Sufism, Orthodoxy, and Spirituality: A Critical Reading of Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah's Thought

Muhammad Badrun[a][*]

[a]Universitas Darussalam Gontor Ponorogo, Indonesia

Abstract

Objective: This study examines the theoretical foundations of Sufism through the intellectual framework of Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah, aiming to uncover his interpretive methodology and his position in reconciling Sufi spirituality with Islamic orthodoxy. **Method**: Employing a qualitative critical-analytical method based on textual analysis of Abu Zahrah's writings, classical Sufi literature, and secondary theological studies, supported by historical contextualization, the research situates his thought within the broader development of Islamic mysticism and its key figures. **Result**: The findings reveal that Abu Zahrah adopts a balanced mediating stance: affirming the ethical and spiritual value of Sufism while critiquing speculative excesses and mystical extremism. He advocates for a purified, ethically grounded Sufism aligned with Qur'anic rationality and Islamic creed, thereby distancing it from esoteric deviations. **Conclusion**: The study concludes that Abu Zahrah's approach provides a valuable framework for rethinking the role of Sufism in modern Islamic thought, demonstrating its continued relevance for contemporary spiritual renewal and intellectual reform within the Muslim world.

Keywords: Sufism; Islamic mysticism; Islamic theology; Abu Zahrah.

Introduction

Sufism, the spiritual and mystical dimension of Islam, has long stood as one of the most profound expressions of Islamic religiosity and inner devotion. Rooted in early Islamic asceticism *(zuhd)* and nourished by centuries of theological reflection, ethical discipline, and metaphysical inquiry. Sufism developed into a multifaceted tradition encompassing both rigorous spiritual practice and complex theoretical frameworks. Moreover, in response to the growing materialism of the Umayyad period, Sufism gradually developed into a sophisticated intellectual and spiritual tradition that permeated nearly every facet of Islamic civilization (Karamustafa, 2007). Also, Sufism develop from the emphasis on divine love and self-purification to the intricate metaphysical doctrines of unity and annihilation *(fana)*, Sufism has attracted both admiration and criticism within Islamic intellectual history (Schimmel, 1975). Its evolution intersected deeply with the major Islamic sciences: it borrowed ethical concepts from Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), engaged with the philosophical rationalism of

---

[*] **Corresponding Author**: mbadrun.syahir@unida.gontor.ac.id

falsafa, responded to the systematic theology of *kalām*, and developed a parallel ethical system alongside classical jurisprudence (*fiqh*) (Knysh, 2000).

By the 9th and 10th centuries, Sufism was no longer merely a practice of individual ascetics but had become an intellectual tradition with defined doctrines, spiritual methodologies (*ṭarīqa*), and literary outputs. Thinkers such as al Junayd al Baghdādī, al Ḥallāj, and later al Ghazālī and Ibn ʿArabī laid down theoretical frameworks that articulated the mystical path (*sulūk*) toward God, emphasizing concepts like divine love *(maḥabba)*, knowledge through unveiling *(kashf)*, and the unity of being *(waḥdat al-wujūd)* (Schimmel, 1975). Sufi thought also produced a vast body of poetry, symbolism, and metaphysical speculation that deeply influenced Islamic literature and aesthetics, particularly in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu contexts.

However, this deep integration also generated tensions. While many theologians and jurists acknowledged Sufism's ethical and spiritual contributions, others criticized its metaphysical doctrines and certain practices as potentially heretical or antinomian (Ess, 1991). Thus, throughout Islamic history, Sufism has oscillated between mainstream acceptance and marginal critique - both revered and contested within the broader framework of Islamic orthodoxy.

Among the prominent voices engaging critically yet constructively with Sufism in the modern era is Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah (1898–1974), an Egyptian scholar renowned for his breadth of scholarship in Islamic law, theology, and sectarian history (al-Qaraḍāwī, 2000). Abu Zahrah approached Sufism with a dual lens: as a jurist committed to preserving the boundaries of Sharīʿa and as a theologian who recognized the importance of inner purification and ethical transformation (Zahrah, n.d.). His writings, especially in *Tārīkh al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya* and his biographical studies of al-Ghazālī and other figures, reveal a nuanced and balanced evaluation of Sufism -one that affirms its spiritual potential while warning against deviations that compromise Islamic orthodoxy.

This study examines the theoretical foundations of Sufism through the perspective of Imam Abu Zahrah. It explores how he conceptualized the origins and historical development of Sufism, alongside his views on major doctrines such as *fanā'* (self-annihilation), *kashf* (unveiling), and *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being). The study also investigates his engagement with leading Sufi scholars, particularly al-Ghazālī and Ibn ʿArabī, and analyzes how he positioned himself between affirmation and critique. The core aim is to uncover Abu Zahrah's interpretive framework and methodological approach in addressing Sufism, highlighting the balance he sought between spirituality and theological orthodoxy. This inquiry is significant for understanding his contribution to modern Islamic thought and for informing contemporary debates on spiritual reform and the role of Sufism in Islamic renewal (Ernst, 2011).

