



Living Sufism in the Modern World: A Qualitative Textual Analysis of Its Ethical, Social, and Cultural Contributions

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Received : March 11, 2026

Revised : April 30, 2026

Accepted : May 21, 2026

Online : July 31, 2026

Abstract

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis and literature-based approach to examine the contemporary relevance of Sufism as a socially engaged ethical tradition. Drawing on classical *Ṣūfī* texts alongside selected modern scholarly interpretations and case-based discussions, the article analyzes how core *Ṣūfī* concepts, such as *ihsān* (spiritual excellence), *khidma* (service), and *maḥabba* (compassionate love), are articulated and mobilized within present-day socio-cultural contexts. Rather than treating Sufism as an inward or exclusively mystical phenomenon, the study demonstrates how its ethical framework operates in public life through institutional practices, interfaith initiatives, and cultural production. The analysis shows that *Ṣūfī* traditions contribute to social cohesion by promoting relational ethics grounded in humility and inclusivity, while also providing a counter-discursive resource against exclusivist and polarizing religious narratives. Furthermore, the study highlights how *Ṣūfī*-inspired cultural forms, particularly devotional literature, music, and ritual performance, function as sites of cultural continuity and adaptive resilience in the face of modern fragmentation. By systematically linking textual principles with contemporary expressions, the article argues that “living Sufism” should be understood not merely as a historical legacy but as an actively interpreted and practiced ethical paradigm. In this sense, “living” refers to both ongoing embodied practices and the continued conceptual relevance of *Ṣūfī* thought in addressing current challenges of pluralism, moral responsibility, and coexistence. The study thus offers a methodologically grounded contribution to scholarship on Islam by clarifying how *Ṣūfī* traditions remain operative within modern socio-cultural realities.

Keywords: *Sufism, Qualitative Textual Analysis, Islamic Ethics, Social Cohesion, Interfaith Engagement, Cultural Resilience, Contemporary Islam*

INTRODUCTION

Sufism has long occupied a central place in the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural history of Islam, commonly understood as its inner or ethical-spiritual dimension. While its metaphysical doctrines and devotional practices have been extensively studied, its contemporary socio-cultural and ethical functioning remains insufficiently theorized in current scholarship. Much of the existing literature either treats Sufism as a primarily inward mystical path or situates it within historical frameworks, thereby limiting a systematic understanding of its role in addressing present-day social and cultural challenges. Historically, *Ṣūfī* networks and institutions, such as *khānqāhs*, *ribāṭs*, and *tekkes*, functioned as centers of learning, charity, and moral instruction, contributing to social cohesion and communal life. *Ṣūfī* figures often acted as mediators across social, ethnic, and religious boundaries, indicating that Sufism has always operated as a socially embedded tradition rather than a purely private spiritual practice. However, the analytical linkage between these historical functions and their contemporary manifestations remains underdeveloped in the literature, particularly in relation to modern concerns such as pluralism, identity politics, and ethical fragmentation.



In the contemporary global context, marked by religious polarization, rapid modernization, and contested interpretations of Islamic tradition, Sufism occupies an ambivalent position. It is simultaneously invoked as a model of tolerance and criticized by reformist movements as marginal or theologically problematic. This tension highlights the need for a methodologically grounded and analytically precise study of Sufism as a “living” tradition.

This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing “living Sufism” as both an ongoing set of embodied practices and a continuing ethical framework that informs contemporary social and cultural life. Rather than advancing normative claims about Sufism as inherently peaceful or universally applicable, the study examines how specific Sufi ethical concepts are articulated, interpreted, and mobilized within modern contexts.

The central research question guiding this study is: How do *Ṣūfī* ethical principles function as socially operative frameworks in contemporary contexts, particularly in relation to social cohesion, pluralism, and cultural expression?

To address this question, the study pursues three objectives:

1. To analyze key Sufi ethical concepts through qualitative textual analysis.
2. To examine their socio-cultural manifestations in contemporary settings.
3. To evaluate their relevance in current debates on coexistence and moral responsibility.

By shifting from descriptive exposition to analytical inquiry, this study seeks to contribute to scholarship on Islam by clarifying how Sufism continues to operate as a socially engaged ethical tradition in the modern world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with Sufism has produced a substantial body of work addressing its metaphysical doctrines, historical development, and spiritual practices. Foundational studies have been instrumental in establishing Sufism as a central dimension of Islamic thought; however, they often remain descriptive, text-centered, or historically bounded, with limited engagement in contemporary theoretical debates.

Early works such as those by Reynold A. Nicholson and Annemarie Schimmel provide detailed accounts of *Sufi* doctrines, symbolism, and devotional literature, emphasizing themes such as divine love, spiritual purification, and mystical experience. Similarly, Michael A. Sells highlights the ethical and experiential dimensions of early Sufism through primary texts. While these studies are foundational, their primary focus lies in interpretation and exposition rather than analytical application to contemporary contexts.

