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The Irfani Approach in Qur'anic Interpretation: Conceptual Foundations, Applications, and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

The *irfani* approach represents one of the epistemological traditions in Qur'anic interpretation that emphasizes spiritual experience, purification of the soul, and intuitive knowledge (*kashf*) as means of accessing the inner dimensions of divine revelation. Despite its significant position within the Islamic exegetical tradition, this approach remains a subject of debate concerning its methodological validity, interpretive boundaries, and relevance to contemporary Islamic studies. This study aims to analyze the conceptual foundations of the *irfani* approach, its forms of application within the tradition of Sufi exegesis, and its relevance to the development of contemporary Islamic studies. Employing a library research method with a qualitative-descriptive approach, this study analyzes data through content analysis of classical and contemporary literature related to Islamic epistemology and Sufi interpretation. The findings demonstrate that the *irfani* approach possesses distinct characteristics from the *bayani* and *burhani* approaches, as it is oriented toward spiritual experience as a source of knowledge. Its application has developed into two major forms: *ishari* Sufi exegesis and *nazhari* Sufi exegesis, each of which reflects different methodological characteristics, levels of scholarly acceptance, and epistemological implications. This study further reveals that the *irfani* approach remains relevant in contemporary Islamic studies due to its contribution to spiritual development, character formation, and the expansion of Qur'anic hermeneutical horizons, while maintaining the principles of Islamic exegesis and religious law as methodological foundations for understanding divine revelation.

Keywords: Qur'anic Interpretation, Irfani Approach, Tafsir Methodology, Qur'anic Exegesis, Islamic Epistemology

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INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an, as the primary source of Islamic teachings, has remained a dynamic subject of scholarly inquiry throughout the history of Islamic intellectual tradition. The development of Qur'anic interpretive methodologies demonstrates that understanding the Qur'an has never been confined to a single approach; rather, it has continuously evolved in response to shifts in scholarly paradigms, social contexts, and the changing needs of Muslim communities.⁶ From the classical to the contemporary period, Muslim exegetes have employed diverse epistemological frameworks to uncover the meanings of divine revelation, ranging from transmission-based interpretation (*tafsir bi al-ma'thur*) and rational interpretation (*tafsir bi al-ra'y*) to various exegetical orientations shaped by specific disciplines such as Islamic jurisprudence, linguistics, philosophy, science, and Sufism.⁷ This diversity reflects the fact that Qur'anic interpretation is an ongoing intellectual enterprise that continually engages with the advancement of knowledge and the realities of human life, giving rise to a wide range of interpretive traditions distinguished by their respective methodologies, characteristics, and objectives.

Within the study of Islamic epistemology, the development of Qur'anic interpretation is frequently explained through three major epistemological systems: *bayani*, *burhani*, and *irfani*. Popularized by Muḥammad 'Abid al-Jabiri, these three approaches represent distinct modes of acquiring knowledge within the Islamic intellectual tradition.⁸ The *bayani* approach is grounded in the authority of revealed texts and linguistic analysis, treating the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the principles of the Arabic language as the primary sources of knowledge. The *burhani* approach, by contrast, relies upon reason, logic, and demonstrative argumentation as the principal means of establishing truth. The *irfani* approach, meanwhile, is founded upon spiritual experience, purification of the soul, and intuitive unveiling (*kashf*) as pathways to understanding the inner dimensions of divine revelation.⁹ These three approaches represent not merely methodological differences but also distinct epistemological paradigms that have shaped the development of Islamic scholarship for centuries.

Among these three epistemological traditions, the *irfani* approach occupies a distinctive position because it seeks to integrate intellectual understanding of the Qur'an with the spiritual experience of its interpreter. Emerging primarily within the Sufi tradition, this approach gave rise to a distinctive genre of Qur'anic exegesis known as Sufi *tafsir*, which is generally classified into *tafsir sufi ishari* (allusive Sufi

⁶ Mannā' Khalīl al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2000), 323–365; Muḥammad Husayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2000), 1:13–45.

⁷ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*. (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li al-Kitāb), 1974, 4:191–230; AS Akhyar, et al. *Dasar-Dasar Ilmu Tafsir*. (Penerbit Lakeisha), 2026.

⁸ Muḥammad 'Abid al-Jābirī, *Bunyat al-'Aql al-'Arabī: Dirāsah Taḥlīliyyah Naqdiyyah li Nuzūm al-Ma'rifah fī al-Thaqāfah al-'Arabiyyah* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 2009), 383–410.

⁹ Abū al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd ibn al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1989), 279–310.

exegesis) and *tafsir sufi nazari* (theoretical or philosophical Sufi exegesis). Through this perspective, the Qur'an is understood not merely as a normative text that establishes legal and theological doctrines but also as divine guidance directing humanity toward spiritual refinement and nearness to God.¹⁰ Consequently, the *irfani* approach seeks to uncover the inner meanings (*al-ma'ani al-batinah*) believed to lie beyond the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text without negating its outward significance as guidance for human life. This perspective has made the *irfani* approach a significant contributor to the richness of the Islamic exegetical tradition, particularly in cultivating moral character, spiritual purification, and the inner dimension of religious life.¹¹

Nevertheless, the *irfani* approach remains one of the most debated trends in Qur'anic studies. Many Muslim scholars have accepted *tafsir sufi ishari*, provided that its interpretations do not contradict the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic text, the principles of Islamic law, or the established rules of the Arabic language.¹² Others, however, have criticized forms of *irfani* interpretation that rely excessively on subjective spiritual experience, intuitive insight, or metaphysical speculation, arguing that such interpretations risk departing from the linguistic and historical contexts of the Qur'anic text.¹³ These debates demonstrate the complex position of the *irfani* approach within the history of Qur'anic exegesis. On the one hand, it offers profound spiritual insights that cannot always be attained through textual or rational approaches alone. On the other hand, it raises important methodological questions concerning epistemological validity, interpretive objectivity, and the legitimacy of employing spiritual experience as a source of religious knowledge.