122

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using textual analysis as its primary method. The primary data are derived from Abu Zahrah's major works that address Sufism and Islamic theology, while the secondary data consist of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other scholarly studies relevant to Sufi thought and Islamic intellectual history. Data collection is conducted through a library-based study, involving systematic examination, comparison, and synthesis of credible academic sources (Creswell, 2018). Data analysis is carried out through critical and interpretive reading, focusing on the identification of major themes, key concepts, and patterns of argumentation in Abu Zahrah's writings, particularly concerning the origins of Sufism, core Sufi doctrines, and his positioning within classical and modern Islamic discourse (Abu Zahrah, 1996). This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of Abu Zahrah's interpretive framework and critical methodology, while also situating Sufism as a living intellectual and spiritual tradition that remains dynamic and continues to generate diverse interpretations within the broader landscape of Islamic thought (Chittick, 2000).

Results and Discussion

Historical and Intellectual Context

Understanding Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah's evaluation of Sufism requires a clear grasp of the broader historical and intellectual developments that shaped the rise and transformation of Sufism within the Islamic world. The emergence of Sufism was neither sudden nor isolated; it evolved organically within Islamic civilization, responding to socio-religious changes, spiritual needs, and philosophical inquiries. This section outlines four key dynamics: (1) the rise of Sufism in the Islamic world, (2) the ongoing debates between Sufis and Jurists, (3) the modern reformist critiques of Sufism, and (4) Abu Zahrah's Contextual Position as a Mediator, all of which shaped Abu Zahrah's balanced and critical engagement with the tradition.

The Rise of Sufism in the Islamic World

Sufism emerged as a spiritual response to the growing worldliness and material prosperity that characterized the post-Prophetic era, particularly during the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. Early Muslim ascetics *(zuhhād)* such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. 778), and Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801) withdrew from political life and worldly pleasures to devote themselves to worship, remembrance of God, and ethical purification (Karamustafa, 2007). Their emphasis on sincerity *(ikhlāṣ)*, fear of divine punishment, and hope in divine mercy laid the foundations of what would later become Sufi spirituality.

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

123

By the third AD/ninth century CE, Sufism began to organize itself intellectually and institutionally. With the contributions of al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, and others, a doctrinal system emerged emphasizing love of God or divine of love (*maḥabba*), mystical knowledge (*maʿrifa*), and spiritual states (*aḥwāl*). Over time, Sufi orders *(ṭuruq)* and spiritual lineages (*silsilas*) began to form, becoming powerful cultural and religious institutions across the Islamic world -from North Africa and Egypt to Central Asia, Anatolia, and the Indian subcontinent (Trimingham, 1971).

Simultaneously, some mystics like al-Ḥallāj (d. 922) used ecstatic language that provoked controversy and was condemned by jurists and theologians (Ernst, 2011). It was during this stage that Sufism entered into dialogue and occasional conflict with Islamic theology (*kalām*) and jurisprudence. While some theologians and jurists viewed mystical insights as complementary to the Islamic sciences, others perceived certain mystical claims -especially those related to *waḥdat al-wujūd*- as dangerously close to heresy *(ilhad).*

Debates between Sufis and Jurists

Despite its growing popularity, Sufism did not go unchallenged. From its earliest stages, it existed in dynamic tension with Islamic jurisprudence *(fiqh)* and theology *(kalām).* Many jurists were cautious about the subjective nature of mystical experience, which they feared could override the objective framework of *Sharīʿa* (Ess, 1991). Accusations of heresy (*zandaqa*) were leveled against figures such as al-Ḥallāj, whose ecstatic utterance *"Anā al-Ḥaqq"* ("I am the Truth") was interpreted by many jurists as blasphemous (Taimiyyah, 1978; Zahrah, 1985).

Yet not all jurists were hostile. Some, like al-Ghazālī, recognized the moral and spiritual depth of Sufism and sought to reconcile it with orthodox Islam. In his *Iḥyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, al-Ghazālī incorporated Sufi ethics into a legal-theological framework. Imam Abu Zahrah himself admired al-Ghazālī's ability to balance outward observance with inner spirituality, and he cited al-Ghazālī as a model for acceptable Sufism (Zahrah, n.d.).

At the same time, Abu Zahrah was aware of the juridical critiques of Sufism -particularly concerns over innovative rituals, uncritical allegiance to spiritual leaders *(shaykhs)*, and claims of hidden knowledge *(kashf)* that were not always accountable to Qur'anic guidance or prophetic tradition. His own writings reflect this legacy of cautious endorsement: affirming the goals of spiritual purification while insisting on full conformity with revelation and reason.

Modern Reformist Critiques of Sufism

With the rise of modern reformist movements in the 18th to 20th centuries, Sufism came under renewed scrutiny. Reformers such as Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, Muḥammad ʿAbduh, and later Rashīd Riḍā viewed many Sufi

124

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

practices -such as *tawassul* (intercession through saints), visitation of tombs, and reliance on dreams or esoteric knowledge -as superstitious innovations *(bidʿa)* that distracted Muslims from the rational, legal, and moral essence of Islam (Commins, 2006; Hourani, 1983).

