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**EQUIVOCITY OF “UNITY OF BEING”  
IN JALĀLUDDĪN RŪMĪ**

It is difficult to attribute the doctrine of “Unity of Being” to Rūmī, because the theological basis of Islam, from which he has drawn the essential of his thought, has as its main pillar the Unity of God: “Say: He is Allah, Absolute Oneness” (112:1).<sup>1</sup> For that reason, “monotheism” (*tawhīd*) became a common principle of all theological, mystical and philosophical schools of Muslim thought. It is known that monotheism means essentially the affirmation that God transcends and is radically different from the world. However, monotheism means, also, that God has attributes and acts by which He appears to be the only actor in the world. Both of these affirmations, transcendence and anthropomorphism, made the Islamic worldview different from the pantheist one, which is based on the flow of God in the World. In the atmosphere of this transcendent and anthropomorphic unity, the discourse of pantheism will remain an exception within the Islamic culture.

However, we can assume that the “Unity of Being” is a derivative of “monotheism” (*tawhīd*), since the unity of God in himself is, in a way, a path to unity of God with the world and we have some Koranic verses which confirm this unity. For example, “*wherever you turn, the Face of Allah is there*” (2: 114), “*everyone on it will pass away; but the Face of your Lord will remain*” (55: 24–25), “*He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward*” (57: 3), “*He is with you wherever you are*” (57: 4). We can notice that the roots of pantheism are even present in the name of God “the Real” (*al-ḥaqq*) as well. According to Sufis, this name points out that other beings are nothing but false and imaginary ones. There are also several *hadiths*, which imply a pantheistic spirit as regards the relation of God with the whole world. We all know the famous holy *hadith* in which God says, “I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be recognized, so I created the world.” We can also find these words related by Abū ‘Ubayda al-Jarrah, one of the Companions of the Prophet, “I never saw anything without God being nearer to me than this thing.” Nevertheless, the distance that separates

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<sup>1</sup> *The Noble Qur’an*. Translated by Abdalḥaq and Aisha Bewley. Dubai, 1999.

the unity of God in Himself, and the unity of God with the world, remains very large. Only the mystics can venture to proclaim pantheism clearly.

This vacillation between monotheism and pantheism is reflected in the corpus of Jalāluddīn Rūmī, to the point that we cannot decide whether he is a proponent of monotheism or pantheism, because his corpus embodies both views on the unity, transcendence and immanence of God.

However, if there are some aspects of the philosophy of unity of being in Jalāluddīn Rūmī's corpus, they appear only in the form of ecstatic utterances (*shaṭaḥāt*) and not in a demonstrative discourse. So we should not expect a great Sufi poet to sacrifice his poetic style for the sake of being in harmony with philosophical principles and concepts. What we can expect from him is restricted to vague poetic allusions in the form of metaphors and symbols, full of contradictions and capable of losing you in a labyrinth of confusion and astonishment.

The equivocity of the notion of "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) appears in two forms: 1) in the potential or the a priori "unity of being," which exists in Nature and Man, expecting someone to actualize it; 2) in the a posteriori "Unity of Being," which is realized through a chain of transformations, where the mystic (*sālik*) moves from monotheism to pantheism.

We can also approach Rūmī's "Unity of Being" from two angles: 1) as a logical structure, i.e. a genre that contains three forms of unity of being: immanent unity (pantheism), human unity with God (*ittiḥād*), and divine unity with man (indwelling, *ḥulūl*); 2) as a genetic form, i.e. as a process of transformation from individualism to total unity.

The other aspect of equivocity of "Unity of Being" is that this unity belongs to the domain of Difference and Opposition, and not to the sphere of Intellect, which is based on the principle of identity. Nevertheless, the objective of this experience is precisely the achievement of identity between men and God through heart.<sup>2</sup> Generally, poetry and rationalism, identity and contrariety, annihilation and subsistence coexist together in Rūmī's ecstatic utterances (*shaṭaḥāt*). This unity aspires, at the same time, to go beyond categories, predicates and oppositions, to overcome unity, plurality, diversity and otherness to meet existence immediately, and to go through all states and stations to reach the unique One. The "Unity of Being" is inseparable from the question concerning the truth of I and the question of reality of You (God). Rūmī does not seem to be embarrassed by the presence of these contrarieties in his writings. He feels rather assured of them because they allow the possibility of change and transformation.

