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Ğihād al-Nafs: An Inquiry into Striving and Spirituality in Dialogue with Western Psychology

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Abstract

The research problem stems from the frequent mischaracterization of *ğihād al-nafs* as a harsh battle "against" the self, waged to suppress the lower *nafs*. By framing inner striving as its object of inquiry, the study reframes Muslim spiritual endeavour as a practice aimed at cultivating mastery over self-sabotaging instincts, fostering inner coherence, and, above all, restoring order (*amr*) within the domain of consciousness. As the results suggest, the discrimination of vices and the integration of virtues are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent dynamics that enable the inclusion of what supports the evolution of consciousness. Adopting a literature-based approach within a hermeneutic epistemological framework, the essay draws upon classical Islamic sources while engaging with insights emerging from Western psychology, concluding that *ğihād al-nafs* is a form of struggle "in favour" of the soul, prompting the correction of inner imperfections, alongside the actualization of latent virtues and potential. As a distinctive contribution, the paper demonstrates how contemporary psychological understandings of striving and spirituality may illuminate the motivational logic underpinning Muslim inner struggle, revealing it as a process of optimization: a way of attuning to the deepest expression of humanity, which precedes and enables spiritual proximity to the Divine.

Keywords: *Jihad Al-Nafs*, *Sufism*, *Tazkiyyat al-Nafs*, *Islam*, *Flow*.

INTRODUCTION

Human experience is marked by an innate tension toward optimizing one's existential performance and is permeated by a desire to progress in an evolutionary direction.[1] Within the nomadic traditions of Arab-Islamic culture, the vital pursuit of conditions more conducive to the continuation of existence has inspired a call to undertake the "effort" to advance: a disciplining endeavour that eventually encompassed all dimensions of human existence and inspired the dedication of energy beyond mere

[1] Basim Aldahadha and Mohammad Al Dwakat, "Development of an Islamic Temporal Focus Scale: Factorial Analysis, Validity, and Reliability," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 7, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.25217/0020247442900.

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subsistence, toward the refinement of cognitive competences and spiritual qualities.[2]

As the wisdom of Islam suggests, the manifestation of the full potential inherent in the human being does not require growth understood in terms of addition or accumulation; rather, it demands a resolute sifting process through which the soul undergoes a refining procedure akin to winnowing, so that its essence may be progressively freed from the excess of matter that occludes it.[3] This is similar to what happens with grain, which must be purified of its chaff precisely because the latter is essentially a shell devoid of nourishment and resistant to digestion.[4] If not removed, it would hinder the milling process, alter the aromatic profile and the aesthetic of the resulting flour, and ultimately diminish its quality and therefore its value.

In Islam, such a process of removal and refinement comes to be regarded as indispensable when the act of purification pertains to the spiritual dimension—that is, when the endeavour undertaken by the Muslim assumes the name of *ğihād al-nafs*.[5]

In Arabic, the verb "*ğāhada*", which translates as "to strive, to contend with, to struggle," derives from the consonantal root *ğ-h-d*, which conveys the meanings of "effort, hard work, struggle," in which the sense of the nominal expression "*ğihād*" is condensed[6]. The *muğāhid* is the one who performs *ğihād* and, therefore, the one who makes the effort, who struggles.[7] He is the one who acts, even though his action repeatedly encounters obstacles and resistance, primarily internal ones. It is because of these uncomfortable frictions that, before any other endeavour—be it military, muscular, or dialectical—the Muslim is called to undertake the most demanding, the greatest of efforts: *ğihād al-nafs* (*ğihād* of the soul), a struggle directed against the inferior and regressive qualities of the human soul, also known as *al-ğihād al-akbar* (the greatest *ğihād*).[8]

When understood in the sense of "*ğihād* of the soul" (*ğihād al-nafs*), the "hard work" of the Muslim is condensed into an inner struggle against that which hinders the

[2] Suhartiwi Suhartiwi et al., "Empowering Students: Examining the Effectiveness of Ta'līm Muta'allim Group Guidance," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 7, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.25217/0020247443000.

[3] Widya Masitah et al., "Exploring Religiosity as Mediator of The Association Between Democratic Parenting, Peer Support, and Self-Concept Among Adolescent Moral Literacy," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 436–57, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.5060.

[4] Faizal Faizal et al., "Islamic-Based Counseling for Fostering Self Efficacy in Muslim Communities," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 8, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.25217/0020258650300.

[5] Setiyo Purwanto et al., "Effect of Mindfulness Dhikr Breathing Therapy for Insomniacs on Quality of Life: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 6, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.25217/0020236368800.

[6] Martin R. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'anic Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 128.

[7] Miftachul Huda et al., "Investigating Respect in Learning as Character Education: A Review of al-Zarnūjī's Ta'līm al-Muta'allim," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 209–32, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4187.

[8] Abdul Karim, "Integration of Religious Awareness in Environmental Education," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 10, no. 2 (2022): 415–42, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v10i2.14404.

process of actualizing human potential.[9] The *muǧāhid* does not aspire to collect medals; rather, he discriminates. He optimizes the dimensions of the burden he carries by freeing himself from unnecessary weights, returning to the earth the fruits that have turned rotten. He requires space for virtues, and that space is created by subtracting as much of it as possible from the domain of vice. In the process, although the two movements may initially appear dichotomous, the actions of "discrimination" (of vice) and "integration" (of virtue) may ultimately prove to be complementary. As the *mutaṣawwifūn*[10] teach, attention directed toward breath (*nafas*)[11] signifies a shift in focus toward the unfolding present[12] rather than a fixation on the past. Within this orientation, what is unnecessarily burdensome gives way to what is truly needed: it is discriminated in favour of the inclusion of what proves conducive to the desired evolution of consciousness.