In Egypt, where Sufi orders were socially widespread, reformist discourse often emphasized scriptural purity, anti-colonial awakening, and Islamic rationalism -creating an intellectual climate that viewed some aspects of Sufism as outmoded or even harmful to Islamic renewal. These critiques were further bolstered by secular modernists who saw Sufism as anti-intellectual or regressive.

Imam Abu Zahrah, writing in this context, did not join the call to abolish Sufism. Instead, he called for its purification and renewal. He recognized that beneath the layers of historical accretions, Sufism preserved essential Islamic values such as humility, sincerity, self-discipline, and divine love. However, he was firm in opposing doctrines and practices that conflicted with the Qur'an, rational inquiry, or the moral purposes of Sharīʿa. He thus represented a moderate reformist voice: neither hostile to Sufism as a whole, nor uncritical of its internal developments.

Abu Zahrah's Contextual Position as a Mediator

Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah's engagement with Sufism was not formulated in a vacuum; it emerged within a complex intellectual, social, and religious landscape in early -to mid- 20th century Egypt. This period was characterized by ideological pluralism and contestations between traditional religious institutions, reformist scholars, Salafi revivalists, secular modernists, and Sufi orders deeply embedded in Egyptian social life. Abu Zahrah, trained at al-Azhar University, was deeply rooted in classical Islamic scholarship, yet he was also influenced by modern reformist concerns over religious stagnation, colonial pressures, and moral decline (al-Qaraḍāwī, 2000).

As such, Abu Zahrah's position vis-à-vis Sufism can be understood as that of a mediating figure -neither dismissive of Sufism in the puritanical or Salafi sense, nor uncritically affirming of all its expressions. Instead, he represented a centrist scholarly current that sought to preserve Sufism's ethical and spiritual core while reforming it in light of Qur'anic guidance, rational integrity, and Sharīʿa compliance. Abu Zahrah defended early Sufism (*al-taṣawwuf al-awwal*) as a legitimate expression of Islamic spirituality. He admired its concern with *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), *ṭahārat al-qalb* (purity of heart), and moral sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) (Zahrah, n.d.). However, he was also deeply aware of the ways in which certain Sufi doctrines -particularly speculative metaphysics like *waḥdat al-wujūd*-could open the door to philosophical confusion or theological excess. He cautioned against spiritual elitism, the authoritarian power of some Sufi

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

125

sheikhs, and the risk of replacing the Qur'an and Sunna with esoteric symbols and mystical utterances.

In his writings, such as *Tārīkh al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya*, he carefully outlined the differences between sound Sufism -which strengthens Islamic ethics and faith- and corrupt forms of Sufism, which deviate from revelation, exploit followers, or fall into superstition. His methodology in dealing with Sufism was marked by balance *(tawāzun)*, discernment *(tamayyuz)*, and a commitment to ethical renewal *(iṣlāḥ akhlāqī)* rather than doctrinal negation. In this role, Abu Zahrah exemplified what may be called an "orthodox reformist" approach: affirming the spiritual legacy of Sufism, defending its role in Muslim piety, but filtering its theoretical foundations through the lenses of Qur'anic theology, reason, and the higher objectives of Islamic law *(maqāṣid al-sharīʿa)*. This mediating stance allowed him to address both traditional scholars who feared modernism, and reformers who rejected Sufism altogether. His position remains valuable in contemporary Islamic discourse for navigating the delicate intersection between spiritual depth and theological clarity.

Abu Zahrah's View on the Origins and Nature of Sufism

Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah devoted considerable attention to the historical development, ethical content, and theoretical evolution of Sufism. His approach was marked by intellectual clarity, theological integrity, and a strong desire to distinguish between what he regarded as authentic Islamic spirituality and later excesses or distortions that crept into Sufi practice and theory.

Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah's engagement with Sufism reflects his broader intellectual commitment to Islamic renewal *(iṣlāḥ)* rooted in revelation, reason, and morality. As a legal scholar and theologian, he recognized the historical and ethical significance of Sufism but was also critical of its doctrinal excesses and philosophical tendencies. His perspective is best understood through three interrelated themes: the distinction he draws between early *zuhd* and later institutionalized Sufism, his positive appraisal of early asceticism, and his critique of excessive theorization and mystical philosophy. This section outlines Abu Zahrah's view on the origins of Sufism, its positive dimensions, and the problems he identified in its historical trajectory.

Distinction between Early Zuhd and Later Organized Sufism

For Abu Zahrah, the origins of Sufism were rooted in the early Islamic ascetic movement, which he viewed with great respect and admiration. He emphasized that the early generations of Muslims -particularly in the first two Islamic centuries- demonstrated a deep fear of God *(khashya)*, detachment from worldly desires *(zuhd)*, and a strong focus on ethical purification *(tazkiyat al-nafs)*. These early ascetics, he noted, were not in conflict with Sharīʿa, nor were they

126

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

speculative philosophers; rather, they were devout individuals who took the Qur'an and Sunna as their guide.

