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## Rasulullah's Sufism: The Principle of Balance of Islamic Esotericism And Exotericism

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### Abstract

*Sufism is a deeply personal spiritual experience that cannot be fully explained through scientific methods. Rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, it emphasizes doctrines such as piety, sincerity, patience, and purification of the soul. However, the historical development of Sufism has involved external influences, sometimes resulting in internal controversies. These have led to criticisms and accusations of heresy, particularly from literalist groups such as ahl al-dhawahir, especially concerning doctrines like wabdat al-wujud. Despite this, Sufism remains strongly grounded in the prophetic tradition. This study aims to explore the characteristics of Sufism practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and how it differs from or aligns with the categories of Sufism developed later in Islamic history. The research uses a qualitative method with an anthropological approach, seeking to uncover the meanings behind spiritual practices and symbols through field-based interpretation. Data were collected through literature analysis and interpreted to reveal underlying theological and spiritual meanings. The findings demonstrate that the Prophet's model of Sufism embodies a balanced form of spirituality, integrating both exoteric (shari'ah) and esoteric (haqiqah) dimensions within the framework of Islamic monotheism. This research contributes to the field of Islamic spirituality by offering a novel perspective on Sufism as lived and exemplified by the Prophet, a form of balance not extensively explored in previous studies. It affirms that the essence of Sufism lies in harmonizing outward religious practices with inner spiritual realization, thereby enriching the discourse on the legitimacy and origins of Islamic mysticism.*

**Keywords:** *Ahl dhanvir, Wibdatul wujud, Esotericism, Exotericis, Qur'an*

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## INTRODUCTION

Sufism is a type of religious appreciation in Islam which is inner (esoteric), as opposed to the type of religious appreciation in Islam which is outer (exoteric). Islam as a monotheistic religion is recognized as a religion harmonizing these two aspects of appreciation: exoteric and esoteric. Sufism activities are considered an act of arming oneself with spiritual values that can uphold them when facing various difficulties or life problems. In fact, Amin Syukur said that Sufism can be used as mental health therapy, because Sufism as therapy is very important to cure various diseases, both physical and psychological (Yoana PP et al., 2015).

Etymologically, the word exoteric comes from English, exoteric, also from Greek, exoterikos, meaning 'outside or outer'. Terminologically, 'exoteric' is something not limited to a group of people and can be understood by the public (Victoria Neufeld, 1988: 477). Dictionary of Philosophy explains that the word 'exoteric' is used for teachings that are understood and delivered to the general public (Thomas Mautner, 2005: 198). In other words, 'exotericism' is defined as the external, formal, dogma, ritual, ethical or moral aspects of a religion.

Etymologically, the word esoteric, in English called esoteric, comes from the Greek word esoterikos meaning 'inner'. Terminologically, the word 'esoteric' is addressed to or only understood by limited and selected students (Victoria Neufeld, 1988: 477). In subsequent developments, the word esoteric means the inner aspect, essence, essence or substance, as opposed to the outer aspect, external aspect, aspect of the Shari'a.

However, Sufism is not devoid of criticism, even rejection from Muslims themselves. It maybe because of a misunderstanding or for some reasons. Regarding how Muslims view Sufism, Nurcholish Madjid polarizes it into two attitudes: one oriented toward Ibn Taymiyah (rejecting) and another oriented toward Imam Al-Ghazali (accepting) (Madjid, 1997: 53).

A Sunni ulama generally rejects philosophical Sufism (having a pantheistic pattern) because it is considered to deviate from Islamic teachings. The theory of *wihdat al-wujud*, *wihhdat al-shuhud*, *al-ittihad*, *al-ittishal*, *al-hulul*, or *al-liqa'*, according to him, deviates from Islamic teachings, because its teachings contain philosophical elements from outside Islam,

such as Greek, Persian, India, and Christianity, using philosophical terms that are difficult to understand to many people (Kautsar Azhari Noor, 2006, 283).

Saudi Arabia rejects Sufism because it is considered to be contrary to the teachings of pure Islam (orthodox puritanism). Likewise, the model of rejection of Sufism in Indonesia follows the model of rejection in Saudi, i.e. because it is in contrast to the pure teachings of Islam (Ahmad Musyafiq, 2012, 58). Among them are the Indonesian Committee for the Solidarity of the Islamic World (KISDI), the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), the Islamic Defenders Front and the Ahlussunnah wal- Jamaah Communication Forum, better known as Laskar Jihad (Komaruddin Hidayat et al., 1999: 76)

The polarization created by Sunni ulama regarding the categorization of Sufism, including “Sunni” and “falsafi” (Amat Zuhri, 2016, 11-16) resulting in the rejection of some Islamic ulamas against Sufism, according to Kautsar Azhari Noer, is just a misunderstanding. Because not only Sunni Sufism originates from the Qur’an and Sunnah, but also philosophical Sufism originates from the Qur’an and Sunnah (Kautsar Azhari Noer, 2006: 284). Abdurahman Wahid (Gusdur) also disagrees with the categorization of Sunni Sufism and philosophical Sufism, with opposite meanings, because both are simply due to differences in perspective (Edi Nurhidin, et al. 2022: 35-36)

Apart from the dispute and polarization regarding the type of Sufism and its rejection by some Muslims, this research tends to explain that the side of Sufism displayed by Rasulullah is moderate Sufism combining elements of exotericism and esotericism. That is Sufism or a form of inner appreciation going hand in hand with external appreciation in the form of attention and practice within the framework of Islamic law teachings.

