

# An Analytic Philosophical Approach to the Concept of Ultimate Reality (Wahdat Al Wajud)

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## Abstract

*The doctrine of wahdat-ul-wujud has received a lot of debate and criticism over the years yet still remains popular amongst the Sufi circles. Every religion creates a relationship between man and his God. Believing in sharing the essence with the Divine contradicts everything we know as humans. The concept of wahdat –ul- wujud in the light of Sufi writings needs to be elaborated to understand. The aim of the study is to investigate how can the different aspects of wahdat-ul-wujud in Sufi writings be compromised to achieve a point of reconciliation. This is a qualitative research. Both descriptive and analytical approaches have been employed during this research. Content analysis was carried out by means of library research. The sources used were Quran, Sunnah and Classical jurist's books and Sufi literature. This research is significant because the relationship of God with His creation will always be debated. It also brings forth the purpose of creation of this world. The results of the research only clarify the concept about the wahdat – ul-wujud in the light of Sufi teachings but also analyzed wahdat al wujud as a practical approach towards achieving religious excellence or merely an innovation that might lead thousands to their destruction.*

*Keywords: wahdat-ul-wujud, Sufi circles, reconciliation, elaborated to understand.*

## The Literal Concept of Wahdat-ul-Wujud

The word wahdat is from weḥdah (وحدة) meaning oneness; unit, used as a technical term in philosophy and theology with these meanings, though not occurring in the Quran. In grammar, the genitive construct Ism al; 'noun of unity" forms the counterpart to Ism al-djins generic noun. Wujud, in philosophy refers to being *mutliq*.

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In mysticism, it is a verbal noun derived from wadjada to find or to experience"-WADJD<sup>3</sup> Wahdat ul wujud is commonly understood to be "Unity of Being". Marijan Mole exposes the issue of the term Wujud being translated correctly because Arabic being a semitic language has no verb to express "to be". SO the term wujud commonly translated as "being" or "existence", in truth means "finding" or "to be found". At the end of the path, only God is present, is found.<sup>4</sup> So wahdat ul wujud is not just "Unity of being" but also the unity of existentialization. Wujud and existence is gained by "being found".

The Philosophical Concept of Wahdat-al-Wujud

***According to Wali Allah; "The meaning of wahdat ul wujud in the mystical context is that the mystic is so absorbed in the contemplation of the All Embracing Existence of which the world is a determination that distinctions and differences vanish which form the basis of our knowledge of good and evil, and which the Shar and reason categorically affirm and fully elaborate. This is the stage where the mystic stays unless God takes them beyond. Wahdat ul shuhud on the other hand, means in this context the consciousness both of the oneness and difference, that is the consciousness that things are one in one sense and multiple in another. This stage is higher and more perfect than the former."***<sup>5</sup>

Early Sufis had a great interest in dualism of soul and matter. They believed that the soul, which is present in each being emanates from God. So for them purpose of life was to integrate their soul with the Divine soul (God) so that 'I' becomes 'Thou'. The Sufis believed that by invoking God by any one of his many names while performing zikr or dhikr (remembrance), they could cleanse their respective souls (tazkiyat-i-ruh) and thereby work out their effacement (fana) in to God and achieve lasting survival (baqa) in Him.<sup>6</sup> Sufism is primarily concerned with the internal state of the soul. Many writers have characterized Sufism as the code of the heart (fiqh al batin) or the purification of the soul (tazkiyat al-nafs), or the feeling of God's presence (al- ihsan).<sup>7</sup> Sufism is also seen as a quest for reality, an enlightenment or gnosis. The philosophical minded scholars supported this view like Al-Ghazali and Ibn I- Arabi. Maruf I-Kharkhi defines Sufism as

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<sup>3</sup> TC Rastogi, *Sufism, A Dictionary with Profiles of Saints-Poets* (Lahore:Vanguard Books,1990),73

<sup>4</sup> Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Lahore: Sang e Meel Publications,2003),267

<sup>5</sup> Wali Allah, *Al-Tafhimat 'l-Ilahiyah*(Hyderabad:Pakistan,1967) VI. II, pp. 263

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari;*Sufism and Shariah* (Liecester: The Islamic Foundation,1986)p.31

<sup>7</sup> Ibid,33.