However, as Sufism evolved -particularly by the 3rd AD/9th century CE- it began to form structured institutions, develop distinct terminologies, and introduce hierarchical orders *(ṭuruq)* led by charismatic spiritual guides *(shaykhs)*. While not inherently problematic, Abu Zahrah warned that this institutionalization introduced potential for doctrinal confusion, elitism, and innovation. He stated: "The early Sufis were ascetics and worshipers; the later Sufis became philosophers and system-builders" (Zahrah, n.d.).

This distinction becomes the foundation for his critical but balanced evaluation of Sufi history.

1. Positive Appraisal of Early Asceticism

    Abu Zahrah held deep admiration for the early ascetic tradition, viewing it as an extension of the Prophetic ethos rather than a deviation from it. He affirmed that early *zuhd* was grounded in Islamic principles, especially those concerning the purification of the heart, detachment from the *dunya* (worldly life), and the constant remembrance of death and the afterlife. In his words: "The goal of *zuhd* was not to escape from the world, but to reform the soul through remembrance, humility, and fear of divine judgment" (Zahrah, n.d.).

    He emphasized that these ascetics did not isolate themselves from the Sharīʿa, nor did they oppose rational or legal scholarship. Instead, they sought to internalize religious values and live them with sincerity - something Abu Zahrah viewed as urgently needed in both his time and ours. Moreover, he argued that many of the Qur'an's ethical imperatives -such as *taqwā* (God-consciousness), *ṣabr* (patience), *ʿafw* (forgiveness), and *ḥubb lillāh* (love for God)- were best embodied in these early Sufi figures. He often cited their sayings and behaviours as ethical exemplars rather than metaphysical authorities. Thus, for Abu Zahrah, the early Sufi ethos represents a vital spiritual heritage that must be preserved and renewed.

    In Tārīkh al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya, Abu Zahrah praises figures such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, and Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, highlighting their simplicity, sincerity, and devotion. He saw these ascetics *(zahidun)* as precursors of Sufism, but he did not equate their ethos with the later doctrinal formulations found in philosophical Sufism. For Abu Zahrah, this distinction was critical: authentic Sufism begins with ethical and spiritual striving, not metaphysical speculation.

2. Critique of Excessive Theorization and Philosophical Mysticism

    Despite his appreciation for early Sufism, Abu Zahrah was strongly critical of what he called "philosophical Sufism" *(al-taṣawwuf al-falsafī)*, which emerged more forcefully from the 6th AD/12th CE century onward.

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

127

This form of Sufism, associated with figures like Ibn ʿArabī, al-Qūnawī, and later ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, introduced ontological and metaphysical concepts that Abu Zahrah viewed as foreign to the spirit and language of the Qur'an. His major objections included: 1) Ambiguity of Language: He argued that concepts such as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) and *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya* (the Muhammadan Reality) lacked definitional clarity and could confuse common believers, leading them to pantheistic or fatalistic interpretations. 2) Epistemological Overreach: Abu Zahrah rejected any claim that *kashf* (mystical unveiling) or *ilhām* (inspiration) could rival revelation *(waḥy)* as a source of guidance. He stressed that spiritual experiences must be evaluated through the Qur'an and Sunnah, not the other way around. 3) Neglect of Sharīʿa: In some strands of later Sufism, he observed a decline in legal adherence, with certain Sufis exalting spiritual states over religious duties. Abu Zahrah warned that such practices eroded Islamic orthopraxy and accountability.

While he did not declare leading Sufi philosophers heretical, he maintained that their expressions should be interpreted cautiously, and not elevated to universal Islamic doctrine. He preferred the balanced integration of spirituality and jurisprudence seen in al-Ghazālī, whom he regarded as a model of ethical mysticism within orthodoxy.

Core Theoretical Concepts in Sufism and Abu Zahrah's Assessment

Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah engaged with Sufism not only as a historical phenomenon but also as a set of core theoretical concepts that shaped Muslim spirituality across centuries. He approached these concepts with a balanced methodology -affirming their Qur'anic and ethical basis when properly understood, while warning against deviations, exaggerations, or philosophical reinterpretations that could compromise Islamic creed and law. His nuanced evaluations can be seen through his discussion of *tawḥīd and maʿrifah, fanāʾ and baqāʾ*, the *role of the shaykh, kashf*, and *ṣafāʾ al-qalb*.

Tawḥīd and Maʿrifah

At the heart of Sufism lies *tawḥīd* (affirmation of divine unity), understood not only as a theological principle but also as an experiential reality. Sufis often describe this as leading to *maʿrifah* (gnosis) -a direct, inner knowledge of God acquired through purification and contemplation. Abu Zahrah welcomed the centrality of *tawḥīd,* arguing that no authentic spirituality can exist outside the framework of God's oneness. He recognized that the aspiration to deepen one's awareness of *tawḥīd* through spiritual practice was commendable and aligned with the Qur'anic call: *"And they were not commanded except to worship Allah, being sincere to Him in religion"* (Q. 98:5).

