Waḥdat al-Shuhūd (2,683 words)
Chittick, W.C.

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

Waḥdat al-shuhūd “the oneness of witnessing” is a doctrine established by Ṣāḥib Aḥmad Sirhindī [q.v.] in response to waḥdat al-wuḍjūd “the oneness of being” or “the unity of existence”, a term that by his day was identified with the position of Ibn al-ʿArabī [q.v.; see also TAṢAWWF. 2.]. Most of the secondary literature has assumed that there really is a specific, recognised doctrine known as waḥdat al-wuḍjūd established by Ibn al-ʿArabī 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-wuḍjūd 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-wuḍjūd was more an emblem than a doctrine, and if Ibn al-ʿArabī was considered its founder, this simply indicates that his writings mark Ṣūfism’s massive entry into the theoretical discussions of wuḍjūd that before him had been the almost exclusive preserve of the philosophers and the mutakallimīn.

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 wuḍjūdī interchangeably with waḥdat-i shuhūd and waḥdat-i wuḍjūd. The specific form taken by the discussion goes back to the early adoption of the term wuḍjūd to render the Greek idea of “being” or “existence” and is complicated by the literal sense of the verb, as exemplified by Kurānic usage (e.g. “He finds God”, XXIV, 39). The difficulty arises the moment wuḍjūd is ascribed to God, given that it can also be ascribed to everything other than God. If God is wuḍjūd, then nothing else can be considered wuḍjūd 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 theological Ṣūfism.

The authors of the early Ṣūfī manuals, such as al-Ḳuṣayrī, al-Sarrādī, and Ḥudżwīrī, had the Kurānic meaning of the term wuḍjūd in mind when they discussed it along with wuḍjūd and taḥwīd and considered it a stage on the path in which the “finder” (wuḍjūdī) is aware only of God. Ibn al-ʿArabī follows this usage when he defines wuḍjūd as “finding the Real in ecstasy” (wuḍjūdī al-taḥkīf iʿl-wuḍjūd) (Iṣfīlahat al-sīhiyya, in Rasāʾil Ibn Arabī, Haydarābād 1948, 5; al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya, Cairo 1911, ii, 133.12, 538.1). Wuḍjūd in this sense is often difficult to differentiate from fānā [q.v.]. In Anṣārī’s classic Manāẓīl al-sāʾ irīn, wuḍjūd 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-ṣafar bi-taḥkīkat al-shayʿ). 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 wuḍjūd, al-Ḳuṣayrī provides an early example of many verses that use the two terms as rhymes: “My ‘finding’ [wuḍjūdī] is that I absent myself from al-wuḍjūd/with. what appears to me through al-shuhūd” (Risāla, Cairo 1972, 249). Here, the second wuḍjūd 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-Ǧūnaydī’s definition of mushhāhada, a term that is often used interchangeably with shuhūd: “Finding the Real along with losing you” (wuḍjūd al-ḥaqq maʿa fūkhānīka; ibid., 279). These authors frequently
discuss the subtle differences between shuhūd and kashf “unveiling”, and Ibn al-ʿArabi can employ both these terms as synonyms for wudūjūd (see indexes of Chittick, The Sufi path of knowledge, Albany 1989; idem, The self-disclosure of God, Albany 1997). In Ibn al-ʿArabi’s voluminous discussions of wudūjūd, the philosophical/theological meaning usually, but not always, dominates over the Şüfi sense of experiential finding, without excluding it.

In tracing the history of the expression wakdat al-wudūjūd, we need to distinguish two basic usages. In the earliest instances, it means wakdat al-wudūjūd al-ḥakṣ, “the oneness of the real wudūjūd”, and indicates the self-evident fact that God’s wudūjūd is the one and only true wudūjūd. 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-ʿArabi, even though his name eventually become 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 Şüfi path. Some, but not all, of these stations demand that God’s absolute wudūjūd be seen as obliterating the relative wudūjūd of all else. For example, sometimes speaks of ahl al-djam waʾl-wudūjūd “the people of bringing together and finding”, whom he also calls the “people of One Entity” (ahl ayn waḥīda; Futūḥat, iii, 447.18; cf. Chittick, Self-disclosure, 183-4). In the Şüfi lexicon, djam is contrasted with fark “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 ʿist)—the ecstatic and poetical exclamation found as early as Anşārī and said in the later debates to be the position of wakdat al-wudūjūd. But Ibn al-ʿArabi 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 1 other eye the true Şüfi must also see that all is not He.

If the term wakdat al-wudūjūd had any significance for Ibn al-ʿArabi’s own position, it would have been discussed in the writings of those of his disciples who wrote about theoretical issues, especially Şadr al-Din Kūnawi and ʿAfif al-Din al-Tilimsāndī [q.v.m.] Kūnawi does in fact use it on two occasions, but it arises naturally in the course of discussions of wakda and wudūjūd, and he attaches no special importance to it. In three works of al-Tilimsāndī seen by the present writer, the closest he comes to it is waḥḍāniyyat al-wudūjūd (Sharḥ al-asnāʾ al-ṣuḥnāʾ, commentary on the name al-samīʿ). Perhaps more significantly, in Sharḥfusṣūs al-hikam, the earliest of the many commentaries written on this famous book, al-Tilimsāndī says concerning a passage from the first chapter that Ibn al-ʿArabi is employing philosophical language to allude to al-tawḥīd al-wudūjūd. In the passage itself, Ibn al-ʿArabi has made the unremarkable statement that wudūjūd brings together all “existent things” (mawdūjūdāt). In the one work of his so far printed, Sharḥ manāzil al-sāʾ irīn, al-Tilimsāndī often uses the expression al-djam waʾl-wudūjūd, defining it, in a phrase reminiscent of al-Dīnaydī’s definition of mushāhada, as “the manifestation [zuhūr] of the Real’s wudūjūd through the annihilation [fanāʾ] of the creature’s wudūjūd” (ed. Tunis 1989, 462).

