**Introduction**

Mysticism has always captured the minds of the Western reader. It conveys a sense of mystery and unorthodox practices. The mystic is one who is seen as the isolated hermit, or the wise man who has removed himself from this world to fully concentrate on spiritual endeavors. The religion of Islam carries this connotation, and its mystical counterpart, Sufism (*tassawwuf*) is even less understood. Sufism has been an indigenous practice within the lives of some Muslims since the inception of Islam itself. As Michael Sells explains in his book, *Early Islamic Mysticism*:

Islamic mysticism is of one the most extensive traditions of spirituality in the history of religions. From its origins in the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'anic revelation, the mystical trend among Muslims has played an extraordinary role in the public and private development of the Islamic faith.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

The study of mysticism has been of interest to scholars in the Western world for centuries. It has only been in the past two centuries that the mystical tradition in Islam, known as Sufism, has been critically examined in Western scholarship. Sufism has always been a widespread but controversial tradition within Islam, and its perspective has, at times, been at odds with the representatives of Islamic orthodoxy.

Like Gnosticism, Sufism focuses on knowledge of the divine. Unlike their mystical predecessors however, Sufis have concentrated more on experience as the primary vehicle for receiving such knowledge. A Gnostic could be considered a “philosophical mystic” because of the emphasis on knowledge of the divine; while the Sufi is more of an “experimental or practical mystic,” engaged in the practice of experiencing the divine. The writings of many of the great mystics of Islam have emphasized the experience of divine love wherein the mystic's soul is enthralled by the presence of the Creator. It is through remembrance of God and one's relationship with Him that a person comes to understand that their soul is part and parcel with the Divine. This mystic union is referred to by some, as the experience of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being). The Sufi metaphysical perspective on this concept was solidified in the theoretical writings of Ibn Arabi (d. 1240). Ibn Arabi, known as al-Sheikh al-Akbar, the “Great Master,” was one of the preeminent mystical writers and thinkers of his time. His works (which will play an important role in my discussion of Sufism) influenced his contemporaries and the Sufis of today. Western scholars such as William C. Chittick and Michel Chodkiewicz have translated much of his work, making a great contribution to the Western scholarship of Sufism.

The great classical Sufi theorists; Ibn Arabi, Abdul-Qadir al-Jilani, al-Ghazali, and several others have served as the foundation of the tradition. It is largely on the basis of their theoretical edifice, that the traditions of Sufism have been developed and elaborated upon, and continue to thrive to the present day. William C. Chittick, Michel Chodkiewicz, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Sheikh Hisham Kabbani and the late scholars Titus Burkhardt, Annemarie Schimmel, and Sheikh Ibn 'Alawi al-Maliki are some of the key representatives of modern scholarship on Sufi metaphysics and practice. These individuals represent the leading experts in the field, and it is their works and their translations of the Sufi writings of centuries past that will constitute the most important sources for this study.

Sufi theological concepts, such as the encounter with the “Face of God”, are firmly rooted in the Islamic scriptural tradition, and Sufism itself has been an inherent part of the Islamic tradition, tracing its roots back to the followers of Muhammad and even the Prophet himself. I intend to use this analysis to counter the assertion of some Muslim conservatives who argue that Sufism is a later innovation, or *bid'a*, that has no place in the religion of Islam. I believe this study, which examines the Sufi concept of encountering the “Face of God” (*wajh Allah*), is significant because of the importance of this concept in the Qur'an itself. The word *wajh* has several meanings in Arabic, but is most often translated as “face” or “direction.” In the second chapter of the Qur'an, entitled *al-Baqarah*, *wajh Allah* is used in a way that conveys a sense of direction: “To Allah belong the East and the West; whichever direction you turn, there is the face of Allah (*wajh Allah*).”[[2]](#footnote-3) For many Muslim commentators, *wajh* is interpreted here as “direction.” However, later in the same chapter we see *wajh* used more clearly in the sense of God's face, “whatever good you give benefits your own souls, and you shall only do so seeking the Face (*wajh*) of Allah.”[[3]](#footnote-4) The “Face of God” is often mentioned in the Holy Qur'an, and has presented several difficulties of interpretation, mainly the suggested anthropomorphism of God it entails and the possibility that human beings might experience the sight of God through a direct encounter.[[4]](#footnote-5) Islamic theological tradition is split over whether God has a “face” and whether human beings can “see it.” Legalists, rationalists and conservatives tend to dismiss the notion of the “Face of God” as a metaphorical reference to the direction of prayer or of righteousness, and express fears that believing in a literal interpretation of the “Face of God” will lead one into the un-Islamic category of anthropomorphism. However, the Qur'anic verses referencing the “Face of God” have played an important role in Sufi mystical speculation in regards to the nature of the human mystical experience of God. Moreover, other Qur’anic verses and sayings of Prophet Muhammad are used by the Sufis to theorize mystical experience. This demonstrates the Sufis’ commitment to defining their mystical ideas within the boundaries of the universally accepted Islamic scripture and Islamic terminology.

In discussing the concept of *Wajh Allah*, three perspectives will be explained: the Sufi mystical perspective, the Wahhabiyya-Salafiyya perspective, and the rationalist perspective. All three have different views on how the Qur’anic verses mentioning the Face of God are to be interpreted. My focus will be on support of the Sufi perspective, and a refutation of the Wahhabiyya and rationalist perspective throughout the dissertation and my conclusion.

**Origins of Sufism**

To begin our discussion of the face of God in Sufi thought, one needs to understand the mystical origins of Sufism itself. Sufism is known as *tasawwuf* within the Muslim world and is often called the “science of the heart” or simply the “heart of Islam” (*qalb al-Islam*). The word Sufi is rooted in the Arabic word *suf*. There are two schools of interpretation on the meaning of *suf* and its relation to the first Sufis. *Suf* means “wool” and the general consensus is that the word Sufi comes from this meaning because the more ascetic companions (*sahaba*) of Muhammad are reported to have worn coarse woolen garments which distinguished them from other *sahaba*. Kalabadhi (d. 990), an early theoretical writer on Sufism describes the first generation Sufis as follows:

Those who relate them to the Bench, and to wool express the outward aspect of their conditions: for they were people who had left this world, departed from their homes, fled from their companions. They wandered about the land, mortifying the carnal desires, and making naked the body; they took of this world's good only so much as is indispensable for covering the nakedness and allaying hunger.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Kalabadhi's description of this first generation ascetics of Islam pertains to their inner state and “making naked the body” is a metaphor for this inward spiritualawareness. When he speaks of “those who relate them to the Bench” he is referring to a term used to describe these ascetic followers of the Prophet Muhammad. Known as ahl as-suffah, or “people of the bench,” who would spend their free time at the porch/bench outside the Prophet's house in dhikr Allah or the “remembrance of Allah.” These followers were reportedly the first to truly employ dhikr as a daily recitation to achieve nearness to God.

As William Chittick notes in his book, *Sufism*, “the Arabic original of the word Sufism (*suf* ) is already problematic in Islamic civilization.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Chittick explains that the word has come to carry a much broader definition then it originally held. The word was not given prominence within the Islamic world through texts, but rather by British Orientalists who wanted a term that would constitute the “attractive and positive” aspects of Islam that appealed to them and avoid the negative stereotypes associated with the religion from which they had emerged.[[7]](#footnote-8) Within Islamic texts, authors have continued to debate what the word *suf* really means, as well as its legitimacy. I think it is likely that the term “Sufism” refers to the *ahl as suffah*, that is, the original ascetics from among Muhammad's followers, who were distinguished as those wearing garments of wool (*suf*). If the reports are accurate, then the people of the Bench can be seen as the forefathers of modern day *tasawwuf,* and while the designation “Sufi” is not found in the earliest writings of the Prophet or his *sahaba*, nonetheless, there are compelling indications that *tasawwuf* in its various forms was practiced at the time of the Prophet.

Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, can be considered the science or study of the inward (*batin*) aspect of Islam. The *batin* is dichotomous with the *zahir* or outward. Thus Sufism is the science of understanding the esoteric meaning of the Qur'an, Islamic doctrine (*aqidah*), and the legacy of Muhammad (*sunnah*). Titus Burckhardt states that “whereas the ordinary way of believers is directed toward obtaining a state of blessedness after death... Sufism contains its end or aim within itself in the sense that it can give access to direct knowledge of the eternal.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Some degree of religious knowledge (‘*ilm*) is required of all Muslims, and religious value is attached to expanding this knowledge as much as one is able. For example, in the Qur'an the believers say: “Oh Lord, advance me in knowledge;”[[9]](#footnote-10) and elsewhere it says “and those on whom knowledge has been bestowed may learn that the Qur'an is the truth.”[[10]](#footnote-11) Both of these Qur’anic verses, along with others, present knowledge as a spiritual virtue. Suhrawardi narrates a *hadith* in which the Prophet likens “the knowledge (‘*ilm*) and guidance (*huda*) which God has charged him to dispatch to an abundant rain shower.”[[11]](#footnote-12) Suhrawardi extends the metaphor to argue that those learned in religion (*al-faqih fi 'l-din*) are like the fields upon which the rain shower of knowledge and guidance falls, and their hearts are as the water channels through which it flows.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Many dispute the origins of Sufism within Islam. For example, the Wahhabiyya movement started by Muhammad b. Abdul-Wahhab (d. 1792) regards Sufism as a *bid'a*, or harmful innovation. They claim that Sufism was influenced by outside sources, mainly Persian, Hindu, Neoplatonic and Christian. However, Burckhardt argues that “the decisive argument in favor of the Muhammaden (Islamic) origin of Sufism lies…in Sufism itself.”[[13]](#footnote-14) If Sufism came from sources outside the fold of Islam, then those who aspire to attain the wisdom of Sufi teachings—which represent neither a purely mental state of wisdom, nor a knowledge derived from books—would not rely so heavily on symbols found in the Qur'an as the main source from which this wisdom and knowledge is derived. The spiritual methods of Sufism are constantly drawn from Qur'anic *ayat* (verses) and the teachings and example of the Prophet Muhammad.

Like the Wahhabiyya, Orientalists have also held that Sufism derived from non-Muslim origins. They base this assumption, at least in part, on the fact that, as stated earlier, the word Sufi is not found in early Islamic doctrines or writings, and that Sufi teachings do not appear with all their detailed metaphysical developments until much later. This judgment is, of course, in sharp contrast to the way in which Sufis believe their mystical doctrine has been transmitted and accumulated. The chains of mystical lineage, known as *salasil* (singular: *silsila*), for transmitting knowledge from master to disciple all the way back to the *sahaba* and ultimately Muhammad began to be documented in writings in the 10th-11th century, but Sufis consider knowledge of the lineage of Sufi masters to have been part of Sufi awareness from the beginning. For the Sufis, the *salasil* of the Sufi orders (*turuq,* s. *tariqa*) stand as strong evidence against the claims of the Wahhabiyya and the Orientalists about the foreign origins of Sufism.

The first generations of Sufis expressed their teachings in language that was very consistent with that of the Qur'an. If, later on, certain elements of Sufi teachings and doctrines became more explicit and were further elaborated, such theological elaboration is certainly within the norms and boundaries of what we find, to some extent, in every spiritual tradition. Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*) is a good example of the expansion and elaboration of the spiritual ideas and religious doctrines found in scripture that has been widely accepted by Islamic scholarship through the centuries.

Doctrine grows when new knowledge is discovered and leads to a need to refute new errors. Just as the Qur'an was orally transmitted from Muhammad, so, too, Sufi doctrines have been continuously transmitted from Sufi master (s*haykh* or *pir*) to disciple (*murid*). Such oral transmission within Islam is considered superior to written transmission as it represents a direct and “personal” encounter with knowledge as opposed to the process of acquiring knowledge perhaps incorrectly, through written works. Sufi writings are therefore secondary phenomena, and, in fact, the traditional method of transmitting Sufi teachings even, ideally today, is oral. This oral tradition often eludes the research of scholars working outside the tradition, namely Orientalists, Western scholars, non-Sufi Islamic scholars, and the Wahhabiyya.

Many of these scholars are quick to recognize the legitimacy of Islam's juridical teachings concerning Islamic law and ethics (*Shari'ah*) in the legal (*fiqh*) tradition*,* yet do not recognize the legitimacy of *tasawwuf*. Sufism, according to William Chittick, “was no more present in early Islam than was jurisprudence or *Kalam* (philosophy), its subject matter was a living reality from the beginning, as was the subject matter of the other two dimensions.”[[14]](#footnote-15) The “orthodoxy” of Islam is merely what has become the predominant line of thinking. Moreover, since mysticism, was always been a peripheral form of practice within the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, and Christianity, Western scholars tended to perceived Islamic mysticism, specifically *tasawwuf,* as peripheral as well, in a way similar to the mysticisms of the other Abrahamic faiths. However, this is an incorrect judgment; Sufism actually played a more significant role in Islam than mysticism did in Judaism or Christianity.

While mysticism is a term commonly used to describe Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, to those within and outside the Muslim world, it poses a problem in its rather narrow range of meaning. One can argue that any form of mysticism (Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Sufism, etc.) is much more encompassing in depth and shades of meaning, than that which is denoted by the generic term “mysticism.” Moreover, mysticism carries a connotation of oddness, of something outside the norm. Thus, “mysticism” suggests something not practiced by the majority of the mainstream and rational practitioners of a given religion.

One problem with “mysticism” is that it suggests the bizarre and exotic. Ultimately most Sufis are no different then ordinary believers within the faith of Islam in their basic outward practices. What is different, however, is their inward dedication. *Dhikr Allah*, or remembrance of Allah, is important to all practicing Muslims. What makes Sufism unique is its approach to *dhikr* within the heart and its interiority. Sufis also differ from other Muslims in that, for them, *dhikr* is practiced and ‘*ilm* is established inwardly as a means of having constant awareness of God. While the majority of Muslims are concerned with applying the *Shari'ah* to their lives in a constructed, exoteric manner, Sufis live the *Shari'ah* both outwardly, and in its essence, and take as their example the life of Prophet Muhammad as they see it. Sufism is the total expression of the law in its application, method and expression as well as in its interior dimension. It is not simply “following the rules.”

While it is true that Sufism, like other esoteric religious practices is associated with specific mystical ideas and practices, such as divine union with God, or personal communication with God, one cannot fully grasp it through such a narrow definition of the “mystical.” Sufism is not a “mystical free for all” where one goes off in search of communion with the Divine, thereby neglecting the religious laws and duties prescribed by the faith. Sufism is ideally about discipline, training, and control of the urges of the self. Sufis emphasize the Greater Jihad in their doctrine, the *jihad an-nafs*, the struggle of the self, in which one fights and attempts to control worldly desires, spiritual weakness and sin through piety, virtue and practice. The word *riyada*, or discipline, is central to Sufi teachings. Often this term has been used in Arabic to describe discipline through exercise, sports and gymnastics. The word *riyadiyyat* or mathematics derives from *riyada*. *Riyadiyyat* literally means “things related to discipline”, a discipline of the mental faculty. A common application of the term “*riyada*” in classical Arabic is to the discipline of the soul, which, when brought under control, can lead to harmony in both faith and works. The tool for such mental exercises or discipline is '*aql*, intellect. Intellect restrains the impulses of the soul. Al-Ghazali believed that to control the self, one must have faith in Islam and practice it with the goal of utmost perfection. One must train the mind, body, and soul towards a harmonious union to achieve the desired results, specifically, the experience of a direct encounter with God.[[15]](#footnote-16)

This encounter with God is not necessarily one of total annihilation of the soul in God (fana), but of achieving intimate knowledge of, or communion with, God. While fana is an experience that many Sufis desire to achieve, many Sufi masters consider it dangerous as an ultimate objective, since one may lose the true sense of their relationship with God, i.e. that of servant and Lord. Most consider this station of al-fana fi’llah, annihilation of the soul in God, as a sublime, yet temporary station. The more ideal station is the one directly following fana, namely the station of baqa, or subsistence. These terms will be discussed further below.

What is the goal of Sufism then? Chittick states that the Sufi goal is not “direct or intimate knowledge of or communion with God,” but rather that “the Sufi is the child of the moment.”[[16]](#footnote-17) By this, he means a Sufi practitioner should be concerned with the observance of the requirements of the present moment, not with future states. The Sufi lives content with what God wants in the present, not with the past nor with the future. Here, this idea is expressed through the common metaphorical theme of the relationship of the lover and the Beloved,

I want union with Him

but He wants separation from me

I abandon what I want

for what He wants.[[17]](#footnote-18)

While the *modus operandi* of the Sufi practitioner is the observance of *Shari'ah* in order to achieve and understand what God wants in the present, I disagree with Chittick's statement that the goal of Sufism does not necessarily involve “direct or intimate knowledge of or communion with God.” There are numerous writings on experiencing this divine knowledge of God (*mar’ifah*) and its relation to the concept of encountering the face of God (*wajh Allah*), which will be discussed below.

In fact, the most important example of an encounter with God in Islamic tradition is the experience famously recorded for the Prophet Muhammad during his Night Journey (*mi'raj*) and his ascension (*isra*) into the heavens where he ultimately met his Lord. It is an account that attempts to describe that which is indescribable. As the Qur'an says, “He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth... nothing is as His likeness, and He is the One, that Hears and Sees.”

**The Night Journey (*al-Mi'raj*) and Its Significance in Sufism**

For Muslims, the Night Journey, known as *al-Mi'raj*, was a deeply religious experience unique to Muhammad. For it was during this event that he experienced a most direct encounter with Allah. The account of Muhammad's ascension into the heavens has sometimes been seen as a prototype of what Muslims can expect in the hereafter. Even for the most rationalist and conservative Muslims, the Night Journey is a mystical experience that they cannot easily explain away nor deny. Although some rationalist and neo-rationalist thinkers have likened it to a dream, and not a physical event, the Sufis revere *al-Mi'raj* as proof of the possibility of encountering God in this life and the hereafter. The various accounts of this event provide a basis in Islamic tradition for fathoming what many consider unfathomable, a direct encounter with God. For this reason, it is an event that Sufis often discuss as a central theme in the path of *tasawwuf*.

Much has been written about the Night Journey, and many varying perspectives can be found in commentary and *ahadith* (Prophetic traditions) about the event, what was experienced therein, and what its ultimate significance is.

Sheikh Muhammad Ibn 'Alawi al-Maliki cites al-Shami in his book, *Prophets in Barzakh*, with regard to the fact that the companions of Muhammad had varying explanations of the Night Journey,

Know may Allah have mercy on me and you, that each of the hadiths of the Companions contains what the other does not. Therefore I consulted Allah Almighty and concatenated them, rearranging the account into a single narrative so that it would be sweeter to attentive ears, and in order for its benefit to suit all occasions.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Al-Kattani in *Nazm al-Mutanathir fi al-hadith al-Mutawatir* listed forty five companions who related something pertaining to Muhammad's Night Journey. The consensus of Islamic scholars is that the account of Muhammad's ascension is one that is very widely transmitted (*mutawatir*), although some narrations omit or add different aspects and elements in their versions of the ascension. Malik b. Sa'sa'a's version, for example, completely omits the mention of *al-Quds* (Jerusalem), the symbolically essential setting for this event in all other accounts. Al-Maliki explains that many of the omissions are due to the fact that some elements of the story were well known, or to forgetfulness on the part of the narrator, or also to the narrator's preference for mentioning only that which they considered important and vital to the story at hand.[[19]](#footnote-20)

Sheikh al-Maliki narrates many of the *ahadith* associated with the story of the Night Journey. Of particular note are the many personalities Muhammad passes along his way. They all call out to the Prophet, “O Muhammad, look at me, I want to ask you something. Each time Muhammad ignores them and does not look at them, and with this he asks angel Gabriel, his companion on the Night Journey, 'Who was this, O Gabriel?' in which the angel would say, 'it was the herald of Jews or Christians, in which If you (Muhammad) had answered him, your community would have followed Judaism/Christianity.’” Many more personalities appear, including, rather peculiarly, that of the world personified, who asks Muhammad, once again, to look at him and answer his question. Again, Muhammad ignores him, and Gabriel explains that if Muhammad acknowledged the world, then his community would have preferred this world to the hereafter.[[20]](#footnote-21)

The Qur'anic verses that are considered to be descriptrions of Muhammad's Night Journey are not so easily identifiable. Two major passages are considered to be the passages that describe *al-Mi'raj*: The first verse of the chapter called *al-Isra'* (Night Journey) or, variously, B*ani Isar'il (*Children of Israel)[[21]](#footnote-22) and the opening verses of *al-Najm* (The Star).[[22]](#footnote-23)

Verse 17:1 of the Qur'an, commonly referred to as “the Night Journey verse,” references a journey by night, yet does not identify who undertakes this journey, nor does it say what the destination was.

