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# *Tawḥīd* and *Tazkiyah al-Nafs* in the Algorithmic Age: An Islamic Cyberspirituality Framework

Tauhid dan *Tazkiyah al-nafs* dalam Era Algoritmik: Kerangka Siber-Spiritualitas Islam

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**Abstract:** *Digital platforms increasingly shape how spirituality is encountered, judged, and practiced. Through recommendation, visibility, and engagement metrics, they may alter the conditions in which religious orientation, authority, and discipline are formed. This conceptual article proposes Islamic Cyberspirituality as a framework for analyzing and evaluating digital spiritual practice. Using theory synthesis, it combines recent scholarship on digital religion, algorithmic mediation, and New Age and platform spirituality with a defined corpus of primary Islamic sources read within a Sunnī, Ashʿarī–Ghazālian tradition. The literature suggests three analytically distinct shifts: an ontological shift in orientation, an epistemic shift in authority, and an ethical-practical shift from discipline to consumption. The article proposes that tawḥīd supplies both an orientation criterion and the accountability that grounds criteria of credibility, that tazkiyah al-nafs specifies a staged process of transformation (niyyah, mujāhadah, murāqabah, muḥāsabah, practice, and akhlāq), and that technology should be evaluated as wasīlah using criteria that include platform design and incentives. The result is a proposed model with propositions and indicators, not a tested finding about user behaviors. Empirical studies of Muslim digital communities are needed to examine it.*

**Keywords:** Islamic Cyberspirituality; *Tawḥīd*; *Tazkiyah al-nafs*; Algorithmic spirituality; Digital religion

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**Abstrak:** *Platform digital semakin membentuk cara spiritualitas dijumpai, dinilai, dan dipraktikkan. Melalui rekomendasi, visibilitas, dan metrik keterlibatan, platform dapat mengubah kondisi pembentukan orientasi, otoritas, dan disiplin keagamaan. Artikel konseptual ini mengusulkan Islamic Cyberspirituality sebagai kerangka untuk menganalisis dan menilai praktik spiritual digital. Dengan sintesis teori, kajian ini memadukan literatur terbaru tentang religi digital, mediasi algoritmik, serta spiritualitas New Age dan platform dengan korpus sumber primer Islam yang ditetapkan secara eksplisit dan dibaca dalam tradisi Sunni, Asy'ariyah–Ghazalian. Literatur menunjukkan tiga pergeseran yang berbeda secara analitis: pergeseran ontologis pada orientasi, pergeseran epistemik pada otoritas, dan pergeseran etis-praktis dari disiplin menuju konsumsi. Artikel ini mengusulkan bahwa tawḥīd menyediakan kriteria orientasi sekaligus akuntabilitas yang melandasi kriteria kredibilitas, bahwa tazkiyah al-nafs menetapkan proses transformasi bertahap (niat, mujāhadah, murāqabah, muḥāsabah, praktik, dan akhlak), dan bahwa teknologi perlu dinilai sebagai wasīlah dengan kriteria yang mencakup desain dan insentif platform. Hasilnya berupa model yang diusulkan beserta proposisi dan indikator, bukan temuan teruji tentang perilaku pengguna. Kajian empiris pada komunitas digital Muslim diperlukan untuk mengujinya.*

**Kata Kunci:** Cyberspirituality Islam; Tawḥīd; Tazkiyah al-nafs; Spiritualitas algoritmik; Religi digital

## Introduction

Digital platforms no longer serve only as channels for religious information. Social media, video platforms, and religious applications form socio-technical environments in which platform infrastructure, algorithmic visibility, the strategies of religious actors, and audience participation jointly influence which figures, messages, and practices gain attention.[1] Recent work describes the resulting authority as hybrid: institutional recognition and scholarly transmission still matter, but they now operate alongside popularity, engagement, and platform visibility.[2] For Muslim communities this opens real opportunities for da'wah and access to knowledge. It also raises the question of how credibility is recognized when views, followers, and recommendations affect who is seen.[3] The issue is therefore not only how religion is communicated digitally, but also which orientations, criteria of credibility, and habits platform environments encourage.

Part of this concern draws on a comparison with New Age spirituality, a term that needs careful use. As a historical movement, the New Age grew out of Western esoteric and countercultural currents of the twentieth century and is usually characterized by an emphasis on the sacralized self, holistic healing, and the free combination of elements from different traditions.[4] Levin shows that its healing practices are diverse and that even its definition remains contested.[5] It should be distinguished from three neighboring phenomena. *Wellness culture* is a wider field of

health and self-improvement products that often borrows spiritual vocabulary; the commodification of spirituality in such fields has been criticized.[6] *Platform spirituality* refers to spiritual expression reorganized by the economic and cultural logic of social media, including self-presentation, branding, and micro-celebrity.[7] *Muslim religious practice in digital space*, finally, is anchored in revealed sources and scholarly traditions and cannot be classed as New Age merely because it uses the same platforms.[8] This article therefore does not treat New Age spirituality as one phenomenon that is always subjective and consumerist. It uses the New Age only as a heuristic comparison, because some tendencies often associated with it, such as self-referential meaning-making and the commercial packaging of spiritual goods, are also reported in platform environments.

