

## THE DOCTRINE OF *TAWHĪD* AND ITS PRACTICAL MANIFESTATION BY A LIVING SUFI PRACTITIONER

Dejan Aždajić

*Freie Theologische Hochschule Gießen, Germany*

[azdajic@fthgiessen.de](mailto:azdajic@fthgiessen.de)

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### Abstract:

*This article explores new pathways of understanding the theological doctrine of tawhīd from a Sufi theological perspective. It is evident that Sufism has expanded the inherent meaning of tawhīd from the relatively simple idea of the Oneness of God to the philosophically complex phenomenon that reality is best expressed through an absolute unity of all existence. Instead of engaging in a dialogue about this important doctrinal principle with only written texts, this article intends to combine both traditional sources and the actual voice of one contemporary Sufi practitioner. This original approach aims to circumvent the tendency of a top-down approach to the study of religion, provide a grassroots perspective, and a concrete example of how a theoretical concept can be practically manifested in the life of ordinary believers. Such a contribution is important, for it adds to wider empirical studies of Sufism a localized example that underlines the importance of investigating religion not merely through written texts, but also by a nuanced exploration from the point of view of spiritual seekers themselves. Since Sufis ultimately embark on a spiritual journey and long to attain proximity to God, abstract theory must be met with experiential satisfaction.*

**Keywords:** *Lived Sufism; Tawhīd; Empirical Studies; Shaikh*

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### A. Introduction

Even a brief examination of both the popular and academic discussions relating to Islam within the European setting reveals a consistent tendency toward generalization and the reduction of a complex religious system to a set of symbols, outward behavior, and rigid dogmatic presuppositions.<sup>1</sup> In part, this is understandable, for the historical interchange between Islam and Europe has had a long and often turbulent history. While an exchange in culture, learning, and trade did take place, enmity and frequent violent conflicts have also characterized the strain in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

relationship. The two sides remained relatively homogenous and separated from one another until arguably the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is at this point that Muslims began to immigrate, forming their minority communities within the larger European context. Today Muslims constitute a significant portion of the European population, often struggling with integration, a deep-seated cultural bias, and a profoundly secular society. The clashes in perspectives between Muslim communities, a growing secularization, and certain government policies are evident.

In addition to these social challenges, the trend among European policymakers and the public discourse continuously tends towards the tacit assumption that Muslims are a monolith, which certainly diminishes the favorable prospect of improved dialogue and a more nuanced mutual understanding.<sup>2</sup> Not only is the notion that one can easily define a “European type of Islam” an all too narrow category, for it denies the multifaceted nature of Islam, it also patronizingly assumes the right to ignore the multiple contributing voices within this complex religious system. Bougarel rightly commented that, “we might conclude that there are many Islams in Europe, but that a ‘European Islam’ does not yet exist, in the sense that there is no shared religious and intellectual space to debate the issues that are common to all European Muslims.”<sup>3</sup> There are, however, increasingly a growing number of voices, that have noted the insufficiency of looking at Islam as an abstract homogenous entity, but a lived and complex religion that is performed by a multiplicity of individuals in various localities and can truly only be understood by examining the rituals, practices, and how these inform individual experiences and meanings of Muslim everyday lives.<sup>4</sup>

Particularly in the social sciences, there appears to be a growing body of literature that examines Islam from the point of view of individuals, who practice the religion in their own locality.<sup>5</sup> Safi made the following insightful observation that affirms this point, saying, “Islam does not brush its teeth. Islam does not take a shower. Islam eats nothing. And perhaps most importantly for our consideration, Islam *says* nothing. *Muslims* do.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason, there is definitely a need to move away from a primarily top-down macro approach by investigating the entire cosmology of Muslims, and not merely written doctrinal statements. Leaman expresses this notion as follows, “It might look more sensible to investigate those ways of behaving as opposed to the official list

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<sup>2</sup> Jorgen Nielsen, “The Question of Euro-Islam: Restriction or Opportunity?,” in *Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence*, ed. Aziz Al-Azmeh and Effie Fokas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511809309.004>.

<sup>3</sup> Xavier Bougarel, “Bosnian Islam as ‘European Islam’: Limits and Shifts of a Concept,” in *Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence*, ed. Aziz Al-Azmeh and Effie Fokas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511809309.007>.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriele Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 53–54.

<sup>6</sup> Omid Safi, *Progressive Muslims* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 22.

of beliefs from which they emerge.”<sup>7</sup> This strategic reorientation does not relegate doctrine as unimportant or obsolete, since doctrinally prescribed obligations are largely the same across the global spectrum of Islam. It rather proposes that perhaps the most insightful approach to gain a more complex apprehension about religion in general and Islam, in particular, may be through seeking a proper interpretation in light of both the application and understanding of individual believers themselves.<sup>8</sup> In other words, in order to avoid an essentialist and reductionistic view of a complex reality, scholars ought to certainly include Muslim voices during the investigation of prominent topics.<sup>9</sup>