This study aims to reveal the characteristics or style of Rasulullah’s Sufism as stated in hadith literature, Sirah Nabawiyah, and so on. Therefore, the methods used in this research were descriptive and analytical methods.

Based on the data required, this study is a qualitative research, because the data required is qualitative data, in the form of information, information or explanations about the behavior of the Prophet’s spiritual life. Qualitative research is, according to Junaidi, the one seeking the meaning behind events, phenomena and social phenomena which can be valuable learning for developing theoretical concepts (M. Junaidi: 2012).

This study, of course, takes data through literature review and explores various authoritative scientific works. Next, after collecting data and information, data analysis was

carried out, reprocessing and providing an overview through data analysis so as to obtain concrete conclusions. This research presents a novel value in the Sufism discourse regarding the principle of balance in Sufism demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad, never been identified by other researchers in the field of Sufism. That is a form of total religious comprehension and experience that is balanced between exoteric and esoteric.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. The Origins and Understanding of Sufism

Until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of Hijri, the term Sufism was not very well known. After entering the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AH, according to Hamzah Ya'qub (1987: 9), this term only became an object of conversation and discussion among ulama.

In his book entitled “al-Risala al-Qusyairiyah”, al-Qusyairi (1330 H: 7) emphasized that his friends and subsequent generations (*tabi'in*) preferred to be called friends (*Rasul*), because he considered it as an honor. Thus, according to him, terms such as: *abid*, *nasik*, *zabid*, and *sufi* (for worship experts) only became known after this generation.

Regarding the origins of the word Sufism, there are various different opinions. Some argue that the term Sufi for worship experts is just a kind of title, because there is no root for the word in Arabic. Meanwhile, some others are of the opposite opinion, namely that there is a stem in Arabic for the word Sufism, although these two parties also disagree with the stem of Sufism.

R.A. Nicholson, an Orientalist from the United States who studied the issue of Islamic mysticism or Sufism, explained, as quoted by Ibrahim Basyuni (1969: 9), that he had collected twelve various definitions of Sufism which were all based on the origin of the word “al-shafa”, linguistically meaning clean or pure. This can also be justified because the attitude of Sufi people and the phenomenon of Sufism itself always emphasize purity and cleanliness of the soul.

Al-Suhrawardi told, in his book entitled *al-'Awarif al-Ma'arif*, that Abu Sa'id al-Kharraz (d. 268 H) was once asked by someone about “sufis”, and he said: “Sufis are people whom Allah has cleansed his heart, then his heart is filled with light, and he enters the essence of pleasure by reciting the dhikr of Allah (Jalaluddin Rahmat, *Jurnal al-Hikmah*, Vol 11, Muttahari Foundation, Bandung, 1993: p. 77).

Taftazani's research (1985: 21) found that some people believe that the origin of Sufism teachings is attributed to the ahl al-shuffah, the muhajirin group constituting the followers of Prophet who moved from Mecca to Medina, who lived on the porch mosque (shuffat al-mosjid) of the Prophet, because they lost their property and were poor. They were known as worshipers, do not ask for anything, even when they are in need.

Hamzah Ya'qub (1987: 38) explains that some argue that Sufism comes from the word "shaf", meaning row, namely the first row in prayer in the mosque symbolizing virtue and glory. However, some others do not consider this ascription to be true. It is because if "shaf" is the stem, the term for people who are whorsiper should not be Sufi, but "shoffi".

As stated by M. Syarif (1987: 38), another opinion states that the word Sufism comes from the Greek word, Sophia, meaning wisdom. This opinion is more acceptable, according to M. Syarif, because Islamic thought also received influence from Greece.

Meanwhile, Ibn Khaldun (Beirut, n.d: 370) believes that the word Sufism comes from the word "shuf", meaning sheep's wool. Among those who think so was Ibn Khaldun. Sufis wear clothes made of coarse wool or sheep's fur as a symbol of simplicity and poverty, and the opposite is clothing made mostly of silk as a symbol of luxury usually worn by rich people.

Among many origins of the word Sufism, according to Bavan Heve (1997, 285-286), the word "shuf" is the one more widely accepted and more in line with language rules. However, a group of ulamas denies this ascription, and even makes it a heresy. One of them is Sufyan Tsauri, according to Basyuni (1969, 10), because the fleece clothes are the clothes of Christian monks when they perform religious ceremonies.

Then, determining a definition of Sufism is not easy, because in general the definitions put forward by the Sufis are the result of their respective spiritual experiences, which of course cannot be uniform, because of the sharpness of taste and the different levels of mujahadah.

