

Syed AmirHossein Asghari

Fitra and Presential Consciousness: Qur'anic Ways of Knowing Beyond Physicalism

Drawing on Qur'anic foundations, my study develops a Sufi account of *fiṭra* as a mode of presential consciousness and a distinctive way of knowing in Islamic mystical thought. Engaging key Qur'anic passages and *ḥadīth* reports in dialogue with the later Sufi and Shī'ī mystical traditions, it argues that *fiṭra* is not only an innate orientation toward God, but also an inner epistemic capacity through which the human being can receive wisdom (*ḥikma*) and directly apprehend aspects of reality beyond representational thought. The study begins with close readings of Qur'anic verses such as 30:30 (“the *fiṭra* of God upon which He has created humankind”), 41:53 (“We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in themselves”), and 5:105 (“O you who have faith! Take care of your own souls”), alongside relevant *ḥadīth* on self-knowledge (“whoever knows his soul knows his Lord”), wisdom, and the heart. On this basis, the paper reconstructs a Sufi map of the inner life, grounded in Qur'anic foundations, in which self-knowledge (*ma'rifat al-nafs*), the heart (*qalb*), and the inner disposition of *fiṭra* form the primary locus of a presential, non-conceptual knowledge distinct from acquired (*ḥuṣūlī*) cognition.

Bringing these scriptural foundations into dialogue with insights from the Islamic intellectual and mystical traditions—including later discussions of *ʿilm al-ḥuḍūrī*, Sufi accounts of the heart and imagination, and selected reflections by figures such as Mullā Ṣadrā and ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī—the paper proposes *fiṭra* as a methodological concept: a disciplined way of turning consciousness back upon itself through remembrance, contemplation, and ethical purification so that divine wisdom can be received. Revelation and the divine commands are thus read as a pedagogy designed to awaken, purify, and guide *fiṭra* toward *ḥikma*.

In the final part, the paper places this Sufi account of *fiṭra* and presential consciousness, grounded in Qur'anic foundations, in conversation with contemporary debates on religious experience and the philosophy of mind. It asks how such a model might speak to current discussions of non-reductive accounts of consciousness, including research on near-death and out-of-body experiences, altered states, and the limits of physicalist explanations. At the same time, it raises classical Sufi and Qur'anic questions about discernment and authority: how to distinguish authentic unveiling from illusion or pathology, and how to situate presential knowledge within broader hierarchies of proof, theology, and communal guidance. In this way, the paper suggests that *fiṭra*, understood as a presential mode of knowing rooted in revelation yet oriented beyond physicalism, offers a fruitful framework for rethinking “ways of knowing” in both Islamic thought and contemporary conversations on consciousness.



Syed AmirHossein Asghari
Indiana University Bloomington

Dr. Seyed AmirHossein Asghari is Senior Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of the Middle East, Indiana University Bloomington, and was previously Research Associate in the Department of Religion at Baylor University. He holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern Studies and Religion from Indiana University (2022). His work spans religion, Qur'anic studies, interreligious thought, and Sufism, with particular attention to Islamic philosophy and mysticism. He is the author of *Sufism and Philosophy in the Contemporary Shia Seminary: Scholars and Mystics* (Bloomsbury / I.B. Tauris, 2025). His current research projects address natural law and interreligious understanding, presential consciousness and *fiṭra* in Qur'anic epistemology, and the Sino-Islamic intellectual tradition of the Han Kitāb. In 2025 he received the Luce–AAR Advancing Public Scholarship Grant from the American Academy of Religion.