



A Critical Exposition of Ibn Arabi's Doctrine of Wahdat ul Wajood

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Abstract

Mohiuddin Ibn Arabi and Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi two leading thinkers of Islamic mystical tradition had a great impact on Islamic thought. Both of these thinkers focused on the nature of the divine, but on many issues their thinking were immensely different from each other and totally opposite. Nonetheless they both derive their ideological framework from the mystical folklore and philosophy of Islam. The role of the latter it appears was to purge Sufism from what he regarded as doctrines that were alien to the Quranic discourse. The philosophies of the two leading thinkers revolved around the concept of Wahdut ul Wajood in the case of Ibn Arabi and Wahdat ul Shuhud, a competing concept within Sufism, expounded by Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi. This is a descriptive expository paper in which the author is trying to present a critical exposition of the doctrine of Wahdat ul Wajood of Ibn Arabi.

Key words: Islam, Ibn Arabi, Sufism, Unity of God

Introduction:

Muhammad b. 'Ali Ibn Arabi is one of the great spiritual teacher, Mystic, philosopher, poet, and sage, of his time. He was born in 1165 AD into the Moorish culture of Andalusian Spain, the center of an extraordinary flourishing and cross-fertilization of Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought, through which the major scientific and philosophical works of antiquity were transmitted to Northern Europe.

Ibn Arabi's doctrine of Wahdat ul Wajud is one of the most celebrated as well as most controversial doctrine of Islamic philosophy. Different scholars treats him differently. Some scholars charged him with infidelity (kufr) at least with unorthodoxy. Others who grasp his real intention uphold him as a great mystic and a man of God. And there are others who suspend their judgment on him on the ground that he spoke in a language which is far beyond their



comprehension. They have nothing to say against his moral or religious life, for this, they hold, was beyond reproach.

Although his focus was mainly in the field of Sufism but his writings seem to have covered the entire range of Muslim scholarship. He wrote on the theory and practice of Sufism, Hadith, Qur'anic exegesis, the biography of the Prophet, philosophy, literature, including Sufi poetry, and natural sciences. In dealing with these diverse subjects he never lost sight of mysticism. He took a problem which is very difficult to solve, i.e., to reconcile a pantheistic theory of the nature of reality with the monotheistic doctrine of Islam. His loyalty to both was equal, and indeed he saw no contradiction in holding that the God of Islam is identical with the One who is the essence and ultimate ground of all things. (Sharif, p.402)

He is forever trying either to interpret the whole fabric of the teaching of Islam in the light of his pantheistic theory of the unity of all being, or to find justification for this theory in some Islamic texts. Both of these methods go hand in hand, with two different languages, i.e., the esoteric language of mysticism and the exoteric language of religion, used concurrently. (Sharif, p.402)

Wahdat ul Wajud as explained by Ibn Arabi, recognizes the existence of only One Being, and negating the existence of all other Beings except God. As its name suggested, "Wahdut ul Wajud" means there is only One Being that is God and the physical world is a manifestation of the One Being. Nothing exists beside the One Being. The essential components of the philosophy of Wahdat ul Wajud can be summarised as follows:

1. Unity of All Being: The most fundamental principle which lies at the root of ibn 'Arabi's whole philosophy, or rather theologico-philosophical and mystical thought, is the principle of the "Unity of All Being" (wahdal alwujud). Basically his doctrine of Wahdat-al Wujud is an extension of the Islamic doctrine of Tawhid, the Oneness of God. From the concept that 'there exists but one God', he takes us to the profession that 'there is nothing in existence except God' (Hussain, 1957, p.50). According to him, Being is one it is that which exists. This being is God. Everything else is his manifestation. Hence the world is identical with God. The identity of the world and God is conceived on the basis of the identity of his existence and essence or the substance and attributes, the world being only a manifestation of his attributes.



His ideas are pantheistic in nature. But Ibn 'Arabi's pantheism is not a materialistic view of reality. The external world of sensible objects is but a fleeting shadow of the Real (Haqq) God. It is a form of acosmism which denies that the phenomenal has being or meaning apart from and independently of God. It is not that cold-blooded pantheism in which the name of God is mentioned for sheer courtesy, or, at the most, for logical necessity or consistency. On the contrary, it is the sort of pantheism in which God swallows up everything, and the so-called other-than-God is reduced to nothing. God alone is the all-embracing and eternal reality. (Sharif, p.410) As Ibn Arabi says:

"Thou Who hast created all things in Thyself, Thou unitest that which Thou createst. Thou createst that which existeth infinitely In Thee, for Thou art the narrow and the all-embracing." (Ibn Arabi, Fusus, p. 88.)

