

## Article

# The Onto-Epistemology of Sufi Experience in Khwāja Bāqī Billāh: A Naqshbandī Model Between Presence, Divine Unity and Ethic Authority

Serhat Gültas 

Department of Sufism, Faculty of Theology, Bursa Uludağ University, Bursa 16140, Türkiye;  
serhatgultas@uludag.edu.tr

## Abstract

One of the most fundamental and debated issues in the history of Sufism concerns not only the nature of mystical experience but also its epistemic value, its authority-generating capacity, and its normative legitimacy. Experiences expressed through *kashf* (unveiling), *ilhām* (inspiration), presence, witnessing, and annihilation have never been entirely rejected within Islamic thought, yet they have never been considered an unlimited or uncontrolled source of truth. This dual stance has shaped both internal Sufi debates and external critiques. Classical *kalām* and legal traditions approached mystical experience cautiously, emphasizing its subjectivity, fallibility, and non-generalizability. In contrast, the Sufi tradition defended unveiling and inspiration as integral to religious life. Modern scholarship, however, has often examined Sufism through universal theories of mystical experience or metaphysical and institutional frameworks, leaving its epistemological limits underexplored. The Naqshbandī tradition is notable for framing mystical experience within a *tawhīd*-centered ontology, a cautious epistemology, and disciplined adherence to the *Sharīʿa*. This framework also allows reconsideration of the relationship between Sufism and ethics, presenting mystical experience as a bridge between transcendence and practical action. This article examines early modern Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī thought through Khwāja Bāqī Billāh (d. 1603). Drawing on his own writings, it analyzes the onto-epistemological structure of mystical experience, arguing that Bāqī Billāh grounds it in a *tawhīd*-centered ontology, treats it as fallible and non-binding knowledge, and preserves the *Sharīʿa* as an indispensable normative criterion. Thus, Sufism emerges as a disciplined ethical horizon connecting transcendence and moral action.

**Keywords:** sufism; Khwāja Bāqī Billāh; Naqshbandī; ethical authority; sufi experience



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Bāqī Billāh: His Life and Spiritual Formation

Khwāja Muḥammad Bāqī Billāh Naqshbandī Uwaysī (971–1012/1563–1603), widely regarded as the founding figure of the Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī tradition in the Indian sub-continent, was born in Kābul in 971/1563. His mother belonged to a Kashmiri family descended from Khwāja ‘Ubayd Allāh Aḥrār, while his father, Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Salām Samarqandī, was of the Qilich Turk lineage (Buehler 2013, p. 20). Consequently, Bāqī Billāh was raised within an intellectual and spiritual milieu closely connected to both the Central Asian Naqshbandī tradition and the scholarly establishment.

Bāqī Billāh received his early education under Khwāja ‘Ubayd Allāh Kābulī before traveling to Transoxiana (Mā Warā’ al-Nahr), where he pursued his religious studies under the guidance of Mawlānā Ṣādiq Halwā’ī (Rizvi 1965, p. 192; Kashmī 1990, p. 267). After a brief return to Kābul, he set out once again for Transoxiana in search of a perfected spiritual master (*murshid kāmīl*). During this journey, he stopped in Lahore, where he met Farīd Bukhārī, who would later become one of the principal patrons of his activities in Delhi. The two subsequently developed a close and enduring friendship (Friedmann 1971, p. 191).

According to Sufi sources, it was during this period that Bāqī Billāh received spiritual grace (*ḥaqīqah*) from Bahā’ al-Dīn Naqshband through the Uwaysī mode of transmission. Later, most likely in 999/1591, when Farīd Bukhārī was also in Kashmir, he traveled there and spent some time in the company of Shaykh Bābā Walī Naqshbandī (d. 1000/1592). Following Bābā Walī’s death, Bāqī Billāh returned to Transoxiana. Hagiographical accounts further relate that during this journey he was guided spiritually by the presence (*rūḥānīyya*) of Khwāja ‘Ubayd Allāh Ahrār (Gavsi 1975, p. 477).

In Transoxiana, Bāqī Billāh became a disciple of Muḥammad Emkeneḡī (d. 1008/1600), one of the foremost representatives of the lineage of Khwāja ‘Ubayd Allāh Ahrār, and was formally initiated into the Naqshbandī order. According to the sources, after completing a three-day spiritual retreat (*khalwa*), he was granted unrestricted authorization (*ijāzat al-irshād al-muṭlaq*) to guide disciples. Although he initially hesitated to return to India, Muḥammad Amkanagī instructed him to proceed to the Indian subcontinent without delay (Khan 1989, pp. 8–28). As Arthur F. Buehler has observed, Bāqī Billāh’s arrival in India should be understood not as an isolated migration but as part of the broader expansion of the Central Asian Naqshbandī tradition into the Indian subcontinent during the late sixteenth century (Buehler 1996; Alam 2009).

Bāqī Billāh devoted the remainder of his life to spiritual guidance in India, where he rapidly attracted a large circle of disciples and emerged as the most influential representative of the Naqshbandī order in the subcontinent. It was during this period that Aḥmad Sirhindī entered his spiritual path, thereby laying the foundations of the Naqshbandī tradition that would later become known as the Mujaddidī branch. Bāqī Billāh passed away in Delhi in 1012/1603 and was buried there (Khan 1989, pp. 8–28).

### 1.2. The Legitimacy, Epistemic Value, and Normative Boundaries of Sufi Experience

Throughout its history, Sufism has developed not only as a discipline devoted to the cultivation of spiritual experience but also as a significant intellectual tradition concerned with the epistemic status of such experience and its relationship to religious authority. Experiences articulated through concepts such as *kashf* (unveiling), *ilhām* (inspiration), *mushāhada* (direct witnessing), and *ma‘rifa* (gnosis) have long been regarded within the Islamic intellectual tradition as potential avenues to truth. At the same time, however, their epistemic value, normative authority, and legitimate scope have been the subject of sustained debate among theologians, jurists, and Sufis since the formative period of Islam. Accordingly, the history of Sufism should be understood not merely as the history of mystical experiences, but also as the history of intellectual efforts to define their epistemological status and establish the boundaries of their religious legitimacy. The diverse approaches developed within the Sufi tradition sought, on the one hand, to affirm spiritual experience as an indispensable dimension of religious knowledge while, on the other, to clarify its relationship to revelation, reason, and the normative framework of the *Sharī‘a*. From the classical period onward, Sufis, theologians, and jurists engaged in extensive debates concerning the epistemic status of unveiling and inspiration, the fallibility of saints, the binding authority of the *Sharī‘a*, and the limits of Sufi experience (Ghazālī 2013, pp. 1–6).

Modern scholarship has generally approached mystical experience through two major interpretive frameworks. The first, exemplified by the classical work of William James, understands mystical experience as a universal mode of consciousness that transcends particular religious and cultural contexts. According to this perspective, mystical experiences may emerge within different religious traditions, yet they share certain essential characteristics at a fundamental level (James 1902, pp. 379–82). In contrast, Steven Katz and subsequent scholars have argued that mystical experience never occurs independently of its historical and cultural context; rather, every experience is shaped by the conceptual and doctrinal framework of a particular tradition (Katz 1978, pp. 26–30; Katz 1983, pp. 3–60). While this debate has generated important insights into the nature of religious experience, it remains limited in its ability to explain the mechanisms of regulation and legitimation that Sufi traditions themselves developed. Put differently, these studies have primarily focused on how mystical experience emerges, while giving comparatively less attention to the criteria by which such experiences are evaluated and the conditions under which they are deemed legitimate.

A similar tendency can be observed in the study of Sufism. A substantial body of scholarship on Sufi experience—particularly within the post-Ibn al-‘Arabī metaphysical tradition—has focused on the ontological dimensions of concepts such as divine unity (*tawhīd*), manifestation (*tajallī*), gnosis (*ma‘rifā*), and unveiling (*kashf*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 1–54, 147–76; Knysh 2017, pp. 10–18, 154–75). Although these studies are indispensable for demonstrating the theoretical sophistication of Sufi thought, they often relegate questions concerning the binding authority of Sufi knowledge, the fallibility of mystical experience, and the epistemological function of the *Sharī‘a* to a secondary position. Yet, within classical Sufi traditions, the central issue is not merely the possibility of gnosis but also its limits. Consequently, Sufi experience should be examined not only as a metaphysical phenomenon but also as an epistemological and normative problem.

