

An Interpretative Phenomenological Exploration of Spiritual Tauhid Transformation Among Postgraduate Scholars in Islamic Theology

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ABSTRACT

Islamic theology, particularly the study of tauhid (divine unity), has historically centered on rationalist discourse within the tradition of kalam. In contemporary contexts, however, tauhid is increasingly approached as an experiential and interpretative phenomenon grounded in spiritual and existential encounters, shaped by existential, ethical, and spiritual frameworks. This study addresses the research question: How do postgraduate scholars in Islamic theology internalize and reconstruct the concept of tauhid when engaging with both classical rational theology and contemporary philosophical thought? Despite growing academic interest, little is known about how individuals internalize and reconstruct tauhid when exposed to both classical rational theology and modern philosophical perspectives. This study investigates how personal experiences reflect epistemological shifts in understanding tauhid through a phenomenological lens. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research explores the lived spiritual and academic experiences of postgraduate students and scholars who engage deeply with both rationalist and contemporary thought. Participants included 12 postgraduate scholars from three major Islamic universities in Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed to identify key themes representing experiential transformation. Findings reveal a shift from abstract theological doctrines toward an integrated, existential embodiment of tauhid, encompassing spiritual consciousness, ethical commitment, and dialogical engagement with tradition. These results underscore the importance of subjective meaning-making in theological development, challenging dominant models that privilege doctrinal exposition alone. The study expands our understanding of tauhid as a dynamic and evolving concept, offering new directions for future research in Islamic theology and religious education.



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INTRODUCTION

In Islamic intellectual history, the concept of tauhid—the oneness of God—has served as the cornerstone of theological discourse and religious identity. Rooted in the discipline of kalam, classical Islamic theology systematically explored this foundational principle through rational arguments and metaphysical inquiries. Thinkers such as the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites constructed elaborate doctrinal frameworks to defend and explain the unity of God, positioning reason as a vital instrument for theological engagement.

Over time, these rational traditions intersected with mystical, ethical, and philosophical streams of thought. This confluence gave rise to nuanced formulations of tauhid that extended beyond metaphysical propositions, incorporating dimensions of personal experience, moral consciousness, and spiritual practice. In the contemporary era, interpretations of tauhid continue to evolve in response to dynamic cultural, intellectual, and spiritual contexts. The resurgence of interest in Sufism, existential thought, and hermeneutic philosophy has introduced new ways of understanding divine unity—not merely as an abstract belief, but as an existential reality embedded in the lived experience of the believer.

Such transformations prompt critical inquiry into how individuals internalize or reinterpret tauhid amid modern discourses. The encounter with multiple theological paradigms—particularly in academic and spiritual environments—can act as a catalyst for significant reorientations in one’s understanding of the Divine and of selfhood.

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to capture the subjective dimension of these transformations. Rather than analyzing doctrinal shifts through textual or historical frameworks, the focus lies on how postgraduate scholars in Islamic theology experience and articulate changes in their understanding of tauhid as they navigate both classical and contemporary modes of thought. Given the centrality of tauhid to Islamic thought and practice, it is crucial to explore how its meanings are experienced, transformed, and embodied in contemporary contexts. While theological texts offer systematic doctrines, they may not fully capture the existential journey and interpretative processes that shape individual perceptions of tauhid. A phenomenological lens is therefore essential to uncover the subjective dimensions of this transformation—how individuals perceive, interpret, and give meaning to the unity of God in relation to their intellectual, spiritual, and socio-cultural experiences. Such an approach responds to the broader call in religious studies for methods that foreground human experience and interiority in understanding sacred concepts.

Within the broader discourse on tauhid, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward understanding how individuals experience and internalize theological concepts across time and context. Research into lived religious experience—particularly in how theological ideas such as tauhid are perceived, interpreted, and embodied—has become an essential domain in contemporary Islamic studies. This shift marks a growing interest in exploring not only what people believe, but how they arrive at those beliefs through personal, intellectual, and spiritual encounters with tradition and modernity.