This study investigates the often-neglected meaning of the practice in question and, drawing on reflections from non-Islamic literature and psychology, aims to highlight how *ǧihād al-nafs* reveals itself to be oriented toward inner order rather than self-denial. Frequently mischaracterized as a harsh battle "against" the self, it is more accurately conceived as a form of striving "in favour" of the soul: a path of refinement that unveils inner imperfections and invites their correction, while encouraging the actualization of latent virtues and potential. This form of effort aims at gaining mastery over self-sabotaging instincts, fostering inner coherence, and, above all, restoring order within the domain of consciousness. Far from conveying any violent connotation, *ǧihād al-nafs* should in fact be interpreted as a work of beautification that turns toward the restoration of order: an order that, in Islam, comes from God, as command (*amr* –Qurʾān, 7:54), and at the same time as a disposition for harmonious existence. An order that is a prerogative of the Cosmos and that man should strive not to alter. A balance that requires a continuous struggle, since the danger of falling into a state of disorder, chaos, and disequilibrium is ever-present.

METHOD

This essay draws on a subset of findings from seven years of bibliographic and ethnographic qualitative research focusing on the Islamic concept of *ǧihād* and the mechanisms of knowledge transmission within diverse educational contexts across the Islamic world. The research delves into primary sources such as the *Qurʾān* and the *Ḥadīṯ*, as well as secondary sources including classical Islamic literature, a carefully curated

[9] Nur Agus Salim et al., "Fostering Moderate Character of Santri: Effective Hidden Curriculum Strategy in Islamic Boarding Schools," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 357–72, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4676.

[10] The term "*mutaṣawwifūn*" designates practitioners of *taṣawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) who consciously engage in spiritual growth and refinement (*tazkiyya*) and cultivate intuitive and transformative knowledge (*maʿrifa*), embodying the ethical and metaphysical dimensions of the Islamic tradition.

[11] *Cfr*. William C. Chittick, *Il Sufismo*. Ed. by Francesco A. Leccese. (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), 66.

[12] *Cfr*. ʻAlī al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb. The Revelation of the Veiled: An Early Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Edinburgh: The E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2014), 39. Originally published in 1911.

selection of academic works, and a multi-year collaboration with the Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Waddaʿwah "Dalwa" (Bangil, Jawa Timur, Indonesia).

This inquiry is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach that integrates human sciences such as anthropology, psychology, theology, Islamology, and education, within a hermeneutic-constructivist epistemological framework. The overarching aim of the author's work, and of this essay in particular, is to foster a deeper understanding of the human condition: its existential trajectories, vulnerabilities, unresolved tensions, and the forces that compel individuals to confront their limitations.

To this end, the author contends that a synergy between the sapiential tradition of Islam and the theoretical elaborations of Western science offers fertile ground for generating clarity, promoting dialogical openness, and yielding transformative insights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An Attentive Focus on Defect

The research conducted over the years has led the author to observe how the spiritual, educational, or performative refinement pursued by the Islamic pedagogy of *ğihād al-nafs* directs the Muslim's attention toward defect and flaw. By opting for a corrective intervention—one that mends the rupture—it channels resources into a transformation that necessarily passes through correction.

While Islam values the resources available to both the individual and the community, it does not pretend to overlook gaps, scratches, or impurities; on the contrary, it is, in a sense, obsessed with them.

In the thought of *al-Šayḫ al-Akbar* Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240 CE), the human being resembles a surface capable of reflecting both God and the forms of the Cosmos He Himself created. The relative perfection of the image of the Real that one reflects depends on the polishing and cleansing of the mirror's surface—that is, the purity of the soul[13]. In this sense, the soul may be imagined as a polished metal object requiring care and maintenance, lest the rust (Qurʾān, 83:14), generated by distraction toward external things and the passionate impulses of the *nafs*, take hold and obscure its reflective qualities. It is precisely due to the deterioration and distortion to which this surface is subject that the artisan's mastery becomes essential[14].

The perfection of the reflected image is the result of a long, careful, and continuous process of removing impurities. In the human being, the locus of this purification is *al-qalb* (the heart) which, in Islam, is the engine of thought and behaviour. Because of its centrality, *al-qalb* becomes the battlefield where *ğihād* of the soul unfolds.[15] It is the alchemical laboratory in which the polishing of the mirror is

[13] Maria De Cillis, *Free Will and Predestination in Islamic Thought: Theoretical Compromises in the Works of Avicenna, al-Ghāzālī and Ibn ʿArabī* (London: Routledge, 2014).
[14] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). Originally composed in the 13th century CE.
[15] Lili Sholehuddin Badri and Ahmed Abdul Malik, "Implementation of Islamic Education Values in Building Students' Religious Character through an Affective Approach Based on the Qur'an," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 21, no. 1 (2024): 217–33, https://doi.org/10.14421/jpai.v21i1.7260.

undertaken: a mirror that symbolically represents Humanity aspiring to rid itself of the distortions observed in imperfect creatures and to reflect the divine image in its fullness.

Islam's almost obsessive concern with imperfection and vice suggests that what may initially appear as dirt or defect, when observed through a transcendent awareness, becomes a source of learning and self-healing. As ibn ʿArabī observes[16], it is precisely through one's flaws and impurities that the human being can rise above other creatures. In their very persistence, these defects become the core of the potential that the human possesses, the driving nucleus of their evolutionary advancement.

Indeed, if the Muslim who seeks the heights of perfection were to avoid recognizing their own imperfection, they would neglect their evolutionary purpose and exempt themselves from striving to become the best possible version of themselves.[17]

To attain the desired goal, the human being must become aware of the dual nature of their *nafs*—rational (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*) and animal (*al-nafs al-ḥayawāniyya*)—and demonstrate the ability to take control of the instinctual impulses that characterize the latter.[18] One is required to renounce passivity and disengagement, and to commit to the realization of the "*insān-project*"[19] (Man-project) that Allāh appears to have presented to the Angels, saying: "Lo! I am about to place a vicegerent on earth, they said: Wilt Thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely I know that which ye know not." (Qurʾān, 2:30).[20] A long-term project, evidently fully understood only by God, since presumably even the most obedient among the angels are still reiterating their perplexities.

Islamic mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) attempts to respond to the angelic question, explaining that man was granted vicariate so that, through him, Allāh might preserve His creation in the same way "the seal preserves the king's treasure"[21] and safeguard the natural order and the equilibrium of the Cosmos[22]—an order and balance that the *muǧāhid* is constantly called to uphold.

