When Power Drifts: Abdulqadir al-Jilani, the Abdal, and the Problem of Moral Alignment

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines the legacy of Abdulqadir al-Jilani by situating his historical role within a general theory of power, moral coherence, and exemplar-based correction. Contemporary discussions of al-Jilani tend to oscillate between devotional sanctification and dismissive marginalization, treating his influence as either mystical excess or cultural ornament. Both approaches obscure the functional significance of his contribution. This paper argues that al-Jilani's importance lies not primarily in spiritual charisma, but in his role as a civilizational response to moral drift under institutional scale.

The paper first develops a structural account of moral failure, drawing on a theory of "coherence" understood as alignment between perception, value, and action. As institutions scale, moral life becomes increasingly mediated by abstraction, leading power to drift from lived reality and suppress corrective feedback. Under these conditions, societies accumulate what is described here as "coherence debt," producing recurring patterns of moral rupture and exemplar suppression. Moral exemplars, on this account, are not rare saints or heroic anomalies, but statistically recurrent figures who surface when internal misalignment becomes intolerable. Whether societies stabilize or collapse depends not on the presence of such individuals, but on whether they are recognized, synchronized with, or suppressed.

Against this theoretical backdrop, the paper reframes Abdulqadir al-Jilani's establishment of the Abdal system and the spread of zawiyah-based networks as an early form of decentralized moral infrastructure. The Abdal are interpreted not as hidden rulers or mystical elites, but as functional carriers of coherence—distributed moral load-bearing elements that preserved ethical alignment when formal institutions could no longer do so. Zawiyahs are shown to have operated as proximity-based nodes of trust, arbitration, care for the poor, and intercultural translation, facilitating a form of globalization grounded in ethical interoperability rather than domination.

The paper concludes by arguing that modern Muslim alienation from this legacy is not primarily theological, but structural. Contemporary systems misrecognize coherence as threat and reduce Sufism to aesthetic or ritual marginalia precisely because its original function was corrective. Finally, the paper extends the analysis to the age of AI, suggesting that the problems al-Jilani responded to—abstraction, feedback suppression, and displacement of moral agency—now reappear at a technological scale. In this light, al-Jilani's legacy is neither historical nostalgia nor sectarian inheritance, but an early articulation of how moral agency survives when power outpaces conscience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Why Abdulqadir al-Jilani Cannot Be Understood Through Hagiography

Abdulqadir al-Jilani occupies a singular place in Muslim consciousness. He is invoked as a saint of extraordinary spiritual rank, a source of blessing, and a symbol of moral authority whose name carries reverence across cultures and centuries. Yet this very reverence has obscured rather than clarified his historical role. Contemporary Muslim discourse tends to oscillate between two unsatisfactory positions: excessive sanctification on the one hand, and dismissive marginalization on the other. In the first, al-Jilani is elevated beyond analysis, insulated within hagiography and miracle narratives that remove him from history and social function. In the second, he is reduced to a representative of "Sufism" understood narrowly as private piety, ritual practice, or cultural excess, and therefore treated as peripheral to serious discussions of power, governance, and moral order. Both approaches fail for the same reason. They treat his legacy as spiritual ornamentation rather than as moral infrastructure.

This paper begins from the premise that Abdulqadir al-Jilani cannot be understood adequately through devotional language alone, nor through modern reductions of Sufism to lifestyle or aesthetics. His significance becomes intelligible only when situated within a broader account of how moral agency survives under conditions of institutional scale. The central claim advanced here is that al-Jilani's enduring impact lies not primarily in personal sanctity, but in his role as a response to a recurring civilizational problem: the drift of power away from lived reality, the suppression of moral feedback, and the consequent need for decentralized forms of ethical correction.

To make this argument intelligible to a contemporary Muslim readership, the paper first develops a general moral theory rather than beginning with biography. It explains how power, once mediated through large institutions, tends to replace direct engagement with reality by abstraction; how this process generates internal contradiction within individuals and societies; and why systems repeatedly encounter figures who cannot tolerate such misalignment. These figures—moral exemplars—are not treated here as rare saints or heroic anomalies, but as structurally recurrent responses to accumulated distortion. Their appearance signals not moral perfection, but institutional failure. Whether societies stabilize or collapse depends not on the existence of such individuals, but on whether they are recognized and synchronized with, or misclassified and suppressed. This account draws on a framework that understands moral durability as a problem of recognition and coherence rather than virtue scarcity or ideological correctness.

Once these dynamics are established, the paper shows why decentralized moral institutions tend to arise when formal structures lose permeability. Under scale, governance necessarily relies on mediation—law, bureaucracy, expertise, representation. When mediation becomes insulated from correction, institutions accumulate what can be described as *coherence debt*: unresolved contradictions between lived experience and authoritative representation. At this point, power increasingly interprets moral correction as threat, and obedience begins to displace conscience. Historically, this condition has not produced moral silence, but moral relocation. Ethical correction exits the center and reappears in proximity-based, service-oriented, and exemplar-driven forms that do not seek sovereignty but

preserve alignment. Sufi orders, and particularly the institutional form articulated by Abdulqadir al-Jilani, emerge in this context as functional responses rather than mystical accidents.

It is therefore essential to clarify what this paper is not. It is not a critique of Muslims for failing to "see" power correctly, nor an indictment of contemporary religious practice. It does not defend Sufism as a lifestyle, a set of rituals, or an alternative identity within Islam. Rather, it offers a structural explanation of why certain moral functions—long present within Islam and historically articulated through Sufism—become especially salient whenever institutions grow too abstract to sustain moral agency. By grounding the discussion in a general account of power, coherence, and exemplarity, the paper aims to make Abdulqadir al-Jilani legible not as an untouchable saint or a marginal mystic, but as a historical figure whose contribution speaks directly to enduring problems of moral governance, including those now reappearing in technologically mediated and AI-driven systems.

