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Exploring the Philanthropic Endeavors of Sufis in the Classical Era: A Historical and Spiritual Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates the philanthropic activities of Sufis during the classical era through a historical and spiritual lens. It posits that Sufi philanthropy constitutes a synthesis of inner spirituality and social responsibility, in which acts of charity are manifestations of divine love and servitude. While prior studies have predominantly focused on contemporary institutional philanthropy, this research addresses a gap by exploring the doctrinal foundations and historical practices of Sufi generosity in early Islamic civilization. Employing a qualitative library-based methodology, the study analyzes classical Sufi texts such as *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, and *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*. The findings reveal that philanthropy is not peripheral but central to Sufi identity, serving as both a spiritual discipline and a social ethic. The study concludes that Sufi philanthropy represents a timeless model of faith-based altruism that integrates mysticism with ethical engagement, providing valuable insights for contemporary discussions on spirituality and social welfare.

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Introduction

In academic discourse, Sufis are often portrayed as figures who emphasize individual piety rather than social piety. This stereotype views Sufis as individuals primarily concerned with personal spiritual experience, often regarded as the ultimate goal of life. Although this perception is not entirely unfounded, it tends to oversimplify the complexity of Sufi life and overlooks their rich contributions to social and philanthropic engagement (Denny, 1979). Many existing studies have focused predominantly on the spiritual dimensions of Sufism while giving insufficient attention to its social dimensions. Yet, Sufism has long integrated personal devotion (*'ibādah*) with social responsibility (*mas'ūliyyah ijtimā'iyah*), revealing a holistic spiritual paradigm that unites the inward and outward aspects of faith.

Critics of Sufism often base their arguments on interpretations of the Prophet Muḥammad's spiritual history, particularly his retreat in the Cave of Ḥirā' and the *Isrā'-Mi'raj* event, which are seen as peaks of mystical experience. However, after receiving revelation, the Prophet did not remain in solitude; he returned to society and led a profound moral and social transformation. Likewise, after his ascension to *Sidrat al-Muntahā*, he returned to earth to establish justice and

compassion, demonstrating that the highest spiritual attainment must be embodied in real social action (Stepaniants & Chittick, 1991). This prophetic model indicates that genuine spirituality is inseparable from ethical engagement and communal welfare.

Reducing Sufism to mere inward mysticism thus neglects the vital social dimension of the Sufi tradition. Since its earliest formation, many Sufi masters have not only devoted themselves to personal worship but have also emphasized social piety and service. Their teachings and practices contributed significantly to the development of charitable institutions, educational endowments, and community welfare projects (Rizvi, 2015). These historical experiences suggest that philanthropy was not an incidental aspect of Sufi life but an important expression of spiritual commitment and ethical responsibility within Muslim societies.

Several studies have examined the relationship between Islam, philanthropy, and social welfare from various perspectives. Research on contemporary Sufi communities highlights the important role of Sufi networks in charitable activism, social services, and community development (Fuhaidah et al., 2020; Sakhok & Munandar, 2020). Other studies have explored the broader field of Islamic philanthropy and social finance, emphasizing the significance of ethical values, social responsibility, and institutional governance in enhancing social welfare outcomes (Maulina et al., 2023; Widiastuti, Ningsih, et al., 2022). Philanthropic practices have also been examined within educational settings, where structured almsgiving programs have been shown to cultivate students' social awareness, empathy, and civic responsibility (Syamsiyah et al., 2026). Recent scholarship has also highlighted the social and ethical dimensions of Sufism, demonstrating how mystical teachings continue to inspire charitable engagement, communal solidarity, and value-based approaches to social transformation (Qadri, 2022; Thibdeau, 2025).

Despite these valuable contributions, existing scholarship primarily focuses on contemporary philanthropic institutions, Islamic social finance, or the social activities of modern Sufi communities (Maulina et al., 2023; Sakhok & Munandar, 2020; Thibdeau, 2025). Relatively little attention has been devoted to the classical doctrinal foundations of Sufi philanthropy and the ways in which early Sufi masters conceptualized generosity, altruism, and social responsibility as integral dimensions of spiritual realization. Consequently, the intellectual genealogy and ethical framework of philanthropy in classical Sufism remain insufficiently explored.