Hence, Ibn Arabi believes that Reality is one and indivisible. We speak of God and the world, the One and the many, Unity and multiplicity, and such other terms when we use the language of the senses and the unaided intellect. The intuitive knowledge of the mystic reveals nothing but absolute unity which curiously enough. He identifies with the Muslim doctrine of unification (tauhid) and further and more daring identification of his pantheistic doctrine with Islam as the religion of unification.

Therefore, like Spinoza ibn 'Arabi also believes in an essential unity of substance but at the same time affirms a duality also in so far as it has two differentiating attributes i.e. Haqq (God) and khalq (universe). It can be regarded from two different aspects. In itself it is the undifferentiated and Absolute Being which transcends all spatial and temporal relations. It is a bare monad of which nothing can be predicated or known, if by knowledge we mean the apprehension of a thing through our senses and discursive reason. To know in this sense is to determine that which is known; and determination is a form of limitation which is contrary to the nature of the Absolute. The Absolute Monad is the most indeterminate of all indeterminates (anhar alnakirat); the thing-in-itself (al-shai) as ibn 'Arabi calls it. (Sharif, p.411)

On the other hand, we can view reality as we know it; and we know it invested with divine names and attributes. In other words, we know it in the multiplicity of its manifestations which make up what we call the phenomenal world. So, by knowing ourselves and the phenomenal world in general, we know reality of which they are particular modes. Ibn Arabi believes that



‘through this phenomenal world and His attributes God describes Himself. We are His names, or His external aspects. Our essences are His essence and this constitutes His internal aspect. Hence reality is One and many; Unity and multiplicity; eternal and temporal; transcendent and immanent. It is capable of receiving and uniting in itself all conceivable opposites’. "He is called the First and the Last: the External and the Internal. He is the Essence of what is manifested and of that which remains latent. . . . The Inward says no when the Outward says I am; and the Outward says no when the Inward says I am, and so in the case of every pair of contraries. The speaker is One, and He is identical with the Hearer." (Ibn Arabi, Fusus, p.77)

Thus, ibn 'Arabi's thought goes on moving within that closed circle which knows no beginning and no end. His thought is circular because reality as he envisages it is circular. Every point on the circle is potentially the whole of the circle and is capable of manifesting the whole. Looking at the points with an eye on the center of the circle (the divine essence), we can say that each point is identical with the essence in one respect, different from it in another respect. (Sharif, p. 412)

For Ibn Arabi, Being is identical with attributes, and attributes express themselves in manifestations or modes which are the world and its objects. He holds that relation between the world and God is one of identity. In bringing out this identification he proceeds either from the negation of the world or from the affirmation of God. Proceeding from the negation of the world, Ibn Arabi holds that the world as such is merely nominal, unreal, imaginary, objectively non-existent, and that God alone exists. The world exists only as the modes of the unity as his modes. It has no existence of its own. Proceeding from the side of God, Ibn 'Arabi maintains that the world is God. It is the modes in which the unity has differentiated itself. These modes exhaust the unity wholly.

He affirms that The One reveals Himself in the many, as an object is revealed in different mirrors, each mirror reflecting an image determined by its nature and its capacity as a recipient. Or it is like a source of light from which an infinite number of lights are derived. Or like a substance which penetrates and permeates the forms of existing objects: thus, giving them their meaning and being. Or it is like a mighty sea on the surface of which we observe countless waves forever appearing and disappearing. The eternal drama of existence is nothing but this ever-renewed creation (al-khalq al-jadid) which is in reality a perpetual process of self-



revelation. Or again, he might say, the One is the real Being and the phenomenal world is its shadow having no reality in itself. (Sharif , p.413)

Therefore, Ibn Arabi believes that this duality and multiplicity are illusory. They are due to our incapacity to perceive the essential unity of things. But this oscillation between unity and duality is due to confusing the epistemic side of the issue with its ontological side. Ontologically, there is but one reality. Epistemically, there are two aspects: a reality which transcends the phenomenal world, and a multiplicity of subjectivities that find their ultimate explanation in the way we view reality as we know it. To our limited senses and intellects the external world undergoes a process of perpetual change and transformation. We call this creation but it is in fact a process of self-unveiling of the One Essence which knows no change. (Sharif , p.413)

