

Repositioning Aswaja Sufism: A Normative-Critical Analysis of Radicalism, Materialism, and Secularism in Modern Society

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jan 6, 2026

Revised Feb 5, 2026

Accepted Feb 20, 2026

Online First Mar 3, 2026

Keywords:

Aswaja Sufism
Materialism
Normative Ethics
Radicalism
Secularism

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to critically reconstruct Aswaja Sufism as a normative-ethical response to three contemporary challenges radicalism, materialism, and secularism within modern society.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative normative-philosophical approach using library research, contextual hermeneutic interpretation, thematic coding, and comparative synthesis. Primary sources included classical Sufi texts, particularly works of Al-Ghazali and Al-Qushayri, supported by contemporary social theory literature. Data were analyzed through conceptual reconstruction without statistical software. (56 words)

Main Findings: The study finds that tawassuth functions as ethical reflexivity against absolutism, zuhd operates as moral regulation within consumer capitalism, and ihsan strengthens inward accountability in plural public life. These principles collectively serve as complementary normative resources that reinforce moral integrity without replacing structural political or economic reforms in modern society.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study advances existing scholarship by systematically reconstructing Aswaja Sufism beyond devotional-historical analysis into a normative-critical framework integrated with modern social theory. It introduces an ethical reconstruction matrix translating classical Sufi principles into contemporary educational, civic, and institutional applications, thereby bridging spiritual moral psychology with structural modern challenges

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1. INTRODUCTION

Modernity is marked by profound processes of rationalization, bureaucratization, and functional differentiation that reshape institutional life as well as human subjectivity. Max Weber conceptualizes this transformation as disenchantment (Entzauberung), a condition in which instrumental rationality progressively displaces metaphysical and sacred worldviews, reducing social action to calculative efficiency. Karl Marx further explains modern transformation through the concept of alienation, describing how individuals become estranged from their essential human capacities under material-economic structures that commodify labor and social relations [1], [2]. Meanwhile, Charles Taylor argues that secularization in modern societies does not eliminate religion but transforms it into one option among many within a pluralistic “immanent frame,” thereby

altering the epistemic status of faith in public and private life. Together, these perspectives illuminate how modernity reconfigures not only social systems but also moral horizons and identity formation [3].

Within this broader theoretical landscape, radicalism, materialism, and exclusivist secularism emerge as multidimensional responses to modern transformation. Radicalism often develops amid identity fragmentation, perceived injustice, and socio-political marginalization, including in contemporary Indonesian Islamic discourse. Materialism reflects the expansion of capitalist-consumer culture in which possession, productivity, and market value become dominant measures of worth, potentially narrowing ethical orientation to economic calculation [4], [5]. Secularism particularly in its exclusivist or reductive form risks detaching moral discourse from transcendent grounding, even though post-secular theorists maintain that religious reasoning can still contribute constructively to democratic public life. These phenomena collectively signal a deeper moral-spiritual disorientation accompanying structural modernization [6]. The problem addressed in this study, therefore, is not merely the existence of radicalism, materialism, and secularism as sociological facts, but the relative absence of an integrated ethical-spiritual framework capable of engaging these challenges normatively without denying their structural determinants.

Although sociological and political scholarship has extensively analyzed these phenomena through structural explanations economic inequality, state policy, globalization, or ideological contestation the ethical-spiritual dimension of moral subject formation is frequently treated as secondary or derivative. Classical Sufi traditions, by contrast, offer a systematic moral psychology centered on self-purification (*tazkiyah*), discipline of the ego (*mujahadah*), and ethical equilibrium (*wasatiyyah*) [7], [8]. Studies on Sufism have predominantly focused on mystical metaphysics, devotional practices, or historical consolidation within Sunni orthodoxy. However, relatively few have attempted to reconstruct Aswaja Sufism as a coherent normative-ethical framework capable of dialoguing with modern structural crises and providing conceptual resources for contemporary moral reconstruction [9].

