

Sufism in the Discourse of Islamic Science: An Analysis on the Issue of Definition and Categorization

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ABSTRACT

Sufism is one of the key branches within the Islamic scholarly tradition, functioning as the spiritual dimension of Islam and focusing on the purification of the Muslim soul. Its foundation lies in practices such as *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the self), self-reflection, asceticism, and other spiritual disciplines. However, Sufism has often been the subject of debate, particularly regarding its definitions, approaches, and classification within the broader discourse of Islamic knowledge. This study aims to analyze the various definitions of Sufism put forward by both classical and contemporary scholars, as well as to explore how Sufism is categorized within the structure of Islamic sciences. Employing a qualitative method through library research, this study draws upon relevant books and scholarly articles, with the collected data analyzed thematically. The findings indicate notable differences among normative, philosophical, and practical approaches to understanding and defining Sufism. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute towards a clearer and more holistic comprehension of Sufism as a legitimate and relevant field within the context of contemporary Islamic knowledge and practice.

Keywords: Sufism, Islamic discourse, Purification of the self, Islamic scholarly, Ihsan

INTRODUCTION

Sufism is considered the spiritual essence of Islam, as it represents a method or inner approach aimed at attaining the pleasure of Allah through programs and life practices based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It is part of the Islamic religious sciences that emerged within the framework of Shariah. However, the definition of 'Sufism' has been the subject of much debate, with various and often differing interpretations offered by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. These divergent views have led to significant disagreements throughout the history of Islamic thought, from its early development up until the modern era.

One of the most well-known definitions of Sufism equates it solely with the cultivation of noble character. Others define it through concepts such as asceticism (*zuhd*), spiritual excellence (*ihsan*), and additional related aspects. This diversity of definitions reflects how the term has created its own intellectual and spiritual phenomenon, shaping the perspectives of both scholars and Sufi practitioners in their quest for a more precise understanding.

Nevertheless, there are also certain scholars and segments of the Muslim community who regard these varied definitions as grounds to reject Sufism altogether, labelling it as an illegitimate or even heretical discipline within Islam. Therefore, this article seeks to explore and critically analyze these differing perspectives and aims to present a holistic definition of Sufism—one that aligns with its essential nature and ultimate purpose: to purify the human soul from all forms of spiritual corruption, sin, and impurity, and to cultivate individuals into true and sincere Muslims.

Definition of Sufism

The term *sufism* in Arabic word is called *tasawuf*. According to some scholars of Islamic Sufism, *tasawuf* does not fully reflect the comprehensive Islamic nature typically found in other Islamic terminologies. Although Sufi practitioners have offered reasonable justifications for the use of this term, the reality is that *tasawuf* has become the established and widely recognized name for one of the branches of Islamic knowledge—specifically, the branch dealing with ethics and spirituality. To this day, no other alternative term has gained general acceptance

to replace it. While there have been a few voices suggesting alternative names such as *‘Ilm al-Fiqh al-Bāṭin* (the science of inward jurisprudence), *‘Ilm al-Ishārah* (the science of spiritual allusions), *‘Ilm al-Ihsān* (the science of excellence), *‘Ilm al-Mukāshafah* (the science of unveiling), *Tazkiyat al-Nafs* (purification of the soul), *Ihsān*, or *‘Amal al-Qulūb* (practice of the heart), these alternatives have not achieved widespread usage—largely due to the controversies surrounding the term *tasawuf* itself (Hilmi, 1970).

However, the suggestion remained just a suggestion, in fact, the proposed names only served as explanations for the term so that its meaning could be easily understood. Thus, the name Sufism continued to be widely and officially used for Islamic spiritual knowledge, and the term has indirectly become an Islamic term.

The Literal Definition of Sufism

Sufism has a wide range of meanings and interpretations due to its nature as a universal phenomenon that exists across various religions, philosophies, and human civilizations. The *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* Dictionary (1994) defines it as a teaching (effort or path) aimed at truly knowing and getting closer to God. Furthermore, it states that this discipline is known as the science of *suluk* (spiritual journey) and *tarekat* (Sufis order).

