

Review Essay

Said Nursi's Perspective of Islamic Spirituality

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Abstract

This article re-examines the concepts of “religion” and “spirituality” within an Islamic framework by situating them in contemporary academic discussions and in selected writings of Said Nursi. While Islamic scholarship traditionally treats spirituality as an inner dimension of *din*, modern disciplinary approaches to religion have reshaped how these terms are analysed and compared. Drawing on recent scholarship in religious studies, anthropology, and Sufi thought, this study clarifies the terms and explores their interrelationship in light of Islamic metaphysics, Qur’ānic ethics, and the spiritual psychology found in Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur*. The article argues that although religion

and spirituality are sometimes treated as distinct domains in modern discourse, Islamic intellectual traditions view them as mutually constitutive, with spirituality functioning as the interior realization of the divine guidance articulated through revelation, law, and prophetic teachings. The study concludes that a comprehensive understanding of spirituality within Islam requires acknowledging its rootedness in the broader structures of *din*, its historical expressions, and its ongoing reinterpretation in modern Muslim thought.

Keywords: Islam; *Latā'if*; Religion; Spirituality.

Introduction

The study of religion and spirituality has undergone significant conceptual expansion over the last several decades, particularly in religious studies, anthropology, Islamic intellectual history, and sociology. Modern theorists have demonstrated that the category of “religion”, often presumed to be universal, is historically contingent. At the same time, the notion of “spirituality” has increasingly become associated with individualised practices of self-cultivation. These developments necessitate revisiting how Islamic thought conceptualises the interrelationship between *dīn* (religion) and *nūḥaniyyah/taṣawwuf* (spirituality). Islam presents a vision in which these terms are not separate or parallel domains but mutually constitutive aspects of a single moral, legal, and metaphysical system.

Talal Asad’s critique of the category of “religion” has been particularly influential. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad argues that the modern definition of religion as a privatised, belief-centred system emerged from specific Christian and Enlightenment contexts and

cannot be uncritically applied to non-Western traditions.¹ Jonathan Z. Smith similarly emphasises that “religion” is not a native term of many cultures but a second-order, comparative construct developed by scholars.² These theoretical insights are crucial when studying Islam, because the Qur’ānic term *dīn* denotes a comprehensive orientation involving law, ethics, ritual practice, communal identity, and spiritual refinement—far broader than the modern Western construct of “religion.”

Debates about “spirituality” have likewise expanded. Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, describes the emergence of “the buffered self”, which favours individualised spiritual seeking over communal religious authority.³ Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas argue that modern spirituality reflects a “subjective turn” emphasising personal experience, inner authenticity, and self-realisation.⁴ In contrast, Islamic traditions reject the dichotomy between spirituality and religion. Spirituality (*ihsān, taṣawwuf*) is the inner dimension of *dīn*, manifested through prayer, remembrance (*dhikr*), moral refinement, and cultivation of character.

Classical Islamic scholarship provides a rich vocabulary for conceptualising this unity. Al-Ghazālī, in *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, defines the spiritual path as an integrated process through which ethical practice,

¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

² Jonathan Z. Smith “Religion, Religions, Religious”, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–284.

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 473–504.

⁴ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 1–19.

ritual observance, and inner purification converge.⁵ Ibn al-Qayyim similarly argues that the heart attains proper spiritual illumination only through disciplined adherence to the *sharīʿah*.⁶ The Qurʾān repeatedly links spirituality to righteous action and moral struggle (e.g., 91:7–10, 2:183), emphasising that inner states derive from embodied religious practice.

In modern Muslim contexts, the thought of Said Nursi offers a significant contribution to this discourse. Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur* corpus conceptualises spirituality through the activation of subtle human faculties (*latāʾif*), moral consciousness, and contemplation of divine signs. Serif Mardin’s landmark study argues that Nursi articulated a spiritually resilient Islamic worldview during an era of intense secularisation in Turkey, presenting inwardness as ethical resistance rather than withdrawal.⁷ Studies by Ahmet Karamustafa, Elisabeth Özdalga, and Mark Sedgwick further show that Islamic spirituality remains embodied in ritual practice, communal pedagogy, and scriptural hermeneutics.

Thus, an Islamic understanding of the relationship between religion and spirituality must be grounded in both classical doctrines and contemporary scholarship. The following sections examine the conceptual meanings of “religion” and “spirituality” and analyse their interrelationship within Islamic thought. By drawing on Qurʾānic exegesis, Sufi metaphysics, Nursi’s writings, and modern academic

⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2005), 13–15.