Research over the past few years has described several related processes. Renser and Tiidenberg show how spiritual healers on Facebook produce and sell spiritual commodities through affective and aspirational labor.[9] Ahmad Rizal and Vella discuss the commercialization of religion on social media as a da'wah medium.[10] AlMazaedh et al. synthesize 88 studies (2010–2025) linking platform infrastructure and algorithmic visibility to religious communication and social cohesion.[11] Studies of digital Islamic authority describe how legitimacy is negotiated through visibility, audience participation, and platform architecture, and work on digital Sufism examines the transformation of piety and isnad online.[12] Yıldız and Ayten propose cyberspirituality as a candidate category for spirituality that takes shape in digital environments. [13]

Table 1 compares these strands with the framework proposed here. Each addresses an important part of the problem. The gap this article addresses is narrower than a claim of total absence: in the literature we reviewed, we did not find a framework that (a) separates orientation, authority, and practice as distinct problems that call for different kinds of analysis, (b) derives criteria for each from primary Islamic sources, and (c) links those criteria to an evaluation of platform design. Whether such a framework exists elsewhere remains open to further searching.

Table 1. Comparison of related strands of scholarship and the framework proposed in this article

| Strand (examples) | Problem addressed | Foundation | Mechanism emphasised | What remains open |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Commodification of spirituality (Renser & Tiidenberg; Ahmad Rizal & Vella; Balishyan & Kompatsiaris) | Spirituality as product, service, and digital labour | Media and cultural studies; political economy | Branding, affective labour, monetisation | Normative criteria for evaluating spiritual practice from within a religious tradition |

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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Digital religion and platform societies (Evolvi; AlMazaedh et al.; Akhmetova et al.) | Changes in religious communication, community, and governance | Media studies and sociology of religion | Mediation, affordances, algorithmic visibility, institutional legitimacy | Mostly descriptive-analytic; limited guidance on orientation and personal transformation |
| Digital Sufism and online piety (Hakim et al.; Harianto et al.) | Transformation of piety, *sanad*, and Sufi authority online | Islamic studies; interpretive case studies | Visibility shaping perceived credibility; hybrid legitimacy | Case- and actor-focused; *tazkiyah* not specified as a staged process applicable to ordinary users |
| Digital Islamic authority and knowledge transmission (Hidayatullah; Siregar et al.; Istifarin & Syamsudin; Efendi et al.; Sulistio) | Negotiation of authority, transmission of knowledge, governance | Sociology of Islam; hadith studies; governance studies | Metrics and platform visibility alongside *sanad* | Criteria for credible authority and for evaluating technology are not derived systematically from classical sources |
| Cyberspirituality (Yıldız & Ayten) | Conceptual confusion between religion and spirituality online | Literature-based conceptual analysis; comparative perspective | Candidate category of spirituality shaped by digital settings | A general category; no tradition-specific normative referent |
| Islamic Cyberspirituality (this article) | Three distinct shifts: ontological, epistemic, ethical-practical | Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, Sunnī theology, ethics, Sufism, *maqāṣid* | *Tawḥīd* (orientation and accountability), *tazkiyah al-nafs* (staged transformation), *wasīlah* (technology criteria) | Conceptual propositions only; empirical testing required |

*Source: author's synthesis of the literature cited in this section.*

The article asks three questions. (1) Which analytically distinct shifts in spiritual orientation, authority, and practice does the literature report for algorithmically mediated spirituality, and how should they be classified? (2) How can *tawḥīd* and *tazkiyah al-nafs*, read from primary Islamic sources, yield separate criteria for orientation, credibility, and transformation? (3) What criteria follow for evaluating technology as *wasīlah*, and what propositions can a conceptual framework offer for empirical testing?

The contribution is a conceptual framework, Islamic Cyberspirituality, developed by synthesizing these strands. It consists of definitions, criteria, a staged model, and

testable propositions. It does not measure the piety or behaviors of users, and a conceptual study cannot show how often the shifts described here occur or how strongly platforms cause them.

## Research Methods

### 1. Research design

This is a conceptual article that uses theory synthesis in Jaakkola's typology of conceptual articles and develops the synthesis into a theoretical model with propositions.[14] It combines two lines of work: a critical reading of the literature on algorithmically mediated spirituality, and a normative-hermeneutic reading of primary Islamic sources. Conceptual research allows perspectives to be integrated into new theoretical constructs, and a structured literature review supports synthesis across disciplines.[15] No data were collected from users, and the study does not measure religious behavior or experience. The reconstruction is normative and written from within an Islamic perspective; it is not a neutral description.

### 2. Corpus A: the literature on digital religion and spirituality

Sources were searched using Consensus (consensus.app), an AI-assisted academic search application, between 1 and 15 March 2026. The search used combinations of the keyword's *digital religion*, *algorithmic spirituality*, *algorithmic authority*, *platformization of religion*, *New Age spirituality*, *cyberspirituality*, *digital Sufism*, *Islamic authority*, and *online piety*, together with their Indonesian equivalents. Every record was then checked on the platform of the publisher or journal that hosts it (Frontiers, MDPI, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, SAGE, and Indonesian open journal systems). The period covered was 2020–2026. Foundational works on the New Age and on the commodification of spirituality published earlier were added as conceptual background. Sources published after the search window were added during revision, after their publisher records were checked.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) a peer-reviewed article, review, or scholarly book; (2) a focus on digital or platform mediation of religion or spirituality, or on New Age and commodified spirituality; (3) enough methodological information to judge what the study actually claims; and (4) publication in English or Indonesian. Excluded were opinion pieces, sources without verifiable bibliographic data, studies of religion online that say nothing about orientation, authority, or practice, and duplicates. The results were screened by title and abstract against these criteria. The final corpus comprises 31 scholarly sources: 25 journal articles and 6 books. Two of the journal articles are methodological references, and the remainder are used as substantive literature.[16] Each source was checked against its publisher record (authors, journal, volume, issue, pages, and DOI) and read for its design, data, and

context, so that empirical findings could be separated from authors' interpretation. Several of the newest sources (2026) are reviews or perspective articles; they are used to position the argument conceptually and not as evidence of user behaviour.

