

# Sufism *contra* Shariah? Shāh Walī Allāh's Metaphysics of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*

Muhammad U. Faruque

University of California, Berkeley (USA)

*mufaruque@berkeley.edu*

## Abstract

This study analyzes the contested relationship between Sufism and the Shariah and Shāh Walī Allāh's problematic of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Some Sufis describe Sufism or *taṣawwuf* as the inner reality of the Shariah while others see it as the inward dimension of Islam. Drawing on a variety of classical sources, Walī Allāh stresses that accepting *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not mean one is being less faithful to the tenets of the Shariah, as it safeguards God's transcendence vis-à-vis the world. Walī Allāh belabors to clarify various misconceptions that bedevil it. His views on *waḥdat al-wujūd* are largely in alignment with that of the school of Ibn 'Arabī, although he seems to add new dimensions to it at times. He also asserts that a Sufi sage's (*ḥakīm*) understanding of the term differs from that of the uninitiate. In addition, he affirms that *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not negate the multiplicity of the cosmos, even though *wujūd* is one.

## Keywords

*al-wujūd al-munbasit* – cosmos – multiplicity – Shāh Walī Allāh – Shariah – Sufism – *waḥdat al-wujūd* – *wujūd*

---

\* I would like to thank Professors Munis Faruqui and Asad Q. Ahmed for their insightful comments on the earlier drafts of this article, and also the anonymous reviewers for providing valuable suggestions. I am also grateful to Professor Gholamreza Aavani, Shankar Nair, and Amin Ehteshami for their support and counsel.

## I Introduction

Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (1703–62) is perhaps the greatest Muslim scholar that India has produced. He is one of those top-ranking personalities in Islam such as Avicenna (d. 1037), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1274), and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) whose ideas had influenced generations of thinkers well beyond their own day.<sup>1</sup> As a prolific writer, he composed over fifty works (including five collections of letters and epistles) ranging from Sufi metaphysics, philosophical theology, *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, mystical psychology to biographical treatises, in which he sought to create a synthetic paradigm for the purposes of reviving the Islamic tradition of his day.<sup>2</sup> The intellectual contribution of this major thinker is relatively unknown in the West,<sup>3</sup> although in the Subcontinent itself, there is no lacuna of books written on his thought in Urdū, Hindī, Bengali, and other Indian languages.<sup>4</sup> He is long held as an important precursor to Islamic revivalist and reformist movements such as Jamaat-e Islami and The Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>5</sup>

- 1 For his autobiography, see Shāh Walī Allāh, *Arḥas al-‘arīfīn (al-juz‘ al-laṭīfī tarjamat al-‘abd al-ḍa‘īf)*, Urdu translation of the Persian original by Sayyid Muḥammad Fārūqī al-Qādirī (Lahore: Al-Ma‘ārif, 1974). On his life, see ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Nadwī, *Nuzhat al-khawāṭir* (Ḥaydarābād (Deccan): 1376/1957), vi, 398–415; Raḥmān ‘Alī, *Tadhkira-i ‘ulamā’-i Hind* (Lucknow: n.p., 1899), 250; Sayyid Athar ‘Abbas Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh and His Times* (Canberra: Ma‘ārifat, 1980), 203–28; Ghulam Hussain Jalbani, *Life of Shah Waliyullah* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1978); J. M. S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlavi*, (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 1–14; Marcia K. Hermansen, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-bāligha*, trans. *The Conclusive Argument from God* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), xxiii–xxxvi; and, idem, *Shāh Walī Allāh’s Treatises on Islamic Law* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), xxii–xxxiii.
- 2 On Walī Allāh’s revivalist project, see e.g., Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), *passim*; and Abulhasan Ali Nadvi, *Saviours of Islamic Spirit*, vol. IV, *Hakim-ul-islam Shah Waliullah* (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research & Publications, 2004), 91–114.
- 3 Apart from Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh and His Times*, and Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, there is no other “scholarly” monograph devoted to Walī Allāh in English. This is rather surprising in that Walī Allāh’s oeuvre contains no dearth of ideas, especially in areas of Sufi metaphysics and philosophical theology.
- 4 The following book edited by Chaghatai provides an overview of Walī Allāh’s reception in some of these languages: M. Ikrām Chaghatai (ed.), *Shah Waliullah (1703–1762): His Religious and Political Thought* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005), *passim*.
- 5 For more information, see Sayyid Abū ‘l-A‘lā Mawḍūdī (founder of Jamaat-e Islami), *Tajdīd wa ihyā-yi dīn* (Lahore: Islamic Publisher Ltd., 1999), 89ff.; and, “Aziz Ahmad, “Political and Religious Ideas of Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi,” *The Muslim World* 52 (January 1962): 22–30.

Given Walī Allāh's political influence, it is unsurprising that hundreds of books would be written on his social and political ideas, especially since colonial experience left Indian Muslims with an "identity crisis."<sup>6</sup> Thus many Muslim historians often view the past in terms of contemporary social and political concerns, and it so happens that the force of "pick and choose" comes into play, i.e., certain ideas of the thinker in question (e.g. Walī Allāh in this case) are blown out of proportion while others are systematically ignored. As one gets around all the assumptions that "mystify" the actual history, and investigates the texts of the author in question, one encounters a very different picture altogether. Such is more or less the case with Walī Allāh, the bulk of whose oeuvre is devoted to explicating abstruse metaphysical doctrines such as *waḥdat al-wujūd*,<sup>7</sup> the theory of *tajalli/zuhūr* (manifestation),<sup>8</sup> the five divine presences (*al-ḥaḍarāt al-ilāhiyyat al-khams*),<sup>9</sup> and so forth. And, even in works such as *Ḥujjat-Allāh al-bāligha* that deal primarily with social/juridical issues, one often finds the metaphysical perspective penetrating into the complexities of communal life.<sup>10</sup>

6 On the historiography of Islam in India and the problem of "identity," see Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 18–22; and, William C. Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 153–4.

7 See, *inter alia*, Walī Allāh, *al-Taḥmīmāt al-ilāhiyya* (Hyderabad, Sindh: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, 1967), 2:135, 143, 246, 249, 261–71; idem, *al-Budūr al-bāziḡha* (Hyderabad. Sindh: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, 1970), 4–9; idem, *al-Khayr al-kathīr* (Bijnor: Madina Press, 1933), 36–9; idem, *Lamaḡāt* (Sindh: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, n.d.), 1–9; and, idem, *Ṣaṭa'āt* (Sindh: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, 1964), 2–14.

8 Walī Allāh, *Taḥmīmāt*, 1:191, 212; 2:159, 257; idem, *Lamaḡāt*, 60–70.

9 Walī Allāh, *Hama'at* (Sindh: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, 1964), 22–3; and, William Chittick, "The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qunawi to al-Qaysari," *The Muslim World* 72 (1982): 107–28.

10 Walī Allāh, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* (vol. 1) / Hermansen (trans.), *The Conclusive Argument from God*, 37–48, 53–6, 287–98. The Arabic version is the following: *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, (Arabic) ed. by 'Uthmān Jum'a al-Dumayriyya (Riyadh: Maktaba al-Kawthar, 1999). Although the *Ḥujjat* primarily is a socio-juridical work, it contains discussions of *'alām al-mithāl* (the imaginal world), emanation, spirit (*rūh*), and the nature of death that deserve scholarly investigation. It is significant that in this book, which is meant to engage a broad spectrum of intellectuals, Walī Allāh goes on to show that some of these Sufi ideas such the notion of "the imaginal world" can be traced back to the *aḡādīth* of the Prophet. On Walī Allāh's notion of "the imaginal world, see the excellent study by Fuad Naeem, "The Imaginal World ('Alam al-Mithal) in the Philosophy of Shah Wali Allah al-Dihalwi," *Islamic Studies* 44.3 (Autumn 2005): 363–90. On thematic study of

It is thus surprising that very little attention has been paid to the more sophisticated mystico-philosophical ideas of Walī Allāh.<sup>11</sup> One potential reason for this neglect could be the daunting stretch of Walī Allāh's thought, which encompasses twelve hundred years of Islamic learning (in both Arabic and Persian) from philosophy to *‘ilm al-ḥadīth* (the study of the prophetic tradition). This study thus seeks to begin providing a remedy for this gap by investigating the most controversial of Sufi doctrines, namely "*waḥdat al-wujūd*," as dealt with in Walī Allāh's metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> It also provides an in-depth analysis of philosophical problems associated with *waḥdat al-wujūd* such as the difference between Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and the Breadth of the All-Compassionate (*al-naḥas al-raḥmān*)<sup>13</sup> and the paradox of multiplicity, which have hitherto been neglected. There is perhaps no other idea or theory, that aroused as much contention as did *waḥdat al-wujūd* in Islamic intellectual history. *Waḥdat al-wujūd* is a "meta" doctrine much like the "deep laws of nature" in science in that its implications permeate into all other "local" doctrines, e.g., one's commitment to *waḥdat al-wujūd* will have implications for one's theory of self (*nafs*).<sup>14</sup> It is also significant to note that

---

Walī Allāh's mystical psychology, see M. K. Hermansen, "Shah Walī Allāh's Theory of the Subtle Spiritual Centers (Laṭā'if): A Sufi Theory of Personhood and Self-Transformation," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (January 1988):1–25.