128

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

However, he was cautious about the Sufi use of *maʿrifah* when it implied esoteric knowledge beyond revelation. Abu Zahrah emphasized that the highest form of knowledge of God is that which is revealed in the Qur'an and explicated in the Sunnah, accessible through reason (*ʿaql*) and contemplation. He warned that some mystical claims of *maʿrifah* risked blurring the distinction between creator and creation if not firmly anchored in orthodox theology.

Fanāʾ and Baqāʾ

Sufis often describe the spiritual journey as moving through *fanāʾ* (annihilation of the self in God) and *baqāʾ* (subsistence through God). This language emphasizes the believer's detachment from worldly attachments and egoistic desires, culminating in total submission to God's will. Abu Zahrah appreciated *fanāʾ* in its ethical sense -the annihilation of pride, ego, and sinful inclinations, leading to sincere servitude (*ʿubūdiyya*). He linked this to Qur'anic teachings on humility and self-purification: *"He has succeeded who purifies it [the soul]"* (Q. 91:9).

Yet, he rejected interpretations of *fanāʾ* that suggested ontological fusion with God or the loss of individual identity in the divine essence. In his view, such expressions risked sliding into pantheism (*ḥulūl* or *ittiḥād*), which contradicts Islamic *tawḥīd*. For Abu Zahrah, the correct understanding of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* is moral and existential transformation, not metaphysical union.

The Role of the Shaykh

The Sufi path traditionally emphasizes the role of the *shaykh* (spiritual guide) as an instructor who helps the disciple navigate the stages of purification and discipline. Abu Zahrah did not deny the importance of spiritual companionship and mentorship, noting that the Prophet himself served as the ultimate spiritual teacher (Zahrah, n.d.).

However, he was critical of the excessive veneration of shaykhs in later Sufi traditions, especially where disciples granted them unquestioned authority or attributed to them supernatural powers (*karāmāt*). Abu Zahrah argued that while companionship in righteousness is encouraged, ultimate guidance belongs only to revelation and the Prophet's example. He warned against turning the shaykh–disciple relationship into a quasi-sacramental hierarchy alien to Islam's egalitarian spirit.

Kashf (Unveiling)

Kashf, or mystical unveiling, refers to the unveiling of hidden truths to the Sufi through spiritual discipline. Many Sufi texts describe it as a gift from God, not a product of human effort. Abu Zahrah acknowledged that sincere worship may lead to inner clarity, inspiration, or deepened understanding, which he considered a blessing of God's guidance. He accepted the possibility of righteous individuals experiencing insights that inspire them to greater obedience. Yet, he firmly rejected any notion that kashf could function as a source of religious

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

129

knowledge parallel to revelation. For him, kashf must always remain subject to the Qurʾan and Sunnah, otherwise it risks introducing subjective opinions into faith. He highlighted examples where reliance on kashf led to antinomian tendencies, with some mystics claiming exemption from Sharīʿa. Such deviations, he argued, undermine both religion and reason (Zahrah, n.d.).

Ṣafāʾ al-Qalb (Purity of Heart)

For Abu Zahrah, one of the most commendable aspects of Sufism is its focus on ṣafāʾ al-qalb (purity of the heart). He praised the early Sufis' emphasis on sincerity (ikhlāṣ), humility, and detachment from worldly greed, which he saw as indispensable for authentic religiosity. This concern, he argued, is not unique to Sufism but is deeply rooted in the Qurʾan: *"The Day when there will not benefit [anyone] wealth or children, but only one who comes to Allah with a sound heart"* (Q. 26:88–89).

He believed that Sufism's greatest contribution to Islamic intellectual history was its moral psychology of the heart, which served as a corrective to excessive formalism in jurisprudence. However, he insisted that purification of the heart must remain tied to ethical action and social responsibility, not solitary mysticism alone. Shortly, it could be concluded that through his nuanced assessments, Abu Zahrah reaffirmed Sufism's enduring value while delimiting its scope. For him, the core Sufi concepts -tawḥīd, maʿrifah, fanāʾ, baqāʾ, kashf, ṣafāʾ al-qalb- are legitimate when understood as ethical and spiritual practices that deepen submission to God. But when these concepts are exaggerated into ontological claims, esoteric knowledge systems, or unchecked hierarchies, they risk departing from Islam's revealed and rational foundations. Abu Zahrah thus positioned himself as a mediator: affirming Sufism's role in nurturing inner faith, while calling for its purification from speculative excesses.