Only once this theoretical groundwork is in place can al-Jilani's establishment of the Abdal system and the global network of zawiyahs be examined for what they were: not peripheral spiritual developments, but a durable moral architecture through which ethical alignment was preserved when formal authority could no longer reliably carry it—when power outpaced conscience.

2. WHY MORAL FAILURE IS NOT A PROBLEM OF BAD PEOPLE

Discussions of moral failure in Muslim societies often begin from an instinctive but misleading premise: that decline results from a deficit of faith, sincerity, or personal virtue. Corruption is attributed to weak *īmān*, injustice to hypocrisy, and institutional failure to bad intentions. While emotionally intuitive, this framing collapses under historical scrutiny. Societies marked by high levels of religious observance, moral rhetoric, and personal piety have repeatedly produced outcomes that contradict their stated ethical commitments. The persistence of this pattern suggests that moral failure cannot be explained adequately by individual deficiency alone.

The framework adopted in this paper begins from a different starting point. Moral breakdown is not primarily a problem of *bad people*, but of *structural misalignment*. As developed in *The Limits of Moral Governance*, large-scale institutions inevitably rely on abstraction: reports, rules, metrics, procedures, legal categories, and expert interpretations that stand in for direct engagement with lived reality.

Abstraction is not itself a moral failure. It is a necessary condition of coordination under scale. The danger arises when abstraction outpaces correction—when decision-making becomes insulated from the conditions it claims to represent.

To understand why this matters, the paper introduces a simple but foundational concept: *coherence*. Coherence refers to the alignment between what individuals can perceive, what they are told is valuable or true, and what they are required to do. When perception, value, and action remain aligned, moral agency is preserved. People may disagree, struggle, or err, but they do not experience sustained internal contradiction. When this alignment breaks, individuals are asked to act in ways that cannot be reconciled with what they can directly see, know, or inwardly affirm. At that point, moral agency does

not disappear; it erodes. The cost is carried *internally* as dissonance, moral fatigue, and gradual normalization of saying one thing while knowing another to be true.

Institutions under scale tend to erode coherence not because they are malicious, but because abstraction becomes operationally efficient. Decisions justified through representations—legal form, procedural compliance, numerical targets, or official narratives—can appear internally coherent while drifting further from lived conditions. Over time, systems learn to protect their representations rather than revise them. Correction is reinterpreted as noise, disruption, or threat. This process produces what can be described as *coherence debt*: the accumulation of unresolved contradiction between institutional claims and experienced reality. Coherence debt can be deferred through discipline, loyalty, or moral exhortation, but it cannot be eliminated without restoring alignment.

This account helps explain a common confusion in Muslim discourse. The existence of Islamic law is often treated as sufficient proof that moral order should follow automatically. If injustice persists, the reasoning goes, the fault must lie with people who fail to implement or obey the law properly. The problem with this assumption is that law itself becomes abstract under scale. Legal form does not guarantee proximity to reality, nor does procedural correctness ensure moral alignment. Courts, rulings, and administrative enforcement can remain formally intact while becoming increasingly detached from the social conditions they govern. When this happens, law risks shifting from a mechanism of moral correction to a mechanism of moral displacement—where compliance with procedure substitutes for alignment with justice.

This does not imply a critique of Islamic law as such, nor does it deny the necessity of legal structures. Rather, it clarifies a structural limit: no legal or institutional form can preserve moral agency on its own. Once mediation becomes insulated from feedback, even divinely inspired norms can be operationalized in ways that demand sustained incoherence from those subject to them. Moral failure, in this sense, is not evidence of insufficient belief or widespread hypocrisy. It is evidence that abstraction has outrun correction.

Grounding the discussion here is essential. Without this shift away from moralism toward structure, figures like Abdulqadir al-Jilani are either romanticized as saints who transcended society or dismissed as irrelevant to "real" governance. Only once moral failure is understood as a problem of coherence under scale does it become possible to see why civilizations repeatedly require forms of ethical correction that operate outside formal power—and why such forms arise even in societies saturated with moral language and religious law.

3. COHERENCE DEBT AND THE SUPPRESSION OF MORAL FEEDBACK

If moral failure were simply a matter of ignorance, correction would be straightforward. Information could be supplied, errors acknowledged, and alignment restored. Historical experience suggests otherwise. Institutions often resist correction even when misalignment is visible internally, widely sensed externally, and articulated clearly by those closest to its consequences. This resistance is not

accidental, nor does it require bad faith. It follows from how power behaves once abstraction and scale combine.

As developed in *Coherence, Power, and Moral Rupture*, institutions accumulate what can be described as *coherence debt* when they suppress corrective feedback rather than integrate it. Coherence debt refers to the unresolved contradiction between institutional representations of reality and the conditions people actually experience. It is not mere dissatisfaction or disagreement. It is a deeper ethical and psychological strain produced when individuals are required to act in ways that cannot be reconciled with what they can see, know, or inwardly affirm. Like financial debt, coherence debt can be deferred through discipline, narrative management, or moral exhortation—but it cannot be eliminated without repayment.

Power suppresses feedback through mechanisms that often appear reasonable from within the system. Critical signals are reframed as lacking context, threatening unity, harming morale, or jeopardizing stability. Procedures are invoked to delay or neutralize correction. Dissent is absorbed into committees, reviews, or internal processes that dissipate urgency without addressing substance. None of this requires ignorance of the underlying problem. On the contrary, suppression frequently signals recognition. One does not suppress what one does not perceive. The decisive factor is cost. Acknowledging misalignment would require revising representations, reallocating authority, admitting error, or destabilizing carefully maintained structures. Suppression, by contrast, offers short-term relief. It preserves institutional continuity by postponing correction.