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<sup>2</sup> In his *Seven Preaching Sessions*, Rūmī says, "the love doesn't disappear from the reason" (*Rūmī. Mawā'iz majālis al-sab'a*. Translated into Arabic by 'Īsā 'Akūb. Damascus, 2004. P. 60).

## 1. "Unity of Being" as a solution to the aporia of One and Many

"Unity of Being" is an equivocal term. First, because it is composed of two concepts: unity and being. Second, regarding being, we notice that Rūmī, generally, replaces it by essence. Consequently, the "Unity of Being" will stand for the "unity of Essence." The reason is that the principle of distinction between essence and existence does not concern God, since His essence is His existence. In other words, He exists not by existence but by Himself. Third, Unity is not an accident to be added to Existence in the expression "Unity of Existence," but a negation of resemblance to other beings. In this context, Rūmī says, "*Look round the world for 'others' and / reach certainty: There are no others*"<sup>3</sup>. Even, when al-Hallaj called out: "I am the Real," the speaker was not really al-Hallaj but God himself.<sup>4</sup> Then, Existence, Essence and Unity mean the same thing, since nothing exists but the One Being who is the divine Essence.

However, the principle of impossibility of the existence of existences other than God is opposed to the fact that other beings exist too. To avoid this contradiction, Rūmī distinguishes between the Real Existence, that is God, and the vain and imaginable one. He says: "*I swear, since I have seen Your face, / the whole world has become fraud and fantasy [to me].*" He, like other lovers of pantheism, uses manifestations of divine self as a way to avoid opposition between the two existences, real and vain. Hence, beings become nothing but divine manifestations of one Real individual: "*all the tasks of the world are different, but [simultaneously] all are one.*"

In this meaning, the world turns into a mirror that reflects the Reality of God. The world, then, does not stand up by itself, but its "stature" stands on God all times. Therefore, we can say that the relation between unity and manifestation is like that between essences and accidents. Rūmī says the following about this meaning, "*Because it is accident (manifestation), men must not stop at it. Essence is like a musk diffuser, and the material world and its pleasant things are the perfume of this musk. This perfume of the musk does not last forever, since it is only an accident. Whoever is looking for musk in this perfume, and is not satisfied with this perfume, is a good man. But anyone who wants to make do only with the perfume (of the musk), and feels satisfied, is a bad man.*"<sup>5</sup>

It is important to notice that the concept of manifestation is contradictory. Manifestation means, first, the act of bringing to light the hidden and the myste-

<sup>3</sup> Rūmī. *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, verse 34972 — quoted from: *Chittick W.C. The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rūmī*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983. P. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Rūmī*. *Kitāb Fīhi mā fīhi*. Translated into Arabic by 'Īsā 'Akūb. Damascus-Beyrouth, 2004. P. 27 (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> *Kitāb Fīhi mā fīhi*. P. 101.

rious essence; but if we ponder upon this concept, we will find out that it has an opposite meaning as well — namely, it refers to the act of hiding the divine Essence from us. Al-Hallaj expresses this contradictory nature of manifestations as follows: *“He is hidden in His manifestation, manifest in His concealing.”* Rūmī explains the reason of concealing the reality of God in the saying: *“If His light shines without veil, any heaven or earth, any sun or moon will disappear, and nothing will remain but the King.”*<sup>6</sup> In terms of paradox, His veil is the condition of the existence of the world.

In this sense, the doctrine of “pantheism” seems to be an extreme solution to the oldest aporia: the One and the Multiple, whether in its objective aspect (the opposition between the One and the Multiple) or the subjective one (the opposition between I and You, the self and the other), that is why the “Unity of Being” has two faces. We can refer to the first one as to potential unity, which is the unity of the Real veiled by His manifestations, while the second one assumes the name of “unity” in the sense of “springing into action” by polishing the mirror of man’s essence. In other words, the objective “Unity of Being” appears as a totality that has two faces, God and the world: *“From the beginning to the end, [there is] no one but You.”*

However, the subjective “unity of Being” means the process of transforming of “I” into “You.” Rūmī thinks that we cannot justify the desire of subjective unity if God is not inside us, *“See in your heart, the kingdom of God is inside you”*, and *“When you contemplate well, you find the roots of all things in your self; all these other things [being] twigs of your self.”*<sup>7</sup> In his *Rubā'iyāt*, he also says: *“O Sufi, the follower of the spiritual path, if you search for that, do not search for Him outside your self, seek him in yourself,”*<sup>8</sup> and he adds: *“why do you travel the world bewildered, Whom you seek, is not outside you.”*<sup>9</sup>

