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Analytical Study of Risalah Qushariah: As Encyclopaedia of Tassawwuf

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Abstract

Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya, authored by the legendary Sufi Scholar Imam Qushairi of eleventh century, is a unique compendium of Sufism. This reference work of classical Sufi literature discusses the very foundations of Tasawwuf. The author has opted for his own style of writing and interpreting Sufi philosophy, in the light of teachings of Qur'an and the Sunnah. In the preamble of his book, the author has claimed to purge the Sufi movement and its philosophy, of the artificialities, incorporated by some of his contemporaries. Secondly, Al-Risalah, gives biographical notes on early Sufis, along-with brief of their thought and practices. The hall mark of this book is Sufi Terminology, explained with an enormous style. This article explores the uniqueness of this encyclopaedic book of Sufism, in style and methodology applied by Imam Qushairi.

Key-words: Sufi Terminology, Classic Tradition, Original Tasawwuf, Style and Methodology

Preamble

The Sufi approach to the understanding of world and the human life, is connected to human insight, emerging out of a deep meditation on the universe around. According to the leading figures of this movement, any spiritual place in Sufism is achieved through the purity of soul and exemplary treatment of God's creation. And obviously, this journey is carried out under the guidance of the Holy Qur'an, and the spiritual practice of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

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Shaykh al-Islam Abu al-Qasim Abd al-Karim bin Hawazin al-Qushayri (986–1072 CE) of Nishapur, had been one of the most celebrated Sufi scholars.¹ His masterpiece, *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya fi 'Ilm al-Tasawwuf*, is considered a trendsetting work due to its subject matter, style, and methodology.

Al-Qushayri was a student of the renowned Sufi author and jurist, Abu Nasr Abdullah bin Ali al-Sarraj al-Tusi (d. 988 CE)². In scholastic theology (*ilm al-kalam*), he learned from the Ash'ari master of Nishapur, Abu al-Qasim al-Isfarayini (d. 1028 CE), and in Hadith and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), he benefited from Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (1028–1085 CE).³ It should be noted that Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj also held the rank of shaykh in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), from whom the great jurist of Khorasan, Shams al-A'imma al-Sarakhsī, acquired knowledge.⁴

Introduction of Risal Qushairyyah

Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya is unique in the field of Sufism, as per its style and methodology of presentation. It consists of three parts⁵:

The first part of *al-Risalah* comprises the introduction of the Sufi outlook. The author presents intuitive thinking on the topics of time and space, matter, spirit, cause and effect, creation and innovation, the nature of creation, and the essence and attributes of Almighty God.

¹ Ziriklī, Khayr al-Dīn ibn Maḥmūd. *Al-A'lām* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm 2002) 4/57.

Ibn Khallikan's *Biographical Dictionary*, 2/170. (Trans: William McGuckin, Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain: 1999.)

² The Shaykh al-Islām of Baghdad; the author of the famous book, *Al-Luma' fi Al-Tasawwuf*. which introduced the mystical path as a religious discipline. of the most renowned figures are his students, who wrote on Sufism—namely 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, author of *Tabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, and al-Qushayrī, author of *Al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*. Similarly, 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (1009–1072 CE) quoted him in *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*. (Ziriklī, *Ibid* 4/57-59.)

³ Full name: 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf; title: Imām al-Ḥaramayn. He is the most important jurist of the Shāfi'ī school and the teacher of Imām al-Ghazālī. In theology (*kalām*), he was a student of Abū al-Qāsim al-Isfarā'īnī al-Ash'arī, and in hadith, he acquired knowledge from Imām al-Bayhaqī. In legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), he held the rank of mujtahid. (Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, 2/170)

⁴ Ziriklī, *Al-A'lām*, 58/4.

⁵ M Alvi, Shoaib Ali, "An Appraisal of Early Tasawwuf Literature", *Peshawar Islamicus*, July-Dec 22, 13/2, p. 97.

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The second part provides biographical accounts, life events, sayings, principles, and etiquette of the Sufi masters. The third part comprises the final ten chapters, which explain core Sufi terminology by detailing terms such as: Tawbah (repentance), Wara' (scrupulousness), Zuhd (asceticism), Samt (silence), Shukr (gratitude), Muraqabah (vigilance), Rida (contentment), Adab (etiquette), and Ma'rifah bi Allah (experiential knowledge of God).

The second chapter contain a detailed explanation of the fundamental beliefs and doctrines of the Sufi class regarding the Oneness of Allah Almighty (Tawhid). The explanation of Quranic verses, oneness of Allah Almighty, have been presented through the interpretations of Sufis, scholars (ulama), and jurists (fuqaha).