⁶ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Madarij al-Salikin*, (Dar al-Hadith, 2003), 41–57.

⁷ Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bedüzzaman Said Nursi*, (SUNY Press, 1989), 45–78.

theories, this study aims to clarify how Islam integrates outward practice and inward awareness into a unified moral-spiritual vision.

What is Religion?

The concept of “religion” has been the subject of extensive theoretical critique in modern scholarship, challenging the assumption that it designates a universal, timeless human category. Talal Asad’s influential analysis in *Genealogies of Religion* argues that the modern definition of religion—typically understood as an inner, belief-centred domain—emerged from specific Christian and Enlightenment contexts.⁸ It cannot, he argues, be uncritically applied to non-Western traditions without distorting their internal logic. Jonathan Z. Smith likewise insists that “religion” is not a native concept in most cultures but a second-order scholarly abstraction created to classify and compare traditions.⁹ These insights are essential when approaching Islam, because the Qur’ānic and classical Arabic term *dīn* far exceeds the semantic scope of the English word “religion.”

In Islamic intellectual tradition, *dīn* denotes a comprehensive moral, legal, spiritual, and social order revealed by God. Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī defines *dīn* as “submission and obedience to a divine sovereign order,” rooted in truth, justice, and ethical coherence.¹⁰ Al-Ghazālī emphasises that *dīn* integrates ritual practice, doctrinal belief, moral refinement, and spiritual awareness, constituting a unified path of human flourishing.¹¹ Ibn Taymiyyah similarly argues that *dīn* combines inner faith (*īmān*) with outward action (*‘amal*), creating an

⁸ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 27–54.

⁹ Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 269–284.

¹⁰ Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *Mufradat Alfaz al-m*, (Dar al-Qalam, 1992), 189.

¹¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihya’*, 13–17.

indivisible relationship between internal states and external embodiment.¹²

The Qurʾān uses *dīn* in multiple interrelated senses: divine judgment (1:4), divine law (3:19), moral accountability (51:6), and a total orientation of life toward God (30:30). This semantic richness underscores that *dīn* is not reducible to institutional practice alone but functions as an existential framework integrating belief, ethics, spirituality, and communal identity. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's argument that "religion" as a reified entity is foreign to many premodern cultures reinforces the idea that Islamic *dīn* is not a static institution, but a lived orientation expressed through personal faith and communal tradition.¹³

Modern scholars of Islamic law highlight the holistic epistemology embedded in *dīn*. Wael Hallaq explains that the *sharīʿah* historically operated not as a rigid code but as a moral-legal system animated by ethical intent, spiritual insight, and social responsibility.¹⁴ This multidimensional understanding aligns with the classical integration of law, ethics, and spirituality found in the works of al-Ghazālī, al-Qushayrī, and Ibn al-Qayyim.

Said Nursi also presents religion as a comprehensive mode of knowing, being, and acting. In the *Risale-i Nur*, he describes *dīn* as a harmonious system that refines the intellect, enlightens the conscience, and activates the spiritual faculties (*laṭāʾif*). Serif Mardin observes that Nursi's understanding of religion is not merely doctrinal but

¹² Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmuʿ al-Fatawa*, (King Fahd Complex, 2004), 289–290.

¹³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Fortress Press, 1991), 15–37.

¹⁴ Wael B. Hallaq, *Shariʿa: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 103–140.

experiential and ethical, offering a model of religious life grounded in inner transformation and intellectual engagement.¹⁵

Thus, an academically robust definition of “religion” in the Islamic context cannot rely on modern Western categories. Rather, *dīn* must be understood as a holistic divine order encompassing belief, practice, ethics, spirituality, and communal life. This framework shapes the Muslim’s entire orientation toward God and the world.

What is Spirituality?

The concept of “spirituality” has become increasingly prominent in contemporary academic discourse, although its definition varies significantly across disciplines. In modern Western scholarship, spirituality often refers to individualised, subjective, and experiential dimensions of meaning-making that may or may not be connected to institutional religion. However, within Islamic intellectual traditions—whether classical, post-classical, or modern—spirituality (*rūḥaniyyah*, *iḥsān*, *taṣawwuf*) is not conceived as an autonomous sphere independent of religion but as the essential internalisation, realisation, and experiential unfolding of *dīn*. To understand Islamic spirituality, it is necessary to situate it within Qur’ānic anthropology, Sufi metaphysics, ethical psychology, and the transmitted practices of the Prophet (PBUH).