Within this context, the Naqshbandī tradition occupies a particularly significant position. The fifteenth century marked a period in which Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought was systematically adopted and institutionalized within the Naqshbandī tradition. As Mukhtar H. Ali observes, Jāmī played a pivotal role in this process. As both a Naqshbandī Sufi and one of the foremost interpreters of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought, he was instrumental in transmitting Akbarian metaphysics across Central Asia, Iran, the Indian subcontinent, and the Ottoman world (Ali 2025, p. 10). Through works such as *Naqd al-Nuṣūṣ* and *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Jāmī synthesized the ideas of the early Akbarian masters—including Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, Mu‘ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, and Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī—thereby providing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school with a more coherent and systematic intellectual framework. According to Ali, Jāmī perceived no tension between his allegiance to Ibn al-‘Arabī and his identity as a Naqshbandī. On the contrary, he regarded these two traditions as mutually complementary. Indeed, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s influence within the Naqshbandī order did not begin with Jāmī; it is already clearly discernible in the writings of Khwāja Muḥammad Pārsā, one of the order’s leading authorities (Ali 2025, p. 10). This intellectual background demonstrates that the milieu in which Khwāja Bāqī Billāh was educated in the sixteenth century had already been shaped by a well-established synthesis of Naqshbandī spirituality and Akbarian metaphysics. Consequently, the references to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s terminology and metaphysical doctrines in Bāqī Billāh’s writings should not be viewed as the result of an isolated intellectual influence. Rather, they should be understood as a natural continuation of the Naqshbandī–Akbarian synthesis that had gradually matured since the fifteenth century.

Unlike many other Sufi traditions, the Naqshbandiyya understood mystical experience not merely as the discovery of metaphysical truths but also as a disciplined practice

regulated and governed by the *Sharīʿa*. Principles emphasized by the order from its formative period onward—such as *khalwat dar anjuman* (“solitude in the crowd”), *hūsh dar dam* (“awareness of every breath”), *yād kard* (“remembrance”), and *wuqūf-i qalbī* (“attentiveness to the heart”)—demonstrate that mystical experience was not conceived as a sphere independent of everyday life and religious obligations (Buehler 1998, pp. ix–x, xvi–xvii). Nevertheless, modern scholarship on the Naqshbandiyya has focused predominantly on the order’s historical development, political influence, and social functions, while paying comparatively limited attention to the epistemic value and normative boundaries of Sufi experience (Buehler 1998, pp. 10–18).

At this point, the writings of Bāqī Billāh offer a particularly valuable opportunity for analysis. As the figure who played a decisive role in the institutionalization of the Naqshbandī order in the Indian subcontinent, Bāqī Billāh has frequently been portrayed in modern scholarship primarily as the spiritual master of Imām Rabbānī Aḥmad Sirhindī and as a precursor to the Mujaddidī tradition. By contrast, his own writings have rarely been examined systematically, especially with regard to the epistemic value, legitimacy, and limits of Sufi experience. Yet the discussions found in his *Malfūzāt* and treatises reveal an understanding of Sufi experience that does not conceive it as an absolute and unrestricted realm of truth. Rather, it is presented within a framework characterized by a *tawḥīd*-centered ontological orientation, an epistemology centered on *maʿrifa* yet conscious of human fallibility, and a normative discipline governed by the *Sharīʿa*. Structured around concepts such as spiritual presence (*ḥudūr*), contemplative witnessing (*mushāhada*), divine unity (*tawḥīd*), inspiration (*ilhām*), unveiling (*kashf*), love (*maḥabba*), and form (*ṣūra*), this framework provides significant insights into the question of how mystical experience is delimited and regulated.

This study seeks to address this gap in the existing scholarship. Its central question concerns the ontological, epistemological, and normative boundaries within which Sufi experience acquires meaning in the writings of Bāqī Billāh. More specifically, the article investigates how Bāqī Billāh conceptualizes Sufi experience; what epistemic status he attributes to *maʿrifa* and *kashf*, according to which criteria he limits the authority of saints; and how he positions the *Sharīʿa* within the structure of the Sufi path.

The principal argument advanced here is that Bāqī Billāh redefines Sufi experience through the interrelationship of ontology, epistemology, and normativity. Within this framework, *tawḥīd* is not merely a metaphysical doctrine but the ontological foundation that determines the orientation of Sufi experience. Likewise, *maʿrifa*, *kashf*, and *ilhām* are not regarded as infallible sources of knowledge but as fallible modes of knowing, while the *Sharīʿa* is understood not as an external mechanism of control but as the constitutive principle that establishes the legitimacy of Sufi experience. In this respect, Bāqī Billāh’s thought articulates a distinctive vision of Sufism grounded not in the unlimited expansion of mystical experience but in its disciplined cultivation and regulation.

To develop this argument, this study is organized around three interrelated analytical sections. The first section examines the ontological foundations of Sufi experience through the concepts of *tawḥīd*, *ḥudūr*, and *mushāhada*. The second section investigates the possibilities and limits of Sufi knowledge through the concepts of *maʿrifa*, *ilhām*, and *kashf*, with particular attention to questions of authority and fallibility. The third section analyzes the normative, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions of Sufi experience through the interconnected themes of the *Sharīʿa*, *maḥabba*, *ṣūra*, and the master–disciple relationship. Taken together, these sections demonstrate how Bāqī Billāh conceptualizes Sufi experience through the mutually constitutive relationship between ontology, epistemology, and normativity.

## 2. Literature Review and Positioning of the Study

A considerable portion of modern scholarship on Bāqī Billāh has focused less on his own intellectual and spiritual thought than on his historical role in the formation of the Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī tradition. Accordingly, he has largely been portrayed as the spiritual master of Imām Rabbānī Aḥmad Sirhindī and as a formative figure in the emergence of the Mujaddidī branch of the Naqshbandiyya. While these studies have made significant contributions to our understanding of Bāqī Billāh's role in the establishment of the Naqshbandī order in the Indian subcontinent, they have generally not examined his conception of Sufi experience as an independent object of inquiry (Tosun 2015, p. 199).

A similar tendency characterizes the broader scholarship on the Naqshbandiyya. Although a substantial body of literature has emerged on the order's historical development, political influence, social functions, and geographical expansion, comparatively little attention has been paid to the epistemic value and normative boundaries of Sufi experience. In particular, while the Naqshbandī commitment to the *Sharī'a* has frequently been emphasized, the ways in which this commitment regulates experiential forms such as *kashf* (unveiling), *ilhām* (inspiration), *mushāhada* (contemplative witnessing), and *ma'rifa* (gnosis) have not been examined in detail (Weismann 2007, pp. 1–10).

Theoretical studies of mystical experience have developed a different line of inquiry. Whereas William James approached mystical experience as a universal and transreligious mode of consciousness (James 1902, pp. 379–418), Steven Katz argued that mystical experiences are always shaped by specific historical and cultural traditions (Katz 1978, pp. 22–74). Similarly, Wayne Proudfoot and other scholars have maintained that religious experience cannot be understood independently of the interpretive frameworks through which it is mediated. Although these debates have generated important insights into the nature of mystical experience, they provide only limited explanations of the mechanisms of regulation and legitimation developed within Sufi traditions themselves (Proudfoot 1985, pp. 1–34).

A significant body of scholarship on Islamic mysticism has, meanwhile, concentrated on the post-Ibn al-ʿArabī metaphysical tradition. Scholars such as William Chittick and Alexander Knysh have examined the ontological and metaphysical dimensions of Sufi experience in considerable detail, elucidating the theoretical foundations of concepts such as *kashf*, *ma'rifa*, and *mushāhada* (Chittick 1989; Knysh 2017). Yet questions concerning the binding authority of Sufi knowledge, the fallibility of mystical experience, and the epistemological function of the *Sharī'a* have often remained secondary concerns. Within the classical Sufi tradition, however, the central issue is not merely the possibility of mystical experience but also its limits.

Against this background, the writings of Bāqī Billāh assume particular significance. The discussions preserved in his *Malfūzāt* present Sufi experience not as an absolute and unrestricted realm of truth but as a mode of spiritual life structured by a *tawḥīd*-centered ontological orientation, an epistemology grounded in *ma'rifa* yet attentive to the possibility of error, and a normative discipline governed by the *Sharī'a*. Passages addressing the relationship between spiritual presence (*ḥuḍūr*), contemplative witnessing (*mushāhada*), and divine unity (*tawḥīd*) illuminate the ontological dimensions of Sufi experience, while discussions of inspiration (*ilhām*), unveiling (*kashf*), attachment to outward forms (*ṣūra*), and adherence to Sunni orthodoxy demonstrate the ethically consequential yet carefully delimited character of that experience.