In the context of contemporary Islamic studies, the study of the *irfani* approach has become increasingly relevant as scholarly attention to spirituality continues to grow. Advances in science, technological innovation, and globalization have transformed modern societies, yet these developments have also generated moral challenges, existential crises, and spiritual emptiness.¹⁴ Within this context, the *irfani* approach offers an alternative perspective by emphasizing that the Qur'an should be understood not only as a source of legal norms and intellectual reasoning but also as a means of inner transformation capable of shaping human character,

¹⁰ Zaduna Fiddarain, et al. "Sufistic Interpretation and its Influence in Islamic Spirituality: the Main characteristics of Sufistic Interpretation and its Method of Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'an." *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies* 7, no. 4 (2024): 1063-1084.

¹¹ Muhammad Irfani, et al. "Methods of interpretation: Epistemological views of bayani, burhani, and irfani." *INTIHA: Islamic Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (2025): 273-284.

¹² Habib and Muslich Shabir. "Al-Ghazali's Qur'anic Sufi Hermeneutics: Study on the Story of Abraham In Search of God." *Kalam* 15, no. 2 (2021): 121-144.

¹³ Maryam Musharraf. "A Study on the Sufi Interpretation of Qur'an and the Theory of Hermeneutic." *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 11, no. 1 (2013): 33-47.

¹⁴ Sanusi Lafiagi Haruna. "Contemporary Approaches to Qur'anic Hermeneutics." *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Sains Dan Humaniora* 8, no. 2 (2024): 314-318.

ethical consciousness, and spiritual awareness.¹⁵ Reexamining the *irfani* approach, therefore, is not merely a historical endeavor to understand the Sufi exegetical tradition but also an attempt to evaluate its contribution to addressing the spiritual needs of contemporary Muslim societies while remaining faithful to the methodological principles established within the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis.

Based on this background, this article aims to analyze the *irfani* approach to Qur'anic interpretation from three principal perspectives: its conceptual foundations, its practical application within the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis, and its relevance to contemporary Islamic studies. Specifically, this study examines the epistemological characteristics of the *irfani* approach, distinguishes it from the *bayani* and *burhani* approaches, explores its implementation in both *tafsir sufi ishari* and *tafsir sufi nazhari*, and evaluates its strengths, limitations, and contributions to the development of contemporary Qur'anic studies. Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the position of the *irfani* approach within the Islamic exegetical tradition while demonstrating that epistemological diversity constitutes one of the enduring intellectual strengths that continues to enrich the dynamic interpretation of the Qur'an across different historical periods.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research approach. A library research design was selected because the object of the study focuses on the concepts, theories, and development of the *irfani* approach to Qur'anic interpretation as presented in both classical and contemporary literature. The research data were collected through a comprehensive review and analysis of written sources relevant to the research topic, including Sufi tafsir works, books on Ulum al-Qur'an, publications on Islamic epistemology, and scholarly articles discussing the *bayani*, *burhani*, and *irfani* approaches to Qur'anic studies. The primary sources consist of classical and contemporary Sufi exegetical works, while the secondary sources include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and previous studies that provide theoretical and contextual support for analyzing the development and contemporary relevance of the *irfani* approach.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify, classify, and interpret the principal concepts related to the *irfani* approach in Qur'anic interpretation. The analytical process began by examining various definitions and characteristics of the *irfani* approach presented in the literature, followed by a comparative analysis with the *bayani* and *burhani* approaches to highlight their respective epistemological foundations. The study then investigated the practical application of the *irfani* approach within the tradition of Sufi exegesis, encompassing both *tafsir ishari* and *tafsir nazhari*, while also examining the perspectives of Muslim scholars regarding the strengths and limitations of these two exegetical models.

¹⁵ Ariani Barroroh Baried and Mulawarman Hannase. "The Irfani concept in sufism and its relation to Islamic philosophy." *Rausyan Fikr: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Ushuluddin Dan Filsafat* 17, no. 2 (2021): 229-256.

Through this analytical framework, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual foundations of the irfani approach, its implementation in Qur'anic interpretation, and its relevance to the development of contemporary Islamic studies in an objective, systematic, and academically rigorous manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Definition of the Irfani Approach

The *irfani* approach to Qur'anic interpretation is an exegetical method that places spiritual experience, purification of the soul, and inner knowledge at the center of understanding divine revelation. The term *irfani* is derived from '*irfan*, which is closely associated with *ma'rifah*, a form of knowledge attained not merely through rational inquiry or textual analysis, but through spiritual proximity to God. Within this framework, the Qur'an is understood to possess not only an outward (*zahir*) dimension accessible through language and reason, but also an inward (*batin*) dimension that can only be unveiled through purity of heart, spiritual discipline, remembrance of God (*dzikr*), and direct spiritual experience.¹⁶ Consequently, the *irfani* approach developed primarily within the Sufi tradition and gave rise to the genre of *tafsir ishari*, which seeks to uncover the spiritual messages underlying the literal wording of the Qur'an. From this perspective, the Qur'anic text extends beyond its linguistic structure and legal implications to convey divine signs that speak to the deepest dimensions of the human soul. Qur'anic interpretation, therefore, serves not only to explain the textual meaning of revelation but also to facilitate spiritual transformation and the cultivation of inner consciousness.

