

Tasawwuf And Its Contemporary Relevance

Waseem Yousuf Khan and Showkat Ahmad Dar*

* **Waseem Yousuf Khan** serve as Lecturer at Government Degree College for Women Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir and **Showkat Ahmad Dar** serve as Lecturer at Government Degree College Boys Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir.

Abstract

Tasawwuf (Islamic mysticism) represents the ethical and spiritual core of Islam, emphasizing moral refinement, inner transformation, and experiential consciousness of the Divine. While modern scholarship often approaches Islam through legal, political, or ideological lenses, *Tasawwuf* offers an alternative paradigm grounded in ethical self-cultivation and social responsibility. Drawing upon the classical definition of *Tasawwuf* attributed to Abū al-Ḥasan Aḥmad al-Nūrī and cited by Pīr Karam Shāh al-Azharī in the Preface to the English translation of *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, this paper argues that *Tasawwuf* is best understood as *khulq* (excellent moral character) rather than ritualism or abstract knowledge. Through a historical and conceptual analysis, the paper situates *Tasawwuf* within the Qur'ānic and Prophetic framework and examines its relevance in addressing contemporary crises such as moral alienation, psychological anxiety, extremism, and social fragmentation in the Arab and wider Muslim world. The study contends that *Tasawwuf*, when grounded in Islamic orthodoxy, provides a viable ethical and spiritual response to the challenges of modernity without retreating into escapism or sectarianism.

Keywords: *Tasawwuf*, Islamic ethics, spirituality, moral renewal, contemporary Islam, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*

Introduction

The contemporary Muslim world is confronted with a complex set of challenges that include political instability, ideological polarization, ethical erosion, and a growing sense of spiritual dislocation. In many Arab societies, Islam is frequently framed either in juridical terms or through political activism, often neglecting its ethical and spiritual dimensions. This imbalance has contributed to the perception of religion as either rigid formalism or ideological instrument, thereby marginalizing its transformative moral potential. *Tasawwuf*, historically embedded within the mainstream Islamic tradition, offers a corrective to such reductionist readings of Islam. Far from being a peripheral or esoteric phenomenon, *Tasawwuf* represents the inward realization of Islamic faith through ethical discipline, spiritual awareness, and social responsibility. Classical Sūfī authorities consistently emphasized that *Tasawwuf* is not opposed to Sharī'ah but constitutes its inner meaning and ethical purpose. The present study seeks to explore *Tasawwuf* as an Islamic ethical-spiritual paradigm and to critically assess its contemporary relevance, particularly within Arab and Muslim societies navigating the pressures of modernity, secularization, and religious extremism.

* **Waseem Yousuf Khan** serve as Lecturer at Government Degree College for Women Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir and **Showkat Ahmad Dar** serve as Lecturer at Government Degree College Boys Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir.

Conceptualizing *Tasawwuf*: Ethical Foundations

Defining *Tasawwuf* has long posed a challenge due to its experiential nature. Early Sūfī masters often resisted rigid definitions, preferring ethical and practical descriptions. Among the most influential formulations is that of Abū al-Ḥasan Aḥmad al-Nūrī (d. 295 AH), who stated: “*Tasawwuf is neither formal custom nor knowledge (‘ilm); rather, it is khuluq (excellent moral character).*”¹ In another statement, al-Nūrī equates *Tasawwuf* with freedom, generosity, abandonment of artificiality, and the manifestation of noble conduct. This definition, cited by Pīr Karam Shāh al-Azharī in his Preface to the English translation of *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, is particularly significant as it situates *Tasawwuf* squarely within the ethical domain rather than ritual practice or speculative theology. This ethical emphasis challenges both legalistic and purely mystical misinterpretations of *Tasawwuf*. It underscores that spiritual realization in Islam is inseparable from moral excellence and social virtue.

