

Exploring the Divine: A Modern Comparative Analysis of Sufi Thought in the Works of Imam Al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the differences in the spiritual mysticism of Sufism between Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi from their respective perspectives. Using a qualitative approach with a literature review method, this research analyzes the concepts, practices, and manifestations of Sufism in both religious and social contexts. Data were collected through an in-depth literature study of the thoughts of these two figures. The findings of the study show that Imam al-Ghazali's understanding of Sufism focuses more on morality and the purification of the soul, while Ibn Arabi places greater emphasis on the metaphysical aspect and *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being). The thoughts of both figures were also influenced by Greek philosophy, which led to differences in the style of their spiritual views. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the variations in Sufi thought and its relevance in the modern context.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah perbedaan mistisisme spiritual tasawuf antara Imam al-Ghazali dan Ibnu Arabi berdasarkan sudut pandang mereka masing-masing. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode kajian pustaka, penelitian ini menganalisis konsep, praktik, dan manifestasi tasawuf dalam konteks keagamaan dan sosial. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi literatur yang mendalam mengenai pemikiran kedua tokoh tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman tasawuf Imam al-Ghazali lebih fokus pada aspek moralitas dan penyucian jiwa, sedangkan Ibnu Arabi lebih menekankan aspek metafisis dan *wahdatul wujud* (kesatuan wujud). Pemikiran kedua tokoh ini juga dipengaruhi oleh filsafat Yunani, yang memunculkan perbedaan corak dalam pandangan

spiritualitas mereka. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman lebih mendalam mengenai variasi pemikiran tasawuf dan relevansinya dalam konteks modern.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sufism, as a mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam, has long been an interesting but controversial subject in Muslim socio-religious discourse (Ogunnaike, 2020). In the modern era, amidst the strong influence of materialism, capitalism and globalization, an urgent need for deeper spirituality has emerged as a balance in life (Haq et al., 2024; Lipton & Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2023). Sufism is often seen as a way to get closer to God, but it is also often seen as something that deviates from Islamic teachings, especially when its practice intersects with mystical elements that are difficult to understand rationally (Ridgeon, 2020). This diversity of views and practices of Sufism is further exacerbated by the influence of foreign philosophies such as Greek, which has given rise to debate regarding the validity of various Sufism approaches in Muslim societies (Setiawan et al., 2020). Differences between ideal concepts (*that should*) Sufism as a pure spiritual path and reality (*that be*) its practice, which is often seen as controversial by some groups, gives rise to the urgency of this research.

Previous research has explored Sufism from various theological, philosophical, and historical perspectives. Calis (2022) discusses the theoretical foundations of contextual interpretation of the Qur'an in schools of Islamic theology and philosophical Sufism, highlighting how Sufism is interpreted through a theological lens. Thibon (2022) explores the Sufi view of time and history in Sufi cosmology, which offers an understanding of the spiritual journey and temporal dimensions in Sufism practice. Ejaz and Hashmi (2024) examine Western perspectives on Sufism, focusing on the classification and identification of prominent scholars who study Sufism from a perspective outside Islam. Aždajić (2020) looks at the interdisciplinarity of Sufi perspectives in theological practice, highlighting how Sufi theology can be understood through direct action.

Dickson (2022) highlights the contextualization of Sufism with Sharia, explaining how Sufism is expressed in contemporary practices related to Islamic law. Arroisi (2022) approaches Sufism from the perspective of Islamic philosophy, especially by understanding God as the highest reality in Sufistic concepts. Milani (2021) discusses the ontology of Sufism, presenting a reading about the nature of mysticism in Islam. Meanwhile, Guefara et al., (2023) studied the history of Sufism in the last few centuries, which includes the historical development and social transformation of Sufism.

However, there is no research that specifically explains and compares the thoughts of Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi in the context of their different spiritual views. This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring how these two great figures understood the essence of Sufism and the role of Greek philosophy in shaping their thinking. Through this study, the differences in spiritual understanding promoted by the two figures are analyzed in depth, providing a new contribution to the existing literature on Sufism.

This research aims to explore and analyze the differences in Sufism spirituality between Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, as well as how the influence of foreign philosophy, especially Greek, helped shape their views. Using a qualitative approach and literature review methods, this research explores more deeply the thoughts of these two figures, as well as their implications for the development of Sufism in a broader socio-religious context.