Glorified be the One who caused His servant to journey by night from the sacred place of prayer to the furthest place of prayer, whose precincts We have blessed, in order to show him some of our signs. Indeed He is the one Who hears, the one Who sees.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Ibn 'Abbas' commentary on the Night Journey is considered to be the most widely circulated narrative in the Islamic tradition. He became associated with an early type of Qur'anic *tafsir* that drew on Jewish and Christian elements and sources, later classified as *Isra'iliyat*.[[24]](#footnote-25) His name was also associated with chains of *hadith* that reported that Muhammad saw the face of God in his Night Journey, which will be discussed in the next section. His name was so important in the development of *tafsir* that “subsequent generations, confronted with the necessity of assigning attribution and authority to already accepted anonymous derived *hadith* reports, chose his name as the one figure who would not be controverted.”[[25]](#footnote-26) Due to these anonymous readings being attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas, scholarship on the subject must critically examine these reports in an attempt to identify the anonymous reports attributed to him, to the authentic reports recorded by him. In an earlier version of Ibn 'Abbas' narrative, Muhammad sees God sitting on his throne. God leans forward and touches Muhammad on his shoulders, and with this touch all of Muhammad's fears vanish and he swoons as if in mystical ecstasy. The Prophet has an intimate dialogue with God, discussing pious behavior and that of Muhammad's status of favor above all previous prophets.[[26]](#footnote-27)

The vast majority of Muslims disapprove of the idea of describing God in human form. It is due to this anthropomorphizing of Allah in the early account of Muhammad's Night Journey, that many Western and Islamic scholars have come to reject its authenticity altogether.[[27]](#footnote-28) Yet within the Qur'an itself, there are *ayat* attributing a face to God, as well as hands and eyes. He is also described as talking and sitting on a throne as mentioned above.[[28]](#footnote-29) The notion of God having a human form (*tashbih*) can be seen as a metaphorical concept, not as a literal description as many, such as the Wahhabiyya, have understood it. For example, the Qur'anic verse: “God's hand is over their hands”[[29]](#footnote-30) is commonly understood to mean that God keeps His promises to those who gave allegiance to the Prophet, not that He literally has celestial hands human hands of flesh and blood. Another verse: “Favor is in the hand of God”[[30]](#footnote-31) is said to be a metaphorical description of God's Might (*quwwa*) and predetermination (*qada' wa-qadar*).

To go back to the narrative of Ibn 'Abbas, while many rejected it out of hand due to its overly anthropomorphic renderings of God, others have cited its authenticity. Tabari's *Tafsir* supports the earlier version of Ibn 'Abbas' narration. Though mentioning it only in passing, Tabari cites it as authoritative and uses it to illustrate his position that Muhammad was able to see God during his ascension. Tabari narrates a *hadith* in which Muhammad said: “I saw my Lord in the best form.” The Prophet continues describing to Ibn 'Abbas what he saw and discussed, and then ends the conversation with “He made the light of my vision in my heart, and I gazed upon him with my heart.”[[31]](#footnote-32)

Al-Tirmidhi's collection of sound (*sahih*) *hadith* in the Sunni tradition reports the same visions Muhammad experienced in which God appeared to him and touched the Prophet with His hands. With few exceptions however, it only appears in ascension narratives attributed to Ibn 'Abbas.[[32]](#footnote-33) Colby in his recent monograph on the subject, argues that the primitive version of the Night Journey began to gain popularity around the 9th century. He argues that it was spread most effectively through Muslim storytellers (qussas) and that these storytellers were a threat to both Sunni and Shi'i hadith scholarship because the masses would take these stories as truth over that of the time- honored tradition of hadith study and collaboration.

Some mystical traditions discuss personal night journeys of other individuals in which they, too, ascended to heaven and met God in person. The heretical proto-Shi'i, Abu Mansur ‘Ijli (d.738) claimed to have been taken up into the heavens in a manner very similar to that described for Muhammad's ascension.

Reportedly Abu Mansur ‘Ijli claimed that during his ascension God told him to draw near, addressed him in Syriac (other versions say Persian) as “my son,” and touched him (*masahahu*) on the head. After that, God commissioned him to tell his community about God, and about what he had experienced. ‘Ijli was said to have become convinced that he was an equal of the prophets, for he had become an anointed individual (*masih*) just like Jesus and an intimate friend of God (*khalil Allah*) just like Abraham.[[33]](#footnote-34)

Abu Mansur ‘Ijli's ascension narrative has many parallels with Ibn 'Abbas' primitive version of Muhammad's ascension. This comparison offers some evidence that Ibn 'Abbas' narrative was collected and composed in an environment that was in dialogue with developing Shi'i ideas, or perhaps the other way around. It is worth noting the time in which Abu Mansur ‘Ijli lived, namely, within the first century after the death of Muhammad. ‘Ijli's account of personal ascension and Ibn 'Abbas' account of Muhammad's ascension are nearly word for word the same in places. This would indicate that Colby's argument that the Ibn 'Abbas narration gained popularity in the third Islamic century may not be entirely correct, and in fact gained notoriety far sooner. By this I theorize that ‘Ijli's account of his personal experience and encounter with Allah influenced the narrative of Ibn 'Abbas. A third possibility is that later 3rd-4th century hagiographers attributed this to 'Ijli based on the narratives of the Prophet's *mi'raj*.

Another early Shi’i who described a personal ascension was a figure known as Muttahir b. Tahir Maqdisi Bazigh. Bazigh claimed that he “had ascended to heaven, and that God had touched him and spat into his mouth, and that wisdom had grown in his breast like a truffle in the earth, and that he had seen ‘Ali sitting at the right hand of God. “Bazigh's account is similar to that of ‘Ijli with the addition of God spitting into Bazigh's mouth, causing wisdom to enter into him as well as the presence of ‘Ali, whom the Shi’i revere as Muhammad's spiritual heir. The spitting in the mouth is understood as a fairly widespread symbol that may have influenced later narrative accounts of Muhammad's ascension in which the Prophet imbibes a sweet drop that falls into his mouth as he nears the Divine Throne.[[34]](#footnote-35)

All the above narratives of ascension, whether they concern Muhammad's Night Journey, or those who claimed to have experienced a night journey of their own, includes an experience of witnessing God through references to seeing the Lord's face, hands, eyes, head, body, etc. Nothing is more significant in these reported encounters with the Divine then that of *wajh Allah*, the Face of God. It is this Divine Face that Sufis claim they seek to experience in their mystical practices. For as the Qur'an says, in the end, “all that exists on the earth will perish, but the Face of your Lord will remain, full of Majesty and Glory.”[[35]](#footnote-36)

**The Face of God (*Wajh Allah*)**

Arguably, nothing is more important as a Sufi goal, than attaining a vision of Allah. ‘Ali b. Abi Talib was once asked “O Prince of Believers! Do you see the Lord when you devote yourself to worship?” to which ‘Ali replied, “Beware! I would not worship a God that I could not see.”[[36]](#footnote-37) For the Sufi, the ultimate goal is to experience a personal encounter with their Lord, such as that which Moses experienced on Mt. Sinai, after which Moses' face “appeared radiant and they were afraid to come near him.”[[37]](#footnote-38) The Night Journey of Muhammad discussed earlier, is, for those who walk the path of Sufism, the perfect and ultimate prototype for their own longed for and indescribable encounter with the presence and face of God.

The Face of Allah (*wajh Allah*) is mentioned numerous times in the Qur'an. *Wajh* has several meanings in Arabic, but is most often translated as “face” or “direction.”A verse often cited by the Sufis is 2:115, in which it is said, “to Allah belong the East and the West: whichever direction you turn your face, there is the face of Allah. Surely Allah

is All Embracing and All Knowing.”[[38]](#footnote-39) In explaining the true meaning of the “face of God,” Sufis often indicate that it is a way of describing the *dhat* (essence) or *haqiqa* (reality) of God—or indeed, of anything.

As Ibn al-Arabi discusses the idea of the “Face,” he begins by explaining the physical reality of faces in general. “A thing is known only through its face, that is, its reality. Everything without which a thing cannot be known is its face.”[[39]](#footnote-40) The “face” of anything is, in truth, its essence, it is how we identify things on this plane of existence. The face is the locus of turning towards God. In the hereafter, according to the Qur'an, those who are among the believers shall have faces illuminated with joy for “faces on that day shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord.”[[40]](#footnote-41) As for those who disbelieve and are people of wretchedness, “faces on that day shall be scowling, thinking that a calamity will be worked upon them.”[[41]](#footnote-42) Regardless of how one lived their life, be it for good or ill, all faces will be turned to their Lord on the Day of Reckoning. The “faces” of human selves will be witnesses to God, for the face of anything is its reality, its essence, and its very being. These faces are not the physical faces we think of, with eyes, mouth, ears and lips. The faces on that Day are not faces of eyesight, but of essence, of our *nafs* (self).

Al-Ghazali discusses this face of the true self in his book, *The Niche of Lights*, in which he explains the idea of the inner and outer appearances of the face:

Everything is perishing but His Face. Not that each thing comes to perish at one time rather than another, but rather that it is perishing from eternity without beginning to eternity without end. It cannot be conceived of in any other way. When the essence of anything other than He is considered in respect of its own essence, it is sheer nonexistence. But when it is considered in terms of the face to which existence flows forth from the First, the Real, then it is seen as existing, not in itself, but through the face toward its Giver of Existence. Hence the only existent is the Face of God (*Wajh Allah*).[[42]](#footnote-43)

Al-Ghazali, like many Sufis, believed that each created thing has two faces in terms of essence, a face turned toward itself, and another face turned towards its Lord. The face turned toward itself is the face of nonexistence, but in facing the Face of God, it exists. The Qur'anic verse, “everything is perishing but His Face”[[43]](#footnote-44) represents a revealed truth (*haqiqa*) for Muslims.

The Sufis seek to experience the Face of God through acquiring intimate and personal knowledge of Him. Yet as the Qur'an asserts, “they encompass nothing of His knowledge save such as He wills.”[[44]](#footnote-45) Knowledge, it is understood, is given by God alone. We may strive to attain this knowledge, but it is He, The One, who gives us understanding. The Qur'anic verse: “They encompass Him not in knowledge, and faces are humbled”[[45]](#footnote-46) is taken to mean that we become meek and humbled by Him, and can seek to increase our knowledge of Him only through His will. The Lord is “He who gave each thing its form and nature, and further gave it guidance,”[[46]](#footnote-47) at least for those who actively seek it.

In seeking out this knowledge, and thus coming to know God's Face, one must understand that he/she cannot experience the true Face of God, for *wajh Allah* cannot be fully known, since God's reality is His essence (*dhat*) and God's essence lies outside the boundaries of human knowledge. Although 2:115 of the Qur'an explained that “wherever you turn, there is the Face of God,” this face we recognize and turn to is not the reality that is His essence, but it is the reality of God's self-disclosure (*tajalli*) according to Ibn al-’Arabi and others.[[47]](#footnote-48) It is God in so far as He desires to disclose Himself to creation. The *tajalli* of God will be discussed later. For now we will concentrate on the concept of *wajh Allah* through Qur'anic verses and their commentary.

Their have been differences of opinion regarding one's ability to experience the Face of God in this world. Imam Ibn Khafif states in his *al-'Aqida al-Sahiha* that, concerning God's face, “[its] sight in this world is impossible.”[[48]](#footnote-49) For some, such as the Mu’tazilites, God's face could not be seen at all, not now in the present life, nor in the hereafter, nor even on the Day of Resurrection. Their beliefs were soundly rejected, for as Qur'an 75:22-23 seems to suggest, the believers will gaze upon God's face in the hereafter.

Al-Qari and al-Haytami were in agreement that it was possible to see God's face in this world, though how it would take place is questionable.[[49]](#footnote-50) They believed only the Prophet was able to experience such an encounter. Al-Qushayri agreed in his *Risala,* stating that “the sight of Allah in the world does not take place for anyone except the Prophet.”[[50]](#footnote-51) Al-Dhahabi had a most peculiar approach in saying that while the sight of Allah in the world is possible, it does not take place even for the Prophet.[[51]](#footnote-52) How then, would a Sufi experience *wajh Allah* if even the Prophet Muhammad, the Seal of Prophecy, was not be able to encounter the Face of God? Most opinion on this matter is based on the authentic (*sahih*) *hadith*, “Verily, you shall not see Allah until you die.”[[52]](#footnote-53) Yet in another *sahih* hadith attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas, the Prophet is reported to have said: “I saw my Lord (*ra'aytu rabbi*).”[[53]](#footnote-54) The latter *hadith* is often explained as the Prophet relating a dream he experienced. The consensus of Islamic scholarship is that the dreams of prophets are true, and thus the dreams in themselves conform to true reality (*haqiqa*).

Another *sahih* *hadith* is mentioned in al-Qari's commentaries in which the Prophet said:

“My Lord came to me in the best form” the narrator said: I think he said: “In my sleep” and asked me over what did the Higher Assembly (al-mala' al-a'la) vie, and I said I did not know, so He put His hand between my shoulders, and I felt its coolness in my innermost, and knowledge of all things between the East and the West came to me.[[54]](#footnote-55)

It is interesting to note that, in the vision, God’s “hand” touches Muhammad on his shoulder. This is a highly anthropomorphic vision; however, the Sufis would interpret this as God’s self-disclosure in this world for the sake of the human being and not God’s true form. The Wahhabiyya, as we will discuss later, interpret it as God having a literal bodily form.

Islamic scholars have interpreted the above account of the Prophet's vision as meaning that, whether it took place in his dream or in a wakeful state, he, Muhammad, saw Allah in the real sense. Al-Razi and al-Bayhaqi interpreted the placing of Allah's hand on the Prophet's shoulders as a demonstration of God's extreme consideration and love for Muhammad.[[55]](#footnote-56) The placing the Hand on the shoulders refers to an outpouring of love and Divine mercy into his heart, and the coolness described is the completion and perfection of his knowledge, as described by the Prophet himself when he said, “I knew all things between the East and the West.” Al-Qari wrote that,

Whether the Prophet saw his Lord in his sleep or whether Allah the Glorious and Exhalted manifested Himself to him with a form (*bi al-tajalli al-suri*), this type of manifestation is known among the masters of spiritual states and stations (*arbab al-hal wa al-maqam*), and it consists in being remind of his disposition (*hay'atihi*), and reflecting upon His vision (*ru'yatihi*), which is the outcome of the perfection of one's self-detachment (*takhliyatihi*) and self-adornment (*tahliyatihi*). And Allah knows best about the states of His Prophets and Intimate Friends whom He has raised with His most excellent upbringing, and the mirrors of whose hearts He has polished with His most excellent polish, until they witnessed the Station of Divine Presence and Abiding (*maqam al-hudur wa al-baqa*), and they rid themselves of the rust of screens and extinction (*sada' al-huzur wa al-fana*). May Allah bestow on us their yearnings, may He make us taste their states and manners, and may He make us die in the condition of loving them and raise us in their group.[[56]](#footnote-57)

Al-Qari explains further that this *hadith* is sound (*sahih*) and that none would deny its authenticity save a Mu’tazalite. This manifestation of God is but the veil of the form (*hijab al-sura*). What is meant by this is that Allah manifested Himself through His self-disclosure (*tajalli*), in a figurative way (*tajalli suri*), since it would be absurd to interpret it as a literal manifestation (*tajalli haqiqi*). For God manifests Himself in manyness (*anwa' min al-tajalliyat*), yet He is transcendent above possessing a body (*jism*), a form (*sura*) and directions (*jihat*) in regard to His Entity, the One Entity (*‘ayn wahida*). Through this understanding, one solves many difficulties raised by the ambiguousness of verses of the Qur'an that describe the Attributes of Allah.[[57]](#footnote-58) As Al-Qari states, “the door of figurative interpretation is too wide to be predetermined or fixed (*bab al-ta'wil wasi ‘an muhattam*).”[[58]](#footnote-59)

Other commentaries on this *hadith* note that if the Prophet Muhammad saw Allah in a wakeful state rather then in a dream, he saw him “with the eyes of his heart.”[[59]](#footnote-60) Another narration from Ibn ‘Abbas in *Sahih Muslim* states “He saw him with his heart twice,” in a Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*) on the verses 53:11, (“The [Prophet's mind] and heart in no way falsified that which he saw”) and 53:13: (“For indeed he saw him at a second descent,”). The first of these two refers to the first time Gabriel descended and appeared in visible form at the Mountain of Light, in the cave of Hira, where he brought Muhammad the first revelation of the Holy Qur'an. The second refers to the Prophet's *mi'raj*. Yet another explanation of this mystical *hadith* as narrated in *Sahih Muslim* and al-Tirmidhi is that what the Prophet saw was light. When asked by Abu Dharr if he had actually seen his Lord, the Prophet answered, “I saw light (*nur*).”[[60]](#footnote-61) The Prophet may have been making a subtle play on words, since *Al-Nur* (Light) is one of the names of God in the Qur’an.

Sound reports among the Companions of Muhammad differed as to whether the Prophet saw Allah or not. Ibn 'Abbas related that he most certainly did, while Ibn Mas’ud, ‘A'isha, Abu Hurayra, and Abu Dharr related reports to the contrary, maintaining that the verses of *Surat al-Najm* referred to the archangel Gabriel and Muhammad. In discussing the Night Journey of Muhammad, the companions differed as well as to whether or not the Prophet encountered his Lord during his ascension into the Heavens. It is authentically narrated through Ibn 'Abbas that Muhammad saw Allah, and it has also been narrated through Ibn 'Abbas that the Prophet, “saw Him with his heart.” Those who denied that Muhammad saw the Lord also denied that he met with Allah in his *mi'raj*. Abu Dharr narrates that he asked the Prophet, “Did you see your Lord?” to which Muhammad responded, “I saw a huge light, how could I see Him (*nurun anna arah?*)” That is, light came in between the Prophet and His sight.[[61]](#footnote-62) How then could two authenticated views of such a personal encounter with God be true? Ibn 'Abbas's statements that “He saw Him” and “He saw Him with his heart” are not in necessarily contradictory for it is said that the Prophet said, “I saw my Lord, glorified and exalted is He!” The latter statement is said to have taken place, not during his Night Journey, but rather in Medina, when Muhammad was alone at the time of the dawn prayer, after which he told his companions about his vision of Allah during his sleep at night. Imam Ahmad declared, on the basis of this evidence: “Yes, he saw him in reality (*na’am ra'ahu haqqan*), for the dream-visions of Prophets are real.”[[62]](#footnote-63)

**Ibn al-Arabi and the concept of Unity in Being (Wahdat al-Wujud)**

Whether a human being can actually see God's face or not, the Qur'an also rather cryptically declares that “wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God.”[[63]](#footnote-64) This idea that Allah's Face is present wherever one may turn is profoundly related to Ibn al-Arabi's concept of *wahdut al-wujud*. *Wujud* is generally translated as “being” or “existence,” though scholars such as Marijan Mole and Annemarie Schimmel favor the more literal translation of *wujud* as “finding” or “to be found,” as it designates God's own Reality and Essence.[[64]](#footnote-65) For our purposes here, *wujud* will be translated as “Being.” This “Being” refers strictly to God's Essence: He is His own reality and all that is in creation relates back to Him.[[65]](#footnote-66) While the word *wujud* is not found anywhere in the Qur'an, it is an all-encompassing word used in certain metaphysical and philosophical works to refer to the Reality of God's Entity. God is the Real, and this Reality permeates the cosmos, thus no one can deny Him. The cosmos are made up of many entities, and so both Ibn al-Arabi and the philosophers have attempted to distinguish “existence” in a general sense from

Being, the many from the One, creaturely being from that of the Creator. Chittick phrases the issue in a question, “If God is *wujud,* are the things also *wujud*?” For Ibn al-Arabi, the answer is yes and no, “God alone is Being” he says, “the 'existence' of the things is identical to that Being, in themselves these things are nonexistent.”[[66]](#footnote-67) In clearer terms, the cosmos and the entities that inhabit it are He/not He, Real/Unreal. In as much as a thing exists, it can only be Real, since the unreal does not exist.

The unreal becomes manifest in the form of the Real. But the unreal is nonexistence. It has no existence, while the form is existent, so it is Real. So where is the entity of the unreal which became manifest, when the form is only Real?[[67]](#footnote-68)

Ibn al-Arabi sees the self-disclosure of God, His pure Being, as revealing Himself to creation through the absolute inwardness in the world of created things. “We ourselves are the attributes by which we describe God,” he notes, “our existence is merely an objectification of His existence.”[[68]](#footnote-69) In the “Contemplation of the Light of Existence as the Star of Direct Vision Rises,” Ibn al-Arabi writes that God declared that “existence is through Me, it comes from Me, and it is Mine. Existence comes from Me, but it is not through Me, nor is it Mine. Existence is not through Me, nor does it come from Me.”[[69]](#footnote-70) By this, he asserts a relationship in which God is necessary for us in order that we may exist, and our existence is necessary for God so that He may be manifested to Himself. Ibn al-Arabi summarizes this relationship in verse:

When my Beloved appears,

With what eye do I see Him?

With His eye, not with mine,

For none sees Him except Himself.[[70]](#footnote-71)

This correlates to the Qur'anic verses in which God says, “We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, in play; We created them not save in truth, but most of them know it not,”[[71]](#footnote-72) and “We created not the heavens and the earth, and all between them, save through the truth.”[[72]](#footnote-73) These verses relate to the above narration by Ibn al-Arabi in that in creating humanity, God bestowed upon us a scion of His light (*nur*) and His breath (*al-ruh al-ilahi*). This is the revealed truth (*haqq*) that Sufi mystics come to understand and propagate. Nothing created is without the Truth of God, we are beholden to Him and only Him as the Creator. When one reaches the highest spiritual station, we acknowledge that our vision is not our own, but God’s. He appears to us through His own Divine manifestation, and our human qualities and attributes merge with the Divine attributes, thus we are lost to bodily form and we see Him “with His eye, not with mine, for none sees Him except Himself.”[[73]](#footnote-74) This truth is the Absolute Reality of creation in its relationship with the Creator. Our existence is unreal, and He is the Real.

