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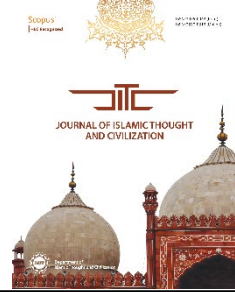
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Investigating Intrinsic Duality of Law and Spirit: An Analysis of Abū Yazīd’s Sufism

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Abstract

The intricate relationship between the duality of outward (*ẓāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*) religiosity has expressed significant attention concerning contemporary scholars. This dynamic interplay of intrinsic spiritual realization offers a significant religious identity, which cannot stand alone. Such inquiries within the Islamic tradition, are expressed through the duality of terms such as “Sharī‘a and Ṭarīqa,” “law and spirit,” or “*fiqh* and *tasawwuf*.” The issue has remained highly contested throughout the history of Islamic thought. The idea that there are two categories of scholars—those who belong to the outward (*‘ulamā al-ẓāhir*) and those who belong to the inward (*‘ulamā al-bāṭin*)—are known in the intellectual and spiritual culture of Islam. For Sufis, the spiritual dimension constitutes the core of the Islamic perception of a well-rounded personality and maintaining the balance between both the internal and external aspects of human actions, ritual or otherwise, is foundational for realizing the Islamic ideals in life. Despite this, misunderstandings continue to surface in scholarly writings. Thus, this paper attempts to address this issue of outward and inward religiosity through the perspective of one of the pioneers of the Sufi movement in Islam, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 234/878), who was termed by al-Junayd as “Gabriel among the angels.” Additionally, this study aims to elaborate on the original Sufi position through al-Bisṭāmī and contribute to the contemporary awakening towards the spiritual value of human life.

Keywords: Abū Yazīd, *bāṭin*, law, spirit, *ẓāhir*

Introduction

“Law” in governing the external dimensions of religious practices, particularly within the framework of Islam, pertains to an external governing dimension. This aspect is commonly associated with what is known as “*al-Fiqh*.” While classical Muslim sources historically employed the term “*fiqh*” more broadly, encompassing both *al-fiqh al-akbar* (greater jurisprudence) and *al-fiqh al-aṣghar* (lesser jurisprudence),¹ it has now become customary to use “*fiqh*” when discussing Islamic Law.

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¹The term *al-Fiqh* (literally ‘understanding’), in its Qur’anic usage and in early Islamic usage was held to be a term that denotes having a clear understanding of the message of the Qur’ān or religion in general (See the Qur’ān, al-Tawbah (9): 122) and encompassed technically the understanding of its comprehensive teachings along with those of the *Sunna*. It was applied to both the external and internal dimensions of Islam. When scholarly discussions started, to be subsequently followed by the process of codification of the sciences, it became a generic term that encompassed *al-fiqh al-akbar*, namely, the greater *Fiqh*: that which concerns with faith and belief i.e. theology, *fiqh al-jawāriḥ* i.e. the *fiqh* of organs, that which concerns with outward conditions namely Jurisprudence or actions, rituals and practices and *fiqh al-qulūb* or *fiqh* of the heart which deals with the inner and spiritual dimension of Islam namely, *Tasawwuf* or Sufism. But by the second century, when the Islamic sciences were becoming specialized and being categorized into specific disciplines of learning, the term became popularly restricted to “Islamic law” and with the passage of time

In contrast, the term “spirit” encompasses the inner dimension of Islamic teachings and practices that falls under the purview of *al-Taṣawwuf*, more commonly known as Sufism, or what can also be termed the Islamic spiritual quest. Nevertheless, in many Muslim communities, there exists a prevailing inclination to confine “fiqh” solely to the realm of the *ẓāhir*² (the apparent or outward) and “*tasawwuf*” to the *bāṭin* (the hidden or inward). An alternative and arguably more illuminating binary in this context is the division between *Sharī‘ah* and *Ṭarīqah*, a distinction that is widely embraced within Sufi orders and is more explicit in its connotations than other categorizations.

In Islam, the interplay between *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* is inseparable and forms a foundational aspect of genuine Islamic practices. Ultimately, it is the spiritual facet of these practices that holds the utmost significance. The transformation of the heart, enabling one to truly experience the profound reality of “living in the presence of God,” constitutes the essential characteristic of a sincere Islamic life.³

Unfortunately, as Muslim societies have expanded over time, particularly after the era of the righteous caliphs, there emerged a divisive sectarian environment, both politically and religiously, accompanied by a gradual shift towards materialism in Muslim lands. These developments contributed to the marginalization of the spiritual dimension in Islamic conduct. The concept of “righteous behavior,” previously grounded in the inseparable connection between *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, began to waver in significance, even to the point of being considered inconsequential.

Consequently, a new norm emerged in which the significance of the Spirit and the vitality of the spiritual dimension were consciously or unconsciously disregarded, or at best, downplayed.⁴ Under

became synonymous to it, to the extent that Muslim minds on hearing the term did not understand it to mean anything but law. For an analytical elaboration on this shift of meaning, see Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), ed. Sa’īd ‘Imrān (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1425 AH), 1/85.