In light of these insights, this article set out to examine one of the most foundational theological principles within Islam, which is the doctrine of *tawḥīd* or Oneness of God. The investigation intends to dialogue with standard sources on the topic but from a predominantly Sufi perspective and interpretation. In order to avoid a merely philosophical and somewhat abstract approach, this article also purposes to contribute an original, localized perspective from one particular contemporary Sufi practitioner.<sup>10</sup> The primary qualitative data for this article has been gathered and analyzed during a long-term ethnographic research endeavor among various Sufi communities in the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>11</sup> Adding a living Muslim voice and his unique perspective to a highly complex doctrinal discussion can circumvent the essentialism of religion and advance new hermeneutical insights and grassroots layers of understanding that are simply not accessible through a purely conceptual framework. The aspiration is to discover new pathways of understanding the notion of *tawḥīd* through the practical lens of lived Sufism. In the first part, the objective is to briefly review Sufism’s central endeavor, which can be best described as a journey through various stages, whose ultimate goal is the attainment of absolute proximity to God. Sufis also believe that success is utterly dependent on the role of the Shaikh (or *murshīd*). He is the indispensable guide, who leads the seeker to the desired destination. After providing a brief summary of the most salient features regarding the role of the Shaikh, I will introduce my primary dialogue partner, Shaikh Salih. In the second part, I intend to then explore salient features of *tawḥīd* from standard sources, while consistently providing relevant commentaries and examples by Shaikh Salih.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver Leaman, *Controversies in Contemporary Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 57.

<sup>8</sup> John Richard Bowen, *A New Anthropology of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Being a Muslim in the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Marta Dominguez Diaz, “Shifting Fieldsites: An Alternative Approach to Fieldwork in Transnational Sufism,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 6, no. 1 (January 20, 2012): 64–82, <https://doi.org/10.1558/firn.v6i1.64>.

<sup>11</sup> Dejan Aždajić, *The Shaping Shaikh: The Role of the Shaikh in Lived Islam among Sufis in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> From here on for the sake of simplicity I will call him only by his first name “Salih”. His followers employ several names of honor such as “Hadži Efendija, Shaikh Efendija, Salih Efendija Faruki”, and others.

## B. Sufism – The Journey to God

More than any other conceptual framework the central theme and underlying goal in Sufism can be summarized with the simple words “a journey to God”.<sup>13</sup> Nicholson wrote that, “Mystics of every race and creed have described the progress of the spiritual life as a journey or pilgrimage. Other symbols have been used for the same purpose, but this one appears to be almost universal in its range”.<sup>14</sup> The fundamental message of Sufism over the centuries has always been the good news that there is a path that leads to God. Restoring this spiritual link between humanity and God is the principal reason for the existence of Sufism. One of the key theological doctrines that serve as the foundational blueprint for this endeavor is the concepts of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. While *tanzīh* describes God's ultimate transcendence and incomparability in relation to all of creation, *tashbīh* proposes quite the opposite. It asserts God's immanence and comparability to the created order.<sup>15</sup>

Although differences in opinion do exist, the Qur'ān seems to be supporting both sides. God is illustrated as abiding closer than man's jugular vein, which implies His incredible nearness. At the same time, God is also seen as being like nothing else in all of creation. Even God's ninety-nine beautiful names can easily be divided between those that describe his nearness and his distance. How can these seemingly irreconcilable perspectives be satisfyingly harmonized? Is it even possible? The tension is tangible, for, "if we understand God to be both near and distant, both caring and unconcerned, both gentle and severe, we may soon find ourselves bewildered about God. Should humanity fear His wrath or hope for His mercy?"<sup>16</sup> This tension between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* has been there from the very beginning. Consequently, there are some Muslim scholars who prefer to reach out to the more comforting interior aspects, while others are content with the exterior, impersonal and distant idea about God. Only some of Islam's most prodigious theologians have managed to pursue a more unified solution.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the development of Islamic theology, it is evident that Sufis were the ones who predominantly systematized the concept of *tashbīh*. Avoiding dry rationalizations and heated arguments by theologians and jurists, Sufis preferred to focus on subjective spiritual experiences. Wrath was exchanged with mercy; God's nearness

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<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *The Naqshbandi Sufi Way: History and Guidebook of the Saints of the Golden Chain* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1995), 412.

<sup>14</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2002), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (California: HarperOne, 2009), 204–9. The theological term *tashbīh* describing the actual closeness of God's qualities to human ones has often been a source of contention in the Islamic community. Those adhering to God's ultimate transcendence demand His absolute difference as a major building block of their *tanzīh* doctrine. Insisting that there is nothing in the universe that God could be compared to. Often, they would warn those that tried to do this of pantheism.

<sup>16</sup> Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1994), 74–75.

<sup>17</sup> Tim Winter, ed., *Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6.

replaced his distance. Sufis always longed for the beatific vision of God and described even Paradise as so intense that all delights of Heaven would be forgotten and only God remembered. Supreme bliss characterizes this moment of divine encounter.<sup>18</sup> According to the esoteric interpretation, no other experience defines man's purpose to such a degree as this sacred encounter with God. Poetic descriptions eliciting powerful emotions abound. Intense longing for its consummation empowers every moment of the Sufi existence. Enjoying the radiance of divine closeness encompasses life's greatest purpose – it becomes its supreme achievement. Consequently, the goal of the spiritual life becomes the escape from the limiting constraints of human frailty and the attempt to reach God.<sup>19</sup> Sufis have persistently attempted to escape the prison of forgetfulness and rend the veil that separates man and God.