Ibn al-Arabi makes note of this Real through Whom creation takes place (*al-haqq al-makhluq bihi*). When God created, He breathed His essence, or spirit (*al-ruh al-ilahi*) into existence. Ibn al-Arabi calls this breath, the Breath of the All-Merciful (*Al-Rahman*),[[74]](#footnote-75) for it is from this breath of the Real that all creation is made manifest, becoming the levels of creation, entities, and the cosmos itself. For in the Qur’an, God says: “I fashioned him and breathed into him My spirit.”[[75]](#footnote-76)

The Qur'an reminds us that we were created from this breath of life, and were always in existence, even within the realm of nonexistence. By this, it is meant that our original existence is within the primordial nonexistence when nothing existed except for God. This mystical paradox is referred to in the Qur'an, where it is said: “Indeed, I created thee before, when thou hadst been nothing!”[[76]](#footnote-77) The Breath of the All-Merciful is the breathing out (*nafkh*) of the Being of the Real, and through it creation takes shape (*tashakkul*). The forms of the entities and cosmos become manifest within the Real, and it is called “Real” as it is identical with the Breath of the All Merciful which is hidden within the Breather of creation. Thus the Breath of God itself is non-manifest, but once breathed, it takes on the properties of the manifest. The Qur'an makes this clear, “He is the First, and the Last, the Inward, and the Outward: and He has knowledge of all things.”[[77]](#footnote-78)

Ibn al-’Arabi explains that “It follows that everything in the universe, everything other than God, is God's self-disclosure *(tajalli*)*,* because everything displays *wujud*, and, by having specific characteristics, it displays the traces of God's names.”[[78]](#footnote-79) What Ibn al-Arabi is expressing here is that God has made Himself manifest within creation, everything is the way it shall be because God has manifested it as such and He has disclosed Himself in that form. This self-disclosure Ibn al-Arabi describes is synonymous with the Sufi concept of unveiling (*kashf*). When God unveils Himself to the human being, one is witness (*shahid*) to the self-display of the Divine.

Self-disclosure (*tajalli*) is employed in the Qur'an in two particular verses. The first is in 7:143, which Sufis frequently cite as it refers to the vision (*ru'ya*) of God in this world, rather then the hereafter.

And when Moses came to Our appointed time and his Lord spoke to him, he said: “O my Lord, show me, that I may look upon Thee! Said He, “Thou shalt not see Me; but behold the mountain, if it stays fast in its place, then thou shalt see Me.” And when his Lord disclosed himself(*tajalli*) to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down thunderstruck.[[79]](#footnote-80)

Everything within the creation is God's self-disclosure, yet Ibn al-Arabi and other mystics hold that only the people of God perceive his *tajalli* in all things. Self-disclosure illuminates; nonexistence is made radiant by the illumination of God's Self-Disclosure, which is eternal:

The Divine Self-Disclosure is everlasting (*da'im*). No veil is upon it. However, it is not known that it is it... When God created the cosmos, He made it hear His speech in the state of its nonexistence. That is His word, “Be!” The cosmos was witnessed by Him, but He was not witnessed by it. Upon the eyes of the possible things was the veil of nonexistence, no other. They did not perceive the Existent Being while they were nonexistent. In the same way light dispels darkness, for darkness cannot subsist along with the existence of light. Such was the situation of nonexistence and Being.[[80]](#footnote-81)

While Divine manifestation (*tajalli*) can be found in creation, this is not to say that God is the stars, the oceans, mountains or humankind in general, for to perceive God as just this, a multiplicity of forms within creation, would be akin to pantheism, and hence a form of polytheism (*shirk*). *Wujud* belongs only to God, the One Entity (*‘ayn wahida*), and His *wujud* is identical with His reality. The diversity of appearances in the cosmos pertains not to the oneness of the Entity, but to the multiplicity of the things of creation, which are nonexistent in themselves, but their existence is dependent upon the *wujud* God bestows upon them. As the Sheikh al-Akbar (Ibn al-Arabi) explains, “creation is an activity, and within it activity becomes manifest.”[[81]](#footnote-82) Ibn al-Arabi uses the phrase *wahida fi'l wujud*, “one in *wujud*” to explain that creation's reality exists only within the Real.

When creation ceases to be, what of the inherent presence of God is within it? “All that exists on the earth will perish, but the Face of your Lord will remain full of Majesty and Glory.”[[82]](#footnote-83) Ibn al-Arabi further commented that “each thing will be perishing forever, as each always has been. None of its descriptions will change, and none of *wujud*'s descriptions will change, for *wujud* is *wujud* and nonexistence is nonexistence.”[[83]](#footnote-84) The *wujud* of God is eternal and of a substance that is imperishable. Our spirit (*ruh*) originates from the Lord. God breathed His spirit (*al-ruh al-ilahi*) into each created thing, and thus all of the cosmos is a scion of the Breath of the All-Mighty. When cosmic destruction occurs, these scions of *ruh* within each of us will return to their Lord, for the Qur'an says, “all that exists on the earth will perish, but the Face of your Lord will remain full of Majesty and Glory.”[[84]](#footnote-85) In this destruction of creation, entities shall be united once again with the Lord. For God is He that brings together all creation. *Jam’*, “bringing together,” is an attribute of God that binds all to Him. The Sheikh al-Akbar refers to this bringing together of many things as *ahadiyyat al-majmu;* “the unity of what has been brought together.”[[85]](#footnote-86)

*Wahdat al-wujud* is not simply “unity of being,” but also a description of the act of being. To be in *wujud* is to be “found,” and hence one is a witness (*shahid*) to the reality of existence through the manifestation of the Divine within creation. In simpler terms, one's existence, that is, one's *wujud*, is gained by being “found” (i.e., perceived) by God. God's essence is not necessarily “found” in the cosmos, in the individual, for creation is not identical to the creator. God is found within creation in so much as He discloses Himself therein. This means that creation is a reflection of the Divine Attributes. To call *wahdat al-wujud* pantheism, as some have criticized, is to misinterpret the foundation of the Sheikh al-Akbar's teachings.

**The Experiential Sufi Perspective on Wajh Allah**

In comparison to the innate spirit of God (*al-ruh al-ilahi*), the Divine Spirit, from which all spirit is made manifest is akin to that of a fire upon which wood is lit. The Divine Spirit, or Universal Spirit (*al-ruh al-kull*) of God is the fire that ignites the kindling. This ignition in which the kindling and spark meet is the breath of life for which Allah has created all beings. “When I have proportioned him and blown into him of My spirit, fall down before him in prostration.”[[86]](#footnote-87) This spirit of God, which God refers to explicitly in the Qur’an as “My spirit,” is what Ibn al-'Arabi calls the *ya'i* spirit, that is, a spirit attached to the letter *ya*, which designates the pronoun “My.”[[87]](#footnote-88) The spirit of Allah is thus breathed into man, the original man being Adam. From this singular spirit made flesh, humanity is born, for “Your Guardian Lord created you from a single person or soul.”[[88]](#footnote-89)

To go back to my metaphor of the fire, when the kindling reacts to the spark, fire is brought forth. From this fire is created light and warmth, and as this fire increases in heat, so too does it engulf other kindling, until all that is left is fire itself. Each individual

piece of kindling represents that which God created, namely the *nafs* of man, the self, the ego. When the spark of life meets the fleshy self, spirit is born and man is created. Yet for individual souls, all spirit originates in that which it emanates from the *ruh al-kull*, the Universal Spirit of Allah. When the kindling is burned out, only fire and its light shall remain. Likewise, when creation ceases to be, all that will be left is the intangible spirit, the light which is our true form. This light (*nur*) is a scion of Al-Nur, “The Light” which the Qur'an presents as one of the Names of God. “Unto Him do all things return,” as the Qur'an so often maintains. Cyprian Rice makes note of this breathing in of the spirit in as represented in the symbolic meaning of the first half of the *kalima*, the Muslim declaration of *la ilaha illa Allah*, there is no god but Allah. “*la ilah* points to the emanation of “things other than He, and *illa Allah* indicates their return to Him, to the everlasting Unity.”[[89]](#footnote-90)

Ibn al-Arabi's metaphysical interpretation of tasawwuf has been influential in the Sufi understanding of God and the Qur'an. Sheikh al-Akbar's teachings have influenced many Sufi orders throughout the centuries, and his writings are still considered by many as the primary sources for the understanding the essence of creation and its relation to God.

Not all Sufi expression is found in the realm of metaphysics however. Many have chosen, one may say, a more “direct” approach to experiencing God. These Sufis, which I will call “experiential” or “devotional” Sufis, believed that direct experience of the Divine was to be favored over metaphysical, philosophical knowledge of God. Personalities such as Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyyah, Abu Yazid al-Bistami, Jalal ad-Din Rumi and Ruzbihan Baqli can be considered proponents of this school of mystical expression.

Ruzbihan Baqli and the Secrets Revealed to HimNone detailed their intimate accounts with the Divine more explicitly than the early 13th century mystic Ruzbihan Baqli. His diary, *Unveiling the Secrets*, has become a foundational literary work that exemplifies the form of devotional and experiential Sufism. Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209) was a Persian mystic whose diary of mystic visions has had a profound effect on Persian Sufism. His visions involve a vivid, if symbolic, understanding of the Face of Allah and what exactly one encounters on the mystic path when the soul is lost to the self, and all that remains is the Face of God. He recounts a visionary experience that caused him to leave his vegetable shop (Baqli translates as “the grocer”) and wander in the desert for over a year until joining the Sufis and training for years in meditative discipline. He began recording his visions in a diary in 1181 when he was fifty-five years old.[[90]](#footnote-91) It is important to note that Baqli's diary is replete with evidence of his knowledge of the Qur'an and *ahadith*. His mysticism, in other words, was profoundly Islamic and he was the author of one of the most important works of Qur’anic commentary (*tafsir*). Baqli makes heavy use of the Qur'an and the *ahadith* of Muhammad throughout his entries. A central theme that runs through his writings is the mystical experience of veiling and unveiling. When God is veiled, and His Divine qualities are lost to Ruzibihan, and he is filled with longing for the Divine. When God reveals His *wujud* to him, the unveiling becomes an ecstatic experience in which God feels so familiar and close that Baqli's sense of self is annihilated and the Divine emerges in the human being. As Ernst notes:

The process of union with God is first experienced as a progressive unveiling of those luminous barriers. Yet the essence of divinity is beyond imagination and conception; human nature is incapable of directly experiencing God in His infinity. God's mercy is so ample, however, that He makes Himself visible to His lover by veiling Himself in forms, which are the forms of divinity (*tajalli*).[[91]](#footnote-92)

How does one explain these Divine forms of God within traditional Islam, in which any physical conceptualization of God is a form of idolatry (*shirk*)? Ruzbihan Baqli is aware of this tension and struggles to explain how Divine Transcendence can exist with the forms of Divine Manifestation.

After midnight I saw him, the Transcendent One, as though he appeared in a thousand kinds of beauty, among which I saw a glory of lofty likeness, “and He has the loftiest likeness (in the heavens and the earth,) and He is the Mighty, the Commanding.”[[92]](#footnote-93) It was as though He were like the glory of the red rose, and this is a likeness. But God forbid that He have a likeness! “There is no likeness unto Him.”[[93]](#footnote-94) Yet I cannot describe except by an expression, and this description is from the perspective of my weakness and incapacity and my lack of comprehension of the qualities of eternity. In the riverbed of pre-eternity there are deserts and wastelands in which dwell snakes of wrath. If one of them opened its mouth, none of creation or time would escape. Beware the one who describes the pre- eternal Lord, for in the oceans of His Oneness all spirits and consciences are drowned, and they vanish in the sublimities of His Greatness and Might.[[94]](#footnote-95)

From this single entry in Ruzbihan Baqli's diary, one can discern his masterful ability to understand and express his visions in the vocabulary of Sufism and Islamic theology. God's Wrath is associated with His transcendence and juxtaposed to His attributes of inexplicable beauty, majesty and greatness. These attributes ultimately annihilate the finite human ego and manifest in the human being His infinite Divine qualities.

In nearly every entry, Baqli claims to see God in “the most beautiful of forms.” Many times God is simply called The Truth (*Al-Haqq*). An intimate entry is entitled as “The Friend of God,” in which Allah has chosen Baqli as his friend and lover.

Among all that I have recalled, I saw God (glory be to Him) on the roof of my house, with the qualities of might, majesty, and eternity. I saw as it were the world entire, a resplendent light, manifold and great. And he called me from the midst of light, in the Persian tongue, seventy times: “Ruzbihan, I have chosen you for sainthood (*wilaya*) and selected you for love. You are my friend (*wali*) and lover...[[95]](#footnote-96)

This vision is reminiscent of Abu Mansur ‘Ijli and Muttahir b. Tahir Maqdisi Bazigh's ascension narratives. All were chosen for sainthood (*wali*), and thus become true lovers of God, the Beloved. Baqli recalls seeing God in a form with qualities of might, majesty and eternity. These qualities are repeated throughout his diary, and help the reader understand what Ruzbihan was seeing and experiencing. God is presented as a resplendent light, another divine attribute that Baqli frequently encounters. Many times this light or the intimate knowledge of God is so overwhelming that Baqli becomes annihilated in its splendor.

In his *Unveiling of Secrets*, Ruzbihan Baqli writes of seeing the Face of God on many occasions. In his entry, “On the Carpet of Oneness without a Veil,” Baqli talks about seeing God “with the eyes of conscience,” and his being illuminated by the attributes of Allah. The entry is one of his longest and in it he says that after an hour passed, gazing into the “hidden heaven,s” God appeared to him, “in majesty and beauty... I saw the joy and satisfaction in the face of eternity.”[[96]](#footnote-97) In seeing God's Face, Baqli entered into ecstasy, crying out repeatedly as he was “annihilated in his majesty.” He continues to be annihilated in different aspects; annihilation of conscience, annihilation of self as he feels God's nearness to him. At one point God is hidden to him (“he hid from me”) and suddenly reappears (“he manifested Himself”) from the the divine essence in the world of eternity as “divine oneness and singleness.” Ruzbihan becomes enthralled and God calls him from beyond the throne in which he sees God completely unveiled to him. In this nakedness between the human soul and the Divine Beloved, God says to him,

Ruzbihan! Do not shed tears at the shifting flow of the shapes of the actions, and do not doubt what you have seen; 'I am I,'[[97]](#footnote-98)your Lord, the One, the Single. You do not deserve that I should distress you in the oceans of unknowing. I am yours throughout My creation, so do not worry over anything. I shall convey you to the station of 'the vision of vision,' and I shall seat you on the carpet of My nearness forever, without a veil.[[98]](#footnote-99)

This intimate relationship that Baqli encounters with God is one that many Sufis have encountered and experienced, albeit to a lesser extent. Baqli's visions are extremely detailed and describe the Lord in very anthropomorphic terms. Yet Baqli is always quick to distinguish his visions from a crass anthropomorphism. He frequently cites the Qur’anic verse: “He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth… nothing is His likeness, and He is the One, that Hears and Sees”[[99]](#footnote-100) in defending his visions. He is critical of the intellectuals who in his time attempted to define what God is. “Glory be to God, glory be to Him beyond what the intellects ascribe to him.”[[100]](#footnote-101) In other entries Baqli reports that God Himself chastises those who liken a form to Him: “I transform the world and what is in it, and nothing temporal harms Me. I transcend the imaginations of charlatans and the allusions of the analogists.”[[101]](#footnote-102)

Many of Baqli's visions are controversial in their descriptions of the prophets in relation to God. In “Anointing the Prophets” he asks God where the prophets and messengers have gone? To which God replies, “they have been annihilated in the lights of eternity.” Suddenly the prophets appear to Baqli, “departing like great drunkards from the lights of eternity, and all of them when in front of God Most High.”[[102]](#footnote-103)

Some of Baqli's visions are seemingly violent in nature, in contrast to the loving, compassionate and friendly God that he frequently encounters:

He took me and slaughtered me. Much blood poured from my neck, and all the ditches filled up with my blood. My blood was like the shining of the rising sun, greater than the regions of the heavens and the earth. Crows of angels took my blood and anointed their faces with it.[[103]](#footnote-104)

I saw a tawny lion of mighty form, clothed with mighty power, walking on top of Mount Qaf. He ate up all the prophets, the messengers and the saints, and their flesh remained in his mouth, and the blood dripped from it. I thought, “If I were there, would he meat me as he ate them?” And I found myself in his mouth, and he ate me...[[104]](#footnote-105)

The two passages describe what most would consider nightmarish visions. How could Ruzbihan Baqli correlate these visions of blood and violence to the loving, overwhelmingly beautiful God he describes so fully elsewhere? Yet, if the Qur'an emphasizes Allah is Merciful and Compassionate, it also indicates that He is wrathful and strict in punishment.[[105]](#footnote-106) However, one may examine the esoteric nature of the above visions and discern a completely different perspective. Even in the case of these violent visions, Allah's Mercy and Love are boundless. In “The Ditches of Blood” passage,[[106]](#footnote-107) the slaughtering of Ruzbihan is the annihilation of the soul into God. The blood symbolizes life and as the blood fills the ditches, it “was like the shining of the rising sun, greater than the regions of the heavens and the earth.”[[107]](#footnote-108) This can be interpreted as alluding to the Qur'anic verse “To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return. *(Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*)”[[108]](#footnote-109)

In the latter passage, entitled “The Lion of Oneness,” the vision of the lion alludes to God. This symbol of the Lion represents pride, majesty, and might all in one. For God will not readily forgive those who associate anything with Him.[[109]](#footnote-110)Again, we can theorize that the eating of the prophets, the messengers, the saints and Ruzbihan Baqli himself symbolizes the Divine Union of soul and Creator. Baqli ends the passage by saying that “The Truth (*Al-Haqq*) manifests the attributes of eternal greatness in the form of the Lion. Its real significance is that the knower of God is a morsel for the wrath of unknowing in the station of annihilation.”[[110]](#footnote-111) The idea that one becomes a “morsel” for God ultimately ties into the concept of *fana*. Here the *ruh* of the human, and for that matter, all of creation, is “devoured” by God. Our souls are “eaten up,” and we are released from this realm of existence. Thus our souls are digested and returned to Him in a primordial paradox of existence within the nonexistence, where nothing exists except the Real, God and only God.

Baqli pays the utmost respect to “his prophet,” Muhammad. He notes the Prophet's superior knowledge of the Divine and Muhammad's unique relationship with God in several entries. In “The Ocean of Wine” entry, he envisions Muhammad, “cross-legged in the midst of the deep ocean, drunk... in his hand was a cup of wine from that ocean.”[[111]](#footnote-112) Most traditional practicing Muslims would find this image appalling and blasphemous, but for Baqli and many Sufis it is a vision of Muhammad drunk on the love of God. Ruzbihan is given drink of this wine from the ocean, and states that “I realized that he is superior to all the rest of creation, since they die thirsty and he is drunk in the midst of the ocean of majesty.”[[112]](#footnote-113)

Ruzbihan spends a great deal of time with Muhammad through many visions. At one point they travel together to reach God, spending time conversing, eating and drinking. “The Truth appeared to Muhammad, and I saw Him show something to him. I was looking at God and how He dealt with his beloved (Muhammad)... secrets occurred between them of which I was unaware.”[[113]](#footnote-114) This vision is different from many of Baqli's other visions in that it does not involve his own experiences with the divine but Muhammad's. Baqli is merely a witness to the events that unfold.

For Baqli and all Sufis, Muhammad is the epitome of human perfection in their encounter with the divine. For he is “the closest of them to God Most High”[[114]](#footnote-115) and when God manifests Himself to the prophets, “all were veiled from The Truth, except for Muhammad.”[[115]](#footnote-116) These visions portray the final prophet as a man with the most intimate knowledge of the Creator, one who not only knows his Lord, but is “the beloved of The Beloved.” This relationship which Baqli frequently mentions is not lost on the reader, and one feels an intimacy with Muhammad as if one were there to bear witness to the mystical events being recorded.

A key aspect of Baqli's visions is his constant annihilation in God (*fana*). Many times this occurs upon seeing God's Face (*wajh*). In “The Station of Annihilation” Baqli notes that this station is the station of lovers:

Who have drunk the ocean of oneness of greatness... they are in a station of annihilation; they have no eye that is not obliterated, no heart that is not dismayed, no intellect that is not annihilated, no conscience that is not vanishing. Glory be to Him who transcends the allusions and expressions of all.[[116]](#footnote-117)

Numerous entries in *Unveiling of the Secrets* describe seeing God's Face. While some very common themes and images appear throughout Baqli’s visions, each vision is uniquely different from any previous of his previous encounters of the Divine. For the Sufi, each experience in encountering the Face of God is without comparison, even to one's own previous interactions. Baqli, like many Sufis, encounters the Face of God using his internal eye, or the eye of the heart:

The Truth manifested His Eternal Face to my heart, without me asking how; it was as though I was looking at Him with an external eye, and the hidden world shone from the appearance of His glory.[[117]](#footnote-118)

The “external eye” is the ocular vision of the human being, and not the “eye of the heart” which was discussed earlier. In this vision, Baqli is given a special blessing that allows him not only to see *Wajh Allah* manifested in his heart, but also to experience it physically with his own human eyes, a perception that does not seem to be experienced very often, if at all, in Sufi mysticism. Despite this intimate blessing, Baqli has trouble describing what his inward and outward vision perceives:

I saw a face vaster than all of heaven and earth, and the throne and the footstool, scattering the lights of His glory, and it was beyond analogies and similitudes.[[118]](#footnote-119)

Despite seeing God's Face, Baqli makes note that it is not to be compared to anything within creation, as it is “beyond analogies and similitudes.” This relates back to 42:11 of the Qur'an, “there is no likeness unto Him,” a verse Baqli frequently cites to defend his visions as real. As a mystic, Baqli envisions God in a bodily form, but he is aware that it is only a self-disclosure and not God’s reality being revealed. By referring back to 42:11, Baqli attempts to show that he is not one who believes God has a literal, physical form (*jism*), thus refuting any allegations against those who would make anthropomorphic assumptions of God based on his visions.