## 3. Corpus B: primary Islamic sources and theological tradition

The Islamic corpus was defined before the reconstruction began (Table 2). The framework is read within the Sunnī tradition, with Ashʿarī–Ghazālian theology and ethics as the main lens, because the classical discussions of intention, self-accounting, and the evaluation of means are developed most systematically there. The works of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya are used as a complementary source, since he treats the same spiritual stations from the Ḥanbalī tradition. This choice limits the scope of generalization (see Section 4).

Table 2. Corpus of primary Islamic sources

| Source type | Texts analysed | Used for |
|---|---|---|
| Qur'an | Q 51:56; 6:162; 112; 45:23; 18:110 (orientation)<br>Q 17:36; 49:6; 16:43; 4:83 (credibility)<br>Q 91:7–10; 87:14; 62:2; 29:69; 59:18; 4:1; 68:4 (*tazkiyah*)<br>Q 13:28; 8:2; 39:23 (affect in worship)<br>Q 5:35; 63:9; 102:1–2 (means and distraction) | *Tawḥīd*, epistemic criteria, *tazkiyah*, *wasīlah* |
| Exegesis (*tafsīr*) | al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr on the verses above | Meaning of *zakkā*/*tazkiyah*, *wasīlah*, and verification (*tabayyun*) |
| *Ḥadīth* | Bukhārī nos. 1 and 100; Muslim nos. 8, 55, 1905, 2750, and the introduction (on the isnād); Tirmidhī no. 2376 | Intention, *iḥsān*, sincerity, affect, knowledge and its transmission, love of status |
| Classical works | al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (books on knowledge, the heart, discipline of the soul, intention and sincerity, *murāqabah* and *Muḥāsabah*, reproach of status and ostentation, *tawḥīd*) and *al-Iqtiṣād fi al-Iʿtiqād*; al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Riʿāya*; Ibn Qayyim, *Madārij al-Sālikīn*; al-Qarāfī, *al-Furūq*; Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām, *Qawāʿid al-Aḥkām*; al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt* | Theology of *tawḥīd*; stations of *tazkiyah*; *maqāṣid* and the ruling of means (*wasāʾil*) |

*Note: translations of the Qur'an follow Abdel Haleem; translations of other sources are the authors.*

## 4. Analytical procedure

Analysis proceeded in four steps, designed so that the categories of diagnosis would not simply be chosen to fit the intended model.

*Step 1: deriving categories.* Claims about spiritual change were extracted from each source in Corpus A and coded in two rounds, without reference to Islamic concepts.

Codes were then grouped by the question they answer: what spirituality is oriented toward (orientation), who or what is credible and on what ground (authority), and what people do and how it forms them (practice).

*Step 2: weighing alternatives.* Alternative categories were considered, including belonging and identity, polarization, misinformation, privatization, commodification, and aestheticization. A category was kept as a separate shift only if it (a) recurred across independent sources, (b) answered a question that no other category answered, and (c) could not be reduced to a mechanism of another category. Commodification, aestheticization, and personalization were treated as mechanisms that operate across the three shifts and not as shifts in themselves. Evidence pointing the other way, for example studies reporting that platforms strengthen belonging, learning, or access to scholars, was recorded as a boundary condition.

*Step 3: reconstruction from Corpus B.* Each Islamic concept was defined from the primary sources, with the *tafsīr* and classical works used to fix its meaning. Criteria were then derived from the texts. For technology, reasoning from the classical rules on means and ends was applied by analogy, and the limits of that analogy were stated.

*Step 4: testing coherence.* Five checks were applied to the relation between diagnosis and Islamic concepts. (a) *Mapping:* each shift is matched to a concept that addresses it through a distinct mechanism. (b) *Separation:* the ontological and epistemic functions of *tawḥīd* must be statable separately. (c) *Independence:* concepts were defined from Corpus B before they were linked to the diagnosis. (d) *Alternatives:* whether another concept, such as *ikhlāṣ* or *ʿilm*, would do the same work better. (e) *Scope:* each proposition must state what would count against it.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Key terms and the layers of algorithmic mediation

*Digital religion* refers to the ways in which religious practice, community, and authority are mediated by digital media, and in which online and offline religious life become intertwined.[17] Gao et al. add that digital technologies reshape the temporal, spatial, and affective conditions of lived religion.[18] In this article the term is used descriptively: it names a field of mediation, not a particular spiritual orientation.

*Algorithmic spirituality* is an analytic term of this article and not an established category. It builds on studies of how algorithms acquire social meaning in religious discourse, how users may read algorithmic recommendation as quasi-spiritual (algorithmic divination on TikTok), and how algorithmic visibility reconfigures spiritual authority.[19] It denotes spiritual practices and judgments whose conditions are significantly shaped by recommendation, ranking, and the display of metrics.

Four features can be observed in the reviewed literature: (i) recommendation or ranking determines exposure; (ii) metrics such as views, followers, and likes are displayed and used as cues; (iii) feeds repeat and personalize topics; and (iv) users or communities treat algorithmic outputs as meaningful. The term has limits. It does not attribute agency or intention to algorithms; it does not apply where religious content circulates in closed networks without ranking systems; and it does not imply that all users are affected equally. Sierocki studies Catholic online discourse and St. Lawrence studies TikTok users, so neither is a Muslim sample; both are used here for conceptual illustration only.