In this context, he has included the opinions of great early Sufis such as: Sheikh Dhul-Nun al-Misri, 796-859 CE, and Sheikh Junayd al-Baghdadi, 830-910 CE) along with the explanations of Islamic scholars and noble jurists (such as Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, 702-765 CE, and Abu Ishaq al-Isfarayini, 948-1028).⁶

The third chapter consists of the remembrance (dhikr) of the Sufi masters. In this chapter, Sheikh Qushayri briefly mentions the spiritual states and works of nearly one hundred early Sufis belonging to the second Islamic century (8th and 9th centuries). Among the renowned Sufi elders: Ibrahim ibn Adham, Fudayl ibn 'Iyad, Bishr al-Hafi, Maruf al-Karkhi, Sari al-Saqati, Abu al-Harith al-Muhasibi, Bayazid Bastami, Sahl ibn Abdullah al-Tustari, and Sheikh Junayd al-Baghdadi are specifically included, whose sayings and states are discussed in some detail.⁷

The final part of the Qushayri Treatise is the longest among all, comprising over sixty chapters, adorned with explanations of the specific terminology of the Sufis. Like an encyclopedia, this section is based on excellent explanations of all Sufi terms and special vocabulary. The style of this section particularly leans towards an inferential/derivative interpretation of Quranic verses.⁸

⁶ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, (Dar al-Ma'arif, Beirut) p: 15

⁷ Ibid, p: 16

⁸ M Alvi, Shoaib Ali, "An Appraisal of Early Tasawwuf Literature" Peshawar

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The Style and Methodology

This methodological approach, supported by chains of transmission (isnad) from various noble Sufis, indicates that the concepts, actions, and spiritual states of the Sufis are derived from the Quran. In the tradition of Sufism, the primary connection of legal and spiritual matters concerning human beings is specifically with the verses of the Holy Quran.

The style of expression in the Qushayri's Treatise is charming and effective. One reason for this is that all discussions of Sufism are adorned with the personal statements and spiritual states (ahwal) of the Sufis themselves.

The second reason is that the concepts and ideas of the Sufis, which are detailed in this book, are fundamentally presented as being derived or deduced from Quranic verses.⁹ Studying this book makes it clear that Sufi practices are, in fact, spiritual interpretations of Quranic verses, which have manifested in the practical lives of the Sufi masters.

In other words, Imam Qushayri, through his style, has linked the reality of the Sufis and Sufism, as a whole, to the Holy Quran.

Adopting the manner of a compassionate researcher and a vigilant critic (muhtasib), Imam Qushayri writes in a realistic style. He witnessed the decline of Sufism in his era and mentions it in the form of a verse, saying that the tents of these Sufis are like those of the first, highly esteemed Sufis, but the women residing in them belong to another tribe. In his view, the original spiritual path (tariqat) has perished. Far from piety (taqwa) and scrupulousness (wara'), unfamiliar with Islamic law (Shariah), an unrecognizable group thinks that the secrets of divine oneness have been unveiled to them – this is a foolish notion.¹⁰

Islamicus July-Dec 22, V:13, No:2, pp. 95-96.

Ahmet Kara Mustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 67-68.

⁹ Al-Qushairi, *Al-Risala*, (Dar al-Ma'arif, Beirut) pp: 15-20

¹⁰ Ibid, p: 21

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According to Al-Qushayri, this situation convinced him to eliminate the unnatural state of the spiritual path and revive true Sufism through this composition of his. Therefore, despite opposition, he has undertaken this responsibility.¹¹ Seeking strength and courage from the Lord Almighty through prayer for success on this path, he is compiling this book.

According to Al-Qushayri, this miserable condition convinced him to remove the unnatural state of the spiritual path and revive true Sufism through this composition.¹² Therefore, despite opposition, he has undertaken this responsibility and is compiling this book while seeking success and courage through prayer from the Lord Almighty for his success in this path.

The Sufi Conception of Tawḥīd

Imam al-Qushayrī explains that, according to the Sufis, true servitude (‘ubūdiyyah) to God requires a person to attain knowledge (ma‘rifah) of Allah and an awareness of pure tawḥīd¹³ (Divine Unity). One dimension of this intellectual and spiritual inquiry is the investigation of the universe, its Creator, and the principle, upon which it has been of created.

The Sufis maintain that sincere devotion to Allah is not possible without a conscious realization of pure tawḥīd. Furthermore, they hold that an understanding of tawḥīd cannot be attained through rational reflection alone, unless one establishes a connection with Divine Revelation and refers back to it.¹⁴

Accordingly, Imam al-Qushayrī elucidates various aspects of the doctrine of tawḥīd in the light of those Qur’ānic verses that became foundational for the explanation of the Sufi conception of Divine Unity and concerning which statements of learned Sufis are available. The following discussion examines these Sufi deductions from the Qur’ānic

¹¹ Ibid, pp: 16-17

¹² Ibid, p: 22.

¹³ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 20

¹⁴ Ibid.

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verses. However, those Sufi interpretations that are not directly connected to the exegetical dimensions of the verses—although recorded by Imam al-Qushayrī—fall outside the scope of the present study.

The Sufi Interpretations of Tawheed

Imam al-Qushayrī, citing the opinion of his teacher Abū Naṣr Sarraj al-Ṭūsī, writes:

“It is said that Ruwaym was asked: ‘What is the first obligation that Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, imposed upon His creation?’ He replied: ‘ma‘rifah! [Knowledge about Allah],’ based on the Divine statement: ‘And I did not create the jinn and humankind except that they may worship Me’ (Qur’ān 51:56). Ibn ‘Abbās has interpreted (Illa Le Ya’budoon means) ‘Except that they may know Me.’”¹⁵

In this regard, the transmitted statement of ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās (may Allah be pleased with him) is particularly noteworthy. In Tanwīr al-Miqbās it is stated: That they may affirm My Oneness and worship Me.¹⁶

Likewise, the exegete Maḥmūd Ālūsī explains the meaning of worship (‘ibādah) in this verse as follows: It has also been said that worship here means tawḥīd, based on what has been narrated from Ibn ‘Abbās that every occurrence of worship in the Qur’ān refers to Divine Unity.¹⁷

Another verse frequently cited by the Sufis in their exposition of the doctrine of tawḥīd, is:

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ¹⁸

(There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.)

