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WAḤDAT AL-WUJŪD IN INDIA

A few years ago I published an article explaining why it is misleading to associate the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* with the name of Ibn ‘Arabī.¹ The habit of doing so has been deeply ingrained in the secondary literature since about the tenth/sixteenth century. Specialists now acknowledge that Ibn ‘Arabī never used the expression, but it is still largely taken for granted that he “believed in it,” especially in Muslim countries. I take the present opportunity to review some of the reasons why the uncritical association of the term with his name can only distort his legacy.

In itself, *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not designate any specific doctrine. Over history, it came to have a variety of meanings depending on who was using it.² Certainly, when it came to be controversial, Ibn ‘Arabī’s name was usually mentioned. Nonetheless, there is no doctrine that he or any of his early followers called *waḥdat al-wujūd*. What the term really tells us is that Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings mark Sufism’s massive entry into theoretical discussions of the meaning and reality of *wujūd*. Before him, such discussions had largely been the preserve of the philosophers and to some degree the *mutakallimūn*.

It is certainly true that Ibn ‘Arabī, along with everyone else, maintained that the Real *Wujūd*, namely God, is one. But why should this statement be singled

¹ “Rūmī and *Waḥdat al-wujūd*,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, edited by A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). P. 70–111; reprinted in Chittick, *Quest for the Lost Heart* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). P. 71–99. See also Chittick, “Waḥdat al-*Shuhūd*,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10 (2000). P. 37–39.

² I mention seven meanings that have commonly been ascribed to the term in “Rūmī and *Waḥdat al-wujūd*.” In modern Persian, the problem is complicated by the fact that *waḥdat-i wujūd* is often employed to translate the highly problematic term “pantheism” and is then freely ascribed to philosophers and mystics in every period and from various traditions. Typically, however, no attempt is made to justify this translation; in this usage, Ibn ‘Arabī appears as one of many exponents of the idea. A good example is provided by the excellent book of Qāsim Kākā’ī, comparing Ibn ‘Arabī with Meister Eckhart: *Waḥdat al-wujūd bi riwāyat-i Ibn-i ‘Arabī wa Māystir Ikhārt* (Tehran: Hirmis, 1381/2002). As part of the historical background, Kākā’ī ascribes belief in *waḥdat al-wujūd* to a whole series of Sufis, from Rābī’a down to ‘Aṭṭār, not to mention various Christian and Hindu figures.

out and called *waḥdat al-wujūd* in his case? Moreover, if we look at his actual writings and focus on his numerous discussions of the relationship between *waḥda* and *wujūd*, we will surely conclude that this is one issue among many and not necessarily the most important. Why then have we decided that *waḥdat al-wujūd* is uniquely significant?

Anyone who wants to claim that Ibn 'Arabī believed in *waḥdat al-wujūd* should first justify using this specific expression and then offer a definition of the expression that corresponds to his position. But what exactly is his position? To establish this, we cannot simply quote a passage or two from *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. Rather, we would need to analyze a broad range of passages addressing the issues of *waḥda*, *wujūd*, and their relationship drawn from all of his writings, especially *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*. This in itself would be a major undertaking, and no doubt scholars who actually look at the texts would not agree on the result. Trying to pin Ibn 'Arabī down on any given issue can be rather hopeless, given that he typically offers multiple ways of dealing with it. The relationship between *waḥda* and *wujūd* is a prime example.

If we were able to establish a clear statement of Ibn 'Arabī's "doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*," we might see that our statement has little to do with what was being debated by later Muslims, notably in the case of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī and his notion of *waḥdat al-shuhūd*.³ Certainly, the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* was widely employed as an emblem for a doctrine that was attributed to Ibn 'Arabī, but the reasons for this lie not in his writings *per se*, but in a lengthy historical process: first the appearance of the expression as a recognizable technical term, second its ascription to Ibn 'Arabī and others, and third the debates over its legitimacy.

