

## Ahmad Sirhindî's Criticism of Wahdat Al-Wujûd and its Historical Background

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### A. Introduction

The doctrine of wahdat al-wujûd (the unity of being), which was put forward in the work of Ibn 'Arabî (d.638/1240), has been defended by his followers. However, it was criticized not only by Muslim scholars (ulama) but also by some Sufis at varying degrees. Consequently, there accumulated a large body of literature around the name Ibn 'Arabî and the doctrine of wahdat al-wujûd. Among Muslim scholars, the most important figure in this regard is certainly Ibn Taymiyya (d.728/1328), who first initiated the debate. We know that Ibn Taymiyya was so strong in his criticism against Ibn al-'Arabî's theory of wahdat al-wujûd that he even charged Ibn 'Arabî with unbelief (takfîr). Among Sufis, it is Alâ' al-Dawlah al-Simnânî (d.736/1336) who was seriously the severest critique of Ibn 'Arabî. Ahmad Fâruq-i Sirhindî (d.1034/1624), who was the follower of al-Simnânî and among important figures of the Naqshbandî Sufî path (Tarîqa), criticized Ibn 'Arabî although he did not use as harsh words as al-Simnânî. Nevertheless, he expressed his respect to Ibn 'Arabî at every occasion. We also have to say that Ahmad Sirhindî did not only criticize the theory of wahdat al-wujûd but also developed his own doctrine regarding the purpose of Sufism, i.e., his doctrine of wahdat al-shuhûd (the unity of witnessing) or professing the unity of God by witnessing.

This article will explore Sirhindî's criticism of the theory of wahdat al-wujûd and his views of wahdat al-shuhûd. It will examine the issues regarding to which Sirhindî criticizes his predecessor (selef), and the principles on which he founds the theory of wahdat al-shuhûd. Additionally, it is also intended to investigate into the basic reasons leading Sirhindî to criticize the theory of wahdat al-wujûd. In doing so, this study basically draws on the *Maktûbât* of Sirhindî. Secondary literature is brought in the footnotes when it is appropriate. It is known that many Sufis who were posterior to Sirhindî participated in the Ibn 'Arabî—Shaykh Sirhindî discussion and supported either one of them. This is why the history of the discussion of wahdat al-wujûd versus wahdat al-shuhûd is an issue worth studying. However, I am not primarily interested in examining the historical aspects of this discussion.

### B. Sirhindî's Criticism of the Theory of Wahdat al-Wujûd and his Doctrine of Wahdat al-Shuhûd

Some issues should be pointed out before embarking upon exploring Sirhindî's criticism against the theory of wahdat al-wujûd. The theory of wahdat al-wujûd, which is identified with Ibn 'Arabî and which to a great extent determined the direction of the Sufism, can be formulated as following: "God is the absolute being (al-wujûd al-haq)" and "there is no being other than God." The essential statement here is that "the absolute being is God". The multiplicity and diversity that are found in the universe do not have an independent reality, but they are rather the disclosure (tajallî) and manifestation (zuhûr) of God's being. There cannot be any multiplication (ta'addud), disintegration (tajazzî), transformation (tabaddul) and division (taksîm) in the necessary and eternal being of God, although He discloses Himself through the forms of the realm of multiplicity infinitely. His being is absolute and cannot be comprehended. Thus one can argue that the theory of wahdat al-wujûd is a monistic system (based on one single reality), which negates any real being other than God's being regarding the relationship between God and the universe.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Abu'l-Alâ Afîfî, *al-Ta'liqât 'alâ Fusûs al-Hikem*, Beyrut 1980; Su'âd Hakîm, *al-Mu'cam al-Sûfî, al-Hikma fî Hudûdî'l-Kalima*, Beyrut 1981, pp. 1145-1157; Ismail Fennî Ertuğrul, *Vahdet-i Vücûd ve Ibn 'Arabî* (published by Mustafa Kara), Istanbul 1991; Ferit Kam, *İbn 'Arabî'de Varlık Düşüncesi*, (published by Mustafa Kara), Istanbul 1992, pp. 77-104.