The origin of the word *tasawuf* has long been disputed, with various opinions and interpretations. As noted by Abu al-Fath al-Basti:

People have differed in their understanding of the term *Sufi* since ancient times. Some believed it derives from the word *suf* (wool), but I do not associate it with any names except with a youth whose heart and soul were pure, and who wore woolen garments—thus, he was called a *Sufi*. There are also opinions suggesting that the term comes from *safwi*, meaning "pure." Then, others argue it originates from *ṣaff* (row), as Sufis were often found in the front rows during prayers and on the battlefield. Another view links it to *ahl al-ṣuffah*—a group of poor *Muhajirun* and *Ansar* who resided on the veranda of the Prophet's Mosque (*Masjid al-Nabawi*), which was specifically built for them to live and engage in worship. Some scholars claim the term is derived from *ṣifah*, meaning good character traits. Others believe it is associated with *Suffah bin Murrah*, one of the custodians of the Ka'bah during the pre-Islamic era. There is even an opinion suggesting that the word comes from the Greek term *sophia*, meaning wisdom. Despite the diversity of views, research shows that most of these etymologies are far from accurate. The opinion considered most plausible is that the word *Sufi* comes from *suf* (wool), as those who wore woolen garments were commonly recognized for their devotion to worship and their ascetic lifestyle (*zuhd*) (Hilmi, 1970; al-Taftazani, 1976).

Although al-Basti has briefly explained the origin of the term *tasawuf* briefly as mentioned earlier, it is useful to examine the definition linguistically, one by one, so that it is easy to understand. *Tasawuf* is said to originate from the word *suf* (صوف), which means 'wool', referring to a coarse garment made from animal fur. This type of clothing was commonly worn by early most Sufis in ancient times because this type of clothing was the most favored clothing by the prophets (*anbiya'*) and the righteous (*siddiqin*) and it became a symbol for those who practised *zuhd* (asceticism) (ibn Khaldun, n.d.). This view was also supported by Abdul Raziq (n.d.), who stated that such clothing was a common phenomenon among the early Sufis, worshippers (*abid*), and the poor (*faqir*). Their purpose in wearing such garments was to cultivate humility and modesty before God. Meanwhile, Hilmi (1970) asserted that the Sufis wore such clothing to distinguish themselves from the general public who wore beautiful and elegance clothes. Among the companions who were known to frequently wear such garments were Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, Salman al-Farisi, Abu Ubaidah al-Jarrah, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari, and others. Likewise, among the *Tabi'in* who wore woolen garments were Ziyad bin Abu Ziyad, Salim bin Abdullah bin Umar al-Khattab, Furqad al-Sanji, and many more. Eventually, such clothing became a traditional dress for those who chose to live a life of *zuhd*. This opinion was supported by al-Qadi 'Iyad, Ibn Khaldun, and Ibn Taymiyyah, as well as several notable Sufi figures such as Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi, Abdul Qadir bin Abdullah al-Shahrwardi, Abu Nu'aym, Zakaria al-Ansari, and al-Ghazali (Ibrahim Basiyuni, 1969). The same view was also held by several contemporary Islamic researchers like al-Akhbar, Abdul Raziq, Zaki Mubarak, and Ibrahim Basiyuni, as well as several Western scholars such as Noldeke, Nicholson, Goldziher, Cara de Vaux, C. Hoir, Massignon, and Margoliouth (al-Taftazani, 1976). All of them believed that the Sufis greatly preferred wearing woolen garments as a symbol of their modest way of life. This tradition of wearing wool among Sufi practitioners began in the city of Kufah (Iraq) in the second century Hijri (eighth century CE) and became official attire by

the fourth century Hijri (Gibb, 1969). Likewise, al-Suhrawardi (d. 587H) (1966) also favored this view, as he saw that the term *tasawuf* was closely associated with the trait of humility, which aligns with the Sufi disposition of self-effacement and seclusion. In general, this opinion is accepted by most scholars and experts in *tasawuf* because the etymology of the term is more appropriate and precise (al-Kalabazi, 2001), and the origin of the term is strongly related to key Sufi practices such as *zuhud* (asceticism) and *tanasuk* (spiritual discipline)