Historical analyses, including those by Nizami (1961) and (Trimingham, 1971), extend this understanding by examining the institutional and socio-political roles of *Ṣūfī* orders. These works demonstrate how Sufism contributed to social organization, cultural exchange, and the spread of Islam. However, they largely remain confined to historical contexts and do not systematically theorize Sufism’s relevance within modern social frameworks.

More recent scholarship has begun to address this gap by exploring Sufism in relation to modernity, pluralism, and interreligious dialogue. For instance, contemporary studies highlight the role of Sufi communities in fostering peaceful coexistence and ethical engagement in plural societies. Nevertheless, this emerging literature remains fragmented and lacks a coherent theoretical framework, often invoking concepts such as “tolerance,” “social harmony,” and “pluralism” without clearly defining or operationalizing them.

This study responds to these limitations by adopting an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates insights from the sociology of religion, ethical theory, and cultural analysis. Within this framework, Sufism is approached as a socially embedded ethical tradition rather than solely a mystical or doctrinal system.

The analysis is guided by three key conceptual categories:

1. Ethical Formation – understood as the cultivation of moral dispositions such as humility, compassion, and self-discipline central to *Ṣūfī* teachings, examined in terms of their social implications.
2. Social Cohesion – conceptualized as the capacity of shared ethical values and practices to generate inclusive and cooperative forms of community life.
3. Cultural Resilience and Pluralism – referring to the ability of *Ṣūfī* traditions to adapt to changing contexts while sustaining meaningful cultural and symbolic continuity.

By synthesizing existing scholarship and situating it within this analytical framework, the study moves beyond descriptive literature review toward a structured and theory-informed analysis. This approach enables a clearer understanding of how Sufi ethical principles are translated into contemporary socio-cultural practices, thereby addressing the identified gap in the literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual design combined with a narrative (non-systematic) literature review to examine the ethical, social, and cultural contributions of *Ṣūfī* traditions in contemporary contexts. The approach is appropriate as the study focuses on interpreting conceptual frameworks and intellectual traditions rather than generating empirical or statistical findings.

Source Selection Criteria

The analysis is based on secondary sources, including classical *Ṣūfī* texts and contemporary academic scholarship. Sources were selected according to three criteria: (1) direct relevance to key *Ṣūfī* concepts (e.g., *taṣawwuf*, *akhlāq*, social engagement); (2) academic credibility, prioritizing peer-reviewed articles and scholarly monographs; and (3) temporal range, incorporating both pre-modern and modern works to ensure historical continuity. However, as the review is non-systematic, selection remains partially interpretive and may involve bias.

Analytical Procedure

A thematic analytical approach was employed in three stages: (1) textual familiarization through close reading; (2) thematic coding of recurring concepts such as ethical formation, social cohesion, and cultural expression; and (3) interpretive analysis situating these themes within broader historical and intellectual contexts. This procedure enables a structured examination of how *Ṣūfī* ethical principles are articulated and linked to contemporary socio-cultural functions.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Methodological rigor is maintained through (1) the use of established scholarly sources, (2) transparency in selection and analytical procedures, and (3) consistency in applying the thematic framework across texts. These measures support analytical coherence, though they do not eliminate interpretive subjectivity.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the reliance on a non-systematic literature review introduces potential selection bias and limits replicability. Second, the absence of empirical data means that findings remain conceptual and are not validated in lived *Ṣūfī* contexts. Third, the interpretive nature of thematic analysis involves researcher subjectivity in the identification and synthesis of themes. Additionally, dependence on translated sources may affect textual nuance.

Accordingly, the findings should be understood as analytically indicative rather than generalizable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Contemporary Expressions and Functions of Sufism

In the contemporary search for meaning, Sufism occupies a significant socio-cultural position within Muslim societies. While modern science and technology have substantially addressed the material and pragmatic needs of individuals, they have largely failed to respond to the spiritual, ethical, and emotional dimensions of human life. This imbalance has resulted in a growing sense of moral disorientation and social fragmentation. In such circumstances, Sufism offers a holistic framework that nurtures inner transformation while simultaneously promoting social harmony, ethical conduct, and cultural continuity. Reassessing Sufism in the modern context requires recognizing it not merely as a personal mystical path, but as a living Islamic tradition with profound social and cultural implications (Lone, 2022, p. 98).

Historically, Sufism has contributed to shaping communal values, artistic expressions, interfaith coexistence, and moral responsibility within society. It also believes in a rich morality. Nevertheless, for Sufism to remain relevant and effective as a socio-religious phenomenon, it must be critically distinguished from irrational, superstitious, and un-Islamic practices that have become associated with it over time. A nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of Sufism, grounded in authentic Islamic teachings and responsive to contemporary social realities, is essential for preserving its identity. Such an approach enables Sufism to function as a constructive cultural force, fostering ethical awareness, social cohesion, and spiritual well-being in the modern world (Lone, 2022, p. 98).