- 11 Although Baljon's book *Religion and Thought* pays some attention to Walī Allāh's mystical thought, it is marred by inaccuracies in translation and terminologies. From another point of view, this is not very surprising, since modern subcontinental scholarship—not least because of British education—has little interest in ideas that transcend political concerns.
- 12 Some previous studies of *waḥdat al-wujūd* are those of Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh and His Times*, 265–7, and Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, 56–63. The former is not primarily a study of Walī Allāh, although it is a voluminous tome. The bulk of the material discussed in it provides the reader with an understanding of the social and political backgrounds underlying the thought of Walī Allāh. As such, the discussion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in Rizvi's study is confined to a few pages and does not tease out the philosophical significance of the doctrine. Baljon's study does better justice in this regard. However, both of these studies limit the discussion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* to Walī Allāh's *Tafhīmāt* (with only one or two minor references to his other works) and seem to be content in showing how it relates to Sirhindī's rival doctrine of *waḥdat al-shuhūd*. In contrast, the present study situates Walī Allāh's doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* within the context of the School of Ibn 'Arabī, and sheds light on Walī Allāh's response to influential figures such as 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492).
- 13 For an explanation of these terms, see section IV below.
- 14 The deep laws of nature include, *inter alia*, Newton's law of universal gravitation and laws of motion, and all the laws of Thermodynamics. The point is, just as the laws of nature

*waḥdat al-wujūd* continues to pose challenges to influential Muslim intellectuals of our time, as can be attested in the books authored by the present Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and the late Āyātullā Khumaynī on this issue.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding, the intricacies of “*waḥdat al-wujūd*” have hardly been brought out in a clear manner in the scholarly circles. This is so because most of the studies use the “expression” without actually clarifying “whose” version of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is being discussed, although most will conjecture Ibn ‘Arabī to be its originator.<sup>16</sup> The problematic of *waḥdat al-wujūd* will be discussed in detail in section IV through the translation of key passages from Walī Allāh’s oeuvre, including its “origin,” “meaning,” “historical development,” and “hermeneutic.” A crucial issue in the interpretation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* seems to

---

affect all the constituent phenomena of nature, a meta-doctrine such as *waḥdat al-wujūd* requires one to have, e.g., a theory of the self that needs to be consistent with its basic framework. That is to say, the notion of the self in this framework has to be non-dualistic; otherwise it will violate the cosmological principle of *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

- 15 See the two books written by Khumaynī on *waḥdat al-wujūd* and its interpretation, Āyātullā Khumaynī, *Misbah al-hidāya ilā al-khilāfa wa-l-wilāya: ta’lifāt Āyātullā al-Khumaynī* (Lamp [showing] the right way to vicegerency and sainthood: A writing by Ayatollah Khomeini), ed. al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Fihri (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Wafa’, 1983); and idem, *Ta’liqāt ‘alā sharḥ “Fusūs al-ḥikam” wa “Miṣbāḥ al-uns” li-āyātullā al-Khumaynī, Muḥammad Ḥasan Rahimiyan* (ed.), (Tehran: Pasdar-e Islam, 1985). On the other hand, the present Grand Imam of Al-Azhar has translated two seminal books on Ibn ‘Arabī from French into Arabic, in addition to composing another work on *waḥdat al-wujūd*: Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, *Mu’allaqāt Ibn ‘Arabī tārikhihā wa taṣnīfihā* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣābūnī / Dār al-Hidāya, 1992) [*Histoire et classification de l’oeuvre d’Ibn Arabi: étude critique*]; idem (trans.), *al-wilāya wa-l-nubuwwa ‘inda al-shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Arabī* (Marrakesh: Dār al-Qiba al-Zarqā, 1998) [*Le Sceau des Saints, Prophétie et Sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn ‘Arabī*]; *Dirāsāt al-faransīyyīn ‘an Ibn ‘Arabī* (Cairo: Dār al-‘Ulūm Qāhira, 1996). On his background, see <http://themuslim500.com/profile/sheikh-al-azhar-ahmad-altayyeb>. In addition, the Leader of Jamaat-e Islami Hind, Abdul Haq Ansari, who passed away recently wrote widely on *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism and Shariah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi’s Effort to Reform Sufism*, (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1985), 101–39; and idem, “Shāh Walī Allāh Attempts to Revise Waḥdat al-Wujūd,” *Arabica* 1988: 197–213. On his life, see <http://jamaateislamihind.org/eng/prof-m-abdul-haq-ansari-is-no-more/>. It is to be noted that Ansari’s article looks at Walī Allāh’s view on *waḥdat al-wujūd* without placing it in the historical context in which it had developed. Moreover, the author shows clear biases against *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which compromises his analyses of the concept at times.
- 16 See e.g. Muzaffar Alam, “The Debate within: a Sufi Critique of Religious Law, *Tasawwuf* and Politics in Mughal India,” *South Asian History and Culture* 2.2 (2011): 138–59; and Ansari, *Sufism and Shariah*.

be Sufism's (alleged) divergence from the Shariah.<sup>17</sup> It is often assumed in the context of South Asian study of Sufism that the proponents of *waḥdat al-wujūd* are expected to display an antinomian attitude, caring little for the normative Islam.<sup>18</sup> These studies often harbor the presumption that Sufism is inherently antagonistic to the legal tradition of Islam (see Section III). What is at issue here is that many scholars of Sufism seem to struggle with the possibility that a Sufi writer or more specifically, someone having sympathy for the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* might view everything he does as being perfectly compatible with the Shariah; rather, they seem to think that these Sufis who insist on strict adherence to the Shariah are somehow being "inconsistent" with or unfaithful to their own beliefs.<sup>19</sup> This "dilemma" arises out of the concern that Sufism or *waḥdat al-wujūd* are somehow incommensurable with the teachings of the Shariah, which is a "false statement of the problem" since there never was such a problem to begin with.<sup>20</sup> The present author reckons that such a misunderstanding occurs, *inter alia*, due to insufficient attention that is given to the complexities of these terms. Thus, as a preliminary step, this study will define Sufism and the Shariah as follows:<sup>21</sup>

- i. **Sufism:** the mystical tradition of Islam that is as diverse as Islam itself, and that embraces a host of doctrines and practices that are sometimes debated by the Sufis themselves. Thus, there are serious, influential Sufis who embrace a "version" of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which they think is compatible with the general understanding of the Shariah.

---

17 This issue will be treated more fully in section II below. The word "Shariah" has not been transliterated, since it has now entered the English language.

18 See for instance, Simon Digby, "Abd al-Quddus Gangohi (1456–1537 A. D.): The Personality and Attitudes of a Medieval Indian Sufi," *Medieval India: A Miscellany* 3 (Aligarh, 1975): 1–66.

19 Alam, "The Debate within: a Sufi Critique of Religious Law," 144ff.

20 For a comprehensive analysis of this issue, see section III below.

21 Although the term Shariah is very well-known, it is somewhat disappointing to see that even in the scholarly circles it is often translated/defined as "Islamic law," which creates all sorts of confusion. That is why, it is necessary, in the opinion of the present author, to clarify what "Shariah" means at the beginning. For a wide-ranging discussion on the Shariah and some of the problems associated with its definition, see Bernard G. Weiss, *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 1–16; and, Wael Hallaq, "What is Sharia?," *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law, 2005–2006*, vol. 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 151–80. For an elaborate discussion of the Sufism/Shariah debate, see section III below.

- ii. **Shariah:** [first of all, it is neither *fiqh* (jurisprudence) nor *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) nor the so-called Islamic law, although closely associated with all of these]. Shariah is the prophetic “framework” based on the sacred sources of Islam, i.e., the Qur’an and the Sunna that seeks to regulate all contingencies of Muslim life. As such it is not a monolithic structure or a rigid set of rules that can be filtered only through *fiqh*.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the relationship between *waḥdat al-wujūd* and the Shariah was of paramount importance to Muslim intellectuals including Walī Allāh, since if the former<sup>23</sup> implied (as its critics seem to assert) no difference between God and the world, why would there be any need to worship Him or follow the Shariah?<sup>24</sup>

In what follows, this study will first sketch a historical context of Islam in the 18th century India as it is against this setting Walī Allāh’s intellectual ideas took shape (section II). Then it will explore the “contentious” relationship between Sufism and the Shariah not only through Walī Allāh’s perspective but also through other Sufis in order to cast more light on the matter (section III). After this, sections IV and V will address the main concern of this study, namely *waḥdat al-wujūd* and the question of multiplicity of the cosmos. Finally, section VI will summarize and conclude.

## II Islam in Eighteenth-Century Mughal India<sup>25</sup>

In the preface of his magnum opus *Hujjat-Allāh al-bāligha*, Shāh Walī Allāh’s laments the intellectual impoverishment of his day:

It discouraged me that I am in an age of ignorance, prejudice, and following the passions, in which every person has a high opinion of his ruinous

22 A relevant example is that of “*adab*” (social and spiritual etiquette), which is a comprehensive term meaning several things and plays a crucial role in the social life of Muslims.