In addition, there are also those who believe that the term *tasawuf* is derived from the name of a man called al-Ghaus bin Mar bin Ad bin Thabikhah bin Elyas bin Mazar, who used to isolate himself from society to engage in intimate supplication (*munajat*) to Allah in the *Masjid al-Haram*. However, he was more famously known as *Sufah bin Murah* (al-Jawzi, 1987). Consequently, it is said that Sufis (*ahl al-tasawuf*) are associated with him because of their similar manner of isolating themselves to devote and worship Allah with deep sincerity (Zaki Mubarak, 1937). This second opinion is less accepted by some scholars of *tasawuf*, as the story is said to have been narrated by Ibn al-Jawzi in his book *Talbis Iblis*, al-Zamakhshari in *Asas al-Balagha* and al-Firuzabadi in the dictionary of *Al-Muhit*, where all three of them were not from the Sufi sect. Nevertheless, Ibn al-Jawzi viewed the derivation of the word as correct, just as he did with the word *al-suf* (Baqi Surur, vol. 2, n.d.; Sulaiman, 1984).

The term *tasawuf* is also said to originate from the word *al-saff* (الصف), which means "row" or "line" — referring either to the line of warriors on the battlefield or to the front rows during congregational prayer. This is because many of the Sufis were known to consistently stand in the front rows when performing prayers in the mosque, due to their deep devotion and wholehearted focus in turning to Allah. Similarly, in times of battle, they were among those who stood at the front lines, bravely fighting the enemies of Allah without fear or hesitation (A.H. Mahmud, 1974). However, from an etymological perspective, this view is less accurate according to the Arabic language method, as the correct grammatical derivative (*nisbah* form) of *saff* would be *al-saffi*, not *sufi*. So logically, it is less appropriate to claim that *tasawuf* originates from the word *saff* (Sulaiman, 1984).

Furthermore, the term is also believed to be derived from the word *ṣafwa* (صفوى), though the pronunciation of this word was considered somewhat difficult for the Arab tongue, and thus it was modified to *ṣufi* (صوفي), which means the purification of the heart and spiritual soul in devotion to Allah (al-Syak'ah, 1996). This concept represents the core of *tasawuf* practice, which is more commonly referred to as *ṣafa al-qalb lillah* — the clarity and serenity of the heart towards Allah (Nicholson, 1951). Therefore, this etymology aligns well with the character and conduct of Sufi practitioners, who are deeply concerned with purifying the heart from blameworthy traits and cultivating openness and sincerity in seeking Allah's pleasure in all aspects of life. This opinion is supported by Shaykh Sha'rawi and Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani in his book *al-Ghunya*, as well as Bishr ibn al-Harith, who stated that a Sufi is someone whose heart is pure for the sake of Allah. Additionally, this suitability is reflected in numerous Sufi texts and teachings, which contain abundant advice, counsel, and guidance on purifying the heart and cleansing the soul. Most of these works explain the ethics (*akhlaq*) and spiritual states (*ahwal*) of Sufis according to their levels and stations, where their actions are not in contradiction with the Qur'an and Sunnah. On the contrary, they are individuals who put into practice what they have learned and who integrate *haqiqat* (spiritual truth), *ma'rifah* (gnosis), and *shari'ah* (Islamic law) (Hilmi, 1970). Although there appears to be a strong correlation between the essence of *tasawuf* and this term, the word *ṣafa* does not conform to proper morphological derivation rules in the Arabic language (al-'Aqqad, n.d.). Thus, this weakens its validity as the actual origin of the term *tasawuf*. Apart from all the previously mentioned views, the term *tasawuf* is also said to originate from *ahl al-Suffah* (أهل الصفة) — a group of companions from among the *Muhajirin* and *Ansar* who had no family or relatives. They were also poor people who had no place to live. As a result, they resided on the porch of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah. Nevertheless, they were people who constantly worshipped and supplicated to Allah (al-Ghazali, 1972). Their story was narrated by Imam al-Bukhari, from Abu Hurairah who said: "I have seen seventy people from among the Ahl al-Suffah staying in that place." In total, there were about 400 individuals who resided in the Prophet's Mosque (al-Suhrawardi, 1966). However, when evaluated from the perspective of Arabic linguistic principles, this opinion is considered inaccurate. This is because if the word *tasawuf* were derived from *Ahl al-Suffah*, then the more appropriate term would be *Suffi*, not *Sufi* (al-Syarbasi, n.d.).

Moreover, this view is also seen as an effort to prove that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had acknowledged the lifestyle of *Ahl al-Suffah*, who lived in the mosque in a state of poverty, detachment (*tajarrud*),

and complete reliance on Allah (*tawakkul*) (al-Suhrawardi, 1966). Therefore, this opinion is not convincingly suitable to be accepted as the origin of the word *tasawuf*.