As a cosmopolitan religion, Islam possesses a distinctly civilizational character, offering comprehensive moral, spiritual, and social nourishment to its adherents. Among the various dimensions of Islamic teachings, Sufism represents the most profound spiritual and ethical framework, one that warrants renewed scholarly engagement in the contemporary world to address the multifaceted challenges confronting humanity. Modern societies are confronted with a wide spectrum of crises, religious, social, economic, and political, that have deeply affected the moral fabric of human life. At the global level, phenomena such as religious extremism, violence, erosion of human values, and persistent violations of human rights have become increasingly visible. At the societal level, traits such as greed, lack of compassion, injustice, and moral indifference have fostered conditions conducive to human exploitation and social disintegration. These challenges not only undermine social harmony but also pose serious threats to the ethical foundations of contemporary societies. In this context, Sufism offers a constructive moral and socio-cultural response to these pervasive maladies (Sells, 1996, p. 1).

Rooted in the ideals of love, compassion, humility, justice, and selflessness, *Ṣūfī* teachings promote a peaceful and inclusive social order. Sufism emphasizes inner moral refinement as a prerequisite for social reform, advocating altruism, honesty, and responsibility toward others. By nurturing ethical consciousness and fostering a spirit of service, it contributes to human security and social cohesion. Historically and in the present, Sufism has played a significant role in Islamic societies, influencing both public institutions and private conduct. Its impact extends beyond individual spirituality to encompass cultural expression, social ethics, and communal harmony, thereby affirming its enduring relevance as a vital socio-religious force in the contemporary world (Sells, 1996, p. 2).

Sufism awakens individual moral consciousness by cultivating a sense of responsibility toward society and fostering sincerity in both belief and action. Through this ethical self-awareness, it contributes to the formation of a healthy and cohesive social order grounded in morality, spirituality, and universal human values. However, for Sufism to effectively respond to the demands

of contemporary society, it requires a contextual and comprehensive understanding that aligns with modern social realities and addresses all spheres of collective life. Furthermore, the continued relevance of Sufism depends upon its critical purification from practices and interpretations that are inconsistent with Islamic teachings. Its aims and methods must be firmly rooted in the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah*, ensuring that its spiritual objectives remain authentic and constructive. When understood and practiced within this framework, Sufism can function as a dynamic socio-religious force, capable of nurturing ethical individuals and sustaining moral integrity within society (Howell, 2001).

During the nineteenth century, the question of the continuing significance of religion emerged as a central concern within Muslim intellectual discourse, giving rise to various movements of Islamic resurgence. However, these movements largely emphasized the political dimensions of Islam, often at the expense of its spiritual and ethical foundations. As a result, the inner dimension of Islam, Sufism, received comparatively limited scholarly and practical attention. In the context of contemporary Muslim societies, characterized by complex social transformations and moral challenges, there is an urgent need to reassess the dynamic relevance and constructive potential of Sufism. The efficacy of Sufism in the modern world manifests in multiple ways. During the Enlightenment period, many Western thinkers predicted the decline or disappearance of religion, arguing that scientific progress would replace religious belief and give rise to a secular, religion-less society. Contrary to these predictions, religion continues to play a significant role in public and private life. In this context, Sufism offers a non-confrontational framework that helps mitigate tensions between religion and the modern state by emphasizing ethical values, inner transformation, and spiritual meaning rather than political domination. In doing so, it reaffirms the authenticity and legitimacy of religion within modern social structures.

Moreover, Sufism highlights the guiding principles of religion that address both the spiritual and worldly concerns of individuals, thereby fostering balance and moral coherence. Contemporary societies, increasingly marked by individualism and social fragmentation, suffer from a decline in solidarity and brotherhood, which has contributed to various social maladies, including widespread violations of human rights. In this regard, *Ṣūfī* brotherhoods (*ṭarīqās*) have historically played, and can continue to play, a vital role in nurturing social cohesion, mutual responsibility, and a sense of shared humanity among individuals (Bruinessen and Howell, 2007).

From the eighteenth century onwards, Muslim scholars across the world recognized the need for a revival of Sufism, aiming to rejuvenate its presence in Muslim societies while highlighting both its spiritual and social significance. Undoubtedly, Sufism has historically played a pivotal role in Islamic revival movements, complementing other religious reforms. Muhammad 'Abduh of Egypt, for instance, regarded Sufism as an inseparable aspect of Islamic teachings, asserting that its legitimacy remains valid in modern times and emphasizing its profound potential in fostering enlightened and morally sound Muslim societies.

During the nineteenth century, Sufism came under considerable criticism, both at the social and religious levels. It was often accused of encouraging withdrawal from worldly affairs and of promoting innovations (*bid'ah*) within Islamic teachings. However, such criticisms largely stemmed from misunderstandings and superficial interpretations of Sufism, rather than from its authentic principles. In response to these challenges, and to reaffirm both its legitimacy within Islam and its social vitality in modern Muslim societies, Sufism underwent a process of reform and revival led by Muslim scholars during the same period. The primary objective of this reformist movement was to reconcile Sufism with *Sharī'ah* and to firmly ground it in the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah*. By emphasizing ethical conduct, social responsibility, and spiritual discipline within the framework of Islamic law, reformist scholars sought to eliminate un-Islamic accretions and restore Sufism to its original normative foundations. As a result, Sufism re-emerged as a constructive socio-moral force,

contributing to the ethical reconstruction of Muslim societies. Its renewed focus on moral integrity, social justice, and communal harmony enabled it to play a meaningful role in shaping societies rooted in spiritual depth and shared human values.