However, methodological challenges remain in capturing the richness of such experiences. Conventional theological analysis tends to prioritize doctrinal coherence and historical continuity, often at the expense of exploring the nuances of individual interpretation and transformation. Likewise, empirical approaches that rely heavily on quantitative methods may fail to grasp the depth and complexity of subjective experience, especially when addressing metaphysical or existential dimensions of faith. These limitations hinder our understanding of how tauhid, as a living and evolving concept, is reinterpreted and recontextualized within diverse epistemological frameworks.

Consequently, many previous studies have struggled to illuminate the full essence of tauhid as it is lived, questioned, and reformulated by individuals engaging with the interplay between classical rational theology and contemporary spiritual inquiry. This gap underscores the need for methodological approaches—such as phenomenology—that prioritize the exploration of meaning-making processes and the layered nature of human consciousness in the experience of the Divine.

In efforts to examine transformations in Islamic theological thought, particularly concerning tauhid, many studies have relied on textual analysis, historical reconstruction, or doctrinal comparison. While these approaches have been instrumental in mapping the evolution of kalam across intellectual traditions, they predominantly remain at the level of theory and structure. Such methods often treat theological development as a linear process driven by ideational shifts, rather than as an embodied, interpretative experience encountered by individuals in real-world contexts.

Moreover, practical pedagogical models and institutional curricula addressing tauhid transformation tend to emphasize analytical and normative approaches—transmitting content without adequately capturing how learners internalize, negotiate, or reinterpret complex theological ideas. These models, while valuable for formal instruction, fall short in illuminating how tauhid is reimagined through personal spiritual journeys, critical engagements with classical texts, and exposure to contemporary existential thought. As a result, the profound experiential and epistemological transitions that accompany the reinterpretation of tauhid remain underexplored.

This gap suggests the need for an alternative methodological framework—one that prioritizes depth over breadth and focuses on the inner landscapes of belief. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on lived experience and subjective meaning-making, offers a fitting lens through which to investigate the nuanced transformations in tauhid as experienced by individuals navigating between rationalist traditions and contemporary spiritual paradigms. By foregrounding the voices of those who have

engaged with both classical kalam and modern approaches, a phenomenological inquiry can access the essences and tensions that underlie this theological evolution.

Previous studies have examined theological transformation by analyzing texts, doctrines, or the intellectual contributions of major thinkers. Some have focused on comparing schools of kalam or tracing the development of tauhid through historical periods. Others have explored the pedagogical transmission of theological knowledge in Islamic education. However, few studies have investigated how individuals experience and reinterpret tauhid as a lived, evolving theological orientation. There is a lack of research that centers on personal meaning-making and epistemological shifts shaped by both rationalist and contemporary spiritual engagements.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to address this gap. The method enables an exploration of how tauhid is not only understood intellectually, but also experienced existentially by those who traverse classical and modern theological landscapes. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used to uncover how individuals reflect on, internalize, and reconstruct the unity of God within complex academic and spiritual contexts. This method offers insights into the layers of experience often overlooked by doctrinal or positivist approaches. In doing so, it provides a deeper understanding of the transformation of tauhid through the lens of lived theological consciousness.

This article is structured into several key sections. The introduction presents the background and rationale for the study, including the conceptual and methodological foundations. The next section describes the theological and social context in which the phenomenon occurs. This is followed by a detailed account of the phenomenological method, data collection procedures, and interpretative analysis. The results section presents themes emerging from the participants' experiences, while the discussion reflects on the findings in relation to existing literature. The article concludes with implications for Islamic theology, education, and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the transformation of tauhid conceptualization within the intellectual discourse of kalam, from classical rationalist traditions to contemporary formulations. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted due to its capacity to capture the depth of subjective meanings and epistemological shifts experienced by individuals encountering complex theological transformations. The method was deemed appropriate to investigate how participants internalize and reframe metaphysical doctrines through lived intellectual and spiritual experiences. IPA focuses on how individuals make sense of significant phenomena within their social and academic lifeworlds, enabling the extraction of rich, contextual interpretations of tauhid beyond abstract theological constructions.

