

Spirituality, Art, and Islamic Mysticism

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Abstract

The general way taken by human beings in exploring the nature beyond their knowledge in order to obtain the deepest understanding is conducted by referring to religions for they do believe that knowledge directly comes from the Source that is manifested in His Revelation. In one religion, there are many channels can be chosen, one among the others is the mystical way, a 'way of exercising a religion' that is emphasizing on spiritual experience. In Islamic terminology, it is called *Tasawuf*. Besides religion, there is another mode that is believed to possess similar characteristics, i.e. art. Parallel to *tasawuf*, in solving problems art is experience-driven as Nasr (193:37) says, "there is no art without knowledge" (*ars sine scientia nihil*). One of art natures is its subject matter to disclose the meaning of beauty or to study beauty as a journey toward the state of knowing so as beauty in art is the knowledge itself. In Islamic dogma the source of knowledge is God as *Haqiqah* (the core of revelation). However, if *tasawuf* and art have something in common and intersecting, for art especially even if it 'talks' about God it does not mean that the subject matter refers to religion. There are art discourses whose subject matter seems to express something religious, yet in its manifestation God's name does not mentioned at all. Meanwhile, art that is created by anchoring it to religion automatically will refer to God as a knowledge source. It is what it is because there is no religion that does not use God's name in its dogma (whatever the name the religion uses to name Him).

Keywords: spirituality, knowledge, *tasawuf*, experience, *Haqiqah*.

1. Background

In Christianity, it is stated "No one will reach the Father unless he goes with me". (Schuon, 2002:103). Meanwhile in Islamic art tradition Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1993:14) contends similar idea: 'art does not play its spiritual roles if the art form is not related to the forms and contents of Islamic revelations'. It means that spirituality can only be grabbed by means of religious ways. When someone has faith on it, it is clear that in practicing his spiritual praxis he must be on the track of religion in all matters of life, including art. The fore-mentioned religion is not limited to the divine religions but also covers all other belief systems of which the base is the belief in God. In Islamic mysticism, it is said to be '*Allah Al Khabir*': He who knows the most. In short, He who owns all knowledge. It is in accordance to Aristotle's saying that the highest knowledge is the knowledge about God (knowing God). The journey to know him is often called as spiritual experience.¹ The journey to know him is often called as spiritual experience.

2. Literature Review

A discussion on spirituality via art refers to the long journey of Aesthetics (the philosophy of beauty) in which abundant theories have been formulized by philosophers. Fierce arguments among Aristotle, Plotinus, Hegel, Heidegger, Merleu Ponty and so on, have been taking place for centuries and is summarized within a discussion scope that is suspected to be limited only in the spiritual matters of the Western philosophy.

Prithh Hof Schuon, a philosopher, whose ideas are rarely being referred to in many discussions on aesthetics, is chosen here to scrutinize the notion on spirituality that will be studied inter-religiously (especially on the mysticism). His notion enriches my opinions and helps me in correlating the core affairs in each religion.

Meanwhile, Gonzales the author of 'Beauty and Aesthetics' focusing on researching beauty in Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Africa provides a pretty broad picture on art viewed from Islamic perspective and Western philosophy at once.

The quite complete idea on spirituality in Moslem thinkers' perspective taken as the main reference is cited from 'Islamic Art and Spirituality' written by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. This writing focuses on Islamic culture existing in Persia that in the past was the home of the great Islamic civilization. In discussing Islamic art, Nasr referred to the Quran and Mohammed's Hadith and to be more specific approached the subject matter using Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*). It can be confirmed in every discussion of various Persian art types, such as calligraphy, architecture, literature, and music.

¹ Frithjof Schuon : 102

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study can be categorized as a textual research. It employs an interdisciplinary approach combining the philosophy of aesthetics, philosophy of metaphysics, Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*), and reflection of logical thinking.

An assumption that spirituality is considered as the main device in attaining the goals of art or religion (*tasawuf*) demonstrating similarities bases this research.