This study addresses that gap by examining the philanthropic doctrines and practices articulated in major classical Sufi texts, including *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, *al-Luma*, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, and *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. Specifically, it aims to investigate how classical Sufi scholars conceptualized philanthropy and how these teachings were translated into social practice. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on contemporary manifestations of Sufi philanthropy (Fuhaidah et al., 2020; Sakhok & Munandar, 2020), this article reconstructs the doctrinal foundations, ethical principles, and historical expressions of philanthropy in classical Sufism. The novelty of this study lies in its reconstruction of Sufi philanthropy as an integrated ethical-spiritual paradigm, demonstrating that philanthropy was not a peripheral social activity within the Sufi tradition but a central spiritual discipline that united devotion to God with responsibility toward humanity.

Method

This study employs a qualitative library-based research design to examine the philanthropic doctrines and practices articulated in classical Sufi literature. Library research is particularly well-suited to investigating historical ideas, ethical concepts, and intellectual traditions preserved in

authoritative textual sources, as it enables the systematic identification, evaluation, and interpretation of relevant literature (Fink, 2014). The study focuses on how classical Sufi scholars conceptualized philanthropy, generosity, altruism, and social responsibility as integral dimensions of spiritual life.

The primary sources consist of major classical Sufi works, including *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah* by al-Qushayrī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* by al-Ghazālī, *al-Luma'* by al-Sarrāj, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* by al-Hujwērī, *Qūt al-Qulūb* by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, and *Irshād al-'Ibād ilā Sabīl al-Rashād* by al-Mālibārī. These texts were selected purposively because of their recognized authority in the Sufi tradition and their extensive discussions of ethical virtues such as *karam* (generosity), *ithār* (altruism), *zuhd* (ascetic detachment), *faqr* (spiritual poverty), and *rahmah* (compassion). Secondary sources include contemporary scholarly works on Islamic philanthropy, Sufi ethics, and Islamic social finance that provide contextual and analytical support for interpreting the classical materials.

Data were collected through systematic identification, classification, and close reading of textual passages related to philanthropy and social ethics. The primary analytical framework employed philosophical hermeneutics, which emphasizes interpreting texts within their historical, intellectual, and socio-spiritual contexts (Gadamer, 2004). Through this approach, key concepts were examined not merely as doctrinal formulations but as ethical principles embodied in the lived practices of Sufi communities. To enrich the interpretation, this study also adopted a comparative-synthetic strategy that relates classical Sufi perspectives to contemporary discussions on Islamic philanthropy and social welfare. Following the principles of integrative literature analysis, the findings were interpreted through processes of comparison, contextualization, and conceptual synthesis (Torraco, 2016). The trustworthiness of the analysis was strengthened through source triangulation among classical Sufi texts, cross-textual comparison of relevant doctrines, and critical engagement with contemporary scholarship on Islamic philanthropy and social ethics.

Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that philanthropy in classical Sufism constitutes a foundational dimension of spiritual life rather than a secondary ethical concern. Three principal findings emerge from the analysis. First, classical Sufi texts consistently ground philanthropy in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, presenting generosity, compassion, and altruism as essential expressions of faith. Second, Sufi scholars developed a coherent ethical framework based on the interrelated concepts of *zuhd*, *faqr*, and *karam*, through which philanthropy functions as a process of spiritual self-transformation. Third, these doctrines were translated into concrete historical practices through individual acts of generosity and institutional forms of social welfare such as *khānqāhs* and *ribāṭs*. Together, these findings reveal that Sufi spirituality functions as an integrated paradigm uniting inner devotion and social responsibility.

Scriptural Foundations of Sufi Philanthropy

The first major finding indicates that Sufi philanthropy is deeply rooted in the primary sources of Islam, namely the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth. Classical Sufi manuals consistently draw upon scriptural evidence to establish generosity, compassion, and altruism as essential components of spiritual life. These teachings are not framed as optional moral virtues but as intrinsic expressions of faith and proximity to God.

Texts such as *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, and *Qūt al-Qulūb* repeatedly cite Qur'ānic verses that emphasize social care and economic justice. For instance, the concept of *ithār* (selfless preference for others) is grounded in Q. 59:9, while charitable responsibility toward the

marginalized is highlighted in Q. 2:273 and Q. 76:8. These scriptural references are interpreted by Sufi scholars as indicators that acts of giving are inseparable from spiritual excellence (*iḥsān*).