We should acknowledge at the outset that Ahmad Sirhindî,<sup>2</sup> who is among the important figures of the Nakshbandî Sufi path (tarîqa), is considered to be the founder of the doctrine of wahdat al-shuhûd. The departing point and the characteristic factor of the doctrine he puts forward concern Ibn ‘Arabî and the doctrine of wahdat al-wujûd. Consequently, the statements that Sirhindî defends consist of the opposites of the basic statements constitutive of the theory of wahdat al-wujûd. Thus, the theory of wahdat al-shuhûd can be described as a reaction to the theory of wahdat al-wujûd.

Although Sirhindî developed the criticisms against the theory of wahdat al-wujûd in Sufism systematically, some other people before Sirhindî raised similar criticisms against Ibn ‘Arabî. In this context, Alâ’ al-Dawlah al-Simnânî (d.736/1336) should specially be mentioned.<sup>3</sup>

According to the author of the *Nafahât al-Uns*, Simnânî criticized Ibn ‘Arabî in his *al-Urwah li Ahl al-Khalwah* as well as in his conversations with various Sufis. One can see his attitude in this regard in his correspondence with Abd al-Razzâq al-Kâshî (d.730/1329). In this correspondence, one finds the basic elements of his criticism against Ibn ‘Arabî. al-Kâshî, who was an interpreter and supporter of Ibn ‘Arabî wrote a letter to Simnânî, when he became aware of Simnânî’s criticism against Ibn ‘Arabî. In this letter, al-Kâshî argues that Ibn ‘Arabî is correct and the theory of wahdat al-wujûds is true on the basis of his own experience as well as on the authority of other Sufis. Responding to al-Kâshî, Simnânî maintains that Ibn ‘Arabî made mistakes in various issues. According to Simnânî, for example, Ibn ‘Arabî’s statement at the beginning of the *Futûhât*, “I glorify the One who made things manifest although it is identical with them,”<sup>4</sup> cannot be approved and is even dangerous. Even atheists and naturalists have refrained from saying such things. For Simnânî, anybody who does not assert that God is free from created attributes is truly unjust.<sup>5</sup>

Simnânî also criticizes Kâshî’s claim that the latter got to know the reality of wahdat al-wujûd at the station (maqâm) of declaring God’s unity (tawhîd), which is the highest station. For Simnânî, wahdat al-wujûd is not the last station. He also states that he reached this station at first for a while, and he loved it. But later on when he reached higher stations it became clear to him that wahdat al-wujûd is clearly a mistake. For Simnânî, although through his Sufi practice (seyr-u sulûk) a Sufi may receive some instances of witnessing similar to wahdat al-wujûd, at the highest station, the station of servitude (ubûdiyyet), he comes to know that things are different. Another criticism of Simnânî is that Sufis who defend the theory of wahdat al-wujûd understand the station of the declaring God’s unity as the highest station, and interpret it such that it may imply incarnation (hulûl), unbelief (kufr) and unity of creator and creature (ittihâd).<sup>6</sup>

As a result, Simnânî’s criticism against the theory of wahdat al-wujûd focuses on two issues. *The first* is that the experience of wahdat al-wujûd is not the end-point, but beginning stage, of the Sufi experience. *The second* is that the theory of wahdat al-wujûd negates the difference between God and the universe.

Before beginning to explore Sirhindî’s position, It should be expressed that regarding his criticism against Ibn ‘Arabî, Sirhindî was influenced by Simnânî to a great extent. Sirhindî clearly says that there is similarity between his position and his predecessor, Simnânî, with regard to methodology:

<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Sirhindî was born in 971/1564 in Sirhind of the east of Panjab. After learning religious sciences from many different teachers, he had completed his sufi education mostly under the guidance of Shaykh Bâqî Billâh. His most important book is *Maktûbât* composed of the letters written to his deputies (*khalîfa*) and disciples (*murîd*). Imâm Sirhindî who also had a relationship with then political leaders and an active role to reconstruct religious life of this area died in 1034/1624 in Sirhind. For more information about his life, see Hamid Algar, “Imâm-ı Rabbânî”, *DİA*, v. XXII, pp. 194-199; M. Abdul Haq Ansari, “The Life and Mission of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindî”, *Islamic Culture*, Hyderabad, April 1985, v. LIX (59), no. 2, pp. 95-116.

<sup>3</sup> For his life see M. Nazif Şahinoğlu, “Alâuddevle-i Simnânî”, *DİA*, v. II, pp. 345-347.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn ‘Arabî, *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, (published by Osman Yahya), Kahira 1985, v. I, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Abd al-Rahmân Jâmî, *Nafahât al-Uns* (Lâmî’î Chelebî Tercümesi), Istanbul 1270/1854, p. 543.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 544.

