

Sufi Path of Knowledge: the comparative analysis of the concepts of the Unity of Being (Wahdat al-Wujud) and the Unity of Witness (Wahdat ash-Shuhud)

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Abstract: This article discusses one of the major themes of philosophy of Sufism - the relationship between the Creator and the universe, the Sufi path of knowledge. In particular, it deals with a comparative analysis of Sufi terms such as the Unity of Being (Wahdat al-Wujud) and the Unity of Witness (Wahdat ash-Shuhud). Translation of “Maktubat”, a Sufi treatise, written by Imam Rabbani Ahmed Sirhindi and works of other foreign authors were used as the basis. Imam Rabbani Ahmed Sirhindi is a representative of the Sufi school of India. In general, the cornerstone of the theory and philosophy of Sufism is the doctrine of Being, the “Unity” of all things. Seeing many forms of Being, a Sufi sees the Unity, covering them, the “Absolute Unity” (al-Wujud al-Mutlaq); in everything they see the manifestation of the Unity, which connects it with other things, integrating them into an organic whole. All Being is one. According to followers of “Wahdat al-Wujud”, Being is not a mental predicate or an abstract idea. It is the most self-evident reality, as it is embodied in all things. At the same time, Being is the most hidden and unknown thing, because it covers all things, so we cannot find anything different from it, with the help of which we could limit or determine it. Being is comprehensible only through intuition. However, from the point of view of the followers of “Wahdat ash-Shuhud”, God is distinguishable from the world, that is, God and the world are totally different forms of Being. If, according to the theory of Wahdat al-Wujud, the truth of the world are divine names and attributes, but Wahdat ash-Shuhud states that the truth of the world are nonbeings in opposition to the names and attributes. According to Imam Rabbani Ahmed Sirhindi’s statements, these theories are not interchangeable, and besides that, they are opposite.

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According to philosophy and theology, Being and Essence is not the same thing; only in God, Being and Essence are one. Being and essence of created things are not identical. To exist, one or another essence must become art and part in being, that is, it must be created by the divine will. Being means God, and essence means the created world. Appealing to the Sufi traditions, it should be noted that God’s will is above the reason and defines it. Both Sufis and most theologians’ statements are based on the Qur’an and Hadiths. Ali-Imran (6), Muminun (12-15), Fatir (41), Vakya (58-72), Anfal (17), Abbas (24-32) Qur’anic Surahs describe the autonomy of Allah’s being and His independence of any essences. In M.Fahri’s saying [1, 278]: “One of the reasons for not considering Sufism as an Islamic phenomenon lies in the texts of Sufi works themselves, where the search for Truth goes beyond the physical worship”, worship is not denied, on the contrary, worship is seen as a stepping stone for further search of the Truth. In some Sufi writings, it is clearly stated: “The meaning of human’s existence is divine worship. The only way he could be involved in God’s being. Sooner or later, he will be bestowed a state of love by the act of the Almighty’s will. This state requires a person should

turn away from everything except the Almighty. The ways of knowing the Creator’s being go only through complete veneration of religious canons. Everything else can be assessed only as inebriation [2, 116]. That is, understanding of knowledge and the nature of the knowing mind is considered inseparable from the ontology of God. Knowledge is represented as a subject-object relationship.

The essence of Being was considered in the days of Prophet Muhammad too. Having been asked what there existed before the creation of the world, he replied: “Only Allah, and there was nothing besides Him.” Ibn Abbas cites the hadith of the Prophet: “O Allah! I Worship Thy might. Thou alone is worthy of worship. Only Thou exist. Thou are eternal. People and jinns are subjected only to Thy will” [3, 123]. Only God can be the only being (Wahdat al-Wujud), the rest being is multiforme, and therefore it appears and disappears. That is the land, heavens, mountains, seas, trees, people and other creatures are different in color, odor, size and weight.

However, according to some philosophical interpretations, there are no various ontological hierarchies of being. It can be supported by the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud (the Unity of Being),

which in the European philosophy of modern times was seen as pantheism.

In XIV century, the similar philosophical doctrine was proposed by Imam Ash'ari. According to his doctrine Wahdat al-Mavjoud, the concepts of Wujud and Mavjoud are identical. This approach assumes parallelism of the being of the Creator and being of the created world. According to it, good and evil, fear and courage, life and death, beauty and ugliness, form and formlessness is God. Such Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari's philosophical beliefs are not inherent in Sufi views. On the contrary, the only existent being is Allah, and the created world has no boundaries, it is limitless. This created a new idea of knowledge of Allah's being, for which in the Sufi tradition term Wahdat al-Wujud was used.

Among Sufis, there is controversy over the thinker who was the first to introduce the word in Sufis' terminological apparatus. In the commentaries to the book "Fusus al-Hikam" written by Ibn Farabi, Ahmed Avni Konuk gives the following interpretation:

1. First, there was not such a word in Ibn Arabi's terminological dictionary. Souad Hakim, who had studied his works, wrote that Ibn Arabi had not used the term in his writings, and it was probably invented by his disciples later. S.Hakim suggests that the word was used by Ibn Taymiyyah (1328).

