The Sufism of Abū Al-Qāsim Al-Qusyairī

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explain concepts of Sufism by Abū al-Qāsim al-Qusyairī, by focusing on explaining his thoughts. It uses qualitative methods based on historical social approaches. By the time of al-Qusyairī’s life (376 H / 986 M - 1073 AD), Sufism was considered to have been deviated from the Qur’an, the hadith, and the religious tradition of the earlier generation of pious Muslims (salaf al-shāhī ḥ), especially after the rise of the concept of ittiḥād (union) and hulūl (confluence) along with its syahāḥāt (bewildered utterance). Besides, some Sufism tends to shy away from sharia (Islamic jurisprudence). Al-Qusyairī is a Sufi figure and thinker who wants to return the teachings of Sufism to the Qur’an, the hadith, and religious traditions of the salaf al-shāhī ḥ, and especially to the assumed authentic theology (tawhid) of the Sunni school (Ahl al-Sunnah aw al-Jama’a’). This paper concludes that the teachings of Sufism by Al-Qusyairī, as stated in his work "al-Risālah al-Qusyairīyyah fi 'Ilm al-Tashawwuf”, likely focus on introducing terms of Sufism such as maqāmāt (stations), al-ahwāl (states), al-karāmāt (grace), and on classical Sufi figures.

Keywords: Sufism, Sharia, haqiqa (reality), maqāmāt (stations), and Sufistic terms

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings are made up of two aspects: physical and spiritual entities, as it is stated by the Qur’an in its explanation about the creation of human. The physical aspect is linked to elements of earth, and the spiritual is directly to God. What is directly linked to God is considered to possess a sort of nobility. The nobility of a human’s body, Sufism is its heart. That is why defenders of Sufism argue that Sufism is the heart of Islam.[1]

The development of Sufism in Islam has undergone several phases. Firstly, it is called as zuhud phase (asceticism). This phase began in the first and beginning of the second century of Hijrah, as a reaction to political conflicts in Muslim society after the assassination of the caliph of Uthman ibn Affan and a civil war between Ali and Mu’a wiya ibn Abi Sufyan (the Shī fi n war), which resulted to a split in Muslim society. As such has caused many people to avoid getting involved in political issues, seen as detrimental to one’s piety. Apart from that, it was also a reaction to the lavish and exaggerated lifestyle of some of the rulers and authorities of the Umayyad dynasty, after the expansion of Islam to Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia.[2]

Secondly, the phase in which the appearance of two distinct schools of Sufism in the third and fourth centuries Hijrah. They are, firstly, the school of sunni Sufism. Followers of this school enclosed their Sufism closely to the Qur’an and the Sunnah, and followed the practice of al-Salaf al-Shāhī ḥ. Secondly, the school of semi-philosophical Sufism. Figures and followers of this school tend to express syahāḥāt (bewildered utterance), and they recognized various maqāmāt (stations) of a spiritual experience, ranging from maqām fana (station of disappearance) to maqam hulūl (station of confluence).[3]

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The disappearance of the semi-philosophical Sufism was perhaps due to widespread accusation that the school is at odd with sharia law, and its leaders such as al-Hallāj, because of such accusation, was assassinated. This has in turn led to the prohibition of Sufism of this school, and many people walked away from Sufism.

Therefore, Sufism of the fifth century tended to carry out some renewals, that is, by returning its teachings to the Qur’an and the Sunnah. Among the most prominent Sufi figures of this century was Abū al-Qāsim al-Qusyairī, who tried to return the teachings of Sufism to the essence and foundation of Islam (the Qur’an and the Sunnah), through his great work entitled, al-Risālah al-Qusyairīyyah fi 'Ilm al-Tashawwuf. His importance, according to Al-Tafluziānī,
is due to its attempt of reforming the teachings of Sufism, which was then followed by al-Ghazālī.\[^{[4]}\]
Obviously, he was the one who defended Sufism from those who regarded it incompatible with the sharia law, and made it popular again throughout the Islamic world. Because of such roles of al-Qusayrī, this paper attempts to explore his ideas on how to integrate Sufism with sharia law, and to examine the extent to which his Sufistic teachings are shaped by the social conditions in which he lived.