Moreover, prophetic traditions reinforce this ethical orientation by linking generosity with divine proximity. In Sufi interpretation, charity is not merely a legal obligation but a transformative act that purifies the soul and aligns human behavior with divine attributes such as *al-Raḥmān* (the Compassionate) and *al-Karīm* (the Generous). Contemporary scholarship supports this reading, demonstrating that Islamic philanthropy is fundamentally embedded in a moral and spiritual framework that prioritizes compassion, justice, and communal welfare (Widiastuti, Ningsih, et al., 2022). This finding suggests that Sufi philanthropy emerges directly from scriptural hermeneutics. By interpreting the Qur'ān and the Sunnah through a spiritual lens, Sufis transform normative teachings into a lived ethic of generosity. In this sense, philanthropy is not external to Sufism but constitutes one of its primary expressions.

This finding differs from much of the contemporary literature on Islamic philanthropy, which primarily examines charitable institutions, philanthropic governance, and social finance mechanisms. By contrast, the present study demonstrates that the foundations of philanthropy were already systematically embedded within classical Sufi interpretations of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. Rather than treating philanthropy as a social instrument alone, classical Sufi texts position generosity and compassion as direct manifestations of spiritual excellence and proximity to God.

Theoretical Construction of Philanthropy in Sufism

The second finding reveals that Sufi thinkers developed a sophisticated theoretical framework that integrates inner purification (*taẓkiyah al-nafs*) with outward social engagement (*'amal ijtimā'i*). This framework is structured around key ethical concepts such as *zuhd* (ascetic detachment), *faqr* (spiritual poverty), and *karam* (generosity), which together form the moral foundation of Sufi philanthropy. Contemporary scholarship likewise emphasizes that Sufi ethics cannot be reduced to individual spirituality alone but constitutes an integrated moral system that links spiritual discipline with social responsibility (Qadri, 2022; Thibdeau, 2025).

Within this paradigm, *zuhd* is not understood as withdrawal from society but as liberation from material attachment, enabling individuals to engage in acts of giving without self-interest. Similarly, *faqr* is interpreted not as economic deprivation but as existential awareness of dependence on God, which fosters humility and empathy toward others. Meanwhile, *karam* represents the active manifestation of divine generosity in human conduct, translating spiritual awareness into social action (Suhandi et al., 2023). Recent studies on socio-Sufism have similarly demonstrated that classical Sufi virtues continue to inspire contemporary models of ethical engagement, social solidarity, and community welfare (Ali et al., 2026; Qadri, 2022).

This theoretical synthesis reflects what may be described as a “spiritual economy,” in which giving serves as both an ethical obligation and a spiritual discipline. Unlike modern economic frameworks that treat philanthropy as the redistribution of surplus wealth, Sufi thought conceptualizes giving as an act of devotion (*'ubudiyyah*) and self-transformation. In this view, wealth is not owned but entrusted, and its proper use lies in serving others. Such an understanding resonates with recent discussions on Islamic philanthropy that emphasize integrating spiritual values, ethical accountability, and social welfare objectives into charitable practice (Hamidah et al., 2024; Widiastuti, Sukmaningrum, et al., 2022).

Recent studies in Islamic social finance reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that value-based philanthropy—grounded in ethical and spiritual motivations—plays a critical role in

achieving sustainable social welfare. For example, research on Islamic financial systems shows that integrating moral values such as trust, accountability, and compassion enhances the effectiveness of philanthropic institutions (Maulina et al., 2023). Thus, the second finding highlights that Sufi philanthropy is not merely practical but deeply conceptual. It is embedded within a coherent moral philosophy that links self-purification with social responsibility, creating a unified vision of spirituality and ethics.

Unlike previous studies that focus on the organizational and economic dimensions of Islamic philanthropy, this finding reveals that classical Sufi scholars developed a coherent ethical-spiritual theory of philanthropy grounded in the interrelated concepts of *zuḥd*, *faqr*, and *karam*. Philanthropy was therefore understood not merely as the redistribution of resources but as a process of self-transformation through which spiritual purification and social responsibility became inseparable.

Historical Manifestations of Sufi Philanthropy

The third finding demonstrates that the philanthropic ethos of Sufism was not confined to theoretical discourse but was actively embodied in historical practices. Sufi communities established institutions such as *khānqāhs* and *ribāṭs*, which functioned as centers of social welfare, providing food, shelter, education, and spiritual guidance to the broader community. Recent scholarship likewise highlights that Sufi institutions historically played important roles in community development, social welfare, and the cultivation of ethical solidarity within Muslim societies (Rohmawati & Zulkifli, 2024).