Sufism not only nurtures the spiritual development of individuals, but also fosters a strong sense of communal solidarity, enabling people to collectively confront social challenges. Owing to its unifying ethos, the significance of *Ṣūfī* brotherhoods is evident in societies where Muslims constitute a majority as well as in contexts where they exist as a minority. More broadly, Sufism demonstrates a dynamic engagement with social change. On the one hand, it acknowledges transformation as an inherent aspect of Islamic civilization; on the other, it cultivates a deep sense of brotherhood and mutual care among its adherents. By harmonizing spiritual growth with social responsibility, Sufism contributes to the formation of resilient communities capable of adapting to changing social realities while preserving ethical and human values.

In contemporary times, the increasing dominance of ideas such as modernization, development, and progress, particularly within Muslim societies, has often taken a predominantly materialistic orientation. This trend has created a widening disconnect between the spiritual and material dimensions of human life, leading individuals to prioritize material pursuits at the expense of spiritual and ethical development. Such an imbalance has contributed significantly to spiritual decline and moral disorientation at the individual and societal levels. This situation raises serious concerns within the Islamic worldview, as Islam envisions holistic human development, integrating both spiritual refinement and material advancement. Islamic teachings advocate moderation and balance, rejecting extremes that undermine either dimension of human existence. In this context, Sufism emerges as an effective and indispensable means of restoring equilibrium between the inner and outer aspects of life. By emphasizing inner purification, moral responsibility, and spiritual consciousness, Sufism complements material progress and ensures that development remains ethically grounded. It enables individuals and societies to pursue modernization without sacrificing spiritual integrity, thereby contributing to the realization of a balanced, harmonious, and value-oriented social order (Nasr, 1987).

Recognizing the practical utility of Sufism is essential for fostering a healthy, inclusive, and classless society grounded in spiritual consciousness and religious values. Through its emphasis on inner purification, humility, compassion, and social justice, Sufism promotes moral equality and human dignity beyond social or economic hierarchies. Moreover, in the contemporary global context, where Islam is frequently misrepresented and associated with violence and extremism, Sufism provides a constructive counter-narrative. By highlighting Islam's spiritual depth, ethical universality, and commitment to peace, Sufism plays a vital role in presenting a positive, authentic, and humane image of Islam to the world (Trimingham, 1971).

In the contemporary world, environmental degradation has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing humanity, necessitating renewed ethical and religious engagement. Within the Islamic tradition, the environment holds profound theological significance, and this dimension requires greater scholarly and public attention. To sustain the social relevance of Islam in modern societies, there is a need to initiate an Islamically grounded and socially recognizable movement aimed at environmental conservation. Islamic theological discourse must be expanded to address humanity's relationship with nature, emphasizing concepts such as stewardship (*khilāfah*), trust (*amānah*), and balance (*mīzān*). Cultivating environmental awareness among individuals is essential to fostering a harmonious relationship between religion and nature. In this regard, Sufism offers a particularly valuable perspective, as it views nature not merely as a material resource but as a spiritually meaningful manifestation of divine signs. By nurturing reverence for creation and emphasizing ethical responsibility toward the natural world, Sufism provides a spiritual foundation for environmental ethics. Recognizing and incorporating *Ṣūfī* insights into

contemporary environmental discourse can contribute significantly to promoting sustainable practices and reinforcing a spiritually informed approach to environmental conservation within Muslim societies (Afzal, 2005).

It is undeniable that the technological revolution has greatly facilitated human life, providing convenience and progress. However, this advancement has also contributed to a growing imbalance between human beings and the natural environment, resulting in environmental degradation and a detachment of ecological concerns from religious and ethical teachings. Consequently, there is an urgent need to revisit the spiritual and ethical traditions of Islam related to nature and to undertake deliberate efforts to integrate these principles into contemporary environmental practices. In this context, Sufism assumes particular significance. By emphasizing the spiritual dimension of creation, the interconnectedness of all beings, and the ethical responsibility of humans as stewards of the Earth, Sufism offers a holistic framework for environmental conservation. In modern times, the principles of Sufism can play a vital role in re-establishing harmony between humans and nature, promoting ecological awareness, and encouraging sustainable practices rooted in spiritual and moral consciousness (Nasr, 2005).

Despite facing criticism for being allegedly anti-modernist and for being blamed as an obstacle to development due to its perceived superstitious elements, Sufism has persisted and remained influential in contemporary society. Its significance is particularly evident in its socio-economic impact, where the ethical, spiritual, and communal teachings of Sufism contribute to collective solidarity, charitable initiatives, and the cultivation of moral values. Moreover, the relevance of Sufism extends to public domains, where it engages with contemporary social transformations and development processes, demonstrating its capacity to harmonize spiritual principles with modern societal needs (Hanieh, 2011).

