

Received : 7 Jan 2022

Accepted : 12 June 2022

Published: 16 June 2022

How to cite this article:

Lone, Niyaz Ahmad.

“The Role and Significance of *Taşawwuf* in Modern-Day Crisis.” *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 11, no 1 (2022): 83-102.

<https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v11i1.12030>

Copyright © 2022 by

Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism.

This publication is licensed under a CC BY-SA.

Abstract: The present manuscript aims to assess the important features of *Taşawwuf* and its position in the contemporary world. Moreover, this study will help to understand the paramount role of *Taşawwuf* in pulling out humanity from these crises and its importance in espousing the society in terms of socio-religious and spiritual development. The suggested methodology for this manuscript will be exploratory, descriptive, and historical to explore the contemporary importance of *Taşawwuf* and its main characteristics. This study reveals the continuing significance of *Taşawwuf* in modern times, where, religious extremism, violence, human value crises, social disharmony, and an imbalance between spirituality and mundane concerns of humanity are some issues that are confronting human beings in the contemporary world. Hence this study found that the legitimacy of *Taşawwuf* in modern society still exists.

Contribution: This article makes a new discovery regarding the continued existence of *Taşawwuf* and its role in maintaining peace, harmony, and religious tolerance in contemporary society and also reveals the role of *Taşawwuf* in the spiritual development of human beings and maintaining a balance between the spirituality and mundane ends.

Keywords: extremism; Islam; modern; spirituality; *Taşawwuf*; violence

Introduction

Taşawwuf or Islamic mysticism is the science of esoteric dimensions of Islam; it believes in direct and firm communion with God rather than purely theoretical knowledge. It insists on the purification of the inner aspects of the individuals. Therefore, on the one hand, it can be characterized as the phenomenon of deep love and loyalty towards God and, on the other hand, a mode of self-purification. *Taşawwuf*, a religious mechanism of the spiritual nourishment of the individuals is paramount in the contemporary world, wherein people are experiencing a spiritual downfall. However, scientific developments have left no stone unscathed in providing life's amenities. Hence, there is an imbalance between the spiritual and mundane aspects of the individuals. Furthermore, religious extremism, violence, human rights violation, human value crises, corruption, hoarding, social inequalities, and much other societal malice are contributing much to the downfall of humanity in the contemporary world.

Therefore, the resurgence of *Taşawwuf* is the need of the hour and is of utmost necessity to enforce it as a spiritual mechanism of the religion in society. *Taşawwuf* acts as a panacea to the moral degradation of society. It pacifies society on religious, social, and ethical grounds. However, *Taşawwuf* must be understood in accordance with the dynamic nature of the society. So, this study aims to assess the main traits of Islamic Sufism and its importance in light of modern challenges and issues faced by human beings.

Literature Review

I have selected a few sources for the literature review. Although an extensive collection of literature is available under the theme of *Taşawwuf*, however, keeping in view the nature of my research paper, I have reviewed the most cited sources and most recent books and journals. In her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Schimmel has focused on the meaning of Sufism and its historical background, along with some prominent Sufi saints and their doctrines. Furthermore, some Sufi orders and Sufism in the subcontinent also has been discussed here. While Chushty, in his *Tāryīkh-e-Taşawwuf*, has mentioned Islamic mysticism, its meaning, and its sources in this cited work. Furthermore, there is mention of some great Sufi saints in Muslim history. Moreover, the author has presented the original image of the Islamic mystic aspect separated from other religions' mysticism. Then Nicholson studies the origin and historical development of Sufism, its relation to Islam, and its general character. After that, he discussed certain principles, methods, and characteristic features of the inner

life of the Muslims. Again Howell, in her article “Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival,” has mostly discussed challenges to modern reformism and the role of Islamic Sufism in the religious revival in Indonesia. Knysh also wrote *Islamic Mysticism*. This book is a general review of Islamic Sufism, and the author has covered some modern aspects. Additionally, here in this book, the author has mentioned the confrontation of the Sufis with their opponents. The last, Nugroho, in his article entitled “Sufism and Interreligious Dialogue: The Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order in Indonesia,” discussed Naqshbandi Haqqani, Religious Plurality, and the role of Islamic Sufism in interreligious dialogue, tolerance, and peace with particular reference to the Naqshbandi *Sufi* order. My study is, however, different from previous studies. In this article, I will highlight the significant characteristic features of Islamic mysticism relevant to modern society in terms of peace, religious tolerance, non-violence, etc. Furthermore, this work is unique because I have brought forth those elements and aspects of Islamic mysticism, which helps maintain its identity and legitimacy in contemporary times.

Method

The study used descriptive, historical, and exploratory methods. Here, in this article, the used books and journals are related to *Taṣawwuf*, its primary traits, and contemporary relevance. In this research article, the recent and most cited sources have been used to identify the dominant themes of my study. The literature used has been accessed via the library and the internet.