These institutions played a crucial role in the socio-economic life of Muslim societies, particularly during periods of political instability. By offering support to travelers, the poor, and marginalized groups, Sufi networks contributed to the development of what may be termed an early form of organized philanthropy. In this context, Sufism operated not only as a spiritual movement but also as a social system that addressed communal needs. Such an interpretation is consistent with contemporary discussions of socio-Sufism, which emphasize the inseparability of spiritual cultivation and social responsibility in the Sufi tradition (Suhandi et al., 2023).

Historical narratives further illustrate how individual Sufis embodied this philanthropic ethos. Figures such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, and al-Ghazālī emphasized that true piety is reflected in acts of generosity and compassion. Their teachings consistently highlight that devotion to God must be expressed through service to humanity, thereby dissolving the dichotomy between ritual and social ethics. Recent studies on religion and social transformation similarly suggest that enduring religious traditions maintain their relevance when spiritual values are translated into ethical action and public service (Ali et al., 2026).

Contemporary research confirms the continuity of this tradition, showing that modern Sufi communities institutionalize charitable practices as extensions of spiritual discipline. For example, studies on Sufi orders in Southeast Asia demonstrate that philanthropic initiatives—such as food distribution, education programs, and social services—are understood as integral components of religious practice rather than auxiliary activities (Sakhok & Munandar, 2020).

Furthermore, recent scholarship emphasizes that Sufi philanthropy can be conceptualized as a “spiritual economy of mercy,” in which acts of giving simultaneously fulfill social and transcendental purposes. As James C. Thibdeau (2025) argues, Sufi ethics transform spiritual consciousness into concrete social responsibility, bridging contemplation and action in a unified ethical framework.

This integrated model challenges modern dichotomies between spirituality and social engagement, suggesting that authentic religious experience necessarily entails ethical responsibility. By uniting inner devotion with outward action, Sufi philanthropy offers a comprehensive framework that remains relevant for contemporary discussions on religion, ethics, and social justice (Qadri, 2022; Thibdeau, 2025).

While many contemporary studies document philanthropic activities in modern Sufi organizations and charitable institutions, the present finding demonstrates that organized philanthropy was already integral to classical Sufi communities and institutions. The historical evidence suggests that *khānqāhs*, *ribāṭs*, and other Sufi networks functioned not only as centers of spiritual formation but also as enduring mechanisms of social welfare, education, and community support (Rohmawati & Zulkifli, 2024; Sakhok & Munandar, 2020).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Sufi philanthropy represents a holistic paradigm that integrates scriptural foundations, ethical theory, and social practice. Rather than viewing charity as a supplementary moral obligation, Sufism positions philanthropy at the heart of spiritual life. It functions simultaneously as a means of self-purification, a form of worship, and a mechanism for social transformation (Qadri, 2022; Suhandi et al., 2023; Thibdeau, 2025).

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Sufi philanthropy operates as an integrated ethical-spiritual system that unites scriptural foundations, moral philosophy, and social practice. This section interprets these findings in relation to both classical Sufi thought and contemporary scholarship, highlighting their theoretical significance and broader implications.

The Basis of Sufi Philanthropic Doctrine

This section establishes the theological and textual foundations of Sufi philanthropy, demonstrating that generosity and social service arise directly from the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, and the lived examples of the Prophet's companions and early saints.

Like other Muslim scholars, Sufis derive their teachings from the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth. In addition, Sufi literature frequently draws upon the examples of the saints (*awliyā'*) and their spiritual experiences as sources of ethical guidance (Arberry, 2013). Classical manuals such as *Qūt al-Qulūb* (Al-Makkī, 2001), *al-Luma'* (Al-Sarrāj, 1960), *al-Risālah* (Al-Qushayrī, 2001), *Kashf al-Mahjūb* (Al-Hujwīrī, 2007), and *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (A. Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, 2011) consistently ground philanthropic ethics in scriptural teachings that emphasize generosity, compassion, altruism, and care for the poor. For instance, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī and al-Sarrāj both cite the verse: “(Charity is) for the poor who are restrained in the way of God, unable to travel in the land. The ignorant think them rich because of their self-restraint, but you shall know them by their mark—they do not beg importunately” (Qur'ān 2:273). This verse is echoed by al-Hujwīrī and al-Ghazālī, who also refer to “Their sides forsake their beds as they call upon their Lord in fear and hope and spend out of what We have provided them” (Qur'ān 32:16) and “(It is also) for the poor emigrants who were expelled from their homes and possessions, seeking the bounty of God and His pleasure and aiding God and His Messenger” (Qur'ān 59:8).