The main gap in this study lies in the still limited efforts to systematically reposition Aswaja Sufism from merely devotional and historical analysis to a normative-critical engagement with the structural challenges of modernity. Several previous studies, such as the study conducted by Prasetyo [10] on the rise of neo-Sufism in Indonesia, emphasized the socio-religious dimensions and dynamics of the Sufism movement in the modern context without conceptually reconstructing its normative ethical framework. Another study by Khobir [11] highlighted the role of the Sufi order in shaping the moderation of Indonesian Islam, but remained at the descriptive-historical level and did not explicitly integrate modern social theory. Meanwhile, studies on contemporary radicalism and secularism, such as those conducted by Ahmad [12] and Arake [13], tend to emphasize sociological and political approaches without including the dimension of ethical-spiritual formation as an independent analytical variable. Thus, a conceptual gap is evident between the historical-descriptive study of Sufism and the structural-empirical study of modernity. This study bridges this gap by reconstructing Aswaja Sufism as a normative-complementary framework that does not replace structural analysis, but rather complements it through moral-psychological integration. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative-interdisciplinary approach that explicitly places Sufi ethical principles in dialogue with modern social theory, and frames them as theoretically grounded conceptual resources for responding to radicalism, materialism, and secularism in contemporary society [14].

This study aims to formulate a normative-critical reconstruction of Aswaja Sufism as an ethical framework capable of responding conceptually to radicalism, materialism, and secularism in modern society. The urgency of this research stems from escalating moral polarization, consumerist excess, and ideological fragmentation in contemporary contexts, which cannot be addressed solely through political or economic reform. By clarifying the ethical-spiritual dimension as a complementary analytic layer, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of modern crisis one that integrates structural analysis with moral subject formation without reducing complex social phenomena to purely spiritual failure.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative normative-philosophical design grounded in conceptual reconstruction. Rather than relying on empirical measurement or statistical generalization, the research focuses on clarifying normative-ethical relationships between spiritual formation and modern structural challenges. The methodological framework integrates contextual hermeneutic interpretation and thematic comparative synthesis [15]. Contextual hermeneutics is used to interpret classical Sufi ethical concepts within their theological-intellectual milieu, while comparative synthesis situates these concepts in dialogue with contemporary social theory on modernity, radicalism, materialism, and secularism. The research is analytical-conceptual in nature and aims to reconstruct Aswaja Sufism as a coherent normative framework relevant to modern discursive conditions.

2.2. Object of the Study

Since this is a normative-philosophical inquiry, the study does not involve human participants or statistical populations. The object of analysis consists of (1) Normative-ethical concepts within classical Sunni Sufism (e.g., *tazkiyat al-nafs*, *tawassuth*, *zuhd*, *ihsan*). (2) Modern theoretical constructs related to rationalization, alienation, consumer capitalism, and secularization. Thus, the unit of analysis is conceptual categories rather than individuals or social groups.

2.3. Data Sources and Data Collection Techniques

Primary Sources Primary data are derived from authoritative classical Sufi texts representing the ethical foundation of Sunni orthodoxy, particularly (1) Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, which elaborates moral psychology, purification of the soul, and ethical discipline. (2) Al-Qushayri, *al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah*, which outlines doctrinal boundaries and ethical principles of orthodox Sufism. Secondary data include scholarly works on, (1) Rationalization and disenchantment, (2) Alienation theory, (3) Consumer capitalism, (4) Secularization and post-secular discourse, (5) Contemporary spiritual crisis, (6) Historical and intellectual development of Sufism.

Data were collected through systematic library research, involving, (1) Textual identification of relevant conceptual passages. (2) Thematic extraction of ethical categories, (3) Scholarly cross-referencing with modern social theory literature.

2.4. Research Instrument

In qualitative normative research, the primary instrument is the researcher's analytical framework. The researcher functions as the interpretive instrument guided by conceptual coding schemes and hermeneutic protocols. To ensure analytical consistency, the following conceptual matrix was developed,

Table 1. research Instrument

Conceptual Category	Source Text	Analytical Focus	Modern Theoretical Dialogue
<i>Tazkiyat al-nafs</i>	<i>Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din</i>	Moral psychology & self-purification	Alienation & moral fragmentation
<i>Tawassuth</i>	<i>al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah</i>	Ethical moderation	Radical identity polarization
<i>Zuhd</i>	Classical Sufi corpus	Spiritual detachment	Consumer capitalism & materialism
<i>Ihsan</i>	Sunni-Sufi doctrine	Moral excellence & accountability	Secular ethical autonomy

This matrix functions as a structured interpretive guide to avoid subjective theological assertions and to maintain systematic comparative analysis.