Results and Discussion

Importance of *Taṣawwuf*

The importance of *Taṣawwuf* can be seen in its holistic and comprehensive approach to human beings; it creates a balance between spirituality and the material needs of the individuals and produces a perfect human being. *Taṣawwuf* makes people God-conscious and seeks a life of piety and God-fearing. Considering the religious importance of *Taṣawwuf*, its inception was an inevitable phenomenon among the Muslims. During the early centuries of Islam, some Muslims who were much more concerned about their faith adopted the way of seclusion to achieve the target of God-realization by relinquishing all worldly pleasures. They focused more on the esoteric purification of their lives, and this trend gradually gained popularity among the Muslims, and there was a massive inclination among the Muslims towards it. Subsequently, these Muslims came to

be known as the Sufis. However, there have remained frequent controversies among Muslim scholars regarding the meaning of the word ‘*Sufi*.’ Conventionally the word ‘*Sufi*’ has been defined in multiple ways. The most commonly used term, ‘*Sūf*,’ means ‘wool,’ and the people who wore woolen clothes as a mark of austerity in their lives came to be known as Sufis.¹

The Qur’anic Justification of *Taṣawwuf*

Although *Taṣawwuf* fetches its teachings, aims, and doctrines from *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah*, the origin of the word *Taṣawwuf* itself has been debatable since its emergence. Because both *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah* provide no clue to this term. The term *Taṣawwuf* became in Islamic teachings after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).² While discussing the historical background of *Taṣawwuf*, Shah Walī-Allāh says that it existed during the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his immediate associates. However, they were not familiar with the term *Taṣawwuf*. In this sense, he considers Islam as the source of *Taṣawwuf*. Though a majority of Muslim scholars assert that Islam is the primary source of *Taṣawwuf*, there is still scope for debate about its origins.³

Nevertheless, Islamic mysticism aims to fulfill the primordial covenant which took place between God and the souls of humanity; Holy Qur’an mentions, “When your Lord brought forth offspring from the loins of the children of the Adam and they bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I not your Lord, they replied, ‘we bear witness that you are.’ This He did, lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘We had no knowledge of that.’” *al-‘arṣ* 07:172)

It was a covenant of living and firm relationship between God and human beings. Hence, this covenant constitutes the most insistent religious aspect of Islam and is the most critical aspect of the religious commitment of the Muslims than any other aspect. *Taṣawwuf* primarily focuses upon the acknowledgement of this religious conviction. The religious conscience of Islamic *Taṣawwuf* revolves around the concept of disinterested love of God; it extends an

¹ Oman Nūri Topbas, *Tasavvuf (Müslümanın Kendisiyle İmtihanında)*, trans. Süleyman Derin (Istanbul: Erkam Publications, 2020), 17.

² Israr Ahmad, *The Reality of Tasawuf*, trans. Basit B. Koshul (NSW: Islamic Library Australia, 2020), 2.

³ Shah Walī-Allāh, *Ham‘Āt*, trans. Mohmmad Sarwar (Lahore: Sindh Sagar Academy, 1946), 45.

unconditional loyalty to God. It aims to attain a higher degree of *Tawḥīd* (oneness of God) by acknowledging God alone as worthy of worship.⁴

The whole *Taṣawwuf*—its sources, teachings, and practices are summed up in verse “*Guide us along the straight path,*” which constitutes the sixth verse of the opening chapter of the Qur’an and is the most often repeated supplication in Islamic teachings. Muslim *Sufi* saints are more concerned about this supplication and constantly seek the right way. Hence, *Taṣawwuf* presents a comprehensive and explicit answer to the question, ‘what is the right path?’⁵

Taṣawwuf constitutes three main elements, i.e., *Tawḥīd* (Oneness of Allah), *Taqwā* (Piety), and complete love of God. All these three elements have been deduced from the Qur’an. So, there will be no exaggeration to say that *Taṣawwuf* derives all its teachings from the Qur’an, though later on, Muslims experienced penetration of some un-Islamic elements either consciously or unconsciously in *Taṣawwuf*.⁶

Furthermore, *Tazkiya-i-nafs* (self-purification), which also constitutes an essential aspect of Islamic mysticism, has been deduced from the Qur’an, “*It is He who has raised among the unlettered people a messenger from among themselves who recites His revelations to them, and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and Wisdom, for they had formerly been misguided-*” (*Jumu‘h* 62:02). Therefore, it explicitly reveals that the Muslim mystics were real adherents of the Qur’an and Sunnah.⁷

The emergence of *Taṣawwuf* in Islam was a natural phenomenon of the religion. Although the dominant feature of the *Taṣawwuf* is the esoteric purification, yet being a religious mechanism of the spirituality of Islam, it also recognizes the exoteric aspect of human life. Because Islam is the alone way of life that realises the mundane concerns along with the spiritual necessities of the individuals, Islam maintains a balance between stability and change. It seeks enforcement of faith and action in the lives of individuals. Islam believes in a moderate attitude towards everything. Therefore, based on these revolutionary features of Islam, *Taṣawwuf* also demands a complete modification of inner as

⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension in Islam* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 23–24.