2. Notion of Deity: Like Spinoza Ibn Arabi's pantheism is also distinguished from the naturalistic philosophy of the Stoics and the materialistic atheists. God that figures in his metaphysics as an unknowable and incommunicable reality, beyond thought and description, appears in his theology as the object of belief, love, and worship. The warmth of religious sentiment displayed in his writings attaches itself to his conception of God in the latter sense which comes close to the monotheistic conception of Islam. Indeed he tries his utmost to reconcile the two conceptions; but his God is not in the strict religious sense confined to Islam or any other creed. He is not the ethical and personal God of religion, but the essence of all that is worshipped and loved in all religions:

"God has ordained that ye shall worship naught but Him." (Cited in Sharif , p.413)

This is interpreted by ibn 'Arabi to mean that God has decreed that nothing is actually worshipped except Him. This is an open admission of all kinds of worship, so long as the worshippers recognize God behind the external "forms" of their gods. They call their gods by this or that name, but the gnostic. (Cited in Sharif , p.413)

Particular objects of worship are creations of men's minds, but God, the Absolute, is uncreated. We should not, therefore, confine God to any particular form of belief to the exclusion of other forms, but acknowledge Him in all forms alike. To limit Him to one form—as the Christians



have done—is infidelity (kufr)-, and to acknowledge Him in all forms is the spirit of true religion. This universal religion which preaches that all worshipped objects are forms of One Supreme Deity is the logical corollary of ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical theory that reality is ultimately one. But it has its deep roots in mysticism rather than in logic. It is nowhere better expressed than in the following verse:

"People have different beliefs about God But I behold all that they believe."
(Ibn Arabi, Futuhat, Vol. III, p. 175.)

As he wrote in Tarjuman al-Ashwaq:

And the verse: " My heart has become the receptacle of every 'form'; It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks. And a temple for idols, and pilgrims' Ka'bah, And the Tablets of the Torah, and the Book of the Qur'an. I follow the religion of love whichever way its camels take, for this is my religion and my faith." (Nicholson, 1911, pp. 30-40.)

So, all paths lead to one straight path which leads to God. But it does not mean that Ibn Arabi approves of the worship of stones and stars and other idols, for these as far as his philosophy is concerned are non-existent or mere fabrications of the human mind. The real God is not a tangible object but one who reveals Himself in the heart of the gnostic. There alone He is beheld.

Thus Ibn Arabi believes that God, as an object of worship, therefore, resides in the heart as the supreme object of love. He is not the efficient cause of the philosophers or the transcendent God of the Mu'tazilites. As Quran says "He is in the heart of His servant and is nearer to him than his jugular vein. "My heaven and my earth contain Me not," says the Prophetic tradition, "but I am contained in the heart of My servant who is a believer".

3. God and Man: It was Husain b. Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 309/922) who first laid down the foundation for the theory of Perfect Man in Islamic literature. Later on this theory of perfect man played a very important role in the history of Islamic mysticism. Mansur's theory was a theory of incarnation based on the Jewish tradition which states that "God created Adam in His own image"—a tradition which the Sufis attributed to the Prophet. He distinguished between two natures in man: the divine (al-lahut) and the human (al-nasut). The two natures are not united but fused, the one into the other, as wine is fused into water. Thus for the first time in



the history of Islam a divine aspect of man was recognized, and man was regarded as a unique creature not to be compared with any other creature on account of his divinity. (Sharif, p.415)

Ibn Arabi took the Mansur's idea of perfect man but completely transformed it and gave a wider application to this. First, he believes that the duality of *Lahut* and *Nasut* is actually a duality of aspects of one reality, not of two independent natures. Secondly, they were regarded as actually present not only in man but in everything whatever; the *Nasut* being the external aspect of a thing, the *Lahut*, its internal aspect. But God who reveals Himself in all phenomenal existence is revealed in a most perfect and complete way in the form of the perfect man, who is best represented by prophets and saints. (Sharif, p.415)