Qur’ānic and Prophetic Foundations of *Tasawwuf*

Tasawwuf draws its legitimacy from the Qur’ān and Sunnah, particularly from the Qur’ānic emphasis on *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul). This has also been mentioned as one of the fundamental duties of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as the Quran maintains:

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

“He is the One who sent among the unlettered a Messenger from among themselves, who recites to them His verses, purifies them, and teaches them the Book and wisdom...”²

The above verse in addition to others, evinces that *Tasawwuf* is essentially concerned with the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). In this regard, the subject has been discussed by scholars in great detail and depth. Likewise, the basic objective of *Tasawwuf* is that the seeker (*sālik*), through all acts of worship, spiritual exercises, disciplines, and spiritual struggles, seeks to behold God, or at least to perceive Him. That is why it has been stated that the real aim of *Tasawwuf* is “divine vision” (*dīdār-e-ilāhī*) or communion with Allah.³ This goal is derived from the Qur’an, where it is stated:

فَمَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُو لِقَاءَ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا
رَبِّهِ

Whoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous deeds and associate none in the worship of his Lord.⁴

Thus, a person who desires to meet his Lord must necessarily adopt righteous conduct and must not associate anyone with Him in His worship. The Qur’ān repeatedly links salvation with inner purification and moral responsibility rather than mere outward compliance. Similarly, Prophetic traditions stress sincerity, intention, humility, and compassion as essential components of faith. The concept of *iḥsān*, articulated in the famous ḥadīth of Jibrīl, provides a doctrinal foundation for *Tasawwuf*. The Hadith is narrated on the authority of Hadrat Umar (ra) in which he narrated that Jibril enquired about *Ihsan* as follows:

فَأَخْبِرْنِي عَنْ : «قَالَ ﷺ أَنْ تَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ
قَالَ الْإِحْسَانُ

¹ Quoted by Peer Muhammad Karam shah in Preface of Ali ibn Uthman Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Eng. Tr. R. A. Nicholson (Lahore: Zia ul Quran Publications, 2001)

² Qur’an Surah al-Jumah, 62:2

³ Yousuf Saleem Chisti, *Tareekh-e-Tasawwuf*, (Lahore: Dar al-Kitab, 2005), p. 104

⁴ Qur’an, *Surah al-Kahf*, 18:110

He said: "Inform me about Iḥsān." The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) replied: "That you worship Allah as though you see Him; and if you do not see Him, then surely He sees you."⁵

Defined as worshipping God as though one sees Him, *iḥsān* represents the highest spiritual station in Islam. Classical scholars widely acknowledge that *Tasawwuf* is the disciplined pursuit of *iḥsān*. Thus, *Tasawwuf* emerges not as an innovation but as an organic development of Qur'ānic ethics and Prophetic spirituality.

Historical Evolution of *Tasawwuf*

The historical development of *Tasawwuf* reflects a gradual transformation from early ascetic piety (*zuhd*) to a systematic spiritual discipline. During the Prophetic period, the foundations of *Tasawwuf* were laid in the personality, conduct, and teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), even though the term *Tasawwuf* had not yet come into use. The Prophet (peace be upon him) embodied the highest degree of spiritual excellence (*iḥsān*), which later Sufi literature identified as the essence of *Tasawwuf*. His life represented a perfect harmony between outward obedience to the Sharī'ah and inward purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). Practices such as prolonged remembrance of God (*dhikr*), night vigils (*qiyām al-layl*), retreat (*khalwah*), simplicity in lifestyle, patience, humility, reliance upon God (*tawakkul*), and unconditional love for creation formed the spiritual model upon which later Sufi practice was constructed. Qur'ānic injunctions emphasizing moral refinement and self-purification, along with the celebrated Ḥadīth of Jibrīl, which defines *iḥsān* as worshipping God as though one sees Him, provide the conceptual and practical framework of *Tasawwuf* in its earliest form.

In the era of the Ṣaḥābah, the Prophetic spiritual legacy was preserved and transmitted through lived example rather than formal institutions. The Companions internalized the Prophet's emphasis on inner sincerity, ascetic restraint (*zuhd*), God-consciousness (*taqwā*), and moral discipline. Among them, the *Aṣḥāb al-Ṣuffah* occupy a distinctive position as the earliest collective embodiment of Islamic ascetic spirituality. Living in close proximity to the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the Mosque of Madinah, they devoted themselves to learning, worship, and service, while deliberately renouncing worldly comfort. Their life of simplicity, constant remembrance, and spiritual attentiveness is often regarded as the proto-Sufi community in Islamic history. Several eminent Companions are frequently cited in Sufi literature for their profound spirituality and ethical depth. 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib is regarded as a central spiritual authority in many Sufi lineages due to his deep knowledge, ascetic disposition, and emphasis on inner wisdom. Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī is remembered for his uncompromising asceticism, moral courage, and detachment from material wealth. Salman al-Fārsī exemplified spiritual seeking, humility, and devotion, while Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq is noted for his sincerity, self-effacement, and intimate closeness to the Prophet (peace be upon him). Likewise, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb combined spiritual intensity with moral accountability, and 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd is remembered for his devotion, humility, and deep engagement with the Qur'ān. In this formative phase, *Tasawwuf* existed not as a separate discipline but as the inner dimension of normative Islamic life, fully integrated into faith, practice, and character. The Prophetic model and the lived spirituality of the Ṣaḥābah thus constitute the original foundation of *Tasawwuf*, upon which all later spiritual doctrines, practices, and institutions were constructed.