The Persistent *Muǧāhada* of the *Mutaṣawwif*

According to *taṣawwuf*, while mystical perfections require Divine Grace for their attainment, ascetic perfections demand a constant effort of self-control over one's

[16] Ibn ʿArabī, cit. in Maria De Cillis, *ibidem*.
[17] Sholihan Sholihan et al., "Implementing Global Ethics in Local Context: A Study of Religious Leaders' Perspectives in Central Java Indonesia," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 12, no. 2 (2025): 255–86, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v12i2.22766.
[18] Zarkasi et al., "Learning Al-Qur'an Hadith Using Study Tours to Improve Religious Moderation Attitudes and Socio-Cultural Literacy of Madrasah Aliyah Students," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 21, no. 2 (2024): 461–76, https://doi.org/10.14421/jpai.v21i2.8744.
[19] The expression "*insān-project*" is a neologism coined by the author to evoke the divine purpose embedded in the human being's unfolding journey of self-definition, as conceived in the primordial intent of its Creator.
[20] Nadhif Muhammad Mumtaz et al., "Educational Policy Analysis: Examining Pesantren Policies and Their Implications on the Independence of Kyai and Pesantren in the Contemporary Era," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 21, no. 2 (2024): 287–306, https://doi.org/10.14421/jpai.v21i2.9612.
[21] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *ibid*., 51.
[22] Muhammad U. Faruque, *The Labyrinth of Subjectivity: Constructions of the Self from Mullā Ṣadrā to Muḥammad Iqbāl* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2018).

passions. Islamic asceticism consists of a complex of devotional practices which, through an ordered and persevering series of prayers and renunciations, aim at complete detachment from worldly passions, expiation of sins, and spiritual perfection in a religious sense. On the other hand, Islamic mysticism aspires to the attainment of extraordinary states of prayer through which one may access higher religious cognitions, intuitive knowledge of God, and union of the soul with God in this very life.[23] Unlike ascetic perfections, mystical ones cannot be attained through the believer's efforts or merits, but only through Divine Grace—although it is precisely the purification achieved through asceticism that disposes the initiate to receive such Grace[24].

Although both exceed the spirit of early Islam, and despite the substantial difference between ascetic acts and mystical states, for the *mutaṣawwifūn*, asceticism and mysticism are part of a single path (*ṭarīq*, *sulūk*), which unfolds through the progressive stages of aspirant (*murīd*), wayfarer (*sālik*), the one who has reached union (*waṣīl*) [in the case of reaching the highest degrees of ascetic training], or perfected (*kāmil*) [in the case of attaining the apex of mystical states].[25] Muslim treatise writers agree in placing *riḍā* (the seventh station, corresponding to the perpetual state of contentment) as the final stage of the ascetic path, which, for the *mutaṣawwif*, is experienced as a continuous *muǧāhada*.[26]

The progression of the *Ṣūfī* path parallels that of the *muǧāhid*'s journey, both unfolding along a route defined by Divine Will—a route that demands refined navigational skills, since the task of becoming what one was born to become presupposes the choice to take the right direction.[27] According to Islamic mysticism, human beings return to God by traversing the same invisible path followed by other creatures. Like man, the bee and the oak tree are born, live, die, and move toward an elsewhere.[28] Their journey is defined by Ibn ʿArabī[29] as the "compulsory return" (*ruǧūʿ iḍṭirārī*) to God. However, unlike other creatures, human beings are granted a privilege: the ability to choose their route of return (voluntary return or *ruǧūʿ iḫtiyārī*), either by following in the footsteps of

[23] Syukri Syukri et al., "Integration of Islamic Values with Environmental Ethics in Pesantren Education: A Case Study at Darularafah Raya Pesantren," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 13, no. 1 (2024): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.14421/jpi.2024.131.1-12.

[24] Carlo Alfonso Nallino, *Raccolta di scritti editi e inediti*, vol. II, Dogmatica–sufismo–confraternite, ed. Maria Nallino (Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1940).

[25] Siti Nur Hidayah, "Pesantren for Middle-Class Muslims in Indonesia (Between Religious Commodification and Pious Neoliberalism)," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 9, no. 1 (2021): 209–44, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v9i1.7641.

[26] Masturin Masturin et al., "Tawhid-Based Green Learning in Islamic Higher Education: An Insan Kamil Character Building," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 10, no. 1 (2022): 215–52, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v10i1.14124.

[27] Sarbini Sarbini et al., "The Character Education Model as a Strategic Framework for Nurturing Religious Moderation Within State Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia," *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 13, no. 1 (2025): 1–38, https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v13i1.30618.

[28] Masturin Masturin, "The Power of Two Learning Strategy in Islamic Religious Education Material Shaping Character Student," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 2 (2024): 250–69, https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v7i2.4678.

[29] Ibn ʿArabī cit. in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

the prophets or, conversely, by yielding to their own whims.

Every movement of return is naturally preceded by a movement of arrival, during which, in the act of incarnation, the spirit descends into the body, transitioning from consciousness to unconsciousness, from heaven to earth, "from the initial unity of the divine breath to the multiplicity of its reverberations in the material realm"[30]. As *Šayḫ* Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi explains[31], once the soul departs from the angelic realm, it passes through the element of fire, igniting within it. It then traverses the realm of water, which extinguishes the fire, and crosses the earth, transforming into mud. Exposed to air, it becomes dry clay, then a plant, an animal, and finally a human being.

> *The jewel of the soul was darkened when burnt by fire, it gathered rust when it hit the water, it was covered with mud passing through earth, and it became heavy and coarse when it came into contact with air. This is the descent, the fall of the human being; when the body dominates the soul, the horse rides the master*.[32]

This initial phase of human existence is referred to as the "descending arc" (*al-qaws al-nuzūlī*)[33]: descending as was the path leading out of the Garden of Eden (*Jannāt ʿAdn*), when—having lost participation in the primordial environment—man felt compelled to continue his migration without rest, in a fervent desire to reincorporate, through effort, the qualities of perfection that once characterized the vicariate of the *nāʾib* Ādam. In pursuit of this coveted goal, the *sālikūn ilā ʾllāh* (those who are engaged in the path leading to God) commit themselves to reversing the arc's trajectory into an ascending curve (*al-qaws al-ṣuʿūdī*), aiming their arrow toward the horizon of a knowledge they ask God to increase within them (Qurʾān, 20:114): a knowledge that arises from the intuitive recognition of the status of things as they truly are, have always been, and will always be. This form of knowledge, considered innate, is believed to have been obscured by spiritual ignorance, fostered by the dissipation of psychic energy on ephemeral matters and by only partial access to information[34]. The terms "*maʿrifa*" and "*ʿirfān*"[35] both denote this profound self-awareness, which can be attained only through personal transformation[36] and the willingness to become receptive to Divine Wisdom.