So man in general—and the perfect man in particular—is the most perfect manifestation of God. The universe which, like a mirror, reflects the divine attributes and names in a multiplicity of forms, manifests them separately or analytically. Man alone manifests these attributes and names collectively or synthetically. Hence he is called the microcosm and the honoured epitome (*al-mukhtasar al-sharif*) and the most universal being (*al-kaun al-jami'*), who comprises all realities and grades of existence. In him alone the divine presence is reflected, and through him alone God becomes conscious of Himself and His perfection. (Sharif, p.416)

According to Ibn Arabi, God is the Reality and the world is his adumbration. But adumbration is the appearance of Reality. It is Reality appearing, manifesting itself. Hence the world is identical with God. As to the relation between man and God, Ibn 'Arabi maintains that the relation between God and man is that of identity, of immanence, of nearness. Really, nearness means nothing other than the fact that God Himself is the very essence of the limbs and parts of man. That means that man possesses all the attributes of God. In fact it is His attributes that are manifested in man. They are bodily there in man. That is why it is said that one who is cognizant of his own self comes to be cognizant of his God."

Criticism of Ibn e Arabi

The controversy about his religious beliefs started when Jamal al-Din b. al-Khayyat from the Yemen made an appeal to the Muslim scholars and theologians of different parts of the Muslim world, asking them to give their opinion on ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of *Wahdatul Wajud*. He describes the doctrine of Ibn Arabi as heretical beliefs and contrary to the consensus of the



Muslim community. The reaction caused by the appeal was extraordinarily wide-ranging. Some writers condemned ibn 'Arabi right out; others defended him with great zeal. Of this latter class we may mention Firuzabadi, Siraj al-Din alMakhzumi, al-Siraj al-Balqini, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, Qutb al-Din al-Hamawi, al-Qutb al-Shirazi, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and many others. Both Makhzumi and Suyuti wrote books on the subject. They could see no fault with ibn 'Arabi except that he was misunderstood by people who were not of his spiritual rank. Suyuti puts him in a rank higher than that of Junaid when he says that he was the instructor of the Gnostics ('arifin) while Junaid was the instructor of the initiates (muridin). All these men are unanimous in according to ibn 'Arabi the highest place both in learning and spiritual leadership. They recognize in his writings a perfect balance between Skart'ah (religious Law) and Haqiqah (the true spirit of the Law), or between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of Islam. (Sharif, p.406)

The greatest opposition appeared in the eighth and ninth/fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when an open war was declared against speculative Sufism in general and that of ibn 'Arabi and ibn al-Farid in particular. The Hanbalite ibn Taimiyyah (d. 728/1328), with his bitter tongue and uncompromising attitude towards the Sufis, led the attack. He put these two great mystics in the same category with Hallaj, Qunawi, ibn Sab'in, Tilimsani, and Kirmani as men who believed in incarnation and unification. In this respect, he said, they were even worse than the Christians and the extreme Shi'ites.

He does not even distinguish between the mystical ravings of Mansur, the deeply emotional utterances of ibn al-Farid, the cold-blooded and almost materialistic pantheism of Tilimsani, and the monistic theology of ibn 'Arabi. They were all guilty of the abominable doctrines of incarnationism and pantheism. Curiously enough, he was less violent in his criticism of ibn 'Arabi's doctrine which, he said, was nearer Islam than any of the others. By far the worst enemy of ibn 'Arabi and ibn al-Farid and most insolent towards them was Burhan al-Din Ibrahim al-Biq'a'i (d. 858/1454). He devoted two complete books to the refutation of their doctrines, not sparing even their personal characters. In one of these books entitled Tanbth al-Gkabi 'aia Takfir ibn 'Arabi (Drawing the Attention of the Ignorant to the Infidelity of ibn 'Arabi) he says:



"He deceived the true believers by pretending to be one of them. He made his stand on the ground of their beliefs; but gradually dragged them into narrow corners, and led them by seduction to places where perplexing questions are lurking. He is the greatest artist in confusing people; quotes authentic traditions of the Prophet, then twists them around in strange and mysterious ways. Thus, he leads his misguided followers to his ultimate objective which is the complete overthrowing of all religion and religious beliefs. The upholders of such doctrines hide themselves behind an outward appearance of Muslim ritual such as prayer and fasting. They are in fact atheists in the cloaks of monks and ascetics, and veritable heretics under the name of Sufis."¹⁹ (Sharif, p.407)

But the most constructive criticism of Ibn Arabi's doctrine comes in the form of Shykh Ahmed Sirhindi's doctrine of Wahdat ul Shahud. His prime concern was to integrate his Sufi ideas with a Sunni framework. He accepted most of al Arabi's teachings but with a change and advocated the concept of Wahdat al-Shuhud (unity of witness) over Ibn Al-Arabi's Wahdat al-Wujud (unity of being). According to him believers had to realise that "Everything is from God" rather than "Everything is God." However, his interpretation did not replace Wahdat al-Wujud except that his emphasis "on obedience to shariah and Sunnah as a means of achieving spiritual realization. It was widely accepted by the Naqshbandiyah and was carried by his successors into Central Asia, Turkey, and the Arab lands, where it has been a source of inspiration.