Abu Zahrah on Major Sufi Thinkers

Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah engaged attentively with the biographies, doctrines, and legacies of major Sufi thinkers. His method combined historical description, juridical-theological assessment, and ethical evaluation: he sought to recover the genuine spiritual contribution of each figure while pointing out tendencies that, in his view, risked doctrinal confusion or social harm. Below we examine Abu Zahrah's treatment of several canonical figures and the pattern of praise-plus-critique that characterizes his approach.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111)

Abu Zahrah regards al-Ghazālī as the paradigmatic scholar who reconciled Sufism with Sunnī orthodoxy. He praises Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn for restoring the moral and spiritual center of Islam and for making the inner life accessible without abandoning jurisprudence or kalām. Abu Zahrah frequently cites al-

130

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

Ghazālī as a model of how mystical experience should be disciplined by Sharīʿa, and credits him with rehabilitating legitimate Sufi practice against both legalist coldness and speculative excess (Zahrah, n.d.). While largely laudatory, Abu Zahrah still emphasizes that even al-Ghazālī's mystical language must be read carefully and subordinated to doctrinal clarity; metaphorical or ecstatic expressions must not be read as metaphysical claims that contravene transcendence. Shortly, Abu Zahrah positions al-Ghazālī as the exemplar of *balanced* Sufism—mysticism in service of ethics and law.

Ibn ʿArabī (Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, d. 1240)

Abu Zahrah treats Ibn ʿArabī as an intellectually important and influential figure but one that requires careful critique. He acknowledges Ibn ʿArabī's erudition and the depth of his spiritual vocabulary, yet he is wary of the metaphysical boldness in works like the *Futūḥāt* and *Fusūs*. Abu Zahrah repeatedly warns that formulations associated with *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) are vague and open to pantheistic misreadings by those lacking the theological tools to distinguish metaphor from doctrine. Specific concerns: 1) Ambiguity: Abu Zahrah argues that Ibn ʿArabī's symbolic-mystical language often lacks the precision required in theological discourse, thus inviting misinterpretation. 2) Authority of kashf: He is critical of any tendency to elevate kashf to the level of legislative or doctrinal authority, a risk he associates with parts of Ibn ʿArabī's legacy. 3) Overall, Abu Zahrah does not anathematize Ibn ʿArabī but insists his ideas be read with caution and constrained by scriptural and rational criteria (Zahrah, n.d.).

Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. c. 910) and the Baghdadi School

Abu Zahrah esteems Junayd as a sober and theologically disciplined Sufi whose emphasis on *sober sobriety* (as opposed to ecstatic excess) exemplifies orthodox mystical practice. Junayd's stress on ethical control, doctrinal awareness, and affirmation of divine transcendence makes him an ideal figure in Abu Zahrah's schema of acceptable Sufism. Shortly, Junayd represents for Abu Zahrah the proper integration of spiritual states with theological responsibility.

Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. early 9th c.)

Abu Zahrah praises Rābiʿa as a model of pure devotion and unconditional love for God (*maḥabba*). Her asceticism and theological insistence that love of God—not fear alone—can motivate worship, fit well with Abu Zahrah's emphasis on ethical interiority rooted in revelation. He highlights her sayings as exemplars of spiritual purity grounded in Qur'anic sensibility. Rābiʿa is presented almost unambiguously positively—her spirituality is for Abu Zahrah the very heart of authentic tasawwuf.

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

131

Al Ḥallāj (d. 922)

According to Imam Abu Zahrah al Ḥallāj is a tragic figure whose ecstatic utterances (e.g., *"Anā al-Ḥaqq"*) provoked juridical condemnation and social crisis. While Abu Zahrah may acknowledge the sincerity of al Ḥallāj's mystical state, he insists that such expressions—especially when public and unqualified—can be dangerously ambiguous and liable to charges of blasphemy or social instability. Al Ḥallāj illustrates the dangers Abu Zahrah associates with unbridled ecstatic expression divorced from doctrinal and communal safeguards.

Shaykh al-Suhrawardī and Later Persian Traditions

Imam Abu Zahrah recognizes the sophistication of Persian Sufi thought (including figures like Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī in both Illuminationist and Suhrawardī-order senses) but again warns against philosophical syncretism when it oversteps the bounds of revelation. He respects the literary and spiritual achievements of Persian Sufism while urging circumspection regarding philosophical borrowings (e.g., Neoplatonic categories). Shortly, appreciation tempered with concern about cross-cultural metaphysical synthesis that might conflict with tawḥīd as classically understood.

Abu Zahrah differentiates between the doctrinal Sufi masters discussed above and the popular Sufi praxis embodied in local orders and zawāyā. He supports practices that renew worship and ethics (dhikr, brotherhood, charity) but criticizes customs he sees as superstition (excessive saint-veneration, tomb cults, ritual innovations) when they contradict the Sharīʿa or foster social exploitation. Reading the Sufi authority, Zahra evaluates some point of views which are emerging a clear hermeneutic pattern, i.e.:

1. Historical empathy: He situates each figure in their historical context and acknowledges legitimate spiritual aims.
2. Doctrinal test: He subjects claims to the litmus test of Qur'an, Sunna, and rational coherence.
3. Ethical criterion: He values outcomes—does the teaching produce humility, piety, and social good?
4. Practical prudence: He warns against institutional structures or claims that enable abuses of authority (al-Qaradawi, 2000).