Viewed through a mystical lens, the "ascending arc of existence" appears to the Muslim as a path unfolding through an ever-increasing intensity of light, opening toward the Infinite Light of God. If he aspires to rise above a condition of animality, the *mutaṣawwif* must strive to activate within himself the latent divine qualities of generosity,

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[30] William C. Chittick, "Spirit, Body, and In-Between," in *The Inner Journey: Views from the Islamic Tradition*, ed. William C. Chittick (Rochester, VT: Morning Light Press, 2007), 162–167.
[31] Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi, "Travels of the Soul," in *The Inner Journey: Views from the Islamic Tradition*, ed. William C. Chittick (Rochester, VT: Morning Light Press, 2007), 132–134.
[32] *Ibid*., 134.
[33] William C. Chittick, "The Traditional Approach to Learning," *Sacred Web* 18 (2007): 29–47.
[34] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Ibidem.*
[35] The *Ṣūfī* masters were also referred to as "*ʿārifūn*" (gnostics), from the term "*ʿirfān*", which denotes a higher knowledge inspired by God (gnosis).
[36] William C. Chittick, *Il Sufismo,* ed. Francesco A. Leccese (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), 47. Originally published in 2000.

justice, patience, and gratitude, while engaging in his *ğihād* against greed, impatience, injustice, cowardice, arrogance, and miserliness—traits considered ontological deficiencies, "flaws" in reflecting the Divine Light[37].

Such an undertaking is never aimed at seizing some kind of spiritual war bounty at the expense of others; rather, it is realized through a laborious process of excavation and gathering, to liberate buried treasures hidden in desolate or ruined inner places[38]. It is an effort directed toward bringing to light one's dormant talents, patiently waiting to be awakened.

The self-directed commitment to migrate from the limitations of the ego toward the full expression of one's latent essence constitutes a form of spiritual care directed toward that innate core which, in Islamic thought, is *fiṭra*. *Fiṭra* is the primordial nature, the spiritual and natural inclination present in every human being, inscribed in the child even before receiving any religious education within the environment in which they are raised[39]. Its subsistence is independent of any confessional framework and represents both the connection with the Divine and the manner in which this connection manifests in each individual soul. It expresses the innate predisposition to recognize Allāh.

In Islamic phraseology, the expression "*al-fiṭra*" denotes creation, understood according to essentially human parameters[40]. It embodies the original nature of man. The term "*iftār*", which shares the same etymological root as "*fiṭr*", evokes the opening of new horizons that accompanies the end of a former state and the beginning of a new one[41]. Within *fiṭra* is inscribed the tendency to strive toward a form of "humanity" which, in order to be realized, requires the protection and nourishment of innate inclinations toward good, and a respectful education that invites one to care for them. If the practice of *ğihād al-nafs* becomes necessary, it is precisely because, throughout life, *fiṭra* is constantly obstructed by the influence of the individual *nafs* and by the negative pressures arising from social context and circumstance.

A form of care aligned with the intention to preserve and cultivate one's *fiṭra* is exemplified by *tazkiyyat al-nafs*, which, according to the *Ṣūfī* masters, constitutes the very path that leads toward God. The translation of the term *tazkiyya* is semantically rich, as it encompasses meanings such as "purification", "growth", "development", and "reform" of the soul. The phrase *tazkiyyat al-nafs* does not appear explicitly in the Qurʾān, although

[37] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[38] In traditional poetry, the metaphor of ruins and deserted places concealing hidden treasures is extremely common. In the poetic verses of *Mawlānā* Ğalāl ad-Dīn, for instance, the physical body of the "Man of God" represents the crumbling ruin that contains the treasure of his soul. *Cfr.* Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Poesie mistiche,* ed. Alessandro Bausani (Milano: BUR-Mondadori, 2018), 47. Originally composed in the 13th century CE.

[39] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḫārī*, *ḥadīṯ* 23:680. al-Bukhāri, *Summarized Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhāri*, comp. A. bin Abdul-Lateef Az-Zubaidi, trans. M. Muhsin Khān (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 1994). Originally composed ca. 846 CE.

[40] Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Islamic Concept of Human Nature: A Critique on the Concept of Inborn Criminality* (Lahore: Minhaj-ul-Quran Publications, 1999), 6. Originally published in 1985.

[41] As happens, for example, with the end of the month of *Ramaḍān*—that is, with the conclusion of the prescribed period of fasting (*ṣawm*).

scholars have derived it from a specific occurrence of the verb *zakkā*, of which *tazkiyya* is the verbal noun. In Qurʾān 91:9, *zakkā* is understood to refer to a distinctly spiritual development and purification[42]. The soul yearns for its own growth and for purification from those aspects of itself that are displeasing to Allāh. For this reason, growth and purification (*tazkiyya*) emerge as synchronous actions, closely aligned with the challenging effort that characterizes the inner struggle addressed in this essay.

Borrowing the words of *Mawlānā* Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī[43], *tazkiyyat al-nafs* may be imagined as a remedy for cowardice and for the fleeting pleasures of the flesh—a remedy that entails the eradication of erroneous thought and false assumptions, and the correction of distortions generated by corrupted morality, blind imitation, and ritualism devoid of meaning[44]. In lexicographic sources, the term "*tazkiyya*" is also translated as "planting seeds": an action that represents the intention to place the seeds in a condition where they may sprout, take root, blossom, and unfold their potential[45]. "*Tazkiyyat al-nafs*" is thus a metaphor for a process of spiritual education oriented toward the highest realization of one's existential potential as a being endowed with a soul.

As explained by *Šayḫ* Gabriel Mandel Khān[46], to be *Ṣūfī* means to become aware of one's potential, to know how to quiet what must be quieted, to awaken what must be awakened, and to understand the impossibility of quieting or awakening what cannot be. It means to possess nothing and, at the same time, not to be possessed by anything. Above all, to approach the mystical perspective means to learn how to learn, to enact the proper practice in order to attain knowledge, and to cultivate the appropriate degree of humility that allows one to acquire a correct understanding of one's own worth.