## **2. The annihilation of the self is the end of a subjective *wahdat al-wujūd***

The experience of “Unity of Being” in Rūmī appears to be immersed in a hard paradox, where he feels that the Beloved is both very transcendent and very near to him at the same time. Indeed, the lover is scattered between the jealousy of his beloved, who urges him to say “none exists but Him,” and the avidity of absorption by Him, which urges him to say, “there nothing in this dress but God.” Therefore, we cannot overcome this aporia without annihilating the self in

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 43. See also P. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P. 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Rūmī*. *Al-Rubā'iyāt*. Translated into Arabic by 'Īsā 'Akūb. Damascus–Beyrouth, 2004. *Rubā'ī* 32. P. 29 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. *Rubā'ī* 1979. P. 516.

the Other or melting into him, or without abolishing the duality between I and You. Paradoxically, Rūmī describes this abolition as a general process that guarantees the evolution of a being from the level of elements to a level of angels going through the vegetable, animal and human levels:

*“I died as mineral and became a plant; / I died as plant and rose to animal; / I died as an animal and I was a man. / Why should I fear? When I became less by dying? / Yet once more I shall die as man, to soar / With angels blest; but even from angelhood / I must pass on: all except God doth perish. / When I have sacrificed my angelic soul, / I shall become what no mind ever conceived. / Oh, let me not exist! For Non-existence / Proclaims in organ tones, ‘To Him we shall return.’ ”*<sup>10</sup>

When we admit that the annihilation of the self is the purpose of “unity of being,” we really see for ourselves that unity is rather an annihilatory than an existential phenomenon, this is why Rūmī says:

*“Take the famous phrase: ‘I am the Real.’ Some people think it is a huge pretension. But ‘I am the Real,’ in reality, is a great modesty. Because who says, ‘I am a servant of the Real,’ affirms two existences, one of himself, the other of God. Yet who says, ‘I am the Real,’ denies himself ... ‘I am the Real,’ means, in fact, ‘I am nonexistent, and He is the Existent, nothing possesses existence but God. I am absolutely nonexistent, I am nothing.’ ”*<sup>11</sup>

For this reason, the aim of annihilation of the self is not the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but the obtaining of an emotional gnosis. In this experience, the distance and duality between God and man disappears.<sup>12</sup> The Sufi does not believe that the perception of self-manifestations of Real will be sufficient, but he hopes to go beyond them to unveil the core of these manifestations. In other words, the Sufi does not seem to be content with seeing the Being or talking about Him, but he wants to become Him, or rather to be burned by Him.

Thus, the way to the “unity of Being” is an oppositional one. It starts from manifestations to end in essence; it leads from a sensitive and multiple being to a rational one, from perceptible to imperceptible.<sup>13</sup> The contrarities cannot be transformed one into another if they do not have the same nature. However, this transformation needs a mystical “stone,” namely the annihilation that dissolves

<sup>10</sup> Nicholson R.A. *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1914. P. 168 (quoted from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/moi/moi.htm#168>).

<sup>11</sup> *Kitāb Fīhi mā fīhi*. P. 83. See also P. 277.

<sup>12</sup> He says: “If he has seen to the willful (intended, *al-maqsūd*), the duality will disappear” — *ibid.* P. 56.

<sup>13</sup> He says: “What is more the furthest from comprehension and sagacity than the secret of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) and His Essence” — *Rūmī. Masnawī*. Vol. 3. P. 291, verse 3640 (my translation).

multiplicity and diversity in an absolute identity: “*Be joyful with Him, not with ‘others’: He is the spring, but others are like January.*”<sup>14</sup> There is neither an end nor a cause to come back to unity.<sup>15</sup>

But the annihilatory way is not a completely negative way; since, thanks to it, the Sufi acquires a total freedom from space, time, geography, history, and all things but not from the beloved; the “Annihilation of the self” gives him a possibility to subsist with God. Finally, the evacuation of the self from knowledge and mundane worries creates in him a new power that enables him to receive the absolute perfection in the soul, because “*it is necessary that he has a core in order to perceive the Core, it is obligatory he has a spirit in order to enjoy the Spirit.*”<sup>16</sup> In this way, non-being becomes a faculty, and annihilation becomes an achievement. This is the condition of the metamorphosis of the individual into the absolute: “*When you have become living through Him /you are indeed Him. That is utter Oneness, how could that be coexistence?*”<sup>17</sup>