“The apprehension of Divine realities.”<sup>8</sup> Yet the third approach to Sufism which is vital to the concept and understanding of wahdat-ul- wujud is to define it in terms of fana and baqa. Junayd referred to it when he said: *“Tasawwuf is that God makes you die to yourself and live by Him.”*<sup>9</sup> Al-Shibli described it as; *“Tasawwuf is to rise above the perception of the world.”* Jami explains it as; *“Walayat means the effacement(fana) of man in God and his survival(baqa) in Him.”*<sup>10</sup> Fana literally means to die and disappear, and baqa means to live and survive. In Sufi context, fana<sup>an</sup> means to abstain from something, to forget and to be unconscious of it; baqa bi means to be occupied with something, live in it or by it. One kind of fana and baqa is to refrain from vice and practice virtue; another kind is to shrink from violating the commands of God and obey His will. Yet another kind, which is crucial to Sufism is an affective experience. This experience can be attained through a particular process which Wali Allah has described in his al-Qawl'l-Jamil as having three major Sufi orders, the Qadririyah, the Chistiyah and the Naqshbandiyah. The orders are agreed upon the basic principle even though differ in details.<sup>11</sup>

A Sufi aspirant begins with a preparatory phase in which he needs to set his beliefs right, discard evil habits, avoid big sins and abstain from small ones to the best of his abilities. He has to perform his obligatory prayers and other duties which the Shariah has placed on him and follow the Sunnah. At the next stage, the aspirant begins dhikr with loud voice by saying the name of God with one stroke. That is, he should say ‘Allah’ loudly, stretch the word as he pronounces, and do it with all force of his heart and throat. He should then pause, regain breath and repeat ‘Allah’. This practice has to be continued for some time before moving onto the next stage where he has to say ‘Allah’ with two strokes. He is recommended to sit as he does in Salat and say Allah pointing first to the right knee and then to the heart. While striking at his heart, he should do it with full force, so that his heart feels the effect and his mind attains concentration. Afterwards the dhikr is repeated with three or four strokes. This is followed by the dhikr of negation and affirmation, that is he should say la illaha illa Allah{There is no god(negation) except Allah (affirmation)}. While repeating these words the aspirant should focus that nothing in this world is worth desiring and loving, nor anything at all exist. God alone is to be sought and loved, and He alone exists.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid,32.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid,33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid,33.

<sup>12</sup> W.B.S Rabbani, Islamic Sufism(Lahore; Bazam-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen,1990),285.

The purpose of these dhikr is to concentrate attention on God, ignite His love and make him the sole object of one's longing<sup>13</sup>. It is believed that if a Sufi says them four thousand times every day and night, he is sure to feel their effect within two months. After achieving it, he is advised to take up silent dhikr in which the eyes and mouth is closed and he has to say it in his heart; 'Allah is hearing', 'Allah is seeing', 'Allah is knowing', raising the words from his navel to his heart, to his brain and then to the throne of God. The second time, the order will be reversed beginning from the throne of God, going to the brain, to the heart and then to the navel. Gradually the Sufi will devote himself exclusively to God. Then follows the stage of meditation (muraqabah) The Sufi meditates on 'Allah is before me', 'Allah sees me', 'Allah is with me'. Some meditate on the Quranic verse 'He is with you wherever you are'<sup>14</sup> or „whichever way you turn is the face of Allah"<sup>15</sup>, or „We are nearer to him than his jugular vein".<sup>16</sup> These meditations produce absorption in God.

However when the Sufi meditates on „Everything on the earth will perish, only the face of your Lord, the Glorious and Majestic will survive,<sup>17</sup> then he completely loses interest in this world and becomes absorbed in God in a state of intoxication (sukr) and effacement (mahw). The Sufis go as far as to imagine they are dead, reduced to ashes that are blown about by the wind, that the heavens have split, and everything has disintegrated and vanished, and that only God is there. Anyone who persists in this meditation for some time will forget himself and obtain complete effacement. This is the beginning of fana.<sup>18</sup>

According to M. Abdul Haq Ansari, fana and baqa are two sides of the same experience. From one side it is the negation of the mystic: negation of his will, his attributes, his self-consciousness and his being and from another angle it is the union with God and assimilation in Him.<sup>19</sup> The mystics claim that there are two levels of union. One at which the mystic experiences oneness with God but at the same time is conscious of his difference from Him. This is called the stage of union (maqam-i-jam). But on the next level, the mystic loses consciousness of difference and is

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<sup>13</sup> W.B.S Rabbani, *Islamic Sufism*(Lahore; Bazam-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen,1990),285.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Quran57:4