⁵ Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1983), 74.

⁶ Yuwsf Salyīm Chushty, *Tāryīkh-e-Taṣawwuf* (New Delhi: Areeb Publications, 2015), 119.

⁷ Chushty, 122–23.

well as outer aspects of life.⁸ Nevertheless, the whole structure of knowledge in the Islamic mystical aspect is based on the realization of Allah almighty. According to Muslim Sufi saints, knowledge's main aim is to realize God almighty in a real sense, and this is known as *Ma'arifat* or '*irfān*' in the terminology of *Taşawwuf*.⁹

Islamic mysticism constructs the life of individuals based on good morality. It builds up both inner and outer aspects of an individual's life to gain Allah's pleasure. Furthermore, it seeks to avoid all those pleasures and activities repugnant to Islamic teachings. It makes individuals subservient to the will of Allah and makes the lives of the individuals free from lust, greed, and carnal desires. *Taşawwuf* demands the effacement of one's wishes in the will of Allah almighty.¹⁰ Therefore, the subject matter of *Taşawwuf* is to construct the individuals' lives according to Islam's teachings. It teaches individuals to strive utmost to fulfill their obligations, fight strenuously for Allah's cause, and show consistency in Allah's way.¹¹

Despite being heterogeneous nature of the universe, Islam believes in unity (*Tawhīd*) which is the cardinal principle of Islam; in fact, Islam has always sought to bring about integration in all aspects of human life. Hence, *Taşawwuf* is an inner dimension of Islamic teachings through which a living concept of *Tawhīd* can be achieved. It integrates individuals by pulling them out of the state of chaos. There is no scope for *shirk* (polytheism) and multiplicity in *Taşawwuf*. Instead, it vehemently resists even a micro-level element of polytheism. It believes in life based on the concept of *Tawhīd*. The primary sources of teachings of *Taşawwuf* are the Qur'an and Sunnah, whose sole motive is to bring humanity under the umbrella of *Tawhīd* (oneness).¹²

Early Evidence of *Taşawwuf* in Islam

During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), we can find the people performing an extraordinary pious life. The life of the Prophet (SAW) is an outstanding example. So, this characteristic of Islam inspired its adherents to

⁸ Walī-Allāh, *Ham'āt*, 25.

⁹ Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1914), 51.

¹⁰ Mir Valiuddin, *The Qur'anic Sufism* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Limited, 1959), 3–4.

¹¹ Valiuddin, 6.

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Germany: Schocken books, 1977), 43.

care about the future life by avoiding mundane pleasures, which is the primary target of *Taṣawwuf*. It seeks a pious life from the individuals. Therefore, it vividly reveals that *Taṣawwuf* has always remained an inseparable segment of Islam though the term *Taṣawwuf* by name was unknown to early adherents of Islam.¹³

However, later on, during the second half of the eighth century and the first half of the ninth century, when the scholarly study was initiated on the Islamic mystic aspect in western countries, the term ‘Sufism’ appeared in Muslim societies. Primarily, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Iran noticed the emergence of many Muslim saints who led a life of seclusion for Allah’s pleasure. Subsequently, there was a massive inclination of the Muslims toward *Taṣawwuf*, which spread to other parts of the Muslim world, establishing various *ṭariqās* (brotherhoods) and spreading its teachings. Gradually *Taṣawwuf* became a dominant feature of the Muslim societies and had a pervasive impact on the spiritual aspect of the life of the people.¹⁴

Different Stages of *Taṣawwuf*

Historically *Taṣawwuf* has gone through various stages. Initially Prophetic period witnessed the people's inclination towards seclusion for Allah’s pleasure, though the term *Taṣawwuf* or Sufism did not exist during those days. There are multiple stories associated with the ascetism of various companions (*Ṣaḥāba*) of the Prophet (SAW). For example, it is said that Abū‘l Dardā ‘Uwaymir ibn Zayd exercised *tafakur* (mediation) and piety (*taqwā*) for forty years. Similarly, Abū Dharr Jundub Ghifārī, a celebrated companion of the Prophet (SAW), is an even more remarkable example of asceticism. He recommended *I’tikāf* (spiritual retreats in a mosque) and used to practice fast for self-purification. Not only this, but instead, Muslim history narrates multiple stories of the exact nature. Nevertheless, the companions of the Prophet (SAW) were real and practical adherents of the Qur’an and Sunnah. Hence, their ascetic way of life was according to *Shari‘ah* (Islamic teachings), yet Prophet (SAW) did not allow his companions to go for a life of seclusion because Islam keeps no scope for

¹³ Alexander Knysh, *Sufism-A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (USA: Princeton University Press, 2017), 15.