Shaykh has condemned the wrong way of thinking about the saints. A separate portion of his letters explains this philosophy. In this respect he has dealt mostly with "Wahdat-ul-wajood". He is also an admirer of Shaykh Ibne Arabi. Shaykh has presented his admiration of the works of Shaykh Ibne arabi as well as his theory of "Wahdat-ul-shahood". "Wahdat-ul-wajood" believes in oneness of Allah Almighty and the mortality of all the living beings except Him. Besides, it also demands to believe and understand Allah Almighty's miracles and demonstrations. It is a kind of "Ilmul-yakeen" while "Toheed-i-Mashoodi" is to believe in oneness of Allah Almighty, It is called "Ain-ul-yakeen". (Sirhindi, Maktubat, L. No. 43) Shaykh has called "Toheed-i-Wajoodi" a basic requirement for the destination and "Maqam-e-abdiat" as a destination, which is an outcome of "Toheed-I-Shahudi". After going through a deep study of Wajoodi philosophy, he has explained its impact on the individuals and



collectively on the society that a man is not free from the restrictions of the Shariah and there is not any system contrary to “Tariqah and Shariah” but it is an interpretation by implementing the spirit of Shariah. Shaykh has elaborated forcefully sharah-o-bast about the drama of Hulul (Incarnation) of the saints of his age. (Sirhindi, Maktubat, L. No. 43)

Usually “Wajoodi and Shahudi” philosophy is not given much importance than mere a philosophy and school of thought by the researchers. If Shaykh’s philosophy and school of thought is analyzed, one thing is very clear that this is not only a theory but also a hidden power that has its effect on the thinking and actions of a man. Shaykh was well aware of the political and social deviation on the basis of “Wajoodi philosophy” that is why he has struck a heavy blow on this philosophy. He has paved the way for a positive change on both levels in it.

Hence, Much of the criticism levelled against ibn 'Arabi's position is due to the misunderstanding of the role which he assigns to God in his system— a fact which attracted the attention of even ibn Taimiyyah, who distinguishes between ibn 'Arabi's wahdat al-Wujud and that of other Muslim pantheists. He says that "ibn 'Arabi's system is nearer to Islam in so far as he discriminates between the One who reveals Himself and the manifestations thereof, thus establishing the truth of the religious Law and insisting on the ethical and theological principles upon which the former Shaikhs of Islam had insisted." In other words, ibn Taimiyyah does not wish to put ibn 'Arabi in the same category with Tilimsani, Isra'ili, and Kirmani whom he condemns as atheists and naturalists. (Sharif, p.415)

Conclusion:

These accusations are unjust as they are unfounded. Ibn 'Arabi, it is true, does interpret the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions in an esoteric manner, and he is not the first or the last Sufi to do it, but his ultimate aim is never the abandonment of religious beliefs and practices. On the contrary, he did his utmost to save Islam which he understood in his own way. The charge of pretense and hypocrisy is contradicted by the bold and fearless language in which ibn 'Arabi chooses to express himself. He does not pretend to be a Muslim in order to please or avoid the wrath of true believers.



He believes that Islam which preaches the principle of the unity of God could be squared with his doctrine of the unity. He may have deceived himself or expressed the mystical union with God in terms of the metaphysical theory of the unity between God and the phenomenal world, but he certainly tried to deceive no one. As famous Muslim scholar Balqini who had the highest opinion of Ibn 'Arabi says:

"You should take care not to deny anything that Shaikh Muhyi al-Din has said, when he—may God have mercy upon him—plunged deep into the sea of gnosis and the verification of truths, mentioned towards the end of his life in the *Fusus*, the *Futuhdt*, and the *Tanazzul*—things which are fully understood only by people of his rank." (Cited in Sharif, p.408)

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