This paper is consisted of three parts. In the beginning, we will explain briefly the biography of al-Qusayrī, and after that explore the socio-political and intellectual conditions that become the backgrounds of his life. In the last part of the paper, we will examine the thoughts of al-Qusayrī and his teachings of Sufism, by putting them in the contexts of his biographical accounts and socio-political backgrounds.

2. SOCIO HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AL-QUSAYRĪ’S LIFE

2.1. A Short Biography

The full name of al-Qusayrī is “Abd al-Karīm Ābū al-Qāsim al-Qusayrī. His lineage was Ābū al-Karīm ibn Hawāzīn ibn Ābū al-Mulkibn Thalihah Ibn Muhammad. He was born in the month of Ṭabīr al-Awwal (unspecified date), 376 H / 986 AD, in Astawā, and had passed away on Sunday morning, 16th Rabi‘-al-Akhir, 465 H / 1073 AD, in Naghabur, the capital of Khurasan, at the age of 87.\[^{[5]}\], \[^{[6]}\]
Furthermore, al-Qusayrī had received a number of titles, such as al-Imām, al-Ustādz al-Shaykh, Zain al-Islām, al-Jami’ bain al-Ṣyāri’ahwa al-Haqqāgh, and many more. These titles indicate the high position of al-Qusayrī in his society, especially in relation to his expertise in Islamic knowledge and Sufism.\[^{[5]}\]

When al-Qusayrī was growing up, he migrated to the Nishapur area, one of the centers of science in Khurasan at that time. It was here that he met Ābū ‘Alī al-Daqqāq, a famous Sufi master. Al-Qusayrī always attended his teacher’s lecture, and from that teacher, he learned and deepened his knowledge about Sufism. Yet, before pursuing the Sufism lesson, his teacher urged him to study sharʿa. Therefore, al-Qusayrī studied Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) with a fiqh scholar, Ābū Bakr Muhammad Ibn Ābū Bakr al-Thīsī, and studied the science of kalām (theology) and ushul fiqh (basic principles of Islamic jurisprudence) to Ābū Bakr Ibn Fārūq. Besides, he also studied ushuluddīn (sciences of basic religion) to Abū ‘Ushayd al-Fārāyānī, especially about aqidah (theology) of the school of Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ṣyārī’ .\[^{[5]}\]

In the area of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), al-Qusayrī was the follower of al-Ṣyārī’. referring to a fiqh school founded by Al-Imām Muhammad Ibn Idrīs al-Ṣyārī’. In the area of theology, he was an adherent of al-Ṣyārī’, referring to Al-Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ṣyārī’. It means that al-Qusayrī is one of the strongest defenders of the Aḥb al-Ṣanaw wa al-Jamā’ah theology (the Sunni school), and he was an opponent of the Muʿtazilah and Syi’ah (the Shi’ite) school.\[^{[3]}\] As a result of his confrontation with both the Muʿtazilah and Syi’ah schools, al-Qusayrī was put pressure and was put in jail by Tughril Bek for the report of al-Kunduri, a saljuq prime minister who belonged to Muʿtazilah theology.

2.2. Political and Intellectual Conditions

Al-Qusayrī spent much of his life in Nishapur. At that time, Nishapur was under the rule of the Buwaihi Dynasty. This dynasty was ruling in the capital of Bani Abbas, Baghdad, from 915 M-1055.M/334 H-447.H.\[^{[7]}\] This dynasty was a loyal adherent to the Shi’ite Islam. In the field of theology, Shi’ite has the same basic understanding as that of the Mutazilah school. Therefore, it can be concluded that during the reign of the Buwaihi Dynasty, the Muʿtazilah theology had the opportunity to develop again, although they had been outclassed by the popularity of the al-ASY’AR school of theology (Aḥb al-Ṣanaw wa al-Jamā’ah).\[^{[8]}\]
The religious mission of Baghdad’s ruling government, during the Buwaihi era, seemed to have diminished. This is due to the difference between the mazhab (school) of the caliphs and the amirs (local governors) of the Buwaihi dynasty. Nevertheless, the Buwaihi dynasty did not completely destroy the remnant of Sunnī influences in Baghdad from the Abbasid era. This is because the Buwaihi is a loyal adherent of the Zaidiyah Shiite school, a sub-school in the Shiites that recognizes the leadership of the caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar, and Utsman. These caliphs were considered as mufidul leaders, not aflâhal leaders among the Shiite Muslims.\[^{[9]}\]

