

The Concept of “Crossing the Boundary” and the “Center and Periphery” Model in Peter Coppens’ Interpretive Study: A Critique and Analysis of Limitations

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Abstract

The article reconsiders Peter Coppens’ categories of “*crossing the boundary*” and “*center and periphery*” in the study of Sufi Qur’anic interpretation. Rather than accepting these models at face value, it highlights how they fail to capture the complexity of Sufi thought. The first model, which links worldly existence with the hereafter, overlooks key spiritual notions such as *fanā’* (annihilation), *qurb* (nearness), and *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being), as well as the regional diversity of Sufi traditions in places like Nishapur, Baghdad, and Andalusia. The second model, which situates Sufism within the larger religious tradition, reduces the institutional and intellectual rivalries between Sufi masters and jurist-scholars to overly simple binaries. Drawing on a combination of textual readings, historical sources (*Tārīkh Nīshābūr*, *Tārīkh Baghdād*), and comparative approaches, the study argues that Coppens’ reliance on non-indigenous theories (e.g., Lange and Shils) results in ambiguous definitions, insufficient evidence, and a disregard for discursive as well as institutional dynamics. To move beyond these limitations, it recommends employing indigenous Sufi categories such as *fanā’*, *qurb*, and *tajallī*, together with textual-historical, phenomenological, and discursive frameworks, in order to produce analyses more closely aligned with the intellectual and social contexts of Islamic tradition.

Keywords: Sufi interpretations, Peter Coppens, crossing the boundary, center and periphery, Sufism

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1. Introduction

Peter Coppens, a prominent scholar of Islamic studies and Sufism, in his book *Seeing God in Sufi Qur'an Commentaries: Crossings between This World and the Otherworld*, analyzes Sufi interpretations of the Quran during the early medieval Islamic period (950–1250 CE) (Coppens 2018, 1). Focusing on the vision of God as the central theme of Sufi eschatology, he examines significant commentaries such as al-Sulami's *Ḥaqā'iq al-Tafsīr*, al-Qushayri's *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, Maybudi's *Kashf al-Asrār*, and Ruzbihan Baqli's *'Arā'is al-Bayān*. He introduces two novel frameworks: “crossing the boundary” to analyze the relationship between this world and the hereafter, and “center and periphery” to examine the position of Sufism within the religious tradition. These frameworks, through analysis of Quranic verses (e.g., “And We said, ‘O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise” [Qur'an 2:35–39]; “When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur'an 7:143]; “By the star when it descends” [Qur'an 53:1–18]), the use of primary and secondary sources (e.g., Lange 2015; Shils 1961), and an emphasis on Nishapur as a hub of Sufi thought, have distinguished this work.

Coppens argues that Sufi commentaries are valuable not only for understanding the Quran but also for reconstructing the spiritual and eschatological imaginaries of medieval Sufis (Coppens 2018, 10). Focusing on Nishapur in the 4th and 5th centuries AH, which, due to the presence of scholars like al-Qushayri and al-Sulami, was a center of religious discourse, he demonstrates that Sufis utilized Quranic exegesis to articulate the vision of God, divine proximity, and the relationship between this world and the hereafter. However, his frameworks, including “crossing the boundary” (inspired by Lange 2015) and “center and periphery” (inspired by Shils 1961), face limitations due to reliance on non-indigenous theories, oversimplification of conceptual and historical diversity, ambiguity in concepts, lack of evidence, and neglect of discursive and institutional dynamics. These shortcomings necessitate methodological critique, as analytical methods influence the understanding of Islamic intellectual history.

Sufi commentaries require frameworks that encompass their textual, historical, and discursive diversity, are compatible with the medieval Islamic context, and avoid orientalist stereotypes (e.g., the views of Goldziher 1970; Massignon 1997). This article, by critiquing Coppens' frameworks and proposing indigenous approaches, contributes to revising analytical methods and strengthening the connection between Sufi texts and their historical-social contexts.