Dr Tahir al-Qadri in his books, *Hakeekat-e-Tasawwuf*, has discussed the development of *Tasawwuf* in two phases—(a) The Pre-Criticism Period and (b) the Period of Criticism. He further explained the *Tasawwuf* during first period passed through the following four stages:⁶

⁵ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book of Faith (Kitāb al-Īmān), Ḥadīth no. 50, English translation: Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Darussalam

- (i) **First Stage: The age of asceticism (*zuhd*), scrupulous piety (*wara`*), and God-consciousness (*taqwā*):** During the time of the Prophethood of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and among his Companions and the Followers (*tābi`ūn*), *Tasawwuf* existed in the first phase of its developmental process. Asceticism, piety, and God-consciousness predominated in this stage. The people of truth attained all stages and perfections of their inner spiritual life through this path, and nearness and presence before God Almighty were realized in the same manner. States of ecstasy, self-effacement, extraordinary phenomena, and spiritual perfections—connected with psychological states—did manifest among them, but only rarely. Among the Companions, the Aṣḥāb al-Ṣuffah are notable, and among the Followers, names worthy of mention include Imām Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Uways al-Qaranī, Imām Zayn al-`Abidīn, Sa`īd ibn al-Musayyib, Ṭāwūs al-Yamānī, Dāwūd ibn Dīnār, Sulaymān al-Taymī, `Āmir ibn `Abd Allāh al-Tamīmī, and Muḥammad ibn al-Munkadir.
- (ii) **Second Stage: The age of spiritual struggle (*mujāhadah al-nafs*) and inner spiritual states:** During the era of the Followers of the Followers (*tābi` al-tābi`īn*), *Tasawwuf* entered its second phase of development. In the second and third centuries Hijri, when sincerity in action (*ikhlaṣ fi al-`amal*) began to decline and, due to an inclination toward mere formalism, outward religiosity (*tasharru`*) replaced the true spirit of the Sharī`ah, the people of truth turned toward spiritual struggle for the sake of restoring sincerity. Through discipline and struggle, they established a deep relationship with God. As a result of this struggle, they experienced inner states such as intimacy and estrangement, ecstasy and self-effacement, unveiling (*kashf*), illuminations, extraordinary acts, and miracles. They expressed these states symbolically through allusions and subtle indications. Among the notable figures of this stage are Rābi`ah al-Baṣriyyah, Ḥabīb al-`Ajāmī, Mālik ibn Dīnār, Fuḍayl ibn `Iyād, `Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak, Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, Bishr al-Ḥāfi, Shaybān al-Rā`ī, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, Bāyazīd al-Biṣṭāmī, Sarī al-Saqāṭī, Junayd al-Baghdādī, and Sahl ibn `Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, among others.
- (iii) **Third Stage: The age of absorption (*jadhb*) and the establishment of the relationship of divine attention (*nisbat al-tawajjuh*):** This stage encompasses the fourth and fifth centuries Hijri. During this phase, among the people of spiritual perfection, the generality (*`awāmm*) remained, as before, committed to the commands and prohibitions of the Sharī`ah. The spiritual elite (*khawāṣṣ*) focused primarily on inner states and spiritual experiences. However, the elite of the elite (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*) transcended both outward actions and inner states and reached the station of *jadhb* (divine attraction). Due to this attraction, the path of the relationship of divine attention was unveiled to them. The veils of determination were torn apart, enabling them to attain direct witnessing of the Divine Reality. They were then granted immersion and absorption in the Divine Essence, such that no distinction remained between existential unity and comprehensive unity. Among the notable figures of this stage are Shaykh Abū Sa`īd al-Kharrāz, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Kharqānī, Abū `Alī al-Rūdhbārī, Abū al-Faraj al-Ṭarṭūsī, Abū Bakr al-Shiblī, Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, and Abū `Uthmān al-Maghribī. Imām al-Ghazālī and Sayyidunā Shaykh `Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī also belong to the latter part of this period. Shaykh `Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī occupied the position of a guide and leader of the caravan of the Sufis.
- (iv) **Fourth Stage: The age of the theoretical formulation of spiritual realities:** This stage comprises the sixth and seventh centuries Hijri. During this period, the Sufis gave a theoretical formulation to the conception of reality that had been attained through inner spiritual experiences. Scholarly discussion and critical examination of the truths of *Tasawwuf* began. They deliberated on the stages and manifestations of existence. As a result, *Tasawwuf* encountered metaphysical issues and philosophical debates. The doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd (Unity of Being) emerged during this era in a systematic form based on rational and theoretical proofs. Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn `Arabī and Shaykh Ibn al-Fāriḍ al-Ḥamawī

