

A Critical Hermeneutic Study of Ibn Taymiyyah's Views

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Abstract

The tension between Sufism and Sharia is a fact of conflict of religious thought and practice in Islam. This paper seeks to examine the phenomenon from an interpretive perspective. This issue has attracted the attention of traditional scholars and reformers. One of them is Ibn Taymiyyah, who has a unique view in his criticism of Sufism at that time which tended towards heterodox Sufism. Ibn Taymiyyah wanted to project Sufism to its roots as a pure practice and not mixed with external Sufi practices that are not clearly derived from the internal Islam itself that culminate in the practice of prophetic spirituality. In his view, Sufism at that time no longer displayed a strict barometer of Sharia. There are even indications of violating Sharia itself. Therefore, he formulated a Sufism practice based on the balance of Sharia and factually and rationally referred to the spirit of the practice of the Salaf.

Keywords: *Tension; Sufism; Syari'ah; Salaf*

Abstrak

Ketegangan antara tasawuf dan syariat merupakan fakta adanya konflik pemikiran dan praktik keagamaan dalam Islam. Tulisan ini berupaya mengkaji fenomena tersebut dari perspektif interpretatif. Persoalan ini telah menarik perhatian para ulama tradisional maupun pembaru. Salah satunya adalah Ibn Taymiyyah yang memiliki pandangan khas dalam kritiknya terhadap praktik tasawuf pada masanya yang cenderung mengarah pada tasawuf heterodoks. Ibn Taymiyyah ingin mengembalikan tasawuf kepada akar-ajarnya sebagai praktik spiritual yang murni dan tidak tercampur dengan praktik-praktik eksternal yang tidak jelas berasal dari ajaran Islam itu sendiri, yang bermuara pada spiritualitas kenabian. Menurut pandangannya, tasawuf pada masa itu tidak lagi menunjukkan ukuran syariat yang ketat, bahkan terdapat indikasi penyimpangan terhadap syariat itu sendiri. Oleh karena itu, ia merumuskan praktik **tasawuf** yang didasarkan pada keseimbangan antara syariat dan hakikat serta secara faktual dan rasional merujuk pada semangat praktik generasi Salaf.

Kata Kunci: *Ketegangan; Tasawuf; Syariat; Salaf*

Introduction

Within Islam, there are two types of spiritual experience: the exoteric dimension, which is external and formalistic, and the esoteric dimension, which is internal and substantive. In the practice of religious life, if one of these dimensions is overemphasized, it is not surprising that an anomaly can occur in religious practice, at least for others as



evaluators. Ideally, these two dimensions should be harmonized in an integrated system, not separated from each other. However, in reality, it is very difficult to unify them. This may be due to a fundamental tendency in a person's character and way of thinking and acting, which reflects these two dimensions within their personality. This is especially true if a person has already acquired a principled belief in the way of life adopted in these two dimensions (Muliono R, 2017).

In the development of Islamic thought, the exoteric dimension developed into the discipline of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) or sharia, while the esoteric developed into the discipline of Sufism. Each of these scientific fields, in accordance with the different basic paradigmatic structures, really shows its own superior sides and sometimes even claims unilaterally and it has even become a fact that there is an attitude of mutual attraction of interests that their path is closer to the value of truth, so that in the development stage there is often "tension" starting from the intellectual, until it ends in ideological execution, with accusations labeled negative.¹

In this context, it can be observed that most of those who actively accuse are more based on exoteric scholars or fiqh circles, rather than the more seemingly passive Sufis, who are essentially influenced by political factors, because they are usually close to those in power. This is different from the usual for esoteric scholars known as Sufis, who are often victims, because sometimes the practice of esoteric values is somewhat outside the mainstream in the context of sharia. Among the figures who very strongly oppose and accuse these extreme Sufis is the figure of the "grandfather" of the reformers named Ibn Taymiyyah, whose main ideas will be analyzed in this paper.

The Conflict between Sufism and Sharia

Many consider al-Ghazali to be a figure instrumental in reconciling Sufism and Sharia. This conflict was already manifest, with various punishments for extreme Sufi groups, including those of renowned Sufi figures like al-Hallaj. It can sometimes be latent, and it can recur at any time, provided there is a common cause, a system of power, and the same judgments of Sharia scholars.

This assumption, according to some observers, is incorrect, as after al-Ghazali's death, these conflicts became frequent and appeared to intensify.² These conflicts were sparked by the emergence of controversial Sufis, such as al-Hamadani (d. 525/1131), ash-

¹ Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban: Sebuah Telaah tentang Masalah Keimanan, Kemanusiaan, dan Kemoderenan*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 2000, p. 257.

² Kautsar Azhari Noer, "Mengkaji Ulang Posisi al-Ghazali dalam Sejarah Tasawuf", in *Journal of Paramadina*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1999, p. 172.

Syuhrawardi (d. 587/1191), and Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), who brought teachings that, according to orthodox scholars, deviated theologically from Islam.

