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Waḥdat al-Shuhūd^(2,683 words)

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(A.), with WAḤDAT AL-WUDJŪD , two technical terms of Ṣūfī mysticism.

Waḥdat al-shuhūd “the oneness of witnessing” is a doctrine established by [Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī](#) [*q.v.*] in response to *waḥdat al-wudjūd* “the oneness of being” or “the unity of existence”, a term that by his day was identified with the position of Ibn al-‘Arabī [*q.v.*; see also TAṢAWWUF. 2.]. Most of the secondary literature has assumed that there really is a specific, recognised doctrine known as *waḥdat al-wudjūd* established by Ibn al-‘Arabī and that *waḥdat al-shuhūd* really does offer an alternative or a corrective to that doctrine. Given the history of the expression and the contexts in which it appeared, however, this assumption is difficult to sustain. The various attempts by scholars to explain *waḥdat al-wudjūd* by employing labels such as “pantheism” or “esoteric monism” succumb to the same assumption and fail to clarify what exactly was at issue in the texts. In fact, *waḥdat al-wudjūd* was more an emblem than a doctrine, and if Ibn al-‘Arabī was considered its founder, this simply indicates that his writings mark Ṣūfism’s massive entry into the theoretical discussions of *wudjūd* that before him had been the almost exclusive preserve of the philosophers and the *mutakallimūn* .

The underlying issue is how Islam’s first principle— *tawḥīd* [*q.v.*], the assertion that there is no god but God—is to be understood. Sirhindī makes this explicit by employing the terms *tawḥīd-i shuhūdī* and *tawḥīd-i wudjūdī* , interchangeably with *waḥdat-i shuhūd* and *waḥdat-i wudjūd* . The specific form taken by the discussion goes back to the early adoption of the term *wudjūd* to render the Greek idea of “being” or “existence” and is complicated by the literal sense of the verb, as exemplified by Qur’anic usage (e.g. “He finds God”, XXIV, 39). The difficulty arises the moment *wudjūd* is ascribed to God, given that it can also be ascribed to everything other than God. If God is *wudjūd*, then nothing else can be considered *wudjūd* in the same sense. It is precisely the status of the “others” that needs to be clarified, and this is a basic issue in *Kalām* , philosophy, and much of theoretical Ṣūfism.

The authors of the early Ṣūfī manuals, such as al-Ḳuṣḥayrī, al-Sarrādj, and Huḍjwīrī, had the Qur’anic meaning of the term *wudjūd* in mind when they discussed it along with *wadjd* and *tawādjūd* and considered it a stage on the path in which the “finder” (*wādjīd*) is aware only of God. Ibn al-‘Arabī follows this usage when he defines *wudjūd* as “finding the Real in ecstasy” (*wīdjān al-ḥaḳḳ fi ’l-wadjd*) (*Iṣṫilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* , in *Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī* , Ḥaydarābād 1948, 5; *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* , Cairo 1911, ii, 133.12, 538.1). *Wudjūd* in this sense is often difficult to differentiate from *fanā* ’ [*q.v.*]. In Anṣārī’s classic *Manāzil al-sā’irīn* , *wudjūd* is made the ninety-sixth of the one hundred stages of the path to God and defined as “achieving the reality of the thing” (*al-zafar bi-ḥaḳīkat al-shay’*). In these discussions, *shuhūd* frequently plays a role, and it is not always clear that “witnessing” God means anything other than “finding” God. In offering definitions of *wudjūd*, al-Ḳuṣḥayrī provides an early example of many verses that use the two terms as rhymes: “My ‘finding’ [*wudjūdī*] is that I absent myself from *al-wudjūd*/ with. what appears to me through *al-shuhūd*” (*Risāla* , Cairo 1972, 249). Here, the second *wudjūd* can mean both the awareness of self and the “existence” of the self as seen independent from God, while *shuhūd* clearly means witnessing God. This interpretation is confirmed by al-Djunayd’s definition of *mushāhada* , a term that is often used interchangeably with *shuhūd*: “Finding the Real along with losing you” (*wudjūd al-ḥaḳḳ ma ā fuḳdānika* ; *ibid.*, 279). These authors frequently

discuss the subtle differences between *shuhūd* and *kashf* “unveiling”, and Ibn al-‘Arabī can employ both these terms as synonyms for *wudjūd* (see indexes of Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge*, Albany 1989; idem, *The self-disclosure of God*, Albany 1997). In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s voluminous discussions of *wudjūd*, the philosophical/theological meaning usually, but not always, dominates over the Ṣūfī sense of experiential finding, without excluding it.