Meanwhile, al-Kalābādhī—contemporary to al-Makkī and al-Sarrāj—quotes “They give others preference over themselves, even though poverty be their lot” (Qur'ān 59:9), which al-Qushayrī later expounds in *al-Risālah*. These verses collectively ground the Sufi conception of generosity as a direct extension of divine justice (*‘adl*) and mercy (*rahmah*).

Hadith traditions further illuminate this foundation. One widely cited narration from ‘Ā’ishah (may God be pleased with her) reports that “Generosity draws one near to God, near to people, near to paradise, and far from hell. The miser, however, is far from God, far from people, far from paradise, and near to hell” (Al-Tirmidzī, 2016). Al-Sha‘rānī also records the Prophet’s counsel to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib: “O ‘Alī, generosity is near to God and His mercy, and far from His punishment; whereas miserliness is far from God and near to His punishment” (Al-Sha‘rānī, 2007).

Al-Ghazālī (2011) treats generosity as an integral part of faith, arguing that the act of giving purifies the soul and shields one from hellfire, in line with the Prophet’s saying: “Give charity even if only with half a date, for indeed it extinguishes sin as water extinguishes fire” (al-Bukhārī, no. 1410). Likewise, al-Mālibārī (2018) narrates the Prophet’s assurance that “the caretaker of orphans will be with me in Paradise like these two fingers,” emphasizing that social care is a form of continuous worship.

Through these texts, philanthropy is presented not merely as a recommended moral act but as a direct expression of divine mercy and justice embodied in human conduct. The findings indicate that Sufi philanthropy represents a hermeneutical transformation of revelation into lived ethical practice. Compassion (*rahmah*) and altruism (*ithār*) are not treated as supplementary virtues but as essential manifestations of faith that unite worship (*‘ibādah*) with social responsibility (*mas’ūliyyah ijtimā’iyyah*). In this sense, philanthropy functions as a form of spiritual embodiment through which human beings reflect divine attributes such as mercy and generosity. Rather than being confined to the realm of personal morality, acts of giving become concrete expressions of spiritual commitment and ethical responsibility toward others. Contemporary scholarship similarly demonstrates that value-based Islamic philanthropy strengthens social cohesion, institutional trust, and welfare outcomes when grounded in ethical and religious commitments (Maulina et al., 2023; Widiastuti, Ningsih, et al., 2022; Widiastuti, Sukmaningrum, et al., 2022).

Building upon this doctrinal foundation, Sufi thinkers systematized philanthropy into a coherent ethical-spiritual framework that integrates inner purification (*taṣkiyah al-nafs*) with outward social engagement (*‘amal ijtimā’i*). This perspective aligns with contemporary studies showing that the integration of ethical values and spiritual motivations contributes significantly to sustainable welfare and poverty alleviation (Hamidah et al., 2024; Hamzah et al., 2024).

The present findings extend contemporary discussions on Islamic philanthropy by demonstrating that the ethical foundations of giving were already systematically developed within classical Sufi hermeneutics. While recent scholarship frequently focuses on governance, accountability, and social finance mechanisms, classical Sufi literature reveals a deeper theological dimension in which philanthropy functions as a manifestation of divine attributes embodied in human conduct. This finding suggests that Sufi philanthropy cannot be understood solely through the framework of charitable obligation; rather, it reflects a broader theological anthropology in which human beings are viewed as moral agents entrusted with cultivating compassion, generosity, and social responsibility as expressions of faith (Maulina et al., 2023; Widiastuti, Ningsih, et al., 2022).

Beyond its historical significance, this doctrinal foundation indicates that philanthropy in Sufism serves as a mode of ethical self-formation, in which spiritual development becomes inseparable from engagement with others’ needs. In this respect, Sufi philanthropy offers a framework that complements contemporary approaches to Islamic philanthropy by integrating institutional effectiveness, moral transformation, and social welfare. Such a perspective resonates with recent studies emphasizing the importance of value-based philanthropy in fostering

sustainable welfare, social trust, and ethical responsibility within Muslim societies (Hamidah et al., 2024; Hamzah et al., 2024).