⁶ Professor Dr. Muhammad Tahir al-Qadri, *Haqeeqat-e-Tasawwuf*, (Lahore: Minhaj Publications, 2000), pp. 22-30

articulated this concept in their writings with arguments and evidences, employing a refined literary language of knowledge and wisdom. Ṣā‘ib Tabrīzī, ‘Arif Rūmī, and Mawlānā Jāmī expressed these realities in the captivating, ecstatic, and powerful idiom of poetry.

Thus, the spiritual gnosis of *Tasawwuf* passed from the elite to the masses, and people everywhere began to affirm and acknowledge it.

Early Asceticism and the Formation of Mystical Consciousness

From the first century of Islam, Muslim society witnessed the emergence of strong ascetic tendencies, largely motivated by an acute awareness of human moral frailty, accountability in the Hereafter, and fear of divine judgment. This early ascetic movement developed firmly within the framework of Islamic orthodoxy, emphasizing repentance (*tawbah*), moral vigilance (*wara’*), self-discipline, and rigorous devotional practice. Over time, however, this predominantly ethical and salvific orientation gradually deepened into a more interiorized and experiential spirituality, laying the groundwork for what would later be recognized as *Tasawwuf*.

Among the most prominent representatives of this formative ascetic phase was Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728 CE). His teachings consistently stressed the primacy of inner sincerity and moral transformation over mere formalism in religious observance. For Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, genuine piety was measured not by the abundance of ritual acts but by the purification of the heart, constant self-accountability, and remembrance of God. Although figures of this period cannot be described as Sufis in the technical sense, they undeniably functioned as the immediate spiritual and ethical precursors of later Sufism.

The Emergence of the Ṣūfī Identity and Early Institutional Expressions

According to al-Qushayrī, the designation “*Ṣūfī*” came into common usage before the close of the eighth century CE, most plausibly derived from the woollen garments (*ṣūf*) worn by ascetics as a visible sign of renunciation. The earliest individual explicitly identified by this title was Abū Hāshim of Kūfā (d. 767 CE). As later authorities such as Jāmī observe, while asceticism, trust in God, and divine love predated Abū Hāshim, he was the first to be socially recognized as a Ṣūfī in a terminological sense. Around this time, the establishment of the first khānqāh at Ramla in Palestine is reported, marking the earliest institutional manifestation of organized Sufī life. According to Meer Valiuddīn⁷, the earliest documented appearance of the term *Tasawwuf* dates to 822 CE, a claim that has attracted considerable attention in modern academic discourse. When situated within the broader chronology of early Islam, this dating assumes particular significance. The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) passed away in 632 CE, while the Hijrah occurred in 622 CE. Consequently, the formal use of the term *Tasawwuf* emerged approximately 190 years after the demise of the Prophet (peace be upon him) (or 196 years when calculated according to the lunar calendar). This temporal distance underscores the fact that while the spiritual ideals and practices later subsumed under *Tasawwuf* were present from the earliest period of Islam, the terminology and systematic articulation of these ideals evolved gradually in response to changing religious, social, and intellectual contexts.⁸

⁷ Dr. Mir Valiuddin, formerly Professor of Philosophy at Osmania University, Hyderabad (India), identifies 822 CE as the earliest recorded date for the appearance of the term *Tasawwuf*, basing his conclusion on the authority of Imām al-Qushayrī. See Mir Valiuddin, *Qur’anic Sufism* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1978), p. 3 as quoted in Dr. Israr Ahmad, *The Reality of Tasawwuf: In the Light of the Prophetic Model*, translated by Professor Dr. Basit B. Koshul (Australian Islamic Library) and can be retrieved from <https://ia902309.us.archive.org/3/items/TheRealityOfTasawwufDr.IsrarAhmedEnglishTranslationOfHaqeeqatETasawwuf/The%20reality%20of%20Tasawwuf%20-%20Dr.%20Israr%20Ahmed%20%28English%20translation%20of%20Haqeeqat%20e%20Tasawwuf%29.pdf>