According to *taṣawwuf*, each individual is engaged in a process of unveiling in which the self is a manifestation of the present moment. In certain *Ṣūfī* texts, each instant of presence is called "*nafas*" (breath), and the *Ṣūfī* themselves are referred to as "*ʾahl al-nafas*" (the people of breath), because they live in full awareness of the uniqueness of the *nafs* in each *nafas*, and experience—alongside their own being—the incessant renewal of Creation[47].

The spiritual path toward God, as represented in *Ṣūfī* tradition, is not only characterized by purification and growth, but is also imagined as punctuated by "stations" that represent the permanent acquisitions of the wayfarer: attainments that, once reached, become integral to one's humanity and are not lost along the path. The passage through the stations is not to be understood as a transition to the next station, but rather as a

[42] Gavin Picken, "Tazkiyat al-nafs: The Qurʾanic Paradigm," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 101–127.
[43] Amīn Ahsan Islāhī, *Self Purification and Development* (Delhi: Adam Publishers, 2000), 19–20.
[44] *Cfr*. Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī* (London: Routledge, 2011), 150.
[45] William C. Chittick, *Il Sufismo*, ed. Francesco A. Leccese (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), pp. 59–61. Originally published in 2000.
[46] Gabriele Mandel Khān, *Sufismo e poesia. Pensieri e viaggi*, trans. O. Guardi and H. ben Shīna (Milano: Confraternita dei Sufi Jerrahi Halveti in Italia & Cooperativa Libraria Università I.U.L.M., 2000).
[47] William C. Chittick, *Il Sufismo,* ed. Francesco A. Leccese (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), p. 66. Originally published in 2000.

passage that carries with it previous attainments. By contrast, the "state" in which one finds oneself is transitory. In summary, a "state" (*ḥāl*) is contingent upon specific conditions and dissolves once they cease to exist, whereas a "station" (*maqām*) represents a stabilized quality of the soul[48].

Following a similar logic of process, the Qurʾān mentions three principal stages related to *ǧihād al-nafs*, which follow a symbolic verticality in the soul's passage from subjugation to demonic temptations to the acquisition of self-control.

The first stage through which the soul passes is defined as *al-nafs al-ʿammāra bi-l-sūʾ*. Here, the *nafs* appears in its most corrupted form; it pursues worldly desires and is provoked by *al-shayṭān* to incline toward evil. It seeks the satisfaction of needs and desires, committing transgressions and living in sin. *Sūrat al-Nāziʿāt* describes it as a reservoir of passions (Qurʾān, 79:40), needs, and appetites which, though fulfilled in Paradise, are considered harmful and destructive when satisfied in this world. In *Sūrat Yūsuf,* the stage of *al-nafs al-ʿammāra bi-l-sūʾ* is described as the condition in which the *nafs* incites man to evil (Qurʾān, 12:53), and the soul seeks fulfillment in physical appetites, becoming a blameworthy abode of every vice.

Upon reaching the second stage, that of *al-nafs al-lawwāma*, the soul reproaches itself, seized by remorse (Qurʾān, 75:2), and struggles to improve itself and purify one's mind, body, and heart. Through its own self-blame, it becomes more aware of its condition and begins to resist the desires to which it had previously succumbed, thus initiating its spiritual *ǧihād* (*ǧihād al-nafs* or *muǧāhada*).

In the *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* authored by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī[49], the disciplining inner struggle with *al-nafs al-ʿammāra bi-l-sūʾ* is presented allegorically as a civil war that generates disorder and threatens life itself. In his work, the author compares the human body to a city in which the soul is the king who governs it. The king's ministers are the sensory faculties, while the organs are his subjects. The lower *nafs*, in which the armies of desire and anger are encamped, represents the enemy that opposes the king within his own realm and seeks to annihilate the people. If only desire and anger were subject to the heart, they would be excellent companions. Yet, it often happens that they rebel against the king, attempt to subjugate him, and exercise power over him, thereby causing serious harm. The body must then assume the role of a frontier outpost, where the soul stands guard.

Upon finally reaching what is described in the Qurʾān as the third and final stage, the soul succeeds in attaining mastery over itself and control over the destructive tendencies that undermine it—such as greed, pride, arrogance, and envy. In harmony with Divine Will, it evolves and, having shed the undesirable attributes of the lower *nafs*, triumphs in its task of *ǧihād*, acquiring the state of tranquillity proper to *al-nafs al-*

[48] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabīʾs Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
[49] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Revival of Religion's Sciences* (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*), vol. II, The Quarter of the Habits of Life, trans. M. M. al-Sharif (Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2011). Originally composed in the 12th century CE.

muṭmaʾinna (Qurʾān, 89:27–30), in which desires are directed solely toward what is good and just. It is precisely at this final stage that, by aligning with their *fiṭra*, the human being attains the highest level of psycho-spiritual integration, harmony, and inner peace[50].

The greatest *ǧihād* (*al-ǧihād al-akbar*) consists in a process of refinement achieved through the practice of "struggle," which invites the Muslim to engage in deep self-confrontation. Yet, the outcomes of this inner struggle must manifest an oblative character, in resonance with the words of the Prophet, who said that among people, the best are those who are most beneficial to others (*ḫayr al-nās ʾanfaʿuhum li al-nās*[51]). In this sense, the "effort" enacted by the individual through *ǧihād al-nafs*, far from being a solipsistic withdrawal, paves the way for both personal and collective healing.

Ǧihād Al-Nafs and the Restoration of Order Within Consciousness

Hungarian psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi[52] observes that well-being requires a constant balance between challenge and competence. Since engaging in the same activity over a prolonged period and at the same level of difficulty tends to produce boredom and frustration, the human beings are naturally inclined to refine their skills in response to increasingly demanding challenges. Mystical heights, he explains, are not attained through some superhuman quantum leap, but through a progressive focusing of attention on the opportunities for action that emerge from the environment—a choice that incrementally raises the challenges and refines the abilities.

