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Beyond the Exoteric and Esoteric Divide in Qur'anic Exegesis. A Socio-Sufi Reading of Tawakkul in Muhammad Mutawalli al Sha'rawi

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Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between socially oriented exegesis and spiritual interpretation in Muhammad Mutawalli al Sha'rawi's reading of Qur'anic passages on tawakkul. It addresses a persistent methodological problem in Qur'anic studies, namely the tendency to treat adabi ijtima'i and ishari interpretation as mutually exclusive. A qualitative library based and descriptive analytical approach is employed to examine ten verses organized into nine thematic units. The analysis distinguishes the linguistic and practical dimensions of the commentary from spiritually suggestive interpretation, while assessing the latter against criteria for acceptable ishari exegesis. The findings indicate that al Sha'rawi repeatedly connects responsible action in public life with inward dependence on God. Nevertheless, not every spiritual exhortation constitutes an independently demonstrable ishari interpretation. The article therefore develops socio Sufistic exegesis as an analytical model rather than a category explicitly formulated by the exegete. Its contribution lies in a differentiated account of the interaction among textual meaning, social responsibility, ethical cultivation, and the methodological limits of spiritual interpretation.

Keywords: Qur'anic exegesis, al Sha'rawi, tawakkul, ishari interpretation, socio Sufistic hermeneutics.

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INTRODUCTION

Qur'anic interpretation has historically accommodated a wide range of intellectual orientations. Linguistic analysis, transmitted reports, jurisprudential reasoning, ethical exhortation, and spiritual reflection have often appeared in the same exegetical tradition. Modern classifications nevertheless tend to separate approaches by their dominant methods and concerns. One influential distinction contrasts adabi ijtima'i exegesis, which emphasizes literary expression and social guidance, with ishari exegesis, which explores spiritually suggestive meanings beyond the immediately apparent sense of a verse (al Dhahabi, 2005; Abbas, 2015). The usefulness of these classifications should not obscure the possibility that individual exegetes move between interpretive registers.

The apparent opposition between social engagement and spiritual cultivation is especially problematic when the subject is tawakkul, commonly rendered as trust or reliance upon God. Qur'anic discussions of reliance frequently occur alongside consultation, decision making, collective courage, conflict, diplomacy, and the pursuit of livelihood. Consequently, the text invites inquiry into how reliance on divine agency relates to the human responsibility to deliberate and act. An exclusively inward reading may understate practical obligations, while an exclusively instrumental reading may overlook the theological dimension that gives those obligations their distinctive ethical orientation.

Muhammad Mutawalli al Sha'rawi offers a productive case for investigating this relationship. His reflections, widely known as Tafsir al Sha'rawi, emerged from an oral communicative setting and frequently connect close attention to Qur'anic expression with accessible illustrations drawn from everyday life. The work is therefore not adequately characterized through a single methodological label. Its interpretive movement between the visible responsibilities of human agents and the inward discipline of reliance requires careful textual scrutiny rather than a predetermined claim of synthesis (al Sha'rawi, 1991).

The present article focuses on ten verses distributed across nine thematic units. The selected passages address leadership and consultation, internal political conflict, prophetic communication, collective struggle, peacemaking, risk management, livelihood, and divine protection. This selection follows the underlying study's deliberate restriction of the corpus to passages in which the relation between outward action and inward reliance can be examined in a comparatively explicit way. The scope does not support generalization to every passage in the exegete's multivolume work.

The central research question concerns how the socially oriented and spiritually suggestive dimensions of al Sha'rawi's interpretation interact in these passages, and under what conditions their relationship can be described as socio Sufistic exegesis. Three subsidiary concerns guide the inquiry. First, what textual and social features are present in the commentary. Second, when do spiritually oriented statements meet the methodological threshold of acceptable ishari interpretation. Third, what explanatory model best accounts for the relationship between practical responsibility and inward trust without conflating distinct kinds of exegetical discourse.

The article contributes to debates over interpretive classification by resisting two opposite reductions. It neither assumes that spiritual language automatically constitutes esoteric exegesis nor confines socially oriented interpretation to secular pragmatism. Instead, it proposes a graduated account in which ethical advice, theological affirmation, and interpretive movement beyond the apparent meaning are distinguished. The resulting model is an analytical reconstruction of a pattern in the commentary, not a new doctrinal school attributed to al Sha'rawi.

METHODS

This study uses qualitative library research and a descriptive analytical design. Its principal material is al Sha'rawi's commentary on the selected Qur'anic verses as reproduced in Tafsir al Sha'rawi. Secondary materials include classical and modern discussions of Qur'anic sciences,

exegetical classification, the conditions of ishari interpretation, and biographical studies relevant to the exegete's intellectual and communicative setting. The analysis is textual and interpretive. It does not involve interviews, surveys, audience measurement, or statistical inference.