2.5. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted through an integrated four-stage process. First, close hermeneutic reading was undertaken to examine primary Sufi texts within their original doctrinal and intellectual contexts in order to accurately identify foundational ethical principles [16]. Second, thematic coding was applied to extract and systematically categorize core concepts related to moral formation, moderation, and spiritual accountability. Third, comparative synthesis was employed to juxtapose these Sufi ethical categories with major constructs in modern social theory, thereby identifying areas of tension, convergence, and potential normative contribution. Finally, conceptual reconstruction was carried out to analytically reformulate classical categories into theoretically refined concepts capable of engaging contemporary discursive conditions. Through this sequential yet interconnected process, classical Sufi concepts are not transplanted uncritically into modern contexts, but are critically reinterpreted to clarify their normative relevance within present structural and intellectual challenges [17].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Radicalism: Ethical Reflexivity Against Absolutism

Radicalism in late modern contexts is frequently linked to identity anxiety, ideological rigidity, and socio-political marginalization. Sociological studies indicate that radical movements often emerge in environments marked by structural inequality, symbolic exclusion, and crisis of belonging [18]. However, beyond these structural determinants, several scholars have emphasized the importance of interpretive

frameworks and moral subject formation in shaping how religious texts are understood and mobilized. In the Indonesian context, research on contemporary Islamic movements shows that scriptural literalism combined with weak ethical reflexivity may foster exclusivist attitudes even when actors operate within democratic settings. This suggests that radicalism cannot be reduced solely to political grievance; it also involves the moral-epistemic orientation of the subject [19].

Classical Sunni Sufism offers a different model of religious subjectivity. Al-Ghazali places *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the ego) at the center of moral reasoning, arguing that arrogance (*kibr*), anger (*ghadab*), and excessive certainty distort judgment and generate moral extremism. Similarly, Al-Qushayri situates Sufi discipline firmly within Sunni orthodoxy while emphasizing spiritual humility and self-critique [20], [21]. Previous studies on Sufism have demonstrated its historical role in mediating doctrinal differences and fostering social cohesion within plural Islamic societies. These findings align with the present study's argument that Sufi ethics cultivate epistemic humility and moral reflexivity.

Normatively reconstructed, the principle of *tawassuth* (moderation) functions as disciplined proportionality rather than mere compromise. It implies the capacity to maintain doctrinal conviction while recognizing the limits of one's perspective [22]. In educational settings, this reconstruction can be operationalized through dialogical pedagogies, structured exposure to intra-madhab diversity, and assessment indicators that measure the ability to articulate opposing arguments fairly. While previous research has acknowledged the moderating influence of Sufism, the novelty of this study lies in systematically translating *tawassuth* into measurable pedagogical and institutional frameworks. Thus, the findings are consistent with earlier scholarship regarding Sufism's moderating function, yet extend it through normative-conceptual operationalization applicable to contemporary educational policy.

3.2. Materialism: Ethical Detachment in Consumer Society

Modern consumer capitalism intensifies commodification and alienation, as originally diagnosed by Karl Marx and later expanded in cultural analyses of consumer society. Economic success and material accumulation increasingly function as dominant markers of value, generating what contemporary scholars describe as existential emptiness or spiritual fatigue. Empirical studies on youth consumer culture in Southeast Asia further demonstrate how identity construction becomes intertwined with market participation, branding, and digital display. Such findings confirm that materialism is not merely an economic phenomenon but a moral-cultural orientation.

Within the Aswaja Sufi framework, *zuhd* (ascetic detachment) is frequently misunderstood as social withdrawal. However, both Al-Ghazali and Al-Qushayri conceptualize *zuhd* as inward freedom from domination by worldly attachment rather than rejection of economic activity. Contemporary scholarship on Sufi ethics reinforces that ascetic discipline regulates desire while affirming responsible social engagement. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that Sufi communities historically participated in trade, governance, and civic life without absolutizing material success.

The present study advances this discussion by reconstructing *zuhd* as ethical-economic regulation within consumer modernity. Instead of promoting anti-modern withdrawal, the framework emphasizes financial ethics, anti-corruption education, and reflective evaluation of consumption patterns [23], [24]. This reconstruction complements earlier sociological findings on spiritual crisis by offering a structured normative response. The research gap addressed here concerns the limited integration of Sufi ethical categories into institutional economic literacy programs. The novelty lies in articulating specific operational indicators such as transparency mechanisms, reflective budgeting modules, and ethical audit practices that translate spiritual detachment into measurable civic virtues. Nevertheless, this proposal remains conceptual and requires empirical validation in future educational interventions.