In tracing the history of the expression *waḥdat al-wudjūd*, we need to distinguish two basic usages. In the earliest instances, it means *waḥdat al-wudjūd al-ḥaḳḳ*, “the oneness of the real *wudjūd*”, and indicates the self-evident fact that God’s *wudjūd* is the one and only true *wudjūd*. Gradually, it comes to designate a distinctive perspective on the whole of reality, though interpretations of what this perspective implies can disagree sharply. The expression itself is not used by Ibn al-‘Arabī, even though his name eventually became associated with it. He should not be called its supporter unless it is explained in a way that corresponds with his teachings (cf. Chittick, *Imaginal worlds*, Albany 1992, ch. 1). However, these teachings are not easy to explain without distortion, since he speaks from diverse standpoints in keeping with various stations of knowledge achieved on the Ṣūfī path. Some, but not all, of these stations demand that God’s absolute *wudjūd* be seen as obliterating the relative *wudjūd* of all else. For example, he sometimes speaks of *ahl al-djām ‘wa ‘l-wudjūd* “the people of bringing together and finding”, whom he also calls the “people of One Entity” (*ahl ‘ayn wāḥida* ; *Futūḥāt* , iii, 447.18; cf. Chittick, *Self-disclosure* , 183-4). In the Ṣūfī lexicon, *djām* ‘is contrasted with *farḳ* “separation”, and it denotes seeing all things as brought together through God’s reality. The people of bringing together and finding have been so overcome by the vision of God that they see no separation between him and the things. In effect, they say “All is He” (*hama ūst*)—the ecstatic and poetical exclamation found as early as Anṣārī and said in the later debates to be the position of *waḥdat al-wudjūd*. But Ibn al-‘Arabī does not consider this sort of vision the highest stage on the path to God, because it amounts to seeing with one eye; with the other eye the true Ṣūfī must also see that all is not He.

If the term *waḥdat al-wudjūd* had any significance for Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own position, it would have been discussed in the writings of those of his disciples who wrote about theoretical issues, especially Ṣadr al-Dīn Kūnawī and ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī [q.v.]. Kūnawī does in fact use it on two occasions, but it arises naturally in the course of discussions of *waḥda* and *wudjūd*, and he attaches no special importance to it. In three works of al-Tilimsānī seen by the present writer, the closest he comes to it is *waḥdāniyyat al-wudjūd* (*Sharḥ al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā* , commentary on the name *al-samī’*). Perhaps more significantly, in *Sharḥ fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* , the earliest of the many commentaries written on this famous book, al-Tilimsānī says concerning a passage from the first chapter that Ibn al-‘Arabī is employing philosophical language to allude to *al-tawḥīd al-wudjūdī* . In the passage itself, Ibn al-‘Arabī has made the unremarkable statement that *wudjūd* brings together all “existent things” (*mawdūdāt*). In the one work of his so far printed, *Sharḥ manāzil al-sā’irīn* , al-Tilimsānī often uses the expression *ahl al-djām ‘wa ‘l-wudjūd*, defining it, in a phrase reminiscent of al-Djunayd’s definition of *mushāhada*, as “the manifestation [*zuhūr*] of the Real’s *wudjūd* through the annihilation [*fanā*] of the creature’s *wudjūd*” (ed. Tunis 1989, 462).