The meaning of these divine words is that Allah is One and Unique. He has no likeness, no resemblance, no modality (kayfiyyah), and no comparable example.¹⁹ According to

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Al-Ferozabadi, Tanwīr al-Miqbās, (Dar Al-Kutub Al- ‘Ilmiyah- Lebanon), 443/1

¹⁷ al-Ālūsī, Maḥmūd. Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī (Dar Al-Kutub Al- ‘Ilmiyah-Beruit) 21/14

¹⁸ Al-Qur’an, Al-Shura 42: 11, Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 20

¹⁹ Also see Qur’anic Commentaries:

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Imam al-Qushayrī, this explanation is attributed to the leader of the Sufi community (Sayyid al-Ṭāʾifah), Junayd al-Baghdādī (810–930).²⁰

A question naturally arises: if nothing resembles Allah, how can His knowledge be attained? Junayd al-Baghdādī himself answers this question:

“Junayd said: Indeed, the first aspect of wisdom that a servant needs to understand is to know the Maker through His creation and to understand the originated world and how it came into existence. In this way, he distinguishes the attributes of the Creator from those of the created, and the attributes of the Eternal from those of the contingent. He then humbles himself before His call and acknowledges the obligation of obedience to Him. For if he does not know his Master, he cannot acknowledge His sovereignty.”²¹

These words of Junayd direct attention toward various dimensions of knowledge and contemplation. In other words, these avenues of reflection are derived from all those Qurʾānic verses that invite humanity to contemplate the Creator, the universe, His power, and the manifestations of that power.

This demonstrates that, in the Sufi tradition, the most important concern for the servant is the attainment of knowledge (maʿrifah)²² and wisdom (ḥikmah).²³ Through reflection upon the creation of the universe, one not only acquires knowledge of the Creator but also develops an awareness of the distinction between the attributes of the Creator and those of creation. This awareness renders obedience to the Creator a necessary obligation. Until one recognizes the Owner and Sovereign, one cannot truly acknowledge His power and dominion.

Al-Zamakhshari, Al-Kashaaf, (Dar ul Kitab Al- ‘Arabi, Beirut), 212/4.

Ibn Kathir, Tafseer Qurʾan al-Azeem. Darussalam, Riyadh 2003, 193/7

²⁰ He was a renowned poet, orator, and theologian of his time. Turning away from reprehensible beliefs, he based Sufism firmly upon the Quran and the Sunnah. Furthermore, in his view, whoever has not mastered the Quran and its sciences, and does not possess deep expertise in Hadith and its related fields, is not worthy of being followed. (Al-Zarkali, **Al-Aʿlam**, 141/2)

²¹ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 21

²² Maʿrifa might be derived from Qurʾan, Al-Tahrim 66: 3, ‘Arrafa (verb) is used reconized/identified. Al-Zamakhshari explain it as Aʿlama (means came to know). See: Al-Kashaaf, 565/4.

²³ Hikma is the word used in Qurʾan, in the meaning of wisdom. For Example, see:

Al- Qamar 54: 5 (Tafseer Al-Qushairi, 328/7)

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This reminds the very famous Hadith e Jibreel, when the Prophet (PBUH) answered to Jibreel's question as he asked: Inform me about Ihsan (excellence/spiritual perfection). In the reply, the Prophet (PBUH) said:

أَنْ تَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ

(It is to worship Allah as if you see Him; and if you cannot see Him, then indeed He sees you.)²⁴

Purity of Tawheed Conception

Thus, in Imam al-Qushayrī's view, despite renunciation of the world (tark al-dunyā), reflection upon the world and all that it contains remains necessary so that investigation of the universe may be undertaken in the light of Divine Power and the knowledge of Divine Unity (tawḥīd). This represents a positive and constructive aspect of Sufi thought.²⁵ For him, tawḥīd is of such central importance that sincere worship is possible only through sincere affirmation of Divine Unity, and a pure conception of tawḥīd cannot be attained without reflection and contemplation.

In this regard, Imam al-Qushayrī narrates, through Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn, a statement of Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Marāghī:

“I heard Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Marāghī say: ‘Reason possesses demonstrative guidance, wisdom offers indication, and gnosis bears witness. Thus, reason guides, wisdom points the way, and gnosis testifies that the purity of acts of worship cannot be attained except through the purity of tawḥīd.’”²⁶

Therefore, reason provides proof, wisdom points toward the same reality, and gnosis bears witness that the means of reaching the true essence of worship is conscious awareness and understanding of pure tawḥīd. It is only through this conception that the spirit of worship may be attained.

