A few years ago I published an article explaining why it is misleading to associate the expression \textit{waḥdat al-wujūd} with the name of Ibn ʿArabī.\footnote{“Rūmī and \textit{Waḥdat al-wujūd},” in \textit{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, \textit{Quest for the Lost Heart} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). P. 71–99. See also Chittick, “\textit{Waḥdat al-Shuhūd},” \textit{Encyclopaedia of Islam}, vol. 10 (2000). P. 37–39.} The habit of doing so has been deeply ingrained in the secondary literature since about the tenth/sixteenth century. Specialists now acknowledge that Ibn ʿArabī 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, \textit{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.\footnote{I mention seven meanings that have commonly been ascribed to the term in “Rūmī and \textit{Waḥdat al-wujūd}.” In modern Persian, the problem is complicated by the fact that \textit{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 ʿArabī appears as one of many exponents of the idea. A good example is provided by the excellent book of Qāsim Kākāʾī, comparing Ibn ʿArabī with Meister Eckhart: \textit{Waḥdat al-wujūd bi riwāyat-i Ibn-i ʿArabī wa Māystir Ikḥārt} (Tehran: Hirmis, 1381/2002). As part of the historical background, Kākāʾī ascribes belief in \textit{waḥdat al-wujūd} to a whole series of Sufis, from Rābiʿa down to ʿĀṭṭār, not to mention various Christian and Hindu figures.} Certainly, when it came to be controversial, Ibn ʿArabī’s name was usually mentioned. Nonetheless, there is no doctrine that he or any of his early followers called \textit{waḥdat al-wujūd}. What the term really tells us is that Ibn ʿArabī’s writings mark Sufism’s massive entry into theoretical discussions of the meaning and reality of \textit{wujūd}. Before him, such discussions had largely been the preserve of the philosophers and to some degree the \textit{mutakallimūn}.

It is certainly true that Ibn ʿArabī, along with everyone else, maintained that the Real \textit{Wujūd}, namely God, is one. But why should this statement be singled...
out and called \textit{wahdat al-wujūd} in his case? Moreover, if we look at his actual writings and focus on his numerous discussions of the relationship between \textit{wahda} and \textit{wujūd}, we will surely conclude that this is one issue among many and not necessarily the most important. Why then have we decided that \textit{wahdat al-wujūd} is uniquely significant?

Anyone who wants to claim that Ibn ʿArabī believed in \textit{wahdat 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 \textit{Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam}. Rather, we would need to analyze a broad range of passages addressing the issues of \textit{wahda}, \textit{wujūd}, and their relationship drawn from all of his writings, especially \textit{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 ʿArabī down on any given issue can be rather hopeless, given that he typically offers multiple ways of dealing with it. The relationship between \textit{wahda} and \textit{wujūd} is a prime example.

If we were able to establish a clear statement of Ibn ʿArabī’s “doctrine of \textit{wahdat 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 Ahmad Sirhindī and his notion of \textit{wahdat al-shuhūd}. Certainly, the expression \textit{wahdat al-wujūd} was widely employed as an emblem for a doctrine that was attributed to Ibn ʿArabī, but the reasons for this lie not in his writings \textit{per se}, but in a lengthy historical process: first the appearance of the expression as a recognizable technical term, second its ascription to Ibn ʿArabī and others, and third the debates over its legitimacy.

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In order to understand what \textit{wahdat 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 ʿArabī’s writings, nor is it found, except in one or two instances, in the writings of his immediate disciples (specifically Şadr al-Dīn Qūnāwī).\textsuperscript{4} It is not until Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī, an important student of Qūnāwī, that \textit{wahdat 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 \textit{wahdat al-wujūd} to Ibn

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item In fact, if we do want to characterize Ibn ʿArabī’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 \textit{taḥqīq}, “realization,” not least because Qūnāwī, in several places (such as his correspondence with Naṣīr al-Dīn ʿṬūsī and \textit{al-Nuṣūṣ}) refers to his own school of thought and that of his master as \textit{mashrab al-taḥqīq}. On the importance of \textit{taḥqīq}, see the introduction to Chittick, \textit{Self-Disclosure of God} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
\item 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 \textit{Wahdat al-wujūd}.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Waḥdat al-Wujūd in India

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

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

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5 Ibn Taymiyya may have picked up the term from Ibn Sabʾīn, who uses it a few times in his writings though not in a clear technical sense. See ibid.
Ibn ʿArabi’s teachings, even though it also continued to be interpreted in ways that flatly contradicted what he was saying.

Why, however, did the expression wahdat al-wujūd become famous in India? I suspect that here we are indebted largely to the most influential proponent of Ibn ʿArabi’s teachings in the eastern lands of Islam, namely ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), who often used the expression to designate Ibn ʿArabi’s position. Jāmī was not only a first-rate scholar and the author of one of the most important Arabic commentaries on the Fūṣūṣ, but he also propagated Ibn ʿArabi’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 ʿArabi’s ideas.

Many theoretical and practical reasons led Sirhindī to react against the expression wahdat al-wujūd, which, by his time, following in the line of Jāmī, was held up as the epitome of Ibn ʿArabi’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 wahdat 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 wahdat-i wujūd as a synonym for tawḥīd-i wujūdi and wahdat-i shuhūd as an equivalent for tawḥīd-i shuhūdi.

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-
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 Hujwiřī—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” (wājid) 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 Ahmad Ghazālī and their contemporaries Aḥmad Samʿānī, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūḍū, 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 ʿArabī 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 ʿArabī’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, hastī), 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 ʿArabī, 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).

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.” 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

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8 Ḥājī Shāh Ḥasan, Riṣāla (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.