What might be considered the earliest instances in which the term wakdat al-wudūjūd designates a distinct position are found in the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s fellow-Murcian Ibn Sabīn (d. 669/1270 [q.v.m.]), 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 ʿulamāʾ are dominated by the root [asl], which is wakdat al-wudūjūd” (Rasāʾi̇l Ibn Sabīn, Cairo 1965, 194; see also 38, 189, 264, 266). He may be saying here that wakdat al-wudūjūd 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 wudūjūd 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-ʿarif though he does insist that wudūjūd 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 ʿAzīz al-Dīn Nasafi, Kashf al-ḥukā yak (written in 680/1281-2), where it designates a doctrine having four different formulations at the hands of two groups of Şūfīs, “the people of the fire” (ahl-i nār) and “the people of the light” (ahl-i ʿarīf; see H. Landolt, La paradoxe de la “face de dieu”: ʿAzīz-e Nasafi (VIIe/XIIIe siècle) et le “monisme émotique” de l’Islam, in St. Ir., xxv [1996], 163-92). The folk of the fire see that the one, true wudūjūd burns away all “others”, while the folk of the light see that the “others” are rays of wudūjūd’s light; these two perspectives correlate with fanāʾ and ʿalākā. Again, the expression is new but not the ideas.

Perhaps the most telling of the early uses of wakdat al-wudūjūd is by Kūnawi’s disciple Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī [q.v.m.], who employs it many times in both the Persian and Arabic versions of his commentary on Ibn al-Fārīḍ’s al-Tāʾīyya. In this work, which is one of the most detailed and sophisticated discussions of the relevant theoretical issues in this period, wakdat al-wudūjūd is the complement of katābāt al-ʿilm and provides a philosophical basis for fanāʾ and ʿalākā. God’s wudūjūd 1 is one through its necessity, while God’s knowledge is many through its objects; thus the oneness of God’s wudūjūd and the many-ness of His knowledge are the two principles through which he gives existence to the cosmos (Mashāʾir al-darāʾi, Tehran 1979, 344; Muntahā l-madārīk, Cairo 1293/1876, i, 357). On the side of creation, the soul (nafs) manifests the many-ness of knowledge, while the spirit (ruḥ) manifests the oneness of wudūjūd (Mashāʾirik 359; Muntahā, ii, 17). Farghānī is careful to point out that wudūjūd does not simply mean “existence”, but also the habitue (malaka) of wudūjūd, that is, finding (yāft) one’s inner connection to the world of the spirit’s oneness (Mashāʾirik, 364-5). In the Arabic passage that corresponds to this discussion, he offers what is perhaps the earliest example of the term wakdat 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-ṭākīkā; Muntahā, i, 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-wudūjūd. This prepares him for the annihilation of the spirit, which yields a subsistence that is accompanied by the witnessing of kathrat al-īlm. Both modes of subsistence can be called djam (Mashārik, 186; Muntahā, i, 226). At a still higher stage, he achieves maḥkām 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 (Mashārik, 395-96; Muntahā, ii, 45). The fact that the earlier, Persian version of this work was based on Ḳūnawi’s lectures suggests that Ḳūnawi employed these terms in the same way that Farghānī does. Nonetheless, the term waḥdat al-wudūjūd itself has not yet gained a special significance, because Farghānī 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-wudūjūd, 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-ʿArabī’s Fuṣūs—Muʿayyid al-Dīn Djiangī, Abd al-Razzaḵ Kāshānī, and Dāwiḏ al-Kaṣṣārī—do not mention it, but, by the 9th/15th century, it was controversial. Djāmī 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-wudūjūd, and this has led modern scholars to treat the debate in the same terms, even though the two authors do not mention waḥdat al-wudūjūd in the letters, nor, it seems, in any of their other writings (see H. Landolt, Der Briefwechsel zwischen Kāshānī und Simnānī über Waḥdat al-Wuǧūd, in Isl., 1 [1973], 29-81).

Sirhindī’s reaction to waḥdat al-wudūjūd occurs in the context of its relatively new-found fame and its general ascription to Ibn al-ʿArabī. 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 Šarīʿa (e.g. Maktābāt, Dihlī 1964, no. 43). In explaining its meaning, he demonstrates little acquaintance with the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī or the major figures who discussed the issues. By insisting that a correct interpretation of waḥdat al-wudūjūd demands that it mean waḥdat al-shuhūd, he was saying that the ʿuḍūjūd of the world is not identical with the wudūjūd of God in every sense—despite the current rhetoric of “All is He”—and that if certain genuine Šūfis had considered the wudūjūd of God and the world to be the same, this goes back to their witnessing, not to the actual situation. At least partly because wudūjūd 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 Šūfī 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-ʿArabī (e.g. Shāh Wali Allāh, in his well-known Fayṣāla-yi waḥdat al-wudūjūd wa ʿl-shuḥūd). It is only in the modern period that Sirhindī has been elevated to special rank by historians of Islamic India (see Y. Friedmann, Ṣayḥ Kh Ahmad Širhindī. 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-wudūjūd 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-ʿArabī 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-wudūjūd exhibits no understanding of the subtleties of Ibn al-ʿArabī’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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First appeared online: 2012

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