“I do not want to examine the books of reality and gnosis (ma'rifa), especially the issues concerning wahdat al-wujûd and its levels of descent. I find many similarities between myself and Shaykh Alâ' al-Dawlah, and I agree with him on this issue in terms of taste and state (hal). However, unlike Alâ' al-Dawlah, the knowledge of the past (prior knowledge, my knowledge of the books of reality written in the past), does not allow me to reject them and to raise offense against their followers.”<sup>7</sup>

The theory of wahdat al-shuhûd can be described as a reaction to basic statements of the theory of wahdat al-wujûd. This is why Sirhindî's doctrine of wahdat al-shuhûd is closely related to the criticism of the theory of wahdat al-wujûd. What is the doctrine of wahdat al-shuhûd, which is systematized by Sirhindî? Sirhindî answers this question. In his opinion, among Sufis there are two kind of declaring God's unity: 1) declaring God's unity in terms of witnessing (shuhûdî tawhîd) and 2) declaring God's unity in terms of being (wujûdî tevhîd). Declaring God's unity in terms of witnessing is “witnessing the One (wâhid). That is, at this station, the follower of the Sufi path (sâlik) does not witness anything other than the One. Declaring God's unity in terms of being is the case where the follower of the Sufi path believes that being is one, and all other things are non-existent. According to believers of the unity of God in this sense all things consist of the self-disclosure and manifestation of one thing. Declaring God's unity in terms of being indicates the level of certainty by knowledge (*ilm al-yakîn*), whereas declaring God's unity in terms of witnessing indicates the level of certainty by sense-perception (*ayn al-yakîn*).<sup>8</sup>

Sirhindî explains the difference between these two kinds of declaring God's unity by an analogy. Suppose a man is closer to the sun. This person sees only the sun; he cannot see stars because of his proximity to the sun. However, although he can see only the sun, he knows that there are stars. They are not non-existent, but they disappeared because of the strength of the sunlight. This person may deny the existence of stars on the basis of his experience of witnessing even though he knows that such a claim does not correspond to reality. In this analogy, the person who does not see stars when he witnesses the sun yet believes that stars exist as entities separate from the sun stands for the proponent of declaring God's unity in terms of witnessing. The proponent of declaring God's unity in terms of being is like the person who denies the existence of stars since he cannot see them when he is closer to the sun. Imam Sirhindî also argues that declaring God's unity in terms of being is contrary to the reason as well as the religious law.<sup>9</sup> Thus one can conclude that the theory of wahdat al-wujûd amounts to denying the existence of other things on the basis of one's witnessing while the theory of wahdat al-shuhûd is the acceptance of the reality of beings other than God despite the experience of unity during one's act of witnessing. Consequently, the former is monist and the latter is to some extent dualist. That is, while the former accepts that there is only one being in the absolute sense, the latter acknowledges two spheres of being. In sum, according to the theory of wahdat al-wujûd, the unity is in knowledge, and according to the other position, it is not in knowledge but in witnessing.<sup>10</sup>

This is how Sirhindî distinguishes between the theory of wahdat al-wujûd and the theory of wahdat al-shuhûd. He criticizes the theory of wahdat al-wujûd in four interrelated issues; and he founds his conception of wahdat al-shuhûd on four principles.

1. Being (wujûd) is an attribute additional to essence (dhât). Imam Sirhindî, in one of his letters, indicates the identity of essence and being in a manner similar to commentators of Ibn 'Arabî, and maintains that “the reality of the Real (Haqq) is pure being”.<sup>11</sup> However, in another letter, he maintains that being cannot be ascribed to the reality of the Real (Haqq). Is not it a contradiction? How does Sirhindî overcome this difficulty? His explanation is as follows. He adopted the view that the reality of the Real is “the pure being” at the beginning of his Sufi carrier up until the middle period. However, when he reached the peak of the Sufi experience, he saw that the reality of the Real could not even be called being.<sup>12</sup> This is because being requires “non-being” (adem), its logical opposite. Indeed, the reality of the essence is free from concepts that require their opposites.