## 3. Sources, Textual Corpus, and Methodology

This study is based on the extant Persian writings of Bāqī Billāh (d. 1012/1603), one of the founding figures of the early Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī tradition. In the historiography of

Sufism, Bāqī Billāh has generally been portrayed as the spiritual master of Imām Rabbānī Aḥmad Sirhindī and as a pivotal historical figure responsible for the dissemination of the Naqshbandī order in the Indian subcontinent. By contrast, his own writings have rarely been examined systematically, particularly with regard to the epistemic value, legitimacy, limits, and ethical implications of Sufi experience. As a result, Bāqī Billāh's thought has often been interpreted through the lens of the later Mujaddidī tradition, while the conceptual framework articulated in his own writings has remained comparatively understudied.

The primary source for this study is *Kulliyāt-i Khwāja Bāqī Billāh*, the collected edition of Bāqī Billāh's extant works. To avoid repetition in citations and references, the individual works contained in this collection are hereafter cited respectively as *Malfūzāt*, *Maktūbāt*, *Rasā'il*, *Sharḥ-i Rubā'iyāt*, and *Ganj-i Faqr*. Particular attention has been given to passages addressing the concepts of *tawḥīd* (divine unity), *ḥudūr* (spiritual presence), *mushāhada* (contemplative witnessing), *ma'rifa* (gnosis), *ilhām* (inspiration), *kashf* (unveiling), *wilāya* (sainthood), *maḥabba* (love), the master–disciple relationship, and the *Sharī'a*. The analysis is based primarily on the original Persian textual corpus.

Within this corpus, the *Malfūzāt* occupies a particularly significant place. The work contains not only theoretical discussions but also records of Bāqī Billāh's conversations with his disciples, his responses to their questions, and his practical reflections on Sufi training. Although the compiler is not explicitly identified in the introduction, various internal indications suggest that the text was compiled by one of Bāqī Billāh's disciples, known by the pen name "*Rushdī*." The compiler further acknowledges that the transmitted statements may contain omissions or inaccuracies in wording and meaning, thereby providing valuable information regarding the formation and transmission of the text. While this admission does not invalidate the historical reliability of the work, it underscores its significance as a primary source reflecting the internal dynamics of a Sufi gathering and the processes of oral transmission.

Studies on the historical value of the *Malfūzāt* genre have demonstrated that such texts should not be read merely as repositories of biographical information but also as discursive documents that reveal the conceptual universe, pedagogical methods, and structures of authority within particular Sufi communities. Accordingly, the *Malfūzāt* is approached here not as a chronicle intended to verify historical events but as a text of ideas that illuminates how Bāqī Billāh conceptualized Sufi experience.

The letters collected in the same corpus constitute another major body of primary sources for understanding both the formative stages of the Naqshbandī–Mujaddidī tradition and the spiritual guidance relationship established between the shaykh and his disciples. The advice, instructional methods, explanations of dhikr and contemplative practices, and responses to the spiritual and ethical challenges faced by disciples reveal the practical dimensions of Bāqī Billāh's understanding of Sufism. These letters are therefore significant not merely as historical documents but also as indispensable sources for understanding the educational and practical aspects of early Mujaddidī Sufism.

Bāqī Billāh's treatises likewise constitute an important source for reconstructing his Sufi thought and pedagogical vision. Although relatively brief in length, these texts are densely composed works that reflect the author's methods of spiritual guidance, understanding of worship, and interpretations of the foundational principles of the Naqshbandī tradition. These treatises, which shed light on the historical memory and spiritual genealogy of the order, are employed throughout the present study where relevant.

The poetic texts included in the final section of the collection provide concise yet powerful expressions of Bāqī Billāh's gnostic experiences and ethical teachings. Taken together, these treatises and poetic compositions demonstrate that Bāqī Billāh should be understood

not only as a spiritual guide and letter writer but also as a multifaceted author who contributed to the fields of spiritual education and Sufi literature.

Methodologically, this study combines close reading, conceptual analysis, and discourse analysis (Skinner 2002; LaCapra 1983; Gadamer 1989). Its objective is not to reconstruct Bāqī Billāh's thought retrospectively through the lens of later Mujaddidī teachings but rather to identify, on the basis of his own writings, the conceptual architecture underlying his understanding of Sufi experience. The study is therefore designed not as a biographical investigation or a history of a Sufi order, but as a text-centered analysis of ideas. Recurrent concepts, the relationships among them, and the responses offered to particular intellectual and spiritual problems are examined comparatively in order to uncover the internal logic of Bāqī Billāh's Sufi thought.

The theoretical framework of the study is organized around the concept of "onto-epistemology," understood as the reciprocal relationship through which conceptions of being and knowledge mutually constitute one another. Here, onto-epistemology is employed not as a ready-made theoretical model borrowed from contemporary philosophy, but as an analytical tool for explaining the interdependence of ontology and epistemology within Bāqī Billāh's thought. In his writings, *tawhīd* appears not merely as a metaphysical doctrine but as an ontological and ethical orientation that determines both the direction and the limits of Sufi experience. Correspondingly, forms of knowledge such as *ma'rifa*, *kashf*, and *ilhām* are never conceived independently of this ontological foundation; rather, they acquire meaning within the normative boundaries established by the *Sharī'a*. Consequently, the present study approaches ontology, epistemology, and normativity not as separate domains but as interwoven dimensions of a single Sufi discipline.

On this basis, the analysis is structured around three principal conceptual axes. First, it examines the ontological foundations of Sufi experience through the concepts of *tawhīd*, *ḥuḍūr*, and *mushāhada*. Second, it investigates the possibilities and limits of Sufi knowledge through Bāqī Billāh's treatment of *ma'rifa*, *ilhām*, and *kashf*, with particular attention to questions of authority and fallibility. Finally, it explores the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of Sufi experience through the framework of *maḥabba* and the relational dynamics of spiritual guidance. In doing so, the study seeks to present Bāqī Billāh not merely as a historical figure but as an independent thinker who developed a systematic approach to the epistemic value, legitimacy, normative boundaries, and ethical consequences of Sufi experience.

#### 4. Theoretical and Historical Background

##### *Experience, Knowledge, and Normativity in Sufism*

In order to assess the place of Sufi experience within the broader landscape of Islamic thought, it is necessary to consider the theoretical tensions through which such experience has historically been articulated. Expressed through concepts such as *kashf* (unveiling), *ilhām* (inspiration), *ḥuḍūr* (spiritual presence), *tawhīd* (divine unity), *fanā'* (annihilation), and *shuhūd* (witnessing), Sufi experience has never been either wholly rejected or uncritically accepted. Rather, from its earliest stages, Sufism became the subject of sustained debates concerning knowledge, authority, and normativity. These debates may be read through three major moments represented by Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, and Ibn Taymiyya.

In the formative period of Islamic thought, Sufi experience was generally legitimized within the framework of asceticism and moral cultivation. In the teachings of figures such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Fuḍayl b. ʿIyād, and Ibrāhīm b. Adham, the primary concern was not the claim to unveiling but rather piety, self-discipline, and moral self-examination. During this period, Sufi experience was understood less as an epistemological problem than as a form of ethical and spiritual depth (Knysh 2017, pp. 16–18). Beginning in the third/ninth

century, however, Sufism increasingly came to present itself not merely as a path of moral refinement but also as a distinctive mode of apprehending truth. Junayd al-Baghdādī's distinction between *sukr* (intoxication) and *ṣaḥw* (sobriety) opened discussions concerning the relationship between mystical states and conscious awareness, while the statements attributed to al-Hallāj brought the question of the limits of unveiling dramatically to the forefront. As a result, the epistemic status of Sufi experience emerged as an unavoidable issue.

As Atif Khalil has demonstrated, Abū Tālib al-Makkī's *Qūt al-Qulūb* represents one of the earliest comprehensive attempts to establish Sufism systematically on the foundations of the Qur'ān, the Prophetic Sunnah, and Islamic jurisprudence (Khalil 2011). Al-Makkī did not present Sufism as an alternative to the outward prescriptions of religion; rather, he understood it as a discipline that complements their inward and ethical dimensions. In doing so, he laid the intellectual groundwork for the synthesis that Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī would later develop more fully in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. From this perspective, Ghazālī's contribution should be understood not as the creation of a new basis of legitimacy for Sufism, but as the institutionalization and broader scholarly acceptance of the Sunnī Sufi tradition that had already begun with al-Makkī and was further elaborated by figures such as al-Qushayrī and al-Hujwīrī.

Within this framework, for example, *tawba* (repentance)—one of the central ethical concepts of early Sufism—is understood not merely as the abandonment of a particular sin. Rather, it signifies a comprehensive model of spiritual formation in which the individual transcends a merely formal adherence to the religion into which they were born and turns wholly toward God and the spiritual life with their entire being (Khalil 2018, p. 7).