Early authors frequently discuss the word kashf or “unveiling” as a synonym for shuhūd, and Ibn ʿArabī often employs both kashf and shuhūd as synonyms for wujūd. 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 ʿArabī, 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.

I mentioned earlier that we do not find the expression wahdat al-wujūd used as anything like a technical term among Ibn ʿArabī’s disciples or early followers except in one instance. Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī employs it many times in both the Persian and the Arabic versions of his commentary on the Tāʾiyya of Ibn al-Fārīḍ. He discusses it as the complement of kathrat al-ʿilm 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 Farghānī, 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.

Ibn al-ʿArabī has the same point in mind when he refers to God as “the One, the Many” (al-wāḥid al-kathīr).

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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 maʿ fuqdānika). Risāla. P. 279.


Having explained the origin of the universe in terms of waḥdat al-wujūd and kathrat al-ʿilm, 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 (naft), 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” (yāft) 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 fanāʾ or annihilation, the manyness of knowledge is eliminated from his awareness. Then he experiences “subsistence” (baqāʾ) 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-ʿilm. Having achieved subsistence in both waḥdat al-wujūd and kathrat al-ʿilm, the traveler reaches the stage of jamʿ, “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 jamʿ al-jamʿ, “the gathering of gathering,” in which the two earlier stations—which correlate with waḥdat al-wujūd and kathrat al-ʿilm—are harmonized. This is the highest station achieved by the greatest of the prophets and saints. Finally comes the station of aḥadiyyat al-jamʿ, “the unity of gather-


\(^{16}\) It is not without relevance that both Ibn ʿArabī and Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī sometimes use “gathering” in close association with wujūd, as in the expression ahl al-jamʿ 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 wahdat al-wujūd and kathrat al-ʿilm are seen to be identical.17

What is especially significant in Farghānī’s use of the expression wahdat 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.

Sirhindī’s reaction to wahdat al-wujūd occurred in the context of its newly found fame and its general ascription to Ibn ʿArabī. 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 ʿArabī’s writings. Instead, they had a vague and sentimental notion of mystical unity, and they used it to invoke Ibn ʿArabī’s support for their own deviations from normative Islamic teachings and practices.

When Sirhindī explains the meaning of wahdat al-wujūd, he demonstrates little acquaintance with the writings of Ibn ʿArabī 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 wahdat al-shuhūd, he was taking for granted that it was the teaching of Ibn ʿArabī and that wujūd was being used in the philosophical sense. He seemed not to recognize that Ibn ʿArabī 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 ʿArabī and many of his followers these two words meant the same thing. So Sirhindī not only ascribes a doctrine to Ibn ʿArabī that he does not profess—wahdat al-wujūd—but he also understands wujūd in a way that is not compatible with Ibn ʿArabī’s use of the word.

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

18 E.g. Maktūbāt (Delhi, 1964). # 43.
Sīrhindī’s objections to *waḥdat al-wujūd*, I was surprised to find that, except among a small minority of authors connected with Sīrhindī’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 Sīrhindī’s branch of the Naqshbandīs felt it necessary to distance themselves from his criticisms. The most famous example here is Shāh Wafī 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 ʿArabī and that of Sīrhindī.

I do not want to suggest that Sīrhindī 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 ʿArabī “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 Sīrhindī’s criticisms of *waḥdat al-wujūd* was Khwāja Khurd, one of the two sons of Bāqī Billaḥ, Sīrhindī’s own Naqshbandī shaykh. In his *History of Sufism in India* Rizvi tells us that although Bāqī Billaḥ had entrusted the upbringing of Khwāja Khurud and his brother Khwāja Kalān to Sīrhindī, the two distanced themselves from him and established their own Naqshbandī center in Delhi, where they continued to teach *waḥdat al-wujūd*. In one of his treatises, the Arabic *Fawāʾiḥ* (a title probably inspired by Jāmī’s famous *Lawāʾiḥ*), 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.”

Another interesting example of the dismissal of Sīrhindī’s position comes from Shaykh ʿAbd al-Jalīl of Ilāhābād, who also seems to have been a contemporary. In a treatise that records a visionary conversation with Ibn ʿArabī, he asks about a recent Sufi who says that “Oneness is in *shuhūd*, not in *wujūd*.” Ibn ʿArabī 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

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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 ʿArabī discusses in the Futūḥāt and the common perception that Sirhindī had nothing to add.

ʿAbd 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 ʿAbd al-Jalīl’s account of the debate, the soul offers various misinterpretations of Ibn ʿArabī’s position similar to those criticized by Sirhindī when he identified waḥdat al-wujūd with the Persian expression hama ʿūst, “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, ʿAbd 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 ʿArabī’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 ʿAbd al-Jalīl, was from Hāhābād. He has been called a second Ibn ʿArabī because of his mastery of Ibn ʿArabī’s works, his own voluminous writings, and his fervent defense of Ibn ʿArabī’s status as the Greatest Master. When he mentions him in his Persian writings, he often does so with the rhyming expression, “Ibn ʿArabī, az wajd u ḥāl barī,” that is, “Ibn ʿArabī, 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 ʿArabī free of such things, Shaykh Muḥibb Allāh wants to stress his mastery of the “stations” (maqāmāt) on the path to God. Indeed, Ibn ʿArabī often tells us that the great Sufis avoid states at all cost, because these are passing gifts that have no ultimate significance. On-

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 ʿArabī 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.

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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.

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 ʿArabī’s actual standpoints on issues of faith and practice. This reading of Ibn ʿArabī’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 ʿArabī—“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 ʿAbd 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 ʿArabī. He read it as supporting his own belief that Ibn ʿArabī 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 ʿArabī 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 ʿArabī. It became controversial for reasons having little to do with Ibn ʿArabī’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 ʿArabī’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.