This article argues that Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi both contributed greatly to the development of Sufism, but there are fundamental differences in the way they interpret the relationship between humans and God. Imam al-Ghazali emphasizes aspects of morality and ritual practices as a path to closeness to Allah, while Ibn Arabi focuses on metaphysical aspects and concepts. *wahdatul*

wujud (unity of being). These two approaches reflect their own uniqueness and offer valuable perspectives in understanding the essence of Sufism in the Islamic tradition.

2. METHOD

This paper uses a comparative qualitative approach that aims to explore and compare the Sufism thoughts of Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi. A qualitative approach was used to produce an in-depth understanding of the meaning of Sufism from the perspective of the two figures and find patterns that emerged from the data collected (Haq & Sen, 2021; Samosir et al., 2023). The comparative descriptive model was chosen because this research seeks to describe and compare the views of the two figures in the context of the spirit of Sufism mysticism in modernity problems, such as the relationship between humans and God, between humans, and humans and nature (Silverman, 2015).

The data collection technique in this research uses the literature study method (*library research*), where researchers collect secondary data from various literary sources such as books, journals, articles and other academic sources relevant to the theme of Sufism (Lune & Berg, 2017). The selected literature was determined based on the relevance and credibility of the source to support the analysis of the views of Sufism from Imam al-Ghazali and Ibnu Arabi (Sugiyono, 2013). Researchers prioritize primary sources such as the original works of the two figures, as well as secondary sources in the form of supporting studies that strengthen the discussion of the concept of Sufism.

The data analysis technique used is content analysis, where the collected data is analyzed in depth to find the main themes related to the spirit of Sufism (Maxwell, 2008). Through this analysis, the researcher identified the concepts, practices and manifestations of Sufism in the thoughts of al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, and compared the structure of their thoughts. This analysis also involves thematic interpretation to reveal differences and similarities in the views of the two figures, in order to reach conclusions that are relevant to the research objectives (Moleong, 2017).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Sufism of Imam Al Ghazali

In this research, the researcher focuses on the Sufism thought of Imam al-Ghazali, a leading figure in the history of Islamic thought. Imam al-Ghazali has a deep view of Sufism, which is based on Islamic teachings and sharia. One of the main concepts promoted by al-Ghazali is *tawakal*, namely complete trust in Allah (Al-Ghazali, 2020). According to al-Ghazali, *tawakal* is not a passive attitude in facing life, but an active mental attitude, where individuals believe that every event is the result of God's will (Fasya, 2022). In this context, *tawakal* becomes an important foundation in the practice of Sufism, enabling a person to face various life trials with calm and determination (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022).

Apart from *tawakal*, al-Ghazali also emphasized the importance of sincerity, namely the purity of intentions in every action. For al-Ghazali, sincerity is a basic principle in spiritual life. Sincerity means doing everything only for the sake of Allah's pleasure, without expecting praise or appreciation from humans (Rosia, 2018). By practicing sincerity, a person can ensure that all his actions are aimed solely at Allah, regardless of worldly motives or personal interests. In this case, al-Ghazali emphasized that sincere intentions are the key to achieving closeness to Allah.

In his Sufism views, al-Ghazali also opposed various Sufism practices which were considered to deviate from Islamic teachings. One example is the rejection of philosophical Sufism, which is considered to involve worship practices that are not based on true Islamic teachings, such as heresy in worship or excessive glorification of certain figures (Ismail & Uyuni, 2020). According to al-Ghazali, the practice of Sufism must always be based on the Al-Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, and must not violate the principles of Sharia.

Furthermore, al-Ghazali also opposed excessive glorification of humans, including saints or Sufi figures. He believes that excessive respect for humans can give rise to shirk, which is contrary to the concept of monotheism in Islam. Excessive relationships between humans and each other must not replace the spiritual relationship between humans and God. Apart from that, al-Ghazali also criticized

the extreme mystical practices that are sometimes carried out in some schools of Sufism. He considers that these kinds of practices not only have no spiritual benefits but can also damage a person's physical and mental well-being (Fasya, 2022).

Imam al-Ghazali also rejects the cult of certain objects or places, such as Sufi tombs or mystical artifacts, which often contradict the teachings of monotheism. For al-Ghazali, love and respect should only be directed to Allah, and should not be associated with other objects (Al-Ghazālī, 1996). In the framework of his thinking, al-Ghazali insisted that the practice of Sufism must remain in the corridor of pure monotheism.