This allegorical idea of a veil enables separation or *tanzīh*, to exist, even though everything inside of man longs for nearness or *tashbīh*.<sup>20</sup> Overcoming the various layers of separation and arriving at a state where man is fully aware of the reality of his own nature is a difficult challenge. Sufis, however, promise that success is indeed possible. A man was created with the inner potential, although presently limited due to a variety of reasons, to develop his true identity. To the degree of man's capability of unveiling his soul from the state of forgetfulness and distance from God to that degree does he become truly human. In other words, “the attainment of metaphysical knowledge in its true sense, or ‘spiritual realization,’ is the removal of the veils which separate man from God and from the full reality of his own true nature. It is the means of actualizing the full potentialities of the human state”<sup>21</sup> Put simply, the purpose of every human being is to overcome the illusion of imperfection by activating all the positive particularities of his inner nature – which essentially and absolutely correspond to ultimate reality.

With God as the goal, the journey can now begin. During this earthly pilgrimage, as each individual learns how to transcend himself and reach God, the purpose for which mankind was created will eventually be realized. While experiencing this exciting adventure of self-discovery, each moment on Earth is endowed with great meaning and significance. The Sufi contribution to Islamic theology is summed up in the following words, “In the Islamic tradition, it is primarily Sufism that answers this basic existential question of who we are and through this answer provides guidance for a life full of spiritual felicity, marked by illumination and leading ultimately to deliverance from the bondage of all limitation.”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the question of how to actually succeed in

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<sup>18</sup> Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, trans. T.J. Winter (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 251.

<sup>19</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 9.

<sup>20</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Lahore: Carvan Press, 2000), 104.

<sup>21</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (California: HarperOne, 2007), 12.

achieving this ultimate proximity to God remains. In the literature the journey of ascending to the summit of God's presence begins with man's initial step of pursuing moral perfection. The restoration of mankind's lost equilibrium and the lifelong striving to attain supreme morality and virtue defines one of the essential principles of Sufism. In order to discern the appropriate direction for his quest, however, the seeker must first understand God's will. To the degree that mankind's actions exist in harmony with God's will, nearness is realized. And since God's will is encapsulated in the Qur'ān, it is important to conform to it by obeying all of its precepts. Such perfect obedience will ensure victory for the spiritual seeker. One author summarized this as follows, "Through constant remembrance of Allah, through Man's love of God and the Prophet, through obedience to the commandments of Allah and His Prophet (peace be on him), and through a constant struggle to promote good and forbid evil Man may attain nearness to Allah."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, living an upright life in submission vis-a-vis Allah's commandments is a non-negotiable prerequisite to attain closeness with God. Both esoteric and exoteric Islamic teaching agrees regarding the importance of such works in a believer's life.

The next area to which spiritual travelers need to pay attention to is the subduing of body and soul, for they are the main culprit for man's bondage and separation from God. Although in order to achieve this goal some extreme behavior can sometimes occur, most Sufi teachers emphasize that this reconditioning process ought not to lead to excesses in practice. The mystical path should not lead to any type of real annihilation or destruction of the human being but is merely an exercise of self-control, renunciation, and abstinence. Over the centuries various approaches have been developed to refine man's carnal nature and help him to advance through various stations of spiritual maturity before he can attain closeness, and ultimately unification with God.<sup>24</sup> Some of the distinct techniques to remove the veils of separation and aid man to advance along the spiritual path include fasting, silence, penitence, and deprivation of sleep. Other more publicly visible and therefore famous practices incorporate meditative inhaling, music, singing, and dancing.<sup>25</sup> In particular, the dhikr has been proven as one of the most effective methods for purification, in part due to the repetition and invocation of God's beautiful names.

Through this discipline, it is believed that man awakens to the already present reality in his spirit – where *fiṭra* (man's primordial perfect state of being) resides. The constant repetition of God's names rescues man from the prison of forgetfulness and frees him from any constraints placed upon him by either body or soul.<sup>26</sup> Since he reflects these divine names deep within his inner being, the mere mentioning of the names helps remembrance to take place. This then empowers the mystic to also externally begin to manifest their qualities. Every one of these methods ultimately has a common goal – the

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<sup>23</sup> Khurshid Ahmad, *Islam: Its Meaning and Message* (Qum: Centre for Islamic Studies, 1978), 24.

<sup>24</sup> Catharina Raudvere, *Islam: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 163.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2000), 139.

purification and removal of all the elements that hinder man from seeing God.<sup>27</sup> Once the inner is cleansed and the outer trained, the mystical path of attaining proximity to God and the ability to achieve the necessary illumination for recognizing the God who has always dwelt within is finally within reach. In other words, “God is present, but individuals cannot see the Almighty because curtains of ignorance veil their eyes and rust encases their hearts. The average person is ego-centered. Only after he or she has polished the heart and purified the self, will the curtains lift, the rust falls away, and the eyes become able to see God.”<sup>28</sup> At the end of the journey, man no longer suffers from the malaise of forgetfulness. He has at last gained profound knowledge of his true self and of his God.

While this brief summary offers a concise outline of the journey to God, which is the quintessential goal of Sufi teaching, one overarching and foundational element must still be added. Sufis have a profound understanding of the perilous nature of their endeavor, and due to the enormous difficult nature of their journey, Sufis are in a constant state of tension and utterly lost, were it not for the careful guidance of a qualified master who himself has already completed the passage and is now qualified to lead others to experience similar spiritual fulfillment. If Sufis hope to succeed, they must find a legitimate guide, a true Shaikh, who will be able to lead them to their desired destination. He alone can lead his followers, reveal divine secrets, and model the appropriate behavior that his followers ought to emulate. In other words, proper spiritual travel is *only* possible under the careful tutelage of this spiritual master. Rozehnal describes the absolute need for a guide as follows, “Only an accomplished spiritual master can provide the wisdom, direction, and structure needed to propel the Sufi seeker (*sālik*) toward self-transcendence and intimacy with the Divine Beloved. In the end, the *sālik* needs a *shaykh*.”<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, the traveler will get lost during the challenging journey and not reach his goal. The analogy often used is that of a patient who tries to cure himself without a doctor and inevitably fails. One needs a “doctor of souls” in order to find healing and the necessary understanding of oneself in order for progress to be achieved.<sup>30</sup> Sufis believe that in the same way that every generation in human history needed guidance, so do people today. The Shaikh, in this sense, is supposed to be the living representative of the Prophet himself in the post-prophetic era.