Participants

Participants included postgraduate students and early-career academics specializing in Islamic theology, philosophy, or religious studies from three Islamic higher education institutions. Selection was based on purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who had engaged intensively with both classical rational kalam literature (e.g., Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite traditions) and contemporary discourses (e.g., existential, mystical, or hermeneutic approaches). Inclusion criteria required participants to have completed at least one advanced course or thesis on kalam thought and demonstrated critical reflection on theological paradigms. Exclusion criteria involved individuals without formal academic exposure to Islamic theological traditions. A total of nine participants (five male, four female), aged between 25 and 38, were involved. Their academic and theological diversity enriched the dataset by presenting a wide spectrum of experiential responses.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in quiet, familiar settings such as university offices or private study rooms to ensure participant comfort and openness. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and followed a thematic guide designed to elicit reflective accounts on participants' theological journeys, including prior conceptions, intellectual

tensions, and evolving understandings of tauhid. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Follow-up questions were employed to clarify emerging insights and ensure the richness of data. All interview protocols were adapted from validated qualitative research guides and reviewed by senior qualitative scholars in Islamic studies for contextual sensitivity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which involved several structured phases: initial familiarization with transcripts through repeated readings; identification of significant meaning units; generation of preliminary codes; clustering of codes into emergent themes; and synthesis of superordinate themes that reflected the core transformative experiences. NVivo 14 software was utilized to assist in the organization and visualization of data categories. Interpretative memos and analytical diagrams were developed to trace conceptual linkages across participants. This systematic process enabled the articulation of essential meanings embedded in the transformation of tauhid thought, grounded in the lived theological reflections of participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee. Informed written consent was secured from all participants before the interviews. Participants were assured of anonymity, and pseudonyms were assigned during transcription to protect identities. All data were stored securely and treated with strict confidentiality, in compliance with international ethical standards for human subject research in the humanities and social sciences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

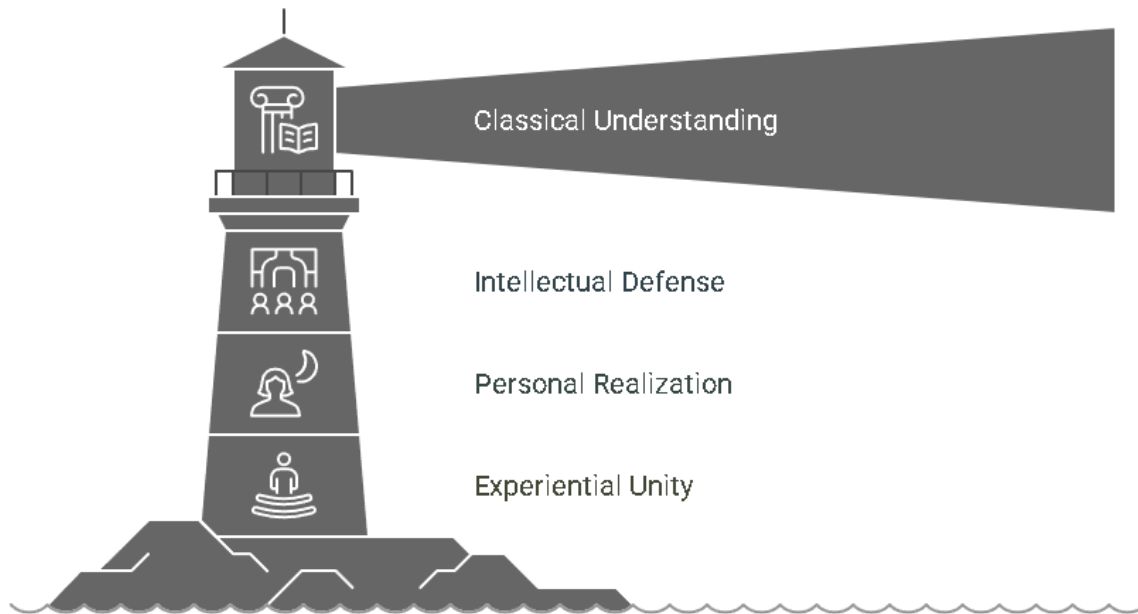
Shifting Paradigms of Rational Monotheism