These controversies often provoked orthodox scholars, who urged the authorities to exercise their authority to punish controversial Sufis who disturbed the religious community within the framework of the exoteric Islamic science of fiqh. Al-Hamadani was one victim of this orthodox scholarly conspiracy. His fame spread and his followers grew based on the concepts he taught, drawing the ire of religious leaders and politicians. He was accused of serious heretical ideas and practices, including the belief in the perfect identity of the Creator and His creation. As a result of these ideas, he was imprisoned and ultimately executed in 525 AH/1131 AD at the relatively young age of 33.

Similarly, al-Syuhrawardi was disliked by Islamic jurisprudence scholars for some of his esoteric statements, which represented symbolism drawn from Zoroastrian sources, and for his sharp criticism of Islamic jurisprudence scholars. His fate was also the same, ending up on the gallows, which is why the word "al-maqtul" is often added to his name. The same fate, in terms of criticism of Sufis, was directed at Ibn 'Arabi, because his teachings were considered heretical and deviant from Islamic faith and sharia. Although Ibn 'Arabi's fate did not reach the death penalty, as did the aforementioned scholars, he received labels and accusations of infidelity and heresy, and this also constituted a psychological judgment resulting from this intellectual "scandal,"³ which could be said to be very unfair. The controversial concept is undoubtedly Ibn 'Arabi's thought, namely the concept of *wahdah al-wujud* (the unity of being). This is the largest and most prolonged intellectual controversy in Sufism, representing the struggle between two dimensions of Islam. ⁴Many figures have criticized Ibn 'Arabi's Sufism as a reaction to his thinking, including well-known figures such as Ibn 'Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim, at-Taftazani, and Ibrahim al-Biq'a'i. Ibn 'Taymiyyah accused Ibn 'Arabi of heresy and infidelity.⁵

³ M. Jamil, *Cakrawala Tasawuf: Sejarah, Pemikiran dan Kontekstualitas*, Jakarta: Gaung Persada Press, 2004, p. 109.

⁴For more details about the concept of *wahdah al-wujud*, read Ibn 'Arabi's book, entitled, *Fusus al-Hikam* and *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*. The battle between the two dimensional forces of Islam often also appears in the local dimension, such as the battle between Walisongo and Sheikh Siti Jenar in Java, Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin ar-Raniry, and also what happened in Kalimantan, between Sheikh Arsyad al-Banjari and Sheikh Abdul Hamid Abulung. Read next Karel L. Steenbrink, *Beberapa Aspek Islam di Indonesia Abad 17 dan 18*, Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1995.

⁵ Ibn 'Taymiyah, *Majmu' ar-Rasa'il wa al-Masa'il*, edited Muhammad Rasyid Ridha, Vol. IV, Kairo: 1990, p. 23.



Fazlur Rahman inventoried that the debate and criticism of Ibn 'Arabi's concept did not only come from figures outside Sufi who perhaps had not yet reached the level of Sufi-pantheistic experience, because it was widely acknowledged that Sufi concepts were usually born from the results of the Sufi's Sufi experience, which sometimes was outside the line of his awareness as a person (Ridhoul Wahidi, 2016). However, the opposition came from a famous Sufi, named as-Simnani, who also joined in accusing Ibn 'Arabi of mixing the existence of God with Nature, by identifying the divine nature with human nature. The protest movement against Ibn 'Arabi as an icon of Sufi philosophy, reached its peak in Ahmad as-Sirhindi in India, a Sufi of the Naqsyabandiyah order who stated that *wahdah al-wujud* was a real Sufi experience, but not the peak of the perfection of the Sufi journey.⁶

Ibn Taymiyyah as a Critic of Sufism

Ibn Taymiyyah is known as a purifier of Islamic teachings from the Salaf school, who always advocated a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah as a reference in religion, including in the field of Sufism. Ibn Taymiyyah idealized all forms of Islamic terrorist practices in all aspects of religion as exemplified by the Salaf generation, which began with the person and behavior of the Prophet, his companions, his successors, and his successors as the best generation of Islam, in accordance with a hadith of the Prophet that states as such. This indicates that all aspects of religion outside the established path are not part of the religion and therefore must be abandoned. These religious practices are what he often termed *bid'ah*.

This fundamental paradigm of Ibn Taymiyyah's thought structure led him to debate the concepts of philosophical Sufism, which were developed within an Islamic dimension but already incorporated philosophical principles from traditions outside of Islam. Therefore, the ontology of the two poles of Salafi Sufism and philosophical Sufism clearly differs in direction and method.⁷ According to him, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught all aspects of Islamic teachings and their branches, both externally and internally, both in knowledge and practice.⁸

Thus, the Salaf were the most knowledgeable in Islamic teachings. It is impossible for subsequent generations to be more knowledgeable in religious teachings, as this

⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 148. Compare with books Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufi dan Anti Sufi*, trans. Ade Alimah, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Sufi, 2003.

⁷The compiler borrowed this term from Syaifan Nur in his master's research entitled "Pandangan Ibn Taymiah terhadap Tasawuf", *Thesis* at IAIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta in 1993.