So to get to know Sufism further, to the point that Sufism is an aspect of Islamic teachings, several expressions of the meaning of Sufism according to several figures below are quoted by Afif al-Din al-Tilimsani in his book entitled *Syarh Manazil al-Sairin ila al-Haq al-Mubin* (1413 AH),

Junaid al-Baghdadi (d. 297H) states that "Tasawuf is (a state when) al-Haq turns you off from you and brings you to life with Him." Meanwhile, according to Ja'far al-Khuldi (1413 H. "Tasawuf is immersing oneself in 'ubudiyah, leaving basyariyah, and looking at al-Haq in kulliyah." When al-Sibly (d. 446H) was asked about Sufism, according to al-Tilimsani (1413 H:

112), he said that “in the beginning it was ma'rifat toward Allah and finally it became the devoutness of Him”.

Without additional explanation, the definition means nothing. In general, people confuse Sufism with asceticism and worship, or Sufism with Zahid and Abid. It was Ibn Sina who made a clear distinction between the three, and thereby emphasized the meaning of Sufism.

As quoted by al-Tilimsani, a *zāhid*, according to Ibn Sina, is a person turning away from the pleasures and pleasures of the world. *Abid* is a person maintaining acts of worship, such as prayer and fasting. ‘Arif, according to him, is a person focusing his attention on the sanctity of *Jabarut*, continuously maintaining the light of al-Haq in his *sirr*. And perhaps the ‘arif’ that Ibn Sina refers to is the Sufi that we are referring to in the current discussion (Jalaluddin Rahmat: 1993: 77).

In this regard, Jalaluddin Rahmat said that a person may be an ‘*abid*, but not a *zāhid*; just like someone is a *zāhid*, but not an ‘*abid*. And either *zāhid* or ‘*abid* is unnecessarily ‘wise. But a ‘wise man should be an ‘*abid* and a *zāhid*. The worship and asceticism of an ‘arif (Sufi) are, according to him, different from the worship and asceticism of a person who is not an ‘arif. As quoted by Jalaluddin Rahmat (1993: 78), according to al-Tilimsani, the difference lies in the goal rather than the method. A Sufi applies asceticism because he wants to avoid anything diverting his attention from Allah. He also worships neither because he wants reward nor is afraid of hell. Sufis worship because He is entitled to be worshiped; Sufis worship Allah because of love.

In this regard, Ali r.a. said: “There are people who worship Allah because they want a reward, that is the worship of traders. There are people who worship Allah because they are afraid of His punishment; that is the worship of servants. And there are people who worship Allah because they are grateful to Him; that is the worship of free and free humans (Jalaluddin Rahmat, 1993: 78).

As a result, Sufism is a further stage of worship and asceticism. A person becomes a Sufi if he has abandoned the *ananiyah* (egoism) toward worship that is based solely on love. If he has migrated from his ‘me’ towards Allah, Sufism will be essentially a spiritual journey toward God.

## 2. Sources of Sufism Teachings: In Various Views

Modern studies prove that the origins of the Sufis cannot be limited to one cause. Because an honest reviewer will not be able to accept various generalizations made, for example, that Sufism is an Aryan intellectual reaction (Hinduism) against the Semitic religion

that conquered it, or that Sufism is nothing other than the pure product of Persian and Indian thought.

Likewise, the opinion says that the origins of Sufism come from Buddhism and Hinduism; they seem to forget that the flow of Indian influence on Islamic culture occurred in the last period. Meanwhile, *kalam* science, Islamic philosophy and science, in Islam, had their origins in areas influenced by Greek culture.

This discourse shows that Sufism is indeed a very complex problem. This methodical basis has deep indications. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to know what the Orientalist view is regarding the issue of Sufism. It is because there is not one vision and perception in understanding Sufism among Orientalists. In a book entitled *The Mystics of Islam* by R.A. Nicholson (1975-11-12), some people argue that Sufism comes from Persian sources. Thouk, for example, an orientalist of the 19th century, considered that Sufism derived from Magian sources, arguing that a large number of Magi in northern Iran, after the Islamic conquest, continued to adhere to their religion, and that many Sufi figures came from the northern Khurassan area. This is confirmed by the fact that the founders of the first generation of Sufi schools came from a group of Magi.

Musthafa Helmi, in *al-Hayat al-Ruhiyat fi al-Islam* (1945: 44), states that other orientalists assume that Sufism originates from Christian sources for the following reasons. Firstly, there was an interaction between Arabs and Christians during the Jahiliyah and Islamic eras. Secondly, there are aspects of similarity between the lives of ascetics or Sufis and the life of the Messiah in their teachings and procedures when training the soul (*riyadhab*) and secluding themselves (*khalwat*), and likewise the monks in the way they pray and get dressed. Orientalists thinking so are Ignaz Goldzzieher, R.A. Nicholson and others.

In this regard, R.A. Nicholson (1965: 12) said that “it can be seen clearly that the tendencies of asceticism and contemplation are in accordance with Christian ideas, and even serve as their starting point. Many Biblical texts and sayings of the Messiah are inscribed in the biographies of the first generation of Sufis. We also can see how the fleece garment came from Christians. The practice of silence, *dhiker*, and other spiritual practices probably came from the same source as well.

Meanwhile, according to Taftrazani (1985: 17), there are several orientalists saying that Sufism originates from the Indian mind, as stated by M. Horten and R. Hartman. The theories of Sufism are, according to Hortman, taken from certain tendencies and forms of spiritual

practice in Indian mysticism. Meanwhile, M. Horten has carried out research to confirm this opinion. Considering the results of his research, he stated that Sufism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century of Hijrah was influenced by Indian thought, especially al-Hallaj teachings.