¹⁴ Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism – A Short History*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1.

monasticism; it vehemently condemns such a way of life. Islam embraces both the spiritual and mundane concerns of the individuals.¹⁵

This was the real image of *Sufi* ideal life during the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW); however, subsequently, about the end of the 8th century and the first half of the 9th century, when the political, intellectual, and social conditions were not too much favourable and congenial, and the people either consciously or unconsciously were less concerned towards their spiritual dimension of the life, *Taşawwuf* emerged in its practical shape to cure the society in terms of spirituality. Moreover, the political unrest and the emergence of various schools of thought within Islam contributed immensely in this regard. Especially during the ending moments of the Umayyad dynasty and the initial years of the Abbasid dynasty, when the moral, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of the Muslim society were not so healthy, because of the negligence of the rulers towards their responsibilities, some sensitive souls who were caring about the world to come, decided to disassociate themselves from mundane concerns, and led a life of seclusion as a panacea to their spiritual and moral ills. Therefore, in such conditions, we can trace and comprehend the origin and development of *Taşawwuf*.¹⁶ During the same time, *Taşawwuf* emerged as a distinct element of Islamic teachings in Muslim societies, and the propagation of Islamic teachings and doctrines was launched on a large scale. It was the time when *Taşawwuf* got a chance to have contact with philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence. Persia, Central Asia, and India-like countries experienced the development of Sufism during the same period. Dhu'l-Nūn of Egypt, al-Muḥāsibī of Bagdad, Ibrahim bin Adam and Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī were some prominent *Sufi* saints during this period. *Taşawwuf* witnessed a new development in its practical aspect during the 4th/10th century. Meanwhile, various classical manuals of *Taşawwuf* appeared, like '*Kitāb al-luma*' (The Book of Flashes) by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-ta'arruf* (Doctrine of the Sūfīs) by Sūfīs Kalābādhī and *Kashf al-maḥjūb* (The Unveiling of the Hidden) by Hujwīrī. These works represent the practical dimension of *Taşawwuf*. Besides, at the same time, various other developments also took place at the intellectual level of *Taşawwuf*.¹⁷

¹⁵ Louis Massignon, *Essays on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, trans. Benjamin Clark (United States: University of Notre Dame Press Indiana, 1997), 108–9.

¹⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, Scholar Select (London, 1908), 98–99.

¹⁷ Nasr Hossein, *Three Muslim Sages* (New York: Caravan Books Delmar, 1976), 86–87.

During the late tenth century, *Taṣawwuf* would present in its original shape by purifying it from the elements repugnant to the teachings of Islam and making it entirely subordinate to the Qur'an and Sunnah. And the Muslim Sufis held that the main aim of *Taṣawwuf* is to represent the purposes of *Shari'ah*. These attempts to purify *Taṣawwuf* from un-Islamic elements were continued furthermore. *Taṣawwuf* experienced a new development in its whole structure during the time of Imam Ghazzāli; in fact, he was a reformer in the history of *Taṣawwuf* who brought these both *Taṣawwuf* and *Shari'ah* very close together and attempted to present the *Taṣawwuf* as an inseparable part of the Islamic teachings.¹⁸

Imam Ghazzāli, from his early youth, had an inclination toward Islamic mysticism; his father was a *Sufi* saint. In his youth, al-Ghazzāli studied mysticism and keenly observed Islamic mysticism. He got mystical education and training from Yūsuf al-Nassāj in Ṭūs. He took a positive view of *Taṣawwuf* and said that mysticism is an important dimension of religion that brings individuals very close to the religion and cultivates religious values by bringing them close to reality. Furthermore, God's living and firm experience can be achieved through Islamic mysticism. Al-Ghazzāli's mystical thoughts and teachings can be seen in his *magnum opus*, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-Dīn* (Revivification of the Sciences of Religion).¹⁹ During his time, Islamic mysticism got paramount in Muslim societies and was considered to be of utmost necessity to enrich the esoteric aspect of individuals with spirituality. The subject matter of Islamic mysticism was to mold society according to the Islamic tenants.²⁰

By and large, *Taṣawwuf* continued with the same popularity and same position among the Muslims till the first half of the eighteenth century, when it had to encounter harsh criticisms by some Muslim scholars because of penetration of some un-Islamic elements and innovations in its teachings and doctrines, and the extreme and monastic attitude of the life by the Muslim *Sufi* saints, though in the nineteenth-century efforts were made for the revival of

¹⁸ Farhat Gill, "The Ascetic Phase in the Development of Tasawwuf," *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture* xxxii, no. 1 (2011): 131–43, http://www.niher.edu.pk/Latest_English_Journal/7.pdf.