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In order to understand what *waḥdat al-wujūd* means in the texts, we need to find instances of its usage, and this is not easy before it becomes controversial in India. It is now well known that the expression plays no role in Ibn 'Arabī's writings, nor is it found, except in one or two instances, in the writings of his immediate disciples (specifically Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī).⁴ It is not until Sa'īd al-Dīn Farghānī, an important student of Qūnawī, that *waḥdat al-wujūd* comes to be used in something like a technical meaning, though this specific meaning is hardly picked up in the later literature. No one ascribes *waḥdat al-wujūd* to Ibn

³ In fact, if we do want to characterize Ibn 'Arabī's perspective by a single label, it will be difficult to do so, especially if we want a label justified by his own writings. My own favored term is *taḥqīq*, "realization," not least because Qūnawī, in several places (such as his correspondence with Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and *al-Nuṣūṣ*) refers to his own school of thought and that of his master as *mashrab al-taḥqīq*. On the importance of *taḥqīq*, see the introduction to Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁴ It comes up in passing, in a discussion of the unity of the Real, in a way that shows it has no special significance for him. See Chittick, "Rūmī and *Waḥdat al-wujūd*."

‘Arabī himself before Ibn Taymiyya, who tells us that it is a heresy equivalent to *ittiḥād* (“unificationism”) and *ḥulūl* (“incarnationism”).⁵

It is worth noting that Ibn Taymiyya’s hostile reading of *waḥdat al-wujūd* gave it a specific meaning that is not suggested by its literal sense, nor by the manner in which Farghānī used the term. Whether or not *wujūd* is “one” depends on how we define it. There can be no question of God’s *wujūd* or of the fact that God is one. It follows that God’s *wujūd* is one. Thus, *waḥdat al-wujūd* can simply mean *waḥda wājib al-wujūd*, the “oneness of the Necessary Being,” and this is what I would presume it to mean if Ibn ‘Arabī used it. In this sense, it simply asserts the unity of God; in other words, it expresses *tawḥīd*, the first axiom of Islamic thought. In other words, the expression is completely unobjectionable.

Ibn Taymiyya criticized *waḥdat al-wujūd* because he understood it in a completely different meaning. In Arabic, *wujūd* is attributed not only to God, but also to the universe and everything it contains. If we attribute *wujūd* to God and simultaneously to the world, we need to distinguish between two different sorts of *wujūd*. Ibn Sīnā and other philosophers, Ibn ‘Arabī, and most of Ibn ‘Arabī’s followers do in fact make this distinction. *Wujūd* in its original and real sense belongs strictly to God. In its derivative, metaphorical, and unreal sense it belongs to everything other than God.

Although Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers distinguished between two sorts of *wujūd*, they also delighted in poetic and allusive language. They did not think that the strictly rational analyses of the philosophers and theologians were adequate to express the nature of things. In their view, language, which appears in the realm of unreal existence, cannot properly express Real Existence. Much like Zen masters, they held that in order to grasp the way things are, seekers need to come face to face with the paradoxes that fill the universe. These paradoxes can aid in the process of transcending the realm of conceptual thought and arriving at a vision of the contingent nature of everything other than God. It is these allusive and poetical passages in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings that tended to stir up the anger of theologians like Ibn Taymiyya.

Whatever the reasons for Ibn Taymiyya’s negative reaction to Ibn ‘Arabī and others who took similar positions, it was precisely his outrage that began the process of associating Ibn ‘Arabī’s name with *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Merely on the basis of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, or the writings of his disciples and followers—such as Ibn Sawdakīn, Qunawī, ‘Afīf al-Dīn Tilimsānī, Farghānī, Mu’ayyid al-Dīn Jandī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, and Dāwūd Qaysarī—there is no reason to suspect that the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* would be singled out as the characteristic doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school of thought. Once Ibn Taymiyya brought the term to the fore, it came to be interpreted in ways that were congenial with

⁵ Ibn Taymiyya may have picked up the term from Ibn Sab‘īn, who uses it a few times in his writings though not in a clear technical sense. See *ibid*.

Ibn 'Arabi's teachings, even though it also continued to be interpreted in ways that flatly contradicted what he was saying.