He turned His face toward me, and I saw the joy of satisfaction in His beauty. I was in a state of rapture and intimacy, unable to contain myself from doing the things that a rash drunkard will do when overcome by recklessness and joy.[[119]](#footnote-120)

When one experiences the Face of God, all rationalization is done away with, and the rapture and ecstasy of the experience is beyond any description. Baqli likens this irrational behavior to a “rash drunkard” who is overcome with both recklessness and joy simultaneously.

Anything but God Most High is annihilated in less than an eye blink. The Truth remains unveiled in the beauty of oneness and the power of endlessness. He said, “Everything is perishing but His Face.”[[120]](#footnote-121) That is the station of singleness and annihilation. I remained astonished and was annihilated, and I do not know where I was.[[121]](#footnote-122)

My mind considered the saying of the Prophet, “His veil is light; were He to lift it, the sublimities of His Face would consume as far as His eye could see of His creation.”[[122]](#footnote-123)

The Qur'anic verse: “Everything is perishing but His Face,”[[123]](#footnote-124) is referenced to explain what was occurring in his vision. The sheer beauty and majesty of God's Face is overwhelming, even for the entirety of creation. The *hadith* of Muhammad reminds us that even the cosmos becomes astonished and is ultimately destroyed in the infinite beauty of the Divine Face.

The Face of God Most High, transcending the indication of thought, was unveiled to me... He manifested Himself within me, and from the vision of His Face came the sweetness of longing, the melting of the spirit, the agitation of the inner consciousness, the shattering of the heart, and the annihilation of intellect.[[124]](#footnote-125)

It is interesting to note Baqli’s statement: “He manifested Himself within me.” This stands in contrast to other visions in which Baqli loses all sense of the self in his spiritual annihilation. This inner manifestation of God within man is the placement of the spirit within the body.[[125]](#footnote-126) Within each of us, is a spark of the Divine spirit breathed into us (*al-ruh al-ilahi*). This spirit placed in creation is not creation itself, but it is God's *wujud* manifesting itself within creation. This recalls the concept that all is “one in *wujud*” (*wahida fi'l wujud*), that is, creation only exists within the Real (i.e. God). Without this *ruh al-ilahi, wujud* ceases to manifest itself in the presence of creation, and cosmic creation is thus annihilated. To truly experience the *wujud* of God one must first recognize what Ibn al-Arabi calls the Universal Spirit of God (*al-ruh al-kull*). Through this one may come to understand the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). This is the truth of existence for the Sufi, a recognition that the Ultimate Truth in all creation is God, and it is only through Him that things exist.

**The Shi’i Perspective**

We have looked at Ibn al-Arabi's metaphysical interpretation of *wajh Allah* and its relationship to Sufism, as well as the mystical expression of experiential, devotional Sufism favored by those such as Ruzbihan Baqli. Both mystical perspectives are considered genuine and practical as effective means to experiencing the Face of God.

These two mystical perspectives can be found in both Sunni and Shi’i traditions. Thus far, we have covered only Sunni mystical thought. What makes Shi’i mysticism different from Sunni mysticism is its emphasis on the family of Muhammad (*ahl al-bayt*). Eleven of the twelve Imams of Shi’i Islam, are descended from Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and his son-in-law ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, who is the first Imam. The twelve Imams, are considered by the Shi’a to be the divinely appointed spiritual guides for Muslims for all time. This emphasis on the Imams is what makes mysticism in Shi’ism both more prominent than, and distinct from, that of its Sunni counterpart.

To recall the analogy of fire, which I proposed earlier, let us discuss the light of the fire. Just as not all flames of fire are equal in regards to temperature, so, too, not all spiritual light, is created equal in Shi’i mystical thought. For example, the

prophets of God, as well as His saints (*awilya')* are created from light purer than that from which the rest of humanity was created. Muhammad, Fatima, and ‘Ali, along with their progeny, known collectively as the Fourteen Impeccables, are created from a pure *nur* (light) and a pure clay, whereas the rest of mankind is created of a lesser quality of clay.[[126]](#footnote-127) *Al-nur al-Muhammadiyya* is a primordial light that was passed through the Prophet, Fatima and the Twelve Imams. Ja’far al-Sadiq, the sixth Shi’ite Imam, references this succession of light, saying: “we were spirits of light, and we taught the secrets of the Science of Unification and Glorification to the shadows... We were silhouettes of light revolving around the Throne of the All-Merciful.”[[127]](#footnote-128) They, along with Muhammad, represent the truest beginnings of creation, created before Adam was made from clay and He (Allah) breathed His spirit into him. The shadows Ja’far al-Sadiq describes are the rest of humanity. In this shadowy pre-existence, the *wujud* of Allah is known to the individual self, for in our primordial conception we were illuminated by the Light of Muhammad and his progeny, whose light is the Light of Allah, *Al-Nur*.

As noted earlier, the majority of Sufi brotherhoods (*turuq*)trace their lineage back to ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, and many *salasil* (those of the Naqshbandiyya, Qadiriyya, Nimatullahiyya, Shadhilliyya, Rifa’i to name the more prominent orders) have several of the Shi’i Imams within their lineage of mystical guides. ‘Ali al-Rida, the eighth Imam within the *Ithna Ashariyya* (Twelver) branch of Shi’ism, seems to be the last of the Imams to have had intimate connections with the Sufi Orders. This is not to say that the last four Imams were against *tasawwuf*; rather it was likely due to the political situation and tensions of the time, that the open link between Shi’ism and Sufism was no longer explicit, and went “underground” as it were.[[128]](#footnote-129) Haydar Amuli (d. 1385) made a profound statement concerning the influence of the Shi’i Imams and their teachings played within the Sufi tradition, saying that “every true Shi’ite is a Sufi and every true Sufi is a Shi'te.”[[129]](#footnote-130)

This statement suggests that the Imams are not only the rightful guides within the realm of Shi’i Islam, but are also among the guides, in the truest sense of the word, in the lineage of most Sufi Orders as well. If Sufism is considered the heart of Islam (*qalb al-Islam*),[[130]](#footnote-131) then the Imam can be considered the inner guide through whom the Sufi is led to knowledge and comes to understand. Another line of Shi’i mystical thought makes a connection between the Imams and the Divine Attributes. God's attributes are either those that concern His Essence (*dhat*) or those that concern His Acts (*fi’l*). The attributes of God's Essence are eternal and without need of those attributes that constitute His Acts. God is always Living (*hayy*) and He can never be otherwise. He is the All Knower (‘*alim*) and is never “unknowing.” The attributes of His Acts are not necessarily present or manifest until after creation. These attributes are sometimes explained of being those whose opposite meaning can also qualify God. For example, He is Merciful (*rahim*), yet He can also be vengeful (*muntaqim*). He can be satisfied (*radi*) but also angry (*sakhit*) and so on. These attributes are also manifested within the cosmos. They manifest in places, “vehicles” or “organs,” so as to present themselves to creation in its entirety, or to humanity in particular. Amir-Moezzi regards these “vehicles” or “organs” of God's Attributes as the Imams. In Shi’i tradition, the Imams state: “we are the eye (*‘ayn*) of God, His side (*janb*), his tongue (*lisan*), His ear (*udhn*), we are the hand (*yad*) of God and we are his face (*wajh*).”[[131]](#footnote-132)

Abu Qurra, a disciple of the eighth Imam, ‘Ali al-Rida, asked him, “It is said that God divided Hearing and Vision between two prophets; Hearing went to Moses and Vision went to Muhammad.” al-Rida replied, “But who was it that preached divine revelation to the *jinn* and to men: 'Sights cannot reach Him, but He reaches [all] sights.'[[132]](#footnote-133)” The Imams, like Prophet Muhammad before them, insisted that to see the Face of God, one must see with the heart. The fifth Imam, Abu Ja'far al-Baqir is quoted as saying, “He cannot be seen with the eyes, but hearts can see Him through the realities of faith; God cannot be known by analogy or apprehended by the senses or compared to humans; He is described by signs, recognized by indices.”[[133]](#footnote-134)

The Imam’s denial that he might see God with ocular vision is in line with most Qur'anic verses and Sufi teachings. To go back to the teachings of Ibn al-Arabi, how can one see God's *wujud* in a realm of physicality in which all is unreal and His *tajalli* or Divine Self-Manifestation, is veiled? What is seen and experienced of the Divine, can only be done through the “eye of the heart” and the light (*nur*) of truth (*haqiqa*). In Shi’i thought, this light is the pre-existential light of the Imam given to him upon his birth.

The birth of an Imam, according to Shi’i belief, is accompanied by a “column of light” (*‘amud min nur*). The moment the Imam is born, God makes a light appear for him, which has been described as a “minaret of light,” or “a lamp of light.”[[134]](#footnote-135) This light fills all of space, from the earth to the Throne of God. The Imam draws his knowledge from it, since he “sees” thereby it all he wants to know. Throughout his entire life, the Imam is able to draw from this column of light, and draw upon a knowledge deeper than any created beings. Through this light, he knows hidden thoughts (*damir*) and sees the actions of the creatures (*a’mal al-khala'iq*).[[135]](#footnote-136)

Believers are able to share with the Imams in this connection to God's light. The Imams have been known to compare their followers to “lights brighter than those seen by earthly beings in the heavens,” or to suggest that celestial beings (angels) can see the people of earth due to the believer being made of light.”[[136]](#footnote-137) This recalls the verse of the Qur'an, in which it is said: “For whomever God has not created light, will have no light.”[[137]](#footnote-138) The light of the believers is derived from the light of the Imams, whose light is derived from the light of Muhammad (*nur al-Muhammad*). Ja’far al-Sadiq explains this light upon the believers in their primordial origins:

Verily God created the believer (*mu'min*) from His light and dyed him (*sabaghahu*) in His mercy (*rahmatihi*) and took the primordial pact (*mithaq*) of *walayah* from him for us; and the *mu'min* is the brother of his fellow *mu'min*, through his mother and his father. His father is light (*nur*) and his mother is mercy (*rahmah*) and he observes through this light from which he was created.[[138]](#footnote-139)

By virtue of this primordial oath of the believer, the light of Muhammad through his descendants, the Imams, is transmitted to the believer. Thus, the Imam acts as a spiritual guide from there on, and the believer is blessed with this light as a beacon of inner guidance.

This beacon of inner light is explained by al-Baqir when he says, “the light of the Imam in the hearts of the faithful is more brilliant than that of the brilliant day star (morning).”[[139]](#footnote-140) Thus the Imam is the Light of God. God does not make Himself known to the believer except through the realities and principles of faith. Nur Ali Shah makes note of this in his *Salihiyya*, “the Light of the Imam is the manifestation of the Light of God, or of Truth, *haqq*. ‘Ali said that 'to know me as Light is to know God and the knowledge of God is the knowledge of me as Light; he who knows me as Light is a believer whose heart has been tested for faith by God.'”[[140]](#footnote-141) Shah further explains that the heart of a believer has two faces (*wajh*). The first is the apparent face in the exoteric (*zahir*) sense, representing life and the maintenance of the overall vehicle of the soul that is the human body. The hidden face, in the esoteric (*batin*) sense, is that whose origin of manifestation is found in the breast, this is the place of union and the epiphany of the Divine Attributes and Names of Allah, which is why this *wajh* is called “the Throne.” For this reason, ‘Ali, [as the archetypal Imam] is the Throne, for through his esoteric facehe is God, he is the confluence of secrets.[[141]](#footnote-142)

For both Sunni and Shi’i Sufis, this vision of Light within the heart is manifested in the radiant form of the Divine Master. It is through this inner guide, the inner Imam, known as the Divine Master, the Master of Light (*mawla al-nur*), that the Sufi attains knowledge. Only through this knowledge is the believer on the mystical path able to penetrate the secrets of the teaching of the Prophets.

The Imam’s connection to God through the column of light represents the epitome of the perfect man as explained in Sufism. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i acknowledges this in saying that the state of the perfect man, “according to Shi’ite belief is possessed in its fullness by the Imam and through the radiance of his being can be attained by his true followers.”[[142]](#footnote-143) The Imam is the Spiritual Pole (*qutb*) whose existence is necessary for both Shi’i and Sunni mystics. According to the teachings of the Imams, the Imam embodies the Sufi concept of the Universal Man, for he manifests the Divine Names and is the spiritual guide for the lives and actions of men. Tabataba'i asserts that one can say that Sufi masters are “Shi’ite” from the point of view of the spiritual life and are connected with the “Imams’ *walayah*” in its external form of religion through the law (*Shari’ah*).[[143]](#footnote-144) The Imamate of Shi’ism is the unbroken chain of succession of the lamp of light that guides the true followers and bestows upon them an intimate connection with the Imams, the Prophet, and with God.

Sadr al-Din Shirazi, commonly known as Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), further discussed the concept of light and its effect on the mystic. He says: “The gnostic who gazes at things through the light of inspirations sees the high and low at once, and he also witnesses the past and the future all at once, with a gauge that he finds from his own world in his essence.”[[144]](#footnote-145) He proceeds to explain that the mystic becomes a witness to the “First Real of all things, which are put into order and given priority some over others through a witness that is neither temporal nor locational.”[[145]](#footnote-146) The word used here for witness, *ma'iyya*, derives from the Qur'an in which it is said: “He is with you wherever you are.”[[146]](#footnote-147) *Ma'iyya* is employed by Ibn al-Arabi to discuss God's not being “a thing (*shay'*).

The Prophet said, 'God is (*kan*), and no thing is with Him.' The meaning is as follows: He is not accompanied by thingness, nor do we ascribe it to Him. Such is He, and there is no thing with Him. The negation of thingness from Him is one of His essential attributes, just as is the negation of 'witness' (*ma'iyya*) from things.[[147]](#footnote-148)

Creation in itself is comprised of thingness (*shay'iyya*). The mystic who is in union with God sees that God is with the things, but the things are not with Him, since this witnessing of God's separation from thingness follows from the knowledge God bestows upon the one who sees this. The gnostic that gazes into the light, from an inward and outward perspective, “encompasses in knowledge what is in his hand and his domination... he encompasses the times that are the measure of his knowledge and his movement from the first of his life span to its utmost end, all at once, like the instant.”[[148]](#footnote-149)

This knowledge is essentially an understanding of the soul's inherent oneness with God. Nothing exists save Him and, according to Sadra, the soul journeys until it reaches this understanding. He explains the importance of this knowledge in the undertaking of the journey of soul:

The body's death in the external realm is not a cause that has the effect of annihilating the soul, as has been held. So, the fully knowing soul is secure from corruption at the occurrence of the death of the bodies. The root of the essence does not change at the loss of the tools. Indeed, the soul's ignorance is her death, and her knowledge is her life, since intellect is nothing other than conception and imaginalization. Whenever a soul lacks intellect, she fails to find her essence. Whoever fails to find his essence is dead.[[149]](#footnote-150)

Mulla Sadra's explanation of the importance of the soul's knowledge and intellect can go back to the hadith of Imam ‘Ali, in which he said: “He who knows his soul, knows his Lord.”[[150]](#footnote-151) Simply put, if someone lacks the knowledge of the soul, their soul has no existence, because the soul's existence correlates to presence and awareness. Without this, one is dead in both a physical and metaphysical sense.

Sadra compares the soul's original position in the primordial nonexistence where nothing exists except God, to a fruit. Sadra explains that “it begins as a seed whose kernel undergoes corruption in the earth and is annihilated from its essence in alien locations.”[[151]](#footnote-152) He continues on to say, “then it is transmuted by the potency of growth from state to state until it finally reaches what it was at first and arrives at the degree of the kernel that it had at the beginning of its affair.”[[152]](#footnote-153) He further explains how the kernel of the individual will travel this journey along with “individuals of its kind,” meaning other spirits (*ruh*) from the created sphere of existence. Finally, the soul will reunite with its Creator, as “it comes to be an existent that subsists through the subsistence of its Existence-Giver, despite the disintegration and disappearance of those affairs.”[[153]](#footnote-154)

Mulla Sadra's explanation of the soul's journey relies upon the concept of annihilation of the soul in God (*al-fana* *fi Allah*). This annihilation is a concept found in both Sunni and Shi’i mysticism. Some consider it to be the final station while others believe it to be the station prior to the final station of *baqa*. The concept of *al-fana* is one of the most important experiences a Sufi encounters with God. No longer is the Sufi visualizing God through the idea of the self, but sees God through Him, for the self no longer is acknowledged nor does it exist.

Shi’i mysticism emphasizes the Imams as a central point in understanding the soul’s relationship with God. Love for the Imams is the cornerstone for the Shi’i mystic. The Imams are made of a pure light, and by following the Imams, a mystic shares in this pure light through association with the Imams. The Imam is the physical embodiment of the Divine Attributes. This physical embodiment relates to the Sufi concepts of *fana’* and *baqa’*. The Imam is the perfect man according to Sufism. Unlike Sunni mystics, the Shi’i believe the Imams were perfect since the beginning of creation, infallible and predestined to lead the true followers. By submitting to the Imams, one submits to the will of God; devotion to the Imams, is devotion to Allah. They have done away with human attributes and encompass the Divine qualities. By doing so, their face is a self-disclosure of the reality of the face of God.

**The Emphasis of *Fana’* in Sufi Mysticism**

The annihilation of the soul (*fana’*) is an important concept within Sufi thought. It refers to the removal of any sense of the self, the *nafs*, and to a state in which one's mind, body, soul, consciousness, and so on, are completely deluged with God's *wujud*. The Sufi thereby becomes one with God in a mystical Divine union of love. In this annihilation, longing in union the Sufi experiences a “return to the moment when God was, and there was nothing else.”[[154]](#footnote-155) Some scholars have correlated *fana* with the Buddhist and Hindu concept of nirvana, but this is incorrect. For Buddhists and Hindus, the idea is to free oneself from a painful cycle of existence through birth and rebirth. Islam denies the theory of rebirth and the karmic effects of one's actions, accepting rather the idea of the individual soul subject to a single, otherworldly judgment.

*Fana’* is said to occur in three stages. First, it begins as an ethical concept: the self is annihilated in its nature and takes on the attributes of God. What is meant is that one must undergo a psychological struggle to exchange one's base imperfect human qualities for those of the Divine, as described by God Himself in the Qur'an. Ibn al-Arabi

describes this union as a “mutual interpenetration of Divinity and man.” The Divine nature (*al-Lahut*) manifests itself in the human nature (*al-Nasut*).[[155]](#footnote-156) In other words, man becomes the recipient of the Divine qualities, and is absorbed into the Divine Reality of Oneness, where human action is guided by God alone and thus, no longer “human” in action but Divinely mandated. One may look at the Ninety Nine Names of Allah in Islamic theology as a model to mold one's moral character. It is through absorption into the Divine that man loses the sense of self and what he does, for he no longer “sees but is seen.” He is revealed to himself as an indwelling spirit within the Universal Spirit of God (*al*-*ruh al-kull*). There is no distinguishing between the self and God, for all is one, within the One (*ahad*).

The second stage is the annihilation in vision. This is when the soul is encompassed by God's Light, *Al-Nur*. At this point, one is on the brink of the third and final stage, in which one is immersed in the *wujud* of God. Here, the description of *wujud* as “being” and “being found,” is particularly relevant, for the self is no longer in existence; the individual being is engulfed in the Being of God; the self has “been found” through its being perceived by God.[[156]](#footnote-157) “The Real is nothing of these organs until they are burned up by His Being, so that He is there, not they.”[[157]](#footnote-158)

Toshihiko Izutsu explains f*ana’* as “the total nullification of the ego-consciousness, where there remains only the absolute Unity of Reality in its purity as an absolute Awareness prior to its bifurcation into subject and object.”[[158]](#footnote-159) Schimmel notes that the mystic “cannot completely and substantially be annihilated in God, but he may be lost for a while in the fathomless ocean of bewilderment.”[[159]](#footnote-160) The Sufi reformer Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) believed *fana’* to be “at a level not different from a dream; it is not the level of reality. When a mystic sees he is one with God, he is not one with God.”[[160]](#footnote-161)

The case of Al-Hallaj (d.922), was a Persian mystic and writer who, upon reaching *fana’*, was famous for proclaiming “I am The Truth (*ana'l Haqq*),[[161]](#footnote-162) or the case of the Persian Sufi Abu Yazid Bistami (d. 874) saying: “Glory be to Me! How great is My Majesty!”[[162]](#footnote-163) are examples of the mystic losing total consciousness of the notion of the self upon union with God, in which their actions are qualified by the attributes of God. This “after existence” in which the self is lost and thereby lives on in God is known as *baqa*. Bistami further explained his experience of *fana’* and the aftermath of experiencing *baqa’* in the Oneness of Allah (*tawhid*):

I came upon *tawheed* in the vanishing of creatures from the Knower (God), and in the vanishing of the Knower from creatures. When I came upon *tawheed* there was realized in me the vanishing of all creatures from Allah Most High and the aloneness of Allah in His Majesty from His creation.[[163]](#footnote-164)

This concept is not without its critics however. The conservative *salafiyya* movement and the rationalists which will be discussed in the following sections are critical of such a notion. For them, the concept of the soul becoming annihilated in God is a form of *shirk* and is in conflict with the Oneness (*tawhid*) of Allah.