a) The Difference Between the Irfani and Bayani Approaches

The *irfani* approach differs fundamentally from the *bayani* approach. The *bayani* approach is grounded in the authority of the text, the principles of the Arabic language, grammar, transmitted reports, and the classical sciences of Qur'anic exegesis. Within this framework, the meaning of a verse is derived through linguistic analysis, consideration of its historical context (*asbab al-nuzul*), variant Qur'anic readings (*qira'at*), and the explanations transmitted from the Prophet, his Companions, and classical Muslim exegetes. Truth is therefore understood to depend upon accurately interpreting the text in accordance with established linguistic and scholarly principles. Consequently, the *bayani* approach emphasizes textual objectivity and methodological rigor to ensure that interpretation remains faithful to the linguistic boundaries of revelation. The *irfani* approach, however, does not stop at the literal dimension of the text. Instead, it maintains that the Qur'an contains deeper layers of meaning that continue to unfold according to the spiritual

¹⁶ Syamsul Rijal and Rasyidin Muhammad. "Irfani Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy Perspective." *Journal Analytica Islamica* 10, no. 1 (2021): 25-38.

refinement of the interpreter.¹⁷ While the *bayani* approach seeks to understand what the text explicitly states, the *irfani* approach seeks to uncover what the text spiritually signifies to the human heart. As a result, *irfani* interpretation is generally more symbolic, contemplative, and spiritually oriented than the normative and text-centered methodology of the *bayani* tradition.

b) The Difference Between the Irfani and Burhani Approaches

The *irfani* approach also differs significantly from the *burhani* approach. The *burhani* approach is founded upon reason, logic, and demonstrative philosophical argument as the primary means of understanding reality and interpreting revelation. Within the *burhani* tradition, human reason functions as the principal instrument for constructing systematic and demonstrable knowledge. Consequently, this approach developed predominantly within the traditions of Islamic philosophy and rational theology. Exegetes employing the *burhani* approach tend to interpret Qur'anic verses through logical reasoning, causal analysis, and philosophical inquiry. In contrast, the *irfani* approach does not regard rational demonstration as the primary path to knowledge. Instead, it emphasizes inner spiritual experience and intuitive insight as the means of attaining truth. Whereas the *burhani* approach seeks truth through rational demonstration, the *irfani* approach pursues it through spiritual witnessing (*mushahadah*) and inner unveiling (*kashf*).¹⁸ Thus, while the *bayani* approach is centered on the text, the *burhani* approach is centered on reason, and the *irfani* approach is centered on spiritual experience.

These three approaches to Qur'anic interpretation collectively represent the major epistemological traditions within Islamic thought. They demonstrate that religious knowledge may be acquired through language, reason, and the purified heart, although each approach operates according to its own methodology, epistemological assumptions, and interpretive boundaries. Historically, the *irfani* approach emerged alongside the development of the Sufi tradition within Islamic civilization, particularly from the third century AH onward, when spiritual thought became increasingly systematized through the teachings of prominent Sufi figures such as al-Muhasibi, al-Junayd al-Baghdadi, and Sahl ibn Abd Allah al-Tustari. During this period, spiritual experience, self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), and *ma'rifah* (gnostic knowledge) came to be regarded as essential means of attaining a deeper understanding of divine revelation.¹⁹ As the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis evolved, these spiritual principles were gradually incorporated into the interpretive tradition by Sufi exegetes seeking to uncover the inner dimensions of the Qur'an without neglecting its outward meaning. This development eventually gave rise to

¹⁷ Azrial Syahrur Ramadhan. "The Relations Between Epistemology System of Bayani, Burhani, and Irfani." *ABHATS: Jurnal Islam Ulil Albab* 6, no. 1 (2025).

¹⁸ Muhammad Irfani, et al. "Methods of interpretation: Epistemological views of bayani, burhani, and irfani." *INTIHA: Islamic Education Journal* 2, no. 2 (2025): 273-284.

¹⁹ A. N. A. Sifa. "Tracing the Historical Roots and the Development of Islamic Epistemology from the Early to Modern Periods (A Study of Bayani, Burhani, 'Irfani)." In *International Conference of Moslem Society*, vol. 3 (2019): 117-128

the distinctive tradition of Sufi exegesis, encompassing both *tafsir ishari* and *tafsir nazhari*, which has remained an important component of the Islamic exegetical heritage up to the present day.²⁰

2. Forms of Irfani Exegesis

Within the tradition of *irfani* Qur'anic interpretation, Muslim scholars generally distinguish between two principal forms of exegesis: *tafsir sufi ishari* and *tafsir sufi nazhari*. Although both emerged from the Islamic spiritual tradition and seek to uncover the inner dimensions of the Qur'an, they differ significantly in their characteristics, methodologies, and levels of acceptance among Muslim scholars.