Contemporary scholarship frequently defines spirituality as a personal search for the sacred, the cultivation of inner awareness, or an orientation toward meaning, transcendence, or self-actualisation. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead identify the rise of “subjective-life spirituality,” in which authenticity and personal freedom replace

¹⁵ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 55–70.

doctrinal authority.¹⁶ Robert Wuthnow similarly explains that spirituality in late modernity often prioritises inner experience over collective religious structures.¹⁷ Although such definitions illuminate trends in Western societies, they are inadequate to describe Islamic spirituality because they rest on individualistic assumptions foreign to Islamic frameworks of selfhood, ethics, and metaphysics.

Islamic spirituality cannot be reduced to private experience, emotional states, or non-institutional forms of religiosity. Instead, it emerges through disciplined conformity to divine command, moral purification, and sustained engagement with revealed guidance. Talal Asad's analysis of embodied religious discipline helps explain this distinction. Asad argues that in traditions such as Islam, "the formation of a pious self is inseparable from practices of the body, speech, and intention".¹⁸ Thus, spirituality in Islam is socially anchored, ethically structured, and conceptually embedded within a scriptural tradition.

Foundations of Islamic Spirituality

The Qur'ān repeatedly emphasises cultivating the inward self as the locus of moral and spiritual transformation. The human soul (*nafs*) is portrayed as a dynamic entity capable of growth or corruption. The Qur'ān identifies various states of the soul—*nafs al-ammārah* (the commanding soul inclined to evil; 12:53), *nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching soul; 75:2), and *nafs al-mutma'innah* (the soul at peace;

¹⁶ Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 1–22.

¹⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (University of California Press, 1998), 3–15.

¹⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford University Press, 2003), 205–230.

89:27). These states reflect levels of spiritual development rather than separate entities.

The Qur'ānic emphasis on *taqwā* (God-consciousness) provides the ethical orientation of Islamic spirituality. Verses such as 2:183—“Fasting has been prescribed...so that you may attain *taqwā*”—demonstrate that ritual obligations cultivate inward awareness. Similarly, Qur'ān 91:7-10 describes the soul's dual potential and the necessity of purification (*tazkiyah*). These verses show that spirituality is inseparable from righteous action, worship, and moral struggle.

The prophetic hadith of Gabriel (Sahih Muslim, 1:1) defines religion as having three interrelated components: *Islam* (exterior practice), *īmān* (interior belief), and *ih̥sān* (spiritual excellence). The definition of *ih̥sān*—“to worship God as though you see Him, and if you do not see Him, to know that He sees you”—is the most authoritative articulation of Islamic spirituality. As al-Nawawi explains, *ih̥sān* is the realisation of presence with God (*murāqabah*) and the refinement of intention.¹⁹ This foundational hadith confirms that spirituality is integral to religion rather than an optional or separate domain.

Classical Muslim scholars developed elaborate systems to describe the stages, states, dynamics, and metaphysics of spirituality. Among the most influential were:

- i. Al-Qushayrī (d. 1074) — His *Risalah* categorises spiritual states (*ahwāl*) such as awe, intimacy, trust, fear, and love, and spiritual

¹⁹ Yahyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Sharh Sahih Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj*, Vol. (1) (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1991), 117–120.

- stations (*maqāmāt*) like repentance, patience, gratitude, sincerity, and reliance.²⁰
- ii. Al-Hujwīrī (d. 1072) — In *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, he emphasises ethics, ascetic discipline, companionship, and the inner illumination of the heart.²¹
 - iii. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) — His *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* synthesises law, theology, ethics, and Sufism; he describes spirituality as the purification of the heart from blameworthy traits and the acquisition of virtues.²²
 - iv. Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240) — His metaphysical writings elaborate on spiritual ontologies, divine names, and the cosmology of the human spirit.²³

These frameworks demonstrate that spirituality is not merely emotional piety but an intellectual, ethical, and metaphysical discipline grounded in regular practices—*dhikr*, fasting, prayer, generosity, contemplation of the Qur’ān, and moral vigilance.

Spiritual Psychology and the Subtle Faculties (*Latā’if*)

A significant dimension of Islamic spirituality concerns the development of the *latā’if*—subtle spiritual faculties that illuminate different dimensions of human receptivity. The Kubrawiyah and Naqshbandīyyah traditions, particularly through Najm al-Dīn Kubra

²⁰ ‘Abdul al-Karim al-Qusyharī, *Al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah*, (Dar al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, 2007), 35–95.