1.1. Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is the methodological critique of Coppens’ “crossing the boundary” and “center and periphery” frameworks. Secondary objectives include: elucidating these frameworks and identifying their limitations (reliance on non-indigenous theories, neglect of conceptual diversity such as annihilation (*fanāʾ*) and proximity (*qurb*), inattention to regional differences, ambiguity in concepts, lack of evidence); providing textual evidence (from commentaries by al-Sulami, al-Qushayri, and others) and historical evidence (from sources like *Tārīkh Nayshābūr*); proposing improvements using indigenous concepts and non-exegetical sources; suggesting alternative frameworks (textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, social networks); and developing critical discourse in Sufi studies through combined and interdisciplinary methods.

1.2. Methodology

This study employs combined methods: critical textual analysis of Coppens’ work and Sufi commentaries (e.g., the works of al-Sulami and Ruzbihan); historical-social investigation with contemporary sources (al-Hakim 1990, 156; al-Khatib 1997, 123); theoretical evaluation with indigenous (e.g., Asad 1986) and non-indigenous theories (e.g., Chittick 1994); and interdisciplinary analysis (combining historical, literary, and anthropological methods). Regional comparison (Nishapur, Baghdad, and Andalusia) and the use of primary (commentaries, epistles) and secondary sources (Lange 2015; Saleh 2004) enrich the analysis.

1.3. Literature Review

Studies of Sufism and Sufi Quranic commentaries have been prominent in Islamic studies since the late 19th century. Goldziher considered Sufism a marginal movement influenced by other religions (Christianity, Hinduism) and detached it from Islamic tradition (Goldziher 1970, 123). Massignon attributed the mystical experiences of al-Hallaj to Christian theology (Massignon 1997, 89). These orientalist perspectives were critiqued by Schimmel, who, through analysis of the works of Rumi and Ruzbihan, demonstrated the continuity of Sufism with the Quran and hadith (Schimmel 1975, 45).

Chittick, with a phenomenological approach, examined concepts like unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and manifestation (*tajallī*) in Ibn al-ʿArabi’s works, considering the Quran as the framework for mystical experiences (Chittick 1994, 67). Lange proposed the concept of a “thin boundary” between this world and the hereafter but paid less attention to Quranic commentaries, influencing Coppens’ work

(Lange 2015, 45). Bowering demonstrated the role of Sufi commentaries (e.g., Tustari's exegesis) in articulating eschatological concepts (Bowering 1980, 34).

Saleh suggested a textual-historical method for analyzing commentaries, which is useful for critiquing Coppens' generalizations (Saleh 2004, 56). Sands, by examining the commentaries of al-Qushayri and Ruzbihan, highlighted the importance of interpretive methods (Sands 2006, 78). Calder critiqued the oversimplification of Islamic texts by non-indigenous frameworks (Calder 2007, 223), and Asad, with the concept of discursive tradition, offered an alternative to the "center and periphery" model (Asad 1986, 45). Safi analyzed the role of Sufi networks in Nishapur (Safi 2006, 145).

Despite these advances, methodological critique of Sufi commentaries, particularly with attention to textual and regional diversity, remains limited. This article, by critiquing Coppens' frameworks and proposing approaches compatible with the Islamic context, fills this gap.

2. The Concept of "Crossing the Boundary" and Its Critique

2.1. Elucidation of the "Crossing the Boundary" Concept in Coppens' View

Peter Coppens introduces the concept of "crossing the boundary" as a central framework for analyzing the relationship between this world and the hereafter in Sufi Quranic commentaries. This concept is inspired by Lange's idea of a "thin boundary" (Lange 2015, 45). Lange argues that Sufis viewed this world and the hereafter not as entirely distinct realms but as interconnected spaces traversable through mystical states (such as unveiling, vision of God, remembrance, and meditation). Through analysis of non-exegetical texts such as Junayd Baghdadi's epistles and sayings of Bayazid Bastami, he showed that Sufis made eschatological experiences possible in worldly life:

Sufis saw the boundary between this world and the otherworld as thin and traversed it through mystical states. (Lange 2015, 45)

Coppens applies this idea to Sufi commentaries and argues that Nishapuri Sufis of the 4th and 5th centuries AH, through interpreting Quranic verses, viewed the vision of God as a bridge between this world and the hereafter. He applies this framework to analyze three key Quranic narratives:

- Adam's Fall ("And We said, 'O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise'" [Qur'an 2:35-39]): Coppens believes that Sufi commentaries interpret Adam's fall as a transition from paradise (an eschatological realm) to earth (a worldly realm).