The claim that "algorithms shape spirituality" covers four different layers, and they should not be merged (Table 3). Algorithms act mainly at the first two layers. Meaning and legitimacy are decided at the last two, in interaction with the first two.

Table 3. Four layers of algorithmic mediation of religion

| Layer | What it is | Observable feature | Examples in the literature |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Platform design | Affordances and business model: ranking, autoplay, display of metrics, monetisation | Which actions the interface invites; what is rewarded | Hutchby on affordances; Fogg on persuasive design; Balishyan & Kompatsiaris on self-presentation and branding |
| 2. Curation and visibility | What is shown, to whom, and how often | Exposure, repetition, personalised feeds | Akhmetova et al.; AlMazaedh et al.; Sierocki |
| 3. User interpretation | How users read content and algorithmic outputs | Use of metrics or recommendations as signs of relevance or truth; reception by youth | St. Lawrence; Istifarin & Syamsudin |
| 4. Community attribution of credibility | How communities grant or withhold authority | Endorsement, *sanad*, institutional recognition, comments and sharing | Harianto et al.; Siregar et al.; Efendi et al. |

*Source: author's synthesis.*

**Reported in the literature.** Balishyan and Kompatsiaris report that spiritual expression among Russian influencers is embedded in self-presentation, micro-celebrity, branding, and entrepreneurial selfhood.[20] Renser and Tiidenberg report that Estonian healers on Facebook produce affective and aspirational labour around spiritual commodities. Harianto et al. report, on the basis of illustrative observations of public content, that metrics, repetition, aesthetics, and emotional response may stand in for spiritual credibility in digital Sufism in Indonesia.[21] Istifarin and Syamsudin report, from netnography of hadith content on TikTok, Instagram

Reels, and YouTube Shorts, a shift toward short, visual, and emotionally engaging formats.[22] Yıldız and Ayten note that social media, artificial intelligence, the metaverse, and New Age movements have intensified the proximity of digitality and spirituality.[23]

**Inference of this article.** Taken together, these studies suggest that personalisation, emotional appeal, aestheticisation, visibility, validation by metrics, and consumption may form a cluster in which the individual becomes the main point of reference. This is an inference across studies of different platforms, countries, and religions. None of them is a corpus built to test it, and none covers all users. It is therefore stated as a possibility: what feels personally relevant or appears repeatedly may come to be taken as spiritually meaningful, especially where no other criteria are in use.

## 2. Three shifts, classified

### 1) *What "ontological" means here*

The word ontological is used in a narrow sense. It concerns what spirituality is ultimately about: the reality, or ground of value, toward which spiritual life is oriented. In Islamic thought this is the question that *tawḥīd* answers: God is the ultimate reality and the ultimate referent of worship.[24] A shift is ontological when that referent changes, for example from God to the self's feelings. A change in who counts as credible concerns the criteria of knowledge and is classed as epistemic. A change in what people habitually do concerns the formation of conduct and is classed as ethical-practical. Table 4 sets out the classification.

Table 4. Three shifts in algorithmically mediated spirituality, by type

| Dimension | Type of shift | Guiding question | Baseline in the Islamic tradition | Tendency reported or inferred | Shift |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Orientation | Ontological | What is spirituality ultimately oriented toward? | God as ultimate referent; affect welcomed but not the criterion | Subjective experience used as the main test of meaning | Transcendent referent → self-referential affect |
| Authority | Epistemic | Who or what is credible, and on what ground? | Competence, argument, transmission, character, accountability | Visibility, popularity, and engagement used as cues | Epistemic criteria → platform cues (often in hybrid form) |
| Discipline | Ethical-practical | How is a person formed? | Learning, reflection, intention, practice, and character formation | Continuous consumption of content | Formation → consumption |

*Source: author's analysis.*

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The three shifts are related but not equivalent. If the self becomes the referent (ontological), felt resonance becomes a plausible test of truth, which affects who is regarded as credible (epistemic). If visibility is read as a sign of credibility, visible content tends to be consumed rather than studied, which weakens habits of discipline (ethical-practical). The relation is one of dependence and mutual reinforcement and not a strict causal sequence. Habits of use also shape orientation, because what is done repeatedly comes to feel normal.

### 2) *Orientation: affect and its limits*

Affect has a recognised place in worship. The Qur'an speaks of hearts that tremble when God is mentioned, of skins and hearts that soften at the remembrance of God, and of hearts that find rest in that remembrance.[25] When Ḥanẓala feared that he had become a hypocrite because his state of heart changed between the Prophet's company and his home, the Prophet told him that there is "an hour and an hour", that is, that states of heart vary. Affect is therefore a valued dimension of religious life. It is not, however, the criterion of truth or of nearness to God. The Qur'an criticizes the person who takes his own desire (*hawā*) as his god.[26]

Emotional orientation becomes a problem when it becomes the single measure, that is, when "does it move me?" replaces "is it true, and does it bring me closer to God?" In that case the purposes of spiritual life, which include knowledge, obedience, and ethical formation, are reduced to a feeling. Gao et al. show that digital technologies reshape the affective dimensions of lived religion, and Balishyan and Kompatsiaris show platform spiritualities organized around self-growth, positivity, and personal empowerment.[27] These studies do not show that Muslim users generally treat feeling as the final criterion. The claim here is conditional: where affect is the only criterion in use, platforms that optimise for emotional response may make that reduction easier.