This dynamic helps explain why moral failure persists even in institutions populated by sincere, well-intentioned individuals. Suppression is not primarily a cognitive failure; it is a form of cost avoidance. Correction carries immediate risks—loss of reputation, funding, legitimacy, or internal cohesion—while suppression appears to preserve functionality. The resulting stability is real but fragile. Each deferred correction increases coherence debt, raising the eventual cost of alignment.

A familiar contemporary pattern illustrates this dynamic without singling out particular actors. Large humanitarian or religious institutions often publicly affirm justice, dignity, and ethical responsibility. These commitments are sincere and widely shared internally. Yet such institutions also operate under constraints of funding, public perception, donor confidence, and geopolitical sensitivity. Over time, pressures to maintain access, relevance, or organizational survival can subtly reshape how moral signals are processed. Critique becomes "unhelpful," exposure becomes "irresponsible," and calls for correction are reframed as threats to the mission itself. What begins as prudence gradually hardens into insulation. Moral feedback is not rejected outright; it is reclassified as disruption.

The crucial insight here is that power fails morally not when it errs, but when it *redefines coherence as threat*. At that point, alignment with reality becomes incompatible with institutional survival as currently configured. Correction is no longer experienced as a path to integrity, but as an existential risk. Once this inversion occurs, moral exhortation intensifies even as moral agency erodes. Individuals are urged to be patient, loyal, and constructive precisely because the system can no longer tolerate genuine correction.

Moral rupture follows not from impatience or rebellion, but from saturation. Human beings can endure contradiction for long periods, especially when survival, belonging, or meaning are at stake. But tolerance is finite. As coherence debt accumulates, the internal cost of participation rises. When that cost exceeds what individuals can bear, rupture occurs. It may take the form of dissent, refusal, withdrawal, or collapse, but it is never sudden in origin. It is the delayed consequence of prolonged suppression.

Understanding this process is essential for the argument that follows. Without it, moral exemplars appear as exceptional heroes or disruptive figures, and decentralized institutions like those associated with Abdulqadir al-Jilani appear unnecessary or eccentric. Once coherence debt and feedback suppression are understood as structural features of power under scale, the emergence of exemplar-based correction and proximity-oriented moral institutions becomes not mysterious, but inevitable.

4. MORAL EXEMPLARS AS STRUCTURAL PHENOMENA, NOT SAINTS

Moral exemplars are often treated as historical anomalies—rare individuals of exceptional virtue, courage, or spiritual attainment who appear unpredictably and alter the course of events through personal greatness. In religious discourse, they are frequently elevated to near-mythical status; in modern institutional discourse, they are dismissed as impractical idealists or disruptive personalities. Both treatments misunderstand their role. As argued in *Exemplar Synchronization and Cultural Recognition*, moral exemplars are not rare miracles. They are *statistical constants* across human societies.

Across civilizations, regimes, and cultural forms, individuals reliably emerge whose internal alignment between perception, value, and action remains unusually intact under conditions of distortion. Their existence does not correlate strongly with ideology, level of religiosity, or institutional design. Monarchies, democracies, theocracies, colonial systems, and modern bureaucratic states all produce such figures with striking regularity. What varies is not whether exemplars exist, but how systems respond to them. Some recognize their signals early, integrate their corrections, and stabilize quietly. Others misclassify the same signals as threats, suppress them, and accumulate distortion until rupture becomes unavoidable.

This distinction is crucial. Moral exemplars do not appear *because* societies are collapsing. Rather, societies collapse because they have long failed to recognize and synchronize with exemplars who were already present. A persistent error in moral and political theory is to treat exemplars as products of crisis—figures forged by extreme conditions. This reverses causality. Exemplars are continuously distributed within populations. What changes during periods of crisis is not their emergence, but their visibility. When systems lose the capacity to absorb correction quietly, coherence that was once managed internally is forced into the open. What appears as sudden moral clarity is often delayed recognition under conditions where suppression can no longer be maintained.

The concept of *synchronization* helps clarify this process. Recognition alone is insufficient for moral durability. For exemplarity to stabilize a system, signals of coherence must be amplified and translated into institutional practice. Synchronization occurs when institutions treat exemplar behavior as

corrective information rather than as provocation. This does not require moral agreement, hero worship, or transfer of authority. It requires only that coherence be preserved as a signal long enough for collective adjustment. Where synchronization succeeds, exemplars remain historically unremarkable. Their insights are normalized, embedded in procedure, and diffused beyond the individual. Where synchronization fails, exemplars become conspicuous precisely because they are isolated, resisted, or punished.

Suppression, therefore, is not evidence that exemplars were misunderstood or invisible. It is evidence that they were perceived as costly. Systems do not suppress random figures; they suppress those whose alignment exposes misrepresentation. Suppression indicates partial recognition coupled with refusal to realign. In this sense, exemplars function as diagnostic instruments. Their treatment reveals the moral permeability of the system that encounters them.

A predictable objection arises at this point: does framing exemplars in this way introduce elitism? Does it imply a hierarchy of moral worth that absolves most people of responsibility? The framework advanced here rejects both conclusions. While capacity varies, responsibility remains universal. Individuals differ in tolerance for sustained misalignment due to temperament, circumstance, risk exposure, and psychological resilience. Some reach thresholds of non-participation sooner than others. This variation is descriptive, not normative. It does not confer moral superiority, nor does it impose equal demands on unequal capacities.