<sup>7</sup> Sirhindî, *Maktûbât*, I-III, Istanbul (undated), v. I, 18th. letter, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 43th. letter, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 43th. letter, pp. 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> Süleyman Uludağ, *Tasavvuf Terimleri Sözlüğü*, Istanbul 1991, p. 507.

<sup>11</sup> Sirhindî, *Ibid*, v. I, 234th. letter, p. 209.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 260th. letter, pp. 244-245.

As Sirhindî states, “how being, which is subsistent with its opposite, is eligible to the level of the essence! If we call this level as being, this is because of conceptual insufficiency. In this expression, the intention is the being to which non-being cannot occur”.<sup>13</sup> It results from this that the Essence, which is beyond our knowledge and comprehension, is free from the state to which attributes and being can be ascribed.

2. Attributes are not identical but additional to the essence.<sup>14</sup> The universe is the shadow of attributes which are shadow of the essence. This demonstrates that the universe is not identical with God.<sup>15</sup> For Sirhindî, regarding the relationship between God and the universe, only the following can be said: the whole universe is the locus of manifestation of the divine names and attributes. However, other than being created by God and being indicative of divine names, the universe has no relation to the Creator.<sup>16</sup> Sirhindî criticizes Ibn ‘Arabî and his commentators at this point. On the one hand, they say that the essence is unknown and absolute, consequently we cannot make any judgment about it, and on the other hand they talk about the essential comprehension (ihâta), proximity (kurb) and togetherness (ma’iyyet). These include judgments about the essence. Thus, if the essence is beyond all kinds of judgments, then the universe cannot be identical with God. “I saw at the highest level that although the universe is a mirror and locus of disclosure of the perfections of divine attributes, contrary to what the supporters of declaring God’s unity in terms of being, the locus of manifestation is not identical to that which is manifest, nor is shadow identical to the original (asl).”<sup>17</sup>

Sirhindî gives an example to explain that the relationship between God and the universe is not a relationship of identity. Let’s suppose that a person wants to make his perfections manifest. He invents sounds and letters to explain hidden beauties in himself to people. Through sounds and letters he makes his perfections manifest. The form consisting of letters and sounds is the mirror and disclosure of these perfections. This form cannot be identical to the perfections, since perfections on the one hand and sounds and letters on the other are related to each other as the signified and the sign. Just as we cannot approve of the identity between human perfections on the one hand and sounds and letters on the other on the basis of the relations of signified and the sign and that which is manifest and the locus of manifestation, we cannot argue for the identity between God and the universe. As a result, the universe is not identical to God.<sup>18</sup> Thus, if the divine attributes and names are not identical to the divine essence, then the universe is not identical to the divine essence.

3. The distinction between the real being and the shadow one is not imaginary, but a real distinction. Sirhindî, who describes the universe as the shadow of attributes and names, argues that the universe has an independent being even if it is relative. At this point he takes issues with the theory of wahdat al-wujûd, which is based on the idea that the universe is an “estimation” (vehm) and “imagination”. For him the theory of wahdat al-wujûd is based on a conception of being which consists of the essence of the Real. Accordingly, the universe is nothing other than the realization of the existence in knowledge (al-subût al-ilmî). Although the universe is God’s shadow and the shadow-being is found only in sense-perception, it is pure non-being *in re*. At this point, Sirhindî criticizes the idea included in the theory of wahdat al-wujûd that “the universe does not have a being independent of the being of the Real,” and argues that it is completely wrong. Sirhindî establishes his view through an analysis of “the original” (asıl) and “the shadow”. Although the universe is a shadow of God, the universe exists *in re* not as an original but insofar as it is a shadow (zilliyyat). For example, let’s think about the relationship between a person and his shadow. Although the features of this person are mirrored in his shadow, the shadow does not feel pain when a piece of fire happens on the shadow. Thus, just as the shadow is distinct from the person, the existence of the universe is distinct from the existence of God.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See, *Ibid*, v. I, 260th. letter, p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> Sirhindî explained that everything other than the pure essence, even if they be names or attributes, is described as other. *Maktûbât*, v. I, 38th. letter, p. 51. Also see v. I, 260th. letter, p. 243.

<sup>15</sup> He clearly expounded his opinion that “the Real is not identical to the universe, is not conjoined to the universe, nor is He separate from the universe. *Maktûbât*, v. I, 8th letter, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Sirhindî, *Ibid*, v. I, 125th. letter, pp. 121-122.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 31th. letter, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 31th. letter, pp. 41-43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 160th. letter, pp. 138-141.