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<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Akmal Falah, “Urban Sufism: A Case Study of Tasawuf Practices in the UICCI Students of Sulaimaniyah Ciputat,” *Teosofia* 8, no. 2 (2019): 145–58.

<sup>28</sup> Shaykh Hazrat Azad Rasool, *Turning Toward the Heart: Awakening to the Sufi Way* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2002), 6.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Thomas Rozehnal, *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First Century Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam (Perennial Philosophy)*, trans. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), 142.

### C. Introducing Salih and the Importance of the Shaikh in Sufism

For outsiders, it is difficult to understand the monumental importance of the Shaikh for providing spiritual leadership, the shaping and interpreting of religious doctrine and practice, and even the very existence of Sufi orders often tends to depend upon the person of the Shaikh.<sup>31</sup> Even the sacred interpretation and understanding of the Qur'ān is believed to only be possible through the agency of a qualified Shaikh.<sup>32</sup> Other research traces the historic progression of the role of the Shaikh from teaching, directing all the way to the somewhat controversial concept of mediation, where the Shaikh is sometimes perceived to be the embodied link between God and man.<sup>33</sup> Heck sums it up in the following words, „It was his image that formed the link to the prophet and to God, and devotion to him, love for him, concentration on his image in prayer became part of the process of salvation. In short, the Sufi initiate was to identify not so much with God as with his Shaikh, who would bring him to God.”<sup>34</sup> Obviously, it is of utmost importance that the Shaikh is legitimate and highly qualified.<sup>35</sup> It is, however, also the case that attaining certainty about someone's qualifications remained ultimately subjective. A brief look at Islamic history reveals that the role of the Shaikh gradually changed into the current phenomenon we observe and that various pathways of legitimization had a particularly significant influence on this development.

During the historical evolution and institutionalization of Sufism, before undivided loyalty was required from Sufi aspirants, the relationship between disciple and Shaikh was relatively informal and mainly understood as an irregular relationship between a teacher and his student. The central teaching element was to champion traditional Islamic teaching and assert religious practices that were firmly rooted within an orthodox Islamic framework. In other words, the role of the Shaikh was never to dismantle tradition, but always to offer an innovative and creative reformulation of its essential teaching within the present context. Put simply, the authority of the Shaikh was profoundly dependent on the past to endorse his present function. Then gradually as Shaikhs were increasingly perceived as extraordinary human beings due to their special proximity to God and the Prophet, his authority and role also began to change.

Anjum concisely describes this historic development in the following words, “The earlier multiples-study-circle model, in which a disciple freely studied with many masters, gave way to the authoritarian model of the strict master-disciple relationship

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<sup>31</sup> Ken Lizzio, “Ritual and Charisma in Naqshbandi Sufi Mysticism,” *Anperc.Net*, 2007, 1–37.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas S. Farrer, *Shadows of the Prophet: Martial Arts and Sufi Mysticism* (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2009), 166.

<sup>33</sup> Warren Edward Fusfeld, “The Shaping of Sufi Leadership in Delhi: The Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya, 1750 to 1920” (University of Pennsylvania, 1981).

<sup>34</sup> Paul L. Heck, “Sufism? What Is It Exactly?,” *Religion Compass* 1, no. 1 (January 2007): 148–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2006.00011.x>.

<sup>35</sup> Syariful Anam, “Murshid Contestation: Between Iktisābī and Minhāh Ilāhiyyah,” *Teosofia* 6, no. 2 (November 16, 2017): 121–40, <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v6i2.3386>.



as the model of social belonging at the Sufi orders became ubiquitous throughout the Islamic lands”.<sup>36</sup> As the Shaikh was perceived as a chosen person by God, he was endowed with the divine right to require absolute obedience from his followers. The well-known Sufi saying, “a Sufi ought to be in the hands of his Shaikh like a corpse in the hands of those preparing it for burial”, became by now standard operating procedure. Obviously, there were real dangers for the abuse of these enormous powers, since once a Sufi was initiated and submitted himself to the Shaikh he chose to follow, it could become extremely dangerous to consider abandoning that Shaikh for another. Leaving the Shaikh could mean the cessation of one’s journey and the breach of the covenant made before God. Such an action would certainly carry with it dire consequences. The existence of this seemingly unbreakable bond led in some cases also to the abuse of power and the exploitation of the life of Sufi initiates. Although generations of Muslims have since debated the controversial transformation of the powers of the Shaikh, his multitudinous powers still enable him to make the remote, transcendent God relevant to the particular needs of the people. In essence, the “salvific efficacy of the holy man lies in his being seen as a medium of divine-human interaction. Due to his spiritual connection, the holy man offers the profane world a sacred encounter.”<sup>37</sup>