What might be considered the earliest instances in which the term *waḥdat al-wudjūd* designates a distinct position are found in the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s fellow-Murcian Ibn Sab’īn (d. 669/1270 [q.v.]), who was much more conversant with the philosophical tradition. In the most explicit of these, he writes that the ignorant and the common people are dominated by multiplicity, while “the elect *ūlamā*’ are dominated by the root [*aṣl*], which is *waḥdat al-wudjūd*” (*Rasā’il Ibn Sab’īn* , Cairo 1965, 194; see also 38, 189, 264, 266). He may be saying here that *waḥdat al-wudjūd* is a doctrinal position; more likely, he is simply asserting that the elect see all things in terms of *tawḥīd* , while the common people see dispersion and incoherence. What is new here is not the idea but the expression, and it is not surprising in the context, given the centrality of the term *wudjūd* to philosophy. That this specific expression had no special significance for him is suggested by the fact that he does not mention it in his major work, *Budd al-‘arīf* though he does insist that *wudjūd* is one (Beirut 1978, esp. 228, 303). Another early use of the term is found in two headings of one of the popularising Persian works of ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaḳā’ik* (written in 680/1281-2), where it designates a doctrine having four different formulations at the hands of two groups of Ṣūfīs, “the people of the fire” (*ahl-i nār*) and “the people of the light” (*ahl-i nūr* ; see H. Landolt, *La paradoxe de la “face de dieu” : ‘Azīz-e Nasafī (VII^e /XIII^e siècle) et le “monisme ésotérique” de l’Islam*, in *St. Ir.*, xxv [1996], 163-92). The folk of the fire see that the one, true *wudjūd* burns away all “others”, while the folk of the light see that the “others” are rays of *wudjūd*’s light; these two perspectives correlate with *fanā*’ and *baḳā*’ . Again, the expression is new but not the ideas.

Perhaps the most telling of the early uses of *waḥdat al-wudjūd* is by Kūnawī’s disciple Sa’īd al-Dīn Fargḥānī [q.v.], who employs it many times in both the Persian and Arabic versions of his commentary on Ibn al-Fāriḳ’s *al-Tā’iyya* . In this work, which is one of the most detailed and sophisticated discussions of the relevant theoretical issues in this period, *waḥdat al-wudjūd* is the complement of *kathrat al-‘ilm* and provides a philosophical basis for *fanā*’ and *baḳā*’ . God’s *wudjūd* ¶ is one through its necessity, while God’s knowledge is many through its objects; thus the oneness of God’s *wudjūd* and the many-ness of His knowledge are the two principles through which he gives existence to the cosmos (*Mashāriḳ al-darārī* , Tehran 1979, 344; *Muntahā ‘l-madārik* , Cairo 1293/1876, i, 357). On the side of creation, the soul (*nafs*) manifests the many-ness of knowledge, while the spirit (*rūḥ*) manifests the oneness of *wudjūd* (*Mashāriḳ* 359; *Muntahā* , ii, 17). Fargḥānī is careful to point out that *wudjūd* does not simply mean “existence”, but also the habitude (*malaka*) of *waḳd* , that is, finding (*yāft*) one’s inner connection to the world of the spirit’s oneness (*Mashāriḳ*, 364-5). In the Arabic passage that corresponds to this discussion, he offers what is perhaps the earliest example of the term *waḥdat al-shuhūd* he tells us that the traveller, finding

his own spirit, is attracted to “the world of the oneness of true witnessing” (*‘ālam waḥdat al-shuhūd al-ḥaḳīqī*; *Muntahā*, ii, 21). When the traveller reaches the advanced stages of the path, he undergoes annihilation of the soul, and this is accompanied by a subsistence in which he achieves the witnessing (*shuhūd*) of *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd*. This prepares him for the annihilation of the spirit, which yields a subsistence that is accompanied by the witnessing of *kathrat al-‘ilm*. Both modes of subsistence can be called *djam* (*Mashāriḳ*, 186; *Muntahā*, i, 226). At a still higher stage, he achieves *maḳām djam ‘al-djam*, in which the two earlier stations are harmonised. In the highest stage, *aḥadiyyat al-djam*, which is exclusive to Muḥammad, the two perspectives are seen to be the same (*Mashāriḳ*, 395-96; *Muntahā*, ii, 45). The fact that the earlier, Persian version of this work was based on Ḳunawī’s lectures suggests that Ḳunawī employed these terms in the same way that Fargḥānī does. Nonetheless, the term *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd* itself has not yet gained a special significance, because Fargḥānī does not always carry it over into the enlarged and thoroughly revised Arabic version of the work.