The systematic legitimation of Sufi experience within Sunni thought was achieved largely through the work of Ghazālī. In both *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* and *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, he emphasized the limits of rational and transmitted forms of knowledge while recognizing unveiling and inspiration as possible means of access to truth. Yet this recognition was by no means unconditional. Ghazālī's position defined the epistemic status of Sufi experience in a dual manner: mystical experience was neither rejected nor elevated above the authority of the *Sharī'a* (Ghazālī 1964, pp. 44–47). This balanced approach subsequently became a major reference point for both defenders and critics of Sufism.

The ontological and epistemological scope of Sufi experience was significantly expanded by Ibn al-ʿArabī. For him, unveiling was not merely a subjective spiritual state but a mode of apprehending the reality of being itself. Within the framework of the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), mystical experience became a form of knowledge that discloses the fundamental unity underlying existence (Chittick 1989, pp. 147, 168). While this perspective deepened the metaphysical dimensions of Sufi thought, it also generated substantial criticism. In particular, the transformation of unveiling into a source of ontological knowledge intensified debates concerning the fallibility and limits of mystical experience.

One of the most influential critiques of the Akbarian tradition was articulated by Ibn Taymiyya. Although he did not reject Sufi experience outright, he assigned only a highly restricted epistemic value to inspiration and unveiling. According to Ibn Taymiyya, inspiration may benefit the individual who receives it, yet it loses all authority whenever it conflicts with the evidences of the *Sharī'a* (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, vol. 11, pp. 65–66). His perspective strongly emphasized the necessity of subjecting mystical experience to normative regulation. In subsequent centuries, this approach exerted an indirect yet significant influence upon the Naqshbandī tradition.

It is at this juncture that the historical significance of Bāqī Billāh becomes particularly apparent. Bāqī Billāh played a pivotal role in the reconfiguration of the Naqshbandī

tradition within the Indian subcontinent. The Naqshbandī heritage that had emerged in Central Asia encountered new challenges within the religiously diverse, culturally plural, and highly interactive social environment of South Asia. These circumstances required not only the preservation of Sufi practice but also a renewed articulation of the nature, limits, and legitimacy of Sufi experience. Questions concerning the criteria by which unveiling, inspiration, and spiritual states should be evaluated—and the ethical consequences they might generate—therefore became matters of practical and social importance rather than purely theoretical concerns.

The writings of Bāqī Billāh clearly reflect this intellectual and social necessity. Throughout his works, he repeatedly returns to questions concerning:

- The limits of mystical experience;
- The binding authority of *ma'rifa*;
- The primacy of the *Sharī'a*;
- The ethical dispositions that emerge from these commitments.

In this respect, Bāqī Billāh occupies a distinctive place in the history of Sufism as a thinker who consciously sought to discipline and delimit mystical experience in ways that produced concrete ethical consequences.

The historical background outlined above demonstrates why Bāqī Billāh's thought cannot be adequately understood within an exclusively ethical or metaphysical framework. His approach requires Sufi experience to be considered simultaneously through the interconnected dimensions of:

- Ontology (*tawhīd*);
- Epistemology (*ma'rifa*);
- Normativity (*Sharī'a*);
- Ethics (*'amal*).

For this reason, the onto-epistemological framework adopted in this study is not merely a methodological preference but a necessary consequence of the internal logic of Bāqī Billāh's writings. The following section applies this framework directly through a detailed analysis of the ontological dimensions of *tawhīd* and *ḥudūr* in Bāqī Billāh's thought.

## 5. Tawhīd and Ontology

### 5.1. *Tawhīd: A Doctrine of Belief or an Ontological Ground?*

In the classical theological tradition (*kalām*), *tawhīd* was primarily understood as a doctrinal principle centered on the unity of God's essence and attributes. Within the Sufi tradition, however, this principle gradually expanded into a broader conception of reality and existence. Although Bāqī Billāh accepts this expansion, he consciously avoids transforming it into a comprehensive metaphysical system.

The frequently repeated statement in the *Malfūzāt* that "Only God truly exists" initially appears to evoke the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Yet a close reading of the text reveals that the expression carries an experiential rather than a systematic metaphysical meaning. The aim is not to construct a new theory of being but to liberate the spiritual seeker (*sālik*) from the absolutization of multiplicity. In this sense, *tawhīd* signifies a transformation at the level of perception and awareness rather than a purely ontological proposition. This position reflects a degree of caution rarely encountered in the post-Ibn al-ʿArabī Sufi tradition. For many Sufis, *tawhīd* evolved into a comprehensive metaphysical explanation of the structure of existence (Chittick 2025, pp. 30–36). Bāqī Billāh, by contrast, limits *tawhīd* to a principle that determines the orientation of spiritual experience.

Accordingly, in Bāqī Billāh's understanding of Sufism, *tawhīd* is not merely a metaphysical doctrine of unity but an ontological principle that determines the possibility, lim-

its, and direction of Sufi experience (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 30). Sufi experience is therefore conceived not as an autonomous and unrestricted domain but as a process continuously regulated by the *Sharīʿa*, ethical discipline, and spiritual training. A discussion recorded in one of his conversations with disciples concerning the issue of “love of form” (*ʿishq-i šūra*) illustrates this point particularly well. The legitimacy of a spiritual practice is evaluated not according to the intensity of the experience it generates or its transformative effects, but according to normative criteria (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 22). Although Bāqī Billāh acknowledges that certain Sufi circles employed attachment to a human form as a spiritual technique and notes that a limited precedent for such a practice was attributed to Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband, he explicitly rejects its development into a systematic method (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 22).

In this context, he cites and critiques the following view attributed to Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband:

“They would first instruct disciples to cultivate attachment to a particular form. Eventually, all other attachments would disappear from their hearts, leaving only that single attachment, which represented the weakest of bonds. Then, through a slight spiritual intervention, even that attachment would be removed. Once every bond of attachment had been severed, spiritual presence and awareness would arise within the heart.” (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 22)

This discussion demonstrates that the epistemic value of mystical experience is not absolutized but rather restricted within an external and binding normative framework. In Bāqī Billāh’s thought, *tawhīd* thus functions as an ontological principle that disciplines human desire, orientation, and experience.

At this point, Bāqī Billāh’s classification of *tawhīd* becomes particularly significant. He distinguishes between what may be termed “corporeal *tawhīd*” (*tawhīd-i jismānī*) and “gnostic *tawhīd*” (*tawhīd-i maʿrifat*). In other words, *tawhīd* is not treated as a single-layered concept. The distinction that emerges clearly from his writings is between the level of doctrinal affirmation and the level of experiential realization. Corporeal *tawhīd* refers to the confessional acknowledgment of God’s unity shared by all believers. At this level, *tawhīd* signifies assent to divine unity and constitutes the basis of religious obligation (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 22).

While explaining the subtleties of *tawhīd* to his disciples, Bāqī Billāh states:

“The state is not completed until the seeker attains essential presence (*ḥuḍūr dhātī*)—which is none other than pure presence itself—and transcends the bond of corporeal *tawhīd*. For *tawhīd* that remains confined to forms belongs to the level of the body. A person may regard both his own corporeal existence and the existence of others as manifestations of God’s existence, yet distinctions and awareness of separation still persist. At this stage, the spirit has not yet reached true annihilation (*fanāʾ*), for it is the spirit that continues to make distinctions. Such a form of *tawhīd* cannot be considered the ‘gnostic *tawhīd*’ described by the scholars of religion and the people of realization.”

Bāqī Billāh further describes this level of realization as “simple cognition” (*idrāk-i basīṭ*). In this state, the servant’s share in the divine self-disclosure (*tajallī dhātī*) consists solely of annihilation (*fanāʾ*), rather than of any additional mode of cognition. The awareness present at this station is therefore simple cognition. Accordingly, he distinguishes between *maʿrifa*, which corresponds to simple cognition, and *ʿilm*, which he associates with composite cognition (*idrāk-i murakkab*) (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-d, p. 179).

While commenting on one of the quatrains of his master ʿUbaydullāh Aḥrār, Bāqī Billāh returns to this distinction and argues that simple cognition may be common to all

human beings, whereas annihilation and composite cognition are attained only by a select few. In this context, he explicitly rejects the position of certain philosophers and theologians who maintained that knowledge of God can only be achieved through knowledge of contingent beings, describing such a view as a grave error (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-d, p. 180).

For Bāqī Billāh, the task of the spiritually perceptive seeker is to remain content with composite cognition while continually inhabiting the station of “not finding.” Only in this way can annihilation encompass the seeker completely, allowing him to move from spiritual intoxication (*sukr*) to sobriety (*ṣaḥw*) (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-d, p. 180).