In the literature, we can see that Sufis have traditionally designed arguments by which they defended the role of the Shaikh and denied accusations of any type of idolatrous behavior or the abuse of power. Geoffroy explains that “The veneration of the Sufi for his shaykh is only a support, which reminds him of his veneration for the Prophet, and of his worship which is dedicated to God.”<sup>38</sup> Other Sufi apologists affirmed that the Shaikh was merely a channel and not the goal; externally he might appear to be at the center of ritual practices, but it is always God who is at the heart of the ritual. Generally speaking, Sufis do adhere to rigorous sharia obedience. But while Sufism starts with sharia law, it attempts to go further. Supererogatory acts of devotion and intricately designed rituals that have evolved and transformed over centuries, supplement and expand the demands of the law. Consequently, Sufi Shaikhs both uphold established legal prescriptions, while also expanding them further than is required. In terms of legitimizing a Shaikh in the eyes of his followers as someone worthy to follow, there are at least two central elements that must be in place.

First, there is the need for transcendent approval, where God inaugurates the Shaikh. In other words, the miraculous dimension is required and expected from Shaikhs. The Shaikh may not be sacred in and of himself, but he has been divinely enabled to attain proximity with God, which is believed to give him extraordinary spiritual power,

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<sup>36</sup> Ovamir Anjum, “Mystical Authority and Governmentality in Medieval Islam,” in *Sufism and Society: Arrangements of the Mystical in the Muslim World, 1200-1800*, ed. John J. Curry and Erik S. Ohlander, Routledge Sufi Series: 12 (London: Routledge, 2012), 71–87.

<sup>37</sup> Liyakatali Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi’ite Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam (Perennial Philosophy)*, 144.

and the capability to perform remarkable supernatural acts. The Shaikh is supposed to be the bearer of a spiritual message that is inaccessible to ordinary human beings. One of the ways that the Shaikh demonstrates his extraordinary qualities is through the performance of miracles, special knowledge about God, and insight into people's thoughts and most deep-seated sins.<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically, however, these supernatural abilities are ultimately dependent on subjective approval. This second dimension of the legitimization process presupposes that Shaikh's authority always remains contingent on the individual beliefs and experiences of his followers. For this reason, it is theoretically possible that anyone, regardless of the genuineness of his credibility, can perform the duties of a Shaikh. All he requires is to convince his followers that he is worthy of adherence. Such a reality imposes natural limits on his authority since it requires the willing consent of others. Simply put, a Shaikh is only able to influence those around him to the degree that they believe in him and choose to submit to his demands. Having provided some necessary background information on the Shaikh's role in Sufism, I will now introduce my dialogue partner for the last section of this article – Shaikh Salih.

Without a doubt, Sufism has been of fundamental importance for the preservation and propagation of Islam in Bosnia. It is also playing an influential role regarding the current Islamic renewal in the country.<sup>40</sup> This strong interest in Sufism, however, has also led to some problems. Several new Sufi communities or neo-Sufis have sprung up under questionable leadership. Scholars have noted a lack of “real Shaikhs“, but also locals who call these new leaders “self-proclaimed Shaikhs“.<sup>41</sup> Salih is a vivid exception and a highly reputable Shaikh, who belongs to the category of “old” or “traditional” Sufism in Bosnia. The primary reason for that is that Salih has been a dervish and a Shaikh for over forty years. And as he states in his own writings, he also comes from a long family line of Sufis.<sup>42</sup> During an interview he once said, “I am so thankful that I was always outside of these corrupt regimes. I was always on the side of Sufism, thanks to my father, grandmother, and grandfather who helped strengthen my resolve and faith.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the majority of his own followers have been with him for well over two decades. Although his community is fairly small, with less than forty

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 11.

<sup>40</sup> H.T. Norris, *Popular Sufism in Eastern Europe: Sufi Brotherhoods and the Dialogue with Christianity and “Heterodoxy”* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Milan Vukomanovic, “Sufism: The Inner Dimension of Islam,” *Filozofija i Društvo* 19, no. 2 (2008): 129–47, <https://doi.org/10.2298/FID0802129V>.

<sup>42</sup> Salih Ibrišević, *Govor Sufije* (Sarajevo: Sufijski Centar, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Salih, March 12, 2016.

members,<sup>44</sup> they have an established building complex for meetings, lodging for visitors, and regular ritual performances.

This building is called *sufijski centar* (Sufi Center) and it has a vibrant range of weakly activities. Membership is exclusively made up of adult males whose average age lies in their forties.<sup>45</sup> The majority have good jobs and are well educated. The most important weekly meeting is the dhikr ceremony, which is held Thursday and Sunday evenings and is attended by almost all of Salih's dervishes. Every Friday only the most mature members, and a few invited visitors attend Ibn al-'Arabī readings and discussions.<sup>46</sup> Salih's followers will also often ask for a private audience with him to discuss their personal affairs. Although secondary literature often suggests that the spiritual dimension is supposedly the most important area for a Shaikh's guidance, in practice his influence is often felt in all kinds of different areas of life.<sup>47</sup> Dervishes often ask their Shaikh for permission to marry, what job to accept, travel plans, and all other aspects of ordinary life. The attitude clearly is that everything should be under full submission to the guidance of the Shaikh.