Commenting on Sufism, 'Allama Iqbal notes that in the formative period of Islam, Sufism was an inseparable and vital component of the faith, guiding the spiritual development and inner life of Muslims. Over time, however, its influence and dynamism within society diminished, largely due to neglect and the failure of its representatives to effectively communicate its teachings. In the modern context, Iqbal stresses the need for a thoughtful reformation of Sufism, one that revitalizes both its spiritual and social significance while remaining true to its core principles and doctrines. Such a renewal, he argues, would safeguard the spiritual dimension of Muslim life against the pervasive influence of Western materialistic thought, while simultaneously guiding ethical conduct, social responsibility, and practical engagement in daily life. By restoring its relevance, Sufism can once again serve as a transformative force, nurturing both the inner self and the broader community (Iqbal, 1930).

Sufism and Interfaith Dialogue

Living in harmony and fostering cooperation are essential in societies marked by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. In today's world, characterized by a heterogeneous mix of religious traditions, cultures, and ethnicities, promoting dialogue, particularly at the religious level, is crucial to safeguarding peace, encouraging mutual understanding, and ensuring coexistence among followers of different faiths. Islam has historically been at the forefront of interfaith dialogue, from its earliest days, aiming to unite people and cultivate a society rooted in peace and social cohesion. Holy *Qur'ān* mentions,

"Say, 'People of the Book, let us come to a word common to us that we shall worship none but God and that we shall associate no partner with Him and that none of us shall take others, besides God, for lords.' And if they turn away, say, 'Bear witness that we have submitted to God.'" (Al-Qurān 3:64)

Interfaith dialogue is not merely a theological debate among followers of different religions; its primary aim is to foster peace, harmony, and mutual understanding by guiding individuals toward shared truths. One of the central features of Sufism is religious tolerance, which holds a significant place within its teachings. Sufism embodies all the virtues necessary for meaningful and productive interfaith dialogue, including generosity, patience, gratitude, humility, and tolerance. Due to its inherently tolerant nature, Sufism plays a vital role in promoting peace and understanding in the contemporary world (Nugroho, 2021, pp. 112-13).

Interfaith dialogue denotes peaceful and constructive engagement among adherents of different religious traditions, grounded in mutual understanding, respect, and appreciation of diverse beliefs, practices, and spiritual experiences. Such dialogue may take place at both individual and communal levels and aims to promote cooperation, tolerance, and trust across religious boundaries. Historically, Muslim engagement in interfaith dialogue has been informed by Qur'ānic principles, Prophetic guidance, and the broader ethical framework of Islam. Within this context, Islamic Sufism possesses particular significance for interfaith interaction. Its strong emphasis on love, humility, patience, generosity, and the pursuit of divine knowledge (*ma'rifah*) nurtures dispositions that are essential for meaningful and respectful dialogue. By cultivating these moral and spiritual virtues, Sufism fosters sincere, empathetic, and harmonious relations with followers of other faiths, thereby creating a favorable atmosphere for genuine dialogue and deeper mutual understanding.

Sheikh Hisham Kabbani defines formal interreligious dialogue as a struggle between the religions whereby the representatives communicate their faith to others and try to gain a correct understanding of the faith of others. The main purpose of this dialogue is to learn from each other (Nugroho, 2021, p. 118). Dialogue, whether conducted in religious, social, or political contexts, is indispensable in diverse and multicultural societies, as it facilitates peaceful coexistence and promotes a deeper understanding of both one's own beliefs and those of others. *Ṣūfī* teachings, as reflected in the works and lives of figures such as Mawlānā Rūmī, articulate a universal vision of humanity and spirituality, often described as a "dialogue of the heart" that transcends rigid doctrinal divisions. Through poetic expression, ethical comportment, and spiritual discipline, Sufism offers a distinctive framework for interfaith engagement grounded in empathy, mutual respect, and shared moral values. In a contemporary world characterized by pronounced religious and cultural plurality, Sufism provides a constructive and meaningful approach to fostering social harmony, religious tolerance, and deeper mutual comprehension. This study examines how the ethical and spiritual foundations of Islamic Sufism underpin interfaith dialogue and contribute to peaceful coexistence within modern pluralistic societies.

Islam treats all human beings equally. Holy Qur'an mentions,

"Mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes, so that you might come to know each other. The noblest of you in God's sight is the one who fears God most. God is all-knowing and all-aware." (Al-Qurān 49:13).

This Qur'ānic verse emphasizes two fundamental principles. First, it affirms the common origin of all human beings from a single pair, thereby rejecting any basis for discrimination rooted in culture, ethnicity, race, or similar distinctions. Second, it explains that human diversity into peoples and tribes is intended not for division or superiority, but to facilitate mutual recognition, understanding, and cooperation among human beings.