A comparison with previous studies further clarifies the contribution of the present finding. Contemporary research on Islamic philanthropy has largely focused on institutional governance, social finance, and welfare outcomes (Maulina et al., 2023; Widiastuti, Ningsih, et al., 2022; Widiastuti, Sukmaningrum, et al., 2022). While these studies demonstrate the importance of ethical values in sustaining philanthropic effectiveness, they rarely examine the doctrinal and hermeneutical foundations through which philanthropy is constructed as a spiritual obligation. The present study, therefore, extends existing scholarship by showing that classical Sufi literature systematically integrated philanthropy into a broader theological vision of worship, compassion, and moral self-formation.

At the same time, this interpretation should be understood within the scope of the study. The analysis is based primarily on classical Sufi texts and does not examine how these doctrines were implemented across different historical regions or institutional settings. Future studies may therefore explore the historical variations and practical applications of Sufi philanthropic teachings in specific communities and periods.

Philanthropic Theory in Sufism

This section examines how Sufi scholars understood philanthropy as an integral component of spiritual and moral formation. In the Sufi tradition, philanthropy is grounded in ethical virtues such as *zuhd* (ascetic detachment), *faqr* (spiritual poverty), and *karam* (generosity), which together cultivate both inner purification and social responsibility. Rather than viewing charitable giving as a merely benevolent act, Sufis regarded it as a spiritual discipline through which individuals free themselves from attachment to worldly possessions and draw closer to God. As reflected in the teachings of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, detachment from the world was not a rejection of social life but a means of overcoming material attachment in order to foster generosity and spiritual awareness (Arberry, 2013).

The early Sufis developed *zuhd* as the first stage of spiritual purification, in which the heart becomes free from the domination of desire and wealth. Al-Junayd al-Baghdādī defined *zuhd* as a state in which wealth no longer binds the heart, while al-Nūrī emphasized that genuine poverty (*faqr*) manifests itself through generosity even in conditions of scarcity (Al-Sarrāj, 1960; Chodkiewicz, 2000). Together, these perspectives reveal that asceticism in Sufism is not withdrawal from society but liberation from possessiveness through compassion and giving. Al-Ghazālī later integrated these ideals into a broader spiritual framework in which generosity becomes a means of self-purification and realization of trust in God as the ultimate provider (*al-Raḥḥīm*) (A. Ḥamid Al-Ghazālī, 2011).

In Sufi ethics, giving (*infāq*) is not an economic transaction but an act of *‘ubūdiyyah* (servitude to God). Classical Sufi scholars consistently portrayed generosity as a sign of spiritual maturity and selflessness. This perspective reaches its most systematic formulation in al-Qushayrī’s typology of *sakba*, *ithār*, and *futūmḥah*, which describes successive levels of generosity culminating in complete selfless devotion to others (Al-Qushayrī, 2001). Conversely, miserliness was regarded as evidence of ego-centeredness and excessive attachment to worldly possessions (Al-Kalābādhī, 1994).

The Prophet Muḥammad, his companions, and the members of his household served as enduring models of this spiritual generosity. Classical Sufi literature frequently recounts examples

of individuals who distributed their possessions to the poor and prioritized others' welfare over personal comfort, thereby embodying the ideals of *tawakkul*, compassion, and social responsibility (A. Ḥamid Al-Ghazālī, 2011; Ibn al-Jawzī, 2005). These narratives reinforced the conviction that closeness to God is achieved not through possession but through empathy, service, and trust in divine providence.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Sufi conception of philanthropy represents an ethical synthesis of *zuhd*, *faqr*, and *karam*. These principles correspond respectively to detachment, contentment, and generosity, forming a moral framework that directs the human soul away from material bondage toward divine intimacy. In this perspective, philanthropy is not a function of surplus wealth but an expression of faith and spiritual consciousness. While Kuran (2001) interprets classical philanthropy primarily as a socio-economic mechanism for redistributing wealth and sustaining moral order, the Sufi tradition adds a transcendental dimension by viewing philanthropy as a pathway to *ma'rifa* (gnosis) and spiritual transformation.