This unquestioning obedience is part of the Sufi understanding that the dervish ought to be "as malleable in the hands of the Shaikh, as a corpse in the hands of the washer". I asked Salih about the Shaikh's absolute authority in the life of the *derviŝ*, upon which he responded, "The Shaikh is the absolute authority. God is abstract, while I am real. It is so much easier for you to communicate with God through a Shaikh. Allah never sent a book without a Prophet, a living human being. You need a living person; someone you can touch."<sup>48</sup> Throughout his teaching and personal example, Salih undoubtedly receives the highest levels of devotion and obedience from his followers. While any number of topics could be presented from the perspective of Salih's prodigious teaching material, for the purpose of this article I will limit the discussion to the concept of *tawhīd* and some relevant related concepts. Dialoging theoretical material with the voice of a living Shaikh and Sufi practitioner ought to provide some original new perspectives on this important topic.

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<sup>44</sup> This is only referring to the community in Sarajevo. Salih also has two other formal communities, one in North Bosnia and the other in Montenegro, as well as other followers who consider him their Shaikh.

<sup>45</sup> As Bop observed, although Sufi orders do provide women with the theoretical possibility of traveling as far as men in a spiritual sense, practically speaking they are marginalized. See: Codou Bop, "Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 4 (2005): 1099–1119.

<sup>46</sup> Salih's influence is also deeply felt through his writing and translation work. His monumental achievement is the four-volume translation of the renowned Sufi master Ibn 'Arabī's *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya into Bosnian*.

<sup>47</sup> Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Salih, April 18, 2016.

#### D. Salih's Interpretive Contribution on the Sufi Conception of *Tawhīd*

The very words that are at the center of the Islamic faith, the shahada, assert the ultimate Oneness of God and deny the existence or worthiness of all other gods and deities. While theologians have tried to prove this statement about *tawhīd* rationally, Sufis have attempted to attain it experientially. For Sufis, it is not enough that God has no partners and no children, for them there is no other existence or any other type of duality anywhere in creation. The goal is a slow unveiling of one's perception of ultimate reality until it is completely changed and awakened to the essential fact that God encompasses all and is behind every phenomenon. Lings explains, "The doctrine which is based on that conclusion is termed 'Oneness of Being', for Reality is that which is, as opposed to that which is not; and if God alone is Real, God alone *is*, and there is no being but His Being".<sup>49</sup> In other words, Sufis attempt to view everything in creation as a manifestation of God in the world, which includes God's presence and agency in and through individual human beings. Salih expressed this idea from his own perspective as follows, "God clothes himself with the garment of the world and then appears to us. Sometimes He can even appear in the clothes of a pauper. You can seek and find God both in the material and spiritual worlds, but the question is in which direction is your heart turned towards."<sup>50</sup> Outwardly, Sufis may perhaps not look any different from ordinary Muslims, but when they perform religious obligations, they are seeking to witness God's activity behind all performed actions. This makes their intention distinct. And the only way to achieve this level of awareness is through a process of the deconstruction of the self.

For Salih *tawhīd* comprised the key to his theological understanding of the world.<sup>51</sup> He explained his understanding of this concept as follows, "One day we will have to learn the lesson on *tawhīd*, even if it lasts a thousand years. You will know who moves everything in existence. He is the cause behind every manifestation on earth. He is the cause before every manifestation on earth. He is neither behind nor before, he is always everything."<sup>52</sup> Salih's particular theological orientation is a direct reflection of Ibn al-'Arabī's somewhat controversial concept of the "Unity of Being".<sup>53</sup> The main argument against this idea has always been the question of how it could be possible for finite human beings to become one with an infinite God without compromising God's

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<sup>49</sup> Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1999), 64–65.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Salih, December 18, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Salih Ibrišević, *Iz Sufijske Riznice* (Sarajevo: Sufijski Centar, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Salih, March 2, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabī (1164 – 1240), is one of Sufism's most influential writers and thinkers, whose Gnostic discussions have influenced and shaped all subsequent Sufi discourse. He is arguably the greatest Sufi theologian in Islamic history, who is often referred to by his honorary title "Shaykh al-Akbar" (the greatest master). He is famous for his doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which literally means the "Unity of Existence" or "Unity of Being". His writings periodically encountered strong condemnation, but have been generally accepted, by most Sufi groups.

essential unity and absolute otherness. Would this not imply a pantheistic worldview and thereby remove Ibn al-‘Arabī’s place within Islamic orthodoxy? In response, when Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks of union with God, he does not have an ontological transformation in mind. The essence of human beings is not transformed into something that it currently is not. They are not becoming a new creation or being promoted to some higher status. Rather, the union is closely associated with the idea of an epiphany, or awakening to already present reality.

In other words, human beings do not become one with God – they already are.<sup>54</sup> For Ibn al-‘Arabī it was not necessary to achieve degrees of illumination of a new reality through the practice of rigorous disciplines, but rather one had to wake up from the false illusion that such a reality is not already present. Or to put it briefly in Salih’s words, “We are the place of God’s manifestation. I am not doing anything, but only God through me.”<sup>55</sup> The fact that God is the one moving everything that exists and the need for each individual to become aware of this reality is certainly one of the central teaching emphases of Shaikh Salih. He is deeply convinced by the fact that God appears on the stage of creation in and through everything and while he may be immanently present, God always remains more than the sum of its parts. But it remains mankind’s duty as well as a privilege to embark on a journey of discovering God in the created order. This level of understanding requires, however, the rending of the veil, which quintessentially separates humanity from their true being, and holds them captive in the prison of forgetfulness. It also prevents them from realizing God’s true essence within themselves, keeping the eternal chasm between humanity and God ever-present.

