
The God Image Between Psychology and Sufism: An Integrative Framework for Islamic Psychology

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Abstract:

The image of God has significant implications for mental health and spiritual life. Despite its importance, scholarship on the God image remains largely dominated by Western Christian frameworks, with limited dialogue between psychological and Islamic-Sufi perspectives. This study addresses that gap through a comparative-integrative analysis of the concept, determinants, and mechanisms underlying the construction of the God image in contemporary psychology and Sufism. Using a library research method, selected classical and contemporary sources were examined through thematic comparative analysis to identify convergence, divergence, and complementarity between the two perspectives. The findings indicate three main points. First, both traditions understand the God image as a personal and relational experience of God that develops across the lifespan. Second, psychology explains the God image as shaped by early emotional attachment, psychological conditions, and sociocultural context, whereas Sufism views it as shaped by cognitive-spiritual capacity and divine disclosure. Third, although both traditions seek to foster a positive image of God, their approaches differ: psychology is oriented toward mental well-being, whereas Sufism is normative and transformative, through purification of the heart. The two perspectives are complementary, as psychology provides tools for assessing maladaptive God images, while Sufism offers guidance for reshaping them. This dialogue contributes to the development of Islamic psychology, particularly in formulating integrative theory and culturally sensitive psycho-spiritual interventions. Further empirical studies are needed to validate this integrative model, especially among Muslim populations in Indonesia.

Keywords: *al-Ilāh al-Mu'taqad*, God image, integrative framework, *ma'rifat Allāh*, psychology, Sufism

INTRODUCTION

Theological discussions of God in the monotheistic tradition are generally rooted in objective-dogmatic attributes of the Absolute, such as Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnipresence. However, in the phenomenological-psychological realm, perceptions of God are not merely inherited doctrines but are actively formed by a complex of determinants, including family upbringing, demographic contexts, and the dynamics of psychological and spiritual experience. Rizzuto (1979) argues that every individual, both believer and atheist, possesses a representation of God within the psychic structure, functioning as a transitional object that evolves across the lifespan.

Within psychology, the discourse on the image of God began as a theoretical study pioneered by Sigmund Freud (1927), who concluded that religion and God are a symbolization of the (biological) father figure projected by the human mind. This discourse was further developed by Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1979) within the framework of object-relations theory. Since

then, the literature on the image of God has expanded within various approaches, including attachment theory and social, cognitive, evolutionary, and neuropsychological perspectives (Schaap-Jonker, 2018). In addition, God image measurements have grown considerably, ranging from classical instruments such as the God Image Inventory (Lawrence, 1997) to the Questionnaire God Representations (QGR-34; Schaap-Jonker, 2023). However, all these developments are grounded in emotional relations between humans and God and their measurable correlates, rather than in theological-metaphysical truth.

Therefore, the terms "God concept" and "God image" are carefully distinguished in the literature. The God concept refers to a set of rational and doctrinally informed beliefs about God, whereas the God image is rooted in individuals' relational experiences and emotional memories, thereby carrying profound clinical and existential implications (Hoffman, 2005). In short, the God one is supposed to believe in (the ideal God) is fundamentally different from the God one actually experiences (the real God) (Lewis, 2021; Lina & Wijanarko, 2022; Tozer & Sinclair, 2022). To date, studies examining the personal God image have explored several key dimensions, including emotional anthropomorphism (loving–punishing), attachment patterns (secure–anxious–avoidant), perceptions of God's actions (guiding–controlling), gendered representations of God, and God's will and purpose in relation to meaning-making (Hoffman, 2005; Schaap-Jonker, 2018). Among these, the attachment-theory framework applied to God image research remains one of the most empirically productive strands within the psychology of religion. Schaap-Jonker (2018) synthesizes decades of attachment-based research, demonstrating that secure attachment to God characterized by perceived divine closeness, responsiveness, and unconditional positive regard is a robust predictor of psychological resilience, lower anxiety, and greater meaning-making capacity.