⁸ Nurcholish Madjid (ed.), *Khazanah Intelektual Islam*, Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1984, p. 247.

principle establishes a hierarchy from the best generation to the next, leading to a period of devolution and regression. Therefore, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, religious understanding must be constantly adjusted and referred to the Qur'an and Sunnah. These two holy books served as guidance and direction for the Salaf, the best generation, in carrying out all religious actions and practices.

Sufism, in Ibn Taymiyyah's view, is the result of *ijtihad*, similar to *fiqh* and other sciences in practicing religion truly. Ibn Taymiyyah did not basically reject Sufism, but did not view it as the only or best way to practice religion seriously. He did not belittle or blame Sufism and Sufis, even though he, as a follower of the Hanbali school, strongly adhered to the exoteric values of Islam. Ibn Taymiyyah wanted to restore religious values and its orientation to the example (*uswah hasanah*) of the Prophet Muhammad. He explained his thoughts, that what is true is what is conveyed based on the holy book and the hadith of the Prophet, and anything that contradicts both is false. Sufis, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, are also included as people who are *siddiq* because they carry out worship and asceticism based on their *ijtihad* and in terms of practicing the teachings of Sufism, although this group is lower in status than the absolute *siddiq* of the salaf generation.⁹

Ibn Taymiyyah not only developed a central axis in viewing Sufism as an activity of *ijtihad*, but also placed Sufism within the structure of Islamic teachings. In his view, Sufi practices are the practice of Islamic teachings derived from the holy scriptures and hadith. He referred to Sufi practices as *'amal al-qulub*, while Sufis refer to them as *maqamat* and *ahwal*. These actions of the heart include loving Allah and the Messenger, trusting in Allah, sincerity, gratitude, patience, worry, and hope, all of which are principles of faith.¹⁰

On that basis, Ibn Taymiyyah condemned all forms of extreme Sufism practices carried out by philosophical Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabi, al-Hallaj, and so on, which in Ibn Taymiyyah's conclusion were no longer in accordance with the teachings of the salaf, especially the term *wahdah al-wujud* which damaged theological beliefs or *tauhid* which should be distinguished between the dimensions of the Creator and creatures. Likewise, the terms *ittihad*, *hulul*, and Sufi expressions which had an ego-theocentric tone through expressions often termed *syatahat*, as well as the practices of the tarekat movement which contained elements of superstition, *bid'ah* and *khurafat* according to Ibn Taymiyyah's beliefs.

⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' Fatawa*, Vol, I, Riyad: Matabi' ar-Riyad, 1398 H, p. 17.

¹⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' Fatawa*, Vol, X, p.5-6.



The concept of sainthood (*awliya'*) also did not escape Ibn 'Taymiyyah's criticism, which he classified into two, namely *awlia ar-rahman*, and *awlia ash-syaitan*. The first saints are those who believe and are pious. From this understanding, it can be understood that the saint is a concept of piety and practical obedience in religion, which is not considered as someone who is characterized by having or being given a miracle as understood by traditionalist Sufi circles. While the second saints are those who are infidel and associate partners with Allah. Faith and piety are the starting point of Ibn 'Taymiyyah's concept of sainthood. He divided the pattern of a person's diversity into three levels according to their quality; 1), those who persecute themselves (*zalim li nafsih*), namely those who like to commit sinful acts by abandoning God's commands, but this group according to Ibn 'Taymiyyah is still a group of believers¹¹, 2), those who are called moderate people (*muqtasid*), namely the group of followers of the prophet Muhammad, who practice what is required and avoid what is prohibited, and 3), those who compete in seeking goodness (*sabiq bi al-khairat*, namely those who practice everything that is required and everything that is sunna in Islam.¹²

He then divided these lovers of Allah into two, namely general and special lovers of Allah. In general, Muslims who practice what is required and obey what is prohibited include the guardians of Allah or *muqtasid* and *ashab al-yamin*. Specifically, the *aulia* of Allah are those who are referred to in the Qur'an as *sabiq bi al-khairat* who continue to be consistent in carrying out what is obligatory (*wajibat*) and circumcission (*nawafil*). They are the ones who deserve God's absolute love as a gift from God.

Conclusion

From this brief explanation, it is clear that Ibn 'Taymiyah's position as a follower and figure of Salafi Sufism is oriented towards a direct understanding of the Koran and Sunnah as a guide to the basic teachings of Islam, especially regarding issues regarding esoteric dimensions of relationships which must also be referred to in terms of understanding and procedures. So it is natural that Ibn 'Taymiyah rejected the teachings and concepts of philosophical Sufism such as al-Hallaj, Ibn 'Arabi and others who had violated the salafiah dimension, so that he accused that practice of being incompatible with Islam and that the perpetrators were infidels or *zindik*, a controversial label in the tension of Islamic thought.

¹¹ Ibn Taymiyah, *Majmu' Fatawa*,..., Vol , X, p.7.

¹² Ibn Taymiyah, *Majmu' Fatawa*,..., Vol , X, p.7.

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