a) *Tafsir Sufi Ishari*

Tafsir sufi ishari is a form of Qur'anic exegesis that seeks to uncover the spiritual indications embedded within the Qur'anic text without rejecting its outward (*zahir*) meaning. In this approach, Qur'anic verses are first understood according to the principles of the Arabic language and the framework of Islamic law, after which they are enriched with spiritual meanings considered relevant to the soul's journey toward God. Because it preserves the connection between the inward interpretation and the apparent meaning of the text, *tafsir ishari* has been accepted by many Sunni scholars, provided that its interpretations do not contradict Islamic creed, the principles of the Sharia, or established linguistic conventions.²¹ This form of exegesis generally arises from spiritual experience, *dzikir*, *mujahadah*, and profound contemplation of the Qur'an. Among the most prominent works representing the *ishari* tradition are:

- *Tafsir al-Tustari*. One of the earliest surviving Sufi commentaries on the Qur'an, characterized by concise explanations emphasizing spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and inner refinement. It was written by Sahl ibn Abd Allah al-Tustari (d. 283 AH), an early Sufi master from Tustar in Persia.²²
- *Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*. A collection of transmitted Sufi interpretations and spiritual insights on Qur'anic verses, compiled by Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412 AH).²³
- *Lata'if al-Isharat*. One of the most influential works in the Sunni Sufi tradition, renowned for harmonizing the outward meaning of the Qur'an with balanced

²⁰ Muhammad Thoriqul Islam, et al. "Historical Criticism of the Hermeneutical Approach in the Interpretation of the Qur'an." *Religia* 28, no. 2 (2025): 269-298.

²¹ Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1976), 2:261-289.

²² Sahl ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil 'Uyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002), 1:3-8.

²³ Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-Tafsīr*, ed. Sayyid 'Imrān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 1:3-10.

spiritual reflection. It was authored by Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (d. 465 AH).²⁴

- *Ruh al-Bayan*. A comprehensive Sufi commentary distinguished by its extensive discussions of ethics, wisdom, and the spiritual dimensions of Qur'anic verses. It was written by Ismail Haqqi al-Bursawi (d. 1137 AH).²⁵

b) *Tafsir Sufi Nazhari*

Tafsir sufi nazhari is more closely associated with philosophical and metaphysical speculation. In this approach, Qur'anic verses are frequently interpreted through concepts such as cosmology, ontology, emanation, and other metaphysical doctrines developed within the tradition of philosophical Sufism. As a result, Qur'anic passages are often understood symbolically, sometimes extending far beyond their original linguistic meaning. For this reason, *tafsir nazhari* has frequently been criticized for being overly speculative and for imposing philosophical theories upon the Qur'anic text. Some Muslim scholars argue that such interpretations risk obscuring the original meaning of revelation unless they remain firmly grounded in the established principles of Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic scholarship.²⁶ Representative works associated with the *nazhari* tradition include:

- *Tafsir Ibn 'Arabi*. A commentary rich in the concepts of *wahdat al-wujud*, metaphysical symbolism, and esoteric interpretation. Although traditionally attributed to Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638 AH), the direct authorship of this work remains a matter of scholarly debate.²⁷
- *Ta'wilat al-Qur'an*. Strongly influenced by the philosophical thought of Ibn 'Arabi, this commentary is widely recognized as a major example of the philosophical-*irfani* tradition. It was written by Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (d. 730 AH).²⁸
- *Al-Ta'wilat al-Najmiyyah*. A commentary characterized by symbolic and metaphysical interpretations within the Kubrawiyyah Sufi tradition. It is attributed to Najmuddin al-Dayah al-Razi (d. 654 AH) and was subsequently expanded by later Kubrawi scholars, particularly Ala al-Dawlah al-Simnani (d. 736 AH).²⁹
- *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*. Although not a Qur'anic commentary in the conventional sense, Ibn 'Arabi's monumental work constitutes one of the principal intellectual foundations for the development of *tafsir sufi nazhari*,

²⁴ Abū al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Basyūnī (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1981), 1:3–15.

²⁵ Ismā'īl Haqqī al-Bursawī, *Rūḥ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 1:5–12.

²⁶ MH al-Dzahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1976), 2:289–351.

²⁷ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 1:5–15.

²⁸ 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 1:3–12.

²⁹ Najm al-Dīn Dāyah al-Rāzī and 'Alā' al-Dawlah al-Simnānī, *al-Ta'wīlāt al-Najmiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2009), 1:3–12.

particularly through its discussions of metaphysics, divine manifestation (*tajalli*), and the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*).³⁰

The existence of both *tafsir sufi ishari* and *tafsir sufi nazhari* demonstrates that the Qur'an has consistently been approached through a broad spiritual horizon within the Islamic intellectual tradition. *Tafsir ishari* illustrates how divine revelation can inspire spiritual purification and moral cultivation, whereas *tafsir nazhari* reflects the efforts of Sufi philosophers to understand the metaphysical relationship between humanity, the cosmos, and God. The distinction between these two forms of exegesis also highlights the dynamic interaction between textual authority, rational inquiry, and spiritual experience within Islamic epistemology. Consequently, the study of *irfani* exegesis is essential not only for understanding the historical development of Sufi tafsir but also for appreciating how Muslims have explored the profound spiritual dimensions of the Qur'an throughout the history of Islamic thought.