The corpus consists of Qur'an 3.159 to 160, 4.81, 26.217, 5.23, 8.61, 10.71, 12.67, 65.3, and 11.56. The first two verses are treated together, yielding nine thematic units from ten verses. The units were selected purposively because each makes a relevant connection between tawakkul and a specific sphere of human conduct. Selection is therefore theoretically motivated rather than representative sampling of the whole commentary.

The first analytic stage identifies the immediate wording and narrative setting of each passage and the exegete's practical implications. These are coded conceptually as linguistic elucidation, social instruction, ethical guidance, and theological affirmation. The second stage examines whether the commentary moves from the apparent meaning toward an additional spiritual signification. Such movement is assessed in light of the principles attributed in the source study to al Dhahabi and other scholars of Qur'anic interpretation. The additional sense must not invalidate the apparent meaning, contradict established religious principles, lack a plausible textual connection, or claim exclusive interpretive authority (al Dhahabi, 2005; al Zarkashi, 2008).

The third stage compares patterns across the thematic units. Particular attention is given to whether human action and spiritual dependence are sequential, complementary, or insufficiently connected. The resulting categories are used to reconstruct a socio Sufistic reading. To reduce conceptual overreach, the analysis separates actual ishari interpretation from Sufistic moral counsel and from ordinary theological statements about divine agency. The presence of all three forms of language in the commentary does not itself establish that all three are equivalent.

The methodological limitation is that interpretation is mediated through a published record of an originally oral exposition. The present analysis can evaluate textual formulations and argumentative coherence, but it cannot verify private mystical experiences or establish audience reception. Furthermore, the article's validity assessment is a normative methodological appraisal, not an empirical test of supernatural claims.

RESULTS

The thematic distribution of reliance upon God

Consultation and leadership in Qur'an 3.159 to 160

The pairing of consultation and reliance is decisive. Consultation, gentleness, and resolve concern the public responsibilities of leadership, whereas reliance reorients the leader after a decision has been reached. The juxtaposition makes passivity an implausible reading of tawakkul. Al Sha'rawi's social exposition can thus be understood as a movement from participatory decision making to confidence that outcomes are not wholly controlled by human planning. The spiritual dimension strengthens rather than replaces deliberation.

Across this unit, the interpretive question is not whether practical action and divine reliance are mentioned in proximity, but whether the exegete establishes an intelligible

relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

Internal conflict in Qur'an 4.81

The passage concerns the discrepancy between outward declarations of obedience and concealed conduct. In this setting, reliance upon God follows the recognition that political or communal actors cannot fully inspect other people's intentions. The exegetical significance is not a mandate to abandon social judgment. It is an acknowledgment of the limits of human surveillance and an ethical restraint against allowing uncertainty to become a justification for arbitrary conduct.

Across this unit, the interpretive question is not whether practical action and divine reliance are mentioned in proximity, but whether the exegete establishes an intelligible relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

Prophetic proclamation in Qur'an 26.217

The command to rely upon the Mighty and Merciful locates prophetic communication within a theology of divine support. The outward task of communicating the message remains intact even where its reception cannot be guaranteed. The spiritually oriented implication is freedom from excessive dependence on audience approval. This implication should be described as ethical or Sufistic guidance unless the commentary demonstrates a distinct, textually anchored movement beyond the verse's apparent sense.

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Collective courage in Qur'an 5.23

The command to enter through the gate and to rely upon God connects collective courage with a specific act. Reliance is not substituted for entering, preparing, or accepting responsibility. The passage demonstrates a central pattern in the corpus. The heart's trust is articulated through action undertaken despite uncertainty. An interpretation that spiritualizes the verse while neglecting its collective imperative would weaken rather than deepen its meaning.

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relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

Peacemaking in Qur'an 8.61

The instruction to incline toward peace when the opposing party inclines toward it is accompanied by the command to rely upon God. Here the social dimension involves negotiation and the evaluation of conditions for peace. The theological dimension concerns the impossibility of eliminating all uncertainty regarding the other party's intentions. The pairing makes trust compatible with prudent diplomacy, not with uncritical credulity.

Across this unit, the interpretive question is not whether practical action and divine reliance are mentioned in proximity, but whether the exegete establishes an intelligible relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

Prophetic steadfastness in Qur'an 10.71

The account of Noah places reliance in a setting of confrontation and publicly declared resolve. The social significance concerns clarity of purpose and willingness to withstand opposition. Inward reliance removes the claim that worldly numerical superiority is the final measure of legitimacy. The commentary's theological language may reinforce moral courage, although such reinforcement is not automatically evidence of an additional esoteric meaning.