## 5.2. *Ḥuḍūr*: A State of Consciousness or an Awareness of Being?

The experiential dimension of authentic *tawḥīd*—that is, what Bāqī Billāh describes as simple cognition (*idrāk-i basīṭ*)—finds its clearest expression in the concept of *ḥuḍūr* (presence). For Bāqī Billāh, *ḥuḍūr* signifies more than the heart’s continual awareness of God or the maintenance of a state of perpetual remembrance (*dhikr*). Rather, it denotes a transformation in the seeker’s relationship with existence itself. Accordingly, Bāqī Billāh presents *ḥuḍūr* as a gradual process. At its initial stage, it consists of conscious attentiveness and vigilant self-observation (*murāqaba*). At its highest stage, however, presence ceases to be a condition sustained through deliberate effort and becomes spontaneous. At this point, *ḥuḍūr* is no longer merely a spiritual “state” (*ḥāl*) but an awareness of being. Bāqī Billāh refers to this mode of awareness as *‘ilm-i ḥuḍūrī* (presential knowledge) (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-a, p. 232).

This understanding prevents Sufi experience from being reduced to a merely psychological state of consciousness. Rather than remaining a transient subjective experience occurring within the interior world of the individual, *ḥuḍūr* comes to signify an awareness of the relationship between existence and the Divine Reality (*al-Ḥaqq*). The culmination of this process is therefore not simply an altered state of consciousness but the emergence of an ontological awareness.

An equally important feature of this framework is that the spiritual experiences undergone by the disciple are never left as private and uncontrolled inner experiences. The solutions proposed in the *Malfūzāt*—such as consulting a spiritual master or undertaking migration (*hijra*)—demonstrate that the Sufi path (*ṣayr wa sulūk*) is conceived as a process that necessarily requires guidance, supervision, and discipline (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 23). Consequently, Sufi experience is transformed from a subjective state of consciousness that becomes absolutized within the individual into a regulated form of spiritual cultivation that produces ethical transformation and ontological orientation. The presentation of *ḥuḍūr* as a station that renders all other pleasures and attachments insignificant further indicates that the ultimate goal of Sufi experience is not primarily the production of epistemic knowledge but the cultivation of an existential orientation and ethical transformation.

This perspective becomes even more pronounced in Bāqī Billāh’s conception of “pure presence” (*ḥuḍūr-i maḥḍ*). His discussions of a form of presence that emerges “without the intervention of negation and affirmation” (*naḥy wa ithbāt*) open a broader reflection on the linguistic and conceptual limits of Sufi experience. In the same context, he states that “when the essence of presence becomes firmly established in itself, it can no longer tolerate the intervention of negation and affirmation.” This statement suggests that even the classical formulations of *tawḥīd* eventually function as symbolic and cognitive instruments that must be transcended at a certain stage of spiritual realization. Yet the purpose here is not to transform experience into an unlimited and uncontrollable mystical realm. On the contrary, even the highest stages of Sufi experience remain conditioned by specific ontological requirements. The suspension of language, conceptualization, and mental operations does not point toward an autonomous claim to truth independent of the *Sharī‘a*; rather,

it indicates a state of presence directed toward the immediate realization of *tawḥīd* itself (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 23).

Accordingly, in Bāqī Billāh's understanding of Sufism, *tawḥīd* functions not as a theological theory of proof but as the fundamental ontological ground that determines how human beings experience existence. Sufi experience, in turn, is understood neither as an absolute source of knowledge nor as a purely subjective phenomenon devoid of significance. Rather, it acquires meaning as a disciplined mode of existence that is continuously regulated at the levels of the self (*nafs*), the heart (*qalb*), and the spirit (*rūh*), epistemologically constrained, and situated within the normative framework of the *Sharī'a*.

## 6. Ma'rifa, Inspiration, and Fallibility

### 6.1. The Epistemological Limits of Sufi Knowledge

Alongside its ontological foundations, the second defining feature of Bāqī Billāh's understanding of Sufism concerns the epistemic value of Sufi experience. As demonstrated through the concepts of *tawḥīd* and *ḥuḍūr*, Sufi experience generates a form of ontological awareness in Bāqī Billāh's thought. Yet this awareness is not automatically elevated to the status of binding knowledge. It is precisely at this point that the place accorded to *ma'rifa*, *ilhām*, and *kashf* becomes decisive.

### 6.2. Ma'rifa: Knowledge or Spiritual State?

Within the Sufi tradition, *'ilm* (knowledge) and *ma'rifa* (gnosis) have been understood not as mutually exclusive forms of knowledge but as two complementary levels of knowing. According to Annemarie Schimmel, *'ilm* denotes theoretical knowledge acquired through study and rational inquiry, whereas *ma'rifa* refers to the direct experiential realization of truth and the inward apprehension of divine reality that results from the purification of the heart (Schimmel 1975, pp. 4–6). Consequently, the ultimate aim of Sufi education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but its existential transformation into lived and realized truth. Mohammed Rustom offers a more nuanced analysis of this classical distinction, arguing that the majority of Sufis differentiated *'ilm* and *ma'rifa* in terms of their scope and nature. In his view, *ma'rifa* transcends theoretical knowledge, signifying the experiential “recognition” of God (*recognition*) attained through spiritual practices such as *dhikr*, *murāqaba*, and self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) (Rustom 2026, p. 39). From this perspective, *ma'rifa* is not the acquisition of new knowledge but rather the rediscovery and recollection of a truth already embedded within the human *fiṭra* (primordial nature) (Chittick and Rustom 2025, p. 5). Viewed in this light, Bāqī Billāh's emphasis on the transformation of *'ilm* into *ma'rifa* through *dhikr*, *rābi'a*, *murāqaba*, and the spiritual journey (*sayr wa sulūk*) may be understood as a distinctive Naqshbandī articulation of classical Sufi epistemology. Accordingly, his presentation of *dhikr* and *murāqaba* as the principal means by which theoretical knowledge is transformed into realized gnosis should not be regarded merely as a characteristic feature of Naqshbandī practice; rather, it represents a continuation of the broader epistemological framework of the classical Sufi tradition.

Bāqī Billāh, however, adopts a cautious distance from this tendency. In his writings, *ma'rifa* is understood not primarily as a mode of cognition that generates theoretical knowledge, but as a spiritual state that produces ethical rectitude, proper conduct (*adab*), and existential orientation within the seeker. For this reason, the individual who attains *ma'rifat Allāh* directs himself exclusively toward the Divine, having realized that only a single Reality truly occupies the horizon of existence (*Sulūk*, p. 127).

Within this framework, *ma'rifa* enables the seeker to reconfigure his relationship with existence, yet it does not transform that relationship into conceptual certainty. Put differently, *ma'rifa* functions less as a means of “knowing” than as a safeguard against “know-

ing wrongly” (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-b, p. 109). Consequently, in Bāqī Billāh’s epistemology, *ma’rifa* does not replace scholarly or doctrinal knowledge; rather, it exists alongside and remains subordinate to it. This epistemological caution constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which the public authority of Sufi knowledge is limited. Accordingly, while *ma’rifa* may possess profound significance for the seeker, it does not constitute evidence for others. For Bāqī Billāh, only those forms of unveiling and gnosis that remain firmly grounded in the *Sharī‘a* can be regarded as valid (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 31).

### 6.3. The Fallibility of Saints

One of the most sensitive issues in the history of Sufism concerns whether saints (*awliyā*) are protected from error. Certain Sufi traditions have implied that the spiritual unveilings of saints possess an unquestionable degree of certainty, thereby rendering Sufi authority effectively immune to criticism. Bāqī Billāh explicitly opposes this tendency. As he states, “The saints are not protected from major sins” (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 53).

Moreover, he emphasizes that disagreement among saints is not only possible but inevitable (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 35). Such differences may arise from the distinct unveilings experienced by individual saints. Yet these divergences do not indicate a plurality of ultimate truth; rather, they point to the limitations of human perception and understanding. To illustrate this point, Bāqī Billāh refers to the well-known disagreement between Ibn al-‘Arabī and ‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī, remarking:

“The state of one saint is not equivalent to that of another. The abundance or deficiency of a spiritual state colors the meaning of one’s words.” (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 35)

This perspective grounds Sufi authority not in personal charisma but in fidelity to the principles of the path itself. The saint is not the owner of the path but merely one of its travelers. This emphasis constitutes one of the key features explaining the anti-charismatic character frequently associated with the Naqshbandī tradition.