The social implications of this framework were significant. By integrating spiritual discipline with generosity, Sufis helped cultivate communities of care, solidarity, and mutual support. Institutions such as *khānqāhs* and *ribāṭs* functioned not only as centers of worship but also as sites of education, hospitality, and welfare provision. As Qadri (2022) observes, these networks embodied an early model of organized Islamic philanthropy that linked spiritual devotion with socio-economic responsibility.

From an analytical perspective, this theoretical construction of Sufi philanthropy reveals a distinctive ethical paradigm that transcends conventional economic models of charity. Rather than treating giving as a function of surplus or institutional obligation, Sufi thought redefines philanthropy as an existential act rooted in spiritual consciousness. Contemporary research on Islamic social finance supports this perspective, demonstrating that philanthropic systems grounded in ethical and spiritual values are more effective in fostering social justice, institutional trust, and sustainable welfare (Maulina et al., 2023; Widiastuti, Ningsih, et al., 2022).

These findings contribute to contemporary debates on ethics and philanthropy by showing that classical Sufi thought developed a comprehensive moral framework long before the emergence of modern philanthropic institutions. The integration of *zuhd*, *faqr*, and *karam* demonstrates that philanthropy was conceived not merely as wealth redistribution but as a process of spiritual self-transformation. In this respect, Sufi philanthropy offers an alternative ethical paradigm that complements contemporary approaches to Islamic social finance by emphasizing the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human flourishing (Maulina et al., 2023; Widiastuti, Ningsih, et al., 2022).

Moreover, the integration of *zuhd*, *faqr*, and *karam* provides a critical response to contemporary cultures of consumerism and material accumulation. Whereas modern economic paradigms often define prosperity in terms of possession and consumption, Sufi philanthropy reorients human aspirations toward ethical responsibility, self-restraint, generosity, and service to others. This perspective suggests that philanthropy is not merely a mechanism of redistribution but also a means of cultivating virtuous character, social solidarity, and sustainable well-being (Hamidah et al., 2024; Hamzah et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the present interpretation should be understood within the scope of textual analysis. The study focuses primarily on classical Sufi literature and therefore does not examine how these ethical principles were implemented across diverse historical and socio-economic contexts. Future research may explore how the concepts of *zuhd*, *faqr*, and *karam* were translated into institutional practices and adapted within contemporary Muslim philanthropic organizations.

Historical Manifestations of Sufi Philanthropy

In the Sufi worldview, devotion to God extends beyond ritual observance into a lived ethic of compassion and generosity. For Sufis, relationships with fellow human beings (*ḥuqūq al-ʿibād*) are not peripheral moral concerns but direct expressions of servitude (*ʿubūdiyyah*) and spiritual purification (*taẓkiyah*). Acts of giving, therefore, function not merely as economic transactions but as manifestations of social piety (*taqwā ijtimaʿiyyah*) and divine mercy in everyday life.

This perspective is clearly reflected in the teachings of several classical Sufis. Al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), for example, emphasized that caring for orphans and feeding the needy could be more spiritually meaningful than ritual performance when detached from compassion (Denny, 1979). Similarly, narratives surrounding ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 797) and Bishr al-Ḥāfi (d. 841) highlight a recurring Sufi theme: that the true value of worship lies in generosity, sincerity, and concern for others rather than in external ritual alone (Al-Malībārī, 2018; Al-Sarrāj, 1960). These accounts did not diminish the importance of pilgrimage or other religious obligations but sought to affirm that authentic devotion must be accompanied by social responsibility.

Accordingly, many early Sufis combined ritual observance with active concern for the welfare of others. Figures such as al-Tustarī, al-Bisṭāmī, al-Junayd, and al-Ḥallāj performed the pilgrimage while simultaneously emphasizing generosity, humility, and service as essential dimensions of spiritual life. In this perspective, ritual merit loses its transformative power when separated from compassion, whereas acts of service become tangible expressions of divine love.

Classical Sufi literature also preserves numerous examples of radical generosity among the Prophet's family and early Muslims. Al-Ghazālī recounts how ʿĀ'ishah distributed all of her wealth to the poor despite her own needs, while al-Qushayrī narrates stories in which compassion transcends social status and material calculation (A. Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, 2011; Al-Qushayrī, 2001). Such narratives functioned as pedagogical models through which generosity was internalized as a source of spiritual joy rather than a burdensome obligation.