There is also an opinion that the word *tasawuf* originates from the Greek language, specifically the word *sufia* (سوفيا), which means wisdom or philosophy. This view was supported by al-Biruni (d. 440H), as reflected in his statement:

“*Al-sufiah* are the wise men (*hukama*’), because *sufia* in the Greek language means wisdom. Hence, they were called *philosophia*, which means ‘lovers of wisdom’. As some groups within the Muslim community held views similar to those of the Greeks, they were given this designation.” (Qasim, 1967)

This view is also supported by Mohamad Lutfi Jumu’ah in his book “History of Islamic Philosophers”, where he argued that the term *tasawuf* or *Sufi* originated from the Greek word *theosophia*, which means “divine wisdom.” This is seen as appropriate, as Sufis seek to understand divine wisdom in their pursuit of becoming perfected Muslims. Additionally, this opinion was agreed upon by Western Orientalists such as Von Hamer and Markes, as well as several Arab writers and researchers, including ‘Abdul ‘Aziz al-Islambali, Mohamad Lutfi Jumu’ah, and Gourgi Zaidan in his book “*Adab al-Lughah al-‘Arabiyyah*.” This belief stems from the idea that Sufism only became known after the translation of Greek philosophical works into Arabic — which marked the entry of philosophical terminology into the Arabic language. However, these views have been rejected by the majority of *tasawuf* scholars and Sufi figures generally (Zaki Mubarak, 1937; Sulaiman, 1997). After the progress and development of the Arab world in the field of knowledge, the Greek term was eventually adapted into the Arabic word *sufi* (صوفي) to better fit the Arabic linguistic framework (Fauqi Hajjaj, 1995). Nonetheless, this opinion is considered inaccurate because the word *safia* (as written in Arabic, believed to have been borrowed from Greek) means “wisdom,” which in the Greek context refers specifically to philosophy or the physical sciences. Likewise, the Arabs also understood *hikmah* to refer more to physics or medicine. Therefore, the word *tasawuf* does not share the same semantic field as *safia*, as understood by both the Greeks and the Arabs (Ghallab, 1969). This clearly shows that the term *tasawuf* was not derived from the Greek word *safia*, contrary to what has been claimed by some Islamic and non-Islamic scholars.

There is also an opinion which asserts that the term originates from the word *al-sifah* (الصفة), on the basis that the Sufis adorned themselves with praiseworthy traits and distanced themselves from blameworthy characteristics. However, this view is considered inaccurate because, according to Arabic linguistic rules, *al-sifah* should be derived as *al-sifati*, not *sufi*. Thus, the inconsistency between the derived term and its supposed origin invalidates this opinion (Sulaiman, 1984). Furthermore, there is a view suggesting that *tasawuf* comes from *al-saufanah* — a type of extremely small plant. The ascetic Sufis, who were very particular about their food and drink intake and consumed them in minimal amounts, were likened to this plant (al-Suhrawardi, 1966). However, according to Arabic grammatical rules, the proper derivative of *al-saufanah* would be *sufani*, not *sufi*. Therefore, the terms *tasawuf* and *sufi* are unlikely to have originated from *al-saufanah* due to this linguistic inconsistency. This rejection based on linguistic grounds is also supported by Ibn Qayyim in his book *Talbis Iblis*. In addition, there is another opinion which suggests that the word derives from *al-sufah*, meaning a scrap of discarded wool lying on the ground. This was likened to the Sufi practitioners who showed such humility and deep submission before Allah that they were compared in value to that cast-off wool. Another opinion claims that the origin lies in the term *sufat al-qafa*, referring to the soft skin at the nape of the neck. The qualities of that skin — gentle and delicate — were seen as reflective of the demeanor and conduct of the Sufis, who are known for their gentleness and courtesy (al-Syarbasi, n.d.). Some Islamic scholars also interpret *sufat al-qafa* as referring to the unkempt hair that grows at the back of the neck, which was often left untended and disheveled. Because many Sufis allowed their hair to remain in such a state, the term *sufi* was thought to have been derived from this word. Lastly, there is an opinion which holds that the term *tasawuf* is simply a designation (*laqab*) without any clear root (*istiqaaq*) linking it to a specific origin. In other words, it cannot be traced back to any particular word in Arabic or any foreign language (al-Taftazani, 1976). This view is supported by al-Qushayri, who emphasized in his work *al-Risalah* that the term *tasawuf* is essentially just a name for a specific branch of Islamic knowledge.