²When *ẓāhir* is juxtaposed alongside *bāṭin* in the context of classifying the sciences of Islam, especially the three main ones, i.e., theology, law, and Tasawwuf, it is understood that the first two classify under the *ẓāhir* sciences and the third under *bāṭin*.

³The famous prophetic tradition known as *Ḥadīth Jibrīl* explains this as the third of the three dimensions of the religion of Islam. For an excellent and detailed study of this hadith, see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000). The Qur’ān states purification of the heart as one of the basic functions of the messenger (al-Jumu‘ah 62:02). The Qur’ān is also replete with discourses on the heart, its centrality, function, and the importance of its cleansing for salvation. (al-Zumar 39:22) and (al-Shu‘arā’ 26:88-89). Furthermore, the Qur’ān employs a variety of terms and nomenclature for spiritual organs, all signifying a singular reality: the human spirit. These terms, including *qalb*, *fu‘ād*, *rūh*, *lubb*, and *‘aql*, are understood in classical Muslim literature as denoting different facets and levels of the same divine spirit—the Breath of the Merciful—infused within the human body. A treaty by the third century Sufi al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (269/883 or 295/905 or 300/910) stands out as an excellent exploration of the topic. See his *Bayān al-Farq bayn al-Ṣadr wa al-Qalb wa al-Fu‘ād wa al-Lubb* (Explanation of the Difference between the Chest, the Heart, the Mind, and the Intellect), introduced and translated by Nicholas Heer, in Nicholas Heer and Kenneth L. Honerkamp, *Three Early Sufi Texts* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2004).

⁴An interesting and telling anecdote is mentioned by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī (463 AH/1071 CE) in his *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*. According to the account, Sa’īd bin ‘Amr al-Barza‘ī said: I was present when Abū Zur‘ah was asked about al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī and his books; he replied to the questioner: “Stay clear of these books; these are books of innovation and misguidance, you should follow the *athar* (traditions of the Prophet [peace be upon him]), for you will find in them what suffices you... Then he said: How hastily people lunge towards innovations?” See *Ta’rīkh Baghdād* (The History of Baghdad), ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Atā’ (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1417), 8/211.

these circumstances, spiritual concerns came to be perceived as an elitist cultural phenomenon and, in some cases, as the domain of individuals outside the purview of legal scholars and official religious authorities.

The cultural history of Islam bears witnesses to the ongoing contest and tension between Sufis and *Fuqahā'* (Jurists) regarding this matter. Even today, this remains an area of unresolved conflict. Within the public sphere, people of the Spirit or Sufi masters became focal points of attention and admiration, as they were seen as embodying the depth of religious life that seemed elusive elsewhere. Sufi masters, actively addressing these challenges, transformed *Tasawwuf*—the path towards realizing *Ihsān* (spiritual excellence)—into a movement dedicated to the Islamic spiritual quest.

The lack of recognition of the profound spiritual dimension within the Muslim faith and practice has led to a persistent distortion of the core message of Islam, an issue that endures to the present day. Even now, there are areas where interest in spiritual growth is met with suspicion by some, despite a widespread consensus on the fundamental importance of purifying the heart as an inherent aspect of Islamic practice. This underscores the significance of engaging in a dialogue about the intricate relationship between spirit and law.⁵

The purpose of this paper is to provide a concise yet comprehensive analysis of the Sufi standpoint regarding the relationship between law and spirit, or between form and essence. This analysis is conducted through the prism of one of the prominent figures in the historical evolution of *Tasawwuf*, Bāyazīd or Abū Yazīd of Bisṭām (161-234 AH/777-848 CE). Thus, it intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Sufi perspective on the intricate connection between these two aspects. Moreover, this study aims to demonstrate that the Sufi viewpoint remains faithful, both in its literal interpretation and its essence, to the foundational epistemology of Islam as derived from the core sources of the Islamic tradition.

It is worth emphasizing that my use of terms such as "spirit", *bāṭin*, *ṭarīqa*, "*tasawwuf*," "spirituality," and "intuition" is strictly guided by the framework of Islam and the authentic Sufi perception and experience which are strictly orthodox and traditionally authentic.

In English and some other European languages, there exist a few significant terms that bear some resemblance to *Tasawwuf* and its related concepts, as mentioned earlier. These terms include mysticism, Gnosticism, esotericism, and others. However, I wish to caution readers that while there may be apparent similarities and points of intersection among these terms, each one signifies a distinct pattern of spirituality that does not necessarily align perfectly with the concept of *bāṭin* in Islam.

These terms carry their own unique histories and characteristics, making them distinct from one another. It must however be mentioned that there is much overlap between them as well. To borrow an apt expression, it would be fitting to quote an Indian Sufi who, when questioned about Yoga practices, remarked, "They are useful means, but not the way of Muhammadans."⁶

2. Historical Background

Abū Yazīd stands as one of the earliest figures among the Sufis during the pivotal period when *Tasawwuf* was crystallizing into a well-organized religious and cultural phenomenon within Muslim

⁵In this complex landscape, a diverse array of groups and movements, including modernists, political Islamists, reformists, Wahhabis, and Salafis, seem to find common ground with what Sufis refer to as '*Ulamā' al-Rusūm*'. An intensified opposition to *tasawwuf*, comes against the backdrop of a prevailing perception that an interest in spiritual discipline was indicative of cultural backwardness and a perilous path toward civilizational decline.