Why, however, did the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* become famous in India? I suspect that here we are indebted largely to the most influential proponent of Ibn 'Arabi's teachings in the eastern lands of Islam, namely 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), who often used the expression to designate Ibn 'Arabi's position.⁶ Jāmī was not only a first-rate scholar and the author of one of the most important Arabic commentaries on the *Fuṣūṣ*, but he also propagated Ibn 'Arabi's teachings in his widely read Persian prose and poetry. In India, where most works written on Sufi teachings were composed in Persian, Jāmī was one of the favorite sources of guidance for those who wanted to understand Ibn 'Arabi's ideas.⁷

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Many theoretical and practical reasons led Sirhindī to react against the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which, by his time, following in the line of Jāmī, was held up as the epitome of Ibn 'Arabi's perspective and the essence of the Sufi outlook. One theoretical reason in particular has not received the attention it deserves, so I would like to give a brief account of it here. It has to do with the two basic meanings of the word *wujūd* and the fact that one of them had come to dominate Sirhindī's understanding. If not for his one-sided reading of the word, he would have found it difficult to raise many of his objections.

The underlying issue in debates over *waḥdat al-wujūd* is how Islam's first principle—*tawḥīd*, or the assertion that there is no god but God—is to be understood. Sirhindī makes this explicit in the very language that he employs. He uses *waḥdat-i wujūd* as a synonym for *tawḥīd-i wujūdī* and *waḥdat-i shuhūd* as an equivalent for *tawḥīd-i shuhūdī*.

In Islamic philosophy, the specific form taken by discussion of *wujūd* goes back to the early adoption of the word to render the Greek idea of "being" or "existence." However, the literal sense of the word *wujūd* is "to find," as exem-

⁶ Jāmī frequently mentions *al-qā'ilūn bi-waḥdat al-wujūd*, "those who speak for the Oneness of Being," meaning Ibn 'Arabi and his followers. Moreover, it is Jāmī who tells us in *Nafahāt al-uns* (completed in 883/1484) that the exchange of letters between 'Alā' al-Dawla Simnānī and 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī in the early eighth/fourteenth century had to do with *waḥdat al-wujūd*. In fact, the letters offer no internal evidence to think that this is so—certainly the two authors do not mention the expression, neither in the letters, nor, so far as I have been able to find, in any of their other writings. Jāmī's statement has led modern scholars to treat the debate as having to do with *waḥdat al-wujūd*. See, for example, H. Landolt, "Der Briefwechsel zwischen Kāsānī und Simnānī über Waḥdat al-Wugūd," *Der Islam*, 50 (1973). P. 29–81.

⁷ In Persia itself, Jāmī was well known but far less influential, at least partly because he was a Sunni, a fact that made him less popular in Safavid times than he might have been. Nonetheless, Fayḍ Kāshānī—a disciple of Mullā Ṣadrā and a major *muhaddith* and *faqīh*—based a good deal of his *Kalimāt-i maktūna* on Jāmī's theoretical writings, including *Naqd al-muṣūṣ*, *Lawā'ih*, *Ashī'at al-lama'āt*, and *Sharḥ-i rubā'iyāt*.

plified by the frequent usage of the verb in the Koran (e.g., “And indeed We found most of them ungodly,” 7:102; “He finds God,” 24:39). It is this primary meaning that predominated in the early Sufi usage. The authors of the manuals—such as Qushayrī, Sarrāj, and Hujwērī—had the Koranic meaning in mind when they discussed *wujūd* along with *wajd* and *tawājud*. They considered *wujūd* a stage on the path to God in which the “finder” (*wājīd*) perceives only God. Notice also that “finder” was often listed among the most beautiful names of God, as in Ghazālī’s *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*.

Gradually, *wujūd* in the philosophical sense entered the Sufi vocabulary. We see many examples of this in the writings of Muḥammad and Aḥmad Ghazālī and their contemporaries Aḥmad Sam‘ānī, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī. It is not always clear, however, which sense of the term—“finding” or “existence”—a given author had in mind, and many authors used the term in both meanings simultaneously.