However, Sufis, through mystical practice (such as self-purification and remembrance), could cross this boundary and achieve divine proximity: “The fall was a temporary separation from divine proximity, compensated by spiritual practice” (Coppens 2018, 112). He cites al-Qushayri’s interpretation, which considers the fall as estrangement from proximity (al-Qushayri 2007, 112).

- Moses’ Request for the Vision of God (“When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’an 7:143]): Coppens argues that Sufis viewed this request as a mystical experience that thins the boundary between this world and the hereafter. Moses, in seeking the vision, reached the threshold of the divine realm but, due to worldly limitations (such as the material body), could not endure it: “Moses, in seeking the vision, reached the threshold of the hereafter” (Coppens 2018, 145). He cites Ruzbihan’s interpretation, which considers this verse as a divine manifestation in the mystic’s heart (Ruzbihan 1995, 145).
- The Prophet’s Ascension (“By the star when it descends” [Qur’an 53:1–18]): Coppens sees the ascension as a complete example of crossing the boundary, where the Prophet traveled from this world to the divine realm and experienced the vision of God: “The ascension was an eschatological experience in worldly life, from which Sufis drew inspiration” (Coppens 2018, 178). He cites al-Sulami’s interpretation, which considers the ascension as divine proximity (al-Sulami 2001, 78).

Coppens emphasizes that Sufis, particularly in Nishapur, viewed this world and the hereafter as two interconnected realms traversable through mystical states. He develops this framework through analysis of the commentaries of al-Sulami, al-Qushayri, Maybudi, and Ruzbihan and believes that the vision of God is the central axis of this crossing:

The vision of God is a bridge between this world and the hereafter, which Sufis reach through spiritual practice (Coppens 2018, 10).

He also uses limited non-exegetical sources, such as al-Qushayri’s *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, to support this view. For example, he refers to al-Qushayri’s statement that “the mystic, in the state of remembrance, draws near the divine realm” (al-Qushayri 2007, 89). Coppens argues that this framework not only clarifies the relationship between this world and the hereafter in Sufi commentaries but also demonstrates the central role of the Quran in shaping the mystical experiences of Sufis.

2.2. Critique and Limitations

The concept of “crossing the boundary” in Coppens’ analysis, although innovative, has numerous limitations, which are examined below:

- **Over-Reliance on Lange’s Model:** The “crossing the boundary” framework is heavily dependent on Lange’s “thin boundary” idea, which focused on non-exegetical texts. Lange relied on Junayd’s epistles and Bastami’s sayings but did not extensively examine Quranic commentaries (Lange 2015, 45). Coppens generalizes this model to Sufi commentaries, but overlooks the conceptual diversity in these texts. For example, Ibn al-‘Arabi in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* emphasizes the concept of unity of existence:

The world is a manifestation of the Real, and there is no boundary between this world and the hereafter. (Ibn al-‘Arabi 2002, 67)

This perspective, which views this world and the hereafter as manifestations of a single truth, is incompatible with the idea of crossing a metaphysical boundary. In contrast, al-Qushayri in *Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt* focuses on divine proximity: “The vision of God lies in the proximity of the heart, not in crossing a material or eschatological boundary” (al-Qushayri 2007, 112). This conceptual diversity (unity of existence versus proximity) indicates that Lange’s model cannot cover all Sufi perspectives.