23 I.e. *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

24 See section V below.

25 Two of the indispensable sources for the history of Islam in eighteenth-century Mughal India are: Muḥammad Hāshim Khāfi Khān, *Muntakhāb al-lubāb* (Calcutta: The College Press, 1860–74); and, Mir Ghulam Ḥusayn Khān, *Siyār al-muta’akhhirīn* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1973). These sources are briefly consulted.

opinions; for being contemporary is the basis of disagreement, and whoever writes makes himself a target.<sup>26</sup>

Shāh Walī Allāh lived in troubled times. The Mughal Empire, which had ruled India for nearly two centuries and created one of the wealthiest and stable regions in the world, was already on the wane by the time he appeared on the scene. The long and powerful reign (nearly five decades) of the emperor Aurangzeb (d. 1707) came to an end when Walī Allāh was only a boy of four. In the next sixty years, ten different Mughal rulers sat upon the throne. His father Shāh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (d. 1719), a Naqshbandi shaykh,<sup>27</sup> was commissioned by the emperor to compile legal rulings for the mammoth collection of fatwas known as *Fatāwā ‘Alamgīrī*. Walī Allāh was very concerned about the social, moral, and political predicaments of his day. He thought the vitality of Muslim religious and social life was under attack.<sup>28</sup> According to Walī Allāh, the *fuqahā’* (jurists) of his day were engrossed in *taqlīd* (imitation of authority), and the *qādīs*<sup>29</sup> of his time became embroiled in hypocritical practices. Moreover, the ulama’s attitude toward *fiqh* ossified in the imitation of one or the other school of law, e.g. *ḥanafī* or *mālīkī*. Added to this was the uncritical adherence to the infallibility of one’s ancestors, which people took seriously.<sup>30</sup> Although himself a Sufi shaykh,<sup>31</sup> Walī Allāh was critical of the popular practices of many Sufis and Sufi orders. Thus he criticized the practice of visitation of Sufi shrines, and made scathing remarks about those Sufis who, instead of taking guidance from the Qur’an and the Sunna, focused on ostentatious ruptures and worldly poetry.<sup>32</sup>

Walī Allāh was equally critical of Shiism in general, and some of its practices such as the Muḥarram procession in particular. He lived in a time when the tension between Sunnism and Shiism reached a new height, and old issues such as “succession to the prophet” were debated and constantly brought to the fore. Walī Allāh was a staunch defender of Sunni Islam and his inclusivist and reconciliatory agendas in matters of *fiqh* and *taṣawwuf* did not embrace

26 Walī Allāh, *Hujjat*, 8 (trans. Hermansen).

27 Ibid., xxiv; Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh*, ch. 4; Walī Allāh, *Anfās*, 202ff; and idem, *Tafhīmāt*, 1:15–16.

28 Walī Allāh, *Hujjat*, 7–10; and Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh*, 289ff.

29 *qādī*: a Muslim judge who judges according to Islamic law.

30 Hermansen, *Shāh Walī Allāh’s Treatises on Islamic Law*, xxviii–xxxii and 127ff.; and Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh*, 245–9.

31 Walī Allāh, *Fuyūd al-ḥaramayn* (Karachi: Muḥammad Sa‘īd, n.d.), 127, 228–38, 297–8; and idem, *Tafhīmāt* 2: 59, 112, 136–7, 145, 150, 160.

32 Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh*, 313–14.



Shiism.<sup>33</sup> It is however, instructive to note that he considered 'Alī superior to the first two caliphs at first, but changed his mind later since the Prophet corrected this belief by appearing to him in a dream.<sup>34</sup>

On the political front, eighteenth-century Muslim India was going through a deep crisis. From 1708 to 1716, the Sikhs from the north plundered the north-west until the Mughals managed to contain them in some capacity. On the other hand, the Hindu Marathas from the south invaded the central regions of the Mughal Empire, and the Mughals were forced to concede the province of Malwa to them. In the 1730s and 40s, Mughal India was under constant attack by the Afghan rulers and warlords.<sup>35</sup> Like many other Sufi shaykhs, Walī Allāh too was moved by the urgency of the situation, and wrote to many Muslim nobles and political leaders urging them to strengthen administrative rule and to overthrow the Hindus who threatened Muslim rule.<sup>36</sup> All in all, Walī Allāh sought to rejuvenate and revive the declining Muslim society of his time. This is clearly discernible in the project of the *Hujjat*, in which Walī Allāh envisioned a new horizon for the troubled Islam of his day.

### III Sufism and Shariah: A False Statement of the Problem

As noted in the Introduction, posing “Sufism and Shariah”<sup>37</sup> as a statement of problem can be misleading because it assumes that a) they are irreducible binaries; b) there is an underlying conflict or tension between these two categories; c) Sufism is inherently antinomian and anti-Shari'ite; d) *fiqh* or the science of jurisprudence is the same as the Shariah, and e) *fuqahā'* or the jurists are the primary defenders and moral guardians of the Shariah. All of these theses, broadly speaking, are contrary to historical evidence and what Sufis themselves have to say regarding the relationship between the Shariah and the *ṭarīqa* (Sufism in this case).<sup>38</sup> However, it may yet be asked, and not

33 Walī Allāh, *Izālat al-khafā' 'an khilāfat al-khulafā'* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1976).

34 Walī Allāh, *Fuyūd*, 228; cited also in Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh*, 249.

35 See for instance, Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi, *Islamic Renaissance in South Asia (1707–1867): The Role of Shah Wali Allah and His Successors* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers, 2004), 52–65.

36 Walī Allāh, *Hujjat*, xxviii.

37 It should be noted that Sufism in this discussion embraces the worldview of *wahdat al-wujūd*.

38 An excellent case in point is Walī Allāh, *Hama'āt*, 11–14, 16–20, in which he reinterprets the origin and development of the entire Sufi tradition. On the relationship between the Shariah and the *ṭarīqa*, see also Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 1385), *Asrār al-sharī'a wa-aṭwār al-ṭarīqa wa-anwār al-ḥaqīqa*, ed. Riḍā Muḥammad Ḥidarj (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī,

without reason, that if there is no real antagonism between Sufism and the Shariah, why then some Sufis seem to defend their practices/doctrines against the practitioners of law?

First of all, it may be pointed out that many of the great Sufis including al-Ghazālī,<sup>39</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī,<sup>40</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1274),<sup>41</sup> Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 1493),<sup>42</sup> ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Sha‘rānī (d. 1565),<sup>43</sup> and Shāh Walī Allāh either hailed from the legal tradition or were well-versed in matters of the Shariah.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, it is true that many jurists tend to castigate Sufism or at least some of its practices. However, it should be kept in mind that the Islamic intellectual tradition betrays vast panoply of beliefs and practices, in which one often observes polemical exchanges between various schools of thought. Sometimes even ulama belonging to the same camp engage in polemical debate with one another. Thus it is not unusual to see scholars belonging to the same camp,

---

2003), 8–15, 73–89, 120–8; ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad al-Bakkārī, *al-‘Aqīdah, al-sharī‘ah, al-taṣawwuf ‘inda al-Imām al-Junayd Abī al-Qāsim al-Khazzāz al-Baghdādī* (Casablanca: Markaz al-Turāth al-Thaqāfī al-Maghribī, 2008), 25ff.

- 39 On Ghazālī’s significance in the history of Islamic jurisprudence, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 340ff. It is to be noted that Ghazālī also authored major juridical treatises such as *al-Mankhūl min ta’līqāt al-uṣul* and *al-Mustaṣfa min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*.
- 40 Scholarship at its current state has not yet uncovered Ibn ‘Arabī’s legal thought, which is vast. Nevertheless, there are some very useful introductory studies in this regard, see Eric Winkel, *Islam and the Living Law: The Ibn al-Arabi Approach* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), chaps. 3 and 4; and idem, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fiqh*: Three Cases from the *Futūhāt*,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* XIII (1993).
- 41 On Rūmī’s relationship with the Shariah and exoteric Islam in general, see the monumental work by Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West; the Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Oxford, Boston: Oneworld, 2000), *passim*; see also Annemarie Schimmel, *Rumi’s World: the Life and Work of the Great Sufi Poet* (Boston: Shambala, 2001), *passim*.
- 42 Aḥmad Zarrūq was a great jurist as he was a first-order Sufi, for more information see Scott Kugle, *Rebel between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarruq, Sainthood, and Authority in Islam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 11–220.
- 43 Sha‘rānī composed major works in *fiqh*, including the famous *al-Mizān al-kubrā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Warīs Muḥammad ‘Alī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1998). On his biography, see M. Winter, “al-Sha‘rānī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954–2004; hereafter *El2*), loc. cit.; Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982), 10ff.
- 44 The list can go on indefinitely, but the works and social ranking of these figures show beyond doubt that there is no “intrinsic” conflict between the Shariah and Sufism.

e.g. *ahl al-ḥadīth* disagreeing over the correct status of various *aḥādīth*.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, one often finds legal scholars/theologians of one school engaging in vituperative attacks against practitioners of a rival school.<sup>46</sup> The same, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to all the different schools of thought in which one observes the ulama pointing fingers at each other over the true nature of this or that theory. The point to note is that there is no unique form of Sufism just as there is not just one school of law in Islam. This is in keeping with the definition of Sufism that is provided earlier.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Islamic orthodoxy is not localized or concentrated in the hands of jurists or traditionists only.<sup>48</sup> From the standpoint of the Sufis, they themselves represent *the heart of Islam* and follow the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad in the best manner possible.<sup>49</sup> Thus from the vantage point of Sufism, the dichotomy between Sufism and the Shariah is rather misplaced or irrelevant as the following quote by Walī Allāh's demonstrates:

The sacred arrangement (*tadbīr*) of the Shariah with regard to the foregoing is developed in two directions. The first involves effecting a