Responsibility, in this account, scales asymmetrically. All individuals experience dissonance when perception, value, and action diverge. All face repeated moments of recognition. What differs is the cost one can bear in responding to those moments. Moral exemplars are not exempt from fear, pressure, or consequence; they are simply those for whom continued participation in falsehood becomes intolerable earlier or more intensely. Their actions do not relieve others of responsibility, but they lower the psychological cost of recognition for those who follow by making misalignment visible and speakable.

This reframing of exemplarity is essential before turning to Sufism and the figure of Abdulqadir al-Jilani. Without it, Sufi figures appear either as spiritual elites detached from social reality or as distractions from "real" moral and political concerns. Once exemplars are understood as structural responses to accumulated coherence debt, the emergence of organized traditions centered on exemplarity, discipline, and proximity to lived reality becomes intelligible. They are not deviations from moral order, but mechanisms through which moral agency survives when institutions lose the capacity to correct themselves from within.

5. WHY MORAL INSTITUTIONS REAPPEAR OUTSIDE POWER

Once moral failure is understood as a problem of abstraction and suppressed feedback rather than individual corruption, a recurring historical pattern becomes visible. When institutions grow beyond the scale at which lived reality can directly correct them, moral agency does not disappear. It relocates. This relocation follows a structural logic rather than an ideological choice.

When abstraction outpaces feedback, formal authority increasingly governs through representations—law, procedure, metrics, doctrine, or expertise—rather than through continuous contact with the conditions it claims to regulate. As shown earlier, this process produces coherence debt: unresolved contradictions between what is officially affirmed and what is actually experienced. At a certain point, formal institutions can no longer integrate correction without destabilizing themselves. Moral feedback is therefore filtered, delayed, or suppressed, not because it is false, but because it is costly. Under these conditions, moral life cannot remain concentrated at the center.

The predictable result is not rebellion in the first instance, nor withdrawal from ethical responsibility. Instead, morality exits formal authority and reappears in proximity-based forms. Correction relocates to spaces where perception, value, and action can remain aligned without passing through heavily mediated layers. These spaces are typically small-scale, relational, service-oriented, and embedded in everyday life. They do not seek sovereignty. They do not issue binding commands. Their authority derives from presence, exemplarity, and trust rather than enforcement. This relocation is not a rejection of institutions as such; it is a structural adaptation to their limits.

This pattern is visible across civilizations and religious traditions. Where courts become inaccessible, arbitration reappears informally. Where bureaucracies lose credibility, trust networks form. Where official moral language becomes detached from lived experience, ethical authority shifts toward those whose lives remain legible and whose actions can be directly evaluated. The critical point is that these developments do not require revolutionary intent or ideological opposition. They arise because moral agency requires coherence, and coherence requires proximity. When formal structures can no longer supply that proximity, alternative forms emerge.

Understanding this dynamic helps correct a common misreading of history. Decentralized moral institutions are often portrayed as signs of weakness, fragmentation, or decline—symptoms of political failure rather than functional responses to it. From the present framework, the opposite is often true. The emergence of proximity-based moral institutions signals not the absence of ethical concern, but its persistence under constraint. It reflects an attempt to preserve alignment when centralized authority has become too abstract to do so reliably. Such institutions do not replace formal power; they compensate for its blind spots.

This structural logic also clarifies why such institutions tend to recur even in societies saturated with moral discourse and legal form. The existence of law, doctrine, or official ethics does not prevent abstraction from eroding coherence. On the contrary, highly articulated moral systems can intensify the problem when their representations become insulated from correction. In such contexts, the gap between moral language and moral experience grows wider, increasing coherence debt rather than resolving it. Relocation becomes necessary not because morality is absent, but because it has become too mediated to function.

Before introducing Sufi orders by name, it is therefore essential to recognize that something like them was historically inevitable. Once the Islamic world expanded across vast territories, integrated complex economies, and developed sophisticated legal and administrative systems, abstraction pressure increased. Moral authority could no longer remain exclusively centralized without risking insulation.

The conditions were set for ethical correction to reappear in forms that prioritized proximity, exemplarity, and continuous feedback. These forms were not accidental deviations from Islamic governance, nor mystical retreats from social responsibility. They were predictable responses to the structural limits of power under scale, consistent with patterns observed wherever institutions grow beyond the reach of direct moral perception.

Seen in this light, the question is no longer why decentralized moral institutions arose alongside formal Islamic authority, but why one would expect anything else. When coherence becomes difficult to sustain at the center, it must be preserved elsewhere. The historical emergence of traditions organized around exemplarity, discipline, and service reflects this necessity. Only after this structural groundwork is laid does it become possible to understand the specific contribution of Abdulqadir al-Jilani—not as the originator of an eccentric spiritual movement, but as a figure who recognized these dynamics and gave them durable institutional form.

6. ABDULQADIR AL-JILANI AS AN INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE, NOT A MYSTIC EXCEPTION

With the structural groundwork now in place, Abdulqadir al-Jilani can be reintroduced in a way that avoids both sanctification and marginalization. He does not appear here as a mystical outlier, nor as a private spiritual teacher accidentally elevated by history. Rather, he emerges as a figure who recognized—implicitly but accurately—the limits of moral governance under scale and responded by engineering a form of moral survivability when formal institutions could no longer reliably preserve coherence.