According to his theory of *flow*, those "immense reward" and "excellence", reserved in *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (Qurʾān, 4:95) for those who undertake *ǧihād* in the path of Allāh, are reached through euphoria, that is, through the sense of well-being produced by an "optimal experience". This experience, although it may appear effortless, is far from being so. It often requires strenuous physical exertion or highly disciplined mental activity. It does not occur without the deployment of qualified performance[53]. Happiness, Csíkszentmihályi notes, requires preparation and is more readily attracted by those who manage to control their inner experience and determine the quality of their lives. The Qurʾān echoes this truth with timeless clarity: "[5.] Verily with hardship cometh ease. [6.] Verily with hardship cometh ease. – [7.] So when thou art relieved, still toil." (Qurʾān, 94:5–7).

Unconsciously following logics similar to those inscribed in verse 95 of *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ*, the theory of *flow* explains how one who, like the Qurʾānic *qāʿidūn*, yields to indolence and pursues trivial goals—such as remaining alive while seated on the sofa in one's living room—will not be rewarded with the same pleasure as one who challenges their abilities in climbing[54]. This is because the challenge itself entails a euphoria linked to the fear of failure or suffering. One who has not conquered, resisted, and prevailed

[50] Yasien Mohamed, *The Islamic Conception of Human Nature with Reference to the Development of an Islamic Psychology* (Cape Town: OpenUCT, 1986).
[51] *Cfr*. al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Muʿǧam al-Awsaṭ*, *ḥadīṯ* n. 5787.
[52] Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology Of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991). Originally published in 1990.
[53] *Ibid*., 54.
[54] *Ibid*., 54–55.

condemns himself to doubt whether he would ever have been capable of doing so—whether he could have successfully faced the dangers inherent in the environment and those, more insidious and fear-inducing, that lie hidden within the inner impulses[55]: within that *nafs* we have not yet learned to govern.

In Islam, it is only through struggle that man may be alchemically transformed from lead into gold. Despite our frequent claims to the contrary, we are not programmed to remain in a state of indolence. Even the much-desired vacations, which temporarily distract from the burdens of daily life, appear as a brief escape from obligations, a momentary isolation from familiar contexts. By generating a void of action and interaction, they constitute a sort of drought in our experience[56]. The most luminous moments in our lives are not those in which we are passive and relaxed—although proper rest is beneficial, soothing, and regenerative. The most meaningful moments occur when the body or mind is pushed to its limits, in a voluntary effort aimed at accomplishing a task that is useful and non-trivial. In such instances, happiness arises from a sense of mastery, of participation in the realization of one's life content; it results from the control of one's psychic energy, which must be invested in consciously chosen and pursued goals[57].

Borrowing an expression from Csíkszentmihályi, in reference to the practice of *ğihād al-nafs*, it may be more appropriate to interpret the *muğāhid*'s struggle as directed "against the entropy that brings disorder to consciousness"[58], rather than as an aggressive confrontation with a part of his own being. After all, a struggle aimed at increasing self-control, discipline, and attentiveness is far from being a conflict against the self or against well-being, since it reveals a commitment oriented toward one's direct benefit.

The Dragon, the Knight, and the Maiden

The *muğāhid*, like every mythic hero, is not exempt from immersion into the somber depths of the psyche. He is called to confront the abysses of his own *nafs*, his vulnerabilities, and his "Shadow"[59]. In doing so, he assumes the destiny that, in nature, belongs to the seed, the quintessential symbol of what unfolds and reveals itself—a seed that, before manifesting the wondrous features of the flower it holds in potential, must first strive to sink its roots in the cold and dark soil. A seed that, before breaking through the surface to bask in sunlight, must first learn to anchor its roots deep within the mud.

In venturing into the depths of his inner recesses, into the dark place where hostile forces oppose him most intensely, the one who struggles finds himself face-to-face with his greatest fear and most dreaded adversary: the dragon, which in Islamic tradition is personified by *al-shayṭān*, the cunning tempter. While in the eighteenth *sūrah* of the

[55] Abraham H. Maslow, *Verso una psicologia dell'essere*, trans. R. Pedio (Roma: Astrolabio Ubaldini, 1971). Originally published in 1962.
[56] Roger Caillois, *L'uomo e il sacro*, trans. Umberto M. Olivieri (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001). Originally published in 1950.
[57] Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Ibidem*.
[58] *Ibid*., 40.
[59] Carl Gustav Jung, *Gli archetipi dell'inconscio collettivo*, trans. E. Schanzer and A. Vitolo (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008). Originally published in 1934.

Qurʾān, dwelling within the cave (*al-Kahf*) is a prelude to the effusion of Divine Mercy and to an awakening decreed by God after a long, prolonged sleep, according to the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung[60], the symbolic cavern represents a place of incubation and rebirth, and entering it corresponds to descending into the labyrinth of the unconscious in order to transform its contents. The encounter with the ancient serpent signifies the confrontation with evil dwelling in the depths of our own humanity—with bestiality, unconsciousness, and ignorance. As also the Persian poet Ǧalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273 CE) writes, the carnal self is Hell, and Hell is a dragon whose fire is not extinguished by oceans[61].

The dragon symbolizes the obstacle that impedes self-awareness and inner evolution. As a manifestation of the archaic forces of the unconscious concealed within the soul, it embodies the oppositional force that inhibits, paralyzes, and holds captive the soul—typically represented in myth as the abducted maiden, the treasure guarded within its coils, or the source of life it protects.

Ultimately, what *ǧihād al-nafs* demands is the exercise of personal authority capable of taming and subduing the "dragon": of progressively diminishing its size, suppressing its malevolent power, and transcending its destructive energies.

In the philosophical work *al-Šifāʾ*, which addresses the healing of the soul from ignorance, Ibn Sīnā[62] (980–1037 CE) identifies virtue with the "moderation" of passions such as anger, fear, pride, resentment, jealousy, and appetites directed toward sex, food, and material comforts: a moderation and balance that are distinct from eradication. In the *Lisān al-ʿarab*, Ibn Manẓūr[63] (1233–1312 CE) further explains that, while the Arabic term "*ʿaql*" (reason), deriving from the verb "*ʿaqala*", belongs to the semantic field of "binding" or "restraining," the adjectival form "*ʿāqil*" (reasonable, discerning, resolute) designates one who is able to imprison his *nafs* and curb his lust, restraining desires just as one restrains a camel by tying its legs together (*ʿaqala al-baʿīr*). Allāh Himself did not annihilate Iblīs when he arrogantly refused obedience (Qurʾān, 38:74–75); rather, He merely diminished him, reducing his power and stature[64].