The dual meaning of *wujūd* is implicit in much of what Ibn ‘Arabī says about *wujūd*, and it was not altogether forgotten by the philosophers, even though they had established the term in its secondary meaning. A striking example is provided by Ibn ‘Arabī’s contemporary Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. 1210), who wrote his works mainly in Persian. He highlights the two meanings in order to explain that *wujūd* designates a reality that has a number of degrees. The lower degrees pertain merely to existence or being (Persian *būd*, *hasī*), whereas the higher degrees also embrace “finding” (Pers. *yāft*), a word that he takes as a synonym for awareness (*āgahī*), perception (*idrāk*, *daryāft*), and consciousness (*bā-khabarī*).

In the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī, the meaning of *wujūd* as “existence” often predominates over its meaning as “finding” and “perceiving,” but certainly not when he discusses it as a technical term among Sufis. Then, for example, he defines it as “finding the Real in ecstasy” (*wijdān al-ḥaqq fī’l-wajd*).⁸ *Wujūd* in this sense is often difficult to differentiate from *fanā*’ or “annihilation” of the self in God.

In the Sufi discussions of the word *wujūd*, the term *shuhūd* or “witnessing” frequently plays a significant role. It is often not clear that *shuhūd* means anything other than *wujūd*. For example, in listing various definitions of *wujūd* offered by Sufi teachers, Qushayrī provides an early example of the many poems that use the two words as rhymes: “My *wujūd* is that I absent myself from *wujūd* / with what appears to me through *shuhūd*.”⁹ In the context of Qushayrī’s several definitions of the word, it is obvious that *wujūd* here means “finding”: it designates the poet’s consciousness of himself and others. As for *shuhūd*, it means seeing God face to face. The poet means to say that true awareness is to be unaware of oneself and aware only of God. However, we can also read it with the

⁸ *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* in *Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī* (Hyderabad, 1948), 5; also *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911). Vol. II. P. 133 line 12; P. 538, line 1.

⁹ *Risāla* (Cairo, 1972). P. 249.

philosophical meaning of *wujūd* in mind. Then it means that no one achieves true awareness until the existence of the individual self has been annihilated through witnessing God. In either case, true *wujūd* is achieved in *shuhūd*, so the two are essentially identical.¹⁰

Early authors frequently discuss the word *kashf* or “unveiling” as a synonym for *shuhūd*, and Ibn 'Arabī often employs both *kashf* and *shuhūd* as synonyms for *wujūd*.¹¹ In his writings it is sometimes impossible to make any distinction between *wujūd* and *shuhūd*.

In short, when we look at the Sufi use of the term *wujūd* down to Ibn 'Arabī, we see that its primary meaning makes it a virtual synonym for *shuhūd*. Only if we stress *wujūd*'s philosophical sense can we understand it in another meaning. Even in the philosophical context, *wujūd* can mean awareness and finding along with existence, as shown by the writings of Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī.

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I mentioned earlier that we do not find the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* used as anything like a technical term among Ibn 'Arabī's disciples or early followers except in one instance. Sa'īd al-Dīn Farḡhānī employs it many times in both the Persian and the Arabic versions of his commentary on the *Tā'īyya* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ. He discusses it as the complement of *kathrat al-'ilm* or “the manyness of knowledge.” His purpose in contrasting the two expressions is to explain the divine origins of both unity and multiplicity. It was clear to everyone that unity is God's attribute, but it was not so obvious that all multiplicity also goes back to God's very self.

According to Farḡhānī, God's oneness lies in *wujūd*. To say that there is “no god but God” means that God alone has true, real, and necessary *wujūd*. The *wujūd* of everything else is derivative, unreal, and, to use the philosophical term, “possible” or “contingent” (*mumkin*). Moreover, the One, Necessary, Eternal God knows all things, and he knows them for all eternity. This means that the objects of God's knowledge are many for all eternity, even though these objects enter into existence only within the matrix of time. Hence, God is one in his *wujūd* and many in his knowledge. The oneness of his *wujūd* and the manyness of his knowledge are the two principles that give rise to the cosmos.¹² Ibn al-'Arabī has the same point in mind when he refers to God as “the One, the Many” (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*).