Sufism offers a valuable response to contemporary challenges at individual, social, and global levels by addressing moral decline, greed, injustice, and the lack of mutual understanding among diverse communities. These problems often arise from the absence of cooperation and

peaceful coexistence among people of different religions, cultures, and ethnicities. In this context, interfaith dialogue becomes essential. Islamic Sufism promotes an inclusive and optimistic view of humanity, emphasizing moral responsibility, sincerity, and spiritual awareness. It supports coexistence and interreligious dialogue while strengthening communal bonds and collective efforts to address social issues. Beyond personal spirituality, Sufism fosters social harmony through tolerance and inclusion, as seen in its significant role in the spread of Islam in regions such as Indonesia.

The contribution of Islamic Sufism to interreligious dialogue can be understood through two dimensions: doctrinal and moral. From a doctrinal perspective, Sufism maintains that all revealed religions originate from the same Divine source and ultimately lead toward the knowledge of God. *Şūfī* thinkers acknowledge that different belief systems each reflect aspects of truth, and therefore emphasize the importance of engaging with them through interfaith dialogue to approach a more comprehensive understanding of ultimate reality. In this sense, Sufism encourages the pursuit of truth through sincere dialogue among religions. Furthermore, Sufism teaches that all human beings share a common divine origin, and thus possess an inherent spiritual nature, which provides a strong foundation for mutual respect and understanding among followers of different faiths (Saeedimehr, 2020, pp. 99-100).

From a moral perspective, the teachings of Sufism embody the essential virtues required for meaningful and constructive interfaith dialogue, such as generosity, patience, and gratitude. In addition, humility and tolerance, central characteristics of *Şūfī* ethics- are crucial for fostering sincere engagement and mutual respect among followers of different religions. Owing to its inclusive and inward-looking approach, Sufism is particularly well suited to addressing questions arising from the comparative study of religions. In the context of modern influences and increasing religious plurality within the Islamic world, the systematic study of other faith traditions has become a pressing necessity. Sufism, through its ethical and spiritual teachings, offers a valuable framework for meeting this need and promoting deeper interreligious understanding (Saeedimehr, 2020, p. 77).

Şūfī interpretations of the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of the Qur'ānic revelation are of immense value for those engaged in interfaith dialogue, especially for individuals who view religions not as rigid, competing systems of dogma but as diverse paths leading to the same spiritual core. It is within *Şūfī* esotericism that the deepest encounters with other religious traditions have taken place, offering a vital foundation for a profound understanding of religions in the contemporary world. The *Şūfī* seeks to transcend external forms, journeying from multiplicity to unity and from the particular to the universal. By moving beyond the many toward the One, the *Şūfī* comes to perceive the One reflected within the many. In this vision, all forms, including religious forms, become transparent, revealing their shared divine origin.

The Gülen (2007) movement has gained widespread attention for its initiatives, particularly in the fields of education and interfaith dialogue. Through these efforts, the movement seeks to build bridges among diverse cultural and religious communities by promoting tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and religious openness. (Long, Ismail, and Yaakob) Many scholars hold that Islam spread in Bangladesh largely through the influence of *Şūfī* saints. A significant portion of Bangladeshi Muslims regard the Sufis as sources of spiritual guidance and wisdom. It is often argued that one of the most important contributions of the Sufis was fostering harmony, mutual respect, and unity between Hindus and Muslims (Alam, 2023).

Sufism is concerned with harmonizing personal piety with social responsibility. In *Şūfī* thought, these two dimensions of piety are not opposed or separate; rather, they are inseparable and complementary, much like two sides of the same coin. Personal spiritual growth, therefore, is fulfilled through active engagement in social life. This understanding explains why *Şūfī* orders such

as the *Naqshbandi* order encourage their followers to participate actively in the social and communal affairs of society. The teachings of the *Naqshbandi Haqqani* order on interreligious dialogue provide a living example of this integration of personal spirituality with social engagement (Nugroho, 2021, p. 124).

Religious diversity holds great significance in Indonesia, and local *Ṣūfī* orders are called to maintain the tolerant nature of both their personal and social piety. The variety of faiths is seen as a divine blessing, allowing followers to experience God's love through this diversity. This perspective inspires them to welcome people of other religions and recognize them as fellow humans sharing in God's love. The *Naqshbandi* Shaykhs, Shaykh Nazim and Shaykh Hisham, exemplify this approach, showing that building relationships with adherents of other faiths is both a way to express love for God and to experience His love in return (Nugroho, 2021, p. 124).

Genuine religious devotion necessarily involves participation in interreligious dialogue. Through such engagement, members of the *Naqshbandi Haqqani* order learn to open themselves to divine illumination, develop deeper self-awareness, and seek mutual enrichment. In essence, interreligious dialogue is not merely a theological exchange but a process of building meaningful and respectful relationships among people of different faiths (Nugroho, 2021, p. 125).

Love occupies a central place in Shaykh Nazim's understanding of religious plurality. He viewed all existence as originating from and sustained by divine love. When people come together through their shared love for God, their differences are no longer sources of division but become expressions of God's love for humanity. Accordingly, the *Naqshbandi Haqqani* order regards religious diversity as a positive and meaningful reality, understanding it as part of God's creative will. This perspective resonates with the pluralistic views of eminent mystics such as al-Ḥallāj and Ibn 'Arabī, who considered religious differences to be outward forms rather than ultimate realities. A similar vision was articulated by Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi, who perceived religious diversity as a universal manifestation of divine love (Nugroho, 2021, p. 117).