### 3) *Authority: hybrid forms and the epistemic risk*

Digital visibility does not simply replace scholarly authority. In Muslim contexts authority is held by scholars (*'ulamā'*), chains of transmission (*sanad*), institutions such as pesantren, universities, and councils, communities of practice, and the perceived credibility of content itself. The literature describes these as combined with platform visibility in hybrid forms.[28] Harianto et al. describe a hybrid legitimacy shared by institutions, creators, and audiences; Istifarin and Syamsudin report that authority becomes more widely shared and is shaped by perceived closeness and engagement, sometimes in tension with *sanad*-based legitimacy.[29] Raya shows digital preachers building recognizable public identities within commercially structured environments.[30]

These findings support a more careful claim than displacement. Visibility opens a new and partly independent route to authority; it may compete with traditional criteria, complement them, or combine with them. Whether it displaces them depends on context and on audience literacy. The epistemic shift is therefore described as a risk, namely that credibility is judged by cues unrelated to competence, transmission, or character, and not as a completed replacement.

The relation between recommendation and users' judgment can be stated as a chain (Table 5). Only some links are supported by evidence, and the last is a hypothesis. Popularity metrics may influence perception, but they are not direct evidence of spiritual legitimacy.

Table 5. Chain from algorithmic recommendation to users' evaluation of religious authority

| Step | Mechanism | Support in the literature | Status |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Recommendation and ranking determine exposure | Akhmetova et al.; AlMazaedh et al.; Sierocki | Reported |
| 2 | Metrics (views, followers, likes) are displayed beside content and reward repetition and aesthetics | Harianto et al.; Raya | Reported in case studies |
| 3 | Users may read metrics as cues of credibility | Harianto et al. (conceptual and illustrative); Istifarin & Syamsudin (netnography of hadith content) | Partly supported; interpretive evidence |
| 4 | Community responses (comments, endorsement, sharing) reinforce the cue | Siregar et al.; Efendi et al. | Reported |
| 5 | Users evaluate teachers or content partly by these cues, independently of competence, *sanad*, or character | Not directly measured in the reviewed studies | Hypothesis to be tested |

*Source: author's synthesis. Moderators likely to matter include digital literacy, prior commitment to a scholar or institution, and institutional endorsement.*

### 4) *Practice: consumption and learning*

Spiritual transformation traditionally presupposes learning, reflection, habituation, and ethical practice. Algorithmic environments are optimized for continuous attention, and spiritual content appears next to entertainment, advertising, and lifestyle content. This creates the possibility that spiritual practice is organized by patterns of consumption. Balishyan and Kompatsiaris and Raya link spirituality to branding and commodification, and Renser and Tiidenberg describe the sale of spiritual commodities.[31] It is an inference, not a finding, that large volumes of viewing and saving may occur without a corresponding change in conduct.

To mark the boundary between consuming religious content and learning from it, Table 6 sets out five levels of engagement. Digital *learning* is taken to be taking place when engagement moves beyond the first level within a period of time; digital

*consumption* is engagement that stays at the first level, however large its volume. The indicators describe learning processes. They do not measure piety, which belongs to God's knowledge alone.

Table 6. Levels of engagement with digital religious content

| Level | Definition | Observable indicators |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Passive engagement | Exposure without further processing | Viewing, scrolling, saving, or sharing without restating or questioning content |
| 2. Reflection (*tafakkur*) | Active consideration of meaning and relevance | Ability to restate and question the content; relating it to one's situation; returning to it; note-taking |
| 3. Internalisation | Content enters one's intentions and evaluations | Reported change in priorities or intention; ability to state why one acts |
| 4. Practice | Enactment in worship or conduct | Repeated acts following from the content across weeks |
| 5. Behavioural change | Durable change in character and conduct | Change that persists beyond exposure to the content and is noticed by others |

*Source: author's construction, informed by the stages in Section 3.3.4.*

## 3. *Tawḥīd* and *tazkiyah al-nafs* as foundations

### 1) *Tawḥīd: framework and two mechanisms*

*Tawḥīd* is read here in two linked senses: the creedal affirmation of God's oneness as developed in Sunnī theology, and its practical entailment that God alone is the final object of worship, love, fear, and hope.[32] Al-Ghazālī treats this practical dimension at length in his discussion of *tawḥīd* and *tawakkul*.[33] Recent conceptual work on Islamic spiritual well-being also places *tawḥīd* among the foundations of a framework linking the relationship with God to meaning, moral agency, and conduct.[34] *Tawḥīd* is not used as a single device for every problem. It operates through two separate mechanisms.

**Ontological mechanism: orientation.** Three criteria follow from the sources. (1) *Ultimate referent:* does the practice direct the person toward God, or does it take desire, feeling, or audience as its final measure?[35] (2) *Sincerity:* is the act done for God whether or not it is seen? Intention governs the value of action, and the *ḥadīth* of the three who are judged first (a scholar, a reciter, and a donor) warns that acts done to be seen and praised bring no reward.[36] Al-Ghazālī's discussion of ostentation and the love of status develops the same point. (3) *Affect subordinate to norm:* feelings are welcomed, but they are evaluated against revealed norms and do not replace them.[37]

**Epistemic mechanism: credibility.** *Tawḥīd* contributes to the assessment of credibility only indirectly. It establishes that claims about religion are accountable to God, so that judging whom to follow is a moral responsibility and not a matter of taste.[38] The criteria themselves come from the Islamic knowledge tradition (Table

7). Visibility is not among them. Metrics may help a message reach people, but they say nothing about these five criteria.