2. Secondly, the truth is that Ibn Arabi was one of the first to substantiate the doctrine of Wahdat al-Wujud. In the works of thinkers who lived long before Ibn Arabi, such as Bayezid Bistami (874) Hallaj (922), Baghdadi (909), Al-Ghazali (1111), this term was not used. It was not used even in the works of the founders of major tariqas, such as Abdulkadir Jilani (1166), Ahmed Yasawi (1167), Ahmed Rifai (1182), the term was not used, although the meaning of this doctrine is conveyed [4, 47].

So, the term and its meaning are not similar. This difference makes it possible for the term to convey non-religious teachings. In the book "Sufism and tariqahs", S.Eraydyn cites the following differences between Wahdat al-Wujud and pantheism to justify Wahdat al-Wujud [5, 250]:

1. The concept of Wahdat al-Wujud is based on the Hadith, which emphasizes its divine essence. Pantheism essentially relies on reason, that is, knowledge of the Unity of Being is limited by the capabilities of sense knowledge.

2. There is no disagreement between those who comprehended Wahdat al-Wujud consciously. Pantheists have quite different opinions, because they have rationally proven knowledge. The power of the mind and the freedom of the human brain lead to fundamentally different opinions.

3. Those who comprehended Wahdat al-Wujud by their own experience perceive God as "absolutely unknowable Being".

4. Those who comprehended Wahdat al-Wujud honor God not as Being, but as the truth of Being. Pantheists honor Being as God.

5. According to the doctrine of Wahdat al-Wujud, each stage of true being has its completeness and one must follow it. That is why they fully obey religious laws. Pantheists do not commit themselves to any rules.

6. For reasonable understanding of Wahdat al-Wujud, it is necessary to master religious knowledge (the Quran, Hadith, prophetic knowledge, etc.). Being a believer and striving to reach the truth, one must take the lead of a perfect man and experience the sense of the way following his example. According to Pantheists, the mind is able to recognize the differences and diversity of teachings.

7. The concept of Wahdat al-Wujud is not transferred from human to humans. This is knowledge, which a man experiences by himself. Pantheism is theoretical knowledge, freely transferred from philosopher to philosopher.

As it can be seen, in the interpretation of Sufi texts, the main difficulty is created by researchers who misuse of some important terms, which are hardly applicable within the meaning given to them in Western philosophy. This problem is almost completely impossible to solve, because even in the presence of Sufi terminology dictionaries, it is necessary to comprehend the deeper meaning of Sufi states personally or to delve into the texts of Sufi works. This implies that terms such as "pantheism", "existential monism", etc. should be revised, since the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud does not imply substantial uniformity of God and a creature. In Ibn Arabi's teaching, perception of the transcendence of God in relation to the categories, including substance, continues; God is over all the attributes: they are not He or anything else. He manifests Himself only by names, not His essence. At the level of essence, He was not understandable and He is unknowable in experience.

In Sufi literature, One Being is described in terms of "self-manifestation" (tajalli), "self-determination" or "entification" or individualization (ta'ayyun), "descent" (tanazzul), etc. The infinite timeless process of God's manifestations generates innumerable gradations of existence. But these different gradations can be reduced to several major, universal levels. The most common schemes of such stages are two - three-membered and five-membered ones.

In the three-membered scheme, the ontological structuring of the universe is conducted through the

distinction between two phases of manifestation of the Absolute – the “Most Holy Effusion” (al-fayd al-aqdas) and the “Holy Effusion” (al-fayd al-muqaddas), which are also called “essential self-manifestation” (Tajalli-i-Zati) and “existential self-manifestation” (wujud tadjalli).”

The concept of “five stages” was subjected to various modifications in its development. In Sufi literature the following five-membered scheme of the manifestation of God’s Being became most common:

1) the stage of absolute unity (ahadiya) or divine essence (zat);

2) the stage of multiple Unity (vahidiya) or the divine names and attributes, the level of divinity (uluhiya); the world of “noumenal essence” as objects, the correlates of divine names are included in it;

3) the stage of divine act (al-af’al) or suzerainty (rububiya); this is the world of disembodied, formless intellects and souls, symbolizing universal ruling forces of the cosmos (mudabbirat kulliya);

4) the stage of images (misal) - the world of typical forms, in which epiphany becomes somewhat physical, and determination or individuation acquire the shape and outline, which are still not material, but only “ideal” (misaliya);

5) the stage of sensual and visible (Hadrat al-Hiss wa-shahada), the world of dominion (‘alam al-mulk), i.e. phenomenal reality.

These stages, or worlds, are often described with the following Arab terms: khakut, lakhut, djabarut, malakut, nasut. All these levels are combined in a “perfect man”, the doctrine about whom holds a prominent place in the philosophical constructs of Sufi thinkers.