According to *Naqshbandi* *Ṣūfī* teachings, true religiosity goes beyond merely respecting the freedom of other faiths; it also requires a genuine commitment to building positive and meaningful relationships with their followers. This outlook is grounded in specific Qur'ānic teachings that call believers to openness and mutual understanding. In response to this divine guidance, believers are encouraged to learn about other religions and actively contribute to fostering harmony among different religious communities. Such harmony can only be achieved through sincere dialogue between adherents of diverse faiths. Simply acknowledging the existence of other religious groups without communication represents only a passive form of coexistence, lacking true engagement. Meaningful interaction and deeper understanding become possible only through direct and open dialogue (Nugroho, 2021, p. 118).

Sufism is characterized by openness, creativity, and flexibility. Rather than adopting a rigid approach, it expresses Islamic teachings through local cultural forms such as music, poetry, art, customs, and storytelling. *Ṣūfī* traditions often integrate Islamic beliefs with the cultural practices of the communities in which they develop, while also drawing upon ideas, symbols, and expressions from other cultures. As a result, Sufism does not merely shape local cultures; it is also shaped by them. This dynamic interaction creates a mutually influential relationship in which religion and culture continuously inform and enrich one another, allowing Sufism to adapt naturally to diverse social and cultural contexts (Alam, 2020).

The second Muslim incursion into India, led by the Ghaznavids around the year 1000, introduced not only military and political authority but also scholars, theologians, and poets to the subcontinent. Among these figures was al-Bīrūnī, whose detailed study of Hindu religion, philosophy, and social life reflects an early Muslim commitment to understanding Indian culture rather than merely governing it. As noted by Annemarie Schimmel, Lahore subsequently emerged

as the first major center of Persian-influenced Muslim culture in India, where the Persian language and cultural traditions profoundly shaped literature, education, and religious life. A central figure in this development was the renowned Sufi saint 'Alī Hujwīrī (*Data Ganj Bakhsh*), who authored the influential Persian work on Sufism, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, in Lahore. His shrine later became an important pilgrimage site in Punjab, symbolizing his enduring spiritual and cultural legacy (Schimmel, 1975, p. 345).

The profound influence of Sufism became most evident with the institutionalization and social integration of organized *Ṣūfī* orders. Through influential figures such as Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī, Sufism developed beyond a purely spiritual path into a significant cultural force that promoted the spread of Islam through ethical example, inclusivity, and compassion rather than political power or coercion. *Chishti* Sufism, in particular, cultivated a distinctive religious culture grounded in love for God, service to humanity, social equality, and the rejection of discrimination. *Chishti khānqāhs* served as open and inclusive spaces that transcended caste and class boundaries, attracting especially marginalized communities. Their accessible preaching, strong emphasis on moral integrity, and commitment to a classless communal life fostered a spiritual culture deeply attuned to local traditions and social conditions. In this way, Sufism, especially through the *Chishti* order, functioned as a transformative cultural movement that facilitated the Islamization of India by nurturing shared ethical values, social cohesion, and cultural integration, leaving a lasting imprint on the religious and cultural fabric of the subcontinent (Schimmel, 1975, p. 345).

Although Sufis often emphasized spiritual experience over formal scholarship and sometimes expressed distrust of excessive intellectualism, they were deeply engaged in writing and preserving spiritual knowledge. Their literary activity demonstrates that Sufism was not opposed to learning but sought to integrate spirituality with everyday life. A key cultural contribution discussed in the passage is the development and popularity of the *malfūzāt*, collections of sayings, conversations, and teachings of *Ṣūfī* masters recorded by their disciples. While this genre had roots in earlier *Ṣūfī* traditions outside India, Indian Sufis refined it into a systematic and continuous record, often maintained on a daily basis. These works captured not only spiritual teachings but also reflections on social behavior, ethics, and community life. On behalf of Nizami (1961), Schimmel says that they function like spiritual diaries, offering insights into the lives of ordinary people rather than elite court circles (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 355-56).

Cultural and Intellectual Contributions of Sufism

Sufism has greatly influenced literature, music, poetry, and art. Sufi poets like Rumi, Ḥāfiz, Jāmī, or 'Irāqī conveyed social messages of unity, love, and tolerance through simple language that reached the common people. This cultural influence strengthened social bonds. *Ṣūfī* ideas form the foundation of Persian lyrical poetry. Without Sufism, this poetry would not have its unique charm. In the greatest poets, the tension between worldly life and spiritual life is resolved in a harmonious balance of spiritual, emotional, and sensual elements. Through love and beauty, the poet creates artistic expressions that reflect divine beauty in small but shining fragments (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 288-89).