¹⁰ The similar meanings of *wujūd* and *shuhūd* in the early texts is confirmed by Junayd's definition of *mushāhada*, a word that is often used interchangeably with *shuhūd*: It is “finding the Real while losing yourself” (*wujūd al-ḥaqq ma' fuqḍānika*). *Risāla*. P. 279.

¹¹ See indexes of Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), and of idem, *Self-Disclosure of God*.

¹² *Mashāriḥ al-darārī* (Tehran, 1979). P. 344; *Muntahā'l-madārik* (Cairo, 1293/1876), Vol. I. P. 357; also edited by 'Āṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya), 2007. Vol. I. P. 478.

Having explained the origin of the universe in terms of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *kathrat al-‘ilm*, Farghānī sets out to explain how these two principles determine the constituents that make up God’s form (*ṣūra*), which is the human being. When God created Adam, he blew of his own spirit into Adam’s clay, and Adam came into existence composed of three basic levels—body, spirit (*rūḥ*), and soul (*nafs*), which is the intermediary between spirit and body. Because of the soul’s close association with the multiplicity of bodily clay, it manifests the manyness of knowledge. In contrast, the spirit, which derives from the one divine breath, manifests *waḥdat al-wujūd*.¹³

In this discussion, Farghānī is careful to point out that the word *wujūd* does not mean simply “existence.” It also means “the habitude (*malaka*) of *wajd*,” that is, the deeply rooted and permanent “finding” (*yāfi*) of one’s inner connection to the world of the spirit’s oneness.¹⁴

In the Arabic text that corresponds to the Persian passage that I just summarized, Farghānī offers what is perhaps the earliest significant example of the term *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, though clearly not as a technical term. He tells us that when the traveler finds his own spirit, he is attracted to the world of “the oneness of true witnessing” (*waḥdat al-shuhūd al-ḥaqīqī*).¹⁵

In continuing his discussion of the spirit’s oneness and the soul’s manyness, Farghānī tells us that when the traveler reaches the point at which his soul undergoes *fanā*³ or annihilation, the manyness of knowledge is eliminated from his awareness. Then he experiences “subsistence” (*baqā*) in the *shuhūd* of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. But, this subsistence is not yet the final stage of the path, because his spirit, which manifests *waḥdat al-wujūd*, has not yet reached annihilation. Once the spirit is annihilated, the corresponding subsistence allows the traveler to have a *shuhūd* of *kathrat al-‘ilm*. Having achieved subsistence in both *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *kathrat al-‘ilm*, the traveler reaches the stage of *jam*⁴, “gathering” or “togetherness,” a term that had long been discussed in the Sufi manuals as the correlative of *farq*, “separation” or “dispersion.”¹⁶

Two further stations of spiritual progress remain after the station of gathering. First comes *jam*⁴ *al-jam*⁴, “the gathering of gathering,” in which the two earlier stations—which correlate with *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *kathrat al-‘ilm*—are harmonized. This is the highest station achieved by the greatest of the prophets and saints. Finally comes the station of *aḥadiyyat al-jam*⁴, “the unity of gather-

¹³ *Mashāriq*. P. 359; *Muntahā* (1293). Vol. II. P. 17; (2007). Vol. II. P. 21.

¹⁴ *Mashāriq*. P. 364–365.

¹⁵ *Muntahā* (1293). Vol. II. P. 21; (2007). Vol. II. P. 27.

¹⁶ It is not without relevance that both Ibn ‘Arabī and Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī sometimes use “gathering” in close association with *wujūd*, as in the expression *ahl al-jam*⁴ *wa’l-wujūd* (“the folk of gathering and finding”), those who have achieved the highest stations on the path to God.

ing,” and this belongs exclusively to the prophet Muhammad. Here *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *kathrat al-'ilm* are seen to be identical.¹⁷

What is especially significant in Farghānī's use of the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* is that it has not yet reached the status of a technical term. The evidence for this is that Farghānī often uses it in the Persian version of the book and then fails to carry it over into the Arabic version of the same passage. If it were a technical term of significance, he surely would have preserved it in the later, thoroughly revised Arabic text.