From the description above, it can be concluded that there are several important points in the concept of Sufism according to al-Ghazali. *First*, conformity with Sharia. Al-Ghazali emphasized that all Sufism practices must be in line with Islamic teachings, without deviating from the basic principles of religion (Al-Ghazali, 1993; Deswita, 2017; Pakar, 2013). *Second*, the importance of knowledge. Al-Ghazali emphasized that knowledge, especially those related to Islamic teachings, is very important in the spiritual journey. This knowledge helps one to understand the spiritual path correctly and avoid mistakes. *Third*, al-Ghazali emphasized correct spiritual practices, namely worship and dhikr carried out with sincere intentions and in accordance with the Shari'a. Al-Ghazali's overall Sufism thought emphasizes a balance between the spiritual and physical aspects of a Muslim's life while always adhering to the correct teachings of Islam.

3.2. Sufism of Ibn Arabi

Ibn Arabi was born during the Umayyad Dynasty in Spain. One of his most famous thoughts is the concept of philosophical Sufism (Arabi, 2019). This term consists of two words, namely "Sufism" and "philosophy." Initially, Sufism and philosophy were closely related. However, over time, the two were considered as different disciplines. Sufism is simply defined as a Sufi lifestyle that focuses on purifying the soul, living in asceticism, and drawing closer to God. Although the term Sufism was not known at the time of the Prophet Muhammad SAW and friends, the practices they carried out reflected the characteristics of Sufism, which began to be defined in the 10th and 11th centuries (Ginting & Nadia, 2021).

Ibn Arabi's thought process developed through a long journey, including an important dialogue with Ibn Rushid, an interpreter of Aristotle's works. Thanks to his discussions with Ibn Rushid, Ibn Arabi began to develop thoughts that prioritized reason and the disclosure of mystical things, such as visions of spiritual realities. He finally concluded that spiritual or mystical experiences were closely related to philosophy. From here, the concept of philosophical Sufism was born because Ibn Arabi tried to philosophize mystical or inner experiences through a metaphysical worldview (Usman, 2022).

One of the main theories born from Ibnu Arabi's thinking is *Wahdat al-Wujud*, or Unity of Being. According to this theory, there is only one true reality, namely God and everything that exists in this world is a manifestation or embodiment of God. This view emphasizes that there is no duality between God and His creation because everything that exists is only an expression of one divine form (Solehah, 2021). This theory differs from the emanation theory, which states that reality flows out of God on various levels. According to the emanation theory, everything, including humans, is an emanation from God, a natural and inevitable process (Rajab, 2019).

The main difference between *Wahdat al-Wujud* and emanation lies in the concept of being. *Wahdat al-Wujud* emphasizes that there is only one true being, namely God, and everything that exists is part of that divine being without any duality. Meanwhile, emanation theory describes a multilevel process in which reality emanates from a divine source at different levels (Asiyah, 2022).

Ibn Arabi's thoughts on Sufism are based on his belief in the existential unity between God and the universe. He believes that God is the only true being, and everything in the universe is a manifestation of God. This view emerged from his observation of the deep interconnectedness of all beings and phenomena in the universe, all of which reflect Divine attributes. Ibn Arabi came to the conclusion that the universe was not only created by God but also depends entirely on His existence and is an emanation of His will and love (Indra Purnamanita, 2023).

In addition, Ibn Arabi introduced the concept of *insan kamil* or perfect human. According to him, humans have the potential to achieve spiritual perfection and become a perfect mirror of Divine attributes. Prophet Muhammad SAW is a prime example of a *human being* because he is the perfect manifestation of spiritual perfection and Divine reality. Ibn Arabi also developed the concept of *tajalli*, or Divine manifestation, which explains how God appears Himself in various forms and realities in this world. Each element of creation is a manifestation of a different divine nature, and by understanding creation, humans can better understand God.

This view is rooted in inner experience and esoteric interpretation of religious texts, where Ibn Arabi sees hidden meanings that reveal deeper spiritual and metaphysical dimensions than the literal meaning of these texts (Akhiyat, 2016). Ibn Arabi's thinking as a whole was built on a strong foundation of Islamic mysticism, which was enriched by the influence of Neoplatonism philosophy and his experiences in the spiritual journey. By integrating philosophy, theology, and mysticism, Ibn Arabi created a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between God and creation. This thinking continues to influence and inspire thinkers and practitioners of Sufism to this day (Rajab, 2019).