⁶Carl W. Ernst, *Reflections of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2016).

societies. If one examines the roster of prominent Sufis from the second half of the second century to the first half of the third century,⁷ it becomes evident that during this era, *Tasawwuf* was solidifying its foundational structure as a science of spiritual awakening and moral transformation. It was evolving into a practical methodology for spiritual purification and, consequently, “an art for living in the presence of God.” This development occurred even before the emergence of notable personalities in the latter half of the third century.⁸ Abū Yazīd stands out among classical Sufis for his unwavering commitment to reinstating the lost integrity of Islamic epistemology during his lifetime. His relentless defense of the spiritual dimension within Islam resulted in his expulsion from his native town of Bisṭām on multiple occasions.⁹

The spiritual dimension played a central role in Abū Yazīd’s life and teachings. He is renowned for his remarkable spiritual achievements. His remarkable spiritual achievements inspired Dhū’l-Nūn (d. 245/860), the eminent Egyptian Sufi, to remark, “My brother Abū Yazīd lost himself in God and began searching for it with others.” He also remarked on another occasion, “His words are beyond our comprehension.”¹⁰ Al-Junayd is reported to have compared Abū Yazīd among Sufis to what Gabriel is among the angels.¹¹

Abū Yazīd is consistently classified by Sufi hagiographers as the most prominent example of Intoxicated Sufis or Sufi intoxication (*Sukr*). However, it is worth noting that his interpretation of *Sukr* may differ from the perspective held by many modern scholars of *Tasawwuf*. It is intriguing to observe that even al-Junayd, representing the school of Sobriety (*Sahw*), often contrasted with Abū Yazīd (assumed to be the leader of the school of intoxication), took on the responsibility of writing commentaries on Abū Yazīd’s ecstatic utterances.

Abū Yazīd holds the distinction of being the first known figure in the history of *Tasawwuf* to claim a spiritual ascension that some have likened to Prophet Muhammads miraculous nocturnal journey (*al-Mi’rāj*). Abū Yazīd’s expressions within the Sufi tradition are characterized as deeply symbolic and imbued with gnosis. They bear the marks of drawing from the wellspring of transcendence. Al-Junayd’s comments on Abū Yazīd’s sayings emphasize the profound depths of meaning and imply that he drew from an exclusive source of spiritual insight.

⁷Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (110/728), ‘Abd al-Wāhid bin Zayd (150/793), Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya (185/801-802), Ibrāhīm bin Ad’ham (160/777), Shaqīq al-Balkhī (194/809-810) Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (215/830), Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī (200/815), Umm ‘Alī (240/854-855), Fāṭima al-Naysābūrī (Nishāpūr), al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (242/857), Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (245/859) are a few names worthy of being mentioned here.

⁸Examples include Sarī al-Saqāṭī (253/867), al-Junayd (298/910), al-Kharrāz (286/899 or 277/890-1), al-Tustarī (283/896), al-Nūrī (295/908), al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (295/905) and many others.

⁹Reports vary on the number of times Abū Yazīd was expelled from his hometown Bisṭām (located in the modern province of Semnan in Iran, near the city of Shahrud); some mention five while others seven. See al-Sahlaǧī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr* (The Light from the Words of Abū Ṭayfūr) in Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī’s *Shaṭaḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* (Ecstatic Sufi Utterances) (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1978); this is the first known comparatively detailed biographical account of Abū Yazīd. Also see al-Sulamī’s *Tārīkh al-Ṣūfiyyah wa-bi-Dhaylihi Miḥan al-Ṣūfiyyah* (The History of the Sufis and in its margin the Trials of the Sufis), ed. by Muḥammad Adīb al-Jādir (Damascus: Dār al-Naynawa, 2015).

¹⁰ See Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir‘āt al-Zamān* (The Mirror of Time) in Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī’s *Shaṭaḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1978), 211.

¹¹Al-Hajweī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* (The Unveiling of the Veiled), ed. and trans. by Is‘ād ‘Abd al-Hādī Qindīl (Cairo: al-Majlis al-‘Alā li al-Shu‘ūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1394/1974), 317.

Abū Yazīds utterances, reflections, and responses to inquiries bear witness to unparalleled spiritual intelligence. It comes as no astonishment that al-Junayd aptly referred to Abū Yazīd as the "Orbit of Gnosis."¹²

These aforementioned facets, among many others, unmistakably affirm Abū Yazīds role as a representative and authoritative figure. Moreover, it is worthwhile to provide a brief overview of who Abū Yazīd was.