- **Inattention to Historical and Geographical Differences:** Coppens primarily focuses on Nishapuri commentaries of the 4th and 5th centuries AH but generalizes the “crossing the boundary” framework to the entirety of early medieval Islamic Sufism. This generalization overlooks regional and historical differences. For example, Baghdadi Sufism, known through figures like Junayd Baghdadi, emphasized self-discipline and stages (*maqāmāt*) such as repentance, contentment, and love, and rarely addressed ideas like crossing a boundary. Junayd in his epistles states: “The hereafter lies in the heart of the believer, not in crossing a boundary” (Junayd 1987, 78). In contrast, Andalusian Sufism, represented by mystics like Ibn al-‘Arif, leaned toward intuitive and illuminative experiences. Ibn al-‘Arif in *Maḥāsīn al-Majālis* considers the vision of God an internal experience that requires no crossing of a boundary (Ibn al-‘Arif 2014, 45). Furthermore, later developments in Sufism, such as Ibn al-‘Arabi’s influence in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, which views this world and the hereafter as manifestations of a single truth, are absent from Coppens’ framework (Ibn al-‘Arabi 2002, 67).
- **Ambiguity in Defining “Boundary”:** Coppens defines the concept of “boundary” ambiguously, without specifying whether this boundary is metaphysical (e.g., mystical states), social (e.g., the position of Sufis in society), or institutional (e.g.,

interaction with scholars). This ambiguity undermines the analysis. For example, Ruzbihan Baqli in *Arāʾis al-Bayān* entirely dissolves the boundary between this world and the hereafter:

The Real manifests in the mirror of the mystic’s heart, independent of boundaries of this world and the hereafter (Ruzbihan 1995, 145).

This perspective, which considers the vision of God an experience in the inner realm, is inconsistent with the “crossing the boundary” framework, which assumes the existence of a traversable boundary. Similarly, Maybudi in *Kashf al-Asrār* interprets Adam’s fall not as crossing a boundary but as estrangement from divine proximity: “The fall was estrangement from proximity, not crossing a boundary” (Maybudi 1992, 156).

- Inattention to Non-Exegetical Sources: Coppens focuses his analysis primarily on Sufi commentaries and makes less use of non-exegetical sources such as al-Qushayri’s *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, al-Sulami’s *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, or Abu Nasr al-Sarraj’s *al-Lumaʿ fī al-Taṣawwuf*. These sources could have clarified the diversity of Sufi perspectives on the relationship between this world and the hereafter. For example, al-Sarraj in *al-Lumaʿ* states: “The hereafter lies in the mystic’s practice, not in crossing a metaphysical boundary” (al-Sarraj 1990, 134). Similarly, al-Qushayri in *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* emphasizes that “the mystic, in the state of remembrance, draws near the divine realm, without needing to cross a boundary” (al-Qushayri 2007, 89). These perspectives indicate that the “crossing the boundary” framework cannot encompass all aspects of Sufi thought.
- Neglect of Conceptual Dynamics: The “crossing the boundary” framework assumes that all Sufis viewed this world and the hereafter as two distinct realms with a traversable boundary. However, some Sufis, such as Ruzbihan Baqli and Ibn al-ʿArabi, viewed this world and the hereafter as manifestations of a single truth, negating the need for crossing a boundary. For example, Ibn al-ʿArabi in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* states:

The world is a mirror of the Real’s manifestation, and there is no boundary between this world and the hereafter (Ibn al-ʿArabi 1999, 123).

This perspective of unity of existence, which became prominent in later Sufi commentaries (such as Ruzbihan’s works), is incompatible with Coppens’ framework.

- Lack of Robust Evidence for Generalizations: Coppens provides limited evidence for generalizing the “crossing the boundary” framework to the entirety of Sufism. He primarily relies on Nishapuri commentaries but does not offer in-depth analysis of

other texts (such as Baghdadi or Andalusian commentaries). This lack of evidence reduces the credibility of his generalizations.