If, as stated in *Sūrat Fāṭir,* Satan is the enemy[65] (Qurʾān, 35:6), then what must be opposed is satanic temptation, not the *nafs* that suffers the insidious whisper of the ancient murmurer (*al-waswās*). If, according to the Qurʾān, the human soul is capable of transitioning from the condition of *al-nafs al-ʿammāra bi-l-sūʾ* (Qurʾān, 12:53) to that of *al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinna* (Qurʾān, 89:27–30), this implies that vice is a garment the soul may discard.

It is common to think of the *nafs* as a part of the self that must be suppressed;

[60] Carl Gustav Jung, *Sul rinascere*, vol. 9*, ed. L. Baruffi (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008). Originally published in 1940.
[61] Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Poesie mistiche*, ed. Alessandro Bausani (Milano: BUR-Mondadori, 2018), 173. Originally composed in the 13th century CE.
[62] Ibn Sīnā cit. in Muhammad U. Faruque, *Ibidem*.
[63] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, vol. 9 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāṯ al-ʿArabī, 2003), 326–332. Originally composed in the 13th century CE.
[64] Ida Zilio-Grandi, *Il Corano e il male* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2002).
[65] *Cfr.* Qurʾān, 2:168; 2:208; 6:142; 7:22; 12:5; 17:53; 36:60; 43:62.

however, since the *nafs* can be controlled via *ğihād* of the soul, it would be more reasonable to envision "liberating the *nafs* from the passivity induced by vice" rather than imagining an annihilating assault upon it. Indeed, if the *nafs* were truly annihilated, it would lose its capacity to reproach itself (Qurʾān, 75:2) and to be pacified, and no process of transcendence could ever occur.

The *nafs* is not an evil entity; rather, it resembles the "pearl" described in the eponymous gnostic hymn of Syriac-Egyptian tradition, in which the hero, intent on retrieving the jewel around which the serpent-dragon had coiled, enchanted the beast by invoking the name of his Father and waited patiently for it to fall asleep[66]. For this reason, *ğihād al-nafs* should be more appropriately understood as a "struggle on behalf of the soul," rather than a "struggle against" it.

What valiant and righteous knight would ever slay the maiden imprisoned by the dragon in order to liberate her from the beast's yoke?

Dragon, knight, and maiden have always belonged to the same narrative, and it is within this curious relational triangle that the allure of archetypal symbolism seems to resonate with the Islamic practice of *ğihād al-nafs*: if there were no dragon (*al-shayṭān*), there would be no need for a valiant combatant (*muğāhid*), and the precious maiden (*nafs*) would, presumably, receive far less attention.

The Neglected Centrality of the Spiritual Dimension in Secular Western Thought

The West is sharply criticized by the Islamic world for the lifestyles it promotes, deemed dissolute; for its excessive attraction to material goods, and for the secularization of knowledge it has enacted. Yet, although religion has ceased to condition Western life in the profound manner it maintained for centuries, interest in the cultivation of the spiritual dimension has persisted. It has merely transformed. What occurred is that, in tending to the soul, one began to seek new paths beyond the devotion to a creed whose principles no longer resonated. In the non-Muslim world, the soul, as a subject of inquiry, is engaged by scholars, free thinkers, healers, shamans, and even scientists, and over the years, it has been my privilege to encounter many of them, both in my country and abroad.

The soul has not been an exclusive concern of revealed religions. Nearly seventeen centuries before the insights of *al-Šayḫ al-Akbar*—which I have previously discussed—Socrates (fifth century BCE) was teaching his disciple Alcibiades that man is nothing other than his soul, and that the Delphic maxim "know thyself" (*gnôthi sautón*) commands man to gain insight into his soul, for it is the soul that man must care for, so that human affairs oriented toward virtue may be reflected in the divine mirror and self-knowledge may become possible[67]–It is worth noting here the recurrence of the allegorical motif of the "mirror".

In contemporary times, according to the educational perspective of John M.

[66] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 114–115. Originally published in 1958.
[67] *Cfr*. Platone, *Alcibiade Primo. Alcibiade Secondo*, trans. D. Puliga (Milano: BUR, 2016), 137, 139, 145, 149 (130c, 130e, 132c e 133c).

Dirkx[68], caring for the soul means nourishing it, observing it, and participating in its growth. It means recognizing its presence in relationships and learning contexts, and providing it with a voice through which it may express itself. In a manner closely aligned with the oblative logic contemplated by Islamic *ǧihād*, for Dirkx, learning that occurs through the soul may be considered transformative if it transcends the individualistic and constrictive vision of the ego and attributes meaning even to what we perceive as other than ourselves. In other words, if it is able to recognize and engage the deeper aspects of the individual and collective unconscious, while simultaneously valuing creativity and intuition.

Overseas, research by American psychologist Lisa Miller[69] challenges prevailing skepticism by exploring the natural spirituality of the human being, which she considers essential to mental health and personal well-being—especially when cultivated during the first two decades of life. The *Spirituality Mind Body Institute* (SMBI), founded by her at Teachers College, Columbia University, investigates the connections between psychology and spirituality. It promotes self-exploration with the aim of cultivating an international community of spiritual activists and visionaries who embody a mode of thought that is both stimulating and therapeutic, and affirms the value of transformative inner work, which is regarded as a catalyst for outward change. According to Miller, spiritual growth is a biological and psychological imperative that should be integrated into the developmental directives of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth shaped by environmental interaction. She argues that an inner spiritual compass is embedded in our genetic endowment and constitutes a primary source of resilience, preparing the individual to face obstacles, difficulties, and existential questions that may otherwise prove disorienting. From her team's research[70], it further emerges that an intimate relationship with the Divine is inversely associated with the use, dependence, or abuse of substances such as marijuana, cocaine, or other illicit drugs—unlike what occurs in certain jihadist militant groups, where the use of contraband drugs is even encouraged.

As this observation shows, strict doctrinal adherence, if devoid of the sacred dimension of divine relationship, proves ineffective even in preventing abuse.