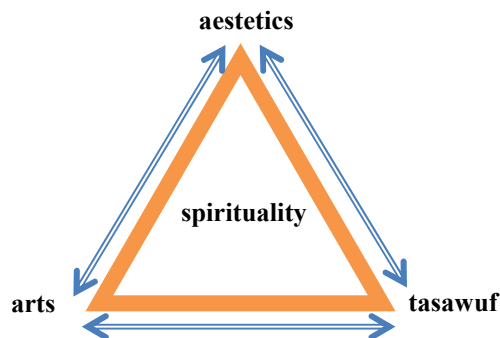


Figure 1: Spirituality Relationship Scheme

3.2 Method of Data Collection and Approach

The data are gathered by conducting a literary study seeking the notions on spirituality in its relation to beauty. On its own, beauty appears on works of art with particular system of value sand symbols when art and religion generate from the same spiritual spaces. For this reason, to develop the system of values and symbols the power of imagination is needed. Psychology and philosophy seems to have important roles when studying it. However, when the study reaches the spiritual level, psychology will contribute only in discovering the subconscious and philosophy will only be limited up to the metaphysical level. Another discipline used is theology, a discourse that discusses spirituality majorly on God's Words and faith that strongly connected with religions, yet it often done by borrowing the methods employed in philosophy. The problem is that philosophy tends to count on logic and is rigorous so that it at many times ends at a dead-end. The presence of phenomenology and existentialist phylosophy has not been able to compete the discussion of human experience using the religious experiences.

To present comprehensive understanding and experience, art creation approach and intense engagement as a member of a *tarekat* in Bandung called '*Tarekat Kadisiyah*' are used so that a deeper and comprehensive insights about spirituality and beauty can be obtained. Both activities enrich the knowledge from the literature and spiritual experience from the process of art creation and *tarekat*. *Tarekat* and art containing spiritual values have taught and trained Moslems' feeling and spirits ranged from the sensed matters to the objects that cannot be identified by means of the five senses.

4. Presentation of Data Analysis and Discussion

In the Western aesthetics, discourses on spirituality were found within the period of the fourth to eleventh century of which aesthetical theology was the characteristic as the result of the effort to institutionalize Christianity as a religion. Agustinus adopted the teachings of Plotinos, Psedo, Dionysius, Al Farabi and Ibn Sina to begin a metaphysical framework of divine light. Spirituality in art surrounded by different contexts continued to the next phase, starting from the eleventh century till fourteenth. Thomas Aquinas started the movement by setting a thought that beauty as a subject matter was something close to God's characteristics. While Al Haytman, Ibn Rushd referring to Aristoteles' discourse contended that the power of art was generated from its ability to depict the possibilities of reality. The modern era, sixteenth till nineteenth century, with a basis on the rationality power drawn from the prior age proposed an unusual view on art. It was said that art could not be formulated due to the human brain boundaries to define art. This state was called as '*je ne sais quoi*' (I don't know what) as formulated by Blaise Pascal, an expert on aesthetics. In this idea, art was treated similarly with God for it was defined as indefinable. Other pholosophers such as Hegel, brought about the spirit of mental reconciliation in the definition of art, i.e. art was the top of the Absolute Spirit revelation. Schpenhauer supported this position by stating that art was the ultimate of universal Will.¹

At the post-modern era, the relation of art and spirituality was examined in the way that art was created as if by referring to religions. However, it was not the reality. In Gautier's view, art had to purify itself from all

¹ Summarized from Martin Suryajaya : 261-465

external factors such as usage, social context, subject matter, that later was read by Walter Benjamin as ‘negative theology’ (Benjamin, 2007:224). The terminology ‘theology’ chosen by Benjamin gave a sense that it was art attaching itself to the discourse of divinity. In reality, they shared only similar methodology but not goals. What Benjamin wanted to deliver was that art had to free itself from the elite people who kept interests to art and turned around from the reproduction of technology advancement that trapped art in a social function. In such a condition, Benjamin (2007:224) said, “art has no longer a ritual but the society’s collective life- the base is politics”. Gautier and Walter Benjamin demystified art as Husserl, Gadamer, Heidegger, and Merleau Ponty did in giving a definition to art by employing the concepts of existentialist and phenomenology that as if moved toward the discourse of religion. It was mainly done by Heidegger and Merleau Ponty who suggested mystical atmosphere yet did not explicitly mention the name of God in their discussions.