²⁴ Al-Qushayri, Muslim bin al-Hajjaj .Al-Jami' al-Sahih. (Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi-Beirut), 1/36, Hadith No. 8

²⁵ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 21

²⁶ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, pp: 21-22

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Imam al-Qushayrī further maintains that tawḥīd is not recognized through reason alone; rather, it can only be known through revelation. Thus, according to Imam al-Qushayrī, awareness of tawḥīd possesses a unique and distinctive significance. Rather than attempting to understand it through human conceptualizations, one can reach the intended destination only by comprehending it in the light of Divine Revelation.²⁷

In this connection, Imam al-Qushayrī cites Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (858–922), who explained that God Almighty is the Creator of time and space rather than being subject to them. He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden; He is Near and yet Far. There is no likeness unto Him.²⁸

From this explanation, Imam al-Qushayrī's method and approach become evident: when the Oneness, uniqueness, and incomparability of the Lord of the universe are clearly stated in the Qur'ānic verses, there is no need to exercise speculative reasoning concerning such matters. The foundations of faith and doctrine must be established upon the explicit texts of the Noble Qur'ān and the authenticated teachings of the Noble Messenger ﷺ. Deriving and acquiring the doctrine of tawḥīd from its primary sources is therefore essential for every believer.

Tawḥīd Distinguishes the Eternal from the Temporal

At another place, Imam al-Qushayrī, drawing upon Sufī explanations of Qur'ānic verses, clarifies an important aspect of tawḥīd: namely, that it consists in distinguishing the Eternal (al-Qadīm) from the temporal or originated (al-ḥādīth).²⁹

According to Junayd al-Baghdādī, tawḥīd means distinguishing Eternity (that is, Allah Most High, who always was and always will be) from origination (that is, creation, which has come into existence and will not remain forever).

This is because the Divine Essence is transcendent above the attributes of created beings, while He Himself is the Creator of all things.³⁰ In this same context, Junayd al-Baghdādī

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid, pp: 23-24

²⁹ Ibid

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explained the word “ma‘a” (with) occurring in Qur’ān 20:46, concerning Allah’s being “with” human beings. In this verse, Allah reassured Prophet Mūsā (Moses) and Prophet Hārūn (Aaron), peace be upon them, as they confronted Pharaoh:

قَالَ لَا تَخَافَا إِنِّي مَعَكُمَا أَسْمَعُ وَأَرَى ³¹

(He said: ‘Do not fear; indeed, I am with you both, hearing and seeing.)

Here, the word ma‘a (“with”) is employed in the sense of Divine support, assistance, and protection. Accordingly, while discussing the distinction between Creator and creation, the renowned ninth-century Iranian Hanbali Sufi Abū Muḥammad Sahl ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī (818–896), who was also a Qur’ānic exegete, offered an illuminating explanation.

According to Imam al-Qushayrī, he stated that the believers will behold Allah Most High with their physical eyes; however, they will neither encompass His Essence nor comprehend its ultimate reality.³²

Ahl Al-Sunnah Theological Principles

According to Imam al-Qushayrī, in matters of faith and doctrine the Sufis follow the principles established by the Sunni theologians³³ (Ahl al-Sunnah), jurists of creed, and scholars of kalām. For example, see in explaining the Qur’ānic verse:

الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى ...³⁴

(The Most Merciful established Himself over the Throne.)

In this verse the word **Istiwā’** has been addressed by Commentators in details. This is a Qur’ānic expression, that literally means “to establish over” or “to rise over,” whose precise modality unimaginable.³⁵

³⁰ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 23

³¹ Taha 20: 5

³² Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 24

³³ See: Al-Ash’ari, Ali Bin Isma’il, Al-Ibanah (Dar al-Ansar-Qahira) p: 40
Al-Taftazani, Sa’d al-Din, Sharah ‘Aqaaid (Maktabah Rahmaniah-Lahore) p: 58

³⁴ Taha 20: 46, Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 29.

³⁵ See Tafaseer:

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The Sufi scholars have interpreted it in accordance with the following principles:

1. **Tanzīh** تنزيه – affirming God’s absolute transcendence above the attributes of created beings;
2. **Ithbāt** اثبات – affirming the attributes mentioned in the revealed texts in their essential reality;
3. **Tafwīḍ and Ta’wīl** تفويض و تاويل – consigning the detailed meaning to God or interpreting the text where a literal reading conflicts with definitive rational evidence;
4. **Negation of Takyīf and Tashbīh** تكليف و تشبيه – rejecting any attribution of modality, direction, location, corporeality, or resemblance to created things.

On this basis, while commenting on the above verse, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (796–859) and Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (861–946) stated that in this blessed verse Allah affirmed His own existence while simultaneously negating the notion of place. The Most Merciful existed from pre-eternity, whereas the Throne is originated and exists only through Him. Imam al-Qushayrī further writes, citing Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (702–765)³⁶:

“Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq also said concerning the Divine statement:

‘Then He drew near and came closer still’ Whoever imagines that He drew ³⁷ **قَدَّمَ** near in His Essence has thereby posited distance and spatial separation. Rather, this nearness signifies that whenever one approaches Him, one becomes removed from the various limited forms of knowledge, for with respect to Allah there is neither nearness nor distance.”³⁸

The fact must be remembered, that majority of the Commentators on Qur’an never have agreed that, the verse referred above is about Allah Almighty to be coming closer. Rather its context clearly states that it was the Angel Jibraeel, who came nearer to Prophet (PBUH).³⁹

Al-Baghwi, Hussain Ibn Mas‘ud, Ma‘alim ul Tanzil (Dar al Tayyebah- Beirut) 276/5.