Abdulqadir al-Jilani did not invent spirituality. Nor did he introduce a new metaphysical vision into Islam. The Qur'anic moral universe, the legal tradition, and the ethical vocabulary of Islam were already well established by his time. What had changed were the conditions under which those elements operated. The Abbasid world had become administratively sophisticated, legally articulated, and economically expansive. It had also become increasingly abstract. Moral authority was mediated through courts, offices, and patronage networks that were progressively insulated from the lived realities of the poor, the displaced, and those without access to power. In the terms developed earlier, abstraction had outpaced correction, and coherence debt had begun to accumulate.

Al-Jilani's response to this condition was neither rebellion nor withdrawal. It was institutional adaptation. His central achievement was to relocate moral correction to a form that could survive institutional drift without attempting to overthrow it. He subordinated power to coherence not by positioning himself as a rival to political authority, but by making moral authority independent of political control.

This independence allowed confrontation when circumstances permitted and correction could be effective, without making moral authority contingent on access to power. In doing so, he rendered sovereignty morally non-essential, not morally irrelevant. Ethical alignment did not depend on holding

office, capturing courts, or embedding correction within state machinery. It depended on proximity to lived reality, discipline of the self, and service to those most exposed to the costs of abstraction.

This subordination of power to coherence was inseparable from al-Jilani's refusal of identity-bound authority. Leadership within the tradition associated with him was not hereditary, bureaucratic, or tied to permanent office. Authority was transmitted pedagogically and ethically rather than juridically. It could be recognized without being monopolized, and relinquished without collapse. This feature is often misunderstood as organizational weakness or lack of political ambition. From a structural perspective, it was a deliberate safeguard. Identity-bound authority fuses correction with self-preservation; once challenged, it must defend itself. Non-identity-bound authority lowers the cost of admitting error and preserves permeability to feedback. In this sense, al-Jilani's model anticipated the very constraints required for moral agency to survive under scale.

Equally significant was his preservation of correction without confrontation. Al-Jilani did not seek to expose the state's incoherence through polemic, nor did he frame moral authority as oppositional by default. Correction occurred through exemplarity rather than accusation, through service rather than denunciation, and through discipline rather than spectacle. This mode of engagement is often misread as quietism. In fact, it reflects a precise diagnosis of power's failure modes. When institutions reinterpret correction as threat, direct confrontation accelerates suppression and raises the cost of alignment. By relocating correction to spaces that power did not need to control in order to function, al-Jilani preserved ethical feedback without forcing a zero-sum conflict.

Several common misunderstandings must therefore be rejected explicitly. Abdulqadir al-Jilani was not anti-law. His project did not replace jurisprudence with mysticism, nor did it treat legal norms as irrelevant. Rather, it recognized that law alone cannot preserve moral agency once abstraction erodes proximity to reality. Nor was he anti-state. He did not seek to dismantle political authority or deny its necessity. His response presupposed the persistence of governance and worked around its limits rather than against its existence. Finally, his approach was not quietism. It did not counsel passivity in the face of injustice, but identified the conditions under which moral correction could remain effective without triggering the defensive reflexes of power.

Seen through this lens, Abdulqadir al-Jilani's significance lies in his ability to translate an implicit moral theory into durable institutional form. He recognized that when coherence becomes costly at the center, it must be preserved at the edges—not as protest, but as infrastructure. What later generations remembered as saintly charisma was, in practice, the visible expression of a system designed to keep ethical alignment alive when formal authority could no longer reliably host it. This reframing allows al-Jilani to be understood not as a mystical exception to history, but as a historically intelligible response to structural conditions that recur whenever power scales beyond conscience.

7. THE ABDAL AS COHERENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

Few concepts associated with Abdulqadir al-Jilani have been as mystified—and consequently misunderstood—as the Abdal. Popular imagination often oscillates between portraying them as

miracle-working figures who secretly govern the world, or dismissing them altogether as unverifiable metaphysical speculation with little relevance to moral or social life. Both approaches miss the point. For the purposes of this paper, questions of miraculous capacity are neither affirmed nor denied, because they are not required to understand the Abdal's historical or moral function. What matters is not what they *could* do, but what they *were doing*.

To understand the Abdal properly, they must be demystified without being desacralized—treated not as objects of fascination or disbelief, but as functionally intelligible components of a moral system operating under conditions of institutional drift. The Abdal were not defined by supernatural feats, hidden political authority, or esoteric status. Their defining feature was ethical rather than spectacular. They functioned as distributed carriers of moral coherence: individuals whose alignment between perception, value, and action remained intact in environments where institutions systematically displaced that alignment.

In this sense, the Abdal were not exceptional because they transcended human limits, but because they encountered those limits *earlier* and *more acutely*. They reached the threshold at which sustained participation in misalignment became intolerable and refused to internalize incoherence as normal. Their significance lies not in claims about unseen intervention, but in their role as stabilizing elements within a moral ecosystem strained by abstraction. By preserving coherence at the level of the human agent when formal structures could not, the Abdal made ethical continuity possible without recourse to domination, spectacle, or centralized control.

Mapped onto the framework developed earlier, the Abdal can be understood as *threshold responders to coherence debt*. As institutions accumulate unresolved contradiction between representation and reality, that burden does not dissipate evenly across society. It concentrates. Certain individuals experience the internal cost of participation more acutely and more quickly. This is not because they are morally superior, but because their tolerance thresholds are lower or their perception less anesthetized by abstraction. When continued participation would require sustained self-betrayal, they respond by maintaining alignment, *even at personal cost*. The Abdal represent the stabilization points where coherence is preserved rather than deferred.