Similar views have been expressed in Sufism as well, even Ibn al-Arabi, one of the greatest minds that ever formulated Sufi thought, believed that *fana’* was impossible. As explained earlier, God's Being (*wujud*) is separate from material creation and thus only His Self-Disclosure (*tajalli*) of what He wishes to reveal is evident in the mystical experience.[[164]](#footnote-165) In essence, for those Sufis, like Ibn al-Arabi, God and the created soul can never fully unite, there is always a limit or boundary which the soul can never cross. God's true identity and Face (*wajh*) is never revealed.

Ibn al-Arabi defends his position by citing the Qur'an in which Moses was never able to see God's true form.[[165]](#footnote-166) Conflicting opinion arose over whether or not Muhammad had seen *wajh Allah* in his ascension into the heavens. Ibn al-Arabi concluded that a person cannot experience the true Face of God, for *wajh Allah* cannot be known, since God's reality is His essence (*dhat*) and God's essence lies outside the boundaries of human knowledge. Ernst seems to defend the position of Ibn al-Arabi in his book, *Ruzbihan Baqli*, saying that, “any form of manifestation, no matter how exalted, places a barrier between God and humanity; every manifestation is inevitably a veil.”[[166]](#footnote-167) These veils, of which some traditions say there are seventy,[[167]](#footnote-168) are never completely removed in this life. “Even if you raise them, you will not see Me, and if you do not raise them, you will not see Me.”[[168]](#footnote-169)

For many Sufis, however, *fana’* is the experience of the existence of the Real, and not a mere dream as Sirhindi explains it. It is understood that when one achieves this reality of union, one returns to the original station of nonexistence within His Existence. It is a return to a place where all “creatures” dwelt in peace and harmony with God before creation itself. This annihilation of the self is a return to the primordial self, in which the “I” did not exist. To realize this, is to affirm the truth of the first half of the *kalima* that “there is no god but God.” Nothing exists save for He, the One, The Real, the Eternal. When one realizes the reality of “the nonexistence of existence,” one has destroyed the self, and the illumination of God's Face and *wujud* is all that ever was, and all that ever will be.

**The Conservative Salafiyya-Wahhabiyya perspective on *Wajh Allah***

The idolaters of our own time are worse in their idolatry than the ancients because the ancients were worshiping God in times of affliction and associating others with Him in times of prosperity, but the idolaters of our own time are always guilty of associating others with God whether in prosperity or affliction.[[169]](#footnote-170)

The statement was spoken by Muhammad b. Abdul-Wahhab (d.1792). He was born in what is today known as Saudi Arabia. The founder of the Wahhabiyya movement, a puritanical movement to cleanse the holiest lands of Islam from anything deemed to be a *bid’a*, or “harmful” innovation, in Islamic belief (*aqidah*) and worship (‘*ibadah*). His aim was a return to the example of the righteous ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*), the companions of the Prophet Muhammad and the two generations succeeding them: the *taba’in*, and the *taba’in-taba’in*.

Born into a family of traditional Hanbali scholars and jurists, Ibn Abdul-Wahhab was initially educated by the Naqshbandi sheikh, Abu Tahir Muhammad, who was also the teacher of Shah Wali Allah, an Indian Sufi reformer of the eighteenth century. Largely on the basis of the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Abdul-Wahhab formulated his puritan doctrine of Wahhabism, and eventually, with the help of the Saudi family, would seek to cleanse the land of unbelievers.

Ibn Taymiyya

Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) was born in Harran, located in what is now Turkey. He was a jurist in the Hanbali school of thought and lived during the time of the Mongol invasions. He rejected the use of *kalam*, a rationally-oriented Islamic theology, to interpret the Qur'an, hadith, and the Divine Names and Attributes of God. He believed it was a harmful innovation (*bid’a*) and thus rejected it outright, claiming that the *salaf al-salih* did not use this method in order to understand God and His Attributes. Interestingly, while the Wahhabiyya-Salafiyya criticize Sufi ideas for bringing Allah too close in relation to human beings, they themselves often adopted anthropomorphisms about God as a result of their commitment to literal interpretation of the Qur’an. Ibn Taymiyya's writings are a good example of this. The modern day Naqshbandi Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani makes note of Ibn Taymiyya’s anthropomorphism and is highly critical of the Salafiyya interpretation as a whole.

Throughout his writings, Ibn Taymiyya asserted that God's “Hand,” “Foot,” and “Face” are literal (*haqiqi*) attributes, and that He is upon the Throne in person (*bi al-dhat*).[[170]](#footnote-171) In his book, *Minhaj ahl-al sunna an-nabawiyya*, he charged the theologians with idol worship, believing they had left the belief of God's Oneness (*tawhid*):

The theologians... have fallen short of the knowledge of the rational proofs which Allah mentioned in His book, so they strayed from them and went into different, innovated directions which, due to the falsehoods contained in them, they went out of some of the truth, which they and other than them share in believing, and they entered into some of the innovated falsehoods, and they have taken out from *tawhid* what belongs to it, for example, *tawhid al-ilahiyya* and the establishment of the literalness of Allah's Names and Attributes.[[171]](#footnote-172)example, *tawhid al-ilahiyya* and the establishment of the literalness of Allah's Names and Attributes.[[172]](#footnote-173)

Ibn Taymiyya's comparison of those who would not agree to his ideas to idol worshippers was an idea that would greatly influence the teachings of Ibn Abdul-Wahhab. The declaration of calling another Muslim a disbeliever (*takfir*) became one of the main doctrines of the Wahhabiyya, and with this, discord and bloodshed fueled the puritanical revolution of the Wahhabiyya within the Arabian Peninsula.

Ibn Taymiyya’s own doctrines may have been influenced by the writings of Abu Ya’la b. al-Farra, (d. 458), a Hanbali jurist who was repudiated severely for his anthropomorphic views. Muhammad al-Tamimi said of him that, “he (Abu Ya’la) had stained the Hanbalis with such distortion and disgrace that the waters of the sea will never wash them clean.”[[173]](#footnote-174) Abu Ya’la said in relation to the external meanings of Allah's attributes: “No matter what arguments to the contrary you give me, I consider it necessary for Him (God) to possess everything in the way of attributes, except a beard and genitals.”[[174]](#footnote-175) The Maliki scholar al-Qadi Abu Bakr b. Al-’ Arabi[[175]](#footnote-176) called Abu Ya’la one of the anthropomorphists (*mujassim*).

This is foul apostasy and a mockery of Allah, and the one who said such a thing has no knowledge of Allah, he must not be followed nor even looked at, nor does he adhere in any way to the Imam whose school he claims to follow and under whose cover he disguises himself; rather, he is a partner of polytheists in their idol worship, for he neither worships Allah nor does he know Allah. He has merely drawn in his own mind an image to be worshiped. Exalted is Allah far above what the heretics and deniers proclaim![[176]](#footnote-177)

Those like Abu Ya’la were the predecessors to Ibn Taymiyya who in turn contributed to the anthropomorphist (*mujassim*) doctrines that would influence Ibn Abdul-Wahhab’s literal interpretation of Adam as created in God's likeness and form (*‘ala suratihi*). His interpretation affirms that Allah has two eyes, a mouth, teeth, two hands, fingers, legs and so on. Ibn al-Salah (d. 1245), a scholar of *ahadith* from Damascus, notes critically that the *mujassim* would say: “We have not heard about the head itself. He can touch and be touched, and His servants can approach His essence. One of them has said: 'And He breathes.' They only placate the common people by adding, 'but not as we think.'”[[177]](#footnote-178)

Ibn al-Jawzi

Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201) was a Hanbali jurist who was nonetheless a harsh critic of the anthropomorphists, many of them whom were claiming to be followers of Imam Hanbal's school of jurisprudence (*madhab*). In this he has stated:

You are adherents and followers of our great *madhab*. Your greatest Imam is Ahmad b. Hanbal, may Allah have mercy on him, who said while under the lash of the Inquisition: “How can I say what was never said?” Beware of innovating in his *madhab* what is not from him! Then, you said regarding the hadiths of the Attributes: "They must be taken in their external sense.” Yet the external sense of *qadam* (foot) is a bodily limb![[178]](#footnote-179)

Ibn al-Jawzi is referring here to the hadith whereby Allah places his “foot” (*qadam*) in the Fire. Accordingly, Ibn al-Jawzi refutes the literalists who claim God has a body (*jism*). In another passage, Ibn al-Jawzi repudiates the anthropomorphist position that God is established literally, in body, upon the throne:

Whoever says: He has established on His throne in His Essence (*bi al-dhat*),” has made Allah an object of sensory perception. It behooves one not to neglect the means by which the principle of religion is established and that is reason. For it is by virtue of reason that we have known Allah and judged Him to be Eternal without beginning. If you were to say: “We read hadiths but we are silent,” no one would have any objection against you. However, your interpretation of the apparent sense is morally repugnant and disgusting. Do not introduce into the madhab of this man of the Salaf, Ahmad b. Hanbal, what his thought does not contain.[[179]](#footnote-180)

Ibn al-Jawzi's emphasis on reason (*'aql*) is consistent with traditional Sunni and Shi’i belief. It was the teachings of the *mujassim* that compelled later writers such as Ibn Taymiyya, and more famously Ibn Abdul-Wahhab to reject reason in favor of narration (*naql*). They relied on narration of *ahadith* and Qur’anic verses in a literal context to support their claims of anthropomorphism such as those mention that God is above the throne and those that mention God’s hands and feet.[[180]](#footnote-181) This, along with the use of sheer military might and political influence, allowed the Wahabiyya reformation to gain a strong foothold in Arabia. Today, the Wahhabiyya have continued what they believe to be a cleansing and reformation of the faith of Islam. The modern Salafiyya such as Muhammad Bin Baz (d. 1999), Ibn Uthayman, Mashur al-Salman, Bilal Phillips, Yasir Qadhi, and others have continued to interpret Allah and His Attributes through anthropomorphism which has is deeply problematic in mainstream Islamic theology.[[181]](#footnote-182) While holding such *mujassim* viewpoints, the Salafiyya rather ironically criticize the adherents of *tasawwuf* for believing in God appearing in form. They attempt to refute the doctrines of *wahdat al-wujud*, *fana’* and mystical utterances claiming union with God as *shirk* in the highest degree. For the modern day Salafi *mujassim*, the mystical beliefs of Sufism are harmful innovations and deviant associations of the non divine with Allah-charges that are grounds for apostasy.

For example, the Salafiyya doctrine would consider al-Bistami and al-Hallaj disbelievers (*kafirun*) for their utterances of divine union, such as “I am the truth,” or “Glory to me,” referenced earlier. In the Qur’an the name *Al-Haqq* (The Truth) is indeed used for God; but it can also be used in a more general sense, as in the verse “truth has come…”[[182]](#footnote-183) Al-Suyuti explains in his *al-Riyad al-Aniqa*:

Among the names and attributes of the Prophet is *al-Haqq*. This was mentioned by al- Qadi 'Iyad and Ibn Dihya. Allah the Exalted said: 'Al-Haqq has come to you from your Lord,'[[183]](#footnote-184) 'Until Al-Haqq came to them, and a manifest Messenger;'[[184]](#footnote-185) 'They gave Al-Haqq the lie when it came to them.'[[185]](#footnote-186) Al-Haqq here means Muhammad, the other being that it means the Qur'an.[[186]](#footnote-187)

Here it is not only the Qur'an that is referred to as “the Truth,” but Muhammad himself, for God has said: “They bear witness that the Messenger is truth.”[[187]](#footnote-188)

In fact, Ibn Taymiyya, whom the Wahhabiyya/Salafiyya claim as an early and leading teacher in their doctrine, has said that when one reaches *fana’*, he is revealed to himself as truth:

This state of love is the state of many people from among the people of love to Allah and the People of Desire of Allah (*ahl al-irada*). When such a person vanishes to himself in the object of his love, that is, Allah, through the intensity of his love. He will recall Allah, not recalling himself, and remember Allah, not remembering himself, and visualize Allah (*yastashhid*), not visualizing himself, and exist in Allah, not in himself. When he reaches that stage, he no longer feels his own existence.[[188]](#footnote-189)

For Ibn Taymiyya, and many others before and after him, *fana’* was the station in which annihilation exposed the human soul to the truth (*haqq*) of reality. This truth is the Absolute Reality that nothing exists except Allah. Those who said “I am the truth (*ana al-haqq*) or “Glory to me (*subhani*)” claimed that they were in the ecstasy of divine union with God. “[Such a person] is drunk with the love of Allah,” Ibn Taymiyya explains, “and this is a pleasure and happiness that he cannot control. From such states the pen of the Law is lifted.”[[189]](#footnote-190)

Muhammad Ibn Abdul-Wahhab

Despite there inherent contradictions, Ibn Abdul-Wahhab’s movement eventually gained momentum when he forged an alliance in 1744 with Muhammad b. Sa'ud, a local ruler at Dari'iyya in the central region of Arabia known as the Najd. Together they launched their puritanical conquest of the Najd and eventually the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. They waged holy war (*jihad*)[[190]](#footnote-191) against those within the Muslim community whom Ibn Abdul-Wahhab declared to be infidels through his declaration of calling other believers infidel (*takfir*) The *takfir* was declared against those who opposed the teachings of Abdul-Wahhab: Sufis, Shi’i, and even other traditionalist Sunnis of the four *madhabs* of Islamic law and jurisprudence who would not go along with his ultra conservative ideology.[[191]](#footnote-192) The *jihad* against other Muslims continued on after the death of Ibn Abdul-Wahhab in 1792, reaching as deep as Iraq, desecrating the tombs of Shi’i Imams and other holy sites were attacked, and ultimately sacking the holy city of Karbala, leading to the desecration of the tomb of Imam Husayn b. Ali, the grandson of Muhammad and son of Imam ‘Ali b. Abu Talib. By 1805, the two holiest cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, were under the rule of the Wahhabiyya, and the new state of the house of Sa’ud stretched from eastern the western Arabian coast to the island of Bahrain.[[192]](#footnote-193)

Not all those who saw a need to reform Sufism and Sufi practice took such a violent and radical approach as Ibn Abdul-Wahhab. Several prominent reformists such as Shah Wali Allah and Ibn Idris, were in favor of serious reform. Shah Wali Allah sought to bring understanding to Ibn al-Arabi’s often misunderstood theory of *wahdat al-wujud*, his reforms grounded in both the Qur’an and the example of Muhammad (*sunnah*). Like Shah Wali Allah, Ibn Idris held Ibn al-Arabi in high regard, but was more concerned with personal reform for the individual mystic rather then a mass reformation of which Shah Wali Allah had attempted to enact. Despite their similar views on some issues, the Wahhabiyya movement nonetheless condemned even their Sufi reformist supporters as guilty of committing *shirk* on account of their veneration of the Prophet and their belief in sainthood.

Wahhabiyya in the Modern Era

The Wahhabiyya state of Arabia centered primarily in the *Najd* would struggle for authority over the region until the establishment of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 under the zealot Abdul-Aziz b. Su'ud (d. 1953). Through the immense wealth of the newly founded oil industry, the house of Sa'ud would spread their ultra conservatism through the world through publication of literature, and the financing of mosques and Islamic centers in the Muslim and Western world. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia aggressively promotes its image as the ideal Islamic state, the followers of true Islam, and this included a policy that was fervently both anti-Shi’i and anti-Sufi.[[193]](#footnote-194) The founding of the Islamic World league in Mecca in 1962 was a platform to promote their Wahhabiyya understanding of Islam. Through the league, funds were distributed to to the training of those engaged in spreading Islam (*da'wa*), unsurprisingly with a Wahhabiyya approach. In contrast, the Barelwi Sufi *tariqat* established the World Islamic Mission in 1973 to combat the growing influence of the Wahhabiyya ideology.

The Wahhabiyya mission has spread across the world. It's main concentration lies in Africa, where Sufism is still deeply rooted in society, and the West, where conversion to Islam is increasing, and where the Wahhabiyya seek to influence the newly converted. The Wahhabiyya and their modern Salafiyya counterparts have accused the Sufis of anthropomorphism in their rendering mystical dreams and visions of encountering *wajh Allah*. Yet they themselves, are guilty of the very accusation of which they level against the mystics. The Sufis do openly discuss encounters with the Face of God, and others such as Ruzbihan Baqli, have described very intimate personal experiences in which Allah appears in bodily form. However, the Sufis are careful to point out that these images do not represent the true *wujud* (Being) of Allah, and that they are merely modes of self-disclosure (*tajalli*) of His Being. The Wahhabiyya on the other hand, disregard the metaphorical interpretation of the Sufis, but claim Allah does have a physical form on the basis of literal Qur’an interpretation.

They cite the Qur'an in which it says: “Do you feel secure that He (Allah), who is above the heavens will not cause the earth to sink with you?”[[194]](#footnote-195) This verse does not say “above the heavens (*man fawq al-samawat*),” but says “in the heaven (*man fi al-sama*).” Sheikh Muhammad Kabbni defends this by citing Qur'anic translations of Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, and Shakir, authors of three of the most popular English versions of the Qur'an:

Pickthall: Have ye taken security frm Him Who is in the heaven...

Yusuf Ali: Do ye feel secure that He Who is in heaven....

Shakir: Are you secure of those in the heaven...[[195]](#footnote-196)

Imam al-Ash'ari (d. 936), an Arab theologian and early Islamic philosopher who founded the Ash’ari school, confirms this position in his *Ibana*:

He is above the Throne and above everything down to the extremities of the lower earth, with an aboveness that does not make him any closer to the Throne or to the heavens. Rather, He is as exalted high over the Throne as He is exalted high over the lower earth, and together with this He is near every creature, and He is nearer to His servant than his jugular vein, and He is witness over everything.[[196]](#footnote-197)

Al-Tabari (d. 923), a Persian historian and exegete of Qur’an, also agrees with Imam al-Ash'ari's position in his *Tafsir*: “Allah made Himself exalted over the heaven with the exaltation (*'uluw*) of sovereignty, and power, not that of displacement and movement.”[[197]](#footnote-198) What can be discerned from al-Ash'ari, al-Tabari, and the consensus of Islamic scholarship on this matter is that God transcends these boundaries that the human mind places upon Him. The literalism of the Wahhabiyya is morever refuted by the Qur’an, when it says: “there is nothing like Him whatsoever.”[[198]](#footnote-199)

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 1448), a medieval scholar of the Shafi’i school of jurisprudence, explains that “Allah is transcendent above incarnation in a place, but because the direction of elevation is nobler than any other direction, Allah predicated it to Himself.”[[199]](#footnote-200) This predication is an indication of God's loftiness and the power of His Attributes. These explanations of Allah's “aboveness” (*fawqiyya*) in relation to His creation is similar to Ibn al-Arabi's notion of *wahdat al-wujud* in that while Allah is above creation, and nothing is His likeness, He has descended into His creation through His self-disclosure and the breathing of the Universal Spirit into the cosmos. Both concepts attempt to address the apparent paradox in Qur’anic assertions about God: that he is far from creation, but also, “nearer to [man] than his jugular vein.”[[200]](#footnote-201)

The Wahhabiyya have accused the Sufis of believing that God is in the world. Yet, the Sufi position can be seen as consistent with the Qur’anic statement: “He is with you everywhere you are (*ayna ma kuntum*).”[[201]](#footnote-202) Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 778), an Islamic scholar and founder of the now defunct Thawri school of jurisprudence, interpreted this verse to mean that “He (Allah) is with you by His knowledge.”[[202]](#footnote-203) Al-Junayd (d. 910), was an early mystic and a central figure in many Sufi *salasil* who laid the groundwork for “sober” mysticism in contrast to “drunken” Sufism such as al-Bistami and his own disciple al-Hallaj. Al-Junayd, according to the historian Ibn al-Athir, was the “Imam of the World of his time,” was accused of heresy in Baghdad. Abu al-Hassan al-Nuri (d. 295), a student of al-Junayd, was asked by the judge in the presence of Sultan al-Mutawakkil, “Where is your Lord in relation to you?” to this al-Nuri replied, “He is, in relation to me, wherever I am in relation to Him, since He said: 'He is with you everywhere you are (*wa huwa ma'akum ayna ma kuntum*).'”[[203]](#footnote-204) Al-Nuri's reply is understood to mean that in the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), God is always with us. Going back to Ibn al-Arabi's Universal Spirit, God can be said to be always with us because He breathed His *ruh* into us. Thus, Allah is with us wherever we are because the origins of the *ruh* lie in the primordial existence in which there was nothing but God.

The doctrine of the Wahhabiyya is in itself a form of innovation (*bid’a*). Their teachings espouse a divisive approach in which those who reject the literal anthropomorphism of Ibn Abdul-Wahhab and his forerunners are considered disbelievers and hence outside of the fold of Islam. This gave the anthropomorphists the doctrinal defense to kill those who opposed them. Where the Wahhabiyya fought Sufism with the sword, the rationalist reformation would fight with the pen.