⁸ Dr. Israr Ahmad, *The Reality of Tasawwuf*, p.2

***Tasawwuf* as an Ethical and Social Project**

Contrary to the widespread misconception that *Tasawwuf* encourages social withdrawal or ascetic isolation, the classical Ṣūfī tradition consistently presents spiritual refinement as inseparable from ethical responsibility and social engagement. From its earliest formulations, *Tasawwuf* has emphasized that inner purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) must manifest outwardly through exemplary moral conduct and active concern for others. Ṣūfīs have long maintained that proximity to God is measured not merely by devotional intensity but by one's ethical comportment and service to creation (*khidmat al-khalq*). Core Ṣūfī virtues such as generosity (*sakhā'*), humility (*tawāḍu'*), patience (*ṣabr*), contentment (*qanā'ah*), and compassion (*raḥmah*) possess clear social implications. Al-Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910) famously defined *Tasawwuf* as “good character” (*al-Tasawwuf akhlāq*), thereby locating the Ṣūfī path firmly within the domain of ethical excellence rather than mystical escapism. Similarly, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, repeatedly stresses that acts of worship devoid of moral rectitude and social responsibility remain spiritually deficient. For al-Ghazālī, the purification of the heart necessarily leads to justice, mercy, and benevolence in social relations.

Historically, Ṣūfī institutions such as *khānqāhs*, *zāwiyas*, and *ribāṭs* functioned as dynamic centers of learning, ethical training, and social welfare in the Arab-Islamic world. These institutions provided food, shelter, education, and spiritual counseling, particularly for travelers, the poor, and the marginalized. Scholars such as Marshall Hodgson have shown that Ṣūfī networks played a crucial role in sustaining social cohesion and moral order during periods of political fragmentation and administrative decline. Through mediation, reconciliation, and charitable activity, Ṣūfīs often acted as moral anchors within their communities.

Prominent Ṣūfī figures further reinforced this ethical-social orientation. Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166) emphasized service to humanity as a sign of genuine spiritual realization, asserting that true sainthood manifests in humility, generosity, and concern for the weak. Likewise, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) articulated a vision of spirituality grounded in love, empathy, and universal compassion, urging his followers to transcend egoism and embrace service as a spiritual duty. In the contemporary context, marked by excessive individualism, consumerism, and moral fragmentation, the ethical framework of *Tasawwuf* offers a compelling model for moral renewal. By prioritizing self-discipline, altruism, and social responsibility, *Tasawwuf* provides an integrated approach to ethical living that harmonizes inner transformation with outward engagement. Its emphasis on *iḥsān*—excellence in both worship and conduct—resonates strongly with modern efforts to restore ethical balance in personal and collective life. *Tasawwuf* should be understood not merely as a mystical tradition but as a comprehensive ethical and social project—one that seeks to cultivate morally refined individuals capable of contributing positively to society while remaining deeply anchored in spiritual consciousness.

Contemporary Relevance: *Tasawwuf* and the Quest for Global Peace

In an age characterized by rapid technological advancement yet profound moral and spiritual dislocation, *Tasawwuf* offers a holistic framework for addressing the roots of conflict and unrest. Rather than treating violence, extremism, or social fragmentation as merely political or economic phenomena, the Ṣūfī tradition identifies inner imbalance, unchecked ego (*nafs*), and ethical erosion as foundational causes of discord. By prioritizing inner transformation alongside social responsibility, *Tasawwuf* contributes meaningfully to the cultivation of sustainable peace. Modern life has generated unprecedented levels of anxiety, alienation, and existential uncertainty. The erosion of shared moral frameworks, coupled with hyper-individualism and consumer culture, has intensified feelings of meaninglessness and inner fragmentation. *Tasawwuf* addresses these psychological and existential crises by reorienting the individual toward transcendence, purpose, and inner equilibrium (*sakīnah*).