Sirhindî discusses this issue in another letter as well. The basic premise in this discussion is the fact that the universe is created out of “nothing.” However, Ibn ‘Arabî, who considers possible beings as forms of the divine knowledge, denies the existence of anything *in re* other than the essence, when he declares that “forms of knowledge are reflected in the mirror of the essence.” For Sirhindî, although the state of “being an existent” is reflected on possible beings, they are nothing (*adem*). Consequently, there are two spheres of being in front of us: 1) “the sphere of the necessary being” and “the sphere of the possible being”.<sup>20</sup> It must be said that this conclusion compels Sirhindî to accept dualism to some extent.

4. The ultimate end of the Sufi experience is not *wahdat al-wujûd*, but *wahdat al-shuhûd*. No Sufi can argue for *wahdat al-wujûd* on the basis of his acts of witnessing. It seems that in all occasions when Sirhindî criticizes Ibn ‘Arabî, this is the main point. Sirhindî states that at the beginning of his Sufi practice (*sülûk*), he attained the witnessing of *wahdat al-wujûd*. However, later on it was unveiled (*keşf*) to him that it was wrong. Thus he abandoned the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*. Departing from this point, Sirhindî concludes that the ultimate end of the Sufi experience is not “unity” but servitude (*abdiyyat*). This approach means that the idea of *wahdat al-wujûd* is an incomplete and insufficient belief. Concerning the course of the experience in question, Sirhindî states:

“The Dervish, author of these lines, used to believe in *wahdat al-wujûd*. While he was a child, knowledge of declaring such a unity occurred to him and he reached the level of certainty in this regard... Upon entering this path, at first the way of declaring the unity was opened to him as a state, and for a while he strolled through the levels of this station. To him rushed knowledge conforming to this station. The problems occurring to the mind of the people defending the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* were unveiled to him and their solutions were presented to him. After a while, another ascription prevailed, and he hesitated about the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*, i.e., he was not sure whether the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* conformed to the reality. However, this hesitation was not an outright denial but rather a good opinion. It lasted for a while, and then came the denial of the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*. He received the inspiration that this station was the station of lowness (*süfliyyat*) and he should go up to the station of “shadow-ness” (*zilliyyat*). However, this dervish did not have a choice regarding the denial, and he also did not want to leave that station since there were great Sufis. When he reached the station of shadow-ness (*zilliyyat*), he saw himself and other things in the universe as shadows. Thus he did not leave that station, since he thought that perfection was *wahdat al-wujûd* and at the new station, i.e., station of shadow-ness... Then through providence and gentleness they lifted him up from this station to a higher one, to the station of ‘servitude’ (*abdiyyat*). Then he became aware of the perfection and nobility of this station. Upon that, this dervish began repenting for the lower stations”.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, Sirhindî criticizes the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* as formulated by Ibn ‘Arabî in four points, as explained above, and he develops the theory of *wahdat al-shuhûd*. According to this the doctrine of *wahdat al-shuhûd* is based on these principles: Being is an attribute additional to the essence. Just as attributes are not identical to the essence, the universe is not identical to attributes. God’s being and the being of the universe are different from each other depending on the opposition between being and non-being (*adem*). The highest point of the Sufi experience is not the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*, based on declaring unity, but the theory of *wahdat al-shuhûd*, based on the station of the servitude.<sup>22</sup>

### ***C. The Historical Background of Sirhindî’s Criticism of the Theory of Wahdat al-Wujûd***

First of all, Ahmad Sirhindî is a follower of the Naqshbandî Sufi path, and lived in India. As a person affiliated with a Sufi path, his criticism about Ibn ‘Arabî and his teachings is really remarkable.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 160th. letter, pp. 138-141.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 160th. letter, pp. 140-141. Also see v. I, 8th. letter, p. 13; v. I, 31th. letter, pp. 41-42; v. I, 43th. letter, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> For Sirhindî’s criticism of the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* and interpretation of his doctrine of the *wahdat al-shuhûd* see Mîr Waliuddîn, “Reconciliation Between Ibn ‘Arabî’s *Wahdat-i Wujûd* and the Mujaddidî’s *Wahdat-i Shuhûd*”, *Islamic Culture*, v. XXV, 1951, pp. 43-51; Abdul Haq Ansari, “Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindî’s Doctrine of *Wahdat al-Shuhûd*”, *Islamic Studies*, 37:3, 1998, pp. 281-313.