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Sirhindī's reaction to *waḥdat al-wujūd* occurred in the context of its newly found fame and its general ascription to Ibn 'Arabī. He objected to it, he says, because a large number of his contemporaries were employing it as a pretext to avoid observing the rulings of the Shariah.¹⁸ It is clear that many of those who spoke of it in his time—like many of those who speak about it today—had no acquaintance with Ibn 'Arabī's writings. Instead, they had a vague and sentimental notion of mystical unity, and they used it to invoke Ibn 'Arabī's support for their own deviations from normative Islamic teachings and practices.

When Sirhindī explains the meaning of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he demonstrates little acquaintance with the writings of Ibn 'Arabī or his major followers. By insisting that it was an inadequate expression of the nature of things and that it needed to be supplanted by *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, he was taking for granted that it was the teaching of Ibn 'Arabī and that *wujūd* was being used in the philosophical sense. He seemed not to recognize that Ibn 'Arabī used it to mean “finding” and “witnessing” as well as “being” and “existence.” So, at least partly because Sirhindī was oblivious to the meaning of *wujūd* as finding and perceiving, he felt it necessary to insist that seeing God in all things goes back to the viewer. The unity achieved on the path to God, he claimed, is that of *shuhūd*, not that of *wujūd*. But, for Ibn 'Arabī and many of his followers these two words meant the same thing. So Sirhindī not only ascribes a doctrine to Ibn 'Arabī that he does not profess—*waḥdat al-wujūd*—but he also understands *wujūd* in a way that is not compatible with Ibn 'Arabī's use of the word.

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This brings me to my final point—how the significance of Sirhindī's objections to *waḥdat al-wujūd* has been perceived in the later Sufī tradition and in modern times. When I spent eight months in Indian libraries in 1988 investigating the influence of Ibn 'Arabī's school of thought with special regard to

¹⁷ *Mashāriq*. PP. 186; 395–396; *Muntahā* (1293). Vol. I. P. 226; Vol. II. P. 45; (2007). Vol. I. P. 301–302; Vol. II. P. 58–59.

¹⁸ E.g. *Maktūbāt* (Delhi, 1964). # 43.

Sirhindī's objections to *waḥdat al-wujūd*,¹⁹ I was surprised to find that, except among a small minority of authors connected with Sirhindī's own Naqshbandī Order, few Sufi writers took notice of his objections, and those who did frequently dismissed them as misguided and self-inflating. Even some of the later masters of Sirhindī's branch of the Naqshbandīs felt it necessary to distance themselves from his criticisms. The most famous example here is Shāh Walī Allāh, who explains in his well-known *Fayṣala waḥdat al-wujūd wa'l-shuhūd* that there is no essential difference between the position of Ibn 'Arabī and that of Sirhindī.

I do not want to suggest that Sirhindī was simply ignored, but his influence on Indian Sufism was certainly much less pervasive than one might suspect by looking at the secondary literature. Most Sufi scholars continued to consider Ibn 'Arabī "Shaykh-i Akbar," the greatest master, and, to the extent that they took notice of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a doctrine specific to him, they interpreted it in ways that respected his positions and those of his major followers. Here again, Jāmī was especially influential.

One of the more interesting examples of scholars who dismissed Sirhindī's criticisms of *waḥdat al-wujūd* was Khwāja Khurd, one of the two sons of Bāqī Billāh, Sirhindī's own Naqshbandī shaykh. In his *History of Sufism in India* Rizvi tells us that although Bāqī Billāh had entrusted the upbringing of Khwāja Khurd and his brother Khwāja Kalān to Sirhindī, the two distanced themselves from him and established their own Naqshbandī center in Delhi, where they continued to teach *waḥdat al-wujūd*.²⁰ In one of his treatises, the Arabic *Fawā'ih* (a title probably inspired by Jāmī's famous *Lawā'ih*), Khwāja Khurd points out that *wujūd* is essentially synonymous with *shuhūd*, so it is wrong to suggest that *waḥdat al-shuhūd* is a corrective to *waḥdat al-wujūd*. He writes, "A group has supposed that *tawḥīd* lies in *shuhūd* and not in *wujūd*, but they have not reached the reality of the station. Another group has verified that *wujūd* is the same as *shuhūd* and that the *shuhūd* opposed to *wujūd* is of no account."²¹