- 
- 45 This phenomenon is ubiquitous in the early development of Islamic history. On the varying status of a *ḥadīth* or a scholar see the voluminous, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, 12 vols., ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1994), *passim*. On the controversy over a particular *ḥadīth*, e.g. concerning “standing before people,” see Imām Nawawī, *al-Tarkhīṣ bi-al-qiyām li-dhawī al-faḍl wa-al-mizya min ahl al-Islām*, ed. Aḥmad Rātīb Ḥammūsh (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1982), 40ff. On polemics regarding the status of seminal Muslim traditionists/jurists, see Ibn Ṣalāh, *Ulūm al-ḥadīth li-ibn al-Ṣalāh Abī ʿAmrū ʿUthmān ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Shahrazūrī* (Beirut: al-Madīnah, al-Maktabah al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1972), *passim*.
- 46 See e.g. Muḥammad B. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrestānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal* (vol. 1), ed. Muḥammad Fahmī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), 38–132; Walī Allāh, *al-Inṣāf fi bayān sabab al-ikhtilāf* (Lahore: Hiʿat al-Awqāf bi-Ḥukūmat al-Banjāb, 1971); cf. Hermansen's translation of the same book, *Shāh Walī Allāh's Treatise on Islamic Law*, chaps. 1–3, 3–43; and Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, 87–105, 307–459.
- 47 I.e. Sufism is as diverse as Islam itself, but this does not mean Sufis who accept *waḥdat al-wujūd* are somehow being less faithful to the teachings of Islam.
- 48 Concerning the jurists, one Sufi remarks the following: “The jurist should be kind to himself, and recognize his place in the religion, and not stretch out his empty hand to the gnostic stations and lordly states which are beyond his reach—until he has first tasted what the true men have tasted.” Quoted from *al-Risāla al-Khurūbiyya* of Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Khurūbī (d. 1556) as cited in *The Qurʾān and the Prophet in the writings of Shaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī*, trans. Khalid Williams (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 115.
- 49 Walī Allāh, *Hamaʿāt*, 11–12.

reformation (*iṣlāḥ*) through good deeds, the abandonment (*tark*) of the major sins, and the establishment of the marks of true community. For these three things the observances and limits are laid down, and all followers of the Shariah are required to abide by them. This is the outward form of the Shariah (*ẓāhir-i sharʿ*), and is called **Islam**. The second direction consists in the purification (*tahdhīb*) of the different levels of self (*nafs*) through the reality of the four virtues, and passing from these forms of goodness to the splendors which they contain, and progressing from the mere outward abstention from sin to a repudiation of its very essence. This is the inward form of the Shariah (*bāṭin-i sharʿ*), and it is called *iḥsān*<sup>50</sup> (inward virtue and beauty).<sup>51</sup>

Despite such unambiguous statements on the relationship between Sufism (as the inner aspect of the Shariah) and the Shariah (exoteric Islam), many contemporary scholars still tend to problematize the reality of Sufism:

The challenge which many preachers of Sufism posed to Islam was even more serious. They had developed a wrong view of Sufism, and of its relation with the Sharīʿah. They believed that the Sharīʿah was an empty form devoid of reality which they thought lay in their *ṭarīqah* (Sufi path). They did not shy away from exalting their *kashf* (intuition) over the *waḥy* (revelation) of the Prophet, nor did they recoil from saying that the real *tawḥīd* (doctrine of the unity of God) was in Ibn al-ʿArabī's philosophy of *waḥdat 'l-wujūd* (the Unity of Being). Influenced by that philosophy some even dismissed the distinction between Islam and *kufṛ* (infidelity) as of little significance [sic].<sup>52</sup>

Opinions as cited above are not isolated cases, nor are they completely outdated by more recent scholarship.<sup>53</sup> A prominent historian of South Asian Islam, whose work is otherwise very insightful, argues that there is a “tension

50 Bold mine. That is, Sufism is identified with “*iḥsān*.”

51 Walī Allāh, *Alṭāf al-quḍs* (Gujranwala: Madrasa Nuṣrat al-ʿUlūm, 1964), 53; trans. G.H. Jalbani and D. Pendelberry as *The Sacred Knowledge* (London: Octagon Press, 1982), 25–6. I have significantly modified the translation based on the original Persian.

52 Ansari, *Sufism and Shariah*, 6.

53 It is true that more recent scholarship on Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī appears to have tackled such views as evidenced in Arthur Buehler, “Ahmad Sirhindī: A 21st-century Update,” *Der Islam* 86 (2009): 122–141, and David Damrel, “The ‘Naqshbandi Reaction’ Reconsidered,” in *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 176–98. However, the alleged tension between Sufism and the Shariah continues to pose challenges to some scholars, as the study by Alam (*The*

between *tasawwuf* and the formal Islam of jurisprudence.”<sup>54</sup> In his view, Ibn ‘Arabī did not require Muslims to follow any particular school of law:

Ibn al-‘Arabī represented jurists (*fuqahā*) as fanatics and adversaries of religious truth, comparing their treatment of the Sufis to the pharaohs’ treatment of the prophets... Ibn al-‘Arabī held that an average Muslim was not to adhere to any particular school of thought: ‘instead he can seek the most accommodating judgments in the law (*shar‘*) and follow them as this entails greater mercy for him... [Ibn al-‘Arabī’s] school of law (*madhhab*) is one that makes it easier for the community.’ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī went even further [...]”<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned citation, the overall tone of his article suggests that practitioners of *taṣawwuf* are negligent with respect to the precepts of the Shariah. At any rate, it should be pointed out that Ibn ‘Arabī’s statements (quoted above) were taken out of context and were not quoted fully. The first sentence is taken from Michael Chodkiewicz’s *An Ocean Without Shore*, in which Chodkiewicz adds the following:

Ibn ‘Arabi nevertheless does not call into question either the necessity of *fiqh*—juridical reflections—or the duty of vigilance incumbent upon the *fuqahā*.<sup>56</sup>

As for the rest (in the above quote), Alam tangentially cites from Mahmoud Al-Ghorab’s contribution in *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*,<sup>57</sup> in which Ibn ‘Arabī *also* stated the following:

Nor him nor other, my writings quote  
the text of the Qur’an: that is my knowledge  
what the Messenger said or consensus  
upon those I base my judgement<sup>58</sup>

---

*Debate Within*) evinces, which has been published at a later date than those of Buehler and Damrel.

54 Alam, *The Debate Within*, 144ff.

55 Ibid., 144.

56 Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabi, the Book and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 21.

57 Mahmoud Al-Ghorab, “Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabi Amidst Religious (*adyān*) and Schools of Thought (*madhāhib*),” in *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. Stephen Hirtenstein and Michael Tiernan (Shaftesbury: Element Books Limited, 1993), 199–227.

58 Ibid., 200.

Finally, in one of his seminal articles on *waḥdat al-wujūd*, prominent Ibn ‘Arabī scholar William Chittick claims that Ibn ‘Arabī’s view of Sufism (*‘irfān* in this case) is based on:

[O]bserving the rules and regulations of the Shariah and the discipline of the Tariqah or spiritual path [...]<sup>59</sup>

This is not the right place to address the issue of Ibn ‘Arabī’s or Rūmī’s position vis-à-vis the Shariah and *fiqh*, for the former should be considered a first order jurist himself as attested from his *Futūḥāt*, which contains numerous meditations on legal issues.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the Ghorab article, which Alam cited contains many useful comments regarding Ibn ‘Arabī’s legal thought, which is far from being anti-Shari‘ite.<sup>61</sup> Sufis of very different persuasion, for example those of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, are in unison when it comes to accepting the Shariah as an indispensable element of their spiritual path. Khwāja Khurd (d. 1601),<sup>62</sup> who was an ardent supporter of *waḥdat al-wujūd* says the following:

Put the Shariah into practice without considering any individual desire or goal. Avoid the works forbidden by the Shariah without having any doubt about them, and without finding dislike for them in yourself. Acquire praiseworthy and beautiful attributes without being attached to them. Be content with whatever happens without being attached to anything. Take advantage of the joys allowed by the Shariah without being heedless of the manifestation of the Reality, or claiming gnosis and contemplation.<sup>63</sup>

And also,

Everything forbidden by the Shariah and considered bad by the Tariqah is the same... [he] must be extremely careful to do everything in

59 Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 74.

60 See n. 30.

61 Al-Ghorab, “Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabi Amidst Religious (*adyān*) and Schools of Thought (*madhāhib*),” *passim*.

62 Khwāja Khurd was the son of Sirhindī’s master Bāqī Billāh (d. 1603). Although the latter entrusted Sirhindī to the upbringing of his son, Khwāja Khurd continued to uphold the superiority of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 154.

63 *Ibid.*, 158–9.

accordance with the Shariah and the Tariqah and to avoid becoming heedless of contemplating Oneness, which is the Reality.<sup>64</sup>

Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī, although a critic of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, states the following regarding the Shariah:<sup>65</sup>

[T]he shariat has a form and a reality. Explaining is entrusted to jurists whose knowledge is from literal reading of books (‘ulama-yi zawahir). Exalted Sufis are distinguished in elucidating its reality. (106) . . . Everything [was shown to me as it] passed above one by one, and my doubt completely disappeared. All that has been disclosed (kashifiyat) corresponds to the outer shariat without even the slightest contradiction . . . There is no contradiction between the inner and the outer . . . The true realized one (muntahi-yi haqiqi) finds that inner experience corresponds to the outer shariat. The difference between the [superficial] jurists and the noble Sufis is that jurists know [topics of shariat] by rational proof and the Sufis know by their inner disclosers and by tasting (sic).<sup>66</sup>

#### IV Shāh Walī Allāh’s Metaphysics of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*

The previous section has hopefully cleared the ground for the discussion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the context of normative Islam.<sup>67</sup> The term *waḥdat al-wujūd*<sup>68</sup> comprises two words—*waḥda* and *wujūd*—both of which were

64 Ibid., 168–9.

65 On Sirhindī’s views on *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindī: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1971), 569–7.