3. Abū Yazīd: An Ascetic, a Mystic, or a Sufi?

Abū Yazīd belongs to an eventful period in the history of *Tasawwuf*. Some refer to this period as one of transition from asceticism to mysticism,¹³ particularly when examining the external social history of *Tasawwuf*. However, this characterization requires closer examination, particularly regarding the core essence of *Tasawwuf*. The validity of this assertion hinges on scholars' interpretations of the fundamental nature of *Tasawwuf* and their perspectives on the historical trajectory of Sufis and the development of their practices. It seems that *tasawwuf* has transformed itself into a dynamic social movement.

Christopher Melchert characterizes the period leading up to Dhū'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (245 AH/860 CE) as primarily ascetical rather than mystical. He contends, "extant record is overwhelmingly ascetical, not mystical, until Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī. Thereafter, truly mystical schools emerged at about the same time in Khurasan (Abū Yazīd and especially the less famous Abū Ḥafṣ al-Naysabūrī) and Baghdad (al-Kharrāz, al-Nūrī). There was soon trouble with old-style ascetics, and seventy-odd Sufis were arrested in the Inquisition of Ghulām Khalīl."¹⁴ In his assessment, the earliest Sufi teachings unmistakably lean toward mysticism are attributed to Dhū al-Nūn,¹⁵ while those of Abū Yazīd are unquestionably mystical.¹⁶

Despite the close friendship and continual contact between these two figures, and even considering that Abū Yazīd (234/847) predates Dhū'l-Nūn (245/860) by twelve years, the key distinction here lies in the differentiation between asceticism and mysticism, by mysticism being viewed as an emerging phenomenon in the third century. Is it even conceivable that the concept of Iḥsān, which *Tasawwuf* serves as a means to realize, remained a dormant notion for over two hundred years until the transition from asceticism (*zuhd*) to mysticism (*Tasawwuf*)?

My argument contends that *Tasawwuf* was an inherent reality from the outset, with its organized framework developing later. The proliferation of spiritual and gnostic expressions during this period, along with an increasing exchange of Sufi ideas and theoretical discussions, might have contributed to the perception of a transition from *zuhd* to *Tasawwuf*. However, that is not the case. The famous dialogue reported between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companion Ḥāritha reveals a mature spiritual discourse, in which the experience of *mushāhada* (spiritual witnessing), the idea of the illumination of heart and gnosis resulting from spiritually oriented life features prominently and in fact, seems to have been the reality of the life of the first Muslim community.

Thus, the notion that there was a distinct phase of Asceticism transitioning into mysticism around the middle of the third century appears untenable when we consider the actual historical trajectory of *Tasawwuf*. Whatever the case, Abū Yazīd was undeniably a Sufi, and it would be more accurate to describe him as such rather than simply a mystic, unless we interpret Sufism as

¹²Al-Hajwerī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 1/317.

¹³Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," in *Studia Islamica*, no. 83 (1996), 51-70.

¹⁴Melchert, "The transition From Asceticism," 51.

¹⁵Ibid., 57.

¹⁶Melchert, "The transition From Asceticism," 58.

synonymous with mysticism and not the other way around. By being a Sufi, he certainly embraced asceticism, as ascetic practices are an integral aspect of Sufi life and perspective.

Abū Yazīd's historical context places him at the center of significant developments in the history of *Tasawwuf* in the first half of the third century. Alongside him were numerous other luminaries, both men and women, scattered across different corners of the Islamic world in places like Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Iran, Mecca, and Medina. As the influence of the Sufi movement expanded and began to draw in larger numbers of adherents, it was met with a series of misfortunes.

Because of various factors, most notably a lack of epistemological sympathy towards Sufis, they faced numerous unfortunate situations, and ostracization among others—though these experiences were certainly not unique to them. Al-Dārānī faced expulsion from Damascus, Ibn Abī al-Ḥawārī (230/845 or 244/860) was compelled to flee the same city, and Dhū al-Nūn faced accusations of concealed unbelief. Sarī al-Saqāṭī also found himself accused of unbelief, while Abū Yazīd was repeatedly expelled from his hometown of Bistam. Abū Ḥamza met a similar fate, being banished from Tarsus. Al-Kharrāz, for his writings on mystical experience, faced expulsion from old Cairo and then Mecca. This pattern persisted throughout the third century and into the fourth, marked by Sahl al-Tustarī's flight from Tustar to Basra for relating conversations with angels and jinn.

Forty years after the death of Abū Yazīd the famous Inquisition of Sufis orchestrated by Ghulām al-Khalīl,¹⁷ known as the *Miḥnat Ghulām Khalīl* took place. The early fourth century bore witness to the tragic episode of al-Hallaj in Baghdad. This event serves as a symbol of the enduring perceptual differences between Sufis and jurists. While the former advocated for the preservation of the inner dimension of Islam, which they perceived as being widely disregarded or marginalized, the latter reacted negatively to many of the former's assertions regarding the inner life and the validity of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) as a legitimate means of knowledge.

While it is reasonable to assume that mutual respect and a cordial relationship between the two persisted, it is undeniable that the contrast between them became a defining characteristic of Abū Yazīd's period.