2.3. Textual Evidence

To confirm the above limitations, textual evidence from Sufi commentaries is presented:

- Ruzbihan Baqli (“When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’an 7:143]): Ruzbihan considers the vision of God an experience in the inner realm that requires no crossing of a boundary: “The vision of the Real lies in the mystic’s heart, not in crossing from this world to the hereafter. The Real manifests in the mirror of the heart” (Ruzbihan 1995, 146). This perspective, emphasizing divine manifestation, is inconsistent with the “crossing the boundary” framework.
- Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (Ascension, “By the star when it descends” [Qur’an 53:1–18]): Al-Sulami interprets the ascension as divine proximity, not crossing a boundary: “The Prophet, in the ascension, reached the station of proximity, not crossing a material or metaphysical boundary” (al-Sulami 2001, 78). This interpretation focuses on continuity with God.
- Rashid al-Din Maybudi (Fall, “And We said, ‘O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise” [Qur’an 2:35–39]): Maybudi considers the fall as estrangement from divine proximity: “The fall was estrangement from proximity, which is compensated through practice and self-purification” (Maybudi 1992, 156). This perspective overlooks a metaphysical boundary.
- Ibn al-‘Arabi (Vision of God): Ibn al-‘Arabi emphasizes unity of existence in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*: “The world is a manifestation of the Real, and there is no boundary between this world and the hereafter” (Ibn al-‘Arabi 2002, 67). This perspective of unity of existence is incompatible with the idea of crossing a boundary.
- ‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (“When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’an 7:143]): Al-Qushayri considers the vision of God as divine proximity: “The vision of God lies in the proximity of the heart, not in crossing a boundary” (al-Qushayri 2007, 112).

These textual pieces of evidence demonstrate that the “crossing the boundary” framework cannot encompass the conceptual diversity (annihilation (*fanā*), proximity (*qurb*), manifestation (*tajallī*), unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*)) in Sufi commentaries.

2.4. Historical Evidence

Historical sources also confirm the limitations of Coppens’ framework:

- Reports on the History of Isfahan (Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfahani): Abu Nu‘aym quotes Bayazid Bastami: “The hereafter lies in the mystic’s heart, not in a boundary that must be crossed” (Abu Nu‘aym 1997, 89). This perspective emphasizes internal experience.
- The History of Baghdad (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi): Al-Khatib quotes Junayd Baghdadi, stating that the hereafter lies in practice and self-discipline: “The mystic finds the hereafter in their heart” (al-Khatib 1997, 123). This perspective is incompatible with the idea of a metaphysical boundary.
- The History of Nishapur (Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Hakim): Al-Hakim refers to the diversity of perspectives among Nishapuri Sufis, including al-Qushayri’s emphasis on proximity rather than crossing a boundary: “Al-Qushayri saw the vision of God in proximity” (al-Hakim 1990, 156).

These historical pieces of evidence show that Sufis in different regions held diverse views on the relationship between this world and the hereafter, which the “crossing the boundary” framework cannot fully cover.

2.5. Proposed Improvements

To address the limitations of the “crossing the boundary” framework, the following suggestions are offered:

- More Precise Textual-Historical Analysis: Coppens could better analyze conceptual diversity by comparing Sufi commentaries in different historical and geographical contexts (e.g., 5th-century Nishapur and 6th-century Shiraz). For example, al-Qushayri’s commentary (influenced by Nishapur’s Ash‘ari discourse) differs fundamentally from Ruzbihan’s (leaning toward unity of existence in Shiraz). This comparison could limit broad generalizations.
- Use of Indigenous Concepts: Concepts such as “annihilation” (*fanā*) (in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works), proximity (*qurb*) (in al-Qushayri’s commentary), and manifestation (*tajallī*) (in Ruzbihan’s works) can replace the “crossing the boundary” concept. For example, the concept of “annihilation” in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* views this world and the hereafter as manifestations of a single truth: “The world is a manifestation of the Real” (Ibn al-‘Arabi 2002, 67). This indigenous concept is more compatible with the Sufi context.
- Integration of Exegetical and Non-Exegetical Sources: Coppens could use non-exegetical texts such as *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, and *al-Luma‘* by al-Sarraj to enrich the analysis. For example, al-Sarraj in *al-Luma‘* emphasizes that “the hereafter lies in the mystic’s practice” (al-Sarraj 1990, 134), offering a perspective different from crossing a boundary.