However, rulers of the Buwaihi dynasty only recognized the theology school of the caliphs of Baghdad. While in practice, they enforced the practice of Shiite ritual ceremonies inside the palace. As a way to unite the two dynasties, it was decided that the 10th of Muḥarram (al-‘ASYūra) is a day of national mourning to commemorate the death of Imam Hussein as a syahid (martyr).\[^{[10]}\] Also, The Buwaihi dynasty forbade mentioning the name of the caliph of the Abbasid dynasty in the Friday sermon, and was replaced by the name of the caliph of the Buwaihi dynasty.\[^{[10]}\]

One positive fact about the period of the Buwaihi dynasty in Baghdad was that the development of science had progressed quite rapidly, compared to the previous period.\[^{[11]}\] During the Buwaihi period, there were cultural and science centers, which become the center of attention among the scholars, such as Bashrah and Kufah. But, one of the most important in the field of philosophy is the emergence of philosophy studies centers. For example, Bashrah had become the center of the congregation of Ikhwān al-Shaffā, a group of renowned philosophers of the fourth century Hijra.\[^{[12]}\] They loyal adhered to the Shiite theology and received a great honor from the Buwaihi dynasty.
If before the third century Hijra, the use of the term “the zuhhdāh community” was widespread in society, but in the third and fourth centuries of Hijra, the term was not used anymore. The more commonly used term were now the Sufi people. They liked to develop and discuss previously unknown concepts in Sufism. While many of these Sufis were still referring to the Qur’an and the Sunnah for their foundation of Sufistic thoughts, a few of them have walked away from both texts, some even completely ignored the rules the concept of sharia law.

Thus in the fifth century, they made a renewal of returning Sufism to the Qur’an and the Sunnah, and re-combining between Sufism and sharia. And it is Al-Qusyairī who had been in the front line of this renewal movement in Sufism. There is an ample reason why al-Qusyairī persistently sought to return the teachings of Sufism to the fundamentals of the Qur’an and the Sunnah, or to combine Sufism and Shari’ah together. This is because he was a loyal follower of the Sunni school. As a loyar adherent of the Sunni, his main ambition is to return the fundamental teachings of Sufism, into Sufism of the Sunni, which is different from that of the Shiite school. Not the least, there were also a tendency among the Sufis to ignore the sharia altogether.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Al-Qusyairīs Thoughts and Teachings of Sufism

Al-Qusyairī was one of the main Sufi figures in the fifth century Hijra. The position of al-Qusyairī is very important, especially because of his works entitled “al-Risālah al-Qusyairīyah” which discussed Sufi figures and their teachings of the Sunni school living in the third and fourth centuries Hijra. This means the book has conserved the teachings of Sufism at that time, both from the theoretical and practical aspects. The teachings of Sufism of al-Qusyairī tend to return Sufism to the fundamentals of the Sunni school, namely the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the tradition of the early generation of Muslim scholars (safaq al-shāliḥ). This is because the teachings of ittiḥād, ḥulūl, and expressions of sybahāt, had been developed widely by that time. According to Ibn Taymiyyah as quoted by Layli Mansur, that the book of al-Risālah by al-Qusyairī was compiled to reject influences of the teachings of ḥulūl and ittiḥād, which were considered detrimental to Islam.[12]

According to al-Qusyairī, the teachings of the Sufism must be based on a true understanding of tawhid (the belief in God’s oneness), so that Sufism can be freed from heresy and superstitions.[5] Al-Qusyairī states that the true tawhid is a tawhid that is based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah. He also states that a tawhid that is not justified by the Qur’an and the Sunnah is a denial of Allah the God, and as such is not tawhid. Every ma’rifah (act of seeing) to God that is not followed by humility and sincerity of the soul, is false and thus, as such is not ma’rifah.[3]

Al-Qusyairī’s statement above implicitly shows his rejection to the Syathahāt Sufi, or a Sufi whose speaking is claimed to be a combination between the divine and human characters, or widely know as sybahāt. This claim is considered by al-Qusyairī as an understanding that contradicts the true tawhid. Moreover, expression of an extreme sybahāt is often (miss)understood as the confluence between the Sufi’s soul and the God in the Sufi’s physical body, such as what was popularly expressed by al-Hallaj, “Anā al-Haqq” (I am al-Haqq, or God), and that of AbūYazīd’s: Subhān, Subhān, ma ‘zhama Sya’nī” (glory to me, glory to me, my shape is the greatest).[2] To an extent, the sybahāt expression, esoterically, can be understood as an expression of the unconscious Sufi, triggered by the powerful and overwhelming divine experience. Yet, al-Qusyairī opted to understand the sybahāt from a theological and sharia point of view.