Table 7. Epistemic criteria of Islamic authority and their digital counterparts

| Criterion | Islamic source | Question to ask in digital space | What metrics can and cannot show |
|---|---|---|---|
| Competence (*ʿilm*) | Q 16:43; Q 4:83; Bukhārī no. 100 (knowledge is lost with scholars, and unqualified leaders give opinions) | Is there recognised training, a known teacher, or institutional affiliation? | Followers do not show training |
| Argument (*dalīl*, *tabayyun*) | Q 49:6; Q 17:36 | Are claims sourced, and can they be verified? | Views do not show that a claim is correct |
| Transmission (*sanad*) | Muslim, introduction (saying of Ibn Sīrīn: "this knowledge is religion, so look from whom you take your religion") | Are teachers and sources declared and traceable? | Engagement cannot substitute for a chain of transmission |
| Character (*ʿadāla*, *Akhlāq*) | Q 49:6; Tirmidhī no. 2376 (love of wealth and status ruins religion) | Is conduct consistent with the message, and free of exploitative commercialisation? | Popularity can coexist with poor conduct |
| Accountability (*amāna, naṣīḥa*) | Muslim no. 55 (religion is sincere counsel) | Can the speaker be corrected? Are there institutional or community means of oversight? | Metrics do not show openness to correction |

*Source: author's derivation from the primary sources in Table 2.*

These criteria do not require that every digital teacher hold a formal credential. They require that credibility claims be open to checking, which is what the Qur'anic instruction to verify news from a source whose reliability is unknown asks of the believer.[39]

### 2) *Tazkiyah al-nafs: sources and dimensions*

*Tazkiyah* is grounded in the Qur'an and the *ḥadīth*, not only in contemporary writing. The Qur'an declares successful the one who purifies the soul and unsuccessful the one who corrupts it, and the exegetes read this as success through obedience and self-purification.[40] The Prophet's mission includes purifying people alongside teaching them the Book and wisdom, which means that learning and *tazkiyah* are paired and that learning does not replace it. The hadith of Gabriel defines *iḥsān* as worshipping God as though one sees Him, the ground of *murāqabah* (awareness of being watched).[41] Contemporary work links *tawḥīd* and *tazkiyah al-nafs* within Islamic psychospiritual frameworks, but those studies are used here only as secondary support.[42]

From these sources six dimensions are derived (Table 8).[43] Each has an observable indicator. The indicators are proxies for a process. They do not measure sincerity or piety.

Table 8. Dimensions of *tazkiyah al-nafs* and indicators for digital practice

| Dimension | Primary sources | Meaning | Indicator in digital practice |
|---|---|---|---|
| Intention (*niyyah*) | Bukhārī no. 1; Ghazālī on intention and sincerity | Directing an act toward God | Can state the purpose of using or producing content; reduced dependence on audience response |
| Striving (*Mujāhadah*) | Q 29:69; Ibn Qayyim, *Madārij* | Effort against desires that pull away from the end | Deliberate restraint, such as limiting use or refraining from approval-seeking posts |
| Awareness (*murāqabah*) | Q 4:1; Muslim no. 8; Ghazālī; Ibn Qayyim | Awareness of being watched by God | Self-monitoring during use; pausing to check motive |
| Accounting (*Muḥāsabah*) | Q 59:18; Muḥāsibī, *al-Riʿāya*; Ghazālī | Periodic reckoning of one's acts | Regular review of what was consumed or posted and whether conduct changed |
| Practice (*ʿamal*) | Q 62:2; Ghazālī on knowledge and action | Turning knowledge into deeds | Concrete acts following from content, repeated over time |
| Character (*Akhlāq*) | Q 68:4; Ghazālī on discipline of the soul and refinement of character | Durable moral qualities | Lasting change in dealing with others and with platform incentives |

*Source: author's derivation from the primary sources in Table 2.*

### 3) *A staged model of transformation*

The sequence from content to self-transformation is presented as a conditional model and not as an automatic progression (Table 9). Arrows indicate dependence: a later stage requires, but is not guaranteed by, the earlier one. Each stage has a defining mechanism taken from the dimensions in Table 8 and a characteristic way of failing, for which the classical sources supply terms: heedlessness (*ghaflah*), knowledge without action, ostentation (*riyāʾ*), self-admiration (*ʿujb*), and delusion (*ghurūr*).[44]



Table 9. Stages of transformation, mechanisms, and failure modes

| Stage | Definition | Mechanism (Table 8) | Condition | Failure mode |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Digital content | Access to knowledge or a reminder | *Murāqabah* over the choice of content | Attention; content that meets the credibility criteria in Table 7 | Heedlessness (*ghaflah*); passive scrolling |
| Reflection | Considering meaning and relevance | *Muḥāsabah*; *tafakkur* | Time and a reflective routine | Reflection that stays intellectual |
| Internalisation | Meaning enters intention and evaluation | *Niyyah*, *ikhlāṣ* | Sincerity of purpose | Knowledge without sincerity; self-admiration (*ʿujb*) |
| Practice | Enactment in conduct | *Mujāhadah* | Effort and support from a community | Practice done to be seen (*riyāʾ*); inconsistency |
| Self-transformation | Durable change of character | *Akhlāq* | Repetition over time; accountability | Relapse; self-satisfaction (*ghurūr*) |

*Source: author's construction.*

Under this model a short religious video is a possible stimulus. Its value lies in what it begins, and not in its metrics or in the emotion it provokes. The model also differs from the *tawḥīd* mechanisms above. *Tawḥīd* sets the orientation and grounds the credibility criteria; *tazkiyah* describes the process by which a person is formed in that orientation. The two answer different questions and address different shifts: *tawḥīd* addresses orientation and, indirectly, authority, and *tazkiyah* addresses practice.