More broadly, the study of the God image holds significant relevance for mental health, as it has the potential to function both as a source of resilience and as a contributor to psychological distress within psychotherapy practice (Schaap-Jonker, 2018). Furthermore, it helps to illuminate the motivations underlying religious behaviors, the mechanisms of religious coping, and the meaning-making process in the face of adversity (Koenig et al., 2012). Beyond clinical implications, the God image is also deeply intertwined with broader dimensions of religious and spiritual life. Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) emphasize that religiousness and spirituality both involve an individual's sense of the sacred, fundamentally shaped by their subjective representation of the divine, while Sulmasy (2002) argues that the spiritual dimension, including the image of God, is central to holistic well-being, a view consonant with the Islamic conception of the human being as a multidimensional spiritual-psychological entity. Empirically, Rizvi and Hossain (2017) confirm that the subjective quality of one's relationship with God is among the strongest religious predictors of subjective well-being across diverse Muslim populations.

Remarkably, the Islamic tradition itself has long acknowledged the subjective dimension of the human–God relationship that modern psychology has only recently begun to empirically investigate. The ḥadīth qudsī in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (al-Bukhārī, 2001) states that God appears according to the servant's presumption (ẓann) of Him, explicitly affirming the role of subjective perception in shaping one's experience of the divine. Meanwhile, the Qur'ān (al-Fajr, 89:15–16) warns against judging God solely on the basis of worldly circumstances, equating prosperity

with divine honor (akramanī) and hardship with divine humiliation (ahānanī). Such subjective distortions are theologically significant, as attributing any qualities contrary to divine perfections to Allah is categorically forbidden in Islamic thought. In Sufism, this theological vigilance is crystallized in a famous principle among Sufi scholars: "Whatever image comes to your mind of God, then Allah is different from that."

Al-Ghazālī developed a systematic epistemological framework to attain knowledge, including knowledge of God (maʿrifah Allāh). Al-Ghazālī (1997) distinguishes among the human soul's faculties: khayāl (imagination) or wahm (estimative faculty), ʿaql (intellect), and qalb (spiritual heart). The former two are structurally constrained by their orientation toward the material and sensory domain, rendering them inherently susceptible to distorting the apprehension of metaphysical realities. The tendency of the majority of people to analogize the unseen (ghayb) with the empirically observable (shāhid) leads, in consequence, to a form of epistemic hijāb (veil), wherein the Divine Names and Attributes (al-Asmāʾ al-Ḥusnā) are perceived through the mediation of corporeal imagery or anthropomorphic emotional categories (al-Ghazālī, 2003). The intellect (ʿaql), by contrast, has the capacity to apprehend abstract conceptual structures and thus occupies a superior position within this hierarchy, a domain dominated by intellectual circles (theologians and philosophers). Nevertheless, its epistemic reach remains fundamentally limited. As al-Ghazālī emphasizes, the incapacity of the intellect to apprehend the Divine Essence and Attributes is itself the highest form of apprehension (al-ʿajz ʿan dark al-idrāk idrāk), a formulation that simultaneously acknowledges the intellect's capacity and its structural inadequacy in relation to the Absolute. Beyond the intellect, the apex of maʿrifah (knowledge of Allah) resides in the qalb (heart), a subtle spiritual faculty capable of receiving divine light (nūr ilāhī); when purified through mujāhadah (spiritual discipline), the heart may attain direct witnessing (mushāhadah) of divine realities. This mode of cognition, superior to the intellect, constitutes the domain of the knowers of Allah—the ʿārifīn (al-Ghazālī, 1964).

Ibn ʿArabī (2009, 2011) advances this epistemological inquiry by emphasizing the role of divine self-disclosure (tajallī) and the heart's receptive capacity (istiʿdād) in one's perception of God. He introduces the concept of al-Ilāh al-Muʿtaqad (the God of Belief), a constructed object of devotion formed through either inferential reasoning (istidlāl) or doctrinal transmission (taqlīd), asserting that "no one worships a god except what they have constructed within themselves" (Ibn ʿArabī, 2009). As Chittick (1989) notes, iʿtiqād (belief) derives from the verb ʿaqada, meaning "to bind" or "to knot"; every belief functions as a cognitive delimitation (taqyīd) of the Absolute, which Ibn ʿArabī terms al-Ḥaqq al-Muqayyad (the Delimited Divine Reality), distinct from al-Ḥaqq al-Muṭlaq, the Absolute Divine Reality transcending all conceptual determination. Employing the Sufi metaphor "water takes the color of its vessel," Ibn ʿArabī (2011) cautions against exclusive adherence to any single conception of God. Accordingly, Ibn ʿArabī distinguishes between the ʿārif, whose purified heart expands to receive every form of divine self-disclosure, and the non-ʿārif, whose heart remains confined to a single constructed image of God, risking denial of the Divine whenever He manifests beyond that boundary.