### 6.4. Kashf Between Possibility and Risk

One of the clearest passages illustrating Bāqī Billāh’s understanding of the epistemological limits of mystical unveiling (*kashf*) is his discussion of Mullā Jāmī’s statement that “*mukāshafa* is never false.” A passage attributed to Jāmī was read before him:

“Sometimes, while remaining fully conscious and without losing the use of the senses, a person is granted disclosure of unseen realities. This is called *mukāshafa* (unveiling). *Mukāshafa* is never false, for it consists of the soul’s witnessing of the unseen world after being freed from the veils of the body.”

In response, Bāqī Billāh remarked:

“Jāmī quoted this statement from the Persian translation of ‘*Awārif al-Ma’ārif*. The correct view, however, is that in some instances of *mukāshafa*, imagination (*khayāl*) may also play a part, and it is precisely there that error arises. By contrast, there is no error in certain knowledge that arises in the heart through divine inspiration (*ilhām*).”

Someone then asked:

“Even in knowledge regarded as certain, errors sometimes occur in what is received through inspiration. How can this be explained?”

Bāqī Billāh replied:

“Such errors arise because a person mixes into inspiration certain preconceived assumptions that he mistakenly considers to be definitive. Otherwise, there is no

error in knowledge derived solely from divine inspiration. The same is true of philosophers who employ the principles of logic. Despite following the rules of logic, they sometimes fall into error—not because of logic itself, but because they incorporate their own assumptions, believing them to be certain. If logic were applied in its pure form, it would never lead to error.”

This passage is particularly significant for understanding Bāqī Billāh’s epistemology of mystical experience. First, he does not regard *mukāshafa* as an infallible mode of knowledge. On the contrary, he explicitly acknowledges that imagination may intervene in the process of mystical unveiling and that this is precisely where error originates. At the same time, he carefully distinguishes the source of error from divine inspiration itself. Error does not stem from *ilhām*, but from the subjective assumptions and conceptual constructions that the individual unknowingly introduces into the experience. Thus, the possibility of error lies not in divine disclosure but in the human act of interpreting and appropriating that disclosure.

Accordingly, Bāqī Billāh’s purpose is not to diminish the epistemic value of mystical experience but to differentiate its various components. Mystical unveiling (*kashf*) may be susceptible to error because of the intervention of imagination, whereas pure inspired knowledge (*ilhām*) remains free from error. Nevertheless, since genuine inspiration can easily become intertwined with psychological projections and subjective presuppositions, mystical experiences cannot be accepted as self-authenticating. Rather, they require careful discernment and must be evaluated in light of the normative criteria established by the *Sharī‘a*.

A revealing example appears in one of the conversations recorded in the *Malfūzāt*. One of Bāqī Billāh’s disciples argued that the Qur’ānic command to “believe in the unseen” (*īmān bi’l-ghayb*) applies only to ordinary believers, since those who possess unveiling and direct witnessing (*mushāhada*) no longer require such faith. Bāqī Billāh immediately rejected this interpretation. Even for those who possess unveiling, the fundamental articles of faith remain universally binding. As he states:

“No, that is not the case. Faith in the unseen is commanded both to the common people and to the spiritual elite.” (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 49)

This position establishes a clear distinction between inspiration (*ilhām*) and revelation (*wahy*). Whereas revelation possesses absolute certainty and authority, inspiration remains inherently fallible. The distinction serves as a crucial safeguard preventing Sufi experience from approaching claims associated with prophecy. By preserving the qualitative difference between prophetic revelation and mystical inspiration, Bāqī Billāh simultaneously affirms the value of Sufi experience and limits its epistemic authority.

#### 6.5. The Distance Between Kashf and Legal Authority

For Bāqī Billāh, unveiling (*kashf*) is not a necessary qualification for spiritual guidance (*irshād*). In this regard, he advises his disciples:

“If the thought occurs to you that those who guide others must necessarily possess unveiling and inspiration, know that this has no basis. Those qualified for spiritual guidance must, after attaining annihilation (*fanā*) and subsistence (*baqā*), become manifestations of the Divine Names al-‘Alīm, al-Ḥakīm, and al-Mutakallim. This principle is firmly established in the writings of the masters of Sufism.” (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-b, p. 77)

Bāqī Billāh’s epistemological caution becomes even more evident in his discussion of whether unveiling can serve as a source of legal or normative judgment. In his view, *kashf* can never constitute the basis for establishing new religious rulings. The *Sharī‘a* derives

its authority from revelation and its sound interpretation, whereas unveiling belongs to an entirely different domain.

He further observes that seekers often develop a longing for extraordinary unveilings during the course of the spiritual path. Such a desire, he argues, arises from human ignorance and self-deception. A person may think, “Perhaps through this unveiling my wish will be fulfilled, a closed door will be opened for me, or divine favor will single me out.” Alternatively, such expectations may arise simply from an inadequate understanding of spiritual realities. For this reason, the one who genuinely seeks God must ultimately become detached even from the desire for mystical unveiling and remain in a state of complete *tanzīh*. This does not imply that mystical unveiling is devoid of value; rather, Bāqī Billāh warns against allowing unveiling itself to become the object of spiritual aspiration. In this context, *tanzīh* signifies directing one’s heart exclusively toward God, beyond attachment to even the most extraordinary spiritual experiences (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-b, p. 100).

Bāqī Billāh goes even further by arguing that physiological conditions may affect the reliability of mystical experience. According to him, those who experience unveiling should pay particular attention to the health of the brain and body. Excessive dryness of the brain, he notes, may lead to erroneous unveilings. Consequently, one should avoid incompatible foods and refrain from excessive voluntary fasting that weakens mental balance and clarity (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 35). Such observations reveal a remarkably cautious approach to mystical experience. Rather than excluding unveiling from the normative sphere, Bāqī Billāh seeks to harmonize it with that sphere. Unveiling may deepen a seeker’s awareness of worship and ethical responsibility, but it can never alter or supersede normative religious obligations.

#### *Maʿrifa* and Ignorance: A Negative Conception of Knowledge

Another striking feature of Bāqī Billāh’s epistemology is his tendency to define knowledge in negative terms. From this perspective, *maʿrifa* does not consist in comprehensively grasping reality but rather in becoming aware of one’s own ignorance. In this sense, *maʿrifa* produces epistemic humility.

Such an understanding prevents Sufi experience from developing into a claim of possessing exhaustive or absolute knowledge. As the seeker’s *maʿrifa* increases, certainty claims diminish. Rather than generating a body of positive and definitive knowledge, *maʿrifa* functions as a mode of awareness that reveals the limits of human cognition. It does not imply complete access to reality or the ability to issue final judgments concerning God and existence. Instead, it protects the individual from false attributions, intellectual illusions, and epistemic excesses.

The value of *maʿrifa* therefore lies not in producing a new domain of knowledge but in continually correcting one’s claims to knowledge. It is not an independent epistemic authority that replaces scholarly learning; rather, it is a complementary mode of awareness that renders the limits of knowledge visible and cultivates greater caution and humility in the seeker. For Bāqī Billāh, the knowledge disclosed to the traveler on the spiritual path never arrives in a pure and transparent form. It comes clothed in various garments and appearances, and therefore requires constant vigilance and discernment. Ultimately, the reality sought by the seeker cannot be fully grasped through cognition alone. It belongs instead to the realm of love (*ʿishq*), affection (*maḥabba*), and freedom from attachment to all that is other than God (*mā siwā Allāh*) (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 61).

This perspective also prevents Sufi experience from becoming a claim to absolute knowledge or complete access to truth. As the seeker advances in *maʿrifa*, certainty recedes, while awareness of the limitations of one’s own understanding deepens. In this respect, Bāqī Billāh’s conception of *maʿrifa* displays striking affinities with contemporary falli-

bilist epistemologies and theories of epistemic humility. As Karl Popper famously argued, increases in human knowledge inevitably expand awareness of what remains unknown, since human knowledge is finite whereas ignorance is, in principle, limitless (Popper 1963, p. 28). Similarly, contemporary discussions of epistemic humility regard the recognition that truth can never be fully possessed as an intellectual virtue and consider awareness of one's cognitive limitations a prerequisite for responsible knowledge production.

Although emerging from a very different intellectual context, Bāqī Billāh's understanding of *ma'rifa* resonates with these insights. Rather than promoting epistemological models that absolutize knowledge, it emphasizes awareness of ignorance and the cultivation of epistemic caution in the face of truth. *Ma'rifa*, therefore, produces not epistemic superiority but epistemic humility.

The ethical and pedagogical implications of these epistemological limits must now be examined. The following section therefore turns to the themes of *maḥabba* (love), *ṣūra* (form), and the ethical risks associated with Sufi experience in order to explore how Bāqī Billāh sought to regulate mystical life through moral discipline and spiritual education.