On the basis of the conditions explained above, Sirhindî criticizes his predecessor. Is there any reason causing Sirhindî to criticize Ibn ‘Arabî, who is a major authority in Sufism, and his teachings? I think the traces of the political, religious and social structure in India when Sirhindî lived may be found in the background of Sirhindî’s criticism of the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*. Specifically speaking, the factor that is found at the bottom of Sirhindî’s criticism is the policies pursued by the Sultan of the Babur State Akbar Shâh (d.1014/1065)<sup>23</sup> concerning religion. Just to mention a few of Akbar Shâh’s activities, we see that he believed that Christianity is a true religion, and had Allâmî translate Gospels into Persian. He aborted collecting taxes from Hindus, prohibited eating beef out of his respect to Hindus, and had Hindu rituals organized at his court. The worse is that he had scholars at his court prepare a fatwa which is known as “infallibility decree.” On this fatwa Akbar Shâh was declared to be the single religious authority.<sup>24</sup>

Having such a powerful religious and political authority, Akbar Shâh probably went further, and in order to realize social unity and stability by erasing the fight between Muslims and Hindus, he put forward his project of uniting essential principles of various religions and belief systems, such as Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism, under the title *Dîn-i Ilâhî* (divine religion). Whether this project succeeded or not is not important, but simply the fact that somebody attempted to do this is worth paying attention.<sup>25</sup>

In conclusion, to summarize Akbar Shah’s activities, we see that the authority of religious scholars became very weak in a society which is supposed to be an Islamic one, Akbar Shâh himself assumed the authority that should be entrusted to them, and a large space of freedom was provided for other religions.

Sirhindî, who lived under such social and political conditions, at first, had relations with the court and friendship with Faydî-i Hindî and Abu’l-Fazl al-Allâmî, who were among important supporters of Akbar. However, Sirhindî cut his ties with these two when he saw that they kept reason and philosophy with such a high esteem that one doubts whether prophethood is necessary or not.<sup>26</sup> Given that Sirhindî had contact with people affiliated with the court, one can rightfully infer that he was aware of Akbar Shâh’s projects concerning religion.

It must be pointed out that it does not seem possible to read and understand Sirhindî’s views included those in the *Maktûbât* without relating them to the socio-cultural background. Looking at the *Maktûbât* from this perspective, one can say that Sirhindî assumes the part of the renewer (*mujaddid*) of the second millennium<sup>27</sup> and attempts to revive religion with its all dimensions and to define relations among religious institutions on the basis of the religious law (*sharî’at*). In this context, Sirhindî was reacting to the political authority because of their religious attitudes and was especially concerned with enforcing the authority of the scholars (*ulema*) and with redefining the relationship between the religious law and the Sufi path.

In his project of reviving religion, Sirhindî’s views on political power are the departing point. For him, political powers are very important in the success or lack thereof of Muslims. “You should know that the position of the sultan to the universe is like the position of the heart to the human body. If the heart is healthy, the body is healthy. If the heart is not healthy, the body is not healthy either. Similarly, if the sultan is on the true path, the universe reaches salvation. If the sultan is corrupt, the universe becomes corrupt”.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, following the saying that “religious law (*sharî’at*) is under the sword.

<sup>23</sup> For Akbar Shâh’s life, see Enver Konukçu, “Ekber Şâh”, *DÎA*, v. X, pp. 542-544.

<sup>24</sup> For Akbar Shâh’s political and religious opinions, see Khâliq Ahmad Nizamî, *Akbar and Religion*, İdaraha-i Adabiyât-ı Delhî, Delhi 1989; Y. Hikmet Bayur, *Hindistan Tarihi*, I-III, Ankara 1987, v. II, p. 63-168; Aziz Ahmed, *Hindistan’da İslam Kültürü Çalışmaları*, (trs. Latif Boyacı), Istanbul 1995, pp. 235-255.