Another interesting example of the dismissal of Sirhindī's position comes from Shaykh 'Abd al-Jalīl of Ilāhābād, who also seems to have been a contemporary. In a treatise that records a visionary conversation with Ibn 'Arabī, he asks about a recent Sufi who says that "Oneness is in *shuhūd*, not in *wujūd*." Ibn 'Arabī replies that everything such critics have written he has already said in the *Futūḥāt*, because there he presents all legitimate points of view. The problem lies in the critics' inability to see beyond their own limitations. Whether this conversation records an actual vision or is simply a literary device, it suggests

¹⁹ For a summary of this research, see Chittick, "Notes on Ibn al-'Arabī's Influence in India," *Muslim World* 82 (1992). P. 218–241.

²⁰ S.A.A. Rizvi. *A History of Sufism in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978–1983). Vol. II. P. 249–250.

²¹ I copied the text by hand from two manuscripts: The Maulana Azad Library of Aligarh Muslim University, Subhanullah 297.7/34; Khudabakhsh Library (Patna) 3997.

quite rightly the vast range of legitimate positions that Ibn 'Arabī discusses in the *Futūḥāt* and the common perception that Sirhindī had nothing to add.

'Abd al-Jalīl has another treatise presenting a similar visionary conversation, but this time the two participants are the spirit and the soul. I have summarized the contents of this treatise elsewhere,²² but I did not mention its full relevance to the issues that are raised by Sirhindī's appeal to *waḥdat al-shuhūd*. The treatise offers a subtle analysis of the different perspectives represented by soul and spirit in a manner reminiscent of Farghānī's depiction of the soul's manyness and the spirit's oneness. The soul speaks as someone who has undergone the annihilation of the distinctions demanded by the manyness of knowledge and who has lost the ability to discern right from wrong. In contrast, the spirit speaks as someone who has moved on to a stage in which all the distinctions demanded by the manyness of knowledge are preserved.

In 'Abd al-Jalīl's account of the debate, the soul offers various misinterpretations of Ibn 'Arabī's position similar to those criticized by Sirhindī when he identified *waḥdat al-wujūd* with the Persian expression *hama ūst*, "All is He." In contrast, the spirit is depicted as seeing all things in their proper places, which is held up as the position of the prophets. Nonetheless, 'Abd al-Jalīl does not stop at differentiating between the vision of the oneness of *wujūd* and the manyness of knowledge. Eventually the debate leads to the integration of these two perspectives into various higher stages of complementary understanding—again, much like Farghānī.

Other Indian Sufi teachers were perfectly aware that Ibn 'Arabī's teachings were prone to misinterpretation. Nonetheless, few of them thought it necessary to critique them or question his spiritual stature. One of the most notable was Sirhindī's contemporary Shaykh Muḥibb Allāh, who, like 'Abd al-Jalīl, was from Ilāhābād. He has been called a second Ibn 'Arabī because of his mastery of Ibn 'Arabī's works, his own voluminous writings, and his fervent defense of Ibn 'Arabī's status as the Greatest Master. When he mentions him in his Persian writings, he often does so with the rhyming expression, "Ibn 'Arabī, *az wajd u ḥāl barī*," that is, "Ibn 'Arabī, free of ecstasy and states." By mentioning ecstasy and states, he is referring to the elation that can be induced by Sufi practices and hence to an emotional and experiential side of Sufism that is commonly criticized by both ulama and Sufi teachers. By calling Ibn 'Arabī free of such things, Shaykh Muḥibb Allāh wants to stress his mastery of the "stations" (*maqāmāt*) on the path to God. Indeed, Ibn 'Arabī often tells us that the great Sufis avoid states at all cost, because these are passing gifts that have no ultimate significance. On-

²² "On Sufi Psychology: A Debate between the Soul and the Spirit," *Consciousness and Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, edited by S.J. Ashtiyani, H. Matsubara, T. Iwami, and A. Matsumoto (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998). P. 341–366; reprinted in Chittick, *Quest for the Lost Heart*.

ly stations, which are permanent acquisitions of the soul and deep-rooted transformations of the very substance of its reality, have any real worth.