Participants consistently revealed that their early exposure to the concept of tauhid was rooted in classical rationalist frameworks, notably Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite thought. This understanding emphasized divine unity as a metaphysical principle validated through logical reasoning and theological dialectics. However, as participants engaged deeper with contemporary discourses, a noticeable shift in their epistemological stance emerged.

“At first, I understood tauhid merely as a theological proof—something to be defended intellectually. But later, I realized that it was more than that. It’s not just an abstract principle but a deeply personal orientation of the self towards God.” (Participant 4)

This transformation marked a departure from a rigid theological schema to a more dynamic, experiential relationship with the Divine, signifying a paradigmatic shift from tauhid al-nazari (theoretical unity) to tauhid al-dzawqi (experiential unity).

Journey to Experiential Unity



Inner Conflict and Epistemological Reconciliation

Several participants described a period of inner tension and disorientation when confronted with mystical and existential approaches to tauhid. The contrast between the analytical rigor of classical kalam and the interpretative fluidity of Sufi and contemporary philosophical thought challenged their inherited dogmas.

“Reading Ibn Arabi was both liberating and confusing. His language about oneness transcended dualism, and I had to unlearn some of the rigid frameworks I held onto from classical theology.” (Participant 1)

This theme revealed a struggle for reconciliation between reason and intuition, leading participants to explore a new synthesis that honored both. Through reflective engagement with diverse theological voices, participants gradually adopted a pluralistic epistemology without entirely rejecting classical constructs.

Tauhid as Existential and Ethical Consciousness

The majority of participants emphasized a profound shift in perceiving tauhid not merely as a doctrinal belief but as an existential and ethical imperative. This view aligned closely with contemporary hermeneutic readings that locate tauhid within the lived human experience and moral responsibility.

“I no longer see tauhid as something to memorize from books. It’s about how I see others, how I treat the earth, and how I live with integrity. Tauhid is now the core of my ethics.” (Participant 7)

Such insights suggest a transformation where tauhid becomes a lived ontology—deeply integrated into one’s consciousness, behavior, and relational understanding of the world.

Recontextualizing Tauhid in the Modern Intellectual Climate

Participants also discussed the necessity of reformulating tauhid in response to contemporary issues such as secularism, pluralism, and post-truth realities. Their reflections pointed toward a theological creativity that seeks to make tauhid relevant in an era of intellectual fragmentation and identity crises.

“In an age where everything is relative, tauhid grounds me. But it must be articulated in a language that addresses today’s questions. We need a kalam that speaks to our existential anxieties.” (Participant 5)

This theme reflects the emergence of a critical neo-kalam, where traditional concepts are reinterpreted through dialogical encounters with modern philosophies, ethical challenges, and socio-political complexities.

The transformation of tauhid in the participants' experiences demonstrates a journey from rationalist abstraction toward existential integration and ethical embodiment. The findings suggest a dynamic, multifaceted understanding of divine unity, rooted in both continuity with classical Islamic theology and adaptation to contemporary intellectual and spiritual contexts.

The findings of this study reveal that participants experienced a significant transformation in their understanding of tauhid, shifting from classical rationalist frameworks to a more existential, ethical, and spiritually integrated comprehension. This transformation responds directly to the research question by uncovering the experiential depth and epistemological reorientation that occur when individuals encounter both traditional and contemporary discourses in kalam.