But reaching the Real does not mean the end of the journey. The human effort to attain the truth is always renewable, since “*the beloved puts on a new dress at any moment,*” and because even if the Sufi reaches the core of a nut, he discovers thousands more cores within it,<sup>18</sup> “*and if the man ... arrives to perceive the Truth, this will not be the Truth himself. The true man is one who never ends to endeavour, and turns around the sublime Truth without relaxation nor repose.*”<sup>19</sup>

When we read the poetry or prose of Rūmī, we cannot determine whether the “Unity of Being” means *ittiḥād* or *ḥulūl*, because both require annihilation.<sup>20</sup> In general, “Unity of Being” indicates the way of *ittiḥād*, which starts from knowledge of the self and leads to the knowledge of the Other Self. The principle of this approach is to consider the self as a mirror of the Real or His astrolabe: “*the man is the astrolabe of Real, but it is necessary to have an astronomer to understand the astrolabe ... Because who “knows himself, knows his God” ... as the*

<sup>14</sup> The continuation of the verse is: “*Everything other than God is leading you astray, / Be it you throne, kingdom, and crown*” (Masnawī. Vol. III. Verses 507–508).

<sup>15</sup> “*Without a cause God gave us Being; /without a cause, He took it back again.*”

<sup>16</sup> Rūmī. Mawā'iz majālis al-sab'a. P. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Masnawī. Vol. IV. Verse 2767, quoted from *Chittick*. The Sufi Path.

<sup>18</sup> About the infinity of the hidden trueness cf. Rūmī. Al-Rubā'iyāt. Rubā'ī 499. P. 146.

<sup>19</sup> Kitāb Fīhi mā fīhi. P. 73.

<sup>20</sup> We can find the traces of *waḥdat al-ḥulūl* in these verses: “*Happy the moment when we are seated in the Palace, thou and I, / With two forms and with two figures but with one soul, thou and I. / The colors of the grove and the voice of the birds will bestow immortality / At the time when we come into the garden, thou and I. / We shall show them the Moon itself, thou and I. / Thou and I, individuals no more, shall be mingled in ecstasy, / Joyful and secure from foolish babble, thou and I. / All the bright-plumed birds of heaven will devour their hearts with envy / In the place where we shall laugh in such a fashion, thou and I. / This is the greatest wonder, that thou and I, sitting here in the same nook, / Are at this moment both in 'Iraq and Khorasan, thou and I.*” — quoted from *Reynold A. Nicholson*. *Mystics of Islam*. Chapter VI.

*silver astrolabe is a mirror of celestial spheres, the human existence ... is an astrolabe of the Real. When God makes the man know Him and have an eye on Him, the man begins to see in his existential astrolabe the disclosure of the Real and His absolute beauty instant by instant, glance by glance. This beauty doesn't disappear.”*<sup>21</sup>

Even if the beginning of a mystical journey is the knowledge of the self, Rūmī advises the Sufi to get rid of his knowledge of the self as soon as he has known it, for he may attain the One and unify with Him. Rūmī describes this dialectic relation with his self as follows : “*Suppose you know the definitions / of all substances and their products, / of what good is this to you? / Know the true definition of yourself. / That is essential. / Then, when you know your own definition, / flee from it, / that you may attain the One who cannot be defined, / O sifter of the dust.*” In the *Rubā‘iyāt*, Rūmī also says: “*When I was preoccupied with myself, I didn't merit my soul / but when I went out of my soul, I found my soul.*”<sup>22</sup> In the station of *ittiḥād*, there is no distinction between the two selves: “*When the soul has been united with God, to speak of Soul (God) is to speak of this soul, and to speak of this soul means to speak of that Soul.*”<sup>23</sup>

The feeling of unity with all things, whether they are similar or opposite, material or spiritual, emotional or intellectual, is one of the several consequences of the unity of Being.