¹⁹ M.M. Sharīf, *History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Wiesbaden, 1963), 617–18.

²⁰ Duncan B. Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 239.

Taşawwuf, particularly in India and Central Asia.²¹

Characteristics of Islamic Mysticism

Islam, being a universal ideology, embraces all the aspects of human beings and recognizes all the legitimate needs of the individuals; therefore, *Taşawwuf*, as an indispensable dimension of Islamic teachings, possesses these main features. The first and foremost characteristic of *Taşawwuf* is that it views an individual holistically. It appeals to both esoteric as well as exoteric aspects of human beings. However, it is more concerned with spirituality rather than the tangible world. Not only this, positivism and pragmatism are two more revolutionary characteristics of *Taşawwuf*. It takes an optimistic view of human life and is practical in its nature. Furthermore, it remains active in its business. *Taşawwuf* does not allow its adherents to confine themselves up to their salvation. Rather, it concerns the spiritual culture of all the individuals in total. It involves utmost efforts to reach up to Reality. The public slogan of *Taşawwuf* is “Love of God,” and it seeks a return of the whole self towards Absolute Reality.²² *Taşawwuf* seeks the inculcation of patience, perseverance, austerity, and contentment-like qualities in its adherents. Furthermore, one of the outstanding characteristics of followers of *Taşawwuf* is that they relinquish all worldly pleasures in the quest for Allah’s pleasure. However, considering the service towards other creatures of God, they never neglect their duties. Living and firm faith in Allah, showing sympathy and respect towards other fellow beings, disinterested or selfless worship of Allah, and making self (*nafs*) subordinate to *Shari‘ah* are other characteristics of the Muslim Sufis.²³

The remarkable feature of *Taşawwuf* is its mystical insight and teachings on the *Sunnah* after the Qur’an. Prophetic *Sunnah* offers a model for the whole structure of *Taşawwuf* and is an example for Muslim *Sufi* saints who tread the path of the Prophet (SAW).²⁴ *Taşawwuf* involves knowing the fundamental nature of existence, and it provides all the basics to achieve the main objective

²¹ Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb, *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 166.

²² Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1911), 71.

²³ Mirza Wahiduddin Begg, *The Big Five of India in Sufism* (Rajasthan: Rashtrapati Bhawan, 1972), 23 (pt.iv, chp. I).

²⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety (Studies in Religion)* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 71–72.

of life. The constant struggle of the Sufis to resist the devil is another magnificent characteristic of *Taṣawwuf*.²⁵ It seeks an inculcation of all those qualities in an individual which the Qur'an has made a prerequisite for a living and firm faith in Allah (SWT), i.e., repentance (*tawbah*), sincerity (*ikhhlās*), remembrance (*dhikr*), and love (*muḥabbah*). *Taṣawwuf* constructs its whole structure on these qualities. Similarly, truth (*haqq*), heart (*qalb*), and poverty (*faqr*) also constitute the main ingredients of *Taṣawwuf*, while poverty in the terminology of *Taṣawwuf* is the simplicity of life. These qualities are the different manifestations of the efforts to attain the pleasure of Allah (SWT).²⁶ The central goal of *Taṣawwuf* is the real experience of God (*ma'rifā*) which is the crucial concept of Islamic teachings.

Hence, all the teachings and doctrines of *Taṣawwuf* lead toward the real experience of God. This major characteristic of *Taṣawwuf* demands self-realization and self-sacrifice to maintain a strong relationship with Allah (SWT).²⁷ It infuses a spirit of service towards humanity. Love and compassion, like the main features of Islamic *Taṣawwuf*, are paramount in the context of societal needs. With the rise of *Taṣawwuf* in its practical form, the social structure of Islamic societies witnessed progress, and Islamic culture was presented positively by making it compatible with the dynamic nature of the society.²⁸ *Taṣawwuf* strongly believes in *Tawhīd* (monotheism). Notwithstanding all these social and religious manifestations, the authority of Islamic mysticism in the contemporary world has remained a debatable issue whether it can maintain its identity in the modern social context where societies favor constant change and modernization.²⁹

Role of *Taṣawwuf* in the Contemporary World

Undeniably, the contemporary world is swimming in the ocean of various religious, social, economic, and political issues. Religious extremism, violence, degradation of human values, violation of human rights at global level, and

²⁵ M. Fethullah Gulen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, vol. 2 (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2007), 14.

²⁶ 'Ā'ishsh Al-Bā' ūniyyh, *The Principles of Sufism*, ed. and trans. Thomas Emil Homerin (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 24.