Using in the book “Maktubat” the term of Tawhid-i Wujudi instead of Wahdat al-Wujud and Tawhid-i Shuhudi instead of Wahdat ash-Shuhud, Imam Rabbani Ahmed Sirhindi do not oppose them, on the contrary, he emphasizes their common root. According to Imam Rabbani, Wahdat al-Wujud has the following differences: “Allah is the only really existing being. The whole world around us is only the shadow of the divine names and relationships. Imaginary shadows cannot be realities; hence really existing being is only Allah. Allah’s attributes is the substance itself. Hence being is not the attributes of substance, it is the substance itself” [2, 118].

Initially, Imam Rabbani comprehended the doctrine of Wahdat al-Wujud, then reached the stage of Wahdat ash-Shuhud. He says about it in his book: “Since childhood, your obedient servant has been persuaded of ahl al-Tawhid (monotheism). That is, of Tawhid al-Wujud. This continued until the time when my Sheikh al-Maarif Muaidnir Razi put me in touch with Muhammad al-Baqi Billah. He taught your obedient servant Naqshbandi’ tariqa. In the short time

I have perfected Tawhid Wujudi. I learned a lot of knowledge of this stage. I also studied Ibn Arabi’s teaching in detail. I studied all the wisdom contained in his book “Fusus”. He said the following about emanations (tazhalliyat): “After that there is only Non-existence. It is referred only to those who have mastered Sufism.” I informed Sheikh Muhammed al-Baqi Billah about everything that was happening to me. All knowledge of Wahdat al-Wujud and the Unity has already seemed weak to me, and it is disappearing. Allah cannot be identical with anything. He is the Supreme Being. And this world is the visible world. Allah is unthinkable in terms of necessity. This world needs having its shape to its end. Eternity cannot be identical with the created world. The mind and religious laws are not identical either” [2, 119]. By the end of his life, Muhammad al-Baqi Billah, the Sheikh of Imam Rabbani began to estrange himself from the doctrine of Wahdat al-Wujud. He said to Imam Rabbani about it, “Alauddaula Simnani’s position by no means was Wahdat al-Wujud. In fact, he had perfect vision (Shuhud).” Under the influence of his teacher, Imam Rabbani revised his attitude towards Wahdat al-Wujud. Studying the views of contemporary Sufis, he concluded that most Sufis were followers of Wahdat al-Wujud and most of them, taking example by the others’ opinion, neglected religious laws. In his research, he referred to Kubravi Sheikh Alauddaul Simnani (736/1336) and Bahauddin Naqshbandi (791/1389), the founder of the Naqshbandiya.

Taking into consideration the above, we can conclude that Imam Rabbani, for various reasons, revised his vision of Being. The main point of his estrangement from supporters of Wahdat al-Wujud was as follows: according to the followers of Wahdat al-Wujud, the world is the shadow of Allah’s names and attributes, and the shadow is identical with the subject. According to Imam Rabbani, the world is the shadow. However, the shadow cannot be identical to the subject. In other words, the supporters of Wahdat al-Wujud classify the word by four characteristics. That is, the world is imagination, illusion, reflection of an image in the mirror or a shadow. Imam Rabbani agrees with the last two, but he disagrees the first two, because in this case the question “If the world and people are the product of the mind, then who shall be graced and punished in the Day of Judgment?” would have remained unanswered.

According to Imam Rabbani, Wahdat al-Wujud is the product of spiritual inebriation and sublime love. On the Sufi paths of knowledge such states are natural. But one must not be satisfied with it. Sufi path of knowledge have different forms. They are different, and Imam Rabbani singles two of them. The first is Wahdat al-Wujud, the second one is Wahdat ash-

Shuhud. Wahdat al-Wujud stage, a Sufi believes that Being is united and unique. There exists nothing but Allah. On Wahdat ash-Shuhud stage he “sees Allah’s being”, but he does not deny the presence of other essences. “Everything is not Allah, but everything is from Him” [2].

Based on the statement of Imam Rabbani, it is possible to specify the main differences between the concepts of Wahdat al-Wujud and Wahdat al-Shuhud:

1. Wahdat al- Wujud is based on the unity and identity of God and the world (the unity of the object and the shadow.) But the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud does not imply the substantial uniformity of God and a creature. However, Wahdat ash-Shuhud distinguishes Allah from the world, the subject from the shadow. That is, Allah and the world are totally different forms of being.

2. According to the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud, the truth of the world is divine names and attributes. But according to Wahdat ash-Shuhud, the truth of the world is non-existence that is opposed to the names and attributes. The shadows of names and attributes are reflected in the mirrors of non-existence and the world is created. For example, the shadow of the “Omnipotence” is reflected in the mirror of “powerlessness” that is opposite it and the power, belonging to the world, is created.

3. According to the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud, the true understanding of being is the understanding of its unity, oneness. According to the concept of Wahdat ash- Shuhud, the latter precedes Wahdat al-Wujud. But this is not the limit. The stage of worship, which distinguishes the Creator from the created, is the highest level.

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