Despite the growing body of psychological research on the God image, two critical gaps remain. First, its theoretical foundations are largely rooted in Western Christian frameworks,

leaving Islamic contexts underexplored. Second, no existing framework bridges psychological theories of the God image with Sufi understandings of divine knowledge, particularly regarding their developmental trajectory within Islamic spiritual life. To address these gaps, this study aims to explore and integrate the psychological mechanisms underlying God-image formation with Sufi explanations of hierarchical divine knowledge to advance the field of Islamic psychology.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a library research design with a comparative-integrative approach, aiming to analyze the concept and mechanisms of God image formation from the perspectives of psychology and Sufism. Library research, as defined by Zed (2008), is a systematic method of collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing scholarly literature as the primary data source. The literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases and classical Islamic texts, using keyword combinations such as "God image," "God representation," "object relations and God attachment," "ma'rifah," "al-Ilāh al-Mu'taqad," and "tajallī." Each retrieved source was evaluated against quality criteria including topical relevance, author credibility, publication reputation, conceptual depth, and availability in English, Arabic, or Indonesian.

The selected literature was classified into two disciplinary domains. The first is psychology, comprising seminal works by Ana-María Rizzuto (*The Birth of the Living God*, 1979) and Moriarty and Hoffman (*The God Image Handbook for Spiritual Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 2007), alongside Hanneke Schaap-Jonker's (2018) synthesizing research on God representation and its psychological correlates. The second is Sufism, comprising classical Islamic texts by Imam al-Ghazālī (*Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (1997), *Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Ma'ānī Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā* (2003), and *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār*, 1964) and Ibn 'Arabī (*Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, 2011, and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, 2009), supported by the secondary literature of William Chittick (*The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 1989).

Data analysis employs thematic comparative analysis through three analytical lenses: convergence analysis, identifying shared conceptual ground between the two traditions; divergence analysis, identifying fundamental differences in assumptions or conclusions; and complementarity analysis, identifying areas where one tradition addresses gaps in the other. Following Jesson et al. (2011), the research procedure proceeds in four stages: first, key concepts within each tradition are identified within their original epistemological contexts; second, points of convergence, divergence, and complementarity are systematically mapped using a structured comparative matrix; third, hermeneutical interpretation is conducted by taking into account the historical, cultural, and epistemological contexts underlying each tradition to avoid anachronistic readings; and fourth, all analytical results are synthesized to produce an integrated theoretical framework. Research validity is ensured through two strategies: source triangulation, which compares multiple theoretical perspectives to minimize interpretive bias; and debriefing, which involves colleagues from psychology and Islamic studies/Sufism who hold doctoral degrees in their respective fields.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Synopsis: Psychology and Sufism

Psychology and Sufism both recognize that humans are influenced by the image of God, which is rooted in personal, relational experience with God. More specifically, both emphasize that the God image: (a) is formed procedurally through internal dynamic processing and environmental factors; and (b) can transform throughout the lifespan. This convergence is empirically supported by Schaap-Jonker (2018), whose extensive review of the psychology of the God image demonstrates that across diverse populations and cultural contexts, the God image functions as a dynamic internal working model, continuously updated through lived relational experiences and meaning-making processes, even as early familial and communal religious socialization remain influential antecedents. In the clinical literature, Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2011) confirm that an empirically grounded psychology of Islam is not only feasible but urgently needed, particularly in view of the Muslim population's tendency to frame mental health concerns within a religious and spiritual vocabulary. Their findings indicate that the quality of the Muslim client's God image, specifically whether it is characterized by mercy (rahmah), justice ('adl), and nearness (qurb), significantly predicts levels of psychological distress, well-being, and the effectiveness of religious coping. From the Sufism side, the convergence with psychology is also anchored in Rizzuto's (1979) seminal observation that the God representation is a "living" psychic construction a finding that resonates with Ibn 'Arabī's concept of al-Ilāh al-Mu'taqad as a personally constructed divine image that both reflects and shapes the believer's cognitive-spiritual capacity.