²⁷ Ahmet T Karamustafa, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology*, trans. John Renard (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004), 14.

²⁸ Khaliq Ahmad Nizāmi, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century* (Uttar Pradesh: Aligarh Muslim University, 1961), 50.

²⁹ Arthur John Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge, 1950), 1.

avarice, lack of love, affection, and justice at society level are some issues that naturally invite the manipulation and exploitation of humanity and other insidious consequences in the society. These issues effects society deleteriously and are pernicious for the moral structure of the society. Therefore, *Taşawwuf* offers a remedy to this social malice and problems. It believes in a peaceful social atmosphere, guarantees justice, honesty, and altruism in society, and espouses a passion for selfless service towards deserved people; it ensures human security. It has a substantial role in Islamic societies, extending from the public to the personal level.³⁰

It awakes the consciousness of individuals about their responsibilities towards society and induces them for sincerity, and hence, constructs a healthy culture based on morality, spirituality, and human values. Nonetheless, *Taşawwuf* needs comprehension of modern societal needs, and its comprehensive understanding is a must to cover all the fields of society. Moreover, *Taşawwuf* needs liberation from un-Islamic elements, and its objectives should be framed according to the Qur'an and Sunnah.³¹

During the nineteenth century, the continuing significance of religion became the focal point of Muslim scholarship, and the Muslim world experienced some movements of Islamic resurgence; unfortunately, these movements gave much more attention to the political aspect of Islam. Hence, the spiritual dimension of Islam received scant attention. In the context of the contemporary social structure of Muslim societies, the need of the hour is to recognize the dynamism and importance of *Taşawwuf* because, in recent times, the efficacy of *Taşawwuf* can be seen in multiple ways. During the age of enlightenment in the eighteenth century, western scholars targeted religion. They said that now religion is no more veiled in society and argued that religion would be replaced by science and gave the concept of a religious-less society. Therefore, *Taşawwuf* can be fruitful in avoiding the tussle between religion and state and can prove the authenticity and legitimacy of religion in modern societies. *Taşawwuf* can highlight the remarkable guiding principles of religion regarding the spiritual and mundane concerns of an individual. Furthermore, modern societies lack brotherhood. Consequently, it has become vulnerable to much social malice, which causes human rights violations on a large scale. So, the *Sufi* brotherhoods

³⁰ Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1996), 1–2.

³¹ Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 26, 2001): 701–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700107>.

(*tariqās*) can help maintain brotherhood among the individual.³²

Islamic mysticism promotes people not only spiritually; instead, it binds people in a community and makes them able to fight collectively against social problems. Because of its unifying nature, the significance of Sufi brotherhood can be seen in the societies where Muslims are in the majority and those societies where Muslims present a picture of the minority. Broadly speaking, *Taṣawwuf* recognizes the change in society because change inherits in Islam on the one hand, and it inculcates a sense of brotherhood among its adherents on the other hand.³³

In contemporary times the prevalence of modernization, development, and progress-like ideas, especially in Muslim societies which are purely materialistic in nature, have created a chasm between the spiritual and material dimensions of the individuals, and people are more inclined toward worldly concerns, which henceforth, substantially contributes towards the degradation of individuals at a spiritual level. Therefore, *Taṣawwuf* can be an effective tool to maintain this balance.³⁴

In modern times, scientific and technological developments are contributing immensely to providing basic amenities of life in a society. However, these developments do not satisfy individuals spiritually and morally. Consequently, there is an imbalance in the lives of individuals. Therefore, the societal efficacy of *Taṣawwuf* exists continually, and it is inevitable to recognize the utility of *Taṣawwuf* to build a healthy and classless society based on spiritual and religious values. Furthermore, in the contemporary world where Islam is being targeted as a source of violence and terror, *Taṣawwuf* can be fruitful in presenting a positive and clear picture of Islam.³⁵

During the nineteenth century, *Taṣawwuf* encountered criticism and was blamed for the inculcation of renunciation from worldly affairs in its followers at the social level and promotion of the innovations in the Islamic teachings at a spiritual level. However, this blame was because of poor comprehension of *Taṣawwuf*. To prove the legitimacy of *Taṣawwuf* in Islam and consider its social

³² Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, eds., *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 282–83.

³³ Barbara DeGorge, *From Piety to Politics: The Evolution of Sufi Brotherhoods* (Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005), 20.

³⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul International Ltd., 1987), 117.