What R. Hartman said, according to the author, is not too wrong, because there are indeed several similarities between the theory of Sufism and the theory of Buddhism, such as the similarities between nirvana in Buddhism and *fana* in Sufism, meaning the disappearance of the soul in the divine spirit. However, this was denied by O'leary (1961: 199-200). He thinks that there is a difference between the two. In the concept of nirvana, the soul seems to lose its individuality in the tranquility of absolute peace. Meanwhile regarding mortality, although the Sufis claim the disappearance of individuality, the eternal essence of life is only due to intuitive contemplation of divine beauty.

Meanwhile, a number of orientalist argue that Sufism originates from the tradition of Greek thought. These orientalist paid more attention to Sufism drawn from Greek sources, Theosophical Sufism, a type of Sufism beginning to emerge in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century pf Hijri through Dzunnun al-Misri (O'leary, 1961: 31).

O'leary (1961: 31) also explains that Nicholson himself argued that theosophical Sufism was the impact of Greek thought. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that in Sufism there is a combination of Greek thought with Eastern religion, including Neo-Platonism and Manu religion.

Al-Taftazani does not deny the impact of Greek thought on Sufism. Through translations or contact with Christian priests in Rey and Hyran, Sufis came to know Greek philosophy in general, and neo-Platonism in particular. This happened when a person named 'Abd al-Masih al-Humsi translated a book entitled Etiology, he introduced to Muslims as Aristotle's work, even though in fact the book was only an excerpt Plotinus' work (Olearli: 1961: 30).

Among the orientalist who studied the issue of the sources of Sufism scientifically and were considered honest was Louis Massignon, a French orientalist, who dedicated his scientific efforts to studying Sufism. To prove his theory about Sufism, he compiled a thorough scientific method regarding Sufism lexicons, referred to the first Sufism sources. This is intended to outline the various factors that have an impact on its formation and development. In his study he came to the conclusion that there are four sources of Sufism: firstly, Qur'an, as the most important source; secondly, Islamic sciences, such as hadith, fiqh, etc.; thirdly, the terminology of the first generation of *kalam* scientists; and Fourthly, scientific languages formed in the East

until the early six centuries AD, such as Greek and Persian which became the languages of science and philosophy (Taftazani: 1985: 33).

The Sufis not merely criticized Persians, Greek Christians, or others, according to Taftazani, because Sufism is basically related to feelings and consciousness. The human soul is one, despite different nationalities or races. Anything related to the human soul, through spiritual practices, can indeed be the same, despite no contact between the two. This means that there is a common thread between the experiences of Sufis, no matter how different the interpretation is between one Sufi and another according to the various cultures where he lives.

Based on the explanation above, according to Taftazani, the similarities between Sufism and various forms of foreign mysticism unnecessarily mean that Sufism ideas were drawn from other sources. So what is more accurate, according to him, is that the idea of Sufism emerged from the Muslims themselves, because their knowledge arises from their own intuition and understanding. There is even a hadith qudsi providing the basis for the concept of *al-fana* (one of the many theories of Islamic Sufism), which can be used as a basis that Sufism emerged from the teachings of Islam itself. Hadith Qudsi narrated by Bukhari, in the Book of Sahih Bukhari, Vol 8. Chapter 'Tawadhu', no 38, explains as follows:

لا يزال العبد يتقرب إلي با لنوافل حتى أحبه , فإذا أحبته كنت سمعه الذي يسمع به, وبصره الذي به, و لسانه الذي ينطق به, ويده الذي يبطش بها, و  
 رجله التي يسعى بها, في يسمع ويصبر وينطق ويعقل ويبطش أخرجه البخار

This hadith clearly provides the basis for the concept of Sufism called *al-Fana*, as a condition by which a Sufi gets closer to Allah. This shows that the theory of *fana* in Sufism also finds reference in Hadith Qudsi. Even some Orientalists have reviewed their opinions and accepted the truth of opinions aforementioned. Examples include, among others, Nicholson ultimately referring Sufism to Islamic sources (Al-Bukhari: n.d.: 38).

Meanwhile, al-Thusi in his book entitled *al-Luma'* shows how Sufis in particular paid more attention to noble morals and the main characteristics and practices. This is for the sake of following the Prophet, his companions, and those who came after him. He also said that all of this knowledge can be traced in the book of Allah SWT (Al-Thusi: 1960: 22-30). From this explanation it can be concluded that *tasawwuf* is viewed from the aspect of its sources across

boundaries coming not only specifically from Islamic sources, but also from sources of teachings beyond Islam.

### 3. Overview of the Validity of Sufism

The assumption that the sources of Sufism's teachings cross the boundaries of religious teachings, not only Islam but also from beyond Islam, has implications to the Muslims' level of appreciation in general toward Sufism itself. So it is not too strange if some Muslims still do not appreciate Sufism or even question its level of validity.