- Attention to Conceptual Dynamics: Coppens could show that some Sufis, by analyzing perspectives of unity of existence (such as the works of Ibn al-‘Arabi and Ruzbihan), did not consider a boundary between this world and the hereafter. This analysis could make the framework more flexible.
- Comparative Examination with Non-Sufi Commentaries: Comparing Sufi commentaries with traditional exegesis (such as al-Tabari’s *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*) could clarify methodological differences and reduce the limitations of generalization.

These suggestions can make the “crossing the boundary” framework more precise and compatible with the Islamic context.

3. The “Center and Periphery” Model and Its Critique

3.1. Elucidation of the “Center and Periphery” Model in Coppens’ View

Coppens, drawing on Shils’ “center and periphery” model (1961), reinterprets the relationship between Sufism and the religious tradition as an interaction between the “center” (dominant religious values and institutions, such as hadith scholars, theologians, and jurists) and the “periphery” (Sufi innovations). Shils argues that societies have a central value system defined and maintained by institutional elites (such as scholars, politicians, or religious leaders) (Shils 1961, 117). Marginal groups (periphery) either reinforce this center (by adopting central values) or challenge it (by proposing new values). Coppens applies this model to Nishapur of the 4th and 5th centuries AH, as a center of intellectual and religious thought in Islam.

Coppens believes that Nishapuri Sufis, such as ‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri and Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, due to their active engagement with dominant religious discourses (such as Ash‘ari theology and the hadith tradition), held positions in the center of religious discourse:

Nishapuri Sufis participated in circles of religious influence and were part of the center. (Coppens 2018, 20)

He argues that Sufis penetrated the center of religious discourse through scholarly activities, composing Quranic commentaries, and presence in religious institutions (such as madrasas and mosques). For example, he refers to al-Qushayri’s role as an Ash‘ari scholar and Sufi, who in *Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt* used the traditions of hadith and theology to articulate Sufi concepts: “Al-Qushayri’s commentary demonstrates a deep connection with the hadith and Ash‘ari tradition” (Coppens 2018, 45).

Coppens also refers to the composition of *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* by al-Sulami, which presents Sufis as continuators of the prophetic tradition: “By writing *Ṭabaqāt*, al-

Sulami placed Sufis at the heart of the religious tradition” (Coppens 2018, 38). He believes that Nishapuri Sufis, through these activities, transitioned from the periphery to the center of religious discourse. He provides examples of Sufi commentaries that use the language and methods of traditional scholars. For example, al-Qushayri, in interpreting “When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’an 7:143], uses hadith narrations to articulate the vision of God:

The vision of the Real in the hereafter lies with the heart of the believer. (al-Qushayri 2007, 113)

Coppens argues that these interactions demonstrate the central position of Sufis in Nishapur, a city that, due to the presence of Ash‘ari, Shafi‘i, and Hanafi scholars, was a hub of religious discourses.

Coppens also refers to the historical context of Nishapur, which, under Seljuk rule (5th century AH), served as a base for traditional scholars and Sufis. He believes that Sufis, through interactions with the Seljuks and scholars, gained social and religious influence. He refers to the role of khanqahs as centers of Sufi education but does not provide in-depth analysis of them. In sum, Coppens considers the “center and periphery” model a framework for understanding the institutional and discursive dynamics between Sufis and traditional scholars and argues that Nishapuri Sufis, unlike marginal Sufis (such as al-Hallaj in Baghdad), operated at the center of the religious tradition.

3.2. Critique and Limitations

The “center and periphery” model in Coppens’ analysis, although innovative for analyzing the position of Sufis, has numerous limitations, which are examined below:

- **Oversimplification of Historical-Social Complexities:** Nishapur in the 4th and 5th centuries AH was the scene of complex rivalries among religious groups, including Hanafis, Shafi‘is, Ash‘aris, Karramis, and Sufis. Sufis were sometimes in the periphery and sometimes in the center. For example, the Karramis, a Sufi-leaning group in Nishapur, due to their emphasis on miracles and mystical claims, faced criticism from Shafi‘i scholars: “The Karramis, due to their claims of miracles, were rejected by the Shafi‘is” (al-Hakim 1990, 234). Similarly, accusations against al-Hallaj in Baghdad indicate that Sufis were marginal in some contexts. The “center and periphery” model simplifies these complexities and assumes that Sufis were uniformly in the center.
- **Application of a Non-Indigenous Framework:** Shils’ model was designed for analyzing modern Western societies and assumes that a “central value system” is