Thus, the definition of *tasawuf* from a linguistic perspective is largely based on the proposed origins of the term, where all the differing opinions ultimately point to a similar underlying meaning — that of spirituality.

Therefore, *tasawuf* can be most accurately described as a discipline that guides a Muslim towards Allah in the best and most sincere manner.

The Technical Definition of Tasawuf

Next, the meaning of *tasawuf* from a technical or terminological perspective is seen through the views of various Islamic scholars, each offering differing definitions. These differences arise from their unique perspectives, observations and experiences according to the time, context, and intellectual developments of their respective eras. Some scholars provide broad and comprehensive definitions, while others offer narrower interpretations. Some define *tasawuf* from the perspective of ethics (*akhlaq*), others from the angle of spiritual purification and acts of worship. There are also scholars who define it through the lens of *ma'rifah* (gnosis), and others from the standpoint of *zuhud* (asceticism). In addition, some Islamic scholars define it through the concept of *ihsan* (spiritual excellence).

Ethics (akhlaq)

From the perspective of ethics (*akhlaq*), several scholars have defined *tasawuf* in this manner, including al-Kattani, al-Jariri, al-Taftazani, and others. According to al-Kattani, *tasawuf* is the path followed by anyone who equips themselves with noble character traits (al-Sullami, 1969). Other Sufi figures have described *tasawuf* as embodying ethical conduct in one's relationship with both creation and the Creator (al-Suhrawardi, 1966). Al-Taftazani (1976) further stated that *tasawuf*, at its core, is *akhlaq*. He regarded it as the spirit (*ruh*) of Islam, as the entire structure of Islamic practice is fundamentally based on ethics. Moreover, al-Sha'rani (1954) defined *tasawuf* as knowledge that emerges from the hearts of the *awliya'* (saints) when they implement the Qur'an and Sunnah. He writes:

"Know, my brothers... that the knowledge of *tasawuf* is an exposition of the knowledge that is generated within the hearts of the *awliya'*, when those hearts are polished through the practice of what is contained in the Book and the Sunnah. Thus, for every person who acts upon the Qur'an and Sunnah, knowledge, manners, secrets and realities will emerge in accordance with those practices — realities that the tongue is too weak and incapable to fully express."

Furthermore, Muhammad Ali al-Qashab defined *tasawuf* as noble character that arose in a noble era, from a noble man, and among an honored community (al-Qushayri, 1991). Similarly, al-Baghdadi defined *tasawuf* as noble character that appeared in a noble time, at the hands of a noble individual, and among a noble people. Abu Muhammad al-Jariri stated that *tasawuf* is the path of migration from blameworthy character to noble character (al-Tusi, 1970). Meanwhile, al-Ghazali (1979) defined *tasawuf* as a path for purifying the soul from blameworthy morals and negative traits, so that a person may cleanse their heart of anything associated with *shirk* (associating partners with Allah) and adorn their heart with constant remembrance of Allah. Based on these various definitions, *tasawuf* can be regarded as the spirit of Islam, since the entire framework of Islamic law is founded upon ethical conduct. Islamic ethics (*akhlaq*) form the very foundation of *shariah*; and if the rulings of *shariah* are devoid of ethical values — whether in matters of creed (*aqidah*) or jurisprudence (*fiqh*) — then such rulings are rendered empty and meaningless. In addition, *tasawuf* places great emphasis on matters of ethics, by encouraging praiseworthy traits (*sifat mahmudah*) and avoiding blameworthy traits (*sifat mazmumah*). This means that *tasawuf* in Islam is a religious discipline that focuses comprehensively on the moral character of human beings.