## 7. Love, Form, and Ethical Boundaries

Bāqī Billāh's conception of *maḥabba* (divine love), which occupies a central place in his writings, cannot be understood merely as an independent development within sixteenth-century Indian Naqshbandism. Rather, it represents the continuation of a long-standing tradition of divine love that first emerged within the early ascetic (*zuhd*) movement and gradually developed into a systematic doctrine throughout the classical Sufi tradition. Recent scholarship likewise demonstrates that the concept of divine love evolved continuously from the earliest Sufis through the Khurāsānī school of Sufism, the Ghazālīan tradition, Ibn al-ʿArabī, and the subsequent Sufi heritage (Ibrahim 2020, p. 60; Zargar 2024, pp. 85–90).

The earliest stage of this tradition is found in the understanding of divine love that developed within the ascetic movement. According to this perspective, early Sufis such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Rābīʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Shaqīq al-Balkhī, al-Muḥāsibī, al-Nūrī, al-Shiblī, and al-Ḥallāj regarded *maḥabba* not merely as an ethical virtue but as the primary spiritual path leading to God. With Rābīʿa in particular, love became an independent theme of Sufi thought that transcended a religious outlook centered on fear, while al-Ḥallāj deepened this conception by associating divine love with self-sacrifice and complete devotion to God (Ibrahim 2020, pp. 60–62; Ayad 2024, pp. 3–4; Zargar 2024, p. 87).

Accordingly, among the early Sufis *maḥabba* gradually evolved from an individual spiritual sentiment into a systematic Sufi doctrine. Through Sarī al-Saqāṭī's elaboration of the idea of reciprocal love between God and the servant, Junayd's placement of love at the center of Sufi discipline, and the independent discussions devoted to *maḥabba* by authors such as al-Sarrāj, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, al-Daylamī, al-Hujwīrī, and al-Qushayrī, divine love came to occupy a central position in Sufi thought. It was increasingly understood as the most effective path to God, the source of *ma'rifa*, and the foundation of spiritual ascent (Ibrahim 2020, pp. 61–62).

The Khurāsānī school of Sufism marked another decisive stage in the systematization of the doctrine of divine love. Sufis such as Shaqīq al-Balkhī, Yahyā b. Muʿādh al-Rāzī, ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī, Abū Saʿīd Abū al-Khayr, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, and Aḥmad Samʿānī interpreted love not merely as an individual mystical experience but as the fundamental principle governing the human orientation toward God. The emergence of expressions such as *Sharīʿat al-Ishq* ("the law of love") and *Madhhab al-Ishq* ("the school of love") fur-

ther indicates that love-centered Sufi thought had by then developed into a distinct intellectual tradition (Ayad 2024, pp. 3–4; Zargar 2024, pp. 87–88).

This intellectual trajectory reached a new stage with Abū Ḥamid Ghazālī and, in particular, Aḥmad Ghazālī. In the *Kitāb al-Maḥabba wa al-Shawq* of the *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, Abū Ḥamid placed divine love at the center of the spiritual life. Aḥmad Ghazālī, meanwhile, interpreted love in his *Sawānīḥ* as the essence of divine reality, the source of existence, and the fundamental principle of the spiritual path (*sayr wa sulūk*). Consequently, *maḥabba* came to be understood not merely as an ethical or spiritual station but also as a metaphysical principle that profoundly influenced later Sufi thought (Ibrahim 2020, p. 70; Ayad 2024, pp. 4–5).

The doctrine of divine love attained its most comprehensive metaphysical formulation in the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī. As Hany Ibrahim has argued, Ibn al-ʿArabī situated the earlier Sufi understanding of love within a broader ontological framework by presenting divine love as the fundamental principle of creation. According to his interpretation, God’s love to be known became the ontological principle explaining the emergence of existence. Thus, *maḥabba* ceased to be merely a spiritual station expressing the servant’s orientation toward God and became the foundational principle through which the entirety of existence is understood (Ibrahim 2020, pp. 13–15; Ayad 2024, p. 5).

Against this historical background, the conception of *maḥabba* articulated in Bāqī Billāh’s letters should not be regarded as an isolated or historically detached theory. Rather, it should be read as a distinctive Naqshbandī interpretation of a broad Sufi intellectual heritage extending from the early ascetics and the Khurāsānī school to the love-centered teachings of Aḥmad Ghazālī and ʿAṭṭār, culminating in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ontological doctrine of divine love. Accordingly, any assessment of Bāqī Billāh’s understanding of *maḥabba* must draw not only upon the Naqshbandī tradition but also upon the wider body of classical Sufi literature in which the doctrine of divine love was formulated and developed.

Bāqī Billāh maintains that the knowledge attained through Sufi experience ultimately directs the individual toward love (*maḥabba*) for the reality that has become known. At this point, he develops a distinction between different forms of love at both the ontological and epistemological levels. His differentiation between “essential love” (*maḥabba dhātiyya*) and “attributive love” (*maḥabba šifātiyya*) provides a direct answer to the question of which forms of Sufi experience may be regarded as genuinely connected to truth and which remain relative or potentially misleading.

Attributive love is defined as a form of affection that arises from particular qualities—such as knowledge, courage, or virtue—and disappears when those qualities cease to be perceived. Such love is ontologically contingent and unstable because it is directed toward attributes rather than essence. Consequently, it is oriented not toward reality itself but toward one of its manifestations. This distinction also carries epistemological implications. A relationship grounded in attributive love does not rest upon necessary or absolute knowledge but upon a conditional and context-dependent orientation.

Essential love, by contrast, is described as a form of love that exists independently of particular attributes and is therefore not subject to increase or decrease. In this conception, love is situated directly on an ontological plane. The object of love is no longer a being defined through attributes but being itself. For this reason, essential love is presented as the purest and least mediated form of Sufi experience. Yet this does not imply an unrestricted or universally accessible domain. On the contrary, Bāqī Billāh explicitly limits such love to those whom he describes as “the possessors of true witnessing” (*ḥaqīqī shuhūd*) (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 24), thereby imposing significant restrictions on its accessibility.

His reflections on the relationship between love and *fanāʾ* further reinforce this perspective. For Bāqī Billāh, love is not merely an orientation or emotional attachment

but a process through which the subject's claim to autonomous selfhood is dissolved. Through this process, the lover (*muḥibb*) comes to experience the taste of *tawḥīd* and the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of the Divine Essence. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is his insistence that this experience occurs only after the realization of *fanā*<sup>1</sup>. Even the highest form of mystical experience therefore becomes possible only through a prior ontological transformation (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 25).

Within this framework, Bāqī Billāh's description of the "path of contemplation" (*murāqaba*) as the "manifestation of experiential love" (*zuhūr-i maḥabbat-i dhawqī*) effectively redefines the goal of Sufi practice. *Murāqaba* is not merely a state of attention or heightened consciousness; it is a mode of awareness that emerges through the purification of love itself. Yet, as noted in the preceding sections, this awareness does not generate claims to epistemic certainty. It remains entirely dependent upon divine grace and therefore lies beyond the seeker's control (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 25).

At that moment, a divine attraction (*jadhba*) seizes the seeker, removes him from himself, and discloses the meaning of selflessness. Nevertheless, Bāqī Billāh establishes three fundamental conditions for the acceptance of such experiences: adherence to Sunni doctrine, vigilance through worship, and sincerity (*ikhhlās*) combined with steadfastness (*istiqāma*) (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 26). These principles clearly delineate the normative framework within which Sufi experience must remain. They function as structural safeguards that prevent mystical experience from becoming an independent source of authority.

The emphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy ensures that Sufi experience remains within theological boundaries, while the insistence on sincerity and steadfastness demonstrates that such experience is inseparable from ethical discipline. Indeed, Bāqī Billāh repeatedly stresses that human beings remain in need of fulfilling their obligatory acts of worship even when seeking sincerity, poverty before God (*faqr*), or the realization of higher spiritual truths. Once an essential self-disclosure (*tajallī dhātī*) occurs, all other concerns may be consumed; consciousness itself may disappear in a state of complete annihilation and absence, yet to remain permanently in that condition constitutes a deficiency. One must return to servanthood, weakness, and awareness of one's perpetual dependence upon God. For this reason, the seeker should strive to preserve consciousness under all circumstances—although this consciousness must be transformed into a form of divine awareness rather than ordinary self-consciousness (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-b, p. 97).