<sup>15</sup> Ibid,2:115

<sup>16</sup> Ibid,50:16

<sup>17</sup> Ibid,28:88

<sup>18</sup> <sup>30</sup> Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari; *Sufism and Shariah* (Liecester: The Islamic Foundation,1986)p.35

<sup>19</sup> Ibid,36.

only aware of One Being beyond difference and distinction. This stage is called stage of absolute union by Sufis (jam l-jam, literally „union of union“). Al- Ghazali describes this absolute union in the following words:

“When the gnostic reach the height of experience they testify without exception that they do not see anything in existence except the One Real Being (al-Haqq). For some, this is an intellectual realization. For others, however it becomes a matter of affective experience (hal- an wa dhawq-an); plurality vanishes for them altogether. They are absorbed into Pure Unity (al-fadaniyat l-mahdah), losing their intellects completely, stunned and bewildered. They are no more conscious of anything other than God, nor even themselves. Nothing exists for them except God ;as a result they exclaim in a state of intoxication (sukr) which removes the control of reason. One of them said: ‘I am God’; another said ‘Glory be to me, how great I am’; a third said: ‘There is none in these clothes except God’. When this experience overwhelms the mystic it is called extinction (fana), rather extinction of extinction (fana l-fana). For he becomes unconscious of himself and unconscious of his unconsciousness (fana), because he is not aware of himself in this state, nor of his forgetfulness of himself. For if he was aware of his self-forgetfulness, he would have been aware of himself. This state is called unification (itihad) in the language of metaphor (majaz), and in the language of reality (al- haqiqah) affirmation of unity (tawhid)”<sup>20</sup>

### **Historical Background of Wahdat al Wujud**

In Sufi circles, all doctrines are related to the Divine name Allah. Islamic mysticism aims to achieve salvation through true tawhid. Sufis believe that wahdat ul wujud has its origins in Qura’nic passages and the Sunnah of the Prophet.<sup>21</sup> The verses are:

*It is not ye who slew them; it was God: when thou threwest (a handful of dust), it was not thy act, but God's: in order that He might test the Believers by a gracious trial from Himself: for God is He Who hearth and knoweth (all things). (Anfal 8:17)*<sup>22</sup>

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَمَنْ نَكَثَ فَإِنَّمَا يَنْكُثُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِمَا عَاهَدَ عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ فَمَآ يُوْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا (10).

*Verily those who plight their fealty to thee do no less than plight their fealty to Allah: the Hand of Allah is over their hands: then any one who violates his oath, does so to the harm of his own soul, and anyone*

<sup>20</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Mishkat l-Anwar*, ed.A.E.Affiffi(Cairo:Darul Quwamiya,1964),58.

<sup>21</sup> AnneMarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*(Lahore: Sang e Meel Publications,2003),24.

<sup>22</sup> Al Quran 8:17 Translation by Yousaf Ali

who fulfils what he has covenanted with Allah,- Allah will soon grant him a great Reward.(48:10)<sup>23</sup>

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعَلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ (16)

*“It was We who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than his jugular vein. “(Qaf 50:16)*

The hadith e qudsi that they quote are, God the All-Mighty says, "O man! I was ill, but you didn't visit me." Man says, "My Lord! You are the Lord of all the realms, how can I visit You?" God says, "Do you not know that so- and-so of my servants got ill, but you did not visit him. If you had visited him, you would have found Me with him."<sup>24</sup>

*God the All-Mighty says: "My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties that I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, his foot with which he walks"<sup>25</sup>*

During the early centuries, the Muslim intellectuals were divided into the Ulema(pure theologians) and jurists and those who treat religion with great devotion. Sufi doctrines and practices were inspired by the activities of individuals who themselves were influenced by the earliest Sufi believers. They were known as ascetics (zuhhad) during the first two centuries. The wife of the Prophet, Hazrat Khadijah and Hazrat Ali were considered amongst the early Sufis. The patriarch of the Muslim mysticism Hassan al-Basri warned people about the futility of this world and to beware of the final reckoning.<sup>26</sup>

A doctrine of gnosis (marifa) which was related to an inner experiential knowledge was developed. The unity of God was transformed through the Sufi mystical experience into union with God. Sufis circulated the doctrine that God is the only true existence and that stimulated the faith that God is the single reality of entirety. The twelfth century saw a turning point in the history of Sufism. There was wide-spread recognition of the theory of wahdat al wujud. The basic article of Muslim faith “La-illah-Illa-l-laha”; there is no god but God, began to be rendered by the Sufis, as there is nothing but God. For them, everything became God, and God became everything and matter came to be considered as emanation from God.<sup>27</sup>