Purification of the Soul

Apart from the ethical dimension, *tasawuf* has also been viewed by some Islamic scholars through the lens of spiritual purification, drawing closer (*taqarrub*) to Allah, and engaging abundantly in acts of worship. According to Abu Turab al-Nakhshabi, a Sufi is someone who is not tainted by any sin and remains pure from all blameworthy traits. Ibn Khaldun (1975) defined *tasawuf* as maintaining noble etiquette (*adab*) with Allah in all actions — both outward and inward — by placing His boundaries (*hudud*) above personal desires, constantly striving to draw near to Allah, and being deeply devoted in supplication to Him. Abu Muhammad bin Ruwaym

viewed *tasawuf* as a method by which the human soul surrenders to Allah in the way He wills (al-Zarkali, vol. 3, n.d.). Al-Juna'id bin Muhammad (d. 297H) considered *tasawuf* to be the path of connecting with Allah without intermediaries — in other words, direct servitude and devotion to Allah without barriers. Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (d. 334H) stated that *tasawuf* is to worship Allah without feeling sorrow or grief. Al-Jariri added that *tasawuf* is about seeking closeness to Allah in every circumstance and consistently refining one's etiquette before Him. Al-Qushayri defined *tasawuf* as the science that deals with purification of the soul and refinement of character, through both inward and outward acts of devotion, in order to attain eternal happiness (al-Qushayri, 1991). Likewise, Sahl bin Abdullah al-Tustari (d. 283H) stated that a Sufi is anyone whose soul has been cleansed and purified from impure traits. Bishr bin al-Harith supported al-Tustari's view, adding that a Sufi is one whose heart is purified solely for the sake of Allah (al-Kalabazi, 1969). Ma'ruf al-Karkhi defined *tasawuf* as a method of complete dependence upon Allah, free from reliance upon created beings (al-Sullami, 1969). Al-Baghdadi similarly defined *tasawuf* as the relationship between a human being and Allah, without any intermediaries (al-Tusi, 1970). There are also those who state that *tasawuf* is essentially about remaining closely attached to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. As Abu al-Qasim al-Nasru Abazi said:

“The foundation of *tasawuf* is remaining attached to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, abandoning one's desires and innovations, honouring the spiritual guide (*shaykh*), recognising the flaws of the self, maintaining good companionship with fellow humans, offering support to others, embodying noble character, remaining constant in devotional recitations (*wird*), avoiding religious concessions (*rukhsah*), and seeking the deeper meanings (*ta'wil*). No one is led astray on this path unless they were already corrupted from the very beginning — for a faulty beginning will certainly impact the outcome.” (Zulkifli Mohamad, 2009).

From these perspectives, it becomes evident that *tasawuf* is a method or path designed to guide individuals toward closeness to Allah through spiritual purification and abundant worship. All of this can facilitate them in achieving perfect happiness in this world and in the Hereafter.

Ma'rifah (Gnosis)

In addition to the definitions mentioned earlier, some scholars have defined *tasawuf* from the perspective of *ma'rifah* (gnosis or deep spiritual knowledge). For instance, al-Kharraj (d. 289H) defined a Sufi as one whose heart has been purified by Allah, causing it to shine with the light of *ma'rifah* (al-Sullami, 1969). Al-Karkhi (d. 200H) viewed *tasawuf* as holding firmly to the realities (*haqa'iq*) of things while renouncing reliance on what is in the hands of created beings (al-Asfahani, vol. 8, 1932). Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (d. 245H) stated that a Sufi is one whose speech reveals the deeper realities of existence; and when silent, their limbs ‘speak’ — indicating a severance from anything that may hinder their journey toward Allah (al-Asfahani, vol. 9, 1932). According to al-Tusi, the Sufi community consists of Allah's most trusted individuals, entrusted with bearing His divine responsibility on earth. He described them in detail as the keepers of His secrets and knowledge, His chosen people, His most sincere servants, His God-conscious saints (*awliya'*), and His honest, righteous beloveds. Then, he described them as those whose hearts Allah has illuminated with gnosis (*ma'rifah*) of Him, whose limbs are adorned with devotion, whose tongues constantly move in remembrance of Him, and whose innermost secrets are purified through vigilant awareness (*muraqabah*) of Him. They have been preordained to receive the best of provisions through divine care and constant attention. They are crowned with the honour of sainthood (*wilayah*), adorned with the ornaments of divine guidance, and their hearts are embraced with gentleness. They are drawn near to Him with affection, until they are completely content with Allah alone.” (al-Tusi, 1970). This aligns with the words of Allah in the Qur'an:

“That is the bounty of Allah which He gives to whom He wills. And Allah is the possessor of great bounty.” (Surah al-Jumu'ah, 62:4)

“Among them are those who wrong themselves, some who are moderate, and some who are foremost in good deeds by the permission of Allah. That is the great bounty.” (Surah Fatir, 35:32)

These definitions make it clear that *tasawuf* is also a form of knowledge that guides individuals to attain *ma'rifah* (gnosis) of Allah — a divine gift of immeasurable value granted only to those whom He chooses.