Al-Jowzi, ‘Abd al-Rahman, Zad al-Maseer, (Dar al-Kitab al-‘Arabi, Bruit) 159/3

³⁶ The full name is Ja'far bin Muhammad bin Ali bin Husayn bin Ali bin Abi Talib. His mother was Umm Farwah; daughter of Asma bint Abd al-Rahman bin Abi Bakr. (Al-Dhahabi, Siyar A'lam al-Nubala-Beirut: Muassasat, 255/6), sixth Imam according to the Imami Shia, counted among the illustrious elders of the Tabi'un (the Successors), even Imam Abu Hanifa and Imam Malik benefitted his knowledge. His compiled work Rasail (Epistles) as mentioned in Kashf al-Zunun. (Al-Zirkali, Al-A'lam ,126/2)

³³ Al-Najm 53:8

³⁸ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 29

³⁹ For Example, see: Ibn Kathir, Tafseer Quran-UI-Azeem, 444/7

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In short, Imam al-Qushayrī explained, in considerable detail, the beliefs of the Sufis and demonstrated that among the great Sufi masters there is not only a clear exposition of the religious doctrines derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, but also a complete affirmation of and firm commitment to them with absolute conviction. By way of summary, in the second chapter he wrote that (through the grace and enabling of Allah on their part), the foregoing exposition of the doctrine of Divine Unity (Tawḥīd) held by the spiritual masters clearly shows in famous Ayat Al-Kursi, and the other Ayat.

Imama Qushairi summarizes, that:

Allah Most High is Eternal (Qadīm) in His existence. He is One, All-Wise, Omnipotent over everything, All-Hearing, All-Knowing, Ever-Living, and Self-Subsisting. There is no resemblance between the Creator and the creation. Allah Most High is exalted above all directions, places, time, and temporal limitations. He is free from form and shape. No one shares with Him in His actions, nor can any contingent or originated thing indwell in Him. He is beyond beginning and end. He cannot be perceived by the physical faculty of sight. All the Most Beautiful Names (al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā) and Sublime Attributes belong to Him. He is the Creator of all creation.⁴⁰

Status of Righteous Saints

Imam Qushairi explains the hierarchal sequence of religious order, according to Sufi thought:

Allah the Most High sent the noble Prophets for the guidance of humankind, and through them people came to recognize and worship Allah as their true Deity. Allah Most High sent the Final Prophet, Muhammad ﷺ, with miracles and clear proofs, by means of which truth and falsehood became manifest and distinct. After the Messenger of Allah, his Rightly Guided Caliphs. Thereafter, the righteous saints (Awliyā'), it is He who safeguarded the upright community (al-Ummah al-Ḥanīfah) from ever agreeing collectively upon misguidance.⁴¹

Al-Baghwi, Ma'alim ul Tanzil, 401/7. Al-Jowzi, Zad al-Maseer 184/4

⁴⁰ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 33

⁴¹ Ibid, p: 34

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Imam al-Qushayri, in his discussion of the Sufi masters (Tadhkār al-Shuyūkh), places the people of Sufism after the ranks of the Companions (Ṣaḥābah), the Successors (Tābi‘īn), and the Successors of the Successors (Taba‘ Tābi‘īn), and then mentions the ascetics and worshippers. According to his account, after the era of the Taba‘ Tābi‘īn, the Muslim community became divided into various groups.⁴²

Among the people of Ahl al-Sunnah, those pure souls who safeguarded themselves from heedlessness preferred for themselves the title of “Sufi.” After this introduction, he presents the sayings and conditions of the renowned Sufis of the second Islamic century in such a manner that the character of the Sufis and the philosophy of Sufism gradually become clear to the reader.⁴³

According to Imam al-Qushayri, the validity of Sufism is established through revelation and reason (sam‘ wa ‘aql), the Prophethood of Muhammad ﷺ, Qur’anic verses, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the consensus (ijmā‘) of the Muslim community.

In this regard, the methodology and style he adopts in his book is to explain fundamental concepts through the sayings of the Sufi masters while deriving their meanings from Qur’anic verses. In the third extensive section of his Risālah, he elaborates upon Sufi concepts in the light of the terminology and technical expressions commonly used by the Sufis, explaining them through the sayings and states of the Sufi masters.⁴⁴

A distinctive feature of this approach is that the principles of Sufism are presented in the very words and terminology of the Sufis themselves, while their connection to the Qur’an and Sunnah is made evident.

Imam al-Qushayri’s statement, citing al-Junayd al-Baghdadi, clearly indicates that knowledge of the unseen (‘ilm al-ghayb—knowledge of what has occurred and what will occur) is an exclusive divine attribute. It also establishes that no human being, including the Sufis, can possess independent knowledge of the unseen. Therefore, if any Sufi were

⁴² Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 30

⁴³ Ibid, pp: 34-35

⁴⁴ Ibid.

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to claim that someone other than Allah possesses knowledge of the unseen, such a person would have deviated from the authentic path of Sufism and from the Straight Path.⁴⁵

Status of Sufism

From this passage of Imam al-Qushayri, it becomes clear that no objection against Sufism remains valid when it conforms to Islam; rather, it constitutes a part of the religion itself. Its validity is established through revelation and reason, and it reaches the level of certainty when supported by the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the Companions, and the consensus of the Muslim community. Anything that departs from these foundations, is not regarded by the leading authorities of Sufism as the correct and authentic path.⁴⁶

In this regard, one important aspect of Imam al-Qushayri's method of deriving principles from the Qur'an and Sunnah is his insistence that knowledge of the unseen is an exclusive attribute of Allah, and that the validity of Sufism rests upon revelation and reason, the Prophethood of Muhammad ﷺ, Qur'anic verses, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the consensus of the Muslim community.⁴⁷

Among the Sufis, the reality of Taṣawwuf (Sufism) is contingent upon its conformity with the Qur'an and Sunnah, the outward requirements of the Sharī'ah, and the divine prohibitions. It does not contradict them.