b. Divergence Points: Psychology and Sufism

Although there are significant points of convergence, these two traditions also exhibit substantial divergences. First, ontologically, psychology has empirically demonstrated that early relational experiences and psychological conditions significantly shape the God image, while Sufism emphasizes cognitive-spiritual capacity (isti'dād) and the role of divine light bestowed upon the heart of a believer whom He wills—thereby positioning God image formation as a reciprocal dynamic between human readiness and divine grace. Second, epistemologically, psychology holds that the God image is emotionally and experientially shaped, while Sufism understands it as hierarchically determined by the cognitive level of believers: ordinary believers, intellectuals, and knowers of God each perceive God at qualitatively different levels. Third, axiologically, psychology adopts a value-neutral position, whereas Sufism is explicitly normative, evaluating the God image on the basis of Shariah as Islamic law and Sufism as the Islamic spiritual teaching. Fourth, regarding transformation goals, psychology is oriented toward reconstructing a functional God image to support mental health, while Sufism is ultimately oriented toward nearness to Allah (qurb) and ma'rifah Allāh.

c. Complementarity: Psychology and Sufism

Beyond convergence and divergence, the two traditions offer meaningful complementarities where the strengths of one address the limitations of the other. First, psychology complements Sufism by providing empirically grounded accounts of psychological dynamics, particularly the impact of parental wounds and life suffering on God image formation, as well as well-developed psychometric instruments and therapeutic models for addressing maladaptive God images. Sufism, by contrast, offers rich descriptions of human

cognitive processing, its limitations, and the hierarchical levels of human knowledge that shape the human–divine relationship, yet it lacks systematic tools for assessing God images and advancing research. Psychology thus fills this methodological gap. Second, Sufism complements psychology by addressing a critical normative gap in God image study toward what the God image should be transformed. Psychology can identify that a punitive God image correlates with anxiety and a benevolent one predicts well-being (Cattani, 2015), yet it offers no inherent spiritual framework for guiding transformation. Sufism provides precisely this a grounded trajectory from distorted representations shaped by the domination of *wahm* (the irrational faculty) toward purified images guided by Shariah and refined through Sufism. It thus supplies the spiritual roadmap for transforming images of God through spiritual awareness.

Together, the integration of both traditions yields a holistic framework for Islamic psychology, a synthesis particularly vital for Muslim populations who frame mental health concerns within a religious and spiritual vocabulary (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This study constructed an integrative theoretical framework that bridges the psychological mechanisms of God image formation and the Sufi perspective on divine knowledge through three layers of dialogue: convergence, divergence, and complementarity. Both traditions recognize the God image as a personal, experientially formed, and dynamic construct. Psychology grounds this in empirical research on attachment patterns, object relations, and sociocultural influence, while Sufism articulates it through concepts such as *maʿrifah*, *al-Ilāh al-Muʿtaqad*, and *kashf* or *tajalli* (divine unveiling) in shaping representations of God. The two traditions diverge in their epistemological foundations, axiological orientations, and transformative goals: psychology adopts an empirical-phenomenological and value-neutral stance focused on how relational experiences shape the God image, whereas Sufism operates within a normative-transformative framework, evaluating God images according to Shariah and Sufi principles, and transforming cognitive-spiritual perception. The integrative framework emerges most clearly in their complementarity. Psychology offers empirically validated tools for addressing maladaptive God images and understanding their developmental antecedents, while Sufism provides a normative-spiritual trajectory for transforming the God image, guiding the individual from distorted representations dominated by *wahm* (the irrational faculty) toward purified knowledge rooted in the *qalb* and oriented toward true knowledge of Allah. Together, these contributions outline a comprehensive Islamic psycho-spiritual framework that provides a theoretical foundation for conceptualizing, assessing, and transforming the God image.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations. As a library-based comparative work, it remains theoretical and awaits empirical study. Future research should therefore pursue quantitative and qualitative studies to validate the proposed model, particularly among Muslim populations in Indonesia. Developing culturally sensitive psychometric instruments that incorporate Sufi's conceptualizations of the God image, along with developing psycho-spiritual interventions grounded in this framework, represent promising directions for advancing Islamic psychology.

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