Zuhd (Asceticism)

In addition, some Sufi scholars have defined *tasawuf* through the lens of *zuhd* (asceticism). For example, al-Khawwas (d. 290H) stated that *tasawuf* is the path taken by one who possesses nothing, and who is not possessed by anything (al-Zarkali, vol. 3, n.d.). Likewise, al-Hasan al-Nuri (d. 295H) defined a Sufi as someone who neither owns anything nor is owned by anything (al-Sullami, 1969). According to Hasan al-Basri, the Sufis are those who employ reason in times of grief and face such trials with the insight of their conscience. They cling firmly to Allah in resisting the temptations of base desires. Dhu al-Nun al-Misri also defined a Sufi as someone who harbors no desire for worldly wants or demands, and who does not feel sorrow over the loss of any worldly possession (al-Tusi, 1970). In general, the definition of *tasawuf* from the aspect of *zuhd* represents the earliest characterization given by Islamic scholars to those who devoted themselves to spiritual practices. This aligns with the historical development of the discipline, which initially emerged under the designation of *zuhd*.

Ihsan (Spiritual Excellence)

Lastly, *tasawuf* is also defined from the perspective of *ihsan*, the third level among the core components mentioned in the famous Hadith of Jibril (a.s.): *al-Islam*, *al-iman*, and *al-ihsan* (al-‘Asqalani, n.d.). *Ihsan* is described as worshipping Allah as though one sees Him — and if one cannot see Him, then indeed, Allah sees him. Al-Attas (1981) has stated that *tasawuf* is the practice of the shari‘ah at the station of *ihsan*. Similarly, al-Kandahlawi (1978) clarified that *ihsan* is synonymous with *tasawuf* or *suluk*, as reflected in his statement:

"*Ihsan* is also what is referred to as *tasawuf* or *sulūk*, or simply call it *ihsan* by any name you prefer. These are merely different terms, but they all carry the same meaning."

Ihsan is identified with *tasawuf* because the principles found in its teachings and practices guide the spiritual journey of a seeker (*salik*) towards attaining the station of *ihsan* (Nasr, 1872). Therefore, *tasawuf* may be understood as an effort to actualise the level of *ihsan* in one's worship of Allah — that is, the ability to perform acts of servitude (*‘ubudiyyah*) to Allah, the Creator (*al-Khaliq*), with utmost perfection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the definitions of *tasawuf* have been articulated by researchers and Sufi scholars in various forms and explanations, both from the linguistic and technical (*terminological*) perspectives. Furthermore, in wider discourse, nearly two thousand different interpretations and descriptions have been recorded — with their variations merely reflecting different modes of expression rather than substantive contradictions. This indicates that, unlike the definitions of some other Islamic sciences, the definitions of *tasawuf* are largely harmonious in meaning.

Nevertheless, the tendency to define *tasawuf* narrowly through specific aspects, such as asceticism (*zuhd*), noble character, or purification of the soul alone — is inaccurate, as such views fail to capture the true essence of Sufi teachings. Hence, the most accurate understanding of *tasawuf* is that it represents the attainment of the rank of *ihsan*, as encompassed within the three foundational pillars of Islam: *Islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*. This is aligned with the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) well-known hadith: "*Ihsan is to worship Allah as if you see Him; and if you do not see Him, [know that] He sees you.*" The rank of *ihsan* can only be achieved by a Muslim whose heart and soul are purified — both outwardly and inwardly. This purification entails being free from transgressions against the *shari‘ah*, from blameworthy traits, from deviant beliefs, and from placing one's reliance or attention on anything other than Allah. Such spiritual purity leads to an inner witnessing of the truth of Allah's divinity, majesty, beauty, and perfection. This inner witnessing, in turn, gives rise to unwavering conviction (*yaqin*), virtuous character, and sincere worship.

Therefore, defining *tasawuf* as the attainment of *ihsan* firmly establishes its legitimacy within Islam. It also implicitly refutes the negative perceptions and baseless claims of some Muslims who regard *tasawuf* as an innovation (*bid‘ah*) or a deviation from authentic Islamic teachings.

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