The practice of art that is carried out non-profitly as the requirement of a spiritual way, as a method in its ritual – as what is done in the *tasawuf* known as *tazkiat al nafs* (soul purification) – has to undergo a self-alienating (*takhali*) from any kind of interests other than self-submission to God. A similar method is also commonly identified in art that merges in religious rituals or traditional art that is still embedded to a certain belief or religion so that when practicing it, there are some requirements should be fulfilled, for examples meditating, fasting, or simply not doing something that are usually done before a shadow puppet show. The *Dalang* (the one who plays the puppets) should fast before he performs. It is done based on the belief that the show possesses a high spiritual dimension as an art that teaches wisdom. The insights of wisdom should be drawn from other dimension of nature such as the dimension of spirit or from God as the owner of the universe. For this matter, each belief or art has different modes in practicing the ritual, yet the essence is the same, i.e. self-sanctification. It is identical with abandoning the material world (*zuhud*) with a spiritual discipline to amalgamate with the root of existence as a form of freedom toward the ultimate soul completeness in conquering the animal natures existing in human beings. Following that path, it is believed that the spiritual journey to find the transcendent world will create beauty that is generated from harmony (*tanāsub*).

If beauty is considered as an obligation to be ‘what it should be’ (harmony), it has the nature/quality of originality that comes from God. He is the source of natural beauty that in obtaining it, as stated in any religion, can be conducted by conducting a self purification through *askese* (mystical rituals), for instance by doing ablution/*thaharah* that is commonly done when people worship God. Therefore, art and religion are the same when the art is attached to God. It means that to head to the unreal world, one has to free himself from the real sensed real world (the material world). Gonzales (2001: 15) stated, “...so that art, like a religion, in the process of ideating or getting inspirations or divine hints, someone has to evade worldly affairs so that he gets the essence in the form of harmony as the true reality about the genuine beauty. Nasr claims that it is impossible for the spiritual art as ‘sacred art’ to detach God from its goal for within the effort of deliberating the self lies an obligation to reject all forms outside the God ”

Intentionality in Husserl’s phenomenology that is similar to *ghirah* in Islamic mysticism becomes a significant matter when the discussion is to get oneself closer to God. It is a constant awareness that God is the highest object of anything. Meanwhile the relation between works of art and the artist is the relation between the intentional object and the intentional awareness. A work of art ontologically is something resulted from something unreal (*iréel*) namely the practice of imagining that ends in what is called an art piece. However, for both cases the peak of the virtue is not on how ‘to make’ but more on how ‘to act’. To act in terms of quality (*hal*) and state (*ahwal*) of the practitioners’ soul both those who do it with art and the *tarekat* practitioners called *shalik*.¹ The quality and state - the artists’ faith- and *shalik* - the theological belief - are the main capitals, i.e. it is faith to the holy book. Faithful artists will be able to refresh their knowledge on aesthetics, intellectualism, and spirituality in order to perform better quality. Doing art based on the faith is a timeless adventure in the metaphysical space that leads the human soul toward the divine beauty (*tahali*).

This kind of art does not merely cover technical things or the skill rationales such as to paint, to play music instrument, to sing, to dance and so on. It is a way that is believed to have capability to ‘discover’ (*alehtes*) the meaning of beauty (*khalon*), namely truth (*agathon*). Heidegger states, “beauty is one of the ways on which truth is manifested as not being hidden” (*aletheia*)², or *tajali* in *tasawuf* mode. It is illustrated in *Rumi* dance concept in which beauty is considered as the existential character about truth that is worthy to be achieved spiritually in the form of spinning the body. The dance is begun with a longing to God and slowly move to the revelation of heaven greatness so that *finally the dancer’s soul be in the state amalgamation (fanā) and drowned in God (baqā)*³.