Although "spirituality" and "introspection" are not synonymous, complementary insights may be drawn from the introspective pedagogy of Duccio Demetrio, who, in exploring the process of inner inquiry, identifies some crucial egoic intentionalities capable of strengthening self-reflective practice[71] and orienting the energies invested in the task of *ǧihād al-nafs*.

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[68] John M. Dirkx, "Nurturing Soul in Adult Learning," in Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice, ed. Patricia Cranton, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 74 (Summer 1997): 79–88.

[69] Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015).

[70] Lisa Miller, *Ibidem*; Lisa Miller, Mark Davies, and Steven Greenwald, "Religiosity and Substance Use and Abuse Among Adolescents in the National Comorbidity Survey," *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 39, no. 9 (2000): 1190–1197.

[71] Duccio Demetrio, *L'educazione interiore. Introduzione alla pedagogia introspettiva* (Firenze: RCS-La Nuova Italia, 2000).

Among the interior habits he examines, Demetrio identifies *autopathy* as the ability to access one's deepest intimacy and derive well-being and relief from inner dialogue—that is, from that same intrapersonal conversation solicited by the undertaking of *al-ğihād al-akbar*. Moreover, mastery, self-control, and regulation of one's actions, thoughts, and narratives are attributed by the author to the constant exercise of reflective thought through *self-inspection*, while *self-cognition* emerges as a *habitus* conducive to sustaining a continuous tension toward decoding circumstances that allow the individuals to test their abilities. At the same time, the awareness of belonging to a group (*self-inclusion*) and the will to care for oneself (*self-care*) focus attention on the relationship the individuals maintain with the community and on the personal domains they reserve for themselves. Meanwhile, *self-prospection*, by turning its gaze toward the horizon of the beyond toward which the step is directed, disposes the individuals to project themselves into the possibility offered by their vocational potential.

In summary, the self-educational intentionality proposed by Demetrio curiously unfolds through actions that the *muğāhid* is invited to undertake in the struggle against the vices of the *nafs*: engaging in inner dialogue and self-control; cultivating care for the self and the community; maintaining motivation to pursue the journey, focusing on favourable opportunities for realizing one's potential within a given ecosystem.

Prejudice: A Scratch on the Mirror

As the examples discussed throughout this work demonstrate, the spiritual quest is a transcultural phenomenon. While it retains a sense of sacredness, it is not confined to the domain of institutional religion, nor is it the exclusive concern of the Islamic world—as Muslims themselves often tend to assume. Indeed, insights emerging from non-Islamic traditions can offer valuable perspectives that help expand the boundaries of understanding around concepts that are deeply rooted in Islamic thought. These external viewpoints do not dilute the integrity of the tradition; rather, they illuminate it from angles that may otherwise remain unexplored.

The Muslim gaze, often focused on deficiency and deviation, would benefit from being complemented by a contemplative attention to the generative potential of shared reflection. Dialogue across perspectives, when pursued with the intention of forging a shared purpose, can yield mutual enrichment that is otherwise difficult to attain. Yet, the Muslim world continues to regard the West with caution, often engaging with it through selectively filtering lenses. Such guardedness, while historically understandable, risks obstructing the possibility of reciprocal growth through comparative experience and intellectual exchange. At the end of the day, it may be worth considering that, among the tendencies of the lower *nafs* that one is called to resist—such as greed, impatience, injustice, cowardice, arrogance, pride, envy, and miserliness—prejudice ought to be included. For it is precisely through the suspension of prejudice that human soul is able to recognize the sacred in the unfamiliar, and embrace the transformative power of inner striving, directed toward the actualization of a more elevated form of "shared" humanity.

CONCLUSION

Frequently mischaracterized as a harsh battle "against" the self, *ǧihād al-nafs* is more accurately conceived as a form of striving "in favour" of the soul: a path of purification that unveils inner imperfections and invites their correction, while encouraging the actualization of latent virtues and potential. It constitutes a disciplining practice aimed at gaining mastery over self-sabotaging instincts, fostering inner coherence, and restoring order within the domain of consciousness.

Far from being reduced to mere exertion, the act of striving is a conscious and agentive engagement oriented toward the flourishing of the human being. It calls for the optimal use of one's energies and talents so that both personal and collective evolution may unfold. The effort undertaken by the *muǧāhid* may ultimately reveal itself as a liberating process: a conscious release of unnecessary burdens and inner defects that distort and disfigure the soul's image. In this process, what is discerned as harmful is set aside in favour of what proves conducive to the evolution of consciousness.

Rather than an act of aggression, *ǧihād al-nafs* may be more fruitfully interpreted as a work of beautification: an effort to restore order and balance. It represents a process of refinement that calls upon Muslims to engage in self-confrontation and to take responsibility for their existence within a community to which they owe their support, in resonance with the words of the Prophet, who affirmed that the best of people are those who are most beneficial to others (*ḫayr al-nās ʾanfaʿuhum li al-nās*). The effort required by the undertaking of *ǧihād al-nafs*, far from being a solipsistic withdrawal, can be more aptly interpreted as a path of healing aimed at the restoration of the individual's inner integrity and the collective flourishing of humanity. The one who undertakes this form of *ǧihād* is called to descend into the shadowed depths of the psyche, to face the abysses of the *nafs*, its fragilities and deficiencies, in order to escape the grip they exert, which significantly hinders the soul's evolutionary growth.

This inner journey, though deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, resonates with broader human questions. The logic of attending the soul that underpins *ǧihād al-nafs* transcends religious boundaries and evokes a perennial human aspiration that extends beyond cultural and historical confines.

As this essay highlights, the efficacy of striving conveyed by *ǧihād al-nafs*, together with the ethic of care and attentiveness that Islam demands toward the inner dimension, finds meaningful echoes in the work of scholars operating within fields of knowledge external to the Islamic religious sphere, whose research is equally impassioned in its pursuit of human well-being. The resonance that emerges can offer genuine benefit, provided we allow ourselves to respond to its invitation to explore and value cultural otherness, not as a fleeting fascination with the exotic, but as a vital source of insight. Such a perspective may contribute to the shared effort to investigate the human being and their most profound inner concerns, while fostering a deeper engagement with the relational and spiritual dimensions that shape earthly existence.

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