Ṣūfī practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God) and murāqabah (spiritual vigilance) foster sustained self-awareness, emotional regulation, and inner calm. By disciplining the ego and cultivating presence, these practices help individuals transcend anxiety rooted in excessive self-attachment and fear of loss. Contemporary psychology increasingly recognizes the therapeutic value of mindfulness, gratitude, and contemplative practices—insights long embedded within the Ṣūfī spiritual discipline. As al-Ghazālī emphasized, a heart anchored in remembrance becomes resilient in the face of external turmoil, thereby reducing the psychological conditions that often precipitate aggression and social breakdown. Inner peace (salām al-naḥs) cultivated through *Tasawwuf* thus becomes the first building block of social and global peace, affirming the Ṣūfī axiom that one cannot give peace to others without first attaining it within.

Countering Extremism and Ideological Reductionism

One of the most pressing challenges confronting contemporary societies—particularly within the Muslim world—is religious extremism, frequently rooted in rigid literalism, moral absolutism, and ethical neglect. Such tendencies prioritize external conformity while neglecting inner reform, often resulting in intolerance and dehumanization of the “other.” *Tasawwuf* offers a powerful counter-narrative by emphasizing humility (tawāḍuʿ), mercy (raḥmah), and continuous self-critique (muḥāsabah). Ṣūfī masters consistently warned against moral arrogance, viewing the struggle against one’s own ego (jihād al-naḥs) as superior to outward confrontation. This inward orientation undermines the psychological foundations of extremism by replacing certainty-driven aggression with ethical responsibility and spiritual modesty. Moreover, the Ṣūfī insistence that ethical excellence (iḥsān) is inseparable from compassion challenges ideologies that justify violence in the name of religious purity. By redirecting religious commitment toward character refinement and service to humanity, *Tasawwuf* contributes to de-radicalization and ethical rehabilitation, offering a constructive path away from ideological reductionism.

Tasawwuf and Its Ethical Dimensions

Tasawwuf, representing the spiritual dimension of Islam, emphasizes the purification of the heart (tazkiyah al-naḥs), the refinement of moral character, and the actualization of divine virtues in practical life. Beyond ritual observances, Tasawwuf offers a comprehensive ethical framework, guiding the believer toward liberation from worldly attachments, cultivation of generosity, selfless service to creation, and excellence in conduct. These ethical dimensions are deeply rooted in the Qur’an and Sunnah and serve as practical guidelines for both personal and societal moral development. Tasawwuf thereby integrates inner spiritual refinement with outward ethical behavior, ensuring that spirituality is inseparable from social responsibility.

- (i) **Freedom (Al-Hurriyyah):** Within the Tasawwuf paradigm, freedom denotes liberation from the bondage of base desires (*naḥs*), materialism, and spiritual heedlessness. The Sufi endeavors to achieve autonomy from the domination of the ego, aligning personal volition with the divine will (*iraadah al-Ilahiyyah*). This freedom is not to be mistaken for permissiveness; rather, it constitutes an inner emancipation whereby the heart acts in accordance with moral rectitude and spiritual awareness. For instance it is mentioned in the Quran as:

وَمَنْ يُزَكِّ نَفْسَهُ فَإِنَّمَا يُزَكِّيَهَا وَإِلَى اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ

And whoever purifies himself does so for the benefit of his own soul; and the ultimate return is to Allah.⁹

In the same line it is also narrated from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stating that:

أحبّ الناس إلى الله يوم القيامة وأقربهم منه مجلساً، القائد العادل، وذو القلب الصادق، والمتخلّص من أهوائه

⁹ Qur’an, Surah al-Fatir, 35:18

*The most beloved of people to Allah on the Day of Resurrection and the closest to Him will be the just leader, the one with an honest heart, and the one who frees himself from desires.*¹⁰

Through Tasawwuf, the believer attains inner liberation, exercising conscious and responsible action, independent of transient worldly attractions.

- (ii) **Generosity (Al-Karam):** Generosity constitutes a fundamental Sufi virtue, signifying magnanimity of spirit and compassion toward others. In Tasawwuf, giving extends beyond material wealth to include the sharing of knowledge, time, guidance, and counsel for the benefit of humanity. A generous disposition reflects divine mercy, embodying selflessness, altruism, and empathy. The Quran says:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ بِاللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ سِرًّا وَعَلَانِيَةً فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

*Indeed, those who spend their wealth [in Allah's cause] by night and day, secretly and publicly, will have their reward with their Lord; they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.*¹¹

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

الكريم قريب من الله، قريب من الجنة، بعيد من النار

*The generous is close to Allah, close to Paradise, and far from Hell.*¹²

In Tasawwuf, generosity represents the liberation of the self from greed and selfishness, reflecting ethical alignment with divine benevolence.