³⁵ John Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, Ely House, 1971), 257–58.

vitality in modern Muslim societies, during the nineteenth century, *Taşawwuf* underwent a process of reformation by the Muslim scholars. The sole motive of the revival of *Taşawwuf* was to bridge the dichotomy between *Taşawwuf* and *Shari'ah* and to make *Taşawwuf* subordinate to the Qur'an and Sunnah. Subsequently, *Taşawwuf* proved helpful for Muslim societies in constructing the community based on socio-moral values.³⁶

In the contemporary world, environmental degradation is one of the grave issues faced by humanity. Therefore, the religious importance of the environment in Islam needs to be highlighted. To continue the social significance of Islam in modern societies, an Islamically recognizable campaign has to be launched to conserve the environment. The theological discourse of Islam needs to explore nature, especially environmental conservation, and awareness must be created among individuals to maintain an interrelationship between religion and nature. Since in *Taşawwuf*, the character has a spiritual significance, the importance of *Taşawwuf* regarding environmental conservation must be recognized.³⁷

It is a fact that the technological revolution has made the lives of people easy. Still, simultaneously it has created an imbalance between human beings and nature due to the destruction of the environment and has divorced the environment from religious teachings. Hence, the need is to explore the spiritual traditions of Islam concerned with nature, and deliberate efforts are necessary to implement Islam's spiritual aspect to protect the environment. Therefore, *Taşawwuf*, in modern times, possesses substantial significance for environmental conservation and maintaining a balance between human beings and nature.³⁸

Therefore, *Taşawwuf* can remain persistent and steadfast in the contemporary world with its social implications and profoundly impact the socio-economic structure of the society. Furthermore, its importance can be seen in the public domains related to the development and other modern social changes.³⁹

³⁶ Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia. Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulamā' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Southeast Asia Publications Series (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 139.

³⁷ Avais Afzal, "Sufism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Braun Taylor and Jeffery Kaplan (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1604.

³⁸ Seyyed Hossain Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 65.

³⁹ Hassan Abu Hanieh, *Sufism and Sufi Orders: God's Spiritual Paths Adaption and Renewal in the Context of Modernization*, ed. and trans. Mona Abu Rayyan (Jordan: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2011), 210–11.

Commenting on *Taṣawwuf*, ‘Allama Iqbal says that during the early days of Islam, it was a natural part of Islam and had an immense role in directing the religious experience. However, later on, it could not gain much more popularity among the Muslims and became inanimate in society because of the ignorance of its representatives. Nevertheless, *Taṣawwuf* needs a reformation in the light of modern social context without fiddling with its fundamental doctrines and teachings to make it proactive in the contemporary world to insulate the spiritual dimension of the Muslims from western materialistic thought and as well as to assist the Muslims in other aspects of the life also.⁴⁰

From the eighteenth century onwards, Muslim scholars from all over the world felt a need for revival in the traditions of the *Taṣawwuf* to animate it in Muslim societies considering its social vitality and religious implications. And no doubt, *Taṣawwuf* played a significant role in the Islamic revival and other Islamic movements. Muhammad Abduh of Egypt saw *Taṣawwuf* as a part of Islamic teachings and held that its legitimacy could not be questioned in modern times. It has a significant role in constructing Muslim societies in an enlightened way.⁴¹

Living in harmony and cooperation is a *sin quo non* in a society characterised by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Since we are living in a world that represents a heterogenous picture with diverse religious traditions, cultures, and ethnicity, therefore, to avoid any possible threat to peace, dialogue, especially on the spiritual level, is imperative to maintain harmony, brotherhood, co-existence among the followers of the diverse faiths. Islam has been a pioneer of the phenomenon of interfaith dialogue from its early inception to bring the people towards unity. This unity is an embodiment of a peaceful society. Holy Qur’an mentions, “*Say, ‘people of the Book, let us come to a word common to us that we shall worship none but God and that we shall associate no partner with Him and that none of us shall take others, besides God, for lords.’ And if they turn away, say, ‘Bear witness that we have submitted to God.’*” (*Al-‘Imrān* 3:64). The interfaith dialogue is not only a theological debate among the people of different religions; the main objective of this phenomenon is to promote peace, harmony, and mutual understanding among the individuals by inviting them towards an everyday reality. Religious tolerance constitutes one of the significant

⁴⁰ Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, 1930).

⁴¹ Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 174–75.

characteristics of the *Taşawwuf* and occupies an interesting place in its teachings. *Taşawwuf* possesses all those essential qualities for profound and productive interfaith dialogue like generosity, patience, gratitude, humility, and tolerance. *Taşawwuf* is tolerant in its nature and teachings. Therefore, it has paramount importance in the contemporary world of peace.⁴²

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the meaning of life in contemporary times, *Taşawwuf* has a considerable role in Muslim societies. In modern times where science and technology have done a lot towards the mundane concerns of the individuals, however, the spiritual aspect of the individuals is in a state of negligence; therefore, in such prevailing conditions, it is must reassess our relationship with *Taşawwuf*, and conceptualize it as a religious tradition of the Islam having social and religious importance so that a balance can be maintained between spiritual and mundane aspects of the individuals. Nevertheless, all that is needed for authentic *Taşawwuf* to be identified by liberating and distinguishing it from irrational and un-Islamic elements encrusted over it. Its sophisticated comprehension in the light of modern social context is necessary to maintain its identity as a socio-religious phenomenon.