66 Aḥmad Sirhindī, *Maktūbāt Imām Rabbānī* in Arthur Buehler (trans.), *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindī* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 106 and 125.

67 I.e., by now it has been made clear that Sufis associated with *waḥdat al-wujūd* belong to the mainstream of Islam.

68 The discussion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that is to follow in the ensuing paragraphs draws on Chittick’s pioneering and comprehensive treatment of the “history” of the term in early Islam leading to the later period. Readers interested in more information should consult this article of Chittick’s (“A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*”) in *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 71–88. Since our discussion of Walī Allāh’s exposition of *waḥdat al-wujūd* requires basic familiarity with the history and meaning of the term, we felt it necessary to include a few introductory paragraphs on this.

important in the Islamic intellectual tradition since early days. The word “*waḥda*” means “unity or oneness,” and is of the same root as “*tawḥīd*,” which means “to affirm unity.” As for *wujūd*, which is from the root *w-j-d*, it is customary to translate it as Being, being or existence, but what is important to note is that in the Sufi context it is often understood as “to find” or “to experience.” For instance, Ibn ‘Arabī defines *wujūd* as “finding the Real in ecstasy” (*wijdān al-ḥaqq fi-l-wajd*).<sup>69</sup> Thus *wujūd* also has a mystical “subjective” connotation, in addition to its regular ontological reference. This dichotomy in the meaning will become more transparent when we will deal with Walī Allāh’s exposition of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. In any event, *waḥdat al-wujūd* refers to the *wujūd* of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), Who is self-evidently *wāḥid* (one), not to be denied by any Muslim. Hence there can only be one *wujūd* in reality.<sup>70</sup>

Although most of the secondary literature assumes that the phrase *waḥdat al-wujūd* refers to a specific “philosophical” position put forth by Ibn ‘Arabī, the term has no precedence in the writings of the latter. However, it is important to note that even though similar phrases such as “*waḥdat wujūdika*” are found in Ibn ‘Arabī’s corpus as in a prayer manual (*Awrād al-usbū*), they have none of the philosophical connotations that came to characterize *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the course of time.<sup>71</sup> We will come back to the specific historical development of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which is crucial in understanding Walī Allāh’s views concerning it. But for now, let us pursue the theme of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as an “emblem” doctrine in early Sufism, and attempt to chart a historical trajectory. The idea of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (as defined above) certainly occurs in the writings of the early Sufis such as Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī (d. 815–16),<sup>72</sup> Abū l-‘Abbās Qaṣṣāb (fl. tenth century),<sup>73</sup> Khwāja ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 1088),<sup>74</sup> and Abū Ḥāmīd al-Ghazālī. Some representative citations from some of these figures will illustrate this point:

69 William Chittick, “*Waḥdat al-Shuhūd*,” in *El2*, loc. cit.

70 This definition will become clearer as we look at some of earliest descriptions of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (although the phrase itself was not used) in the next paragraph.

71 For more information, see Janis Esots, “Mulla Ṣadra’s Teaching on Wujūd: A Synthesis of Philosophy and Mysticism” (PhD diss., Tallinn University, 2007), 25–6.

72 Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfīyya* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960), 83–90.

73 Chittick, “A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*,” 71.

74 S. de Laugier de Beauceueil, “Abdallāh Anṣārī,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abdallah-al-ansari>.



There is nothing in existence (*wujūd*) but God.<sup>75</sup>

There is nothing other than He (*laysa ghayrahu aḥad*).<sup>76</sup>

There is nothing in *wujūd* but God and that *All things are perishing except His face* [28:88].<sup>77</sup>

The citations above are by no mean exhaustive, and against the backdrop of such statements the following quotes by Ibn ‘Arabī would ring familiar:

Only God is *wujūd*. There is nothing in existence but God... *wujūd* is identified with God and in the abode of *wujūd*, there is but God... All of *wujūd* is one in reality; there is nothing along with it.<sup>78</sup>

From the aforementioned statements, it might appear to the critics of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that *it* (i.e. *waḥdat al-wujūd*) negates the incomparability (*tanzīh*) of God, and blurs all the distinction between the world and God or the creator and the created. This might be the case since if *wujūd* is one which encompasses both God and the world, what then is the precise ontological status of the world?<sup>79</sup> Thus taking such statements out of their proper context and overlooking others in which the Sufis affirm the absolute incomparability of God, one might easily be tempted to equate *waḥdat al-wujūd* with pantheism, panentheism, natural mysticism and the like.<sup>80</sup> An elaborate discussion of all the problems associated with *waḥdat al-wujūd* would take us too far afield, and hence, we will restrict ourselves to a few brief remarks to clarify the

75 *lā fi-l-wujūd illā-llāh*. This is an oft-quoted saying that is repeated in various authors, viz., ‘Ayn al-Qudat Hamadānī, *Tamhīdāt*, 256; and al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār*, ed. A. E. Afifi (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya, 1964), 55. Cf. Ghazālī, *The Niche of Light*, 16; and idem, *Ihyā ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 4:230—all cited in Chittick, “A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*,” 71. For a more elaborate discussion of this quote and the related, see Qāsim Kākāyī, *Waḥdat-i wujūd bih riwāyat-i Ibn ‘Arabī wa Māyistar Ikhārt* (Tehran: Hirmis, 2002), 148–71.

76 Anṣārī, *Ṭabaqāt al-sūfīyya*, 172, 174 and 180 as cited in Chittick, “A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*,” 72.

77 al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār*, 55.

78 Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkīyya* (Beirut: Dar Ṣadir, n.d.), 2:69, 54, 114, 160, 216, 516 etc., translation mine.

79 It is to be noted that for Sufis themselves these statements do not pose any problem, since for them they suggest *tawhīd* in the sense of “nothing is real but the Real,” i.e. there is only one Reality. However, the precise ontological status of the world as being only “relatively real” will be clarified in the ensuing paragraphs.

80 Chittick, “A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*,” 72–3.

misconception. Unlike some theologians, Sufis such as Ibn ‘Arabī assert that a perfect understanding of *tawhīd* requires one to simultaneously uphold both the transcendence and the immanence of God. However, this does not prevent them from asserting the considerable “discontinuity” between God and the world. So Ibn ‘Arabī says:

The Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) has two viewpoints of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), which is why God appointed for him two eyes. With one eye he looks upon Him in respect of the fact that **He is independent of the worlds [3:97]. So he sees Him neither in anything nor in himself.**<sup>81</sup> With the other eye he . . . sees His *wujūd* permeating all things.<sup>82</sup>

Now that we have shed some light on the basic theme of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, we may move on to elaborate on Walī Allāh’s treatment of this doctrine. However, it should be kept in mind, as Chittick has pointed out, that the expression did not become a recognizable technical term until Ibn Taymiyya demonized it, and various Sufi authors then responded to him giving the term a meaning congruent with proper *tawhīd*, balancing both transcendence and immanence.<sup>83</sup> Thus it is no wonder Sirhindī employs the terms *tawhīd-i wujūdī* and *tawhīd-i shuhūdī* interchangeably with *waḥdat-i wujūdī* and *waḥdat-i shuhūdī*.<sup>84</sup> It is also significant to note that Sirhindī coined the expression *waḥdat al-shuhūd* largely because a number of his contemporaries were employing it as a pretext to avoid observing the rulings of the Shariah, and also, it enabled him to respond to the criticisms made by Ibn Taymiyya and his followers.<sup>85</sup>

It is against this background Shāh Walī Allāh expounds *waḥdat al-wujūd* in several of his treatises, most notably in *al-Tafhīmāt al-ilāhiyya* and *al-Khayr*

81 Bold mine.

82 Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, 3:151 (Beirut edition) as cited in Chittick, “A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*,” 76–7, translation slightly modified. Cf. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 368.

83 Chittick, “A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*,” 83ff.

84 See e.g., William Chittick, “*Waḥdat al-Shuhūd*,” In *EL2*, loc. cit. For the contrast between *tawhīd-i wujūdī* and *tawhīd-i shuhūdī* in Sirhindī’s writings, see Aḥmad Sirhindī, *Intikhāb-i maktūbāt-i Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī*, ed. Fazlur Rahman (Karachi: Iqbal Akādami, 1968), 44ff.

85 Ibid. More indepth analysis is required to gauge the similarities and differences between Walī Allāh and Sirhindī’s respective conception of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd*. Unfortunately, this is outside the scope of the present investigation.

*al-kathīr*.<sup>86</sup> In what follows I will analyze, through the translations of key passages, his elucidation of this doctrine. It is to be noted that Walī Allāh distinguishes between, what I would call, “metaphysical” (objective) and “mystical” (subjective) *waḥdat al-wujūd*.<sup>87</sup> As we had occasions to note earlier, *wujūd* for the Sufis denotes both the act of finding God and the objective reality that encompasses all things. Walī Allāh elaborates on the mystical *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the quote below:

Know that *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* are terms used in the context of the [mystical] wayfaring to God (*al-sayr ilā 'llāh*), exalted is He. It [might] be said [about these two terms] that the wayfarer possesses the stations (*maqamāt*) of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* respectively. The meaning of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is the immersion of the [wayfarer] in the gnosis of the all-encompassing reality (*ma'rifat al-ḥaqīqa al-jāmi'a*), in which the world is perceived in such a way that all the ruling properties (*aḥkām*) of distinction and separation, i.e. knowledge of good and evil, of which [human] intellect (*aql*) and the Divine Law (*shar'*) offer clear statements, are obliterated. Some wayfarers remain at this station until God recues them from it. The meaning of *waḥdat al-shuhūd* is the gathering of the ruling properties of togetherness and dispersion (*al-jam' wa-l-tafriqa*), and the [wayfarer] knows that things are “one” (*wāḥida*) from one aspect while “many” (*kathīra*) from another. And this way station is superior to and more perfect than the other.<sup>87</sup>

The above citation makes it clear that both *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (unity of witnessing)<sup>88</sup> refer to the attainment of different stations by the wayfarer (i.e. the Sufi). The attainment of the station of *waḥdat al-wujūd* seems to suggest a more ecstatic orientation, in which the *mystic's* inner state is completely absorbed by the reality of the all-encompassing being of God.