²¹ ‘Ali al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, (Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1992), 83–130.

²² al-Ghazālī, *Ihya’*, 13–25.

²³ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, (SUNY Press, 1989), 45–90.

and later Ahmad Sirhindī, emphasised these faculties as centers of spiritual perception.²⁴ The *laṭāʾif* typically include *Qalb* (the spiritual heart), *Rūh* (spirit), *Sirr* (inner secret), *Khafī* (hidden consciousness) and *Akhfa* (most profound hidden awareness).

Said Nursi adapts this tradition, describing *laṭāʾif* as spiritual capacities—conscience (*wiḍdān*), intellect, emotions, spiritual intuition—that allow humans to recognise divine signs. For Nursi, spirituality requires activating these faculties through ethical discipline, prayer, and reflective engagement with revelation.²⁵ Serif Mardin notes that Nursi's spiritual psychology functions as a modern translation of classical Sufi ideas into rational, Qur'ānic language suitable for a secularising era.²⁶

Islamic spirituality is inseparable from ritual actions. Prayer (*ṣalāh*) cultivates humility and presence; fasting disciplines desire and awakens compassion; almsgiving purifies the heart of miserliness; pilgrimage symbolises spiritual journey; and Qur'ānic recitation shapes the believer's consciousness. William Chittick explains that rituals mold the inner self by engraving divine meanings onto the heart through repetition, rhythm, and intention.²⁷ Unlike modern secular spirituality, Islamic spirituality grows through submission rather than autonomy.

Islamic spirituality is closely tied to ethics. Al-Ghazālī lists virtues such as sincerity, patience, trust, and gratitude as essential for spiritual

²⁴ Najm al-Dīn Kubra, *Fawa'ih al-Jamal*, (Manshurat-i Bidar, 2002), 57–80.

²⁵ Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Collection*, (Sözler Publications, various editions), 110–135.

²⁶ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 83–119.

²⁷ William C. Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, (SUNY Press, 1992), 6–12.

ascent.²⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim argues that all spiritual paths converge on purification of intention and moral discipline.²⁹ Islamic spirituality is therefore ethical rather than purely mystical.

Modern research on Sufism in Turkey—by Karamustafa, Özdalga, and Sedgwick³⁰—shows that spirituality continues to evolve through Community-based learning (*sohbet*), Ethical service (*hizmet*), Informal *dhikr* circles, Qur’ānic study groups and Nursi-inspired movements

These expressions show that spirituality remains embedded in social, educational, and ethical structures, contradicting Western assumptions that spirituality is individualistic or anti-institutional.

Religion	Spirituality
The founder of the religion is Allah. Religion is the law set by Allah. Religion is a declaration, a manifesto, describing both the One who made this beautiful universe and the universe itself.	Spirituality is a degree of spiritual attainment that emerges in a person when he fulfills the de facto gratitude by acting under Allah's orders and prohibitions with his material organs, intangible feelings, and <i>Letaif</i> (subtle faculties).
Religion includes the basic tenets of Islam, which never changed in the course of human history.	Spirituality is variable. It can weaken or strengthen a person over time.

²⁸ Ghazali, *Ihya'*, 115–150.

²⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Madarij al-Salikin bayna Manazil Iyyaka Na'budu wa-Iyyaka Nasta'in*, (Dar al-'Asimah, 2003), 67–91.

³⁰ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

Religion is broader than spirituality and it encompasses spirituality.	Spirituality is a dimension of religion.
Allah teaches the principles of religion to the prophets, and the prophets convey them to people. True religion cannot be of human origin.	Spirituality is the high states, blessings, tastes, and happiness that a person feels in his conscience and soul. It is strengthened by the application of religious principles.
Religion is effective in functioning the entire universe, including man (from outside to inside).	Spirituality is within man. It is affected by the order, arrangement, and functioning of the universe (from inside to outside).
Religion is the very life of life, its light, and its basis. There is no life without religion.	There is life without spirituality.
Religion is the light of happiness, sublimity of feeling, and salvation of conscience. The revival of religion is the revival of the nation. No nation can continue in existence without religion.	Spirituality is nourished and strengthened by religion. There is no spirituality without religion.