Mohiuddin Ibn Arabi and Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi were the two prominent thinkers of Islam’s mystical practice. Their teachings and philosophies focused on the divine nature but they differed vastly in their

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<sup>23</sup> Al Quran 48:10 Translation by Yousaf Ali

<sup>24</sup> Sahih Muslim, Hadith of Birr

<sup>25</sup> Sahih Bukhari. Hadith of Riqaq

<sup>26</sup> Ibid,30.

<sup>27</sup> Shahid, A. Chaudhary, *Sufism is Not Islam*, (Regency Publication, New Delhi, 1998), p. 42.

understanding and principles. Sirhindi wanted to cleanse the Sufism from what he regarded as the doctrine that was unfamiliar to the Quranic discourse. The major ideas in Sufism revolve around the concept of wahdat or unity with God". Wahdat-al-wujud, (Unity of Being) essentially states that in God lives everything and God lives in every-thing and wahdat-al- Shuhud also known as unity of witness holds that God is separate from His creation. He is transcendent. A few Islamic scholars have claimed that the two doctrines differ only in semantics and that the discussion is only an assortment of spoken arguments which have come about because of the confusing language. Still the relationship between divine and non divine is constantly under debate in the Sufi and non Sufi circles as well.<sup>28</sup>

Ibn-i-Arabi was not the first one to derive the concept but he managed to merge varying Sufi views on Reality and re-oriented them in a sound and coherent manner. He was celebrated by the title sheikh-al-Akbar, the (Greatest Sheikh). He wrote brilliant mystical poetry in Arabic. His great work al- futuhat-al-Makkiyyah, (Meccan Victories or Discourses) and the Fusus-al-Hikam (Bazels of Wisdom) are overwhelmingly philosophical. Jalal-al-Din Rumi was also inspired by his ideas.<sup>29</sup> The distinctive tendency of the Sufis to disregard outward traditionalism with Islamic law (Al-Shariah), and their extreme exclamations made them obnoxious to the orthodox. It was Abu-Hamid al-Ghazali who finally aligned the Sufi doctrine with formal framework of Islam. Later on Ibn Arabi came forward with his doctrine that the being of all things is God: there is nothing except Him. He argued for the doctrine of wahdat- al-wujud.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that the doctrine of wahdat ul wujud has no footing either on religious grounds or rational ones. The Quranic verses and ahadith given in its support are debatable and do not support wahdat ul wujud in explicit terms. Similarly the notion is as alien to the human intellect as is the idea of Jesus being God's son (God forbid). The doctrine is expressed in such a philosophical language that it might even puzzle the best of the philosophers themselves and the ideas are far-fetched. No doubt, Ibn Arabi was a man of good intent, with extraordinary imagination and even Ibn Taymmyyah failed to find fault with his character. Yet humans are all prone to errors and that's what this doctrine is. It has the potential to destroy the concept of Creator as we know it. It glorifies man beyond everything. May Allah forgive everyone for error of judgments'. Most importantly it has been discovered that the words of ecstasy of the Sufi saints must not be used as a basis for validating this doctrine of wahdat ul wujud. They are songs of rapture of men who lost themselves in the love of God. When Beyazid said "Glory be to Me!"

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<sup>28</sup> Shahid, F.H., Seminar Paper: Family of the Heart Seminar, Ibn-al-Arabi and Sirhindi, (June 2005), p. 01.

<sup>29</sup> Rizvi, A. Abbas, *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. II, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pub: 1983), p. 103.

he was not calling himself God. He was rather repeating after God and forgot to mention “God says; Glory be to Me”. Such utterances must be understood in the sense they are made and not confused with a formal doctrine that reduces everything to Oneness. To say that wahdat ul wujud existed long before Ibn Arabi presented it with this name would be inappropriate. As a matter of fact, the Sufi scholars like Beyazid, Junayd, Hallaj, Ghazali and others were not advocates of wahdat ul wujud. They were lovers of God who may have made statements that portray their inclination towards wahdat ul wujud. But in truth, they loved one God but held God and the world to be separate. They neither came forward with such doctrines nor encouraged such behaviour. What they felt was personal, their devotion was for themselves.

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