It is in this milieu that Abū Yazīd found himself in the position of countering the 'ulamā', including the Fuqahā', Muḥaddithīn and Qurrā' from his city. He ardently advocated for the recognition of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) divinely inspired knowledge, positioning spiritual reasoning as a method superior to external scholarship in the hierarchy of knowledge. He contended that this knowledge, being directly from God, provided a profound understanding of the teachings of Islam. His famous statement directed at the external scholars, "You have taken your knowledge dead from the dead and we have derived ours from the Ever-Living One,"¹⁸ gained popularity among Sufis for all time to come. Ibn 'Arabī (636/1240), one of Abū Yazīd's great admirers, celebrated this saying and repeatedly quoted it in his seminal work, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*.

4. Exploring Abū Yazīd's Perspective on Law and Spirit or *Zāhir* and *Bāṭin*

It is time to delve into Abū Yazīd's stance on the interplay between "law and spirit," often symbolized as "*Zāhir* and *Bāṭin*." Notably, Abū Yazīd did not leave behind any written works, and his immediate disciples are not known to have penned anything either. What people do possess,

¹⁷He was Aḥmad bin Muḥammad al-Bāhili; born in Baṣra, brought up in Baghdad and died there in 262 AH or 275 AH. He was known for his piety but accused (probably falsely) of hypocrisy and concocting Prophetic traditions. See al-Dhahabī, *Mīzān al-Itidāl* (The Balance of Moderation), ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bajāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa li'l-Ṭibā'ah wa'l-Nashr, 1963), 1/141-142.

¹⁸Al-Sahlaḥī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 100.

however, is close to five hundred of his sayings and comments attributed to him.¹⁹ Additionally, there are a handful of accounts describing his spiritual journey in his own words, and these are exceedingly rich in spiritual vocabulary and concepts. Many of these concepts, it appears, were possibly introduced for the first time in his expressions, shedding light on the multiplicities of spiritual states and statuses, diverse levels of divine theophanies, and the multifaceted nature of spiritual experiences.

Furthermore, we owe our gratitude to al-Tusi's diligent efforts, as he preserved some invaluable fragments from a lost book authored by al-Junayd, titled *Sharḥ Shaḥāḥāt Abī Yazīd* (an exposition of Abū Yazīd's ecstatic utterances). In the realm of Sufi literature, particularly within the corpus of Sufi biographies, we encounter scattered pieces of information about Abū Yazīd. Given the scarcity of sources, these fragments assume significant importance, particularly when they are recorded by Sufi masters who lived close to Abū Yazīd's time. Notable among these luminaries are figures like al-Kalabādhī, al-Qushayrī, al-Tūsī, and al-Hujwīrī.

Within these classic hagiographies, we stumble upon profoundly instructive evaluations of Abū Yazīd, authored by his eminent contemporaries and those who came after him. These assessments position him at the very heart of the realm of spiritual exploration and mysticism, further enriching our understanding of his enduring influence on the world of Sufism.

Through an analysis of the extant materials related to Abū Yazīd, and the insights provided by his peers, whether contemporaries or subsequent Sufi scholars, one can delineate a clear Bayazidian perspective regarding the binary of "law and spirit" or "*Zāhir* and *Bāṭin*." This perspective emerges as a representative of the Sufi stance that resonates throughout Sufi thought. Abū Yazīd's perspective on the relationship between *Zāhir* and *Bāṭin* is one of integration, rather than conflict. He envisions them as complementary, such that neither can legitimately exist in isolation from the other.

In contrast, some modern interpretations of the principal sources of Islam, heavily influenced by either a modernistic ethos or a literalistic approach, or sometimes a combination of both, tend to perceive the relationship between the outward and inward dimensions as inherently conflicting. However, it is crucial to emphasize that such a perspective is incongruent with the foundational sources of Islam.

Historically, there have been groups, such as the *Bāṭiniyya* (esoterists), who advocated for an exclusively "internal" understanding of religion. Some of these groups may have overlapped with what we now refer to as esotericism. Al-Ghazālī in fact, authored a refutation of their beliefs. Even as early as the 9th century, some individuals rejected the outward practices of religion while championing an exclusive focus on esotericism. Al-Junayd categorically condemned such groups as outlaws and infidels (*zanādiqa*). It is therefore imperative to maintain a clear demarcation between these outlawed positions that were unequivocally rejected by Sufi scholars themselves and the authentic Muslim Sufi stance.

5. The Self of the Believer in Abū Yazīd,s Perspective

For Abū Yazīd, the external aspects of a believer's life hold little value if the inner dimensions are absent, and conversely, the inner cannot be conceived without the external. In his view, the inner represents the spiritual essence of the outer, while the outer serves as the tangible manifestation of the inner. This perspective aligns with Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) comment on a

¹⁹Here we are referring to al-Sahljāī's afore mentioned *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*. Al-Sahljāī (476/1084) was a Bistamian from the same town of Abū Yazīd and a contemporary of al-Hajwerī. It is worth mentioning that we find many of these sayings scattered in many pre-Sahljāī Sufi biographical sources.

companion's prayer, wherein he remarked, "Had his heart submitted to God, his organs would have submitted too."²⁰ It underscores the unity of both the inner and the outer in the life of a believer.