Despite these usages of the term *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd*, it is rarely found in the early texts, and apparently it does not become an issue until Ibn Taymiyya [q.v.], who mentions it in the titles of two treatises and attacks it violently, claiming that it asserts the identity of God and creation and that it is nothing but the well-known heresies *ḥulūl* (“incarnationism”) and *ittiḥād* (“unificationism”). The major commentators on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ*—Mu‘ayyid al-Dīn Dḡandī, ‘Abd al-Razzāk Kāshānī, and Dāwūd al-Ḳayṣarī—do not mention it, but, by the 9th/15th century, it was controversial. Dḡāmī in *Nafaḥāt al-uns* (completed in 883/1478) writes that the exchange of letters between ‘Alā’ al-Dawla Simnānī and Kāshānī in the early 8th/14th century had to do with *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd*, and this has led modern scholars to treat the debate in the same terms, even though the two authors do not mention *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd* in the letters, nor, it seems, in any of their other writings (see H. Landolt, *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Kāshānī und Simnānī über Waḥdat al-Wuḍjūd*, in *Isl*, 1 [1973], 29-81).

Sirhindī’s reaction to *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd* occurs in the context of its relatively new-found fame and its general ascription to Ibn al-‘Arabī. He objects to it, he says, because a large number of his contemporaries were employing it as a pretext to avoid observing the rulings of the *Shari‘a* (e.g. *Maktūbāt*, Dihlī 1964, no. 43). In explaining its meaning, he demonstrates little acquaintance with the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī or the major figures who discussed the issues. By insisting that a correct interpretation of *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd* demands that it mean *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, he was saying that the *‘l-wuḍjūd* of the world is not identical with the *wuḍjūd* of God in every sense—despite the current rhetoric of “All is He”—and that if certain genuine *Ṣūfis* had considered the *wuḍjūd* of God and the world to be the same, this goes back to their witnessing, not to the actual situation. At least partly because *wuḍjūd* in his understanding had none of the earlier connotations of finding, he felt it necessary to insist that seeing God in all things goes back to the viewer and does not offer a final explanation of the nature of reality. In any case, most *Ṣūfī* theoreticians in India ignored or dismissed his objections, while others felt it necessary to point out that he really did not disagree with Ibn al-‘Arabī (e.g. *Shāh Walī Allāh*, in his well-known *Fayṣala-yi waḥdat al-wuḍjūd wa ‘l-shuhūd*). It is only in the modern period that Sirhindī has been elevated to special rank by historians of Islamic India (see Y. Friedmann, *Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī. An outline of his thought and a study of his image in the eyes of posterity*, Montreal and London 1971).

Finally, we should keep in mind that the Muslim authors themselves had no interest in the history of ideas in the modern sense. For Sirhindī, *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd* was a living issue, and it was not important to know exactly how it had come upon the scene. He saw that his contemporaries ascribed the expression to Ibn al-‘Arabī and, like Ibn Taymiyya, he thought that they understood it to mean the absolute identity of God and creation. Thus although his interpretation of *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd* exhibits no understanding of the subtleties of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s position or of the various meanings that had been given to the term over the centuries, it does reflect the status of ongoing debates on *tawḥīd*, the most basic of theoretical issues in Islamic thought.

(W.C. Chittick)

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(in addition to references given in the article): For various meanings given to the term *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd* in the sources and the secondary literature, see Chittick, *Rūmī and Waḥdat al-wuḍjūd*, in *Poetry and mysticism in Islam*, Cambridge 1994, 70-111. On Sirhindī, see J.G.J. ter Haar, *Follower and heir of the Prophet: Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624) as mystic*, Leiden 1992. For a good summary of Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of *waḥdat al-wuḍjūd*, see M.U. Memon, *Ibn Taimīya’s struggle against popular religion*, The Hague 1976.

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