In saying that Ibn ‘Arabī was free of ecstasy and states, Shaykh Muḥibb Allāh obviously wanted to distance him from those who understood *waḥdat al-wujūd* as an emotional experience of the “mystical” type. Anyone familiar with the history of Sufism knows that Sufi practices have occasionally degenerated into the search for mystical experience for its own sake. Perhaps India, with its vast medley of religious possibilities, had more than the usual share of Sufi paths that were considered deviant by those who kept to the normative standards of the tradition.

* * *

Finally, let me say something about Sirhindī’s fame and the importance that has been given to *waḥdat al-shuhūd* in the modern literature. The underlying reason for all the attention seems to be the growing sense of Muslim nationalism in the subcontinent. This of course was stimulated by British rule, exacerbated by partition, and sustained and intensified by the increasingly secular outlook on human nature and society that has accompanied modernity. Islamic nationalism, first in India and then in Pakistan, needed founding fathers, and Sirhindī seemed to fill the bill. His proto-Islamism was seen as opposing the universalizing tendencies of Akbar’s legacy and understood as a prelude to the anti-Hindu policies of Awrangzīb and a corrective to the dangers inherent in Dārā Shukūh’s openness to the Hindu tradition. Sirhindī provided a convenient figurehead who could be read as an ideologue in the Muslim struggle for autonomy. At the same time, *waḥdat al-wujūd* could be depicted as representing all the forces threatening “Islamic identity” from both outside and inside. Those who “believed in *waḥdat al-wujūd*” could be accused of denigrating the Shariah and following non-Islamic teachings, leading to the decline of Islamic civilization.²³

In short, *waḥdat al-shuhūd* was held up as the proper Islamic perspective, and *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a corrupt vision of things. This was perfect for nationalistic purposes, but it played havoc with the historical record, not to mention the appreciation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s actual standpoints on issues of faith and practice. This reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s legacy then coincided nicely with the hostility of certain Orientalists. For example, when Louis Massignon—who was one of the most sympathetic Western scholars of Sufism—heard about *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, he was

²³ It is only this sort of understanding that could have led Fazlur Rahman, one of the Pakistani scholars who built up Sirhindī’s image, to tell us that *waḥdat al-wujūd* “gravely endangered” the position of the Shariah. He writes, “A thoroughly monistic system”—by which he means the *waḥdat al-wujūd* of Ibn ‘Arabī—“can not, by its very nature, take seriously the objective validity of moral standards.” This may well represent Sirhindī’s understanding of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, but in no way does it correlate with the understanding of more perceptive and less politically inclined Muslim thinkers, such as ‘Abd al-Jalīl and Muḥibb Allāh. See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 289ff.

able to take it as a confirmation of his own personal antipathy toward Ibn 'Arabī. He read it as supporting his own belief that Ibn 'Arabī had no insight into the experiential side of Sufism, a side that could be nicely designated by the word *shuhūd*. In Massignon's eyes, Ibn 'Arabī helped to submerge Sufism's spirituality into the Greek heritage and to transform true mysticism into sterile philosophy.

I can summarize my points as follows: the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* appeared rather late in the history of Sufism, a century after Ibn 'Arabī. It became controversial for reasons having little to do with Ibn 'Arabī's own teachings. Sirhindī criticized it not least because he stuck to one meaning of the word *wujūd* and ignored the other. Many of the Sufi scholars of India had a much better understanding of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings, so they did not take Sirhindī's criticisms seriously. Sirhindī does not owe his modern fame to the supposed importance of *waḥdat al-shuhūd* as a corrective to *waḥdat al-wujūd*, but rather to the need of Islamic nationalism in India for founding fathers who could be called upon to justify the break with a long tradition of co-existence.