This balanced method allows Abu Zahrah to defend genuine Sufism while isolating and critiquing problematic tendencies. And it is obviously noted that Abu Zahrah's evaluations of major Sufi thinkers are neither wholesale rejection nor blind endorsement. He recuperates the ethical and devotional contributions of figures like Rābiʿa, Junayd, and al-Ghazālī while insisting on circumspection toward metaphysical systems (notably aspects of Ibn ʿArabī) and ecstatic practices that risk doctrinal confusion. His central concern is that mystical discourse remain subordinate to revelation and oriented toward moral reform,

132

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

not metaphysical speculation or social disorder. In this respect, Abu Zahrah's stance functions both as scholarly critique and practical counsel for reforming Sufism within an orthodox framework.

Theological and Legal Critique

Abu Zahrah's analysis of Sufism was not limited to its spirituality or intellectual heritage. As a jurist (*faqīh*) and theologian (*mutakallim*), he was deeply concerned with how mystical practices and doctrines interfaced with the Sharīʿa and ʿaqīda. His critique unfolded across three interrelated themes: the harmony of Sufism with Sharīʿa, the rejection of antinomian trends, and the careful interpretation of mystical language and symbols.

Sufism and Sharīʿa

For Abu Zahrah, the Sharīʿa is the foundation and reference point for all Islamic sciences, including tasawwuf. He affirmed that true Sufism does not operate outside the framework of law but is its inner dimension *(al-bāṭin)*, complementing the outer observance *(al-ẓāhir)* (Zahrah, n.d.). He frequently cited al-Ghazālī's model: "The law is like the body, and Sufism is its soul" (al-Ghazali, n.d.). In Abu Zahrah's assessment, Sufi practice that nurtures sincerity (ikhlāṣ), humility, and detachment from vice is not only permissible but commendable. However, once mystical practices contradict explicit Sharīʿa injunctions—such as neglecting obligatory rituals or inventing ungrounded rites—they fall into error (Zahrah, n.d.). Thus, his framework may be summarized: 1) Valid Sufism: dhikr, zuhd, maḥabba, muraqaba, fanāʾ understood as humility. 2) Invalid Sufism: ritual innovations, exaggerated saint-veneration, metaphysical claims undermining tawḥīd.

Rejection of Antinomian Trends

Abu Zahrah was particularly concerned about antinomian tendencies—the belief that advanced mystics are exempt from religious duties or beyond moral accountability. This idea had appeared in some ecstatic circles, sometimes justified through concepts like al-insān al-kāmil (Perfect Man) or by extreme readings of fanā (Knysh, 2000). Abu Zahrah's response was emphatic: "No one, regardless of his station, is released from the obligations of the Sharīʿa. To claim otherwise is heresy (zandaqa) and a corruption of religion".

He argued that the Prophet *sallahu alaihi wa sallam* himself -despite being the recipient of revelation- never abandoned prayer, fasting, or legal duties. To suggest that a Sufi could transcend these obligations was to contradict the Qur'anic command of universal servanthood *(ʿubūdiyya)*. He also critiqued the cult of charismatic *shaykhs* in some orders, warning against blind obedience that could lead followers into unlawful or irrational acts.

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

133

Mystical Language and Symbols

A final area of Abu Zahrah's critique concerned the symbolic and metaphorical language used by many Sufis. Expressions such as *"union with God" (ittiḥād)*, *"I am the Truth" (anā al-Ḥaqq)*, or poetic imagery of divine love were often misunderstood by non-initiates and sometimes used by critics as evidence of heresy (Schimmel, 1975). Abu Zahrah adopted a nuanced stance:

1. Charitable Interpretation: He allowed that many Sufis spoke in metaphor or in states of ecstasy, meaning that their words should not always be taken literally. He invoked Junayd's principle of interpreting ecstatic utterances (*shaṭḥiyyāt*) with caution and contextual sensitivity.

2. Limits of Language: At the same time, Abu Zahrah insisted that symbolic or ecstatic speech should not be normalized in public discourse, since ambiguous phrases could cause doctrinal confusion or encourage pantheistic misreadings. He therefore demanded clarity and restraint from Sufi leaders.

3. Ethical Criterion: He measured mystical language by its outcomes: if it led to deeper reverence for God, humility, and obedience, it could be tolerated as devotional rhetoric. If it caused arrogance, confusion, or antinomian tendencies, it was to be rejected.

Critiquing the teaching of Sufism, Abu Zahrah reaffirmed his central conviction: Sufism must remain a means of ethical refinement within Islam's revealed framework, never a path that overrides or replaces the Sharīʿa.

Sufism in the Modern Era: Abu Zahrah's Reformist Perspective

Imam Muhammad Abu Zahrah approached Sufism not only as a historical discipline but also as a living force within the modern Muslim world. His engagement was shaped by the intellectual and social challenges of the twentieth century: the rise of secularism, the spread of materialist philosophies, and the crisis of religious identity in post-colonial societies. Abu Zahrah did not call for the abolition of Sufism; rather, he argued for its renewal and reform, so that it could play a constructive role in spiritual and ethical revival.