Questioning the validity of Sufism can imply taking a judgmental stance with serious implications, because it concerns the issue of the extent to which we are able and entitled to judge someone's spiritual experience. Mysticism or mystical experiences, including those of a Sufi, always turn inward, and are necessarily personal in nature. Thus, mystical experiences are almost impossible to communicate to other people, and may forever remain the perpetrator's personal property. So there is often eccentric or 'out of line' behavior, and other people, fellow Sufis themselves, will look at it with understanding and even admiration. Various stories about 'guardians' behaving strangely, as is common in various Islamic countries and regions, may be a continuation of this mystical perception. However, the people tending to view Islam from shari'ah perspective only (ahl al-dhawahir) will see these eccentricities as oddities outside the shari'ah's line of validity.

Therefore, those who see themselves as adherents of standard teachings will quickly condemn such behavior considered strange, nothing more than an absurd eccentricity, meaningless, if not madness or the perverted pull of Satan.

Nurcholis Madjid (1994: 7) states that the most serious errors in ahl al-dhawahir's perspective are those in the area of basic theories and views, leading to the notion of 'existential unity' (wahdat al-wujud). It is because this view is considered to have deviated far from the true teachings of Islam. In his book entitled *Fusus al-Hikam*, one of the figures adhering to this view, Ibn 'Arabi, is quoted by Nurcholish Madjid (2008: 258). Ibn Arabi sings in a poem that has the following tone of joking with God:

ويعبدني وأعبده فيحمدني وأحمده  
 وفي الأعيان أجده ففي حال أقر به  
 وأعرفه وأشهد فيعرفني وأنكره

أساعده فأسعده فأنبأ الغنى وأنا  
فأعلمه فأوجدته لذلك الحق أوجدني  
وحقق في مقصده بذا جاء الحديث لنا

So He (God) praised me, and I praised Him.  
And He worshiped me, and I worshiped Him  
In the state of birth, I agreed with Him  
And in essence, I fight against Him.  
So he recognized me but I didn't recognize him  
then I recognized Him, and I saw Him  
So how could it be that He does not need (me)  
Even though I helped Him and made Him happy?  
For this is the truth that manifests me  
Because I fill His knowledge and make Him happen  
Thus the word has come to us  
And all its meanings have been revealed to me

What Ibn 'Arabi stated, according to Nurcholish Madjid (2008: 259), is at first glance difficult to understand the level of truth in the context of Islamic sharia. Therefore, he was accused by sharia scholars of being the most responsible for the deviations in Islam, especially those occurring among the Sufis. However, to his followers, he was considered *al-shaykh al-akbar* meaning a great teacher.

Regarding this, Nurcholis Madjid (2008: 256) explains that in relation to a person's spiritual experience aforementioned, the Qur'an contains various words referring to the Prophet's spiritual experience. For example, a painting about the Prophet's two experiences of meeting and dealing with the Angel Gabriel and Allah. The first is his experience when he received the first revelation in the Hira' cave, on the hill of light (Jabal Nur). And the second is his experience with the famous night journey (isra') and ascending to the sky (mi'raj). These two experiences of the Prophet are described in the Qur'an, in surah al-Najm/53: 1-18, as follows:

By the stars when they sink,  
Your friend (Muhammad) is neither astray nor wrong,  
And he does not speak according to his desires,  
It is nothing but a revealed teaching  
Taught him by the mighty Gabriel,

The wise one who shows himself perfectly,  
That is, when he is on the high horizon,  
Then he came closer and closer,  
Up to the distance of two bows and closer,  
Then he conveyed to his servant what Allah had revealed,  
The soul (of the Prophet) does not deny what he sees for himself  
So are you going to deny what he has seen?  
Even though he had actually witnessed it on another occasion,  
Namely in Sidratul Muntaha,  
Nearby there is a paradise of residence,  
When the sidrah is overwhelmed by something that covers it,  
The Prophet's vision neither wavered nor misdirected,  
Indeed, he has witnessed the incalculable signs of His great Lord.

Is it possible that this mystical experience of the Sufis should be seen as a form of true religious experience, like the Prophet's experience in the Mi'raj which was indescribable, and therefore also incommunicable? Therefore, it cannot be explained scientifically, but can only be experienced by yourself. Sufis like to say that to know the essence of experience, one just has to experience it oneself. They have a rich repertoire to describe the reality. For example, it is impossible to explain how sweet honey is, if one does not taste it himself. How can you explain the bitterness of bitter melon, if you do not taste it yourself, and so on.

Because the problem of Sufism relies on an experiential approach rather than reasoning, Sufis cannot avoid accusations of heresy uttered by the groups not accepting the validity of Sufism and its theories.

#### **4. Rasulallah's Version of Sufism: Principles of Balance of Islamic Esotericism and Exotericism**

In the Qur'an, Allah explains that He created the heavens and everything in them with the principle of balance. This is as explained in Qs Al-Rahman 55: 7-8 as follows:

والسما رفعها ووضع الميزان أن لا تطغوا في الميزان

“And He has raised the heavens and created balance, so that you do not disturb that balance.”

If we pay attention to the words linking the principle of balance with the creation of heavens, we also know that the principle of balance is God's law for the entire universe and therefore violating the principle of balance is a cosmic sin, because it violates the law governing the universe. If humans are called a 'small universe' or 'microcosm', then without exception, humans must maintain the principle of balance within themselves, including in their spiritual life.