Across this unit, the interpretive question is not whether practical action and divine reliance are mentioned in proximity, but whether the exegete establishes an intelligible relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

Risk management in Qur'an 12.67

Jacob's instructions to his sons present an unusually explicit juxtaposition of precaution and divine decree. The practical measures belong to the sphere of human judgment, while the acknowledgment of divine authority prevents those measures from becoming objects of ultimate dependence. The interpretive pattern is not a denial of causality. Rather, the causes are used while their efficacy is understood as limited and contingent.

Across this unit, the interpretive question is not whether practical action and divine reliance are mentioned in proximity, but whether the exegete establishes an intelligible relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of

confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

Provision and sufficiency in Qur'an 65.3

The affirmation that God suffices for those who rely upon Him addresses livelihood and existential vulnerability. Al Sha'rawi's treatment, as analyzed in the underlying study, resists both neglect of means and fascination with means. The ethical outcome is an active search for provision without the assumption that material resources independently guarantee security. This unit is particularly important for the proposed model because it directly joins everyday economic conduct with inner orientation.

Across this unit, the interpretive question is not whether practical action and divine reliance are mentioned in proximity, but whether the exegete establishes an intelligible relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

Divine protection in Qur'an 11.56

The prophetic declaration of reliance upon God frames human vulnerability against divine sovereignty over living creatures. The immediate function is theological confidence amid opposition. Its implications for courage and moral consistency are significant, yet a disciplined reading must distinguish these implications from any claim that the verse necessarily carries a separate hidden meaning. The spiritual reading remains accountable to the explicit theological content.

Across this unit, the interpretive question is not whether practical action and divine reliance are mentioned in proximity, but whether the exegete establishes an intelligible relationship between them. The strongest evidence for integration is found where the command to act remains binding while the commentary locates the ultimate ground of confidence beyond the action itself. Such a relationship can be described without presuming that every spiritual application is a formally valid ishari interpretation.

A differentiated assessment of interpretive validity

The examined material does not support an undifferentiated classification of al Sha'rawi's discourse as ishari. Statements about dependence upon God, the limits of human power, and the need for inward sincerity are frequently compatible with the apparent meaning of the relevant passages. They may therefore function as theological clarification or ethical counsel rather than as interpretations that introduce a secondary signification. This distinction matters because an overinclusive definition would make the category of ishari interpretation analytically uninformative.

Acceptable ishari interpretation requires a more specific movement. A spiritually suggestive meaning must be linked to the wording and context of a passage while preserving its primary signification. It must remain compatible with the larger normative structure of

Qur'anic teaching and must not be presented as the only possible meaning. These conditions are especially important in passages on reliance because the language of inner surrender can otherwise be misused to negate the duties of planning, consultation, work, and protection.

The thematic comparison suggests a gradient of integration rather than a uniform fusion. In some units, practical and spiritual dimensions are closely linked by the verse itself. In others, the spiritual dimension appears primarily as an implication for character formation. A smaller subset may be discussed in terms of interpretive extension, provided the extension satisfies the stated criteria. The proposed model therefore describes the structure of interaction among dimensions and does not certify every spiritually inflected statement as ishari maqbul.

DISCUSSION

From a binary classification to a relational model

The results challenge a rigid opposition between socially engaged and spiritually oriented exegesis. Adabi ijtima'i interpretation emphasizes the intelligibility of Qur'anic discourse and its relevance to concrete collective life. Ishari interpretation, when methodologically defensible, explores an additional spiritual dimension without displacing the textual sense. These orientations differ in emphasis and epistemic claims, but they need not be mutually exclusive in the practice of a single commentator. Al Sha'rawi's treatment of tawakkul demonstrates why a relational rather than binary framework is useful.

The key relationship is asymmetrical. The apparent meaning and its practical demands provide the point of departure. Spiritual reflection may intensify the ethical significance of those demands, but it cannot annul them. This asymmetry follows the insistence in classical discussions that entry into inward understanding presupposes attention to the outward expression of scripture (al Ghazali, n.d.; al Zarkashi, 2008). Consequently, integration should be evaluated by whether the spiritual dimension remains responsible to textual and normative constraints.

The model proposed here can be expressed as an interpretive sequence. The exegete first attends to wording and context, then articulates a responsibility in the social world, then reflects on the inner disposition required for that responsibility to be carried out without absolutizing human agency. In some passages, a further suggestive meaning can be evaluated through the conditions of acceptable ishari interpretation. This sequence is analytical, not a claim that every passage in the commentary follows a fixed rhetorical order.