In his al-Risālat al-Qusyairīyyah fi ‘ilm al-Tasawwuf, al-Qusyairī has explained in details his thoughts on the teachings of Sufism. They are examined as follows:

3.1.1. The first:

As a preface, al-Qusyairī presented a topic on the basics of faith, which is called tawhid, arguing that the true tawhid is fundamental to the correctness of the teachings of the Sufi. In this section, al-Qusyairī explains the concept of ma’rifah, the attribute of God, on faith, and others.[5] Additionally, al-Qusyairī states that to reach ma’rifah, the first obligation of a servant is to have a correct tawhid, that is a tawhid that does not have any elements of bid’ah (heresy).[13] A sanctity of a worship is only possible to achieve through the true tawhid.[5] This is the kind of tawhid that becomes the foundation of the Sufism teachings among the Sunni Sufi masters.[5]

Ma’rifah means seeing the God, here Allah: that Allah is the only One. The One who is neither born or giving birth, has neither a match or a spare, has neither resemblance, or can be resembled, has neither a shape or a similarity, and is not similar to anything. To know God, a servant must know His creation, how he was created: then he knows the Creator. People who do not know the makhlīq (creature), will never know the khāliq (creator). This statement is a reflection of a proverb “Who does not know himself, will not be able to know his Lord”.

3.1.2. The Second:

A discussion of terms commonly used in the Sufism (mushshalāhāt al-tasawwuf), such as, al-Waqf, al-Maqām, al-Hāl, al-Qablā wa al-Basth, al-Haibah wa al-Uns, al-Tawājud wa al-Wujūd, al-Jam` wa al-Farq, al-Fanā` wa al-Baqā`, al-Ghabah wa al-Hudhūr, al-
Shawa wa al-Sakr, al-Dzaqaq wa al-Syarb, al-Mahwu wa al-Isbat, al-Situr wa al-Tajallī, etc.

Therefore, Al-Qusayrī explained the terms of the Sufism in detail in 27 words by commenting on the Sufis. The terms commonly used by the Sufis are presented by Al-Qusayrī in a complete and quite comprehensive form. These terms seem rather difficult to be interpreted because they are of Sufi expressions having derived from their spiritual experience. It seems that al-Qusayrī wanted to explain that these Sufi-specific terms are to be known and understood by all those who want to deepen the teachings of Sufism. If someone wants to deepen the teachings of Sufi, he should know and understand the terms of Sufism for the first. Knowing the terms of Sufism will make it easier to learn the teachings of Sufism.

What is interesting in his description about the terms popular in Sufism presented is the part of "al-Syarī'ahwa al-Haqqāgh" (shari'a and essence). Al-Qusayrī does emphasize that the shari'a and the haqqāgh (reality, here, referring to Sufism) are inseparable. The practice of shari'a law must reach its reality, and the achievement of reality cannot leave its shari'a.[14] Al-Qusayrī states that every shari'a that is not reinforced by the reality, it will not be accepted (ghair maqābt), whereas a reality that is not supported by shari'a will be useless (ghair al-mahshūṣ).[14] This explanation is interesting because for many Sufi assuming that their maqam (station) had reached the reality, shari'a is no longer important for them, while at the same time some of the jurists formally emphasized the fulfillment of shari'a aspects (of a worship) rather than an achievement of the reality. Yet, for al-Qusayrī, both the shari'a and the reality are strengthening each other.