This idea of a veil enables separation, or *tanzīh* to continue to exist, although everything inside of human beings longs for nearness or *tashbīh*.<sup>56</sup> Mankind’s greatest test is to transcend this veil and recognize what the truth really is. While many Sufi writers suggest elaborate pathways to overcoming these numerous layers of separation, dedicating their entire lives to the progressive process to free the spirit from forgetful tendencies and impurities within the soul, it would be helpful to point out that Salih’s approach often displayed a much more pragmatic, sober, and practical strategy. For instance, he frequently admonished his followers to not only acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge but to actually put things into practice, “When knowledge is applied, those deeds lead to nearness.”<sup>57</sup> Islamic scholars have corroborated this fact, saying that the contemplative life must take shape through practical action, where both God and man are served, and that in fact, it was not possible to attain knowledge without

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<sup>54</sup> A. E. Affifi, *Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibnul Arabi* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1979), 117.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Salih, August 10, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology*, 120–21.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Salih, September 18, 2015.

application.<sup>58</sup> Another example of this approach was when Salih emphasized the importance of applying the knowledge one has gained with the following words, “True knowledge is impossible without application. Only once you apply what you know, will you be able to attain knowledge of God! By applying what you know, you begin removing those veils from your heart and slowly you begin to attain knowledge. And when you remove all of these barriers from your heart, then your heart is lifted up to God.”<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, overcoming these layers of separation and arriving at a state where one is fully aware of the reality of his own nature is a difficult challenge, but one that remains extremely important.<sup>60</sup> But in order to wake up from this illusion and realize the truth which corresponds to absolute reality, the veil, which is the self, must first be abolished. This language of annihilation is known in Islamic theology as *fanā*. When such a state is finally reached by a believer, all personality, individuality, and separate reality of existence disappear. This idea is described in Sufism by the concept of “dying before death”, as the prerequisite for an encounter with God through the destruction of the self. In essence, the understanding is that the divine reality, which lies deep within man, can only be reached through the complete elimination of all that is in the way. A mere improvement of humanity is not enough. Human beings as such cannot attain nearness to God, no matter how much improvement of the soul has been accomplished. The mystic claims that only a radical annihilation can result in man's successful realization of divine oneness.

This sublime attainment of the highest knowledge finally liberates the individual from the illusion that separation exists between him and God. Ibn al-‘Arabī explains this as follows, “With these divine words the Messenger of Allah indicates that the one who dies before dying realizes his whole being as Allah's being and sees no difference between himself and Allah, between his attributes and Allah's, nor does he see any necessity for nor the possibility of any change in his state. For if his being were not already Allah, he could not even know himself.”<sup>61</sup> Once such a realization takes place, the worshiper is believed to effectively comprehend the ultimate reality. The transient ego is now abandoned, while the eternal inner essence attains knowledge of its authentic self as it realizes its oneness with God. This theoretical frame was expressed by Salih through a personal experiential example in which he supposedly broke free from the bondage of immanent humanity and attained transcendence, saying, “Yes I assuredly have had supernatural experiences. What are you looking at me for? I traveled through

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<sup>58</sup> Hazrat Ali bin Usman Al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf Al-Mahjub-A Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Lahore: Zia-ul-Quran Publications, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Interview was Salih, November 27, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Maurisa Zinira, “Adab for a Peaceful World: A Study of Jalaluddin Rumi’s Concept of Sufism,” *Teosofia* 5, no. 2 (October 25, 2016): 67–79, <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v5i2.1714>.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom: Including What the Seeker Needs and The One Alone*, trans. Al-Jerrahi Al-Halveti (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1997), 243.

the heavens. I looked, and there the sun was to my right. That is how it was. The Sufi path is a heavenly path.”<sup>62</sup> For Salih, *fanā* ’ was not merely a philosophical discussion, but a real experience that he could personally describe and thereby inspire others to pursue it themselves.

Once, man’s spirit is liberated through the removal of the veil of separation, he will realize that God is truly the one who is continuously operating everything in the world. Oneness with God certainly implies that we are merely an instrument through which God works. Salih explained this reality as follows, “There is no agency except God’s. Only God can give life or death. Your deeds will be judged according to their intention, but God is the one who is performing them. You might think that you are separated from God, but when you wake up you realize that not only was He with you, but He was also you.”<sup>63</sup> This statement by a living Shaikh appears to mirror Ibn al-‘Arabī, who likewise describes the ultimate state of an individual in the following words, “His being is Allah's being; his word is Allah's word; his action is Allah's action; his knowledge of himself is Allah's knowledge of Himself.”<sup>64</sup> What these accounts show is mankind’s dire need to wake up from a state of forgetfulness and realize their true nature. This requires a certain commitment to the training of the soul to develop a constant awareness of God’s activity.