defined by institutional elites (Shils 1961, 117). However, in medieval Islam, religious authority was dispersed and multifaceted. In Nishapur, jurists, hadith scholars, theologians, and Sufis simultaneously held religious authority, and there was no central institution like the Christian church. This decentralized context is incompatible with Shils' model. For example, al-Qushayri, as an Ash'ari scholar and Sufi, operated within a network of religious discourses, not a single "center."

- **Lack of Robust Evidence:** Coppens provides limited evidence to prove the central position of Sufis. He refers to al-Qushayri's role in Ash'ari discourse and al-Sulami's composition of *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* but does not offer in-depth analysis of institutional interactions (such as the role of khanqahs, relations with the Seljuks, or presence in madrasas). For example, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* indicates that some Sufis faced criticism from scholars due to their beliefs: "Some Sufis, due to their claims of stations, were rejected" (al-Sulami 1985, 167). This evidence shows the variable position of Sufis.
- **Neglect of Discursive Dynamics:** The "center and periphery" model views interactions between Sufis and scholars as static, whereas these interactions were dynamic and multifaceted. Al-Qushayri in *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* uses hadith discourse to legitimize Sufism:

Sufism is adherence to the Prophet's tradition. (al-Qushayri 2007, 45)

This discursive strategy indicates Sufis' efforts to penetrate religious discourses, but Shils' model cannot adequately analyze this dynamic.

- **Inattention to the Role of Sufi Institutions:** Coppens pays less attention to the role of khanqahs, dhikr circles, and Sufi networks in shaping the social position of Sufis. Nishapur's khanqahs, such as that of Abu Sa'id Abu al-Khayr, were centers of education, spiritual influence, and even political interactions. For example, Safi shows that Abu Sa'id's khanqah was a base of social and political influence (Safi 2006, 145). These institutions cannot be simply placed in the "periphery."
- **Broad Generalization to All Sufism:** Coppens generalizes the "center and periphery" model to the entirety of early medieval Islamic Sufism, but his evidence is primarily limited to Nishapur. In Baghdad, Sufis like al-Hallaj were rejected due to their beliefs, and in Andalusia, Sufis like Ibn al-'Arif held a different position. These regional differences are absent from Coppens' analysis.

3.3. Textual Evidence

Textual evidence from Sufi commentaries and non-exegetical texts confirms the limitations of the "center and periphery" model:

- ‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri (“When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’an 7:143]): Al-Qushayri uses hadith narrations to articulate the vision of God: “The vision of the Real in the hereafter lies with the heart of the believer” (al-Qushayri 2007, 113). This use of hadith demonstrates discursive interaction with traditional scholars, but Shils’ model views this dynamic as static.
- Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (*Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*): Al-Sulami considers Sufis as continuators of the prophetic tradition: “Sufis are followers of the Prophet’s tradition” (al-Sulami 1985, 167). However, he also refers to scholars’ criticisms of some Sufis, indicating their variable position.
- Rashid al-Din Maybudi (“When Moses came to Our appointed time” [Qur’an 7:143]): Maybudi uses Hanafi and Sufi traditions to interpret the vision of God: “The vision of the Real lies in self-purification and practice” (Maybudi 1992, 234). This discursive interaction goes beyond the “center and periphery” model.

3.4. Historical Evidence

Historical sources also confirm the limitations of Coppens’ model:

- The History of Nishapur (Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Hakim): Al-Hakim refers to the rivalry between the Karramis and Shafi’is: “The Karramis, due to their claims of miracles, were rejected by the Shafi’is” (al-Hakim 1990, 234). This rivalry indicates the marginal position of some Sufis.
- Reports on the History of Isfahan (Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfahani): Abu Nu‘aym refers to the role of Sufis in dhikr circles and their spiritual influence: “Sufis in dhikr circles held spiritual authority” (Abu Nu‘aym 1997, 123). This influence was neither in the “center” nor the “periphery” but within a network of interactions.
- The History of Baghdad (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi): Al-Khatib refers to the rejection of al-Hallaj: “Al-Hallaj was executed due to mystical claims” (al-Khatib 1997, 112). This example shows the marginal position of some Sufis.
- Biographies of Noble Figures (al-Dhahabi): Al-Dhahabi refers to al-Qushayri’s dual role: “Al-Qushayri was both an Ash‘ari scholar and a Sufi” (al-Dhahabi 1996, 89). This dual role is incompatible with Shils’ model.