3. General Characteristics of the Irfani Approach

The Irfani method rests on the conviction that the meaning of the Qur'an does not end at the literal level but contains inner, esoteric dimensions (*batin*). The unveiling of these meanings depends on the purity of the interpreter's heart and the depth of their spiritual connection with the Divine source. According to Ibn 'Arabi, the Qur'an functions as a mirror reflecting the divine reality within the soul of the servant.³¹ Unlike rational or linguistic interpretations, the Irfani approach cannot be fully rationalized or debated logically, as it arises from inner illumination rather than intellectual deduction. Knowledge in Irfani epistemology is regarded as a divine gift (*'ilm ladunni*), bestowed through God's will (*iradah*). Thus, true understanding emerges from the refinement of the spirit and the purification of the heart. When the heart becomes pure, God imparts knowledge directly to it.³² The Irfani exegesis is characterized by essential features:

- a) Spiritual epistemology: knowledge is acquired through spiritual purification, divine illumination (*kashf*), and direct inner experience rather than through reason or textual analysis alone.
- b) Inner meaning (*batin*): the Qur'an is understood to contain deeper spiritual meanings beyond its outward linguistic and literal sense.
- c) Symbolic interpretation: Qur'anic expressions are interpreted as symbols that convey profound spiritual and metaphysical realities.
- d) Personal spiritual experience: the interpretation of the Qur'an is enriched by the exegete's personal experience of spiritual discipline, contemplation, and closeness to God.

³⁰ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 1:47-75.

³¹ S. Rijal and R. Muhammad. "Irfani Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy Perspective." *Journal Analytica Islamica* 10, no. 1 (2021): 25-38.

³² A. B. Baried and M. Hannase. "The Irfani concept in sufism and its relation to Islamic philosophy." *Rausyan Fikr: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Ushuluddin Dan Filsafat* 17, no. 2 (2021): 229-256.

- e) Moral transformation: the primary aim of interpretation is to cultivate ethical character, purify the soul, and strengthen one's relationship with Allah.
- f) Harmony between *zahir* and *batin*: The outward meaning of the Qur'an is preserved while its inward spiritual significance is explored without contradicting the apparent text.

The language of Irfani interpretation is frequently metaphorical and symbolic, conveyed through *tamthil* (analogy) and *isharah* (subtle illusion) rather than through purely textual mechanisms. Such a style reflects the Sufi belief that divine truths transcend rational articulation and must be experienced inwardly.³³

4. Application of the Irfani Approach in Interpreting Qur'anic Verses

To further demonstrate the depth and symbolic nature of Irfani interpretation, this discussion presents specific examples analyzed through comparative hermeneutical observation. The focus lies on how Irfani readings differ from rational or linguistic interpretations by uncovering spiritual meanings embedded within metaphoric expressions. To illustrate the practical application of the Irfani approach, several Qur'anic verses may be examined:

- 1) Al-Hadid: 4 and Qaf: 16

وَهُوَ مَعَكُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ

"And He is with you wherever you are..."

وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

"And We are closer to him than his jugular vein."

From the perspective of irfani exegesis, the statements in Quran 50:16 and 57:4, are understood not merely as affirmations of God's omniscience and perpetual supervision, but also as indications of the existential nearness between God and His servants. Sufi exegetes such as al-Qushayri and Ibn 'Arabi explain that this nearness does not imply an ontological union (*hulul*) or God's physical indwelling within creation. Rather, it signifies the continual manifestation of God's attributes, mercy, and providential care encompassing all existence. Through the spiritual experience of *mushahadah*, a seeker (*salik*) who has undergone *tazkiyat al-nafs*, *mujahadah*, and *dhikr* comes to realize that no aspect of existence is ever separated from the Divine presence and oversight.³⁴ Such awareness gives rise to the spiritual state of *ihsan*, in which one worships God as though seeing Him, while remaining fully conscious that God always observes His servants.

Furthermore, irfani exegesis regards these two verses as an invitation to cultivate *hudur ma'a Allah* (constant awareness of God's presence) in every aspect of life. Within the framework of *wahdat al-wujud*, Ibn 'Arabi interprets divine nearness and companionship as indications that the entire cosmos serves as the locus of the

³³ Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, *Bunyāt al-'Aql al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabīyyah, 2009), 383–410.

³⁴ Abū al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Basyūnī (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1981), 3:380–382.

tajalli (self-disclosure) of God's names and attributes, making every created being a sign that directs humanity toward Him. By contrast, Sunni Sufi exegetes such as al-Qushayri emphasize that the inner meanings of these verses must remain within the boundaries of orthodox Islamic doctrine, understanding divine nearness as the proximity of God's mercy, assistance, and perpetual awareness rather than as an ontological union between the Creator and creation.³⁵ Accordingly, the irfani approach understands these verses as a spiritual foundation for cultivating *muraqabah*, deepening *ma'rifah*, and fostering the awareness that the journey toward God begins with an ever-present consciousness of His nearness.

2) The Symbolism of Divine Light (An-Nur: 35)

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

"Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth..."

For rational exegetes, the verse is often understood metaphorically as divine guidance. However, Irfani commentators such as al-Qushayri interpret "Light" as an indication of divine illumination (*tajalli al-anwar al-ilahiyyah*) within the purified heart. The "lamp" and the "glass" symbolize the human heart that receives and reflects spiritual knowledge and divine presence.¹ In Irfani interpretation, the "Light" (*Nur*) represents not merely intellectual guidance but a deeper spiritual illumination attained through purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and proximity to God. Al-Qushayri views the parable of the lamp and glass as symbols of the purified heart, which becomes receptive to divine guidance and experiential knowledge (*ma'rifah*).³⁶

Table 1. Comparasion between Rational's and Irfani's Approach

Approach	Exegete	Interpretive Focus	Arabic Expression	Meaning Summary
Rational (<i>bi al-ra'yi</i>)	Al-Razi	Metaphorical guidance and knowledge	النُّورُ : الْهُدَى وَالْمَعْرِفَةُ	"Light" signifies divine guidance and knowledge that directs human intellect.
Irfani (<i>Sufi</i>)	Al-Qusyairi	Spiritual manifestation of Divine presence	النُّورُ : تَجَلَّى الصِّفَاتِ الإِلَهِيَّةِ فِي قَلْبِ الْعَارِفِ	"Light" is the divine manifestation reflected in the heart of the gnostic.