In this regard, Imām al-Qushayrī, narrating through Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd and quotes the famous Sufi master Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (d. 245 AH)⁴⁸:

مدار الكلام على أربع: حب الجليل وبغض القليل واتباع التنزيل وخوف التحويل

(The foundation of spiritual discourse rests upon four things: love of the Majestic One (Allah), disdain for worldly trivialities, adherence to the Revelation (the Qur'an), and fear of losing one's faith.)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 36

⁴⁷ Ibid, p: 37

⁴⁸ His full name was Thawban bin Ibrahim al-Misri, counted among the most famous devout elders of Egypt. Known for eloquence, wisdom, and poetry. Abdullah bin Abd al-Hakam objected, and later, Caliph Al-Mutawakkil summoned under the accusation of heresy (Zandaqah); after hearing he was released; returned to Egypt, and passed away in Giza. (Al-Zarkali, Al-A'lam, 102/2)

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Imām al-Qushayrī, attributing the following statement to Sari al-Saqati ⁴⁹ (d. 253 AH), writes: (English Translation)

It is related from al-Sarī that he said: Sufism consists of three meanings: that the light of one's gnosis (ma'rifah) does not extinguish the light of one's piety; that one does not speak of esoteric knowledge in a manner that contradicts the outward meaning of the Book or the Sunnah; and that miraculous gifts (karāmāt) do not lead one to violate the sanctities and prohibitions established by Allah.⁵⁰

This passage clearly demonstrates that Sufism does not stand in opposition to the outward Sharī'ah, nor does it transgress the boundaries established by Allah. According to the Sufis, a true sign of sainthood (wilāyah) is conformity to the Sunnah. Whoever acts contrary to the Sunnah cannot be regarded as a saint. Imām al-Qushayrī writes that Abu Yazid al-Bistami once said.⁵¹

He further establishes that: Any Sufi practice, symbol, or activity is considered acceptable only when it is supported by the Qur'an and Sunnah. The proof of its authenticity lies in following the Messenger of Allah ﷺ in one's states, sayings, and actions. They say always:

أصل التصوف ملازمة الكتاب والسنة...⁵²

Al-Junayd said: Whoever has not memorized the Qur'an and has not studied (recorded) Hadith should not be followed in this matter (of Sufism), because our knowledge is bound by the Qur'an and the Sunnah.⁵³

In summary, the foundation of Sufism, in their view, is adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah, abandonment of personal desires and innovations (bid'ah), reverence for

⁴⁹ His full name was Sari bin Mughallis al-Saqati, counted among the Sufi elders of Baghdad. Hazrat Junayd al-Baghdadi (Saqati's maternal uncle and teacher) narrates, "I have never seen anyone more devoted to worship than Sari". (Al-Zarkali, Khayr al-Din bin Mahmud. Al-A'lam, 82/3)

⁵⁰ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 45

⁵¹ Ibid, p: 48

⁵² Ibid, p: 145

⁵³ Ibid, pp: 103-107

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spiritual teachers, consideration for the circumstances of others, consistency in remembrance (dhikr) and devotional litanies (awrād), and avoidance of excessive legal concessions and unwarranted interpretations.

Sufi Terminology in Al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah

An objection is often raised on the basis of certain distinctive expressions and specialized terminologies employed by the Sufis, namely that, instead of adopting the terminology of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the people of Sufism have forged an independent path of their own.

Imām al-Qushayrī explains that, in reality, the Sufis did not introduce an entirely new vocabulary; rather, they have based their discourse upon the very terms found in the Qur'an and Sunnah. He gives examples such as **tawbah** (repentance), **wara'** (scrupulousness), **zuhd** (asceticism), **ṣamt** (silence), **shukr** (gratitude), **murāqabah** (spiritual vigilance), **riḍā** (contentment), **futuwwah** (spiritual chivalry), **adab** (proper conduct), and **ma'rifat Allāh** (gnosis of God).⁵⁴

In explaining these concepts, they did not abandon the methodology of the pious predecessors (al-salaf); rather, in accordance with the spiritual temperament of the Sufis, they placed the purification of the heart and the rectification of inner states at the center of their concern. Their approach thus highlights the fact that Sufism is not a system separate from the Sharī'ah, but rather its inward and spiritual interpretation.⁵⁵

With regard to the distinctive language, expressions, and technical terms of the Sufis, Imām al-Qushayrī writes that one group of Sufis may express itself in a particular mode of language, while another may employ different words. Nevertheless, they mutually agree upon the meanings of their expressions and technical terms so that communication may continue among them, while those who are not concerned with this path remain unable to fully comprehend the intended message.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 419

⁵⁵ Ibid, p: 422

⁵⁶ Ibid.

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The Sufi chains understand one another perfectly through this mode of discourse. This method was adopted in order that confidential spiritual matters should not reach unqualified individuals who might misuse them and thereby create discord. Hence, the Sufis deliberately chose a symbolic and guarded mode of expression concerning spiritual secrets.