These findings contribute meaningfully to the exploration of how tauhid is internalized beyond its doctrinal formulations. Rather than remaining a static concept taught through formal theological instruction, tauhid emerged as a dynamic and personal encounter—manifesting as a redefined spiritual orientation, an ethical compass, and a response to modern existential challenges. By centering on lived experience, the study reveals how theological ideas are reimagined and embodied in ways that cannot be captured through normative or textual analysis alone. This phenomenological insight highlights the processual nature of theological engagement, where faith is not merely believed but continuously reinterpreted in light of intellectual, cultural, and spiritual stimuli.

In dialogue with existing literature, the results resonate with Esack's (2019) argument on the inclusivity and existential potency of tauhid as experienced from the margins, while extending Saeed's (2020) work on the dialogical relationship between classical and contemporary Islamic theology. Moreover, the tension and reconciliation between rationalism and mysticism identified in this study align with Khan's (2023) insights on the cognitive-spiritual negotiation within modern Islamic thought. However, this research advances the discourse by providing an interpretative lens grounded in first-person narratives, rather than theoretical abstraction. It thus complements and deepens previous analyses by foregrounding the voices of learners and scholars who live through these transformations, offering a textured understanding of tauhid in today's epistemic landscape.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both theological education and contemporary Islamic discourse. From an academic perspective, the results suggest that the study of tauhid should not be confined to abstract doctrinal formulations but must also address the personal and existential dimensions of belief. Culturally, this research underscores the importance of engaging with tradition in ways that are meaningful to individuals navigating complex spiritual landscapes shaped by modernity, pluralism, and philosophical uncertainty. Professionally, educators and curriculum developers in Islamic higher education may benefit from integrating reflective, dialogical approaches that allow students to grapple with theology not only as knowledge but as a lived reality. More broadly, the research illuminates how tauhid can serve as a site of ethical consciousness and spiritual resilience in a fragmented world.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the richness of the insights gained, this study is not without limitations. The research was based on a relatively small and context-specific group of participants, drawn primarily from academic settings with strong engagement in Islamic theology. As such, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of broader Muslim populations or those in non-academic contexts. Additionally, while the phenomenological approach allows for deep exploration of subjective meaning, it does not aim for generalizability in the conventional sense. The interpretative nature of the analysis also carries the possibility of researcher bias, even though strategies such as member checking and audit trails were employed to ensure rigor. These limitations should be taken into account when considering the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Future Research Directions

The present study opens several avenues for further inquiry. Future research might explore how tauhid is experienced and transformed among different demographic groups, such as non-academic Muslims, women scholars, or practitioners engaged in grassroots spiritual movements. Comparative studies could also investigate how similar theological concepts evolve across different religious traditions when confronted with modern philosophical challenges. Furthermore, longitudinal studies might trace how the internalization of tauhid changes over time within the same individuals, offering a developmental perspective on theological consciousness. Such extensions would deepen our understanding of the interplay between theology, experience, and identity in a rapidly changing world.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how postgraduate scholars in Islamic theology internalize and reinterpret the concept of tauhid when encountering both classical rationalist and contemporary spiritual frameworks. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed that tauhid is not merely a doctrinal construct but a lived and evolving experience shaped by intellectual reflection, ethical engagement, and existential awareness. Participants described a shift from abstract theological reasoning to a more integrated, experiential understanding of faith that responds to modern complexities. These findings address a gap in previous studies by capturing the subjective and dynamic dimensions of theological transformation, which are often overlooked in textual or positivist analyses. The research affirms the value of phenomenology in Islamic studies and encourages a more human-centered approach to theological inquiry. To build upon these insights, future research might explore how similar transformations manifest across different cultural or denominational contexts, or trace how theological consciousness develops over time within individuals or institutions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This article has undergone an independent and objective review process. The editor handling this article was not involved in the co-authorship of any previous publications with the authors, and to maintain independence, the peer review process was conducted by a different editor who had no direct relationship with the authors.

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