3) The Concept of the Tranquil Soul (Al-Fajr: 27-30)

يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً

"O serene soul, return to your Lord."

Ibn 'Arabi interprets this passage through a mystical framework in which the address to the "tranquil soul" (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*) represents the soul's

³⁵ Ibn al-'Arabi, *Tafsir Ibn 'Arabi*, ed. Ahmad Farid al-Mazidi (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 2:233-235.

³⁶ Abu al-Qasim 'Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, *Lat'if al-Isharat*, ed. Ibrahim al-Basyuni (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah al-'Ammah li al-Kitab, 1981), 2:456-459.

completion of its spiritual journey toward proximity to God. The command “return” (*irji’i*) is understood not merely as a reference to physical death, but as an indication of the soul’s return to its divine origin after undergoing purification and spiritual realization. In the Irfani framework, the “tranquil soul” refers to the soul that has overcome attachment to multiplicity and attained a state of spiritual annihilation (*fana’*) and realization of divine unity.³⁷ By contrast, linguistic and ethical exegetes, such as al-Tabari and al-Qurtubi, emphasize meanings related to faith, obedience, divine pleasure, and moral tranquility. The Irfani interpretation therefore expands the verse from an ethical description of the righteous soul into a metaphysical reflection on the soul’s encounter with divine reality.³⁸

4) The Universal Presence of the Divine (Al-Baqarah: 115)

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ

“To Allah belong the East and the West; wherever you turn, there is the Face of Allah.”

Within Irfani interpretation, this verse is understood as indicating the universality of Divine presence and the possibility of recognizing the signs of God in every aspect of existence. While the literal (*zahiri*) interpretation relates the verse to the issue of prayer direction (*qiblah*) and the legal circumstances surrounding it, mystical commentators perceive the expression “wherever you turn, there is the Face of God” as an indication of divine manifestation (*tajalli*) and spiritual witnessing (*shuhud*).³⁹ In the metaphysical framework of Ibn ‘Arabi, this verse is further interpreted as reflecting the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), where all created beings manifest the signs and attributes of the Divine Reality.⁴⁰ Rational and juridical exegetes, such as al-Tabari and al-Qurtubi, primarily emphasize the legal and contextual meaning of the verse, particularly its relation to prayer orientation.⁴¹ The Irfani reading therefore extends the meaning beyond physical direction toward a spiritual and ontological reflection on the relationship between God and creation.

³⁷ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Arabī*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001), 2:421–423.

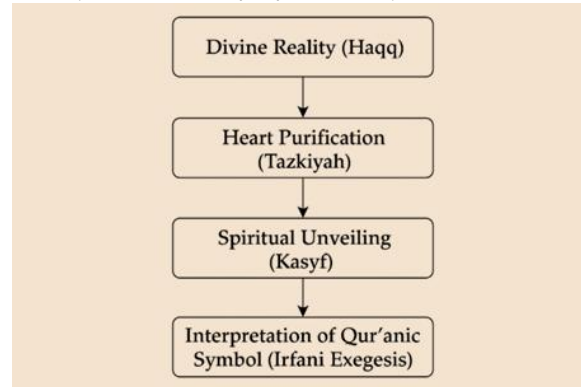
³⁸ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajr, 2001), 24:414–420; Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2006), 22:279–285.

³⁹ Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Basyūnī (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1981), 1:101–103.

⁴⁰ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 2:502–505.

⁴¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajr, 2001), 2:527–533; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2006), 2:79–82.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of Irfani Interpretation (Al-Baqarah: 115)*



In summary, the Irfani approach transforms the act of exegesis into a process of inner realization, where the exegete encounters divine meanings through spiritual unveiling rather than mere intellectual analysis. This discussion highlights that the Irfani approach not only deepens the interpretive dimension of the Qur'an but also provides a metaphysical framework that integrates reason, spirituality, and ontology. By including symbolic, textual, and experiential layers of meaning, Irfani exegesis transforms Qur'anic interpretation into an act of spiritual realization.

5. Strengths and Limitations of the Irfani Approach

The *irfani* approach to Qur'anic interpretation possesses several strengths that have established it as an important tradition within the Islamic intellectual heritage, particularly in uncovering the spiritual dimensions of the Qur'an. Unlike the *bayani* approach, which emphasizes linguistic analysis and transmitted reports, or the *burhani* approach, which prioritizes rational inquiry and logical argumentation, the *irfani* approach seeks to cultivate a living religious experience through an inward engagement with divine revelation. Its primary strength lies in its ability to present the Qur'an not merely as an object of academic inquiry but also as a source of moral formation, purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), and the strengthening of the believer's relationship with God.⁴² Consequently, *irfani* exegesis frequently highlights themes such as sincerity, patience, trust in God (*tawakkul*), and divine love, offering profound spiritual insights that inspire personal transformation. From this perspective, the Qur'an is understood not only as a guide for outward conduct but also as a means of cultivating inner consciousness and shaping the moral character of the believer.