86 However, he does touch on *waḥdat al-wujūd* in many of his other treatises, although they contain nothing substantially new, see e.g. *al-Budūr al-bāzigha*, 4–11; idem, *Lamaḥāt*, 1–8; and, idem, *Saṭa'āt*, 2–14. It is to be noted that the treatise “*Faysala-yi waḥdat al-wujūd wa-l-shuhūd*,” is actually a translation of Walī Allāh's *al-Maktūb al-madani fi taḥqiq waḥdat al-wujūd wa-waḥdat al-shuhūd*, which is a response to a certain man called Effendī Ismā'īl al-Rūmī al-Madani who asked the former if it is possible to reconcile *waḥdat al-wujūd* with *waḥdat al-shuhūd*. And this treatise is reproduced in Walī Allāh's *Tafhīmat*, which I have used in the present study. See also, Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, 60.

87 Walī Allāh, *Tafhīmāt*, 2:263 (all translations from the *Tafhīmāt* are mine).

88 On *waḥdat al-shuhūd* and Sirhindī's views on it, see Chittick, “*Waḥdat al-Shuhūd*”; and Friedmann, *Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī*.

That is the reason the wayfarer loses his/her awareness of the *shar'ī* distinction between good and evil or regular legal categories of right and wrong. In short, on this view, the state of *waḥdat al-wujūd* would refer to the mystical state of *sukr* (intoxication) of classical Sufism. This seems to be a novel interpretation<sup>89</sup> that might have developed in the Indian *wujūdī* tradition, as one does not readily find such an understanding of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the immediate context of the school of Ibn 'Arabī. According to Walī Allāh, the station of *waḥdat al-shuhūd* is one in which the mystic overcomes the state of *fanā'* (extinction) and is able to witness both unity and multiplicity, i.e., he does not lose sight of the fact that God and the world are separate although the latter's existence depends on the former. After expatiating on mystical *waḥdat al-wujūd*, Walī Allāh turns his attention to explaining the "metaphysical" *waḥdat al-wujūd*:

As for *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the (Sufi) sage's (*al-ḥakīm*)<sup>90</sup> mystical intuition (*dhawq*) concerning it is different from that of the opinions of the others. For according to him, every contingent being (*mumkin mawjūd*) is assumed to have either an actuality (*fi'līyya*) or a quiddity (*māhīyya*).<sup>91</sup> By its actuality is meant its way of being established and the manner in which its form is actualized (*hay'a taḥaqququhu*), by which it (i.e. the contingent being) is distinguished from pure, simple non-existence (*al-'adam al-ṣirf al-basīṭ*) itself (*nafs al-amr*).<sup>92</sup> As for [its] quiddity, it is a thing considered dark and illusory stripped of [any] fixity (*taqarrur*), and is a marker by which things are differentiated from one another. However, the [quiddity] has a distinction before [our] knowledge [establishes] its connection with God, the transcendent. The *ḥakīm* stipulates that the [discussion] of quiddity should not be pursued further as it lacks a corresponding reality; hence he ignores it. As regards the [concept] of actuality, the aspect of its emanation (*ṣudūr*) and the power of its existentiatio that do not rest with the Necessary (*al-wājib*), are found to be impossible (*mumtanī'a*) in the external world. They are [also removed]

89 This view of *waḥdat al-wujūd* seems to have its roots in Sirhindī, although a fuller treatment of this connection is outside the scope of the present endeavour.

90 Since Walī Allāh clearly distinguishes "philosophers" (which, for him carries a negative undertone) from the Sufis, I rendered it "the Sufi sage."

91 *fi'līyya* in philosophy (*falsafa*) is one of the two modes of *wujūd* (being), the other being *quwwa* (potentiality). In this context, it means every existent that possessing *fi'līyya* has its source of manifestation in God.

92 *Nafs al-amr* is a logical term that could mean "the thing itself," or "the thing in its entirety" regardless of whether it exists in the mind or in the external world. It is practically untranslatable into English.

from the circle of actuality [itself], for [it] resembles a thing which is shorn of its essentialities. So, it is permissible to [say] that every actuality has an aspect in the Necessary . . . the former is the undifferentiated explanation of the latter, and also, its representation in itself (*'aynihā*).<sup>93</sup>

Several points can be discerned from the above statement. First of all, Walī Allāh seems to strike a note between the commonplace understanding of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which would reduce all the distinctions between God and the world and a more nuanced explanation of it by the Sufi metaphysicians, which would preserve God's transcendence; whence the contrast between the *ḥakīm* and others. Then he explains that every contingent being, which is placed vis-à-vis the Necessary Being, has two different aspects—actuality and quiddity. The contingent being is characterized by the actualization of its form, which differentiates it from pure non-existence. Its actuality (*fi'līyya*) is also bestowed upon it by the Necessary, without Whom it would be shorn of its essentialities. As for the notion of quiddity, Walī Allāh's explanation is somewhat opaque here. Nonetheless, he seems to suggest that quiddities are not actually existent since they are like figments of imagination. This view is largely in keeping with the broader Akbarian (i.e. the school of Ibn 'Arabī) paradigm of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that we described at the beginning of this section.<sup>94</sup> Walī Allāh also describes the metaphysical *waḥdat al-wujūd* in *other* places such as the *Tafhīmāt* using a less technical language:

Another usage of these two [expressions, i.e. *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *shuhūd*], pertains to the knowledge of realities of things (*ma'rifat ḥaqā'iq al-ashyā'*) as they are, and reflects on the relation between the temporally originated (*al-ḥādīth*) and eternal (*al-qadīm*). According to **one** [group] of Sufis, the world is an aggregate of accidents (*a'rāḍ mujtami'a*) that [subsists] in one reality, in the same manner as forms of man, horse or ass made of wax have wax (*sham'*) as their [common substance]. The nature of wax remains the same under all conditions, although the wax is not named through its [true] name [i.e. wax]. Rather, the [wax] is named after the forms it has assumed. These forms are, in reality, representation (*tamthīl*) of wax, and they do not possess being [in them], except [when] wax is added to them. According to **another** group of Sufis the world is a [series] of reflections of the Divine Names and Attributes (*al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt*) reflected in the mirror of antipodal non-existence. These names

93 Walī Allāh, *al-Khayr al-kathīr*, 36–7 (all translations mine).

94 See also, Chittick, *The Sufī Path of Knowledge*, 74, 80.

and attributes such as power (*qudra*) and its antipodal non-existences which is powerlessness are reflected in [the mirror of nothingness]. Thus when the light of power is reflected in the mirror of powerlessness, it becomes contingent power (*qudra mumkina*). The same holds true for other analogous attributes. This is also the case with Being (*wujūd*). The [epithet] *waḥdat al-wujūd* is applied to the first group, while that of *waḥdat al-shuhūd* to the second.<sup>95</sup>

Before delving into the substance of the above account, it is necessary to state that *waḥdat al-wujūd* explains the nature of reality by overcoming the rigid bipolar relationship between Absolute Being (God) and the contingent (the cosmos). Thus it is no coincidence that the whole of reality is conceived in terms of *wujūd* because the latter embraces everything by definition, i.e. if anything exists, it cannot be devoid of being. At heart, *waḥdat al-wujūd* seeks to describe the interrelationship of God and the cosmos, which can be multifaceted given the complexities characterizing it. According to Walī Allāh, Sufis who valorize *waḥdat al-wujūd* are those who liken everything other than God (*mā siwallāh*) to be made of different forms but of the same substance.<sup>96</sup> So “wax” is metaphorically used in lieu of “*wujūd*” in order to suggest that all contingent realities are particular determinations of the one “*Wujūd*,” and they share Its “being” just as different forms shaped by wax share the same wax. This interpretation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is not far from the one offered by Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350), a major figure in the school of Ibn ‘Arabī:

In reality, everything other than God is like waves in a turbulent ocean. Little doubt do we have in that even though the wave is an accident subsisting in water, and is other than it [in one respect], it is not different from water with respect to its *wujūd* and reality.<sup>97</sup>

However, it is curious to observe that Walī Allāh ascribes the second interpretation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* to the followers of Sirhindī, despite the fact that it is not substantially different from what Ibn ‘Arabī has to say regarding God’s

95 Walī Allāh, *Tafhīmāt*, 2:263–4.

96 Ibid., 263, 267, 273–4. In other words, contingent beings do not possess any “being” of their own. Their *wujūd*, in this metaphysics, is always sustained by the *wujūd* of the Real Being (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*).