Regarding this aspect of spiritual balance, it can be understood that Islam is a medieval religion (*wasat*). The middle position (*wasat*) is, according to Ibn Tamiyah, the middle between Judaism which is legalistic and very socially oriented on the one hand, and on the other hand, Christianity which is very spiritualistic, paying great attention to spiritual depth and experience so that it becomes gentle. He said: "The Taurah Sharia is dominated by rigidity, and the Gospel Sharia is dominated by gentleness, while the Al-Qur'an Sharia mediates and includes both." (Ibn Taymiyah, n.d.: 240)

So as an intermediary between the two predecessor religions, according to Nurcholish Madjid (1994: 7), Islam contains legal teachings with an orientation to problems of human behavior outwardly like Judaism, but also contains deep spiritual teachings like Christianity. In fact, although differentiable, the two are inseparable.

If we trace this principle of balance in religious appreciation, it roots strongly in the traditions of the Prophet and his companions' life, reflecting the the Prophet's spiritual life his people must emulate . closely observed, the Prophet's form of religious appreciation reflects moderate religious behavior. A moderate attitude means a life attitude normally meeting natural needs is not far from physical norms and adapts to the environment (Hossein Nasr, 2003, 259). In other words, the Prophet carried out a unified exoteric and esoteric religious appreciation. This can be extracted from some of his recommendations for his friends in the practice of their religious life; that is:

- a. The command to appreciate religion in balanced manner.

This can be seen from several hadiths regarding a companion named Usman ibn Maz'un, in which Muhammad asked him to appreciate religions in balanced manner, as follow:

دخلت امرأة عثمان بن مظعون على نساء النبي صلعم. فرأيتها سيئة الهيئة، فقلنا لها: ما لك؟ فما في قریش أغنى من بعلك! قالت: ما لنا منه شيء. أما ليله ففانم. وأما نهاره فصائم. فدخلنا إلى النبي فذكره ذلك له فلقيه،

فقال: يا عثمان! أما لك بي أسوة؟ فقال: بابي وأمي وما ذلك! قال: تصوم النهار وتقوم الليل؟ قال: إني لأفعل, قال: لا تفعل! إن لعينك عليك حقا, وإن لأهلك عليك حقا. فصل ونم وصم وافطر

“Uthman ibn Mazh’un’s wife visited the house of the Prophet’s wives, and they saw her in a bad condition. So he asked them: “What happened to you? There is no one among the Quraysh richer than your husband!”. She answered: “We did not get anything from him. Because at night he worships, and during the day he fasts.” They went to the Prophet and told him about this. So the Prophet met him (Ustman ibn Mazh'un), and said: "O ‘Uthman, don’t I have an example for you?" he answered: "By my father and mother, you are like that"". Then the prophet said: “Is it true that you fast every day and do not sleep (worship) every night?” He replied: “I did.” The Prophet said: “Don’t do it. In fact your eyes have a right over you, and your family has a right over you. So pray and sleep, fast and eat.”

Carefully observed, it can be seen clearly that the hadith tells the story of how Muhammad advised Maz’un to have balance in appreciating or comprehending and practicing Islamic teachings.

b. The command to practice religion correctly and with ease.

This command was also recorded in the Prophet Muhammad’s advice to Usman Ibnu Maz’un to carry out religious teachings straightly and with ease.

إن عثمان بن مظعون اتخذ بيوتا فقعده يتعبد فيه, فبلغ ذلك النبي, فتاه وأخذَه إلى باب البيت الذي هو فيه وقال: يا عثمان إن الله عز وجل لم يبعثني بالرهبانية, وإن خير الدين عند الله الحنفية السمحة. أخرجه الدارمي في سننه ج: 2 ص: 179, رقم: 2169

‘Uthman ibn Mazh’un bought a house, then he lived in it (all the time) to worship. The news came to the Prophet s.a.w., so he came to him, then he took him to the exit of the house where he lived, and he said: "O ‘Uthman, indeed Allah did not send me with the teachings of monkhood, and indeed the best din (religion) with Allah is *al-banafiyyat al-sambah* (the expansive spirit of truth)." (Sunan Al-Darimi, n.d.: 179; Nurcholish Madjid 1995 97; Sulaiman: 2015: 305)

بلغ به (النبي) أن ناسا من أصحابه احتموا النساء واللحم اجتمعوا فنكرنا ترك النساء واللحم فأوعد فيه وعيدا شديدا, وقال: إني لم أرسل بالرهبانية, إن خير الدين الحنفية السمحة. المعجم الكبير ج: 8, ص: 170

The news reached the Prophet s.a.w. that a group of his friends avoided women and avoided eating meat. They gathered, and we talked about the attitude of avoiding women and eating meat. So the Prophet gave a stern warning, and said: “Indeed, I was not sent with the teachings of monkhood. Indeed, the best deen is *al-banafiyyat al-sambah*.”

c. To carry out religious teachings without avoiding the secular pleasures

Related to this, Al-Thabbari, in his book of Tafsir (Juz 7: 9), relates the complaints of a friend’s wife who was neglected by her husband, as follows:

وقد روي أن رسول الله زار عبد الله بن عمرو بن العاص, وكانت امرأته تلتف رسول الله, فقال:  
 كيف أنت يا أم عبد الله؟ قالت: حرم فلا ينام, ولا يفطر, ولا يطعم اللحم, ولا يؤدي إلى أهله حقهم. قال: فأين هو؟  
 قالت: خرج ويوشك أن يرجع الساعة, قال: فإذا رجع فأحبسيه علي. ففخرج الرسول وجاء عبد الله, وأوشك  
 الرسول في الرجعة, فقال: يا عبد الله بن عمرو! ما هذا الذي بلغني عنك؟ إنك لا تنام! قال: أردت بذلك الأمن من  
 الفرع الأكبر. قال: وبلغني أنك لا تفطر! قال: أردت بذلك ما هو خير منه في الجنة. قال: وبلغني أنك لا تؤدي إلى  
 أهلك حقهم! قال: أردت بذلك نساء خيرا منهن. فقال الرسول: يا عبد الله بن عمرو! إن لك في رسول الله أسوة  
 حسنة. فرسول الله يصوم ويفطر ويأكل اللحم ويؤدي إلى أهله حقوقهم. يا عبد الله بن عمرو! إن الله عليك حقا, وإن  
 لبيدتك عليك حقا, وإن لأهلك عليك حقا  
 أخرجه احمد بن حنبل. وذكر كذلك في تفسير الطبري ج: 7 ص: 9

It was narrated that Rasulullah visited ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-Ash, and his wife asked Rasulullah for mercy, so he said: “How are you, O Abdullah’s mother?” He answered: “He was alone, so he did not sleep, did not break his fast, did not want to eat meat, and did not fulfill his obligations to his family.” He asked: “Where is he now?” Replied: “he is out, and is almost home at this time”. He said: “When he comes home, hold him for me.” So the Rasulullah went out, then ‘Abdullah came, and the Rasulullah was almost home. So he said: "O 'Abdullah ibn 'Amar, how about that news having reached me about you? that you do not sleep." He replied: “With that I want to be safe from greater danger.” He said: “And it came to me (news) that you did not break your fast (fast)”. He replied: “With that I want something better in heaven”. He said: ‘And news reached me that you have not fulfilled their rights for your family.’ He replied: “With that I want a better woman than them.” So the Messenger of Allah said: “O 'Abdullah ibn 'Amr, for you there is a good example in the Messenger of Allah. And the Messenger of Allah fasted and broke his fast, ate meat, and fulfilled their family's rights. O ‘Abdullah ibn

'Amr, verily Allah has rights over you, indeed your body has rights over you, and indeed your family has rights over you.'

Regarding this problem, Nurcholish Madjid (1995: 96-97) commented that with his policy the Messenger of Allah described a healthy and correct lifestyle to us, and explained that excessive attitudes were reprehensible, even regarding the attitude of a servant in his spiritual life. Because Allah does not accept it from His servants if His Sunnah is ignored and then that person thinks that this attitude brings him to Allah's pleasure.

However, according to Rahman, to see whether or not the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad is the basis for the attitudes, behavior and traditions of Muslims in the history of their religious spiritual life, it is necessary to observe more closely the practice of their spiritual life from time to time. Rahman calls it living sunnah (Rahman: 1962), namely the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad which is not only the normative tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, but also becomes the tradition of Muslims collectively who live in the midst of society from time to time concerning the example of the Prophet Muhammad (Saputra, et. al., 2024).

Adib notes that one of the figures reformulating the spirit of balance in Islamic lifestyle and spirituality reconciling Islamic exotericism and esotericism as described in the Prophet's Sunnah above is Al-Ghazali. He said that Al-Ghazali, through his wanderings, chose Sunni Sufism based on the Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah mixed with the concept of *Ablu al-Sunnah Wa al-Jamaah*. He further emphasized that Al-Ghazali succeeded in integrating three Islamic sciences initially running separately: *kalam*, *fiqh* and *tasawuf*. Al-Ghazali successfully connects the dogmatic and formal formulations of orthodox *kalam* to the dynamic teachings of *tasawuf*. He has given a very valuable lesson to the pure scholastic group and is able to soften the dogmatic nature of extreme religious teachings and include a vital dimension between the external (exoteric) and internal (esoteric) aspects (Adib, 2022).

Bowen (2012) stated the way to see Islam starts from the description of its adherents about the textual tradition to its social practices through an anthropological lens. This allows the use of two complementary ways of analysis: firstly, focusing inward, with a more indepth understanding of the goals, understanding, and emotions around certain practices. But at the same time it follows the second way, opening outward, toward the social significance of its religious practices and conditions. This new Islamic anthropology emphasizes religious texts and ideas, but only as they understand and embody them in a particular space and time.

Anthropology seeks to understand how certain Muslims understand and use certain parts of these texts and ideas (Saputra, et. al., 2024).