This reframing also clarifies the often-misunderstood logic of substitution associated with the Abdal. Classical accounts frequently state that when one Abdal dies, another replaces him. Read superficially, this appears as numerology or metaphysical bookkeeping. Read functionally, it describes load-bearing replacement. Moral coherence, once displaced from institutions, must be carried somewhere. When one individual who has been absorbing that burden disappears—through death, exhaustion, or suppression—another inevitably emerges to bear it. The number is not the point. The principle is continuity. As long as coherence debt persists, there will be individuals who reach their thresholds and respond. Replacement is not mystical succession; it is *structural necessity*.

Seen this way, the Abdal are less like a secret council and more like an ethical immune system. They do not direct the body; they prevent collapse by absorbing strain. Their invisibility is not evidence of irrelevance, but of successful containment. Where coherence is preserved quietly, the Abdal remain socially unremarkable. They become visible only when suppression intensifies or when institutional

correction fails so thoroughly that coherence can no longer remain hidden. Visibility, in this sense, is a symptom of late-stage failure rather than proof of sudden emergence.

A common objection at this point is that such an account reduces the Abdal to unverifiable metaphysics. This objection misunderstands the nature of the claim being made. The present account does not depend on miracle reports, hidden hierarchies, or supernatural governance. It offers a *functional description* that stands independently of metaphysical commitments. One need not affirm any specific unseen mechanics to recognize the pattern it describes. Any society that suppresses feedback, accumulates coherence debt, and displaces moral agency will generate individuals who respond by maintaining alignment at personal cost. Naming this function "Abdal" does not create the phenomenon; it recognizes it.

This reframing preserves what is essential in the traditional understanding without binding it to speculative claims. It explains why the Abdal were known to earlier figures like Ali ibn Abi Talib (May Allah be pleased with him), why later figures like Abdulqadir al-Jilani could articulate their role without inventing it, and why similar figures recur across cultures under different names. The Abdal are not an anomaly within Islamic history. They are Islam's way of acknowledging a structural truth about moral life under power.

Understanding the Abdal in this way also raises the intellectual bar for contemporary Muslim discourse. It shifts attention away from spectacle and toward function, away from personality and toward structure. Most importantly, it makes clear that dismissing the Abdal as superstition or romantic excess does not neutralize their role. It merely ensures that coherence debt continues to accumulate unrecognized. Whether named or not, the burden must be carried. The Abdal concept matters because it names how moral agency survives when institutions cannot bear it alone.

8. HOW ZĀWIYAS SOLVED PROBLEMS STATES COULD NOT

If the Abdal represent the human carriers of moral coherence under institutional drift, the *zāwiyah* represents the spatial and organizational form through which that coherence was stabilized, transmitted, and made socially usable. Zāwiyas were not peripheral religious spaces nor informal monasteries. They were proximity-based moral institutions that solved coordination problems states could not address without coercion or abstraction. Their significance becomes clear once they are evaluated against the constraints required for moral agency under scale.

First, zāwiyas preserved *proximity to reality*. Unlike courts, administrative centers, or elite religious institutions, they were embedded in everyday life. They fed the poor, housed travelers, mediated local disputes, and trained individuals in ethical discipline through direct presence rather than distant authority. Moral claims could be evaluated immediately against lived conditions. Hypocrisy was visible. Sincerity was legible. Correction did not require appeal to abstract representation; it occurred through encounter. This proximity sharply reduced coherence debt by keeping perception, value, and action aligned.

Second, zāwiyas maintained *objective legibility*. Their purposes did not require specialized interpretation or bureaucratic mediation. Ordinary people could judge whether a zāwiyah was fulfilling its role: Were the hungry fed? Were disputes settled fairly? Were travelers protected? Was conduct consistent with professed values? Moral evaluation remained public and intuitive rather than delegated to expert authority. This legibility prevented the substitution of procedural compliance for ethical reality—a failure mode that plagues large-scale institutions once abstraction dominates.

Third, zāwiyas embodied *moral and institutional memory*. Ethical norms were not preserved as slogans or texts alone, but rehearsed through daily practice: discipline, service, humility, and accountability. This embodied transmission allowed values to survive generational turnover without relying on rigid formalization. Memory remained lived rather than symbolic. As a result, alignment produced psychological coherence rather than dissonance. Individuals did not need to suppress what they perceived in order to belong; the institution reinforced rather than contradicted moral intuition.

Fourth, zāwiyas operated through *non-identity-bound authority*. Leadership was not proprietary, hereditary, or fused with permanent office. Authority was recognized through character, discipline, and trust, and could be transmitted or dissolved without institutional collapse. This feature sharply reduced the incentive to suppress feedback. Correction did not threaten the survival of the institution because the institution was not anchored to a fixed identity that required defense. Error could be acknowledged without existential risk. This stands in stark contrast to centralized power structures, where correction is often experienced as an attack on legitimacy itself.

Fifth, zāwiyas functioned as continuous *feedback mechanisms*. Because they were accessible, relational, and embedded among those most affected by abstraction, they registered moral signals early. The poor, the displaced, travelers, and marginal populations encountered zāwiyas not as clients of an impersonal system, but as participants in a moral economy. Where injustice intensified, feedback was immediate rather than delayed. Correction could occur quietly and incrementally, preventing the accumulation of coherence debt that later forces rupture.

The civilizational impact of this institutional form was profound. Zāwiyas generated *trade trust* across vast distances by providing recognizable moral grammar to merchants who otherwise lacked shared legal or political frameworks. A trader traveling from West Africa to Central Asia could rely on zāwiyah networks for hospitality, arbitration, and reputation signaling. Disputes were resolved without recourse to distant courts or coercive enforcement. *Intercultural translation* occurred organically, as ethical norms were transmitted without erasing local custom. The *protection of the poor* was not treated as charity alone, but as a stabilizing function of the moral system itself. Those most exposed to abstraction were placed closest to correction.