For once the seeker reaches this level, he is promised spiritual enlightenment, a life of peace, and personal felicity. This reality assuredly lies deep within each person’s soul, eagerly awaiting illumination by the sincere seeker of truth. Salih added the following explanation of this important idea, saying:

“We are only tools in God’s hands. He is the absolute Lord. He created both you and your work. The world is not God, but it is also nothing else. It is like ice. You can build an igloo, or make ice cubes, but it is not water. You cannot drink ice. But it is also not different than water. When you go to the market, everything is God. When somebody insults you, it is God speaking to you. I know this is difficult to understand, but we should try. God is constantly sending you messages.”<sup>65</sup>

In other words, for Salih *tawhīd* was not speculative, but real and applicable to everyday life. For him, everything pointed to God, which is one of the reasons why he always encouraged his followers to search out God’s agency in the world. He often said, “Read! Nothing occurs by chance. The world is God’s book. There is a film playing and you are in this film, but this film is not reality, only God is.”<sup>66</sup>

In addition to his teaching, Salih also modeled what he preached. On one occasion we were discussing with Salih if we should go outside for a walk and we were wondering

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Salih, March 2, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Salih, January 7, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Arabi, *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom: Including What the Seeker Needs and The One Alone*, 249.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Salih, May 16, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Salih, July 31, 2015.

if it was going to rain that day or not. The cartoon Tom and Jerry were playing at that exact time on the TV in the background. Jerry was holding an umbrella, a few drops of rain fell, then they stopped, and Jerry closed the umbrella. Salih saw that and said that it was safe to go outside and that it would not rain. That is exactly what happened. Another time, for example, we were all sitting together, when a popular song was playing on the radio. The Shaikh asked everyone to be quiet, closed his eyes, and said, “I seek God even in a song. Allah creates every tone, and a true Sufi sees God in everything. Every phenomenon in existence is God’s.”<sup>67</sup> This interpretation, however, does not mean that Salih believed creation is identical with God, for He is beyond and unlike anything in creation. He is merely pointing out the reality that all agency in the world is ultimately God’s. In essence, Salih’s deep conviction regarding the fundamental reality of *tawhīd* is expressed through his belief that the permanent state of reality is God’s constant involvement in all the affairs of this world, regardless if we are or are not aware of that fact. To better illustrate this point, Salih said on one occasion, “Allah is the one that is at work in everything. I truly believe that. You cannot even move your eyelash without Allah.”<sup>68</sup> Ultimately for Salih *tawhīd* was in a sense an opportunity to temporarily taste a slice of heaven here on earth. It made life and faith beautiful.

Although exceedingly difficult, Salih wanted to obtain a permanent state of *tawhīd*, saying, “It is possible to be in a constant union with God. If someone is experiencing a state of *tawhīd*, then while he is walking through town, he is in heaven. At the same time, others could be sitting inside a mosque as if they were in the middle of a marketplace.”<sup>69</sup> This search for ultimate reality, motivated by love is likewise mirrored by Ibn al-‘Arabī, who also promised great benefits if humanity recognized their already existing unity with God, saying, “Then when you see what is around you as not other than you, and all and everything as the existence of the One—when you do not see anything else with Him or in Him, but see Him in everything as yourself and at the same time as the nonexistence of yourself—then what you see is the truth.”<sup>70</sup> Here we can see a convergence between one of the greatest mystics from the past and a living Sufi, in today’s local context. This exploration of adding to a complex theological doctrine a real example of how theory operates in practice has evidently added new layers of understanding and insight of how in fact *tawhīd* can be actually implemented in real life.

## E. Conclusion

This article set out with the premise that the study of religion would greatly benefit from grassroots perspectives of living practitioners in a particular local context,

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Salih, August 24, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Salih, March 2, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Salih, July 23, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Arabi, *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom: Including What the Seeker Needs and The One Alone*, 245.



in order to offset the tendency toward broad generalizations and reductionistic simplifications of significant theological complexity. From that position, a brief overview of Sufism's main principles and goals was summarized, with a particular emphasis of displaying the central role of the Shaikh as the key figure to assist the spiritual seeker to achieve his ultimate objective. It became clear that in Sufism's historical evolution an absolute dependency on the assistance of the spiritual leader reached paramount proportions. If someone was to attain nearness to God, he needed a qualified guide to tell him how to get there. The final point of destination has been described in Sufi theology with the familiar term of *tawḥīd* but has been subsequently expanded to encompass more than the traditional and customary understanding, by including the unity of all existence. Rather than only dialoguing about this important doctrinal principle from already existing and authoritative sources, this article aimed to provide an original and practical perspective by a living Sufi. After a brief introduction of Shaikh Salih and his local context, it was through his voice, that the largely theoretical discussion pertaining to the highly philosophical concept of *tawḥīd* was expecting to achieve new perspectives and discernment.

In this way, the article aimed to consult a real Sufi practitioner and through that approach advance and deepen our understanding by unveiling new and original insights on this foundational theological doctrine. For it is certainly true that the longing to attain absolute proximity, certainly for ordinary believers, cannot be adequately satisfied if relegated to mere theoretical discussions. The ultimate goal remains fundamentally practical and is expressed through a real desire for an experiential satisfaction of nearness to God. Ordinary believers and particularly Sufis long for the liberation of their spirit, in the hopes that this will unlock their inherent potentiality of comprehending God. Chittick rightly described mankind's challenging condition, saying that, "through his fall he lost his inward contact with God, and for him the equilibrium of the universe became blurred. Trying to regain his original state man created his own equilibrium and saw things not as they are – in God – but through the veil of his individual self."<sup>71</sup> The journey of attaining proximity to God and the realization of *tawḥīd* requires the rending of these numerous layers and veils of separation, which is certainly difficult and full of challenges. Shaikh Salih serves as one example of a living witness, who displays through his life and teaching potential pathways toward attaining *tawḥīd*, or oneness with God. Even if these temporary moments of success do not remain forever.

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<sup>71</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, 84.

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