## 4. Technology as *wasīlah*

### 1) *Grounding the distinction between wasīlah and ghāyah*

The Qur'an commands believers to be mindful of God and to "seek the means (*wasīlah*) of approaching Him", which the exegetes explain as drawing near to God through obedience and good deeds.[45] Worship is the purpose for which humans were created, and the Qur'an warns against wealth, children, and rivalry in increase (*takāthur*) that distract from remembrance.[46] In legal and ethical theory, means take the ruling of their ends: al-Qarāfī and Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām formulate that means (*wasāʾil*) are judged by the purposes (*maqāṣid*) they serve, and al-Shāṭibī adds that acts are to be assessed by their outcomes (*maʾālāt*).[47] Al-Ghazālī likewise treats knowledge and acts as means to nearness to God, valued by what they lead to.[48]

The analogy to digital platforms has limits. First, the classical rules concern acts and the rulings of jurists, whereas platforms are systems of design, ownership, and incentives, so evaluation must reach institutions and designs and not only users. Second, judgments about benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) and harm (*mafsada*) depend on empirical evidence about platforms, which is still limited. Third, the framework yields ethical criteria for evaluating technology and not rulings (*fatwā*) on particular platforms.

### 2) *Technology is not a neutral tool*

Treating technology as a means does not mean treating it as neutral, nor as fully directed by its users. Design shapes behavior: affordances invite some actions more readily than others, persuasive design deliberately aims to change attitudes and behavior, and many platform business models depend on capturing attention and personal data.[49] Accordingly, the criteria for evaluating a technology as *wasīlah* include six elements. (1) *Persuasive design:* whether features such as autoplay, infinite scroll, and notifications are used to hold attention. (2) *Attention economy:* whether the model rewards time on the platform more than benefit to the user. (3) *Monetisation:* whether religious content is produced under revenue incentives, which the *ḥadīth* on the love of wealth and status warns can harm religion.[50] (4) *User data:* whether information about people's spiritual lives is collected, profiled, or sold, which engages the duty of trust (*amāna*). (5) *Popularity incentives:* whether metrics and rewards pull content production toward visibility, which is the danger of ostentation.[51] (6) *Capacity to choose:* whether users have transparency about ranking and control over their feeds.

A *wasīlah* can drift toward the position of a *ghāyah*. A platform that begins as a medium of communication may become an arena in which visibility and engagement are the main aims, and religious content may then be produced for views, followers, and shares more than for knowledge or transformation. Balishyan and Kompatsiaris show spirituality absorbed into a culture of self-presentation and branding, and Raya shows religious branding and commodification among Indonesian preachers.[52] The appropriate response is neither rejection nor neutrality but critical instrumentalism: technology is recognized as a powerful means and is evaluated against the six criteria above.

### 3) *Affordances, habits, and institutional conditions*

If technology shapes habits through its design, responsible use cannot depend on individual choice alone. Affordances such as continuous feeds and visible metrics encourage habits of checking, scrolling, and reacting. Four institutional conditions therefore matter. (a) Platforms should be transparent about ranking and should label

credentials. (b) Religious and educational institutions should produce accessible, verifiable content and teach digital literacy. (c) Communities should maintain norms of verification (*tabayyun*). (d) Policy should address design practices that exploit attention. Harianto et al. likewise recommend spiritual literacy, transparent credentials, layered teaching, and accountable learning paths.[53] Responsibility is thus shared among individuals, scholars and institutions, and platforms.

### 4) *Propositions and indicators*

The normative principles above are turned into propositions that can be examined empirically (Table 10). They concern platform practices, users' stated criteria, and learning processes. None of them requires, or claims, a measurement of any user's piety.

Table 10. Propositions, indicators, and possible methods

| Proposition | Indicators | Possible method |
|---|---|---|
| P1. Platform designs that reward visibility make it more likely that religious content producers adapt content to metrics rather than to learning aims. | Changes in format, length, and titles after metric feedback; creators' stated aims | Content analysis; interviews with creators |
| P2. Users who rely on popularity cues to choose religious teachers apply fewer of the criteria in Table 7. | Criteria reported when choosing teachers; verification behaviour | Survey; vignette experiment |
| P3. Volume of content consumed does not by itself predict reflection and practice; movement beyond passive engagement depends on reflective routines (*niyyah*, *Muḥāsabah*). | Levels in Table 6; presence of reflective routines | Diary study; longitudinal survey |
| P4. Where institutions provide verifiable credentials and layered learning paths, users report using more of the criteria in Table 7. | Availability of credentials and learning paths; criteria reported | Comparative case study; survey |
| P5. Features that make attention-capturing design visible or controllable are associated with more intentional use. | Use of limits and controls; reported intention before use | Field study; platform audit |

*Source: author's construction. Each proposition would be weakened by evidence that the stated relation does not hold in the population studied.*

## 5. Islamic Cyberspirituality: the framework

Islamic Cyberspirituality is defined here as a normative-analytical framework for understanding and evaluating spiritual practice in algorithmically mediated environments. It specifies (1) an orientation criterion drawn from *tawḥīd*, (2) criteria of credibility drawn from the Islamic knowledge tradition and grounded in *tawḥīd*'s accountability, (3) a staged process of self-transformation drawn from *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and (4) criteria for evaluating technology as *wasīlah*. Its scope is Muslim digital

practice and the platforms on which it takes place. It is not a measure of individual piety, and it is not tested.