<sup>25</sup> For *Dîn-i Ilâhî*, see Makhall Lal Roy Choudhury, *The Dîn-i Ilâhî or The Religion of Akbar*, New Delhi 1997; Aziz Ahmed, *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Hamid Algar, “İmâm-ı Rabbânî”, *DÎA*, v. XXII, p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> In his letter 301 (v. I, pp. 362-363), Imam Sirhindî writes that although the light of Nubuwwat had been hidden until the second thousand years, it had to come into light in his time. And in the other letter he also explains that someone who achieved *‘ayn al-yaqîn* and *haq al-yaqîn* and received from *‘ilm* the light of Nubuwwat was Mujaddîd of the second thousand years (see. v. II, 4th. letter, pp. 12-13). According to his expressions he might consider himself to have this mission of the second thousand years.

<sup>28</sup> Sirhindî, *Ibid*, v. I, 47th. letter, p. 63.

The glow of the religious law is related to the princes and sultans”,<sup>29</sup> he finds a close connection between the application of the religious law and government, and he considers sultan as “the sword of the religious law and the person to promote it.”

Indeed as mentioned above, Akbar Shâh, who did not observe the religious law, and—as Sirhindî states—who was under the influence of unbelievers, caused Muslims to become weak:

“In the last century, the poverty of Islam reached its outmost limit. The people of unbelief are not satisfied simply with application of the rules based on unbelief, they also want that Islamic rules disappear from the earth. They keep trying to erase traces of Muslims. The situation became so terrible that if a Muslim performs an Islamic custom, they send him to death. Butchering a cow is one of the important customs of Muslims on the Indian land. But unbelievers are ready to pay capitation tax (cizye) but not to butcher cows”.<sup>30</sup>

In numerous letters, Sirhindî emphasizes that Islam and unbelief must be clearly distinguished from each other. Although the term unbelief has a broader scope, Sirhindî specifically intends Hinduism in India. Since Islam and unbelief are two opposites excluding each other, if one becomes more powerful, the other becomes weaker. One should strive to erase unbelief, to destroy idols, to avoid relations with unbelievers and to fight against unbelievers. Indeed if Muslims do not follow these advices, unbelievers will be happy to annihilate them.<sup>31</sup> I think Sirhindî’s intolerant and rigid attitude towards unbelievers and his advice that all kinds of relations with unbelievers should be cut off parallel Akbar Shah’s policies towards reconciliation of different religions.

While Sirhindî complained about Akbar Shâh’s policies for making Islam and Muslims weaker, he was very happy when Jhangir (d.1037/1627) took the power. Indeed, Sirhindî frequently expressed his expectation that when the holder of the power changed, Islamic rules would be put into practice and Muslims would become stronger.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the execution of the religious rules depends to a great extent on the sultan. In order for the sultan to carry it out, scholars have crucial responsibilities. Nevertheless, “all kinds of difficulties that appeared in the preceding period (when the Akbar Shâh ruled) were due to the scholars who were dragged by worldly desires because they caused the sultan to go astray”.<sup>33</sup> This is why in the new period scholars should help the sultan by indicating him the true path. Indeed, we see that Sirhindî did his best in this regard. He wrote numerous letters to relatives of the sultan asking them to urge the sultan to observe religious-legal rules and the principles of the people of the tradition (sunna).<sup>34</sup>

One may argue that the most important thing Sirhindî, as a renewer (muceddid), wanted to accomplish is to redefine the relations among Islamic institutions according to the socio-cultural conditions. In this context, for him the relationship between the religious law (sharî’at) and the Sufi path must be reconsidered and a basic principle to solve the incoherencies between them must be established.<sup>35</sup>

Sirhindî does not accept the traditional Sufi view that the Sufi path is the core and higher level of the religious law. For him, the religious law and the Sufi path are identical; there is no substantial difference between them.<sup>36</sup> The religious law consists of knowledge, practice and sincerity (ihlas), and the Sufi path is a supportive element for the maturation and completion of sincerity, which is the third element of the religious law.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 65th. letter, p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 81th. letter, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> More information, see Sirhindî, *Ibid*, v. I, 47th. letter, p. 63; 65th. letter, pp. 77-78; 193th. letter, pp. 164-165; 269th. letter, p. 283.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 193th. letter, p. 165; 194th. and 195th. letter, p. 166.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 193th. letter, p. 165; 194th. and 195th. letter, p. 166.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 65th. letter, p. 77; 66th. letter, p. 78-79; 194th. and 195th. letter, p. 166; v. II, 67th. letter, pp. 109-118.