Another significant strength of the *irfani* approach lies in its capacity to demonstrate the richness and depth of Qur'anic meaning. Sufi exegetical tradition maintains that divine revelation contains multiple layers of meaning that extend beyond the literal sense of the text, including subtle spiritual indications (*isharat*) that may be perceived according to an individual's level of spiritual maturity. This perspective enriches the Islamic exegetical tradition by offering contemplative

⁴² MH al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1976), 2:261–289.

insights without necessarily contradicting the outward meaning of the Qur'anic text. In many *tafsir ishari* works, these spiritual interpretations function as complementary rather than alternative readings, enabling readers to integrate legal, ethical, and spiritual dimensions into a more comprehensive understanding of revelation. Furthermore, the *irfani* approach contributes significantly to the development of Islamic character education by placing the purification of the heart (*qalb*) at the center of the interpretive process.⁴³ Accordingly, Qur'anic interpretation is understood not only as an intellectual exercise but also as a means of promoting moral development and spiritual transformation in everyday life.

Despite these strengths, the *irfani* approach has also been the subject of substantial criticism among Muslim scholars. The most fundamental concern relates to its high degree of subjectivity. Unlike the *bayani* approach, which relies on established linguistic principles, or the *burhani* approach, which employs logical reasoning as a means of verification, the *irfani* approach depends largely upon the interpreter's personal spiritual experience and intuitive insight. Experiences such as *kashf* (spiritual unveiling), *ilham* (divine inspiration), and *mushahadah* (spiritual witnessing) cannot be empirically tested or independently verified, making them difficult to establish as universally valid sources of knowledge.⁴⁴ This characteristic allows for considerable diversity in interpretation, and in some cases may lead to readings that bear only a limited relationship to the linguistic context or historical circumstances surrounding the revelation of a verse. For this reason, many Muslim scholars maintain that inward interpretations should remain grounded in the outward meaning of the Qur'an and should never contradict the fundamental principles of Islamic creed or the Sharia.

A further limitation is particularly evident in *tafsir sufi nazhari*, which is often influenced by metaphysical doctrines and philosophical Sufism. In certain cases, Qur'anic verses are interpreted through theoretical constructs such as *wahdat al-wujud*, emanationist cosmology, or philosophical symbolism, resulting in interpretations that appear highly speculative and significantly removed from the original linguistic context of the text. Such interpretive models have been criticized by many Qur'anic scholars for imposing external philosophical concepts upon divine revelation and potentially obscuring the intended meaning of the Qur'an.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, these criticisms should not be generalized to the entire *irfani* tradition, since many Sufi exegetes continue to uphold the outward meaning of the Qur'an while treating inward interpretation as a complementary rather than a substitutive dimension of exegesis. Accordingly, the *irfani* approach continues to occupy an

⁴³ Mannā' Khalīl al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2000), 357–365.

⁴⁴ Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, *Bunyāt al-'Aql al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-'Arabiyyah, 2009), 383–410.

⁴⁵ S Rijal and Rasyidin Muhammad. "Irfani Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy Perspective." *Journal Analytica Islamica* 10, no. 1 (2021): 25-38; AB Baried and M Hannase. "The Irfani concept in sufism and its relation to Islamic philosophy." *Rausyan Fikr: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Ushuluddin Dan Filsafat* 17, no. 2 (2021): 229-256.

important position within Qur'anic studies, provided that spiritual experience is employed to deepen one's appreciation of the Qur'an without neglecting the principles of the Arabic language, the foundations of Islamic law, and the established methodologies of Qur'anic interpretation.

6. Relevance of the Irfani Approach to Contemporary Islamic Studies

In modern academic discourse, the Irfani method has often been criticized for its perceived subjectivity, as it relies heavily on the interpreter's personal spiritual experience. Nevertheless, contemporary scholars argue that when properly contextualized, Irfani epistemology can enrich academic Qur'anic studies by bridging the gap between spiritual intuition and analytical rigor. Qur'anic hermeneutics integrating spirituality and linguistics yields deeper and more contextually grounded interpretations. Similarly, local Sufi exegesis in Indonesia reflects Irfani tendencies adapted to the Malay cultural and linguistic context. This indicates that Irfani interpretation remains relevant within the Southeast Asian exegetical tradition and contributes to a pluralistic understanding of the Qur'an in localized contexts.⁴⁶ Recent studies further affirm that spiritual hermeneutics can complement rationalist models by offering an experiential dimension that rational analysis alone cannot reach. The Irfani approach, when applied responsibly, allows the Qur'an to be read not only as a historical-linguistic document but as a living text that interacts with the reader's inner state.⁴⁷

Despite its potential, Irfani exegesis has been subjected to considerable criticism. Many modern academics contend that it risks exceeding textual boundaries and promotes excessive subjectivism. Such criticism, however, often stems from misunderstanding the epistemological foundations of 'irfan. Spiritual knowledge cannot be assessed through empirical or positivist criteria, for it is grounded in ontological purity and the sincerity of the interpreter's heart. From this standpoint, the Irfani method does not abandon reason but transcends it, situating knowledge as an act of divine bestowal rather than human construction.⁴⁸ Contemporary hermeneutical theories, such as Ricoeur's "second naïveté" or Gadamer's "fusion of horizons", offer useful parallels to Irfani epistemology. Both emphasize the transformative encounter between text and interpreter. Thus, Irfani hermeneutics may be framed as a form of transcendental hermeneutics, which seeks understanding through the ontological relation between human and Divine, rather than through purely semantic or grammatical analysis. This alignment allows Irfani

⁴⁶ Supriyanto. "Sufi Isyari Exegesis and Its Implications for Contemporary Qur'anic Interpretation." *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Jurisprudence, Economic and Legal Theory* 3, no. 4 (2025): 3283-3292.