97 Dāwūd b. Maḥmūd al-Qayṣarī, *Rasā’il-i Qayṣarī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Anjuman-i Islāmī-i Ḥikmat wa Falsafah-i Īrān), 12–13.

names and attributes, and the cosmos.<sup>98</sup> At any rate, after all these abstruse discussions, Walī Allāh summarizes his conception of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the following:

The sum of this [doctrine], when all tropes and metaphors which make apprehension difficult melt away, is that contingent realities (*al-ḥaqāʾiq al-imkāniyya*)<sup>99</sup> are impotent and deficient, and the Necessary Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-wujūbiyya*)<sup>100</sup> is all-perfect and all-powerful. It is thus possible to say that contingent realities are non-existents (*aʿdām*), and that myriads of beings are manifested through It.<sup>101</sup>

When discussing *waḥdat al-wujūd*, Walī Allāh frequently brings up the issue of the proper relationship between the all-expansive being (*al-wujūd al-munbasit*)<sup>102</sup> and the Necessary, which for him is also the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhī*). The reason why he takes issue with a number of Sufis including ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492), is that in his view, they fail to distinguish between the all-expansive being which is an emanation from the Necessary and the Necessary itself:

Mawlānā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, after giving a detailed exposition of the all-expansive Being (*al-wujūd al-munbasit*), which pervades the forms of the existents, said that it is the same as the Necessary, the Glorified, and that by this word the Sufis mean *waḥdat al-wujud*. When it was clear to them that the reality of the Necessary is none other than Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), they felt no need to establish proof for His unity and for the rejection of polytheism (i.e. associating partners with Him). Thus it is impossible to conceive of duality (*ithnayniyya*) and multiplicity (*taʿaddud*) in Him, without considering entification (*taʿayyun*) and limitation (*taqayyud*). Whatever may be witnessed, intellected, or imagined concerning the many, it exists in a relative manner, and not in the

98 Walī Allāh, *Tafhūmāt*, 2:264.

99 Another expression for the contingent being, i.e. *mumkin al-wujūd*.

100 I.e. the Necessary Being.

101 Walī Allāh, *Tafhūmāt*, 2:264.

102 *al-wujūd al-munbasit* is also called *al-naḥās al-raḥmānī* (the “Breath of the All-Compassionate”). It is the reality through which the entire cosmos including the angels, the heavens and all other entities is manifested. The expression can also be translated as “deplayed existence.” From another point of view, *al-wujūd al-munbasit* can be understood as the act of God (*fiʿl Allāh*).

manner of the Absolute. Yes, it is [true] that non-being which is nothingness is the opposite of this (38).<sup>103</sup>

In his view, it is due to confusion between these two modes of being, i.e. between *wujūd munbasit* and *wujūd muṭlaq* that led many Sufis to renounce the Shariah.<sup>104</sup> The reason for such rejection is simple. If there is no difference between the Divine Essence and the myriads of Its manifestation that includes everything else, why should one be motivated to follow the rules and regulations of the Shariah? This issue is explored in detail in the next section. Walī Allāh also alludes to the idea that those Sufis, who cannot differentiate the Manifest from the loci where He manifests His names and attributes, are mistaken:

He who thinks that the all-expansive Being (*al-wujūd al-munbasit*) is the same as the Necessary is mistaken, for he is not able to discern the manifest (*zāhir*) from the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*).<sup>105</sup>

It is pertinent to note here that Walī Allāh's criticism of Jāmī has a parallel in history in that Ibn 'Arabī was also accused by 'Alā' al-Dawla Simnānī (d. 1336)<sup>106</sup> for failing to distinguish between Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and the Breadth of the All-Compassionate (*al-nafas al-rahmān*), which is an emanation of the former.<sup>107</sup> According to Mullā Ṣadrā, this misunderstanding grew out of the fact that Ibn 'Arabī applied the expression "*wujūd muṭlaq*" to both the Necessary and His first emanation, which is the all-expansive being.<sup>108</sup> The ambiguity lies with the word "*muṭlaq*," which can be used in the sense of both "conditioned by something" and "unconditioned absolutely."<sup>109</sup> In addition, Walī Allāh also argues that since the notion of existence applies synonymously

103 Walī Allāh, *al-Khayr al-kathīr*, 38. On Jāmī's views on *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ Naqsh al-fuṣūṣ*, ed. W. Chittick (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), 65ff.

104 Walī Allāh, *al-Khayr al-kathīr*, 37–8.

105 Ibid., 39.

106 J. van Ess, "Ala-Al-Dawla Semnani," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ala-al-dawla-semnani>.

107 Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā), *Īqāz al-nā'ūmīn* (Tehran: Anjuman-i Islami-yi Ḥikmat va Falsafa-yi Īrān, 1985), 19ff.; also by the same author: *al-Ḥikma al-muta'āliya fī l-asfār al-'aqliyya al-arba'a*, ed. Gholamreza Aavani et al. (Tehran: Bunyād-i Ḥikmat-i Islami-yi Ṣadrā, 2001), 2:354ff.

108 Ṣadrā, *Īqāz*, 20–4.

109 That is, *wujūd muṭlaq* may refer to either *wājib al-wujūd* or *wujūd munbasit*, or *wujūd lā-bisharṭ maqṣamī* and *wujūd lā-bisharṭ qismī* respectively.



to both God and contingent beings, some Sufis falsely identify the former with the latter:

Since the concept of existence, due to its illimitable applicability (*bī-l-ittlāq al-‘amm*), applies [also] to the Necessary <Itself>, Who is infinite, they thought that both existence and the Necessary are one and the same.<sup>110</sup>

## V *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* and the Question of Multiplicity: The Paradox of “All is He”

One of the controversies concerning *waḥdat al-wujūd* is its supposed claim of assuming equal status for both the Absolute and the relative, i.e. the cosmos; whence the famous expression—all is He (*hama ūst*).<sup>111</sup> However, as has been mentioned, sophisticated theologians hardly allow for the similarity (*tashbīh*) of God, without also asserting His transcendence. Shāh Walī Allāh attempts several arguments in order to suggest Sufis do not deny the multiplicity of the world (as their detractors claim) while upholding *waḥdat al-wujūd* because for them the world “exists” only in relation to nonexistence, but not in relation to True Existence (*wujūd haqīqī*):

The saying of the Sufis does not imply that contingent realities are unreal and [pure] relationalities (*idāfāt*) that are the concomitants (*lāḥiqa*) of Being (*wujūd*), since we say: the Sufis say that the fire is other than the sky, and these [i.e. the sky and the fire] are other than air. [Similarly], man is other than a horse, and if Being encompasses everything, they would inevitably not want the meaning of relationalities to vie with this difference that is the source of disagreement concerning its properties. This meaning brings out the fact that multiplicity is real (*al-kathra ḥaqīqa*) and unity is perspectival (*al-waḥda i’tibārīyya*). When we do not mean by the reality of multiplicity except other than the distinction found in the ruling properties (*aḥkām*), difference in effects, and transformation of realities that are the specific existents (*al-wujūdāt al-khāṣṣa*), [then]

<sup>110</sup> Walī Allāh, *al-Khayr al-kathīr*, 39.

<sup>111</sup> The Sufi Zayn al-Dīn Khwāfī (d. 1435) had staunchly upheld the position “all is from him” as a counter to *waḥdat al-wujūd*. This formula is also found in Anṣarī, *Intimate Conversations (Munājāt)*, trans. W. M. Thackston (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 215; see also Annmarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 147, 274, 283, 362, 376.

the differences in the principles of being (*aṣl al-wujūd*) and non-being (*‘adam*) refer back to the unique all-expansive being (*al-wujūd al-wāḥid al-munbasit*) that [encompasses] the structures of existents *in toto*.<sup>112</sup>

In short, for Walī Allāh multiplicity is real to the extent that its ruling properties and effects are discernible, and it is distinguishable from non-existence. However, it is crucial to note that the reality of the all-expansive being permeates the entire cosmos, which suggests a continuity between the Necessary and the contingent since the former lends *wujūd* to the latter through the intermediary of the all-expansive being. Walī Allāh states:

It is from this perspective that Sufis say the world is identical with the Real. They do not wish to negate the particular existents that descend from Being to the <multi-layered> hierarchy of [reality]. Rather they wish to use the meaning of descent and manifestation (*tanazzul wa zuhūr*) intelligibly, saying Zayd and ‘Amr are similar in one respect, their species being one, but different in another. They say man and horse are one from the aspect of its animality (*ḥaywāniyya*), and also, courage and lion and are one insofar as the attribute of courage is present in both of them. Similarly, the Sufis say that the world is identical with the Real, by which they mean the [reality] of the world is identical with the all-expansive being. However, the all-expansive being, in turn, subsists in the True One (*al-ḥaqq al-awwal*). Thus they do not negate the distinction completely.<sup>113</sup> One of them has said:

Every level of being (*wujūd*) has its own ruling  
If you do not preserve the hierarchy [of being], you are a heretic<sup>114</sup>

From the above quote, it becomes clear that Sufis, according to Shāh Walī Allāh, do not negate the multiplicity of the cosmos. When Sufis say that the world is identical with God, they have in mind the all-expansive being (*al-wujūd al-munbasit*), which is *posterior* to True Being and which, moreover, subsists in it. The poem he cites explains that there is only one *wujūd*; otherwise the whole point of the “unity of being” would be superfluous. However, this one

112 Walī Allāh, *Tafhīmāt*, 2:275.

113 Ibid., 275–6.

114 Ibid., 276.

Being descends and manifests so as to give birth to the cosmos.<sup>115</sup> Thus there are levels of being (*marātib al-wujūd*) starting from the pinnacle of emanation to the lowest degree of existence. What is important to note is that the light of *wujūd* is manifested at every stage in the hierarchy of reality in such a way that everything is encompassed by it. At this stage it might also be fruitful to shed light on the relationship between the all-expansive being and particular existents. In Walī Allāh's account:

One of them is the one being (*al-wujūd al-wāḥid*), which encompasses the structures of the existents (*ḥayākil al-mawjūdāt*), and is prior to particular existents. The particular existents are emanations and determinations that are [obtained] due to its [i.e. *al-wujūd al-munbasit*] generality (*li-'umūmihi*). The reality (*annīyya*)<sup>116</sup> of the relation between this [Being] and quiddities (*māhiyāt*), which are its [different] aspects and noetic forms (*al-ṣuwar al-'ilmīyya*) is known, while their howness (*kayfiyya*) remains unknown.<sup>117</sup>

According to Walī Allāh, the multiplicity of the cosmos is the result of the divine names that possess several modes of being, whose subsequent self-disclosures (*tajalliyāt*) bring actuality (*fi'liyya*) to all other entities:

The multiplicity of modes in the emanation of the world is due to the multiplicity of the names, which are sacred essences. Each of these [names] has its own aspect. All the consequents terminate at one [terminal] consequent, while all the [different] aspects end at one [final] aspect (*jīha*). This one aspect is not distinguished from the Necessary except by titles and tales, and not by the titled and the told. Thus every actuality is encompassed by the simple one, which is the Necessary, the Glorified.<sup>118</sup>

The question of multiplicity or its precise status vis-à-vis *waḥdat al-wujūd* is central to the disagreement between the proponents and the opponents of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Theologians such as Ibn Taymiyya and the ulama to whom Walī Allāh was responding believe that *waḥdat al-wujūd* implies obscuring all the distinctions between the *wujūd* of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), and that of the

115 Although the "tense" of the sentence suggests that this "act of descent" is a temporal event, in reality, it is an atemporal event.

116 Literally means "that-they-are."

117 Walī Allāh, *Tafhīmāt*, 2:268.

118 Walī Allāh, *al-Khayr al-kathīr*, 37.

cosmos and declaring the world identical with God. In a nutshell, they claim that the cosmos is reduced to He (as in the expression *hama ūst*), while it is *from* Him (as in *hama az ūst*). The arguments of Walī Allāh in the above accounts betray considerable evidence to refute such simplistic binaries concerning *waḥdat al-wujūd*. This issue was of paramount importance to the Muslim intellectuals including Walī Allāh, since if there is no difference between God and the world why would there be any need to worship Him or follow the Shariah? Thus we find Walī Allāh going at length to clarify the complex interrelationship between the Real and the cosmos. That is to say, the worldview of *waḥdat al-wujūd* safeguards the value of the Shariah, as it does not negate the multiplicity of the cosmos. In other words, the proponents of *waḥdat al-wujūd* do not claim that there is no distinction between God and the creatures, since this would render the Shariah devoid of substance. The source of all the controversies regarding *waḥdat al-wujūd* rests on this, i.e. whether or not God and the world are identical. For this reason, Walī Allāh is at pains to clarify the distinction between Absolute Being and the all-expansive being. Since *waḥdat al-wujūd* ultimately explores the God-world relationship, the *shahāda*, and God's transcendence, it would be suggestive to look at one of Walī Allāh's predecessors, namely Khwāja Khurd who explains all these matters masterfully in his treatise *Nūr-i waḥdat*. According to Khwāja Khurd, the oneness of *wujūd* can be understood as a commentary on Islam's basic creed "*lā ilāha illā-ʾllāh*:"

The path of invocation is as follows: "No god," that is, all things that are witnessed are not, in the sense that they are lost in the Oneness of the Essence and absorbed within Him. "But God," that is, the Oneness of the Essence is manifest in the form of these things and witnessed by the gaze. Hence the things are non-manifest in Him and He is manifest in the things. So he is both the manifest dimension of the things and their non-manifest dimension. In the things, there is nothing but the manifest and the non-manifest. Hence, the things are not the things; rather they are the Real. The names of things given to the things depend upon the viewpoint, and that also is identical with the Real.<sup>119</sup>

After explaining (in the above) how things can be both He/not He, Khwāja goes on to affirm God's supreme incomparability:

---

119 Khwāja Khurd, *Nūr-i waḥdat*, 162 as translated in Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*.

In one respect, He is incomparable with all interrelationships, and between the cosmos and the Real there is no interrelationship.<sup>120</sup>

As for the relationship between the Real and the cosmos, he states:

The relationship of the Real to the cosmos is like the relationship of water to snow, or rather, it must be considered even closer than that . . . The issuing forth and returning take place in eternity without beginning, eternity without end, and in all temporal moments, since at each moment the cosmos goes back to the Reality and comes out from the Reality, like the waves of the ocean.<sup>121</sup>

As for the true nature of the cosmos and how it comes about, he says:

The Real knew Himself through His own attributes (*ṣifāt*). These are the realities of the things. Then He showed Himself to Himself through those attributes. This is the cosmos. Where is the other? How should the other have come into existence?<sup>122</sup>

In Khwāja Khurd’s view, *tawḥīd* is the consummation of spiritual realization that makes one see that ultimately, “I and thou” are false categories that prevent the wayfarer from beholding the absolute truth. In other words, the illusion of duality disappears, and the one who professes *tawḥīd* is not other than the one whose *tawḥīd* is being professed:

*Tawḥīd* is the attribute of the One, not of the I or the you. As long as I and you remain, there is association, not *tawḥīd*.<sup>123</sup>

Finally, Khwāja Khurd meditates upon the memorable verses of ‘Aṭṭār’s *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, in order to reflect on the nature of spiritual journey and the true “identity” of the wayfarer:

---

120 Ibid., 165.

121 Ibid., 164.

122 Khwāja Khurd, *Nūr-i waḥdat*, 161.

123 Ibid., 167.

Thirty birds (*sī murgh*) set out looking for the Sīmurgh. When they reached the way station (*maqām*), they saw that they were the Sīmurgh (Griffin).<sup>124</sup>

## VI Conclusion

This study has analyzed the contested relationship between Sufism and the Shariah, and Walī Allāh's views on the problematic of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. It was argued that many a times the problem of Sufism "versus" Shariah emerges out of the assumption that both Sufism and the Shariah are mutually exclusive categories. It was also pointed out that sometimes the problem occurs for taking it granted that the Shariah is synonymous with *fiqh* or Islamic law, and represents an unchanging set of rules/dogmas. The textual evidence presented in this study, shows that Sufis themselves view the Shariah as inseparable from their spiritual itinerary, which is primarily based on the imitation of the prophetic model (*imitatio Muḥammad*). Moreover, as has been pointed out, many great Sufis were also well-versed in legal matters, and the person of Walī Allāh provides a good case in point for this. Some Sufis describe *taṣawwuf* as the inner reality of the Shariah while others see it as the inward dimension of Islam. The Sufis such as Walī Allāh identify the inward dimension of Islam with *taṣawwuf*, which they sometime call "*iḥsān*."<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, accepting *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not mean one is being less faithful to the tenets of the Shariah, which its detractors often allege. This confusion arises from the fact that in the eyes of the critics of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the latter means reducing the cosmos to God, which compromises the meaning of *tawḥīd*, i.e. God's oneness and transcendence. Indeed, if one were to believe in such an understanding of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, it would hardly make any sense to follow the rules and regulations of the Shariah, which includes, *inter alia*, worshipping God. That is the reason Walī Allāh spends considerable time explicating the correct version of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that safeguards God's transcendence and multiplicity of the cosmos, but at the same time makes clear that "real" *wujūd* belongs only to God and that contingent beings possess only "borrowed" *wujūd*.<sup>126</sup>

Walī Allāh's views on *waḥdat al-wujūd* are largely in line with that of the school of Ibn 'Arabī, although he seems to approach it from different angles. The

124 Ibid., 161. Cf. Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, *Mantiq al-tayr*, ed. M. J. Mashkūr (Tehran: n.p., 1337 sh.), 260ff.

125 See s.v. section III of the present study.

126 I.e. borrowed from God.

language of his exposition is rather obscure, which employs a whole gamut of technical terms to say much the same thing, as in the case of earlier members of the school of Ibn ‘Arabī—who, however, wrote more clearly than Walī Allāh (for instance, al-Qayṣarī). In Walī Allāh’s view, *waḥdat al-wujūd* refers to both the subjective and objective poles of being. In his view, some Sufis conflate the relationship between the Necessary and *al-wujūd al-munbasit*,<sup>127</sup> hence mistakenly take the cosmos for God, whereas in reality, it is God’s manifestation through the all-expansive being that encompasses the entire cosmos. In this way, Walī Allāh safeguards God’s transcendence vis-à-vis the world.

Understandably, *waḥdat al-wujūd* poses a dilemma to many: on the one hand it affirms that *wujūd* is one, while on the other it also seeks to maintain the Real’s transcendence. We are therefore caught forever in the stranglehold of He/not He.<sup>128</sup> Entities are “He” from the point of their “*wujūd*,” which implies that they are not non-existents. But at the same time, they cannot be “He” since they are “particularized” instances of *wujūd*, which implies that their being is localized and conditioned, whereas the Real’s *wujūd* is absolutely unconditioned beyond even “conditionality” itself.

---

127 See s.v. section v of the present study.

128 On He/not He, see p. 24. That is, the ontological status of the cosmos (including human beings) is ultimately ambiguous. One cannot ascribe “absolute” independence to it (for reasons described above), nor can one declare it God.