Table 1. Comparison of Religion and Spirituality

The Relationship between Religion and Spirituality

The relationship between religion and spirituality has been conceptualised in diverse ways in the academic literature, often shaped by the historical and cultural contexts in which these categories emerged. In contemporary discourse, particularly in Western scholarship, some writers distinguish sharply between religion—seen

as institutional, doctrinal, and collective—and spirituality—understood as personal, experiential, and individualistic. However, such dichotomies are foreign to the Islamic worldview, where *dīn* (religion) and *ihsān/rūhaniyyah* (spirituality) are distinct yet inseparable aspects of a unified system. Unlike the dualistic separation prevalent in modern Western thought, Islamic intellectual traditions maintain that spirituality is the inner, experiential dimension of religion. Understanding this relationship requires examining classical Islamic sources, Sufi metaphysical frameworks, modern theoretical debates, and the contributions of thinkers such as Said Nursi.

Contemporary scholarship often identifies four key models describing the relationship between religion and spirituality: (1) the two are entirely separate; (2) they are identical; (3) spirituality is broader than religion; (4) spirituality is a dimension of religion.³¹ The first model sees institutional religion as rigid and impersonal, while viewing spirituality as fluid and inward; the second collapses both into a single category; the third elevates spirituality as a superior, more inclusive realm; and the fourth views spirituality as the heart of religion.

For Islamic thought, the fourth model—spirituality as a dimension of religion—offers the closest approximation. Talal Asad's insights into embodied religious traditions suggest that Islamic religiosity is cultivated through practices, rituals, and ethical formations that shape specific dispositions.³² This means that religious

³¹ Brian J. Zinnbauer, Kenneth I. Pargament, Brenda Cole, Marks. Rye, Eric M. Butter, Timothy G. Belavich, Kathleen M. Hipp, Allie B. Scott, Jill L. Kadar, "Religiousness and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36(4) 1997): 549–564.

³² Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 205–230.

practice (*amal*) and spiritual experience (*hāl*) are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive.

Qur'ānic and Prophetic Foundations for Integrated Spirituality

Islamic spirituality is rooted in the Qur'ānic view that human beings must cultivate inner awareness while also fulfilling outward obligations. The Qur'ān states, “He has succeeded who purifies the soul, and he has failed who corrupts it” (91:9–10). This verse establishes *tazkiyah* (purification) as a spiritual imperative. However, the Qur'ān also repeatedly commands ritual obligations—prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage—not merely as formal duties but as means to nurture inner states such as humility, gratitude, and God-consciousness (2:183).

Returning to the Prophetic *ḥadīth* of Gabriel further clarifies the relationship between outer and inner aspects. Islam is presented as threefold: *Islam* (actions), *īmān* (belief), and *iḥsān* (spiritual excellence). The definition of *iḥsān*—“to worship God as if you see Him”³³—locates spirituality at the heart of religious life. Al-Nawawī comments that *iḥsān* is the perfection of worship through inward presence and sincerity.³⁴ Thus, in this foundational text, spirituality is not a separate path but the culmination of religion.

Across centuries, Muslim scholars affirmed the inseparability of spirituality and religious practice. For al-Ghazālī, religious rituals without inward sincerity are devoid of transformative value, just as spirituality detached from *sharī'ah* is directionless and prone to error.³⁵

³³ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Imān [Book of Faith], hadith no. 4. <https://sunnah.com/muslim:8c>.

³⁴ al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 117–120.

³⁵ al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 25–32.

Ibn al-Qayyim develops a similar view in *Madarij al-Sālikīn*, arguing that spiritual refinement arises from ethical conduct, disciplined worship, and moral vigilance.³⁶ The Sufi tradition, primarily through al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī, describes spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) as accessible only through rigorous conformity to divine commands.

These perspectives reveal a consistent principle: the structure of *dīn* provides the necessary discipline and equilibrium through which the spiritual heart (*qalb*) becomes receptive to divine illumination. Rituals shape inward disposition; inward purification enhances the beauty of action.

Islamic spirituality operates through a dynamic relationship between outward performance and inward states. Prayer disciplines the body and trains the heart to cultivate presence (*khushūʿ*). Fasting restrains the ego and heightens empathy. Charity softens the heart and breaks attachment to wealth. *Dhikr* (remembrance) orients the mind toward divine presence and purifies the spirit from heedlessness (*ghaflah*). As William Chittick notes, outward forms are “the vessels that carry the lights of meaning into the heart”.³⁷

This synergy is also reflected in Sufi metaphysics. Ibn al-ʿArabī argues that actions without inner awareness lack spiritual potency, while awareness without action is incomplete.³⁸ This holistic anthropology refutes modern claims that spirituality can thrive outside of normative religious structures.