Mystical love is one of the most important and fascinating aspects of Sufism. In this form of love, God becomes the ultimate and absolute object of all thoughts and emotions. Love takes complete control of the lover's heart and mind, making spiritual life very intense and refined, almost like an art. Because these feelings are very deep and difficult to express, some of the greatest Persian works on love were written to describe them. Sometimes, this refined mystical love was expressed through human love, where a person was seen as reflecting divine beauty. From this idea developed a mixed Persian poetic tradition that combined mystical and romantic elements (Schimmel, 1975, p. 89).

Sufism played a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape of South Asia by encouraging the development and flourishing of vernacular literary traditions such as Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Deccani, and other regional languages. Although Persian remained dominant in royal courts as the language of administration and power, *Ṣūfī* saints and poets deliberately used local languages to convey spiritual teachings to the broader population. This approach made religious knowledge more accessible and simultaneously enriched regional literary traditions. In addition, Sufis made important contributions to the growth of poetry and music as means of spiritual expression. In several *Ṣūfī* orders, especially the *Chishtī Silsila*, music (*samāʿ*) and poetic recitation were practiced as structured spiritual disciplines aimed at deepening concentration, refining emotions, and inducing spiritual states. Through these artistic and cultural forms, Sufism extended beyond purely devotional practice and emerged as a powerful influence in shaping collective aesthetic sensibilities and cultural identities. Consequently, *Ṣūfī* engagement with language, poetry, and music played a vital role in creating a rich and inclusive cultural heritage that continues to shape South Asian societies today (Dey, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine how *Ṣūfī* ethical principles function as socially operative frameworks in contemporary contexts, with particular attention to social cohesion, pluralism, and cultural expression. By employing qualitative textual analysis of classical and modern sources, the study has demonstrated that key *Ṣūfī* concepts, especially *iḥsān*, *khidma*, and *maḥabba*, operate not merely as abstract spiritual ideals but as ethically generative principles that are translated into concrete socio-cultural practices.

With respect to the first objective, the analysis shows that *Ṣūfī* ethical concepts are internally structured around a model of ethical formation that links inner transformation with outward responsibility. Rather than remaining confined to personal spirituality, these concepts produce relational dispositions, such as humility, service, and compassion, that are inherently social in orientation. Regarding the second objective, the study finds that these ethical dispositions are institutionally and culturally mediated through practices such as *Ṣūfī* networks, interfaith initiatives, and artistic expressions, thereby contributing to forms of social cohesion and cultural continuity observable in contemporary contexts. Finally, in relation to the third objective, the analysis demonstrates that *Ṣūfī* ethics provides a flexible yet normatively grounded framework capable of engaging current debates on pluralism, coexistence, and moral responsibility, without reducing these to abstract or universalist claims.

Theoretically, the study contributes by advancing a conceptualization of “living Sufism” as a socially embedded ethical paradigm. This moves beyond dominant approaches that treat Sufism either as a purely mystical tradition or as a historical phenomenon. By integrating insights from the sociology of religion and ethical theory, the study shows that *Ṣūfī* thought can be analytically understood as a mediating framework between individual moral formation and collective social practice. In this sense, Sufism is not approached normatively as “inherently peaceful,” but analytically as a tradition whose ethical grammar enables particular forms of social engagement under specific conditions.

The findings also generate more grounded practical implications. First, the demonstrated linkage between ethical formation and social practice suggests that *Ṣūfī* frameworks can inform community-level initiatives aimed at strengthening social cohesion, particularly where moral fragmentation is a concern. Second, the analysis of interfaith engagement indicates that *Ṣūfī* ethics contributes to dialogical practices rooted in relational virtues rather than doctrinal negotiation, offering an alternative model for coexistence in plural societies. Third, the study’s examination of cultural production shows that *Ṣūfī*-inspired artistic and literary forms function as mechanisms of

cultural resilience, preserving ethical meaning while adapting to changing contexts. These implications are derived directly from the patterns identified in the textual analysis rather than from prescriptive assumptions about Sufism.

At the same time, the study remains limited by its reliance on textual and secondary sources, which constrains the ability to assess how these ethical frameworks are enacted across diverse lived contexts. Future research could extend this work through empirical investigation of contemporary *Ṣūfī* communities to test and refine the analytical model proposed here.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that Sufism can be more precisely understood as a “living” tradition not simply because it persists, but because its ethical concepts continue to be interpreted and operationalized within contemporary social realities. By clarifying the mechanisms through which *Ṣūfī* ethics translates into social practice, this research provides a more analytically grounded account of its relevance to modern debates on pluralism, coexistence, and moral responsibility.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has several methodological limitations. First, it relies on a non-systematic review of secondary literature, which introduces potential selection bias and limits the comprehensiveness and replicability of the analysis. Second, the absence of empirical data means that the findings remain conceptual and do not capture how *Ṣūfī* ethical principles are enacted in lived contexts. Third, the interpretive nature of thematic analysis involves a degree of subjectivity, which may influence the identification and framing of key themes.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating empirical methods such as ethnographic studies or interviews with contemporary *Ṣūfī* communities. Additionally, adopting a systematic literature review approach would strengthen analytical rigor, while comparative and context-specific studies could further test and refine the concept of “living Sufism” in diverse socio-cultural settings.

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