3.1.3. The Third:

A discussion of the maqā mát and the path that a person must undertake, namely al-Taubah, al-Mujāhadah, al-Khalwahwa al-'Uzlah, al-Taqdīw, al-Wara', al-Zuhd, al-Shāmt, al-Khafṣah, al-Jalā', al-Huzn, al-Ju 'wa-Tark al-Siyah, al-Kusiyah wa al-Tawādhu', al-Khafat al-Nafs, al-Ghābah, al-Qanā'ah, al-Tawakkul, al-Synkkru, etc. Al-Qusayrī describes these maqā mát as a collection of Sufi paths that a sālik (Sufi traveler) should pass in order to become closer to God (taqarrub ‘ila Allāh). Here, Al-Qusayrī seems to make a suggestion that it is a must for a sālik to walk a long journey in order to reach the reality as to be as close as possible to God.[5] In this paper, the writer wishes to present some of the maqā mát stated by al-Qusayrī. Almost all literature of Sufism places al-Taubah (repentance) as the first station,[15] as it is according to al-Qusayrī in his work "al-Risālat al-Qusayriyih ft ilm al-Tashawuf". It seems that repentance is the first way for a salik to be closer to God. Repentance is seen as a way to purify a soul from a sin. A salik must purify the soul from sin in order to make it holy. This is because the most holy essence, or the God, can only be approached by a holy soul of His servant. Thus the next station offered by al-Qusayrī is mujāhadah. It is a serious effort made by a sālik in both guarding and restraining his worldly desire from going ashtray and committing wrongdoings. This station is also closely related to an effort of purifying the soul. And the next station discussed by al-Qusayrī is al-Khalwah wa al-'Uzlah (contemplation and self-isolation). It means that to retreat and get away from the crowd. The aim of this station is to avoid a sālik from bad environmental influences and to keep him/herself only with God, hoping for an enlightenment.

The essence of all stations presented by al-Qusayrī is that a sālik must always maintain the purity of his or her soul, keep striving to be obedient and devout, and have admirable qualities.

3.1.4. The Fourth:

Talking about al-ahwāl (mental conditions) and al-karāmāt (miracles), this section discusses the karāmāt of guardians embodied in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the definition of guardians, maintenance of a guardian, the fear of guardians of Allah, seeing Allah with bashirah (heart’s eyes), and many more. Al-Qusayrī did not explain the al-ahwāl as thoroughly as when he did with other terms in Sufism and maqā mát. Instead, he was quite thorough when discussing about the guardians, shaykh, and the disciples. Thus, it seems that Al-Qusayrī wants to emphasize the quality of mental conditions and the privileges that have been granted by Allah to the saints, shaykh, and the disciples. The mental conditions and privileges that they get are of course the abundance of God’s gifts through the mujāhadad and riyādah that they did.

If the maqā mát is meant as an attempt by a salik to ascend up the stairs to Allah, the station of ahwāl is commonly called taraqqi (or ascending) with kasb (effort) that requires struggle and resistance. So ahwāl is the inner strength which is only granted by Allah through His grace (wahbiyah), and as such only come with a sense of tanazzul, or a feeling by a Sufi traveler of his or her closeness to the God.

3.1.5. The Fifth:

This part is a discussion about a number of famous figures in Sufism, such as Abdullah al-Abhuri, Ruwaiminb Ahmad, Ibrahim ibn Adham, Ali Al-Ashbahani, Hatim al-Asham, Abū Sa‘īd bin al-Ra'ī, Abū al-Khair al-Aqtha Ahmad, Ahmad al-Anthakī, Abū Hamza al-Bazzār, Abū „Ubayd al-Bisri, Abū Yazid al-Bushāmī, and many other figures, number of which is amounted to 83. This part focused on biographies of these figures and their prominent characters. Apparently al-Qusayrī also wanted to introduce these Sufi figures to people who are beginner in and want to learn Sufism. Therefore, the figures that he presented here are those Sufis are similar to him, namely the Sunni Sufi masters.
4. CONCLUSION

Referring to the explanations above, it can be concluded that, Al-Qusyairī is at once a Sufi master and scholar. As a Sufi master he wanted to return the teachings of Sufism to the fundamentals of the Sunni school, they are, the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and traditions of the earliest generation of devout Muslim scholars, salaf al-shālih. This is even crucial when it comes to tawhid: it must be the tawhid of the Sunni school theology. This research finds out that, as a Sufi scholar, al-Qusyairī wants to introduce basic terms and teachings of Sufism to those who are not familiar with, yet want to study Sufism. Thus, his book, al-Risālah al-Qusyairīyyah fi ‘Ilm al-Tashawwuf, focuses on discussing specific terms in Sufism, on maqāmāt, ahwāl, on karāmāt, and on classical Sufi figures.

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