Abū Yazīd eloquently described the heart of a believer as "his heart is dilated with the light of Islam, and his heart is turned to his Lord; the interior of his heart witnesses his Lord and his understanding is sound; he takes his refuge with his Lord, being consumed when he is near, and crying out when he is far."²¹ This description emphasizes the spiritual nature of the believer's self, which is in perpetual communion with God's presence. This self remains connected to God, engaged in constant witnessing, ignited by the power of God, and simultaneously expressing the longing inherent in the separation between the self and God.

This can be termed a "spiritual paradox." It becomes apparent how the self suffers and/or enjoys various manifestations of a state of "perplexity" (*al-Ḥayra*), a result of the conditions that signify a genuine proximity to God. This proximity places the believer in a profound existential tension, positioned between two fundamental aspects of the Divine essence: transcendence and immanence.

If the essence of human life lies in realizing one's nature as a Divine agent, then the spiritual life serves as the path to awaken this reality and live it. This awakening hinges on developing a constant awareness of the Divine presence within the heart. Such development is not possible without undergoing the transformative consequences of what Sufis refer to as the state of "divine attraction" (*al-Jadhb*).

In light of Abū Yazīd's earlier statement, this spiritual attraction appears synonymous with spiritual suffering. By examining the five key terms in the statement—*Inshirāh* (expansion), divine light, *Inābah* (turning in repentance), *Shuhūd* (witnessing), *Ihtirāq*, and *ṣurākh* (crying out)—which lie at the core of Sufi psychology, one can readily discern that the essence of a believer's life is devoted to upholding the spiritual dimension.

In this framework, faith transforms into a profound act of witnessing and witnessing serves as a pointer to proximity with the Divine. While some may perceive this state as indicative of an advanced spiritual stage, a thorough comparison with the dimension of *Iḥsān*, the third of the three dimensions of Islam, convinces us that this should ideally represent the believers' constant state. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself defined *Iḥsān* as, "to worship God as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He certainly sees you."²² The practical embodiment of this definition is nothing besides "living in the presence of God," precisely what the state of witnessing (*Shuhūd*) implies.

Iḥsān, therefore, is an experiential spectrum that ranges from living in the constant presence of God. The higher level in the first half of the definition indicates, being conscious of God's presence, and the lower level referenced in the second half. The believer finds himself positioned between these two extremes, and the realization of his/her faith hinges on where he/she falls within this spectrum. This establishes a hierarchy among believers in their spiritual journey towards God.

As we have previously noted, residing in the presence of God undoubtedly entails a heightened state of perplexity, as it becomes impossible to define the nature of the divine theophanies (*tajalliyāt*) or divine inflows (*wāridāt*) experienced by the believer. These experiences are peculiar to each, contingent upon their proximity to God, the intensity of divine theophany, and, above all, the psychological and spiritual fortitude of the believer. In simple terms, it represents an encounter with

²⁰Abū Bakr bin Abī Shaybah, *Kitāb al-Muṣannaḥ*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt (Riyād: Maktabat al-Rusdh, 1409), 2/86.

²¹Abū Bakr al-Kalābādī, *Kitāb al-Ta'aruf li-Madhhab ahl al-Taṣawwuf* (The Doctrine of the Sufis), trans. A. J. Arberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 70.

²²Muḥammad bin Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīh*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhayr bin Nāṣir (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Nājah, 1422), 1/19.

the realm of truth, which boasts endless levels and is inherently ineffable. Paradoxically, the more one immerses himself in it, the more enigmatic it becomes. After all, what can one possibly say about encountering the countenance of God?

The Hadīth of the Prophet provides clear guidance on the anticipated psychological state of an individual standing in ritual prayer, proclaiming, "When any of you stands for prayer, he has God in front of him," and "When any of you is in prayer, he is conversing with God."²³ Consequently, being conscious of God's presence, encompassing the entirety of one's inner and outer being, stands as the paramount objective of prayer. It is within this arena that believers exhibit a wide spectrum, ranging from the highest to the lowest levels of awareness. This represents the essence of spiritual life, the *bāṭin* or the inward state that shapes the personality of the believer.

6. Exploring Multiple Levels and Characteristics of Spirituality

Abū Yazīd's sayings offer profound insights into the multiple levels of spirituality, which are derived from his own experiences. While these utterances undeniably exhibit a multilayered and multifaceted character, they defy straightforward classification. The following analysis of some of these sayings will elucidate this point, simultaneously crystallizing Abū Yazīd's distinctive paradigm of spirituality.

In one of his revelatory statements, Abū Yazīd asserted, "If you claim that your prayer unites you with God, know that it is distancing you from Him. If you abandon it, you become an infidel, and if you witness it, you associate partners with Him."²⁴ Under typical circumstances, within the life of a devout believer, this assertion is regarded as a fundamental truth. However, in a world plagued by forgetfulness and countless distractions that hinder humanity's progress toward God, this truth may not always be readily apparent.