3.3. The Impact of Sufism in the Golden Age of Islam and the Contemporary Period

Debates and differences of opinion regarding religion or belief are unavoidable, especially when what is being discussed is something sacred. Nevertheless, Sufism plays a significant role in Islamic civilization, both in the past and the present. In previous eras, especially in the golden age of Islam, Sufism played a role in purifying the human soul, distancing oneself from greed, and emphasizing spiritual aspects, namely closeness to God. This spiritual purification is also reflected in human behavior towards fellow creatures. For example, Imam Al-Ghazali, in his work *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, emphasizes the importance of purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) and ethics in social interactions. According to him, a Muslim must be able to control negative desires and emotions such as anger, envy and hatred, and replace them with good qualities such as patience, gratitude and compassion (Al-Ghazali, 1993).

Apart from emphasizing the relationship between humans and God and fellow humans, Al-Ghazali also gives appreciation to nature. He believes that nature is a collection of signs of God's greatness that invite humans to reflect on its beauty and order. In this way, people can strengthen their faith and spiritual understanding. According to Al-Ghazali, contemplating God's creation can deepen feelings of gratitude, admiration and love for Him. Nature is seen as a means of getting closer to God, not just as a source of material benefits. He also emphasized that nature reflects the order and balance that are part of Divine justice. Therefore, understanding natural laws can help humans live in harmony with nature. Al-Ghazali also reminded us that nature is a trust from God that must be protected and used wisely, and warned against excessive exploitation, which could damage the balance of nature (Al-Ghazali, 1993).

Al-Ghazali's thinking is in line with Ibn Arabi's view of the relationship between man, nature, and God. In his theory of *Wahdat al-Wujud* (unity of being), Ibn Arabi argues that all existence is a manifestation of God, while creation is only a false shadow of His true being (Purnamanita, 2023). The consequence of this view is that every creature on earth must be treated fairly, compassionately, and respected as a manifestation of God himself. Ibn Arabi emphasized that, ultimately, all religions aim toward one truth, namely, God (Arabi, 2024).

From this, it can be concluded that both Al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi emphasized the importance of good, fair and dignified treatment towards fellow creatures and the universe. Both emphasized that strong spirituality is the basis for realizing noble manners and morals towards God, humans and nature (Ayri & Humaira, 2023). Plurality, for them, is not a disaster, but an opportunity to seek knowledge and the essence of truth. Debates and disputes in pluralistic societies, especially those rich in religious diversity, are considered normal. The history of the golden age of Islam shows that differences of opinion were commonplace and were debated scientifically and discussed calmly until reaching profound conclusions (Ba-Yunus, 1988; Ogunnaike, 2020; Rahman, 2021).

Sufism has a significant impact in forming respect for fellow humans and nature, as well as in fostering deep submission and obedience to Allah. In today's materialistic era, Sufism is still needed to maintain a balance between fulfilling worldly and spiritual needs. Even though the understanding of Sufism varies according to the views of the figures followed, its essence remains as a tool to get closer to religion and maintain a relationship with God (Calis, 2022; Kahfi et al., 2023; Ridgeon, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION

This research provides an in-depth understanding of the concept of spirituality in Sufism, according to Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi. These two figures, even though they come from different backgrounds, have a similar understanding of the importance of purifying the soul and a deep relationship with God. An important finding from this research is that the Sufism thought developed by both of them was greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, especially in terms of metaphysical and ethical theories which were later "Islamized" by them. This concept of Sufism, although rooted in Islamic teachings, is enriched with elements of Greek philosophy which provides a new dimension in spiritual understanding and mysticism in Islam.

This research makes an important contribution to understanding the development of Sufism in the golden age of Islam, as well as how Islamic scholars were able to appreciate differences in intellectual understanding in a religious context. In contrast to most research which focuses on a single interpretation of Sufism, this research highlights the plurality of thoughts in Sufism and the importance of scientific discussions that developed among Islamic figures at that time. Through this approach, this research shows that differences of opinion in Sufism are not a negative thing, but are part of an intellectual dynamic that enriches the treasures of Islamic scholarship. Therefore, differences in Sufism should be seen as an opportunity to deepen religious understanding, not as a source of division.

Although this research provides a comprehensive picture of Sufism according to Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, this research still has limitations in terms of analyzing the influence of other Sufism figures or the development of Sufism outside the world of classical Islam. Future research can expand the scope of the study by examining how Sufism's thoughts are received and translated in various parts of the Islamic world, as well as how Sufism develops in a modern socio-political context. Future research could also explore the differences in understanding of Sufism in Sunni and Shia traditions and their impact on the social life of Muslim communities in the modern era.

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