This system constituted an early form of globalization, but one fundamentally different from its modern counterpart. Modern globalization operates primarily through extraction: resources, labor, data, and value are abstracted from local contexts and reintegrated elsewhere through opaque mechanisms. Moral responsibility diffuses as scale increases. In contrast, Sufi globalization operated through *interoperability without domination*. Local cultures were not homogenized. Authority was not centralized. Ethical alignment traveled without sovereignty. Trust scaled without coercion.

Understanding zāwiyas in this way reframes their historical role. They were not accidental byproducts of piety, nor nostalgic remnants of a premodern world. They were a functional solution to the moral limits of large-scale governance—a solution that allowed ethical life to scale horizontally rather than vertically. Their decline under modern state consolidation and colonial administration does not mark their failure. It confirms the framework developed in this paper: institutions that preserve moral agency do so by remaining corrigible, and they dissolve or are suppressed once power demands permanent, legible control.

Seen from this perspective, the global spread of zāwiyas from Mali to China was not a cultural curiosity. It was evidence that a decentralized moral architecture had emerged capable of coordinating trust, justice, and care across civilizations without reproducing the pathologies of empire. That such an architecture once existed is not a call to romantic restoration. It is a reminder that globalization *does not* require domination—and that moral agency can scale, if institutions are designed to carry coherence rather than replace it.

9. WHY MUSLIMS NO LONGER RECOGNIZE THEIR OWN MORAL INFRASTRUCTURE

If the moral architecture associated with figures like Abdulqadir al-Jilani was historically functional, globally scalable, and civilizationally stabilizing, a natural question follows: why is it so poorly recognized today by the very communities that inherited it? The answer proposed here is neither moral failure nor theological deviation. It is *misrecognition*—a structural breakdown in how moral signals are identified, interpreted, and valued under modern conditions of power.

Using the framework developed in the preceding sections, the problem can be stated simply: *recognition fidelity has collapsed*. Recognition fidelity refers to a society's ability to correctly identify sources of moral coherence and distinguish them from noise, ornamentation, or threat. When recognition fidelity is high, exemplar behavior is integrated quietly, proximity-based institutions are valued for their stabilizing function, and correction is treated as information. When recognition fidelity declines, coherence is misclassified, marginalized, or aestheticized. This decline does not require theological error. It follows from structural transformation.

Modern Muslim societies operate within institutional environments shaped by colonial administration, centralized nation-states, and globalized bureaucratic norms. These systems privilege legibility, standardization, and control. Authority must be visible, codified, and reproducible. Moral value becomes increasingly associated with what can be formally measured, certified, or enforced. Under these conditions, institutions that preserve coherence through proximity, exemplarity, and informal feedback appear illegible. They do not fit the dominant grammar of power. As a result, their function is misread.

Sufism, in this context, is rarely evaluated for what it historically *did*. Instead, it is classified according to how it *appears* under modern epistemic filters. It is dismissed as aesthetic excess—reduced to music, poetry, dress, or ritual expression detached from moral consequence. It is treated as irrational

mysticism—associated with unverifiable claims and emotional experience rather than ethical function. Or it is regarded as politically irrelevant—assumed to be quietist, apolitical, or incapable of engaging structural injustice. None of these classifications address the role Sufi institutions played in preserving moral agency under scale. They are products of misrecognition, not analysis.

The key insight is that this misrecognition is structural rather than theological. Muslims do not reject Sufism because it contradicts Islamic principles; they reject it because modern institutional logic no longer has categories capable of recognizing its function. Systems optimized for centralized control cannot easily perceive decentralized correction as valuable. Proximity-based moral institutions are interpreted as informal, unserious, or inefficient precisely because their success depends on remaining non-coercive and corrigible. What once functioned as infrastructure is now read as ornament.

This misrecognition is reinforced by contemporary moral discourse itself. Under conditions of abstraction, ethical concern becomes increasingly symbolic. Identity, rhetoric, and visible compliance substitute for lived alignment. Moral language intensifies even as moral agency erodes. Within such an environment, practices oriented toward discipline, humility, and feedback appear either redundant or suspicious. They do not produce immediate political leverage, nor do they translate easily into ideological messaging. As a result, they are sidelined in favor of forms of engagement that appear more legible to modern power, even when those forms reproduce the very pathologies they seek to oppose.

Crucially, this diagnosis does not blame Muslims for misunderstanding their tradition. It recognizes that recognition itself is shaped by institutional conditions. When societies inherit structures that reward abstraction and suppress feedback, their moral perception adapts accordingly. What cannot be measured, centralized, or mobilized is discounted. This explains why Sufism is often marginalized even by sincere, thoughtful Muslims who are committed to justice and reform. Their frameworks of evaluation have been recalibrated by systems that cannot easily accommodate coherence as a category.

Understanding this alienation is essential for the argument that follows. If Abdulqadir al-Jilani's legacy is to be recovered meaningfully, it cannot be done through exhortation or nostalgia. It requires restoring recognition fidelity—developing the conceptual tools needed to see moral infrastructure where modern categories see only ritual, sentiment, or irrelevance. Without this shift, the very mechanisms designed to preserve ethical life under power will continue to be misunderstood, even as the conditions that made them necessary intensify.

10. WHY THIS LEGACY MATTERS MORE NOW THAN EVER

The relevance of Abdulqadir al-Jilani's legacy does not diminish with modernity; it *intensifies*. The structural conditions he responded to—abstraction, mediated authority, suppression of feedback, and the displacement of moral agency—are not relics of a premodern past. They are the defining features of contemporary power, now reproduced at a technological scale through artificial intelligence systems.