Support for Spiritual Renewal

Abu Zahrah recognized that Sufism historically offered Muslims a path of spiritual purification, moral refinement, and inner discipline. In an era when religion risked being reduced to external formalities, he insisted that Sufism's emphasis on sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*), humility (*tawāḍuʿ*), and remembrance (*dhikr*) remained indispensable. He wrote that Islam is not merely a legal or intellectual system but a faith that transforms the heart. For this reason, the ascetic ethos of early Sufis — marked by simplicity, detachment from worldly greed, and devotion to God — should be revived as a corrective to modern spiritual apathy.

134

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

Thus, Sufism in its purified form, far from being an outdated relic, was for Abu Zahrah a necessary spiritual remedy in modernity.

Call for Reform within Sufism

At the same time, Abu Zahrah was outspoken about the need to reform Sufi institutions and practices. He was critical of:

1. Superstitious customs such as exaggerated saint-veneration, shrine rituals, or the attribution of miraculous powers to shaykhs.
2. Blind obedience to Sufi leaders that undermined individual responsibility and rational accountability.
3. Withdrawal from social duties under the guise of spiritual detachment.

For Abu Zahrah, a reformed Sufism must shed these excesses and return to its scriptural and ethical roots. This reformist agenda aligned him with modernist scholars who sought to preserve Islam's inner dimension while removing distortions introduced through cultural accretions (al-Qaradawi, 2000). He envisioned a Sufism that would cooperate with law (*Sharīʿa*) and theology (*ʿaqīda*), rather than operate in competition with them.

Role of Sufism in Countering Materialism and Secularism

Abu Zahrah was deeply concerned with the ideological currents of his time, especially the spread of Western secularism, atheism, and materialist philosophies. He believed that Sufism, if purified, could serve as a powerful counterbalance.

1. Against materialism: Sufi spirituality reminds humans that true fulfillment lies not in consumption or technological progress but in the remembrance of God.
2. Against secularism: The Sufi emphasis on divine presence in every aspect of life resists the relegation of religion to the private sphere.
3. For Muslim identity: A reformed Sufism could reinforce Muslim moral consciousness and provide resilience against cultural colonization.

In this way, Abu Zahrah envisioned Sufism as a moral and spiritual fortress in the face of modern disorientation. Abu Zahrah thus promoted neither the abolition nor the uncritical adoption of Sufism, but a middle path: a call to reform its structures while preserving its inner vitality. For him, Sufism was not a marginal aspect of Islam but an indispensable tool for addressing the spiritual crises of the modern Muslim world.

Conclusion

Tawakkul demonstrates a strong connection to an individual's level of psychological resilience. The act of surrendering oneself to Allah SWT after exerting optimal effort functions as an internal source of strength that enhances

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

135

a person's capacity to confront pressure, hardship, and adverse life experiences. In the context of bullying victims, a high level of *tawakkul* has the potential to reinforce psychological endurance, as individuals who place their trust in God tend to display better emotional regulation, perceive their lives as more meaningful, and maintain a more optimistic outlook on the future. The belief that every experience—including the suffering caused by bullying—carries a particular spiritual purpose enables victims to develop healthier forms of psychological adaptation. Thus, *tawakkul* should not be viewed merely as a theological concept; it also serves as a significant coping mechanism that allows individuals to endure, recover, and continue to grow despite stressful and challenging circumstances.

References

Abū Zahrah, M. (1948). Tārīkh al-madhāhib al-islāmiyya: Fī al-siyāsa wa-al-ʿaqāʾid wa-tārīkh al-madhāhib al-fiqhiyya. Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī.

Abū Zahrah, M. (1955). Tārīkh al-jadal fī al-islām. Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī.

Abū Zahrah, M. (1958). Uṣūl al-fiqh. Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī.

Abū Zahrah, M. (1960). Al-madhāhib al-islāmiyya fī al-ʿaqīda, al-tafsīr, wa-al-fiqh. Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī.

Abū Zahrah, M. (1970). Al-muʿjizāt wa-al-karāmāt wa-al-iḥsān. Maktabat Wahbah.

Adams, C. J. (1972). The ideological basis of political conflicts in the Middle East. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 401, 45–56.

Chittick, W. C. (2000). Sufism: A beginner's guide. Oneworld.

El-Tobgui, C. (2020). Ibn Taymiyya on reason and revelation: A study of Darʾ taʿāruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql. Brill.

Haddad, Y. Y. (1982). Contemporary Islam and the challenge of history. State University of New York Press.

Kerr, M. H. (1966). Islamic reform: The political and legal theories of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā. University of California Press.

Knysh, A. (2000). Islamic mysticism: A short history. Brill.

Lauzière, H. (2016). The making of Salafism: Islamic reform in the twentieth century. Columbia University Press.

Schimmel, A. (1975). Mystical dimensions of Islam. University of North Carolina Press.

Trimingham, J. S. (1971). The Sufi orders in Islam. Clarendon Press.

136

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2, (2025): 121-137.

Winter, T. (Ed.). (2008). The Cambridge companion to classical Islamic theology. Cambridge University Press.

SUHU: Journal of Sufism and Humanities
Vol. 1, No. 2 (2025): 121-137.

137