These historical examples reveal that Sufi philanthropy operated as a lived ethical system in which spiritual consciousness was continuously translated into social action. Institutions such as *khānqāhs* and *ribāṭs* served not only as centers of worship and spiritual training but also as sites of hospitality, education, and welfare provision. As Qadri (2022) notes, these networks embodied an early form of organized Islamic philanthropy that linked devotion with socio-economic responsibility. Modern scholarship confirms the continuity of this tradition, showing that contemporary Sufi communities continue to institutionalize charitable initiatives, educational programs, and social services as extensions of spiritual discipline rather than merely humanitarian activities (Sakhok & Munandar, 2020). Likewise, Thibdeau (2025) argues that Sufi mysticism transforms metaphysical awareness into concrete ethical responsibility, integrating contemplation and social engagement within a unified moral framework.

From an analytical perspective, these findings challenge the widespread assumption that Sufism is primarily concerned with inward spirituality. Rather, the historical record demonstrates that social engagement has long been an integral component of the Sufi tradition. By linking self-purification with social welfare, Sufi philanthropy offers a distinctive ethical paradigm in which spirituality is measured not only by ritual observance but also by the capacity to cultivate compassion, solidarity, and justice. In this respect, Sufi philanthropy remains a historically rooted yet normatively relevant model for addressing contemporary concerns related to social welfare, ethical responsibility, and human flourishing.

Moreover, the historical experience of Sufi institutions demonstrates that spirituality and public welfare need not be treated as separate domains. By combining religious devotion with education, hospitality, and charitable service, classical Sufi communities developed enduring models of social engagement that continue to inspire contemporary faith-based initiatives. Their experience suggests that religious communities can contribute meaningfully to social cohesion, ethical responsibility, and community welfare while maintaining their spiritual commitments (Sakhok & Munandar, 2020; Thibdeau, 2025).

Nevertheless, the historical interpretation presented here should be understood within the scope of the available textual sources. While classical Sufi literature and historical accounts provide valuable insights into the philanthropic role of Sufi institutions, the present study does not examine regional variations or the practical operation of specific *khānqāhs* and *ribāṭs* across different historical settings. Future research may therefore investigate how these institutions functioned in particular social, political, and economic contexts and how their philanthropic practices evolved over time.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sufi philanthropy, far from being a marginal dimension of Islamic spirituality, constitutes a central pillar of the Sufi worldview, integrating faith, compassion, and social responsibility into a unified ethical-spiritual system. The analysis of classical Sufi texts reveals that the Sufis consistently rejected any separation between spiritual perfection and social virtue. For them, devotion (*ibādah*) without generosity (*karam*) was incomplete, and piety (*taqwā*) without compassion remained spiritually deficient.

Throughout the classical period, Sufi scholars interpreted the Qur'ānic call to charity not only as a legal obligation but as a transformative spiritual discipline. Figures such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, al-Nūrī, and al-Ghazālī conceptualized philanthropy as a process of inner purification (*taṣkīyah al-naḥs*), while others, including al-Ḥallāj and Bishr al-Ḥāfi, emphasized the primacy of social compassion over ritual formalism. These perspectives collectively produced a distinctive theology of giving in which selflessness becomes an act of worship and service emerges as a form of divine remembrance.

This study contributes to the field by addressing a significant gap in the existing literature, which has largely focused on contemporary philanthropic institutions, Islamic social finance, and modern Sufi organizations. By reconstructing the doctrinal foundations, ethical principles, and historical manifestations of philanthropy in classical Sufism, this study demonstrates that philanthropy functioned as an integral component of Sufi spirituality rather than a peripheral social activity. In doing so, it offers a comprehensive ethical-spiritual paradigm—what may be described as a “spiritual economy of mercy”—in which compassion serves as the primary medium of religious expression.

In the contemporary context, where religious life is often fragmented between ritual observance and social engagement, the Sufi model offers a critical corrective. It provides a framework in which spirituality is actualized through ethical responsibility and social care, thereby addressing modern challenges such as moral alienation, inequality, and the instrumentalization of religion. In this sense, Sufi philanthropy remains not only historically significant but also normatively relevant for contemporary Islamic thought and practice.

Future research may extend this study by examining how Sufi philanthropic ethics can be operationalized within modern institutional frameworks, including Islamic social finance, digital

religious communities, and transnational philanthropic networks. Such inquiries would further illuminate the enduring potential of Sufi spirituality as a resource for integrating faith, ethics, and social transformation in the modern world.

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