Acknowledgement

I am thankful to all the staff members of the Rumi Library of the Islamic University of Science and Technology. They provide me space in the library during the research process of this article. I would also like to show my gratitude and appreciation to the reviewers and editorial team of the esteemed journal *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism*, who accepted my research article for publication in the said journal.

Funding

The author received no specific grant to do the research.

Author Contributions

N.A.L. is the sole author of this article.

⁴² Wahyu Nugroho, "Sufism and Interreligious Dialogue: The Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order in Indonesia," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 10, no. 1 (April 29, 2021): 111–26, <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v10i1.8459>.

Bibliography

- Afzal, Avais. "Sufism." In *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by Braun Taylor and Jeffery Kaplan. London: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Ahmad, Israr. *The Reality of Tasawuf*. Translated by Basit B. Koshul. NSW: Islamic Library Australia, 2020.
- Al-Bā'ūniyyh, 'Ā'ishsh. *The Principles of Sufism*. Edited and translated by Thomas Emil Homerin. New York: NYU Press, 2014.
- Arberry, Arthur John. *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge, 1950.
- Azra, Azyumardi. *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia. Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulamā' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Southeast Asia Publications Series. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004.
- Begg, Mirza Wahiduddin. *The Big Five of India in Sufism*. Rajasthan: Rashtrapati Bhawan, 1972.
- Bruinessen, Martin van, and Julia Day Howell, eds. *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.
- Chushty, Yuwsf Salyīm. *Tāryikh-e-Taṣawwuf*. New Delhi: Areeb Publications, 2015.
- DeGorge, Barbara. *From Piety to Politics: The Evolution of Sufi Brotherhoods*. Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2005.
- Gibb, Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen. *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Gill, Farhat. "The Ascetic Phase in the Development of Tasawwuf." *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture* xxxii, no. 1 (2011): 131–43. http://www.nihcr.edu.pk/Latest_English_Journal/7.pdf.
- Gulen, M. Fethullah. *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*. Vol. 2. New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2007.
- Hanieh, Hassan Abu. *Sufism and Sufi Orders: God's Spiritual Paths Adaption and Renewal in the Context of Modernization*. Edited and translated by Mona Abu Rayyan. Jordan: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2011.
- Hosseini, Nasr. *Three Muslim Sages*. New York: Caravan Books Delmar, 1976.

- Howell, Julia Day. "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 26, 2001): 701–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700107>.
- Iqbal, Mohammad. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Lahore, 1930.
- Iqbal, Muhammad. *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*. Scholar Select. London, 1908.
- Karamustafa, Ahmet T. *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology*. Translated by John Renard. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004.
- Knysh, Alexander. *Islamic Mysticism – A Short History*. Vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- . *Sufism-A New History of Islamic Mysticism*. USA: Princeton University Press, 2017.
- Lings, Martin. *What Is Sufism?* Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1983.
- Macdonald, Duncan B. *Development of Muslim Theology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903.
- Massignon, Louis. *Essays on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*. Translated by Benjamin Clark. United States: University of Notre Dame Press Indiana, 1997.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossain. *The Need for a Sacred Science*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Sufi Essays*. Germany: Schocken books, 1977.
- . *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*. London: Kegan Paul International Ltd., 1987.
- Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1914.
- Nizāmi, Khaliq Ahmad. *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*. Uttar Pradesh: Aligarh Muslim University, 1961.
- Nugroho, Wahyu. "Sufism and Interreligious Dialogue: The Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order in Indonesia." *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 10, no. 1 (April 29, 2021): 111–26. <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v10i1.8459>.

- Schimmel, Annemarie. *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety (Studies in Religion)*. North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- . *Mystical Dimension in Islam*. Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
- Sells, Michael A. *Early Islamic Mysticism*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1996.
- Sharīf, M.M. *History of Muslim Philosophy*. Vol. 1. Germany: Otto Harrassowitz Wiesbaden, 1963.
- Sirriyeh, Elizabeth. *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.
- Topbas, Oman Nūri. *Tasavvuf (Müslümanın Kendisiyle İmtihanında)*. Translated by Süleyman Derin. Istanbul: Erkam Publications, 2020.
- Trimingham, John Spencer. *The Sufi Orders in Islam*. London: Oxford University Press, Ely House, 1971.
- Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1911.
- Valiuddin, Mir. *The Qur'anic Sufism*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Limited, 1959.
- Walī-Allāh, Shah. *Ham'Āt*. Translated by Mohmmad Sarwar. Lahore: Sindh Sagar Academy, 1946.