### 1) *Difference from cyberspirituality and digital Sufism*

From Yıldız and Ayten the framework takes the premise that digital environments are not neutral settings and may give rise to distinct forms of spiritual practice, and the use of literature-based conceptual analysis.[54] It differs in aim. Their contribution is to propose cyberspirituality as a candidate category that clarifies the overlap between religion and spirituality online. A category defined by the digital setting does not say which orientation or criteria should govern practice within it. Islamic Cyberspirituality adds a normative referent from the Islamic tradition. This is an extension of their aim and not a criticism of it. From digital Sufism research the framework takes attention to piety formation and isnad.[55] It differs by moving from a particular Sufi tradition or set of actors to a framework applicable to any Muslim digital practice, and by adding the evaluation of technology.

The elements that the Islamic corpus contributes are: the separation of *tawḥīd*'s ontological and epistemic mechanisms (Section 3.3.1); a *tazkiyah* model with six dimensions, indicators, and failure modes (Tables 8 and 9); and criteria for *wasīlah* that include platform design and incentives (Section 3.4.2).

### 2) *Relation among the three components*

The three components can be related in at least three ways: as a causal sequence, as normative levels, or as dimensions that influence one another. The framework adopts a combination, and each reading has a consequence.

*Normative priority. Tawḥīd* fixes the end, *tazkiyah* describes the way, and *wasīlah* governs the instruments. When criteria conflict, orientation takes priority over process and process over instrument. A technique that increases reflection but encourages ostentation would pass the process test and fail the orientation test, and so would not be endorsed. This ordering follows the classical logic of ends and means.[56]

*Processual dependence.* Transformation requires orientation, because intention (*niyyah*) is one of its dimensions. *Tazkiyah* without *tawḥīd* would be self-improvement and not purification of the soul. The framework therefore predicts that platforms oriented to self-improvement may produce habit change without a change in spiritual orientation.

*Feedback.* Technology affects the process. Design shapes attention and habit, and habit shapes the heart; al-Ghazālī describes acts and states of the heart as influencing one another.[57] Criteria for *wasīlah* must therefore feed back into the assessment of the other two components. The framework predicts that identical content may have

different effects under different platform designs. A strict causal chain from *tawḥīd* to *tazkiyah* to technology would miss this feedback.

### 3) *The model: conditions, mechanism, outcomes, and boundaries*

Table 11 states the model in a form that separates conceptual constructs from empirical claims.

Table 11. The Islamic Cyberspirituality model

| Element | Content | Status |
|---|---|---|
| Initial conditions | An algorithmically mediated environment with the features in Section 3.1; users' baseline orientation and literacy; institutional context | Conceptual description |
| Mechanism | (1) Orientation check (T1–T3); (2) credibility check (Table 7); (3) staged transformation (Tables 8–9); (4) evaluation of technology as *wasīlah* (Section 3.4.2) | Conceptual criteria derived from primary sources |
| Possible outcomes | (a) Reorientation and transformation; (b) engagement without transformation; (c) reversal, in which *wasīlah* functions as *ghāyah* | Propositions P1–P5 (empirical, untested) |
| Boundaries | Not a measure of individual piety; limited to the tradition and corpus in Section 2.3; closed communities without ranking systems fall outside the scope | Scope conditions |

*Source: author's construction.*

The specific contribution of the article is therefore fivefold: a reclassification of the reported shifts into ontological, epistemic, and ethical-practical types; the separation of two mechanisms of *tawḥīd*; a six-dimension account of *tazkiyah* with indicators and failure modes; criteria for technology as *wasīlah* that include design and incentives; and five propositions for empirical examination.

## Conclusion

*Diagnosis.* The literature reviewed suggests that algorithmically mediated environments may affect spirituality at three distinct levels: what spirituality is oriented toward (ontological), who is regarded as credible (epistemic), and how people are formed (ethical-practical). The evidence is uneven. It is stronger for the role of visibility and metrics in debates over authority than for effects on orientation or practice, and the last link of the chain from recommendation to users' judgment remains a hypothesis.

*Proposed model.* Islamic Cyberspirituality reads *tawḥīd* as the orientation criterion and as the accountability that grounds criteria of credibility, *tazkiyah al-nafs* as a staged process of transformation with six dimensions, and technology as *wasīlah* evaluated by criteria that include platform design, attention economy, monetization, data, and popularity incentives.

*Contribution.* The article's specific contribution is the separation of the three shifts and of the two mechanisms of *tawḥīd*, the *tazkiyah* model with indicators and failure modes, the platform-inclusive criteria for *wasīlah*, and five propositions. It extends cyberspirituality and digital Sufism research with a normative referent from the Islamic tradition.

*Limitations.* The study is conceptual and has not been tested empirically; its findings are a theoretical framework and not a validated model of user behaviour. The literature selection is limited by the databases, languages, and period searched, and several 2026 sources are reviews or perspective articles. The Islamic corpus is limited to the texts in Table 2, and the reading is made within the Sunnī, Ashʿarī–Ghazālian tradition, with Ibn Qayyim as a complementary source. Other theological and spiritual traditions, including other Sunnī and Shiʿi approaches, may define *tawḥīd*, *tazkiyah*, or the ruling of means differently. The framework is therefore not generalizable to all Muslim communities or platforms without adaptation.

*Agenda.* Empirical work should test P1–P5 with Muslim digital communities, religious content creators, online learning environments, and users of Islamic platforms, using the indicators in Tables 6 and 8 without treating them as measures of piety. Comparative studies across traditions and platforms would show where the framework holds and where it must change.

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