*“If there be any lover in the world, O Moslems, 'tis I.  
If there be any believer, infidel, or Christian hermit, 'tis I.  
The wine-dregs, the cup-bearer, the minstrel, the harp, and the music,  
The beloved, the candle, the drink, and the joy of the drunken — 'tis I.  
The two-and-seventy creeds and sects in the world  
Do not really exist: I swear by God that every creed and sect — 'tis I.  
Earth and air and water and fire, nay, body and soul too — 'tis I.  
Truth and falsehood, good and evil, ease and difficulty from first to last,  
Knowledge and learning and asceticism and piety and faith — 'tis I.  
The fire of Hell, be assured, with its flaming limbos,  
Yes, and Paradise and Eden and the Houris — 'tis I.  
This earth and heaven with all that they hold,  
Angels, Peris, Genies, and Mankind — 'tis I.”*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Kitāb Fīhi mā fīhi*. P. 39; and he says: “in the Hadith ‘show me the things as they are.’ Man is something great, all things are right in him, but the veils and darkness don't permit him to learn the science existent inside him,” — *ibid*. P. 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Rūmī*. *Al-Rubā‘iyāt*. *Rubā‘ī* 15. P. 24; he also says: “sometimes I say ‘I'm prince of my self / and at times I cry ‘I'm captive of myself’ ” — *ibid*. *Rubā‘ī* 16. P. 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Masnawī*. Vol. VI, verse 4040, quoted from *Turkmen E*. The essence of Rūmī's *Masnevi*. Istanbul, 1992. P. 345.

<sup>24</sup> Rūmī — quoted in *Nicholson R.A*. *The Mystics of Islam*. P. 161–162.

In the domain of ethics, all judgments about human acts lose their meaning in the state of unity of being: “... *for the persona vanished in the Real, offenses are not offenses, crimes are not crimes, because he is absorbed in the Real.*”<sup>25</sup>

For Rūmī, the same place (the Being) is not wide enough for two essences,<sup>26</sup> for two judgments. However, this unity in place and in self does not prevent Rūmī from recognizing the existence of diversity between the two essences: “*O God! O I! O You! My radiant pearl! We are diverse one from the other! I am your fate.*”

### 3. The “Unity of Being”: from existential signification to discursive one

It is well known that the way Rūmī has proceeded to demonstrate his “Unity of existence” is an analogy in all its forms: comparison, metaphors, allegories, anecdotes, parables, etc., which gave his unity a metaphoric and poetic character. Thus, to say that “Unity of Being” is metaphorical means that it is in fact a “discursive unity,” and not an existential one. It means also that this unity is achieved only by the use of discourse and metaphors, namely by using logos in its linguistic sense.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, if we consider that God has created the world by a Word — I mean, language, we can say that the world is nothing but a disclosure of the Being that inhabits language. Then, the affirmation that the unity of being in Rūmī is discursive has the same meaning as saying that it is existential. In this way, we will say that the realization of a discursive unity has the same intensity as the realization of an existential unity. Thus, the mirror or the astrolabe, where the Sufi sees the Real, is language. When the Sufi is interpreting the Koranic verse “wherever you go there is the face of God,” he sees God in all things. We think that this sight is a poetic and metaphorical seeing, and not a sensual or a rational one. In this poetic experience, only the viewer, the viewed and vision become the same thing: “*at the end of it ‘all I see is nothing but God’ or ‘Only God sees*

<sup>25</sup> Kitāb Fīhi mā fīhi. P. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ibid.* P. 58; elsewhere, he says: “A man knocks on the door of his sweetheart, a voice inside says: ‘who is knocking?’ He answers: ‘I am’; the voice tells him: this house does not hold you and me. And the door remains closed. The lover departs to the desert. After one year, he returns and knocks on the door one more time, the voice from inside asks him like it did the last time : ‘who is knocking?’ The lover answers: ‘this is you yourself’; and he opens the door to him” — Rūmī, quoted from *‘Abd al-Qādir Mahmūd*. *Al-falsafa al-ṣūfiya fī ‘l-islām*. Cairo, 1967. P. 535.

<sup>27</sup> Concerning the vanishing of the name of I in the name of the you, he says: “If you want your names, renounce your names, and cling to this name ... because who searches his name, wastes his name, and who hides his name in this name, wins the good reputation for eternity” — Mawā‘iz majālis al-sab‘a. P. 68.

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*God or before anything else I see only God.*”<sup>28</sup> This is the meaning intended by the Sufis when they claim they see God by God.

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Then, the “Unity of Being” is essentially a unity of seeing through the language. And not any language, but the poetical one. The “Unity of Being” becomes the “Unity of Discourse,” in the sense that the discourse contains the Existence.

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<sup>28</sup> *Henson St.* “How God becomes conscious of Himself?” // <http://www.stevenhenson.com/SHEN%20Talk%20May%202005.pdf>