Imām al-Qushayrī states that he adopted the method of explaining these specialized Sufi terms in his book so that those who sincerely desire to follow the path of the great Sufis and undertake spiritual wayfaring (sulūk) may find it easier to understand the terminology of Sufism.⁵⁷

In the present study, those words and technical terms will be selected which, according to Imām al-Qushayrī's distinctive style and methodology, were specifically formulated by the Sufis in their interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. The terms whose explanations are have no direct reference to the Qur'an and Sunnah will, for reasons of scope, remain outside the present discussion.

Categories of Sufi Term

It should be noted that, in the view of the exponents of Sufism, the specialized terminology of Sufi knowledge falls into two categories. On the one hand, there are certain words and expressions commonly used among the Sufis that have not been derived directly from the revealed texts. Examples include **waqt** (time), **maqām** (station), and **ḥāl** (state). Such terms nevertheless remain conceptually and interpretively connected to the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah.⁵⁸

On the other hand, there exists a large number of terms that are directly derived from the Qur'an and Hadith, such as **tawbah** (repentance), **taqwā** (God-consciousness), **dhikr** and **shukr** (remembrance and gratitude), and **iḥsān** (spiritual excellence).

⁵⁷ Ibid, p: 151

⁵⁸ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p 151

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However, some of these concepts have been elaborated and enriched by the Sufis through their own spiritual and symbolic interpretations. Consequently, their explanations do not necessarily correspond in every respect with those offered by Qur'anic exegetes (mufasssirrūn) or Hadith commentators (shurrāḥ al-ḥadīth). Examples of such concepts include **mushāhadah** (spiritual witnessing), **fanā' wa baqā'** (annihilation and subsistence), and **qabḍ wa baṣṭ** (constriction and expansion).⁵⁹

The Terms Derived from the Words of Qur'an and Sunnah

One of the most prominent examples demonstrating that Sufi terminology rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah is the concept of **tawbah** (repentance), which is itself a highly significant Qur'anic term. Thus, Imam al-Qushayri explains the Sufi conception of repentance by citing the Qur'anic verse⁶⁰: **وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ** And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, so that you may attain success.

He then relates it to the Prophetic tradition: The Prophet ﷺ said:

التَّائِبُ مِنَ الذَّنْبِ كَمَنْ لَا ذَنْبَ لَهُ...⁶¹

(The one who repents from sin is like one who has no sin.' ...)

Imam al-Qushayri writes that, in the light of this Prophetic explanation, the jurists identified the legal pillars of repentance and held that its validity requires: remorse for the sin committed, immediate abandonment of the act of disobedience, and firm resolve not to return to it in the future. Imam al-Qushayri does not confine repentance merely to a legal definition; rather, he emphasizes its inner dimension. He explains that repentance begins with the awakening of the heart, that is, the heart's emergence from the slumber of heedlessness.

This understanding is itself derived from the Qur'an and Hadith, for the Prophet ﷺ described the heart as the center of the entire body and the source of both righteousness and corruption:

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Al-Noor 24: 31

⁶¹ Ibn Mājah, Al-Sunun, Kitāb al-Zuhd, Bāb Dhikr al-Tawbah, Hadith no. 4250

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إِذَا صَلَحَتْ صَلَحَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ، وَإِذَا فَسَدَتْ فَسَدَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ، أَلَا وَهِيَ الْقَلْبُ...⁶²

(If it is sound, the whole body is sound; and if it is corrupt, the whole body is corrupt. Indeed, it is the heart.)

Thus, this verbal Prophetic explanation becomes an interpretation of the Qur'anic principle that human success and failure fundamentally depend upon one's inner state. Imam al-Qushayri further writes that distancing oneself from evil companions is also necessary for repentance to take effect.⁶³

Imam al-Qushayri further states that the highest degree of repentance is for the servant to repent from everything other than Allah. This represents a profound inner interpretation of the Qur'anic principle that servitude belongs exclusively to Allah. Likewise, his distinction between **tawbah** (repentance), **inābah** (turning to Allah), and **awbah** (constant return to Allah) is derived from the interrelationship of various Qur'anic verses, such as: And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, so that you may attain success.⁶⁴

In this way, the entire discussion demonstrates that the Qur'an, in its essence, is the fountainhead of guidance, yet its elaboration, specification, and practical application cannot be fully realized without the Sunnah of the Messenger ﷺ. Imam al-Qushayri integrated all these dimensions into the framework of Sufism in such a way that the Sharī'ah, the Sunnah, and the inward spiritual states emerged as a single, coherent intellectual and practical system.

Terminology Based on Sufi Interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah

Imam al-Qushayri begins with the concept of **waqt** (the present moment). According to the Sufis, the reality of waqt is that it is an anticipated event whose occurrence is merely

⁶² Al-Bukhari, Al-Jami' al-Sahih, 20/1, Hadith 50, Al-Tirmizi, Al-Sunun, (Dar al-Gharab Islami-Beruit) 229/2, Hadith 889

⁶³ Al-Qushayri, Al-Risala, p: 209

⁶⁴ See the verse: Al-Noor 31: 24, Qaaf 50:33, Suaad 38:30

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presumed or expected. Shaykh Abu 'Ali al-Daqqaq says that waqt exists between the past and the future.⁶⁵

A Sufi is **ibn al-waqt** ("the son of the moment"), that is, one who is fully possessed by his spiritual state, because he is concerned neither with the past nor with the future.⁶⁶

Thus, the dominant spiritual condition of the Sufi constitutes his waqt. When the Sufis say that a certain person is "under the rule of time," they mean that he has submitted completely to the matters and divine operations (tasarrufat) that become manifest to him from behind the veil of the unseen.