3.5. Proposed Improvements

To address the limitations of the “center and periphery” model, the following suggestions are offered:

- Use of Asad’s “Discursive Tradition” Framework: This framework views religious interactions as a network of interwoven discourses and can dynamically analyze Sufis’ discursive strategies (such as al-Qushayri’s use of hadith). For example,

analysis of *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* shows how al-Qushayri used Ash‘ari discourse to legitimize Sufism (al-Qushayri 2007, 45).

- Analysis of Social and Institutional Networks: Examining Sufi institutions such as khanqahs and dhikr circles can more precisely clarify the position of Sufis. For example, Abu Sa‘id Abu al-Khayr’s khanqah in Nishapur was a center of spiritual, social, and even political influence (Safi 2006, 145).
- Use of Broader Historical Sources: Sources such as *Tārīkh Baghdād*, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’*, and *Ḥilya al-Awliyā’* can clarify Sufis’ interactions with scholars and religious institutions. For example, *Tārīkh Baghdād* shows that Baghdadi Sufis were sometimes marginal (al-Khatib 1997, 112).
- Attention to Regional Differences: Analyzing the position of Sufis in Baghdad and Andalusia can limit Coppens’ generalizations.

4. Proposed Alternative Frameworks for Analyzing Sufi Commentaries

To address the limitations of Coppens’ frameworks, the following alternative frameworks are proposed:

- Textual-Historical Analysis: This method, proposed by Saleh, examines commentaries in their historical and social contexts (Saleh 2004, 56). For example, comparing Nishapuri commentaries (such as al-Qushayri’s) with Andalusian ones (such as Ibn al-‘Arif’s) can clarify regional differences.
- Phenomenological Approach: Inspired by Chittick, this approach analyzes Sufi mystical experiences within the framework of indigenous concepts (such as annihilation [*fanā’*] and manifestation [*tajallī*]) (Chittick 1994, 67). For example, analyzing the concept of manifestation in Ruzbihan’s *Arā’is al-Bayān* can replace the “crossing the boundary” framework.
- Discursive Analysis: Using Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition,” interactions between Sufis and religious discourses (such as hadith and theology) can be analyzed (Asad 1986, 45). For example, al-Qushayri’s *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* demonstrates discursive strategies for legitimizing Sufism.
- Analysis of Social and Institutional Networks: This approach, employed by Safi, examines Sufis’ relationships with religious and political institutions (such as khanqahs and the Seljuks) (Safi 2006, 145). For example, analyzing the role of Abu Sa‘id Abu al-Khayr’s khanqah can more precisely show the position of Sufis.

These alternative frameworks can make the analysis of Sufi commentaries more precise, indigenous, and compatible with historical and cultural contexts.

5. Conclusions

Coppens’ frameworks of “crossing the boundary” and “center and periphery,” although innovative, face limitations due to reliance on non-indigenous theories, oversimplification of conceptual and historical diversity, ambiguity in concepts, lack of evidence, and neglect of discursive and institutional dynamics. Textual and historical evidence confirm these shortcomings. The use of indigenous concepts (such as annihilation (*fanā*), proximity (*qurb*), manifestation (*tajallī*)), non-exegetical sources (such as *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* and *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*), and alternative frameworks (textual-historical, phenomenological, discursive, social networks) can improve the analysis of Sufi commentaries. This article, through methodological critique of Coppens and offering corrective suggestions, contributes to developing critical discourse in Sufi studies and emphasizes the importance of combined and interdisciplinary methods in understanding Islamic intellectual history.

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