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From Letter to Spirit: The Role of Spiritual Unveiling in Sufi Exegesis

Spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) is an inner knowledge acquired through mystical experience and divine gnosis by the virtue of which the heart is able to perceive the realities of the unseen. Spiritual unveiling represents the core essence of all Sufi sciences and the epitome of various spiritual stations. It is based on the Sufi differentiation between outer eyes and inner ones, while the former is created for the physical eye to see worldly matters, the latter is designed for the heart to witness divine realities. Despite the heated debate between Sufis and *ẓāhirī* scholars regarding the level of authenticity of spiritual unveiling and whether the divine knowledge resulting from it is legally binding, *kashf* remains one of the quintessential features which distinguishes Sufism from other Islamic sciences. This article aims to address the issue of spiritual unveiling in Sufi literature with special attention given to an unpublished manuscript of a treatise titled *al-Anwār fī kitāb kashf al-asrār* by Ruzbihān al-Baqlī written specifically on this subject. This manuscript is of great significance as it is most probably the only independent Sufi treatise that was written for the sole purpose of discussing the significance and authenticity of *kashf*. After establishing the essentiality of *kashf*, the discussion will be directed to explore the science of Sufi exegesis, being one of the most important examples of *kashf*. For Sufi exegetes *kashf* shapes the backbone of the science of Sufi esoteric hermeneutics which depends on exploring the spiritual gems of Quranic verses beyond the literal exoteric interpretation, which is largely based on speculative sciences and intellectual reasoning. The article will also discuss how esoteric exegesis flourished with the advent of a number of pioneering Sufi scholars who set in place a rigid criteria for unveiling to be accepted as part of Sufi hermeneutics, the most important of which is whenever a spiritual unveiling contradicts the exoteric understanding of a verse, the priority is always given to the literal meaning. The last part of the article will be dedicated to discussing the esoteric commentaries on some Quranic verses related to spiritual unveiling and how they were interpreted by different Sufi scholars. This section attempts to demonstrate how the concept of *kashf* goes beyond its theoretical understanding through studying its practical application in the science of Sufi hermeneutics.



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