¹ Art processes in religion perspective exhibit an essence and substance that is related to moral movement, social and individuals’ efforts of piety....Nasr (1998:16)

² Heidegger : 54

³ Nasr (1998 : 144) from J.L. Michon ‘Scared Music and Dance Islam’ in World Spirituality : An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest volume XX

Art embracing the spiritual values is the one containing the dimension of infinity. As long as the spiritual art is still understood as a mode, there will be no end in the creation of work of art since finishing an art piece is never the major goal. The final end is not the art piece but the spiritual experience takes place in the self of the artist. When there is a passion to be near to God, art as a spiritual way will be endlessly produced. To approach Him, Moslem thinkers, Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and Al Jilli (1355-1356) introduced a concept on *Insan Kamil* (a Perfect Human Being) based on the Hadith: '*man arafa nafsahu faqad arafa Rabbahu*' means 'know your self (*nafs*) and you will know your God (*Rabb*)'. This view is in line with Gadamer's notion (1975:86): "Aesthetical experience is basically a self-understanding mode" although he limited his discussion in self-knowing for one's sake and did not discuss things related to God. Creating art is a journey toward one's inner, introspection (mysticism), a diving into the deepest rooms of self that anchored on concrete experiences. The phenomenon of familiarity toward self by means of art generates sensations in the feeling that guide human to the highest imagination, namely the unification of self and God. The 'dialogue' displayed in the play of visual language, body movement, human voice, or others that has no end but the top of discovery, to meet the Being, The Kind, The Right, The Beautiful (*Bonum, Verum, Pulchrum*).

If the conception/spiritual methodology in the *tarekat* area is practiced in art, for instance contemplation, religious remembrance, meditation, *riyadoh*, or any other way in religion and other beliefs, it will be a process of a fusion of the intrinsic and the extrinsic, that aims at achieving the inner wisdom and discipline in outer behavior. When experience becomes something very personal, the border between an object and a subject is gone so that what is materialized is a morale conduct manifested in life as a noble and beautiful practice. Within the concept of a non-profit purity of contemplation in art creation – in Islam there is a definition of Islam as 'surrender'-, there is no moral demand except to achieve the aura of truth that penetrates into the self. The state of being surrender, that is the characteristic of religion cosmology, will be recognized as a spiritual condition that can be read universally. Nasr (1997:142-143) asserts that Rumi views beauty as the direct proof from God.and a medium to rise awareness that there is a spiritual world within human being.

Practising art is a process of infusing the soul into the work, is the nourished life experience that presenting new truth about new reality. To pursue meaning using art in finding a description of the magnificent reality that cannot be done by employing any point of view other than art, is a bigger whole than just the summation of its parts. Like what Cezanne says, "A painting comprises within itself even the scent of landscap". It means that an art piece stores vocabulary that can only be tracked by an experience of merging that in the art spirituality context it is meant as a medium of unification and merger between the artist and God.

Tabel 1: Comparison art spirituality and tasawuf

Spirituality	Deliverance	Framing	enlightenment
Art	Cut up/dekolase	compose	Harmony/estetis
Tasawuf	Takhalli/emptying	Tahalli/fulfillment	Tajalli/teofani

Finally, the relationship between whorship in the world of *tarekat* and art rituals is an organic relation that is causal where an experiencer of spiritual way (*shalik*) and an artist contemplating the meaning of God at once. It triggers a creative action that is originated from inner activity in a form of feeling that touches the highest image of beauty, God.

5. Conclusion

If religion teaches noble morals to its adherents and work of art is an artist's creation through a particular method that is materialized as an experience and if the created art is based on the spiritual experience found in religion, consequently art can teach benevolence too. Visual on canvas, movement in dance, human voice or musical instrument sound in a song or other media of art is a 'new life' which is vitalized so that the inspiration of art is uniform with the artistic 'material' called art artifact. The inner aspect and its physical appearance are packed as a whole to deliver meaning. Merleu Ponty (1974:182) states, "the musical significance of a sonata cannot be separated from its sound or voice medium". Art that expresses a spiritual meaning via material existency invites human to 'experience' the essence of truth from the spiritual realm. It is a personification of the deepest teaching in forms of aesthetical metaphor, logic, and symbols. An art piece is not only a collection of materials constituting the art artifact but a reflection of art body as the blend of the creator and his creation. Doing art is one of the life aspects lived by experience/ mutual effort carried out by religion and art as a creative activity.

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