This approach also clarifies the conceptual status of socio Sufistic exegesis. The term designates an interpretive pattern reconstructed by the researcher. It is not a self description that al Sha'rawi consistently employed and should not be treated as an established classical genre. Its usefulness depends on its ability to discriminate among different kinds of evidence rather than simply attaching an attractive label to a commentator who uses both practical and devotional language.

The market as a metaphor for engaged spirituality

The underlying study employs the expression market Sufism as an operational metaphor for a spirituality exercised amid ordinary transactions, work, and social relations. The market

symbolizes neither an endorsement of commercialism nor a rejection of contemplative practice. It marks the setting in which intentions are tested and ethical commitments become observable. This formulation accords with the recurring pattern in the selected passages, where reliance is expressed alongside specific decisions and responsibilities (al Sha'rawi, n.d.).

The metaphor is particularly illuminating in relation to livelihood and risk. A person may pursue lawful means, take precautions, consult others, and negotiate peace while recognizing that the eventual outcome cannot be reduced to personal technique. Such recognition may cultivate humility, perseverance, and restraint. It does not justify abandoning institutional accountability or substituting pious language for competent judgment.

The formulation that bodily faculties act while believing hearts rely upon God summarizes the interpretive pattern. It gives neither the body nor the heart an independent monopoly over religious life. Instead, outward responsibility and inward orientation are mutually relevant, although they operate at different levels. The model thus addresses the problem of how religious discourse can encourage action without treating human mastery as absolute.

Orality and the communication of Qur'anic interpretation

Al Sha'rawi's oral mode of exposition is relevant to the accessibility of this synthesis. An orally delivered commentary can move between lexical explanation, everyday analogy, ethical appeal, and theological reflection without formally announcing a change of genre. This communicative flexibility helps explain why a reader may encounter social and spiritual registers within a single extended exposition. Nevertheless, oral presentation is a medium of communication rather than an independent criterion of interpretive validity.

The methodological consequence is that rhetorical effectiveness must not be mistaken for epistemic warrant. A compelling illustration can make a spiritual application memorable, but its admissibility still depends on its relationship to the Qur'anic wording and the normative boundaries of interpretation. Likewise, a sermon may contain profound Sufistic counsel without thereby producing a new esoteric meaning of the verse. Maintaining these distinctions is necessary for a rigorous assessment of the commentator's contribution.

Implications and limitations

The findings have three implications for contemporary Qur'anic studies. First, interpretive classifications should be treated as analytical tools rather than mutually exclusive identities. Second, studies of spirituality in tafsir require explicit criteria distinguishing interpretation from ethical application. Third, discussions of tawakkul benefit from examining the social and institutional settings in which reliance is invoked. The selected passages repeatedly resist the notion that trust is equivalent to inactivity.

The study is limited by its purposively selected thematic corpus and by its reliance on a published textual record of oral interpretation. It does not establish how listeners understood the original broadcasts, nor does it assess all interpretive themes in the complete commentary. Future research could compare the same passages with other twentieth century commentators,

examine the original oral recordings where available, and evaluate whether the proposed categories retain their discriminating power beyond the theme of tawakkul.

Further comparative work should also investigate cases in which an apparent spiritual interpretation conflicts with a passage's practical injunction. Such counterexamples would provide a more demanding test of the proposed model than passages in which social action and inward reliance already appear complementary. The value of the socio Sufistic concept ultimately depends on whether it remains open to revision when textual evidence does not support integration.

CONCLUSION

The examination of ten Qur'anic verses in nine thematic units indicates that al Sha'rawi's interpretation of tawakkul repeatedly connects practical responsibility with inward reliance upon God. Consultation, collective courage, diplomacy, precaution, livelihood, and public communication remain meaningful human obligations. Spiritual dependence qualifies the understanding of their outcomes without negating the obligation to act.

The analysis also shows why spiritual language cannot automatically be classified as ishari exegesis. Theological affirmations and Sufistic moral counsel must be distinguished from an additional interpretive meaning that satisfies criteria of textual connection, compatibility with the apparent sense, and normative legitimacy. Socio Sufistic exegesis is therefore best understood as a qualified analytical reconstruction of a relational pattern in the commentary, not as an unrestricted merger of interpretive categories.

By preserving this distinction, the article offers a framework for studying the interaction of exoteric and spiritual dimensions in contemporary Qur'anic commentary. Its central proposition is that reliance upon God becomes ethically intelligible not in the abandonment of human agency but in the responsible exercise of agency without claiming ultimate control over its results.

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