**The Rationalist-Reformist movement**

As noted in the previous section, Sufism is not without its critics. Fortunately, not all critics of Sufism were as violent as the Wahhabiyya. From the seventeenth century onward, the Islamic world has seen several internal attempts as the reform of Sufi doctrines and teachings. The emergence and influence of a Western, Enlightenment form of rationalism gave rise to new efforts to critically examine the mystical elements of *tasawwuf* and how they applied to the modern world. The rationalist and reform movement was found throughout the Muslim world, and within some Sufi circles, attempted to return to the roots of what Sufism was intended to be.

While the Wahhabiyya/Salafiyya movement initiated by Ibn Abdul-Wahhab played an influential role in the modern critique of Sufiism, notably those embraced by the fundamentalist strains of Islamic discourse as seen in al-Qaeda, the Taliban and even the Saudi government, Sufis themselves have been keen to refute some of the concepts and beliefs associated with *tasawwuf*. Some of Sufism's harshest critics have been Sufis themselves. Ibn Taymiyya, as we have seen, who was himself a Sufi in the Qadariyya order was extremely critical of many Sufi practices and beliefs of his time. Ruzbihan Baqli, the great Sufi Master of 13th century Persia is reported to have said, “I looked into

Hell, and I saw that most its inhabitants were those donning a patched frock (ie woolen garment, *suf*) and carrying a food bowl.”[[204]](#footnote-205)

Criticism of Sufism has always been an inherent part of Islam throughout its history, witness the early anti-Sufi fervor in the execution of al-Hallaj in 922 C.E. But It has been within the past two to three centuries that the dissatisfaction with Sufism has grown substantially. Much of this has been inspired by the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abdul-Wahhab, which claim that many Sufi practices are innovations (*bid’a*) that have no authentic basis in the Qur'an and *Sunnah* of Muhammad and his followers.

Sufism began a critical campaign of reform within its ranks during the early to late eighteenth century, continuing on until the Wahhabiyya movement of Saudi Arabia became the main initiator of anti-Sufi rhetoric of the times. Among the most prominent voices of Sufis reform were those of Shah Wali Allah and Ahmad b. Idris, two eighteenth century Sufis whose impact would help modify the more extreme Sufi practices of their time.Their writings and beliefs were influenced through the writings of Muhammad Abduh.

Abduh was an influence for both Sufi reformists and Salafi revivalists alike. One could consider Abduh a “Salafi Sufi” in his approach to reformation, and thus both Sufis and Salafis claim him as one of their own. His writings on returning back to the example of the companions of Muhammad, the *salaf*, could be taken to the side of the extreme Salafiyya interpretation as expanded upon by his student Rashia Rida, or interpreted through the lens of Sufi reformation such as Shah Wali Allah and Ibn Idris, all three whose writings and ideas will be discussed below. Muhammad Abduh’s writings could be considered a theological bridge which both moderate Salafis and Sufis may find a common ground.

Muhammad Abduh

The perspective of Shah Wali Allah and Ibn Idris is, in some ways, similar to what one finds in the writings of Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). Abduh was educated by his uncle, Sheikh Darwish Khadir, a Sheikh in the Shadiliyya-Madaniyya *tariqa*.[[205]](#footnote-206) Through Sheikh Darwish, Abduh was given a balanced interpretation of *tasawwuf* in which libertine and extreme practices of *dhikr* were forbidden. Abduh recognized the *bid’a* character of these practices and sought an intellectual reconciliation between moderate Sufism and the modern world. Abduh can be considered a foundational figure within the modern Wahhabiyya-Salafiyya movement, yet he remained passionately Sufi in his personal life. He saw the dangers that arose in the misconceptions of the teachings of Sufism. He maintained that Muslims who read the Qur'an through an exoteric understanding would go astray based on a literal interpretation of the religious text. He was a great admirer of Ibn al-Arabi, though he knew his writings were easily misunderstood.

But this exterior meaning is not what is intended and the speech alludes to meanings known only to one who knows their key.... When I was in charge of the printing presses, I ordered a ban on printing *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations) and their like because books of this kind should only be looked at by their own people (i.e. The Sufis).[[206]](#footnote-207)

His hesitancy to distribute Ibn al-Arabi's works was not out of disapproval of what was written, but of how those writings would be interpreted by the lay person. Without proper training in Qur'an and *tasawwuf*, the works would have corrupting effects on the uneducated who are unable to discover the hidden meanings. His love and respect for Ibn al-Arabi are found in a fatwa where Abduh cites comments from Ibn al-Arabi’s *al-Futuhat* on *Sura al-Baqara* verse 186 counseling against the need for any intercession since God is always near.[[207]](#footnote-208)

A significant cause of much to the chagrin of the modern Salafis, Abduh was not one to blame the Sufis for the decline, but the jurists and judges who so strongly opposed the Sufis, that the mystics resorted to secrecy and the use of highly technical, symbolic language. The damage lies not with the Sufi teachings themselves, for Abduh understood and agree with their authenticity. The danger arose from the misinterpretation of esotericism, which the majority of Muslims simply will not understand and be easily misled by it. The Wahhabiyya-Salafiyya movement therefore completely denounces any esoterc interpretation of the Qur'an.

Abduh himself was careful to critically examine even traditional practices within Sufi Orders, deeming some practices attributed to early Sufis to be based on outright forgeries. “I respect Abu'l-Hasan al-Shadhili and I belong to his *tariqa* and have not followed any other. But not everything attributed to him is correctly ascribed.”[[208]](#footnote-209) He saw a serious risk in people accepting any practice at face value, especially if the practice was suspect in regards to the Qur'an and Sunnah, and the views of the salaf, the companions of the Prophet. Muhammad Abduh can be considered an advocate of “Salafi Sufism.” *Tasawwuf* was not for the masses, but for the spiritually elect. Its teachings and practices were not for the ignorant masses who failed to interpret the messages and beliefs correctly, and fell all too easily to *bid'a*.

Muhammad Rashid Rida

Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935) was a student of Abduh. Yet, where Abduh accepted Sufism as an authentic expression within Islam, being careful to avoid any spiritual extravagance on the part of practice, Rida saw all forms of *tasawwuf* as unlawful (*haram*) and outside the religion of Islam. Rida initially was enthralled by Sufi teachings. He took to al-Ghazali's teachings and practiced austere asceticism until he realized it would be of no benefit. He joined the Naqshbandiyya for a short period of time, but left it while condemning the Naqshbandiyya use of silent *dhikr*:

My daily office in this *tariqa* was the mention of God's Majesty in my heart, without voicing it, five thousand times, closing my eyes and holding my breath as long as possible, fixing my attention on the bonding of my heart with the heart of the Sheikh, and this kind of dhikr is unlawful.[[209]](#footnote-210)

Rida was finally turned away from the path of Sufism during a *dhikr* of the Mawlawiyya Order. Here the young Rida observed the famous “Whirling Dervishes” perform. He relates he was overcome with anger at the sight of “forbidden acts” and shouted at the assembly of people before leaving.

Upon arriving in Cairo as a student of Muhammad Abdhu, Rida began printing *al-Mansur*, a periodical that served as a salafi platform. He was initially warning people of the dangers of accepting saintly miracles and intercession, much like his teacher. However, after the death of Abduh, Rida eventually came under the influence of Ibn Tamiyya's and Abdul-Wahhab teachings. It was the 1920s, and the Wahhabiyya reassertion of the Arabian Peninsula was attracting attention. Upon Ibn Sa’ud's declaration as king of the Hijaz in 1926, Rida wrote a book in support of Ibn Sa’ud as a defender of true Sunnism and the Wahhabiyya doctrine as representative of the original faith of Islam. After this, the publications of *al-Mansur* would take a decisively anti-Sufi stance.

Rida denounced the Sufi *turuq*, notably the Tijaniyya which were situated in Northern Africa. He declared al-Tijani a liar and indirectly called him and his followers disbelievers (*kafirun*). He argued against the pursuit of *fana’*, believing that is was not necessary, and in fact, not possible to go beyond the station of absolute trust in Allah (*tawakkul*). He criticized the guide-disciple relationship as he believed it discouraged independent personal thought and led to blind acceptance of the infallible sheikh. According to Rida, both Sufism and Shi’ism were responsible for bringing external influences into Islam, such as Zoroastrianism. Esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an was undermining Islam and was guilty of conspiring to end Arab authority in the state. His latter view had much to do with his strong support for the Wahhabiyya regime of Ibn Sa’ud.

Despite Abduh’s influential, moderate stance, in the end, it was the extreme teachings of Rida that decisively garnered greater influence in the formulation of anti-Sufi anti-Shi’i positions. Yet, not all those who were influenced by Abduh asserted an extreme anti-Sufi and anti-Shi’i stance. Shah Wali Allah and Ibn Idris were two prominent figures in the Sufi reform movement that sought to reinterpret mystical belief and practice with Abduh’s position of returning to the example of the companions of Muhammad in a modern context.

Shah Wali Allah

Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762) was an Indian Sufi intellectual. He spent fourteen months in Islam's holiest cities of Mecca and Medina where he studied *hadith* and *tasawwuf* to such an extent that he took initiation into four Sufi orders; the Shadhilliya, Shatariyya, Suhrawardiyya, and the Kubrawiyya from the mystic Abu Tahir Muhammad (d. 1733). While studying different schools of legal thought and the views of different scholars, he experienced visions that would affect the rest of his life. On August 14, 1731, Shah Wali Allah recorded a dream of how Hasan and Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandsons and the second and third Shi’i Imams, came to him:

Hasan carried in his hand a reed-pen, of which the point was broken. He stretched out his hand to give it to me, and said: “This is the pen of my grandfather, the Messenger of God.” Thereupon he withdrew his hand and explained, “Let Husayn mend it first, since it is no longer as good as when Husayn mended it the first time.” So Husayn took it, mended it and gave it to me.[[210]](#footnote-211)

Scholars have interpreted this broken pen to mean that the production of inspired writings have stopped, and Shah Wali Allah was to take up the pen once again and bring back scholarship and reform to the Muslim *ummah*. Other dreams of Shah Wali Allah described Husayn clothing him in the Prophet’s mantle. He continued to have dreams of spiritual significance and began to develop a close mystical relationship with the Prophet, spending much of his time in Medina contemplating at the Prophet's tomb. On his return journey to India, he experienced a vision of Muhammad, in which the Prophet personally clothed Shah Wali Allah in his mantle. [[211]](#footnote-212) He understood these dreams as a calling to reform Islam and Sufi practices. He believed himself to be the renewer of his age (*mujaddid*) and the Prophet's representative (*wasi*) to command the *ummah*, and, in Sufi terms, as the pole (*qutb*) of the age, a position in which one is the head of all of God's saints on earth.

Prior to his visit to Mecca, Shah Wali Allah was initiated into the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya *tariqa* at age fifteen and into the Chisti order a couple of years later. He was disturbed by the populist “Sufi miracle workers” of his time, whereby admiration for such Sufi showmen and their ecstatic poetry was replacing the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Visitation of saint's tombs was another popular observance where one would ask the saint for intercession and answers to prayers, rather then spending their time in pursuit of the spiritual knowledge of Allah (*ma’rifah*).

Shah Wali's views on these practices was evidently very close to the views of Ibn Taymiyya. Where Ibn Taymiyya had been troubled by the corruption of faith through Jewish and Christian influence in Syria, Shah Wali Allah was similarly prepared to eradicate any Hindu influence in India. Both were critical of Ibn al-Arabi's influence on theosophy, but Shah Wali Allah, unlike Ibn Taymiyya, regarded Ibn al-Arabi with a great degree of respect and attempted to penetrate the misguided interpretations of his concept of the unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). According to Shah Wali Allah, at the time he lived, the notion of *wahdat al-wujud* had been transformed inro an ill conceived understanding that God and the world were identical, and thus human accountability and God's forgiveness and punishment were equally rejected.[[212]](#footnote-213)

He supported those interpreters who understood Ibn al-Arabi as maintaining the universal existence of creation proceeds from God's Being (*wujud*) and was not set up on a plane of equality and likeness. It is not clear how successful he was in clearing up these misconceptions of *wahdat al-wujud*, for his deeper concern was for a broad reformation within the study of *tasawwuf* itself.

According to Shah Wali Allah, without a sound foundation of *Shari'ah*, and an in depth understanding of the Qur'an, those on the Sufi path were cheapening the essence and beauty of the religion. He asserted: “Sufis without knowledge of Qur'an and *Sunnah*, and scholars who are not interested in *tasawwuf* are brigands and robbers of the religion (*din*).”[[213]](#footnote-214) Likewise, scholars who chose to ignore or outright condemn Sufism were themselves cheapening a spiritual, esoteric insight into the Qur'an and life of the Prophet, but also closing themselves off to a possible personal encounter in the experience of the Divine as well. The heretic and those who proclaimed heresy were both destroying the very faith they both proudly claimed to live by.

Shah Wali Allah desired unity within the different schools of law as well as the many Sufi *tariqat* that were at odds with one another. He showed preference for the Naqshbandiyya, describing the order as “the most illustrious and pure and the least heretical *tariqa*.”[[214]](#footnote-215) Upon returning to India, he would recount the virtues of many Sufi *tariqat*, including the Qadiri, Chisti and Suhrawardi in particular, with the latter being highly respected by Shah Wali Allah for its adherence to the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. Shah Wali Allah noted the certainty of his visions and his designated role as the *mujaddid* of the age to renew mysticism:

God bless med and my contemporaries by granting a path (*tariqa*) which of all paths affords the closest proximity to God... And my Lord revealed to me: “We appoint you as leader (*imam*) of this path and We will show you its most lofty aspects.” Because of the introduction of this *tariqa* all other *tariqas* and methods of traversing the path (*madhahib*) can be abolished. This will produce a beneficial effect, since the existence of various *madhhabs* in mystical practice gives rise to factionalism among the people.[[215]](#footnote-216)

His vision of a unified *ummah* under the guidance of a unified *tariqa* reflected a growing trend during his time. He inspired a new line of Sufi reformists who sought this unification of the mystical path, though his vision and those of his followers was never fully realized.

Ahmad Sirhindi

Another important Sufi reformer was the Sufi teacher and scholar Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624). As mentioned earlier, Sirhindi was a Naqshbandiyya teacher and an open critic of many so-called “mystical” practices that were prevalent in his time. Sirhindi concluded that the act of *fana’*, annihilation of the soul in God, was not a physical annihilation but a symbolic one. He distinguishes between *fana’*, which means to literally die and disappear and *fana’an* which means to abstain from something, to forget or to be unconscious of it. *Baqa’* on the other hand means to live and survive. In contrast to Ibn al-Arabi 's *wahdat al-wujud*, Sirhindi was an advocate of *wahdat al-shuhud,* or Unity of Perception. *Wahdat al-Shuhud* perceived union with God as a matter of vision (*shuhudi*) and not one of reality (*'ayni*). He writes:

*Fana* and *baqa* are perceptual (*shuhudi*) not existential (*wujudi*). Man does not become God and is not united with God. The servant is servant forever, and the Lord is Lord eternally. They are wicked heretics who think that *fana* and *baqa* are existential; that man discards his ontological limitations and unites with his Primal Source, Who is free from all limitation and determination; that he dies to his self and lives in his Lord; or that like a drop of water which loses itself and mingles in the river, he casts away his individual limitations and becomes one with the Absolute. May God save us from these blasphemous ideas.[[216]](#footnote-217)

The absolute unity when one is annihilated with regard to all aspects of identity is the more popular notion, and one with which Sirhindi strongly disagrees. Sirhindi believes that what the Sufi unites with is only a shadow *(zill*) of God, which is other than God (*ghayr Allah*), and a mere creature (*makhluq*) of God. Sufis often experience visions of light in their ecstatic moments. Sirhindi considers these lights to be creations of God (*makhluq*). They have no relation to God whatsoever, and are mere creations of the Creator as is the rest of the cosmos. Sirhindi quotes Khwajah Baha al-Din Naqshband, founder of the Naqshbandiyya *tariqa*, “whatever is seen, heard or experienced, is other than God (*ghayr Allah*), and must be negated by the word (*kalima*) of negation (i.e. *la ilaha illa Allah*: there is no god except Allah).”[[217]](#footnote-218)

Sirhindi believed in a stage above *fana’* in which there is a separation from union with God. *“*The experience of distinctionless unity is, however, not the ultimate experience of the Sufi. There is beyond it a second experience of difference, a separation after union.”[[218]](#footnote-219) This separation after union (*farq ba’d al-jam’*) was earlier described by Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1072). Al-Qusharyri explains that it is a state in which the mystic is returned to sobriety (*sahw*) at the time of obligatory prayers (*fara'id*). This return (*ruju'*) is for God, and the Sufi perceives that within this state, God controls him completely, that God alone is the Originator of his essence and existence by God's own power, and guides his acts by His knowledge and will.[[219]](#footnote-220) Mohammad Iqbal agrees with Qushayri's notion, believing that the ego of the self cannot truly be extinguished, it must be refined, he says:

It is in the ego's effort to be something that he discovers his final opportunity to sharpen his objectivity and acquire a more fundamental 'I am,' which finds evidence of its reality not in the Cartesian 'I think' but in the Kantian 'I can.' The end of the ego's quest is not emancipation from the limitations of individuality; it is, on the other hand, a more precise definition of it.[[220]](#footnote-221)

Iqbal relates to Sirhindi's definition of *fana’* in that the ego of the self, is a natural human inclination. Thus it is inherently inclined to exist and self-negation is a false mysticism:

In condemning self-negation I am condemning those forms of conduct which lead to the extinction of the “I” as a metaphysical force, for its extinction would mean its dissolution, its incapacity for personal immortality. The ideal of Islamic mysticism according to my understanding is not the extinction of the “I.” The *fana’* in the Islamic mysticism means not extinction but complete surrender of the human ego to the Divine Ego. The ideal of Islamic mysticism is a stage beyond the stage of *fana’* i.e. *baqa’* which from my point of view is the highest stage of self-affirmation.[[221]](#footnote-222)

Sirhindi acknowledges this state as the true state of union. He notes that those Sufis such as Wali Allah who defend *wahdat al-wujud* as the truest union are in error, for it is a lower experience in comparison to the union of difference described above, in which both oneness and difference are revealed. Sirhindi makes note however, that not all Sufis attain the stage of separation after union. “Some stay, such as Wali Allah observes, at the first stage... their words which speak of pure union and give no indication of difference should not, therefore, be taken to represent their final experience.”[[222]](#footnote-223)

*Wahdat al-wujud* had negative connotations in the minds of Iqbal and Sirhindi. In their view it failed to perceive the difference between good and evil, and by doing so, it cheapened the role of Islam and why it was brought forth to mankind. It led one to identify with God and believe that all is One as God. Sirhindi referred to al-Hallaj (d. 922), Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235), and Farid ad-Din Attar (d. 1230) as some examples of those who, according to him, were lost in the trappings of *wahdat al-wujud*, “they are the untiring singers of unity and identity, the intoxicated lovers of One-in-all Beauty and the supreme preachers of 'all that is good.'”[[223]](#footnote-224) He criticizes those such as Ibn al-Arabi for theorizing on a philosophical level that “den[ies] objectivity of evil, relativise[s] faith, condone[s] erroneous beliefs and excuse[s] misdeeds.”[[224]](#footnote-225)

Sirhindi felt that the unitive experience of *fana’* affected Sufi beliefs and practice. *Shath*, words uttered in an ecstatic state whereby Sufis boast of superhuman powers or identify with God, are an example of such a unitive experience. Al-Bistami saying “How glorious is my majesty,” and al-Hallaj stating, “I am the Truth” are just two examples of how a Sufi loses his sense of identity and imagines that all that is left is God. Sirhindi believed *shath* was more than heretical words, and that it affected one’s observance to the *Shari'ah* itself. When this happens, Sirhindi has noted that the Sufi begins to neglect his duties as a Muslim, and usually obligatory prayer (*salat*) is abandoned.

Through *shath*, reason is completely suppressed. The reality of experiencing *fana’* is short live, but it leaves an effect on the mystic that is akin to alcoholic intoxication (*sukr*):

Some Sufis recover from intoxication quickly and become sober; others take hours, days, even months to regain their normal state. The intensity of intoxication varies from Sufi to Sufi: some may not eat, drink or sleep; others may do all these things, but remain unconscious of what goes on around them. Those who are protected (*mahfuz*) perform daily prayers and avoid sin.[[225]](#footnote-226)

Al-Kalabadhi reports the case of al-Junayd (d. 910):

He had been standing in the mosque of al-Shunezi for many days, without eating, drinking, and sleeping, saying only 'Allah Allah', although he performed the prayers on time. Someone from the audience said: 'He is then sober (*sahi*).' Junayd observed: 'No, ecstatic people are taken care of by God in their state of ecstasy.'[[226]](#footnote-227)

This intoxication can trap the Sufi, as in the case of al-Hallaj,to a degree that all sense of sobriety is lost, and thus all sense of obligation to the *Shari'ah* and *Sunnah* are neglected or ultimately abandoned. Sirhindi calls the drunken Sufis “Bistamis” because of Abu Yazid al-Bistami's views of *sukr* over *sahw.* Bistami may have viewed intoxication as ideal, but was always observant of the *Shari'ah* and reported states of separation later in his life. Sirhindi mentions him among several prominent Sufis who moved on from this stage, to the final stage, noting that al-Bistami upon reaching this separation of union said, “I did not know You except after an unknowing and did not serve You except after a lapse of a period.”[[227]](#footnote-228)

However, this is a misreading of what al-Bistami had said. Although there is no reference to when al-Bistami said this, Sirhindi surmises that al-Bistami spoke this upon reaching the stage of separation after union. Abu Yazid al-Bistami was the first Sufi to speak about *fana’* and as mentioned earlier, he was clearly intoxicated in mystical union. In reading about al-Bistam's life, one can come to the conclusion that the above quotation, used by Sirhindi, is not indicative of Sirhindi's “truest stage of union” but rather that al-Bistami’s claim that he did not know God except after an unknowing is a reference to the veiling (*kashf*) from Allah to the created world. It was only when God revealed Himself to al-Bistami through unveiling Himself that al-Bistami truly lost himself and came to know God.