- (iii) **Khidmat al-Khalaq (Service to Creation):** Tasawwuf places great emphasis on *Khidmat al-Khalaq*, the selfless service to creation, as an expression of divine love (*mahabbat Allah*). Assisting the needy, alleviating suffering, and promoting the welfare of society are regarded as essential pathways for spiritual refinement. This dimension illustrates that ethical and social engagement are integral to spiritual development. The Quran maintains:

وَاعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَلَا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئًا وَيَالِوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا
وَبِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَالْجَارِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ
وَالْجَارِ الْجُنُبِ وَالصَّاحِبِ بِالْجَنبِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ وَمَا مَلَكَتْ
أَيْمَانُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ مَن كَانَ مُخْتَالًا فَخُورًا

*Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and show kindness to parents, relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the distant neighbor, the companion at your side, the traveler, and those whom your right hands possess. Indeed, Allah does not love those who are arrogant and boastful.*¹³

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

خَيْرُ النَّاسِ أَنْفَعُهُمْ لِلنَّاسِ

*The best of people are those who are most beneficial to others*¹⁴.

Through *Khidmat al-Khalaq*, Tasawwuf fosters empathy, humility, and social responsibility, consolidating the ethical dimension of Islamic spirituality.

- (iv) **Excellence in Character (Husn al-Akhlaq):** A primary objective of Tasawwuf is the cultivation of *Husn al-Akhlaq*, the refinement of character, which encompasses honesty, patience, humility, sincerity, and moral courage. Spiritual realization is incomplete unless it is reflected in ethically exemplary behavior, thereby ensuring that inner purification manifests in socially beneficial conduct. It is mentioned in the Quran:

¹⁰ Sahih Muslim

¹¹ Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:274

¹² Sunan al-Tirmidhi 1347

¹³ Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa, 4:36

¹⁴ Daraqutni

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ وَإِيتَاءِ ذِي الْقُرْبَى وَيَنْهَى
عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَالْبَغْيِ يَعِظُكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

*Indeed, Allah commands justice, good conduct, and giving to relatives; and forbids immorality, wrongdoing, and oppression. He admonishes you that you may take heed.*¹⁵

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated:

أَكْمَلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِيمَانًا أَحْسَنُهُمْ خَلْقًا

*The most perfect of believers in faith is the one with the best character.*¹⁶

Husn al-Akhlaq epitomizes the ethical culmination of Tasawwuf, wherein the purified heart translates into noble actions, ensuring that spiritual growth is tangible, socially constructive, and ethically significant. The ethical dimensions of Tasawwuf—freedom from the self (*Al-Hurriyyah*), generosity (*Al-Karam*), service to creation (*Khidmat al-Khalaq*), and excellence in character (*Husn al-Akhlaq*)—constitute an integrated framework for spiritual and moral development. Tasawwuf bridges the internal and external spheres of human existence, aligning personal purification with social responsibility. Through this holistic vision, it cultivates ethical awareness, compassion, and a sense of accountability, offering a transformative model of moral life rooted in divine guidance.

Tasawwuf in Pluralistic Societies

In increasingly pluralistic and multicultural societies, tensions often arise from competing identities and exclusive truth claims. *Tasawwuf* provides a distinctive model for coexistence grounded not in theological relativism but in ethical universality and human dignity. Sūfī thinkers such as Ibn ‘Arabī articulated a metaphysical vision that recognizes diversity as an expression of divine wisdom, famously asserting that the heart capable of embracing all forms becomes a locus of peace rather than conflict. The Sūfī emphasis on love (*maḥabbah*), compassion, and service to all creation (*khidmat al-khalq*) fosters inter-communal trust and dialogue without eroding religious identity. Historically, Sūfī orders played a crucial role in mediating communal tensions and promoting social harmony in diverse societies across the Arab world, South Asia, and Africa. Their inclusive ethical posture allowed them to engage constructively with religious and cultural “others” while remaining firmly rooted in Islamic spirituality. In the contemporary global context, this Sūfī ethos offers a viable paradigm for peace-building—one that affirms spiritual depth alongside social inclusivity.