Some Sufis have said: (الوقت سيف) Time is a sword. Outwardly it may appear gentle and silent, yet its edge is sharp and cutting. Whoever obeys time and bows before it succeeds, while whoever opposes it is ruined and destroyed. Shaykh al-Daqqaq says: Time wears you away, but it is not itself consumed:

كل يوم يمر، يأخذ بعضي-يورث القلب حسرة ثم يمضي

(Every day that passes takes away a part of me;

it leaves the heart an heir to regret and then departs.)⁶⁷

In the spiritual path (suluk), the stages of discipline and spiritual exercise (riyadah) that a seeker encounters are what the Sufis call **ahwal (states)** and **maqamat (stations)**. Thus, a Sufi's maqam (station) is the particular stage of spiritual discipline through which he is passing. A **hal (state)** is a condition that descends upon the heart without deliberate intention or effort.⁶⁸ It is called a hal because it is subject to change.

Some Sufis, however, maintain that a spiritual state may endure and remain. In this regard, Imam al-Qushayri cites the saying of Shaykh Abu 'Uthman al-Jabri, who said: For forty years I have remained in the same state. Whatever condition Allah has placed me in, I am content with it. I have never felt displeasure.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Al-Qushairi, Al-Risala, p: 152

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p 153

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p: 154

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According to Imam al-Qushayri, when a hal acquires permanence and continuity, it becomes the means of ascending to a higher and more exalted state. The spiritual states of the Noble Messenger, Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him and his family), were in a constant state of progression and elevation. A hadith recorded in Musnad Ahmad states: Indeed, a veil comes over my heart, and therefore I seek Allah's forgiveness seventy times a day.⁷⁰

Imam al-Qushayrī writes that among the people of Sufism there is also the terminology of **fanā' wa baqā'** (annihilation and subsistence). By fanā' is meant the disappearance of blameworthy qualities, whereas baqā' is realized when a servant becomes adorned with praiseworthy qualities. According to the Sufi conception, at any given moment one of these two states must necessarily be present in a person. The negation of one quality inevitably results in the affirmation of the other.

From the perspective of their interpretive style and methodology, these may be counted among those expressions whose wording is derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, but whose interpretations are based upon the distinctive formulations of the Sufis themselves.

Summary of the Article

A study of the methodology, style, and particularly the approach of derivation and inference from the Qur'an and Sunnah employed by Imam Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī demonstrates that, in his view, Sufism is neither an independent nor a self-invented system; rather, its foundation rests entirely upon the Qur'an and Sunnah.

The research reveals that Imam al-Qushayrī raised his voice against the un-Islamic innovations and corruptions that had entered Sufism during his time and sought to reform them by reconnecting authentic Sufi teachings with the Qur'an and Sunnah. He presented the sayings, spiritual states, and practical lives of the Sufis in the light of Qur'ānic verses in order to demonstrate that Sufism is, in essence, a spiritual interpretation of the Qur'an.

⁷⁰ Ahmad Bin Hanbal, Al-Musnad (Mussisat al-Risalh, Beirut) 391/29, Hadith 17848

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In the various chapters of his celebrated work, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, he explained concepts such as Divine Unity (*Tawḥīd*), gnosis (*Maʿrifah*), asceticism (*Zuhd*), repentance (*Tawbah*), contentment (*Riḍā*), spiritual vigilance (*Murāqabah*), and other Sufi terms. By citing the statements of eminent Sufis, ḥadīth scholars, and jurists, he demonstrated that Sufi doctrines are not separate from the Sharīʿah; rather, they represent its inward and spiritual dimension.

According to the research, Imam al-Qushayrī regarded **Tawḥīd** and **knowledge of God (Maʿrifat Allāh)** as the foundation of Sufism. This knowledge is not attained solely through reason but through the guidance of divine revelation. Drawing upon various Qurʾānic verses, he clarified that the purpose of human creation is the knowledge and worship of God. In the Sufi view, contemplation of the universe enables a person to recognize the Creator, and from this awareness emerges sincere worship. In accordance with Sunni theology, Imam al-Qushayrī emphasized God's transcendence, unity, and incomparability, making it clear that genuine Sufism is inseparably linked with Sharīʿah, Tawḥīd, and adherence to the Prophetic Sunnah.

In *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, Imam al-Qushayrī further explains that Sufism is founded upon the Qurʾan and Sunnah, transmitted knowledge and reason, the Prophethood of Muḥammad ﷺ, the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the Muslim community. In his view, authentic Sufism is that which remains subordinate to the Sharīʿah and whose concepts are derived from the Qurʾan and Sunnah. Through the statements and experiences of the Sufis, he also establishes that knowledge of the unseen belongs exclusively to God, and anyone claiming otherwise has deviated from genuine Sufism. By citing numerous Sufi authorities, he demonstrates that the objective of Sufism is the knowledge of God, adherence to the Prophetic Sunnah, and observance of the Sharīʿah. Thus, in his understanding, Sufism is not a philosophy separate from the Sharīʿah but rather a systematic intellectual and practical framework representing the inward and spiritual interpretation of the Qurʾan and Sunnah.