This is not to say that the stage of separation after union with God is not a true experience. This stage may not be the final experience that the Sufi yearns for; it is possibly the stage immediately before annihilation of the soul into God (*fana’ fi'Allah*). Abdullah al-Nibaji has said that “*tasawwuf* is like pleurisy: you talk nonsense (*hidhyan*) at first, but when you are established you become quiet.”[[228]](#footnote-229) Junayd speaks of those seeking intoxication in God that “they are happy with it. But when they come in the presence of God ecstasy vanishes.”[[229]](#footnote-230) Ibn al-Arabi has said that “*shath* is a lapse on the part of the advanced Sufi,”[[230]](#footnote-231) and “in a saint, always a sign of imperfection.”[[231]](#footnote-232)

One may see the separation after union not as a final stage as Sirhindi saw it, but to be more pragmatic, a living stage of existence. The separation after union is a state in which one acknowledges their position of servitude to the Lord. Their actions are not theirs, but commanded by the Will of Allah. It is through Him they exist; through Him they simply are. One may experience *fana’ fi'Allah* during their lifetime many times, but one must live the experience of separation after union. Only upon one's passing, after living the life of separation after union, can one truly and unceasingly achieve *fana’ fi'Allah*. In this view, annihilation of the soul in God is in fact, the final goal for Sufis, and not that of separation after union as defended by Sirhindi.

Many Sufis have claimed that the state of *fana’* can be experienced in moments throughout one's life as was the case with Ruzbihan Baqli, al-Hallaj and al-Bistami. Mystical intoxication and its effects on the Sufi is dependent upon the spiritual station attained by the Sufi and his/her knowledge of the Divine. While separation after union is the sobering state which Sirhindi believes to be the ultimate stage of Sufism, it is, *fana’ fi'Allah* that Sufi Masters, for over a thousand years, have concluded is the final stage where in one achieves ultimate dissolution in God. *Fana’* is the truest stage of the soul, in which one returns (*ruju'*) to the primordial state of existence in non-existence, where nothing “is” but Allah.

Sirhindi seems to have been attempting to reform mysticism in order to adapt it to the intellectual climate of time. He sought to make *tasawwuf* less “mystical” and more of a rational ethic to relate to the times in which he lived. His promotion of the idea of separation after union as the final and truest stage of experience was a way to rid the Sufi orders of the spiritual stagnation that had crept into their beliefs and practices. Separation after union, which Sirhindi called *fana’-i-haqiqi* or the real *fana’* was his attempt to rid Sufism of its superstitious elements, to curb saint worship and return to the origins of *tasawwuf* itself.

Sirhindi like others before and after him, failed to understand Ibn al-Arabi's *wahdat al-wujud* and simply dismissed it as heretical pantheism, rather then a form of *panentheism*, in which God exists in and interpenetrates every part of nature, and timelessly extends beyond as well.

Throughout its history, the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* has all too easily been dismissed as pantheistic, and hence as a form of *shirk*. But this misunderstands and misrepresents Ibn al-Arabi's idea of God's Being (*wujud*) descending into creation through form of Self-Disclosure (*tajalli*) through veiling (*kashf*). One's existence is within the realm of nonexistence and thus unreal insofar as God as the Real is separate from creation. One only comes to the Absolute Reality when He discloses Himself through the lifting of veils of illusion. Many Sufis claimed that in such a state nothing separates the Lord from the soul, and a person unites with their Beloved Lord, lost in such union that *fana’ fi'Allah* is achieved. In our most primordial existence, we exist only in Him, and it is in our nonexistence that we truly exist. Through this, one can understand that *wahdat al-wujud* is certainly not pantheism, nor even perfect panentheism.

Ahmad b. Idris

For as much as Shah Wali Allah was an influential Sufi intellectual, Ahmad b. Idris (d. 1837) could be considered the opposite. He was not a prolific writer of scholarship nor claimed to have any brilliant visions that would alter his life's course. He has been recognized as a seminal figure among Sufi reformers only recently. Three of his closest students went on to form Sufi orders themselves: Muhammad b. Ali al-Sanusi founded the Sanusiyya in Libya, the Meccan Muhammad 'Uthman al-Mirghani founded the Khatmiyya in the Sudan, and Ibrahim al-Rashid founded the Rasdhidiyya in Sudan and Somalia.

His impact was not through the pen, as it was for Shah Wali Allah, but through word of mouth. His personal communication spread through a compilation of his students’ notes that were later formulated into short treatises and fragments of *tafsir*. Idris was more a preacher than a scholar, as he is known largely through his prayers and litanies. The following is a short prayer characteristic of Idris:

O God, cleanse me of every impurity, every error, every malady, every sickness, every sin, every act of disobedience, every negligence, every transgression, every veil, every estrangement; indeed, of everything of which Thou cleansed Thy Prophet, Muhammad, May God bless him and grant peace to him and his family, outwardly and inwardly, O Lord of the Worlds.[[232]](#footnote-233)

Much is unknown about Ahmad b. Idris. His date of birth is uncertain, though most place it around 1760 in the village of Maysur near Fez, Morocco. He studied at the Qarawiyyin Mosque for 20-30 years until his journey to the East at the turn of the nineteenth century. His initial journey was to perform the *hajj*, but this resulted in his permanent settlement in Arabia for fourteen years in Mecca and the latter part of his life in Yemen. During his stay in Mecca he befriended Sharif Ghalib, ruler of the holy city until the Wahhabiyya reformation in 1803. Despite being a prominent Sufi master, he remained in Mecca under Wahhabiyya rule until moving to Yemen in 1827 when the Wahhabiyya lost control of Mecca to the Egyptians and Idris experienced rising opposition from the Meccan *ulama*.

He was resented for his outspoken criticism of their fanaticism and factions of law and his insistence going beyond the medieval formulations of the jurists and returning to the foundation of Islam itself, that of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*.[[233]](#footnote-234) He spent the last ten years of his life in Zabid in Yemen, a city ruled by an enthusiastic Wahhabi. A famous debate took place between him and the Wahhabiyya scholars, who were allegedly bested in the encounter with Ahmad b. Idris. Upon being questioned for his high regard of Ibn al-Arabi, whom Ibn Abdul-Wahhab and his followers classified as an unbeliever (*kafir*), Idiris maintained his acceptance of Ibn al-Arabi's writings only in so far as they agreed with the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. He was questioned about his view of Ibn Abdul-Wahhab's reforms. Idiris recognized the supposed intentions of Ibn Abdul-Wahhab’s purification of the faith, but argued that Ibn Abdul-Wahhab was overly harsh in his attacks on those Muslims who differed in opinion with the Wahhabiyya reforms. The scholars and ruler were impressed with his fair-mindedness and was allowed to stay in Yemen in peace until his death on October 21, 1837.[[234]](#footnote-235)

Ahmad b. Idris was able to actively pursue spiritual reform within *tasawwuf* under the watchful eye of the Wahhabiyya reformation due to his lack of interest in creating any kind of mass counter-movement that could be targeted as a threat to Ibn Abdul-Wahhab's puritanical reforms across the Arabian Peninsula. Idris was more concerned with personal purification of the individual, and their total dependence on God (*tawakkul*) through the practices of the classical Sufi tradition.

He, like Shah Wali Allah before him, was most concerned to insist upon proper exoteric understanding of the Qur'an (*zahir*) and *ahadith* before one may consider embarking on the esoteric (*batin*) understanding. It has been noted in the Idrisi Sufi order:

If Ibn Idris was asked anything concerning the Qur'an, he would look at the inside of his hand and then give his commentary from Divine Knowledge; if he was asked about the noble Tradition, he would look at the outside of his hand and then explain it from the Divine Secrets and Gnosis of God.[[235]](#footnote-236)

His style of transmitting knowledge can be seen in the traditional manner of a Sufi master who receives inspiration from the unseen (*al-ghayb*). He insisted that one must undertake *ijtihad,* the process whereby one makes legal decisions by independent interpretation of the legal sources of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. He trained his students to undertake missionary work throughout Africa to secure a Sufi renewal of faith. Through these missionary outposts in North Africa and the Sudan, Ibn Idris sought to fulfill his plans for reformation within *tasawwuf*.

Ahmed Al-Tijani

Ahmed Al-Tijani (d. 1815) was a Sufi reformer and leader of Fez, Morocco. He was noted for his distinctive teachings. Upon joining the *tariqa* he founded, the Tijaniyya, one must renounce all other Sufi *tariqat* and believe in their inferiority and that no harm is done in abandoning their practices. This belief may have stemmed from Tijani's own clashes with the local Qadiri Sufi order of his time, which ultimately ended his life. Abandoning the Tijaniyya however, was grounds for apostasy, and led to one's death. Furthermore, he prohibited the visitation of Sufi saints and their tombs.

These rather extreme regulations governing his order, have placed a decidedly dark cloud over al-Tijani's legacy as a Sufi reformer. Yet one cannot ignore the rationale behind what al-Tijani sought to accomplish in North Africa. He was very influenced by the writings of Ibn al-Arabi and the doctrine of annihilation in the Prophet (*fana’ fi Muhammad*,) as well as the elaborate praise writings of the Prophet (*madih*) of the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly of Muhammad al-Jazuli's *Dala'il al-Khayrat*. It was due to this religious perspective that we find al-Tijani firmly believing in his visions of the Prophet, “cloaking him with a green robe embroidered with the *shahadah* and [his being] given a sword to draw against his foes.”[[236]](#footnote-237) Given his belief that Muhammad had come to him, specifically, and thus that he had been guided by the perfect (Prophetic) master, it is no wonder that he felt inclined to break ties with all other masters of Sufi *tariqat*, and expected the same from his followers.[[237]](#footnote-238) His personal beliefs in spiritual exclusiveness and in Muhammad as the master and true authority were the foundation of the Tijaniyya Order and remain so to this day.

Another reform instituted by al-Tijani was an emphasis on thankfulness (*shukr*), rather than on the traditional Sufi practice of renunciation *(zuhd*). He encouraged his followers to develop an inward spirit of thankfulness for the bounties that God has bestowed upon the world. The wealthy of society did not need to give up their riches in the service of God and the order; the poor were not expected to increase their hardship through abstinence. Many interpreted al-Tijani's emphasis of *shukr* over *zuhd* as “Sufi commercialism” in an attempt to win over the elites of society to his message, and garner a seat of influence in Fez. However, al-Tijani did not expect his followers to live an easy life upon acceptance into the order. Those joining were expected to fulfill the traditional religious duties within Islam, as well as practicing the additional Tijani litanies and prayers while earning a living rather then depending on begging or charity. Al-Tijani wanted people to free their hearts from worldly attachments, and cultivate a true love in their hearts for the Beloved, whether the person be rich or poor. In the Tijaniyya *tariqa*, the Sufi was not to be removed from society, but rather to live like anyone else, while seeking to avoid sinfulness.[[238]](#footnote-239)

Al-Tijani's teachings quickly developed a popular following throughout the North African region and influenced many orders in the area for years to come. Muhammad b. Ali al-Sanusi (d. 1859), was the founder of the Sanusiyya Order and was heavily influenced by al-Tijani's belief system. He was a disciple of Ibn Idris but also had close contact with al-Tijani during his stay in Fez in 1814. He encouraged those in the Sanusiyya to build Sufi lodges and cultivate a network of trade and agricultural pursuits. He disliked the dress and asceticism of the dervishes and was committed to seeing his order be distinctively modern and carry a strong work ethic. Because of this, many followers of the order were among the middle class traders.[[239]](#footnote-240)

The Sufi masters of North Africa were unlike their previous counterparts. North African Sufism stressed the importance of the mystical experience and the guide more than others. The role of Sufi saints for example, as guides, was not a widely shared belief. In an ever changing environment, the key to sustaining the North African *tariqat* was to lead with an awareness of the need to respond to both spiritual and material needs. Donal Cruise O'Brien, in *Charisma and Brotherhood* notes the popularity of such Sufi leaders and their overwhelming popularity in North African Sufism as a whole:

The miracle working saint or prophet could bring supernatural assistance to bear in support of his disciples' endeavors, whether in trade or in war. The miracle was taken as proof that here was a leader who could intercede for his disciples on the Last Day, who could deliver on his promise of paradise in the hereafter. Success in business, success in war, with a guaranteed paradise as the bottom line: who might not have been tempted by such a charismatic contract?[[240]](#footnote-241)

While the reformation of Sufism was seen throughout the Muslim world, North African Sufism exemplified the spirit of renewal in a more visible, practical manner in contrast to Sufism in the Middle East and South Asia which focused on a more inward renewal. North African *tariqat* attempted to implement Sufi renewal not just in the context of the Sufi order in its structure and mission; but also through a kind of spiritual renewal of society as a whole.

Fazlur Rahman

Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) was an American Muslim scholar and a popular critic of Sufism. He noted that while traditional Islamic orthodoxy (i.e. Sunni Islam) was quite accepting of Sufism in its many forms, the works of Sufis have hardly been part of traditional Islamic education. Ibn al-Arabi for example, while being regarded as a foundational figure of many Sufi beliefs and practices, has been considered by many of the orthodox to be a heretic. “Sufism was not so much an intellectual discipline,” Rahman writes, “as a moral, spiritual one.”[[241]](#footnote-242) While many of the *ulema* throughout Islamic history have traditionally been Sufi, Rahman sees this as an act on their part to cultivate inner character building and practical piety. Because of this, Sufism was considered outside the boundaries of the intellectual or academic curriculum.

Rahman is highly critical of traditional Sufi thought in its mystical interpretations. With regard to the concept of *fana’*, for example, Rahman believed that the Idrisid tradition of replacing the concept of annihilation of the soul in God with annihilation in Muhammad to be questionable at best. While this realignment of annihilation of the soul continued to be circulated through the writings and beliefs of Ahmad al-Tijani of the Tijaniyya Order,[[242]](#footnote-243) for Rahman, it was simply a shift in direction of an outdated idea.

The mystical branch of Islam produced its own theory of knowledge according to Rahman, one that holds that knowledge learned in books does not constitute knowledge at all. True knowledge, that is, the knowledge of the Divine (*ma’rifah*) is one vouchsafed to a Sufi by God through a direct intuitive experience. Rahman asserts that “Sufis rejected both learning and intellectual thought as positively harmful.”[[243]](#footnote-244) Rahman thus seems to contradict his earlier statement that Sufism does not represent “an intellectual discipline.” Moreover, as mentioned above, many *‘ulama’* throughout Islamic history have been part of a Sufi *tariqa*. Not only were they initiated into these orders, many of them, such as Abdul-Qadir al-Jilani, were Sufi masters themselves. Al-Jilani was not only a judge (*qadi*) in Islamic law and jurisprudence, but also one of the most influential Sufi masters in the history of Islamic mysticism. For Rahman to say that Sufis perceive traditional spheres of learning and intellectualism as “positively harmful” is clearly contradicted by the reality of Islamic intellectual history.

Rahman further espouses that Sufis “poured contempt on rationality.”[[244]](#footnote-245) He notes Sufi masters such as al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), and Mulla Sadra (d. 1641) advocated and claimed for themselves the ability to combine rationalism with intuitive experience. Not only did they claim this for themselves, but advocated this in their teachings to their disciples. The “Intellectual Sufism” of al-Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra, Sirhindi, Ibn al-Arabi and many others, exemplifies a Sufism grounded in a rational approach to explaining spiritual encounters and experiences with the Divine. However, Rahman seems to indicate that this perspective was the exception, rather than the norm. This is not the case, as the above mentioned scholars were key personalities in the development of *tasawwuf*, and every traditional Sufi order assimilates, to some extent, the teachings they proposed. The importance of rationalism and reasoning is not lost on the Sufis, as Rahman seems to assume. Reasoning (*'aql*) is one of the most important aspects Sufism emphasizes. Al-Suhrawardi writes on its importance in regards to the mystical path:

Reasoning (*'aql*) [[245]](#footnote-246) is the job of language. The power to think is reflected in the following *hadith*: First, God made the human mind so that his creation could think. The ability to use *'aql* is related to worship, as another *hadith* reports that with *'aql* you can know me and also praise me.[[246]](#footnote-247)

Al-Suhrawardi is stating that any knowledge of the divine within the science of *tasawwuf* that does not incorporate logic and reasoning will ultimately lead to one failing to encounter God. The idea of using ones reasoning is not an anomaly found in the Suhrwardiyya Order, but is a point stressed in the many Sufi writings as well. This perspective on the use of rationalism and reasoning, held by al-Suhrawardi and others, is far removed from the one Rahman attributes to Sufism.

The Naqshbandiyya order, of which the famous Sufi reformer Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi was a master, is popularly called the most “sober” of all *tariqat* for its emphasis on *Shari'ah* and *Sunnah* in its practice. That is not to say that other orders do not live by *Shari'ah* and *Sunnah*, but the Naqshbandiyya emphasize them in a manner that appeals to one inclined towards a more rationalist, analytical approach. Again, Rahman would seem to be unwarranted in the generalization he makes about traditional Sufi practice, and one can clearly see his bias against any form of mysticism. As Rahman is a staunch rationalist, this comes as no surprise.

How could Sufism, with such key and influential figures such as Ibn al-Rabi, Mulla Sadra, al-Suhrawardi, al-Jilani and many others consider intellectual spheres of learning as “harmful?” Rahman is simply misinterprets much of the mystical tradition in Islam. He is critical of the Sufi experience of encountering God, “God was made [by Sufis] the exclusive object of the experience, and thus, instead of men's seeking values from this experience, the experience became the end in itself.”[[247]](#footnote-248) He saw this as emphasizing individual enrichment, and asocial in its context. The science of Sufism as noted earlier is called *qalb al-Islam*, the heart of Islam by Nasr and Burckhardt. *Tasawwuf* originated as a personal doctrine whereby an individual might cleanse their heart of worldly desires and focus on the Lord, it was not meant to be a doctrine of societal reformation as Rahman would seem to prefer, but an individual practice to focus the heart.

Rahman is opposed to the writings of Ibn al-Arabi as pantheistic in nature, and believed his monistic doctrine was in opposition to orthodox Islam.[[248]](#footnote-249) Rahman misinterprets the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, as have many others as meaning that “God is in everything, and everything is God.” This is not what Ibn al-Arabi asserts in his writings on God's *wujud* and His *tajalli*. What Ibn al-Arabi explains consistently, and through the use of Qur'anic passages, is that creation is a reflection of the Real, a projection of God's attributes and *wujud* into the sphere of creation.

Ibn al-Arabi defends through numerous Qur’anic verses that creation in itself is a projection of God's *wujud*: “All that exists on the earth will perish, but the Face of your Lord will remain, full of Majesty and Glory.”[[249]](#footnote-250) This is because God is the Absolute Reality, and nothing is outside His existence that is real, for He alone is the Real, and anything else is merely a projection of His attributes. For “indeed, I created thee before, when thou hadst been nothing!”[[250]](#footnote-251) According to Ibn al-Arabi we were within the Real in our primordial non-existence, this was our original station, when we existed within Him. Only when God said “Be!” was the cosmos and creation manifested. God created humankind as a scion of his *wujud* when He “fashioned him and breathed into him [His] spirit.”[[251]](#footnote-252)

Rahman further ignores the proofs in the Qur'an for this projection of the Real into creation. For example, the Qur’an says, “We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them is, in play; We created them not save through the Real, but most of them know it not,”[[252]](#footnote-253) and “We created not the heavens and the earth, and all between them, save through the Real.”[[253]](#footnote-254) God is in creation insofar as His essence and attributes are breathed into it. His self-disclosure (*tajalli*) is veiled and only when He unveils (*kashf*) Himself to creation is the Real truly seen with “the eye of the heart.” For creation is not separate in its essence save as a projection of the Real, for ultimately “everything is perishing but His Face”[[254]](#footnote-255)

Rahman further cites the conduct of the Prophet, noted in the Qur'an and in his *Sunnah* as “exemplary conduct” to stand in opposition to the “God-intoxication” that the Sufis attribute to him. He uses the initial revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad as an experience that invited “socioeconomic justice. He aimed at constituting a community for goodness and justice in the world.”[[255]](#footnote-256) What Rahman fails to record is that Muhammad's journey to the cave of Hira was not an isolated event. Many times in his life, prior to the revelatory experience of the Qur'an, Muhammad was known for his long periods of isolation in the cave of Hira where he said he contemplated the nature of God. Furthermore, in Rahman stating that upon receiving this revelation, Muhammad aimed to constitute a community of goodness and justice in the world. The aim of Muhammad’s message was initially to return people to the belief in God as one, and warn of the Day of Judgment. It was not until the migration to Medina, that Muhammad would create the community of goodness and justice that Rahman discussed

The Qur'anic *ayat* attributing to communal law and justice were not revealed to much later, upon the Muslims migration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina, where Muhammad and his followers ultimately established a community of “goodness and justice in the world.” The initial revelations, known as the Meccan Suras are filled with images of the Last Day, heaven and hell, the bounties and beauties of experiencing the Lord, and the sweetness of eternity for those who worshiped the one true God. What Rahman refers to are the Medinan Suras, the suras that describe marriage, divorce, how one should treat one another within society, the communal law, etc. Themes such usury and the conditions of the poor were mentioned in the Meccan suras, but only as general moral ideas. It was not until the settling of Medina, that these ideas were fully developed and recognized as a matter of divine guidance through the Qur’an. These were not the verses initially revealed to Muhammad in the cave of Hira, or for that matter his first several years of revelation. For Rahman to suggest that what Muhammad experienced was a divine call for justice is hardly born out by Islamic tradition and rather limiting to the message of Islam. It is not born out by traditional Qur'anic *tafsir* and ignores the primary reason for Muhammad's journeys to the cave of Hira. Not only that, Rahman's excessive rationalization of Muhammad’s life and mission does not do justice to the fullness of the personality of Muhammad himself, as related in classical Islamic tradition.