3.3. Secularism: Public Moral Consciousness in Plural Society

Secularization has transformed religion from a comprehensive social order into one option within plural public spheres, as argued by Charles Taylor. In extreme forms, secularism may detach moral reasoning from transcendental accountability, potentially leading to ethical fragmentation. However, contemporary political philosophy presents more nuanced models. John Rawls, through the concept of public reason, limits theological justification in constitutional deliberation, while Jürgen Habermas proposes a post-secular model in which religious arguments may enter democratic discourse provided they undergo translation into generally accessible language [25]. These theoretical debates indicate that the issue is not religion's exclusion but its mode of articulation in plural societies.

The Sufi principle of *ihsan* moral excellence grounded in constant awareness of Divine accountability introduces an inward dimension often absent in purely procedural secular ethics. Previous scholarship on spiritual crisis suggests that legal regulation alone cannot sustain moral integrity without interiorized responsibility. In line with these studies, the present research argues that *ihsan* can be translated into universally communicable virtues such as integrity, fairness, transparency, and trustworthiness. This reconstruction aligns

with post-secular theory by framing Sufi ethics not as theological imposition but as a source of civic virtue expressed in publicly accessible categories [26], [27].

The novelty of this study lies in synthesizing Sufi moral psychology with post-secular democratic theory in a systematic matrix of ethical translation. While prior studies have separately examined Sufism's spirituality or secularism's political theory, few have integrated them into a coherent normative framework applicable to institutional contexts. The findings therefore complement earlier literature while expanding its scope through interdisciplinary synthesis.

The results of this study are consistent with prior scholarship demonstrating that Sufism historically contributed to social moderation, ethical discipline, and communal cohesion. However, earlier research largely remains descriptive or historical, with limited normative reconstruction addressing contemporary structural crises such as radicalization, consumer capitalism, and pluralist secularism [28]. The principal gap identified is the absence of a systematic conceptual bridge between classical Sufi moral psychology and modern social theory. This study addresses that gap by reconstructing *tawassuth*, *zuhd*, and *ihsan* as complementary normative resources rather than theological alternatives to structural reform.

The implications of this research are threefold. First, at the theoretical level, it contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue between Islamic ethics and modern social theory by demonstrating that spiritual-moral categories can function as analytical supplements to structural explanations [29]. Second, at the educational level, it offers a conceptual foundation for moderation-oriented curricula, ethical-economic literacy programs, and character-based leadership training grounded in Sufi principles. Third, at the civic level, it proposes an inward ethical orientation that streng [30].

This research is limited by its normative-philosophical nature. It does not provide empirical measurement of educational outcomes or behavioral change resulting from the proposed ethical reconstruction. The operational indicators outlined remain conceptual and require future empirical validation through field studies, curriculum experiments, or policy analysis. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on classical Sunni Sufi authorities and does not extensively engage alternative Sufi traditions or non-Sunni perspectives. Future research may expand comparative analysis across broader Islamic intellectual traditions or test the framework within concrete institutional settings.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the normative reconstruction of Aswaja Sufism offers a coherent ethical-spiritual framework capable of complementing structural analyses of modern challenges such as radicalism, materialism, and secularism. Drawing upon the moral psychology articulated by Al-Ghazali and the doctrinal-ethical discipline outlined by Al-Qushayri, the findings demonstrate that the principles of *tawassuth*, *zuhd*, and *ihsan* function as reflexive moral resources that cultivate epistemic humility, regulate consumer desire, and strengthen inward accountability within plural public life. Rather than substituting political or economic reform, this reconstruction positions Sufi ethics as a normative supplement that reinforces moral integrity alongside institutional structures. Future research is recommended to empirically examine the implementation of these principles within educational curricula, civic leadership models, and ethical-economic literacy programs, as well as to expand comparative analysis across broader Islamic intellectual traditions and sociocultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all parties who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the completion of this research. Appreciation is extended for the constructive insights, academic discussions, and intellectual support that have enriched the development of this study. The author is also thankful for the encouragement and assistance received throughout the research and writing process. Any remaining limitations are solely the responsibility of the author.

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