Khawāja Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī’s celebrated ethical maxim—urging the seeker to be *sun-like in compassion, river-like in generosity, earth-like in humility, and night-like in concealing others’ faults*—offers a powerful Sūfī framework for coexistence in pluralist societies. By invoking the sun, which shines without discrimination, the Shaykh articulates a vision of universal mercy that transcends religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. Such an ethic resists exclusivism and moral superiority, emphasizing service and empathy rather than domination or withdrawal. In socially diverse contexts, this Sūfī ideal fosters trust, mutual respect, and ethical solidarity without requiring theological compromise. Rooted in the inner discipline of *Tasawwuf*, Chishtī’s teaching demonstrates how spiritual refinement translates into social harmony, making the Sūfī path not only a means of personal salvation but also a practical model for peaceful coexistence in multi-religious societies.¹⁷

¹⁵ Qur’an 16:90

¹⁶ Sunan Abu Dawud 4:62

¹⁷ ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlawī, *Akhbār al-Akhyār fī Asrār al-Abrār* (Delhi), and K. A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1974).

Conclusion

Tasawwuf, as articulated by classical Muslim scholars and aptly encapsulated in the ethical definition cited by Pīr Karam Shāh al-Azharī, represents a deeply rooted Islamic response to the enduring moral, spiritual, and existential challenges of human life. Far from being a peripheral or escapist tradition, *Tasawwuf* constitutes the inner ethical core of Islam, concerned fundamentally with the purification of the self (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), the cultivation of moral excellence (*iḥsān*), and the realization of a harmonious relationship between the individual, society, and the Divine. In the contemporary world—marked by ideological polarization, moral fragmentation, spiritual alienation, and social unrest—*Tasawwuf* offers a balanced and integrative paradigm that reunites law (*sharī'ah*), ethics (*akhlāq*), and spirituality (*iḥsān*). By emphasizing inner reform alongside outward compliance, it addresses the deeper moral and psychological roots of intolerance, extremism, and ethical decay that afflict many modern societies. Its insistence on humility, mercy, self-accountability, and compassion serves as a corrective to rigid literalism and moral arrogance, reaffirming the Qur'anic vision of Islam as a source of guidance, balance, and human flourishing.

Equally significant is the relevance of *Tasawwuf* in pluralistic societies characterized by religious, cultural, and ideological diversity. Here, the challenge is not merely peaceful coexistence but ethical coexistence grounded in mutual respect and human dignity. *Tasawwuf* provides a distinctive Islamic framework for such harmony by prioritizing ethical universality, spiritual humility, and compassion over exclusivist self-assertion. Firmly rooted in Qur'anic spirituality and Prophetic ethics, it enables Muslims to engage constructively with diversity without diluting their religious identity. At the intra-Muslim level, *Tasawwuf* plays a crucial role in mitigating sectarian tensions. By emphasizing inner reform (*iṣlāḥ al-bāṭin*) over outward polemics, it redirects attention from doctrinal rivalry to moral self-accountability. Classical Ṣūfī teachings consistently warn against condemning others while neglecting one's own ethical shortcomings. This ethic of humility (*tawādu'*) and self-critique (*muḥāsabah*) fosters tolerance among differing schools of thought and legal traditions, thereby strengthening unity within the Muslim ummah on the basis of shared ethical values rather than rigid uniformity.

Beyond the Muslim community, *Tasawwuf* offers an effective bridge for interfaith harmony. The Ṣūfī emphasis on love (*maḥabbah*), mercy (*rahmah*), and service to humanity (*khidmat al-khalq*) encourages engagement with people of other faiths as fellow human beings rather than adversaries. Drawing upon the Qur'anic understanding of human diversity as divinely willed, Ṣūfī spirituality nurtures a moral disposition that respects difference while remaining firmly anchored in faith. This approach avoids both isolationism and theological relativism, promoting cooperation on shared ethical concerns such as justice, peace, and human welfare.

Historically, Ṣūfī figures and institutions functioned as mediators and moral anchors in multi-religious societies across South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Their khānqāhs, shrines, and ethical networks often served as inclusive social spaces that fostered dialogue, compassion, and communal trust. This legacy underscores that *Tasawwuf* is not merely a personal spiritual path but a socially integrative force capable of reducing communal tensions and nurturing ethical cohesion. In an age increasingly dominated by materialism, identity politics, and spiritual emptiness, *Tasawwuf* restores meaning and transcendence by reconnecting the human heart to its divine purpose. Properly understood and authentically practiced, it does not advocate withdrawal from the world but calls for ethical engagement with it, transforming inner spirituality into social responsibility. Thus, *Tasawwuf* remains not only relevant but indispensable in the contemporary period—offering a timeless Islamic framework for moral regeneration, psychological well-being, and harmonious coexistence in the Arab and wider Muslim world, and beyond.

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