Muhammad was indeed a man of “God-intoxication.” Upon receiving a revelation, it has been traditionally narrated that Muhammad would begin to perspire immensely, and he would feel a ringing sensation in his head. Not only does this seem to indicate an individual being enthralled and intoxicated with a mystical, or divine experience, but the actions and sayings (*ahadith*) of the Prophet himself often suggested that, while being a rational man, he was truly “intoxicated” with the love of God.

Rahman, a great mind in the realm of modern Islamic scholarship fails to understand traditional practices in *tasawwuf*. His trouble in distinguishing the genuine from the false is demonstrated throughout his works on Sufism. He often cites the “Sufi practices” of a mystic falling onto “such objects as serpents and knives”[[256]](#footnote-257) or “the rending of garments and other 'mystic' feats such as eating glass”[[257]](#footnote-258) as the norm in Sufism rather than as anomalies among the diverse practices of Sufism. His inherent antipathy toward Sufism is apparent when he speaks of Abdul-Qadir al-Jilani having “nearly displaced Muhammad himself in the eyes of the Sufi-worshiping public.”[[258]](#footnote-259) Fazlur Rahman contributed much in the fields of Qur’anic studies and Islamic reform in general. However, his scholarship on Sufism, or lack thereof, must be taken with caution. His lack of understanding of the field of Islamic mysticism is clearly shown, and his personal distaste for Sufism supercedes any substantive intellectual, academic approach to the subject.

**Conclusion**

Where the anthropomorphists of the past and the Wahhabiyya/Salafiyya of the present fail most assuredly is in their lack of understanding of the esoteric readings of the Qur'an. One must acknowledge and understand both the outward (*zahir*) and inward (*batin*) understandings of the Qur'an. The Wahhabiyya and their modern day counterparts of the Salafiyya defer only to the outward, exoteric meaning, and believe that there is no inward, metaphorical understanding. Interpretation (*ta'wil*) of the Qur’an has been supported by scholarly consensus throughout the history of Islamic scholarship. It has been used to understand or explain the most mystical and difficult passages of the Qur'an.

Likewise, the rationalist movement, despite its scholarly and philosophical approach, fails to acknowledge the direct experience the mystical nature of seeking the Face of Allah. They rationalize Qur’anic passages and Prophetic *hadith* that allude to this to such a speculative degree, that many, like Sirhindi, claim that the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey did not physically happen, and was merely a dream. They defend their point of view by citing numerous *ahadith* and works of Islamic scholarship that the dreams of the prophets are realities in themselves, and not the imaginative dreams a normal human being experiences. In doing this, they have not helped their cause; they have damaged it by discrediting the physical and mystical experience the

Prophet encountered. By doing so, they have refuted the very physical journey of Muhammad that is essential to the mystical perspective inherent in Islam through the example of the Prophet Muhammad. By criticizing this element, they have inadvertently denigrated the profound spiritual experience of the very prophet they revere and love.

The rationalist assertion that *fana’ fi Allah* is metaphorical, or represents a dream state, whereby the process of divine union is turned into a purely imaginative experience, in which one's spirit is still intact within the human body, is, in some ways, a more fantastical notion than that of the mystics they try to repudiate. How can one unite with that which a person is not physically a part of? The Qur’an speaks of the perishing of all creation except the Face of God and thus divine union is ultimately not an imaginative state as suggested by the rationalists, but a physical annihilation of the soul into God, for He alone is the Real, and He alone will stand eternal as creation ceases to exist. The Sufi rationalists believe in the authority of the Qur’an, acknowledge the Day of Judgment when all will be judged and destroyed, yet do not acknowledge the physicality of spiritual annihilation in God as the Qur’an asserts that “Everything will perish except for His Face.”[[259]](#footnote-260) This physical annihilaton of the mystic’s soul in God is not when the Sufi is still alive, but when the entire cosmos comes to an end. Only then, will the soul of the Sufi be annihilated and attain Divine union. Yusuf Ali comments on this verse that “the only Eternal Reality is Allah. The whole phenomenal world is subject to flux and change and will pass away, but He will endure forever.”[[260]](#footnote-261) In looking closely at the divine encounters the Sufi mystics claim to have experienced—from al-Bistami, al-Hallaj, Ruzbihan Baqli, and so many others—one sees that their experience of encountering the Face of God does not seem to be merely an expansion of spiritual imagination, but suggests direct, actualized encounter wherein the identity of the self is destroyed, and the union of the soul with God is finalized. When one reaches *baqa’*, the human qualities of the spirit are replaced and controlled with Divine qualities. No longer is the Sufi in control for only Allah guides those who have attained this level of spiritual being and awareness. *Baqa’* is the experience of the unveiled *wujud* of Allah in this life, it is to be the intimate companion of the Beloved, and to experience this relationship while one still breathes. But to get to the station of *baqa’*, one must first experience the station of annihilation.

Nonetheless, one can argue that *fana’* is the ultimate destination for the mystic, for it allows one to enter the spirit's primordial state of existence within the Divine. Sufis speak of the annihilation of the soul in this life, whereby one is temporarily lost in the oneness (*tawhid*) of Allah, after which it comes back changed through this spiritual experience, which is the station of *baqa’*. But it is when one passes away, when the spirit is no longer bound to the created body, that the final realization of *fana’* will take place. For the spirit will have no destination save Allah, no physical body will contain it, and upon the spirit’s recognition of its primordial destination, will be attracted the Divine without hesitation. The Light of Allah (*Al-Nur*) will be a beacon that attracts those who have witnessed in the present life. The *ruh* will flock to the Originator of Life, who breathed them out. In this final annihilation, the *ruh* of creation will be sucked back in, and be reunited with God for all eternity. Hence, the *ruh* will return to the Divine Spirit (*al-ruh al-ilahi*); the paradox of nonexistence in the primordial existence will be fulfilled, and *fana’ fi Allah* will be reached in its completion. In this state, Sufis would say that one has become “one in *wujud*” (*wahida fi'l wujud*), since creation only exists within the Real (i.e. God).

I have discussed the Face of God (*Wajh Allah*) and different perspectives, Sufi and anti-Sufi, concerning the encounter with God. The Wahhabiyya have proclaimed mysticism a harmful innovation (*bid’a*) that does not originate in Islam. Unlike the Wahhabiyya, the rationalists viewed Sufism as a genuine tradition originating in the *Shari’ah* and *Sunnah* of Muhammad. The Wahhabiyya believe the Face of God to be a literal attribute, and thus would seem to espouse the very un-Islamic concept of anthropomorphism. The Sufi rationalists such as Shah Wali Allah, Ahmad Sirhindi and others, on the other hand, attempted to reform Sufism from the inside. While adhering to traditional mystical practices and teachings, the Sufi rationalist movement was an attempt to approach mysticism through logical conclusions. What this entailed was a demystification of mysticism, where the mystical experience was not seen as “real” in the sense of physically happening, but became, in the view of the Sufi rationalists, a vision or dream. This perspective on the Face of God, and on *fana’* and *baqa’*, drastically limits and dilutes *tasawwuf*, reducing it to a simple philosophy of the heart, and causing it to lose much of its spiritual grandeur.

The teachings of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) have been understood by many throughout Islamic history as presenting the truest understanding of the mystical encounter as a genuine experience. Through the Qur'anic *ayat*, the sayings of Muhammad (*ahadith*), and his example (*sunnah*) one can argue that mystical teachings have their origin in the very beginnings of Islam, and have a sufficient basis in the revelation of the Qur'an itself. Furthermore, when one considers the mystical experiences recorded by al-Bistami, al-Hallaj, Ruzibihan Baqli, Abu Mansur 'Ijli, and Bazigh, as well as the metaphysical writings of Ibn al-Arabi, Mulla Sadra and al-Suhrawardi, it is clear that the mystical encounter with God, in which He unveils (*kashf*) Himself to the mystic in both the stations of *fana’* and *baqa’* have a solid basis in the scripture and tradition of Islam and a legitimate place in Islamic spiritual and intellectual history. Based on this evidence, the mystical experience of encountering the Face of God (*Wajh Allah*) in which the mystic becomes annihilated through divine union, is not a marginal phenomenon, but a well documented, experience with the Islamic spiritual tradition.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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1. Sells, Michael, *Early Islamic Mysticism,* p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Holy Qur'an 2:115 Holy Qur'an 2:115. I will be using Yusuf Ali’s *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* in citing English translation of verses, unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Holy Qur'an, 2:272. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Holy Qur'an, 6:103. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Arberry, A.J., *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Chittick, Williamm, *Sufism*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ernst, *Shambala Guide to Sufism,* introduction, p. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Burckhardt, Titus, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Qur'an 20:114. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Qur’an 22:54. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ohlander, Erik, *Sufism in an Age of Transition,* p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Ohlander, p. 142-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Chittick, William, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Ibid, p. 170-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Ibid, p. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Iraqi, Fakhruddin. *Fakhruddin 'Iraqi*, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. al-Maliki, Muhammad, *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 52-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Ibid, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Ibid, p. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Qur'an 17:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Qur'an, 53:1-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Qur'an 17:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Colby, Frederick, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Newby, Gordon, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Ibid, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*, p. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Qur'an 55:17, 38:75, 54:14, 2:153, 20:5, 2:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Qur'an 48:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Qur'an 3:73. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Colby, p. 44-45 in citing Tabari's *Tafsir*, vol. 11, p. 510 (commentary on Qur'an 53:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Ibid, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Ibid, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Ibid., p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Qur'an 55:26-27 as translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 430, Yusuf Ali in *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, p. 1400, and Muhammad Malik in *Al-Qur’an*, p. 712. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Bible, Exodus: 34:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Qur'an 2:115 as translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Chittick, *Self Disclosure of God*, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Qur'an 75:22-23 as translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Qur'an 75:24-25 as translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Chittick, *Sufism*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Qur'an 28:88. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Qur'an 2:255 as translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Qur'an 2:210-211 as translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Qur'an 20:50. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 112, 164, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Al-Maliki, Muhammad, *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Al-Maliki, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Al-Maliki citing al-Qushayri’s *Risala* in *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Ibid, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Al-Maliki citing *Sahih hadith* as reported in Sahih Muslim, al-Tirmidhi, *Musnad*, 16:415 no. 22663, al-Hakim, 4:456, in *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Al-Maliki citing *Sahih hadith* as reported in *Musnad*, 3:165 no. 2580, 3:184 no. 2634, al-Haythami, *Majma' al-Zawa'id*, 1:78-79, in *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Al-Maliki citing Sahih Bukhari, Al-Tirmidhi, narrated as *sahih* in three chains of narration, in *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Al-Maliki, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Al-Qari, *Jam' al-Wasa'il*, p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Al-Maliki, *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 140-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Al-Qari, *Jam' al Wasa'il*, p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Al-Maliki, p. 140-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Al-Maliki citing *Sahih hadith* reported in *Sahih Muslim*, al-Tirmidhi through four chains of authenticity in *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Al-Maliki citing *Sahih hadith* reported in *Sahih Muslim* in *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Al-Maliki, *Prophets in Barzakh*, p. 148-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Qur'an 2:115 as translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. Chittick, William, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Ibid, p. 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. Ibid, p. 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 266 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. Ibn al-Arabi*, Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, p. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Corrigan, John, *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, p. 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. Qur'an 44:38-3944:38-39 as translated by William Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. Qur'an 15:85 as translated by William Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. Corrigan, John, *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, p. 321. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. *Al-Rahman* is related to the Arabic word *Rahim* meaning “womb,” so the symbolism is particularly strong in Arabic. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. Qur'an, 15:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. Qur'an, 19:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Qur'an, 57:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Chittick, *Self Disclosure of God*, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Qur'an, 7:143 as translated by William Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 430. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. Chittick, *Self Disclosure of God*, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. Qur'an 55:26-27 translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 430, Yusuf Ali in *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, p. 1400, and Muhammad Malik in *Al-Qur’an*, p. 712. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. Chittick, *Self Disclosure of God,* p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. Qur'an 55:26-27 translated by William Chittick in *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 430, Yusuf Ali in *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, p. 1400, and Muhammad Malik in *Al-Qur’an*, p. 712. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. Chittick, *Self Disclosure of God*, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. Qur'an 15:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. Chittick, William, *Self Disclosure of God*, p. 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. Qur'an 4:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. Rice, Cyprian, *The Persian Sufis*, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. Ernst, Carl, *The Unveiling of Secrets*, p. x. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. Ibid, p. xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. Qur'an 30:27 as translated by Carl Ernst in *Unveiling of Secrets*, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
93. Qur'an 42:11 as translated by Carl Ernst in *Unveiling of Secrets*, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
94. Ernst, *Unveiling of Secrets*, entry #87, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
95. Ibid, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
96. Ibid, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
97. Qur'an 28:30 as translated by Carl Ernst in *Unveiling of Secrets*, p. 147-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
98. Ernst, *Unveiling of Secrets*, p. 25-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
99. Qur’an 42:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
100. Ernst, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
101. Ibid, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
102. Ibid, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
103. Ibid, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
104. Ibid, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
105. Qur'an see 2:61, 2:165, 2:196, 3:11, 5:2, 5:98, 8:25, 8:48, 59:4, 59:7 as examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
106. Ernst, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
107. Ibid, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
108. Qur'an 2:156. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
109. Qur'an 4:48, 4:116, 6:88. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
110. Ernst, *Unveiling of Secrets*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
111. Ibid, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
112. Ibid, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
113. Ibid, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
114. Ibid, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
115. Ibid, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
116. Ibid, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
117. Ibid, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
118. Ibid, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
119. Ibid, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
120. Qur'an 28:88. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
121. Ernst, *Unveiling of Secrets*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
122. Ibid, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
123. Qur'an 28:88. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
124. Ibid, p. 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
125. Qur'an 15:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
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127. Amir-Moezzi, p. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
128. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Sufi Essays*, p. 113-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
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130. Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 4-5 and Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, p. 27-28, *Sufi Essays*, p. 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
131. Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, p. 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
132. Ibid, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
133. Ibid, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
134. Ibid, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
135. Ibid, p. 58-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
136. Dakake, Maria, *The Charismatic Community*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
137. Qur'an 24:40 as translated by Maria Dakake in *The Charismatic Community*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
138. Dakake, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
139. Dakake, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
140. Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism*, p. 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
141. Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, quoting Nur Ali Shah, p. 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
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143. Ibid, p. 114-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
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145. Ibid, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
146. Qur'an 57:4 as translated by Muhammad Malik in *Al-Qur’an*, p. 721. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
147. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
148. Sadra, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
149. Ibid, p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
150. Ibid, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
151. Ibid, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
152. Ibid, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
153. Ibid, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
154. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
155. Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
156. Ibid, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
157. Chittick, William, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
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160. Sirhindi, Ahmad, *Sufism and Shari'ah*, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
161. Ibid, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
162. Ibid, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
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164. Chittick, *The Science of Self-Disclosure*, p. 52-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
165. Qur'an 7:143. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
166. Ernst, *Ruzbihan Baqli*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
167. Ibn al-Arabi citing *hadith* narrated by Ibn Maja in *Sahih Muslim*, in which Muhammad alluded to God had seventy veils of light and “if these veils were removed, the glory of His Face would burn up any creature who saw it,” in *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
168. Ibn al-Arabi, *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
169. Sirriyeh, Elizabeth, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
170. Kabbani, Muhammad Hisham, *Islamic Beliefs & Doctrine According to Ahl al-Sunna: A Repudiation of “Salafi” Innovations, Vol. I,* p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
171. Ibid, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
172. Ibid, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
173. Ibid, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
174. Ibid, p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
175. This is a different Ibn al-Arabi, and not the Sufi metaphysician Ibn al-Arabi discussed above in relation to his theory of *wahdat al-wujud.* [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
176. Ibid, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
177. Ibid, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
178. Ibid, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
179. Ibid, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
180. Ibid, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
181. See the above mentioned scholars writings on *aqidah*, and their refutations against Sufism and Shi’ism. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
182. Qur’an 17:81. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
183. Qur'an 10:108 as translated by Muhammad Malik in *Al-Qur’an*, p. 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
184. Qur'an 43:29 as translated by Muhammad Hisham Kabbani in *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
185. Qur'an 6:5 as translated by Muhammad Hisham Kabbani in *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
186. Kabbani, Muhammad Hisham, *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
187. Qur'an 3:86 as translated by Muhammad Hisham Kabbani in *Salafi Movemvent Unveiled*, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
188. Kabbani, citing Ibn Taymiyya’s *Majmu’at al-fatawa al-kubra* (p.396-397) in *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
189. Ibid, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
190. While *jihad* can mean holy war as is popular in a Western context, the actual meaning of the word means “struggle” or “thriving.” Traditionally, the armed struggle or “holy war” is known as the “lesser *jihad*” and the “greater *jihad*” is the *jihad an-nafs* or the “struggle for the self” against sin and desires. This lesser and greater *jihad* is referred to in a *hadith* in which Muhammad says, after returning from a battle with the pagan Arabs: “We have returned from the lesser *jihad* (holy war), to return to the greater *jihad* (struggle for the self).” [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
191. Sirriyeh, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
192. Sirriyeh, p. 22-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
193. Ibid, p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
194. Qur'an 67:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
195. Kabbani, *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
196. Kabbani citing Al-Ash'ari’s *al-Ibana 'an usul al-diyana*, ed. Fawqiyya Husayn Mahmud, p. 21 in *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
197. Kabbani, *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
198. Qur'an 42:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
199. Kabbani, *Salafi Movement Unveiled,*  p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
200. Qur'an 50:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
201. Qur'an 57:4 as translated by Muhammad Malik in *Al-Qur’an*, p. 721. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
202. Kabbani, *Salafi Movement Unveiled*, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
203. Ibid, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
204. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
205. Sirriyeh, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
206. Ibid, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
207. Ibid, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
208. Ibid, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
209. Ibid, p. 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
210. Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
211. Ibid, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
212. Ibid, p. 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
213. Ibid, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
214. Sirriyeh, quoting Shah Wali Allah's, *Tafhimat-i Ilahiyya*, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
215. Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
216. Sirhindi, *Sufism and Shari'ah*, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
217. Ibid, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
218. Ibid, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
219. Ibid, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
220. Iqbal, Mohammad, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
221. Sirriyeh, p. 131-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
222. Sirhindi, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
223. Ibid, p. 47-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
224. Ibid, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
225. Ibid, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
226. Al-Kalabadhi, Abu Bakr, *Al-Ta'arruf Li-Madhhab Ahl Al-Tasawwuf*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
227. Ibid, p. 40, originally in Sirhindi's *Maktubat,* Vol. I, p 656. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
228. Al-Kalabadhi, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
229. Ibid, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
230. Ibn al-Arabi, *Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
231. Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore*, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
232. O' Fahey, R.S., *Enigmatic Saint*, p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
233. Sirriyeh, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
234. Ibid, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
235. O' Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint*, p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
236. Martin, B.G., *Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
237. O'Fahey, *Der Islam*, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
238. Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, p. 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
239. Ibid, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
240. O'Brien, Donal Cruise, *Charisa and Brotherhood*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
241. Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
242. O'Fahey, R.S. And Radke, Bernard, 'Neo-Sufism Reconsidered,' *Der Islam*, p. 52-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
243. Ibid, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
244. Ibid, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
245. For Sufis, in its mystical connotation, *‘aql* is often means “intellect” which stands above rationality, or reasoning. However, al-Suhrawardi is using *‘aql* in the context of reasoning in the above quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
246. Mohammed, Khaleel, *Coming To Terms With The Qur'an*, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
247. Ibid, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
248. Rahman, *Islam*, p. 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
249. Qur'an 55:26-27 as translated by William Chittick in *Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 430, Yusuf Ali in *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, p. 1400, and Muhammad Malik in *Al-Qur’an*, p. 712. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
250. Qur'an 19:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
251. Qur'an 15:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
252. Qur'an 44:38-39 as translated by William Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
253. Qur'an 15:85 as translated by William Chittick in *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
254. Qur'an 28:88. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
255. Rippin, Andrew, Khaleel, Mohammed, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
256. Rahman, *Islam*, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
257. Ibid, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
258. Ibid, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
259. Qur’an, 28:88. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
260. Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, p. 985. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)