Being God-conscious is an essential characteristic of life when viewed through the lens of the Iḥsānic dimension of faith that inherently requires a degree of self-annihilation commensurate with one's level of God-consciousness. This state necessitates the believers unwavering focus and dedication, which is logical to conceive the believer as occupying various degrees of annihilation (*fanā'*), sustained by God. Paradoxically, this state is the representation of both higher and lower levels of spiritual life, contingent upon their interpretation.

Nevertheless, the fundamental principle underlying this saying underscores the crucial relationship between the inner and outer dimensions of spirituality. The absence of the spiritual dimension, the act of "witnessing God," leads to associating partners with God, while ignorance of this dimension results in infidelity. This understanding of religious life and practice has its firm foundation and connection with the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* that belongs to a higher level of spiritual witnessing.

Abū Yazīd's profound spirituality was undeniably unique, was evident in many of his responses and comments. An extraordinary incident serves as a testament to his exceptional connection with the Divine. When the Qur'ānic verse, "On the day when We shall gather the God-fearing to the All-Merciful in groups,"²⁵ was recited in Abū Yazīd's presence, he immediately entered into a state of ecstasy and exclaimed, "How can one already with Him be gathered? They are eternally in His company."²⁶ This sheds light on the depth of his intimacy with the Divine, demonstrating that the realization of Iḥsān had transformed his very nature. It is possible that he was alluding to an initial

²³Abū Dā'ūd, *Sunan Abī Da'ūd*, eds. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt and Muḥammad Kāmil (n.p.: Dār al-Risālah al-Ālamīyah, 2009), 1/289.

²⁴Al-Sahlaḥī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 118.

²⁵Maryam 19: 85.

²⁶Al-Sahlaḥī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 174.

stage of transcendental transformation when he remarked that "remembrance of God with the tongue is forgetfulness"²⁷ and stated, "Oh, you who sold everything for nothing and who bought nothing for everything, know that in your worship of God, there are signs that render you oblivious to sinning."²⁸

The fundamental concept is that spirituality entails a journey away from the self and into the Divine presence. Abū Yazīd might have found himself in this state when he declared, "God has servants, and were He to veil Himself from them in this world or the hereafter, they would not worship Him."²⁹ Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, an equally prominent Sufī of Abū Yazīd's time, recognized this aspect of Abū Yazīd's spirituality and remarked, "My brother Abū Yazīd had lost himself in the love of God."³⁰ This state of annihilation is what Abū Yazīd referred to as the, "Realization of Nothingness," and lived by it as if it became an essential characteristic of his personality. When asked how he achieved this state, he responded, "By nothing,³¹ or by losing all that belongs to them and witnessing only what belongs to Him alone."³² The realization of our nothingness constitutes the essence of the spiritual journey, as revealed to him in a dream, where he saw God and asked, "O my God, how can I reach You? "Gods response was simple yet profound: "Leave yourself and come."³³

The expression frequently attributed to Abū Yazīd is "*Subhānī*," which translates to "Glory to me." Many Sufis and scholars have interpreted it as belonging to the genre of ecstatic utterances known as *Shahāh*. Interestingly, even Ibn Taymiyya, who is considered the precursor to the modern Wahhābī/Salafī trend in Islam, analyzed it as an outpouring from a state of intoxication.

When al-Junayd, was informed (most likely by his disciples) that Abū Yazīd was becoming immoderate in his speech, he inquired about what had reached them of his immoderations. They reported that they had heard Abū Yazīd saying, "Glory to me, glory to me, I am the supreme God!" Al-Junayd responded, "The man was in a state of complete annihilation through witnessing the Divine Majesty (*Shuhūd al-Jalāl*). He expressed what he directly witnessed, understanding that he had witnessed nothing but God. Have you not heard of the mad lover (*Majnūn*) of the tribe of Banī 'Āmir who, when asked his name, responded, *Layla*."³⁴

It is crucial to recognize that these overflowing expressions indicate an extreme level³⁵ of fanā' in Abū Yazīd's spiritual experience. This state aligns with the concept of "dying before death," often referred to in Sufī circles, which is encapsulated in the Prophet (PBUH) saying: "Die before you

²⁷ibid., 182.

²⁸Ibid., 136.

²⁹Ibid., 162.

³⁰This was when someone came to Dhū al-Nūn after visiting Abū Yazīd. Dhū al-Nūn asked him, "did you see Abū Yazīd?" The man replied: "Yes, I saw him; I asked him, "Are you Abū Yazīd?" He replied, "Who is Abū Yazīd? I wish I had seen Abū Yazīd." On hearing this Dhū al-Nūn started weeping and said: "My brother Abū Yazīd lost his self in God's love and began searching for it with other seekers." See al-Sahlaḡī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 95.

³¹Al-Sahlaḡī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 87.

³²Ibid., 87.

³³Ibid., 124.

³⁴Ibid., 89.