#### *The Ethical Risk of Excessive Attachment*

According to Bāqī Billāh, even excessive love for one's spiritual master may become an obstacle on the spiritual path. For this reason, he displays considerable caution regarding the writing of biographies and hagiographical accounts. Just as the epistemological limits of Sufi experience require regulation, so too must emotional attachments and interpersonal relationships be carefully disciplined.

In Bāqī Billāh's writings, this concern emerges most clearly through the interconnected themes of love (*maḥabba*), the master–disciple relationship, and attachment to outward form (*ṣūra*). The epistemological caution discussed in the previous section here assumes the form of an ethical discipline. Unregulated love produces not merely epistemological error but also moral risk.

Within Sufi training, the proper cultivation of emotions and relationships is no less important than the acquisition of knowledge. For this reason, while Sufi traditions generally acknowledge the necessity of love for the spiritual master, they also recognize the danger that such affection may become excessive and thereby transform into a veil obstructing spiritual progress. Bāqī Billāh's reluctance to encourage the composition of biographies and hagiographical narratives should be understood within this context. His position re-

flects not merely personal modesty but a deliberate pedagogical strategy aimed at directing the disciple's attention away from outward forms and toward ultimate reality itself.

This concern becomes most apparent in the narratives surrounding the compilation of the *Malfūzāt*. When the compiler requested permission to record the conversations that took place in Bāqī Billāh's gatherings, the latter initially showed little enthusiasm for the project. Upon encountering notes that had previously been recorded without authorization, he reportedly remarked:

"There are already many such sayings in people's books. What need is there to say, 'I heard this from so-and-so'?" (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 25)

His explanation is significant because it reflects an epistemological approach that rejects grounding the legitimacy of Sufi knowledge in personal charisma or individual authority. Instead, it emphasizes the continuity of truth within the broader Islamic scholarly and Sufi tradition rather than its attribution to any particular individual. Consequently, the authority of Sufi discourse derives not from its being "the shaykh's words" but from its conformity with the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the inherited legacy of earlier Sufi masters. Even more revealing is his response when a disciple explained that these notes had provided him with spiritual benefit:

"If these words contain a secret for you, then study something from that knowledge, but do not set about writing it down. For the lower self (*nafs*) may claim a share in this matter." (Bāqī Billāh n.d.-c, p. 25)

The target of this criticism is not writing itself but rather the forms of egoic appropriation and symbolic capital that may emerge around textual production. The issue at stake is not the preservation of knowledge as such, but the danger that knowledge may become a source of personal ownership, prestige, or spiritual superiority.

Indeed, Bāqī Billāh later permitted the recording of matters related to the spiritual path, though he imposed an important restriction:

"You may write about matters concerning the path, but do not include the stories of the shaykhs narrated in the gatherings. Do not write these things and then set up a shop with them."

The metaphor of "setting up a shop" constitutes a direct criticism of the possibility that hagiographical narratives may be employed to generate personal influence, charisma, or social prestige. Thus, the pedagogical value of saintly narratives is not entirely rejected; rather, their transformation into a discourse that produces sanctity, privilege, and exceptional status around the person of the spiritual master is actively resisted. For this reason, the compiler of the *Malfūzāt* explicitly states that he deliberately omitted many of the stories recounted in the gatherings in accordance with his master's instructions.

A similar attitude appears in Bāqī Billāh's treatment of miracles (*karāmāt*). According to the accounts preserved in the sources, whenever an extraordinary event or spiritual intervention occurred, he refrained from attributing it to himself and instead connected it to a book, an external cause, or divine agency. Even when offering medical advice to the sick, he reportedly consulted medical works rather than presenting healing as a direct consequence of his own spiritual power. Such behavior may be interpreted as a deliberate strategy designed to prevent charismatic authority from becoming concentrated in his own person. In this way, the disciple's attention is directed not toward the extraordinary qualities of the shaykh but toward divine action and the reality to which the shaykh points.

Taken together, these examples suggest that Bāqī Billāh's caution regarding biography and hagiography rests upon ethical and pedagogical concerns rather than merely epistemological reservations. The sensitivity to the limits of knowledge and experience discussed in

the previous section here takes the form of a discipline governing love, attachment, and devotion. Unregulated attachment to the spiritual master may cease to function as a means of attaining truth and instead become a veil that confines the disciple to outward form. The proliferation of miracle stories, the centrality of hagiographical narratives, and the excessive glorification of the shaykh all possess the potential to weaken the *tawhīd*-centered orientation that Sufi training seeks to cultivate. Bāqī Billāh's reluctance to have his own life story and extraordinary experiences recorded should therefore be understood as part of a conscious pedagogy intended to prevent precisely such dangers.

In conclusion, Bāqī Billāh demonstrates that Sufi love is not a uniform or homogeneous phenomenon but rather a multilayered structure characterized by ontological depth, epistemological limits, and normative regulation. While the presentation of essential love (*maḥabba dhātiyya*) as the highest form of experience preserves the transcendent aspirations of the Sufi tradition, the restriction of this experience to specific conditions and its subordination to the *Sharī'a* reveal the extent to which it remains subject to epistemic and normative control. The result is not the production of charismatic privilege but the cultivation of an ethics centered upon sincerity (*ikhlās*), humility, and disciplined spiritual formation.

## 8. Conclusions

This study has examined the onto-epistemological structure of Sufi experience through an analysis of the writings of Khwāja Bāqī Billāh. It has demonstrated that concepts such as *tawhīd*, *ma'rifa*, *kashf*, *wilāya*, and *maḥabba* are not presented as isolated elements within his thought but rather as interconnected dimensions of a coherent spiritual discipline. The analysis has shown that Bāqī Billāh understood Sufi experience neither as an unrestricted realm of mystical truth nor as a merely subjective and private experience. Instead, he situated it within a framework characterized by a *tawhīd*-centered ontological orientation, a fallible yet transformative mode of knowing, and a normative order governed by the *Sharī'a*.

The first major finding of this study is that Bāqī Billāh treats *tawhīd* not merely as a doctrinal principle but as the ontological ground that determines both the direction and the limits of Sufi experience. In his thought, *tawhīd* functions less as an object of metaphysical speculation than as a principle that transforms the individual's relationship to existence. Concepts such as *ḥuḍūr*, *mushāhada*, and *fanā'* emerge as different manifestations of this ontological foundation.

Second, this study has demonstrated that Bāqī Billāh regarded *ma'rifa*, *ilhām*, and *kashf* as forms of cognition possessing epistemic value without generating absolute certainty. This approach simultaneously acknowledges and limits the epistemological status of Sufi experience. His insistence on the fallibility of saints, his caution regarding the diverse sources from which unveiling may arise, and his continual appeal to *Sharī'a*-based criteria prevent mystical knowledge from becoming an independent and unquestionable authority. In this respect, Bāqī Billāh's epistemology displays notable affinities with contemporary discussions of fallibilism and epistemic humility.

Third, the study has shown that the ultimate aim of Sufi experience, in Bāqī Billāh's thought, is not the production of knowledge but the cultivation of ethical transformation. His treatment of love and the master–disciple relationship, his criticisms of attachment to outward form, and his cautious attitude toward hagiographical culture all demonstrate the centrality of ethics within his understanding of Sufism. Mystical experience thereby ceases to function as a means of generating personal superiority or charismatic authority and instead becomes a process of moral and spiritual formation.

The study also seeks to contribute theoretically to the broader field of Sufi studies. Modern scholarship on mysticism has frequently focused either on the universality of mystical experience or on its historical and cultural contexts. The writings of Bāqī Billāh, how-

ever, provide answers not only to the question of how mystical experience emerges but also to the questions of how it is regulated, delimited, and legitimated. From this perspective, Sufi experience appears not merely as a state of consciousness or a form of metaphysical insight but as a field in which ontology, epistemology, and normativity intersect and become mutually constitutive.

Ultimately, Bāqī Billāh's thought demonstrates that early modern Naqshbandism developed an approach distinct from models that tend to absolutize mystical experience. Within his framework, transcendence, epistemic humility, fidelity to the Shari'a, and ethical responsibility emerge as inseparable dimensions of spiritual life. This perspective offers important insights not only for understanding the intellectual character of the Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī tradition but also for contemporary discussions concerning religious experience, mystical authority, and epistemic legitimacy.

Bāqī Billāh's writings therefore deserve to be read not merely as historical documents belonging to the history of Sufism but also as conceptual resources capable of contributing to ongoing debates about the limits of mystical experience and the legitimacy of religious knowledge. More broadly, they suggest that the enduring significance of Sufism lies not in the unrestricted expansion of mystical experience but in its disciplined cultivation through the mutually constitutive relationship of ontology, epistemology, normativity, and ethics.

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