⁴⁷ Sanusi Lafiagi Haruna. "Contemporary Approaches to Qur'anic Hermeneutics." *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Sains Dan Humaniora* 8, no. 2 (2024): 314-318.

⁴⁸ Z Fiddarain. "Sufistic Interpretation and its Influence in Islamic Spirituality: the Main characteristics of Sufistic Interpretation and its Method of Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'an." *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies* 7, no. 4 (2024): 1063-1084.

interpretation to engage productively with modern academic discourse while maintaining its metaphysical depth.⁴⁹

In the digital and globalized era, Qur'anic studies have increasingly leaned toward rationalist and empirical methodologies, often sidelining the spiritual dimensions of the text. Within this context, Irfani epistemology offers a restorative balance. It harmonizes 'ilm (rational knowledge) with dzawq (spiritual taste), inviting interpreters to perceive revelation as both an intellectual and experiential reality. This integrative framework addresses not only epistemological concerns but also responds to the spiritual crisis of modern readers who seek meaning beyond secular rationalism.⁵⁰ Moreover, the pedagogical implications of Irfani hermeneutics are significant. It provides a reflective model for Qur'anic education that cultivates spiritual sensitivity alongside analytical competence. Recent educational studies emphasize that incorporating contemplative and experiential learning methods can enhance comprehension and ethical awareness among students of tafsir. Thus, Irfani hermeneutics not only preserves the spiritual legacy of classical Sufism but also offers a relevant paradigm for rehumanizing Qur'anic scholarship in the twenty-first century.⁵¹ Finally, the integration of Irfani epistemology within academic Qur'anic studies demonstrates that spirituality and scholarship are not contradictory domains but complementary paths toward a holistic understanding of divine revelation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the *irfani* approach constitutes one of the major epistemological traditions in Qur'anic interpretation, distinguished by its emphasis on spiritual experience, purification of the soul, and intuitive knowledge as pathways to understanding the inner dimensions of divine revelation. Unlike the *bayani* approach, which is grounded in textual authority and linguistic analysis, and the *burhani* approach, which prioritizes rational demonstration and philosophical reasoning, the *irfani* approach seeks to integrate intellectual understanding with spiritual realization. Within the history of Islamic exegesis, this epistemological orientation has given rise to two principal forms of Sufi interpretation, namely *tafsir ishari* and *tafsir nazhari*, each possessing distinct methodological characteristics and differing levels of scholarly acceptance. While *tafsir ishari* generally remains faithful to the outward meaning of the Qur'anic text and supplements it with spiritual insights, *tafsir nazhari* is more closely associated with metaphysical speculation and philosophical doctrines, making it more susceptible to scholarly criticism. These findings indicate that the diversity of Qur'anic interpretation reflects the richness of

⁴⁹ Abdul Halim. "Ta'wīl as Quranic Hermeneutics in the Philosophical Thought of Ibn 'Arabī." *Islamic Studies Review* 3, no. 2 (2024): 260-288.

⁵⁰ SL Haruna. "Contemporary Approaches to Qur'anic Hermeneutics." *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Sains Dan Humaniora* 8, no. 2 (2024): 314-318.

⁵¹ Supriyanto. "Sufi Isyari Exegesis and Its Implications for Contemporary Qur'anic Interpretation." *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Jurisprudence, Economic and Legal Theory* 3, no. 4 (2025): 3283-3292.

Islamic intellectual tradition, in which language, reason, and spiritual experience function as complementary epistemological foundations rather than mutually exclusive approaches.

The analysis further reveals that the *irfani* approach continues to possess significant relevance within contemporary Islamic studies. In an era marked by rapid scientific advancement, technological development, and increasing moral and spiritual challenges, the *irfani* perspective offers an important contribution by emphasizing that the Qur'an is not merely a source of legal norms or intellectual discourse but also a means of ethical formation, spiritual refinement, and inner transformation. At the same time, this study also highlights the methodological limitations of the *irfani* approach, particularly its reliance on subjective spiritual experience and the potential for speculative interpretation when detached from established principles of Qur'anic exegesis. Accordingly, the epistemological value of the *irfani* approach should be understood within a balanced framework that respects the outward meaning of the Qur'anic text, adheres to the principles of the Arabic language and Islamic scholarship, and recognizes spiritual insight as a complementary rather than independent source of interpretation.

This study contributes to the existing scholarship by providing an integrated conceptual analysis of the *irfani* approach that encompasses its epistemological foundations, principal forms of exegesis, practical application in interpreting Qur'anic verses, methodological strengths and limitations, and contemporary relevance within Islamic studies. By synthesizing these dimensions into a unified analytical framework, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the position of the *irfani* approach in the broader tradition of Qur'anic interpretation. Nevertheless, this research remains limited to a conceptual analysis based on library sources and therefore does not examine the application of the *irfani* approach across specific exegetical traditions, historical periods, or regional contexts. Future studies are encouraged to undertake comparative analyses of Sufi commentaries, investigate the reception of *irfani* interpretation in contemporary Muslim societies, and explore its potential contributions to Qur'anic hermeneutics, Islamic education, ethics, and interdisciplinary Islamic studies. Such investigations will further enrich scholarly understanding of the continuing role of *irfani* epistemology in the dynamic development of Qur'anic interpretation.

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