³⁵Sufis generally speak of three levels of fanā'. Ibn 'Arabī however, discusses it by dividing it into seven levels which eventually come back to three. See 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah* (Al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism) (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 1438/2017), 256, also al-Kalābādhī, *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf li Madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* (Cairo: Maktab al-Khānjī, 1994), 92-100, and Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḡāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings) (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 2/512-514.

die.”³⁶ According to Sufi interpretation, this saying underscores the importance of seclusion and self-annihilation.³⁷

In this context, it is worth delving into Abū Yazīd’s fourfold classification of the stages of proximity to God (*al-Ittiṣāl bi’llah*). According to him, proximity to God unfolds in the following four stages:³⁸

1. The first stage, individuals stand contemplating under the pressure of what descends upon them.
2. The second stage, God chases them from where they are aware and brings them back through another door.
3. The third stage, God delays them, and they say that they will not leave.
4. The fourth stage, God surrounds them if they cannot depart.

Many of the sayings attributed to Abū Yazīd, as recorded in classical sources, provide evidence of his continuous fluctuation within various states of *fanā’* in its multifaceted forms, governed by the ascent and descent of the spirit. His experiences culminate in the final fourth stage of complete immersion. Dhū al-Nūns comment on Abū Yazīd’s experience, “this is something beyond our states,”³⁹ indicates the highest level, from the perspective of the spiritual wayfarer, of Abū Yazīd’s immersion or submersion in spiritual ascension.⁴⁰

This progression represents the secret of the spirit that constitutes the inner essence of religion. It’s within this stage that Abū Yazīd could respond to someone who asked about the greatest name of God by saying, “It is in *Lā ilāha illa Allāh*; you say it while you are not there,” referring to a state of complete self-annihilation.⁴¹ This corresponds to the seventh of the seven valleys of the Sufi path, as elucidated by the renowned Persian Sufi poet Farīd al-Dīn al-‘Attār (627/1230) in his work *Conference of the Birds*.⁴²

From this brief analysis, the Bayazidian paradigm of the relationship between law and spirit can be outlined as follows:

- Each of these dimensions constitutes two integral aspects of religious life.
- The relationship between them is necessarily integrative.
- The outward aspects of life hold no meaning without the inward, and vice versa.
- The inward dimension constitutes the essence, while the outward embodies the form.

³⁶This particular tradition is not narrated through an authentic Prophetic narration; however, several traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) imply this meaning.

³⁷See ‘Alā’ al-Dawlah al-Simnānī, *Al-Wārid al-Shārid al-Ṭārid Shubhat al-Mārid* (The Oncoming Flood that Dispels the Devil’s Doubts), critical edition with translation by Giovanni Maria Martini in *‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī Between Spiritual Authority and Political Power: A Persian Lord and Intellectual in the Heart of the Ilkhanate* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2018), 12-13.

³⁸Al-Sahljāī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 95.

³⁹Ibid., 103.

⁴⁰For more examples from Abū Yazīd’ sayings and comments see al-Sahljāī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 134 and 163; for a statement from Aḥmad bin Khūdraweh on Abū Yazīd reported by al-Junayd, 96.

⁴¹Al-Sahljāī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 109.

⁴²Farīd al-Dīn al-‘Attār, *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* (The Conference of the Birds), trans. by Afkham Darbandī and Dick Davis (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984).

- The inward dimension involves cultivating the art of “living in the presence of God” and realizing it in daily life, which corresponds to what the Prophet termed as *Ihsān*.
- Multiple levels of this realization exist, depending on ones level of spiritual development.
- Spiritual development is a gradual process that commences with self-purification and reaches its zenith when the highest degree of self-annihilation is achieved.
- All these levels of the spiritual journey entail some degree of witnessing and its associated experiences.
- The level of the inward dimension is manifested through the outward, which serves as evidence of the authenticity of the believers spirituality.

7. Conclusion

Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī remains a significant figure in the history of *Tasawwuf*, particularly during its transformative period in the third/ninth century. His life and teachings exemplify the subtle balance between *ẓāhir* (outward) and *bāṭin* (inward) religiosity, highlighting the inseparability of law and spirit in Islamic life. Abū Yazīd’s understanding of spirituality revolved around the concept of God-consciousness and His presence, while at the same time emphasizing that external actions must align with inner spiritual realization to achieve a well-rounded Islamic identity. So he advised against being impressed by extraordinary feats unless they were grounded in adherence to the Sharī‘ah. This position is reiterated by other prominent Sufis, such as al-Kharrāz, who asserted that any esoteric insight contradicting exoteric rulings stands nullified, and al-Nūrī, who warned against claims of spiritual states that circumvent religious law. These statements also stress the integral relationship between outward practice and inward spirituality, reflecting the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere of Abū Yazīd’s era.

Abū Yazīd’s paradigm unmistakably asserts that the relationship between law and spirit, or *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, is inseparable, and the essence of religion cannot exist on its own without the spirit. His paradigm also underscores that spirituality is grounded in faith, rooted in love, nurtured by spiritual poverty, and maintained through constant remembrance of God. However, the researcher suggests that these profound aspects of spirituality deserve further exploration and discussion in future research. Hence, future researchers can use this study and look into the additional dimensions of law and spirituality.

Conflict of Interest

The manuscript author has absolutely no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

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