What Bowen expressed above can likely be the direction of development in the study of living hadith. The phenomenon of living hadith is a small part of the overall reality of “living Islam” itself. Islam practiced in all daily lives of Muslims relates to all Islamic ritual practices around Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, sufism, and others. It no longer focuses on the sacred text, but shifts to society and its culture. It is him who in Bowen's language tries to see the picture of its adherents about the tradition of the text to its practice through an analysis of ‘focusing inward’ (individual understanding of the practice of living hadith) while also ‘opening outward’ (the social significance of the practice) (Saputra, et. al., 2024).

Bowen's theory assumes to analyze the text tradition of a particular community and how the text tradition is understood, experienced and becomes a living culture in amid society. In this case, what is meant by the text tradition and the shift of the tradition into a living culture is related to the practice of Sufism life coexisting equally with the Implementation of Islamic law, as indicated in the hadith above. Something similar is what happened in several Islamic boarding schools in East Java and West Java the author has observed and experienced himself. They are At Tanwir Islamic boarding school located in Talun, Sumberrejo, Bojonegoro, and Al-Bayyinah and Al-Musaddadiyah Islamic boarding schools in Garut, West Java, traditionally carrying out Sufism activities, such as repentance, dhikr, wirid in congregation, after the completion of prayer, in addition to riyadhah activities, such as fasting, qiyamullail, etc. However, according to the author's observations, all of these Sufi activities are solely aimed at forming noble morals, combined with the implementation of obligatory sharia, without abandoning his obligations and rights as a *basyar*, namely as an ordinary Muslim.

The three Islamic boarding schools aforementioned are the ones where the author gained knowledge and actualized himself in religious activities and dedication. The three are Islamic boarding schools organizationally and traditionally affiliated with the Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) mass organization, the followers of Ahlu al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah (Aswaja) using Al-Ghazali's Sufi views as a guide to its teachings (Muhammad Rijal Fadli, 2020). This was confirmed by Mujamil Qomar emphasizing that NU defined Imam Junaid al-Baghdadi and Imam Ghazali, and other imams agreeing with both imams' thoughts as role models in Sufism (Mujamil, 2014).

Furthermore, Mujamil said that al-Ghazali had done a great service in reconciling the scholars of sharia (ahl al-dawahir) and the scholars of Sufism (ahl al-bawatin) until the scholars

of sharia were willing to accept al-Ghazali's version of Sufism. In addition, al-Ghazali had successfully straightened out Sufism to remain within the control of the sunnah and developed a model of Sufism that should be, namely Sufism that is built on a solid foundation of sharia. In other words, al-Ghazali had built moderate Sufism, a construct of Sufism based on a strong foundation of sharia as a manifestation of Sufism that is balanced between the practice of Sufism itself (esotericism) and sharia (exotericism) (Mujamil, 2014).

In line with Mujamil, Adib said that al-Ghazali presented Sufism based on Qur'an and Hadith. Spiritual stages such as tawbah, zuhud, ridha, and tawakkal, and others are given a basis in Qur'an and Hadith. He concluded that the character of al-Ghazali's Sufism is khuluqi-'amali rather than philosophy. Adib also presented the result of research result confirming that Al-Ghazali was one of the Muslim intellectual figures successfully compromising and integrating Sufism into sharia and cable of softening the dogmatic nature of extreme religious teachings and include a vital dimension between the external (exoteric) and internal (esoteric) aspects (Adib, 2022).

There is no doubt that the tradition of Sufism running in the Islamic boarding school environment is Sufism formulated by Al-Ghazali as the role model, having become a tradition from time to time. This is clearly inseparable from the spirit of the Prophet's teachings on Islamic Sufism combining aspects of Islamic esotericism (tasawuf) and Islamic exotericism (sharia) in a balanced manner, without denying sharia and Sufism.

From the description above it can be seen clearly how and to what extent deep religious appreciation (then technically and academically called "Sufism" in the Islamic world) can be carried out. Islam, said the Prophet, is not synonymous with a "monastic system", rejecting worldly life, but Islam is a religion adopting the principle of physical and spiritual balance. This means that religious appreciation that is too inward or excessive is not in line with the principle of balance of Islamic spirituality itself, and the religious appreciation that is too outward (only paying attention to aspects of the sharia) is also not in line with the principle of balance.

## CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the Sufism exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is firmly rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, representing a balanced integration between the exoteric (shari'ah) and esoteric (ḥaqīqah) dimensions of Islamic teachings. The

Prophet's model of Sufism offers a moderate form of Islamic spirituality that avoids extremes and is grounded in the unity of God (tawḥīd). This concept provides an alternative to the dichotomy between Sunni and philosophical Sufism, and responds to critiques from literalist groups concerning doctrines such as *wahdat al-wujud*. Academically, this study contributes to the field of Living Hadith and Islamic spirituality by presenting a new narrative of prophetic Sufism that is contextual, balanced, and relevant to contemporary Muslim religiosity. However, the research is limited by its conceptual and literature-based approach, lacking empirical data on how this model of Sufism is practiced in the social lives of Muslims today. Future research is recommended to explore the implementation of prophetic Sufism within contemporary Muslim communities—such as pesantren or Sufi orders—through anthropological or ethnographic methods. In-depth studies of *living Sunnah* and *living Hadith* in Sufi practices will enrich our understanding of contextualized religiosity, grounded in the authentic prophetic tradition and capable of fostering inclusive and balanced Islamic spirituality.

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