³⁶ al-Jawziyyah, *Madarij al-Salikin*, 76–110.

³⁷ Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, 7–14.

³⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 92–104.

The Role of Spiritual Faculties (*Laṭāʾif*) in Connecting Religion and Spirituality

Many Sufi traditions teach that spirituality involves the activation of subtle spiritual faculties (*laṭāʾif*) such as the heart (*qalb*), spirit (*rūḥ*), and inner secret (*sirr*). Najm al-Dīn Kubra describes these capacities as loci of divine illumination awakened through continuous worship and ethical discipline.³⁹ The purification of these faculties requires ritual acts, Qurʾānic recitation, and continual remembrance—emphasising again that spirituality depends on religious commitment.

Said Nursi offers a modern reinterpretation of these ideas. He presents *laṭāʾif* as diverse spiritual capacities—conscience, heart, intellect, and emotional intuition—unlocked through prayer, ethical struggle, and contemplation.⁴⁰ Serif Mardin notes that Nursi uses this framework to reconcile rational faith with spiritual experience in a secular context.⁴¹ Thus, Nursi illustrates how spirituality animates religion while remaining anchored in it.

Social Dimensions of Spirituality and Religion

Contrary to Western constructions of spirituality as individualistic, Islamic spirituality is socially embedded. Sufi communities rely on collective practices—*dhikr* gatherings, companionship (*ṣuḥbah*), shared learning, and ethical service (*khidmah*). Ahmet Karamustafa's work shows that early Sufi networks cultivated spirituality through communal bonds.⁴² Elisabeth Özdalga and Mark Sedgwick document similar patterns in Ottoman and modern Turkish Sufism,

³⁹ Kubra, *Fawaʾih al-Jamal*, 64–85.

⁴⁰ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur*, 112–136.

⁴¹ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern*, 83–119.

⁴² Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 44–71.

where spirituality remains tied to ritual, community, and shared hermeneutics of the Qurʾān.

This communal dimension reflects the principle that spirituality flourishes through shared practice rather than solitary exploration—a stark contrast to modern individualist conceptions.

In sum, the Islamic paradigm presents a distinct model: *spirituality is a dimension of religion but cannot exist independently of it*. Religion provides the structure: law, ethics, rituals, and belief, while spirituality provides the meaning: sincerity, presence, purification, and experiential knowledge.

Without spirituality, religion degrades into formalism devoid of moral depth. Without religion, spirituality becomes subjective, unanchored, and prone to deviation. This holistic integration is evident in both classical Sufism and modern thinkers such as Nursi. Thus, the Islamic worldview rejects both the modern split between religion and spirituality and the reduction of spirituality to emotion. Instead, it offers a unified, comprehensive vision grounded in divine revelation and embodied practice.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Islamic understanding of the relationship between religion and spirituality differs fundamentally from the dichotomous models dominant in contemporary Western scholarship. Whereas modern theoretical frameworks often separate religion from institutional practice and spirituality from individual practice, Islamic thought—grounded in the Qurʾān, Prophetic teachings, and classical Sufi scholarship—presents *dīn* as a holistic system in which outward practice and inward refinement are integrated. Qurʾānic exhortations to purify the soul (91:7–10) and

cultivate *taqwa* through ritual obligations (2:183) demonstrate that spirituality emerges through religious action rather than apart from it.

Classical scholars such as al-Ghazālī, al-Qushayrī, and Ibn al-Qayyim emphasised that spiritual realisation cannot occur without adherence to *shari'ah*, moral discipline, and ethical transformation. These insights are reinforced by modern thinkers like Said Nursi, who conceptualises spirituality as the activation of inner faculties (*latā'if*) through prayer, contemplation, and moral striving. Studies of Turkish Sufism show that this integration continues in contemporary Muslim contexts, where spirituality remains rooted in communal practice, ethical service, and Qur'ānic hermeneutics.

Therefore, the Islamic paradigm reveals a “distinction without separation”: religion provides the structure—belief, law, ethics, and ritual—while spirituality provides the experiential depth and inner transformation. Together, they form a unified orientation toward God, affirming that authentic spirituality in Islam cannot be detached from the religious framework that sustains and guides it.