AI systems *radically* amplify abstraction. Decisions once made by identifiable human actors are now mediated through models, optimization targets, proxies, and statistical representations. Authority is increasingly exercised through systems that no individual fully controls, understands, or experiences directly. Outcomes are justified by reference to performance metrics, alignment objectives, or system behavior rather than lived consequence. This does not introduce a new moral problem; it intensifies an existing one. The distance between perception, value, and action grows wider, and with it the risk of coherence erosion.

Like large bureaucratic institutions, AI systems suppress feedback not primarily through ignorance, but through cost structures. Signals that threaten stability, performance, or deployment incentives are filtered, delayed, or reframed. Human judgment is retained selectively, often downstream of decisions already made. Correction becomes expensive because it requires retraining models, revising objectives, admitting error, or constraining systems whose value is defined by scale and speed. As in earlier institutional contexts, suppression appears rational locally even as it accumulates coherence debt globally. The result is a displacement of conscience: moral responsibility diffuses across layers of abstraction until no single agent experiences ownership of harm.

This is why the question of AI alignment cannot be reduced to technical safeguards or centralized oversight alone. Alignment fails not because values are unspecified, but because moral agency is displaced. No amount of formal constraint can substitute for continuous correction grounded in lived reality. Systems that cannot register the human cost of their outputs in proximate, embodied ways will inevitably drift, regardless of how sophisticated their objectives appear.

At this point, the relevance of Abdulqadir al-Jilani's model becomes unmistakable. His response to institutional drift did not rely on perfect rulers, flawless law, or centralized moral authority. It relied on *distributed exemplarity*. Ethical correction was preserved not by concentrating power, but by ensuring that coherence could survive outside it. The Abdal system articulated a simple but profound insight: moral alignment cannot be guaranteed from the center. It must be carried by individuals embedded in real conditions, capable of responding when abstraction breaks contact with consequence.

Generalized beyond its historical form, the logic of the Abdal offers a critical lesson for the age of AI. Moral correction cannot be centralized without becoming abstracted from the realities it seeks to govern. Alignment must remain proximate to lived experience, continuously informed by those who bear the consequences of decisions rather than those who optimize representations of them. Distributed exemplarity is not a spiritual luxury; it is a structural requirement for moral durability under scale.

This does not imply importing medieval categories wholesale into modern systems, nor does it require theological commitment to specific metaphysical claims. It requires recognizing that no alignment framework—technical, legal, or ethical—can succeed if it treats moral agency as something that can be encoded, enforced, or audited from above. Coherence survives only where individuals retain the capacity to register misalignment and respond without waiting for permission from the system that produced it.

In this sense, Abdulqadir al-Jilani's legacy anticipates one of the central challenges of the present moment. As AI systems increasingly mediate economic access, political decision-making, and social coordination, the risk is not that they will lack values, but that they will displace conscience entirely. The historical response to such displacement was not the abolition of power, but the creation of moral infrastructure capable of operating alongside it without being absorbed by it.

Seen this way, al-Jilani is not a figure of nostalgic reverence, nor a symbol of premodern spirituality. He represents an early articulation of a problem modern societies are only *beginning* to confront: how to preserve moral agency when power scales beyond human perception. The question his legacy poses to the age of AI is not whether machines can be aligned, but whether humans can remain aligned *within* systems that increasingly govern them.

11. Conclusion

From Sanctification to Recognition

This paper has argued that Abdulqadir al-Jilani cannot be understood adequately through the language of sanctification alone. To revere him solely as a saint (however sincerely) is to obscure the historical and moral function that made his influence endure. Al-Jilani was not significant because he stood apart from society in spiritual elevation, but because he responded to society's structural limits with institutional intelligence. He was, in this sense, a moral systems architect: a figure who recognized how ethical life degrades under abstraction and designed forms capable of preserving coherence when formal power could no longer do so reliably.

Reframed in this way, al-Jilani's contribution does not compete with law, governance, or political authority. It compensates for their limits. His legacy demonstrates that moral durability does not depend on perfect rulers, complete institutions, or uninterrupted sovereignty. It depends on whether coherence—alignment between perception, value, and action—can survive when power becomes mediated, insulated, and resistant to feedback. The Abdal system and the global network of zāwiyas were not mystical ornaments layered onto Islamic civilization; they were the infrastructure through which moral agency remained possible under scale.

This perspective also invites a difficult but necessary reassessment of contemporary Muslim decline narratives. Muslims did not lose power simply because they lost politics, territory, or technological advantage. Those losses were consequential, but they were downstream. What was lost first was coherence: the lived mechanisms by which moral correction was preserved when institutions drifted. In forgetting how coherence was historically maintained, Muslims inherited structures of power without the ethical architecture required to keep those structures aligned. The result has been moral fatigue, misrecognition of exemplarity, and a tendency to substitute identity, rhetoric, or procedure for lived alignment.

Recovering Abdulqadir al-Jilani's legacy, then, does not mean reviving medieval forms, romanticizing Sufism, or retreating into spiritual nostalgia. It requires restoring recognition—learning again how to identify moral infrastructure when it appears, even when it does not resemble modern categories of authority or effectiveness. It requires understanding why decentralized exemplarity, proximity-based

institutions, and continuous feedback are not signs of weakness, but conditions for ethical survival under scale.

In an age where power increasingly operates through abstraction—whether bureaucratic, economic, or algorithmic—the stakes of this recovery are no longer historical. They are immediate. To remember al-Jilani rightly is not to look backward, but to recover a truth civilizations repeatedly forget and must repeatedly relearn: that when power scales beyond conscience, humanity survives only by building structures that keep conscience alive.

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