<sup>35</sup> For Sirhindî’s role as Mujaddid and how he explained the relation between sharî’at and tariqat, see Aziz Ahmed, *Studies in the Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Oxford 1965; Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism and Sharî’ah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindî’s Effort to Reform Sufism*, Leicester 1986; Arthur Buehler, “Sharî’at and ‘Ulamâ in Ahmad Sirhindî’s Collected Letters”, *Die Welt des Islams: International Journal for the Study of Modern Islam*, v. 43, n. iii, (2003), pp. 309-320.

<sup>36</sup> Sirhindî, *Ibid*, v. I, 84th. letter, p. 95.

Thus the Sufi path is at the service of the religious law.<sup>37</sup> The Shaykh considers the religious law as a universal principle that comprises all realities including the data reached by Sufi experience. Consequently, the religious law is the authority which Muslims should apply to solve all kinds of conflict.

Sirhindî turns this theoretical relationship between the religious law and the Sufi path into more dynamic and practical form. The religious law consists of the principles of people of the prophetic tradition (ehl-i Sunna). In this regard, the people of the prophetic tradition have the authority. It should be clearly mentioned that by people of the prophetic tradition he means the Muslim theologians. In many letters, Sirhindî states that the scholars of the prophetic tradition represent the rightful side, and consequently all kinds of interpretation should be considered on the basis of their principles.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the scholars of the prophetic tradition—who represent the religious law—or the people of the truth,<sup>39</sup> irrespective of their education, have a higher position than Sufis. It is interesting that Sirhindî establishes this view on the relationship between prophethood and friendship (nubuvvat-velayat). Just as waves does not have value compared to sea, friendship is unimportant compared to prophethood.<sup>40</sup> Since prophethood is higher than friendship, the knowledge of scholars, the source of which is the candle of the prophethood, is higher than the knowledge received from the levels of friendship:

“The rational consideration of the scholars who follow the path of prophets is founded upon the perfections and sciences belonging to prophethood. In contrast, the consideration of Sufis is limited to the perfections and knowledge belonging to friendship. Thus, the knowledge attained from the candle of prophethood is truer and firmer than the knowledge received from the level of friendship.”<sup>41</sup>

For Sirhindî, who states that the authority to represent the truth belongs to the scholars of external things (ulama al-zâhir), it is now proper to say that Sufis should not be taken into account when there is a debate between the people of the truth and the Sufis, or when the Sufis defend a view contrary to the views of the people of the truth:

“No friend (of God) can ever reach the level of any prophet. The head of a friend (of God) is always under the foot of a prophet. It must be known that if one pays attention to issues of debate between scholars and Sufis, one sees that scholars are always right”<sup>42</sup>

“One of the things that is required for the follower of the Sufi path is to follow the true creed, which is deduced from the Qur’an, the tradition of the Prophet and transmissions of the noble predecessors by the scholars of the people of the traditions and community (ehl-i sunna ve’l-cemaa). He also should understand the Qur’an and the Tradition in the way the people of the truth, i.e., the scholars of the people of tradition and community, understood. If knowledge attained through unveiling (kashf) and inspiration (ilhâm) is contrary to the intentions confirmed by the people of the truth (ehl al-haq), one should not regard the unveiling and inspiration but take refuge to God from them”<sup>43</sup>

Thus, regarding the relationship between the religious law and the Sufi path according to Sirhindî, one may argue that the principles provided by the scholars of people of the tradition and external things (ulama al-zâhir), who represent the religious law are the sole criteria of the truth. Hence if the opinion of a Sufi contradicts the principles of the scholars of external things, then it should not be regarded.

One should consider Sirhindî’s criticism against Ibn ‘Arabî and the theory of wahdat al-wujûd in this context. The sole criteria of the truth of the data given by unveiling (kashf) and inspiration (ilhâm) are the intentions (maânî), which the people of the truth and scholars of external things deem true. Then, some views put forward by Ibn ‘Arabî on the basis of unveiling and inspiration are mistaken and faulty since they do not conform to the criteria set up by the people of truth. However, such faulty views are similar to faulty opinions in jurisprudence, and so Ibn ‘Arabî is excusable.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 36th. letter, p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 36th. letter, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> Sirhindî interestingly used these two words as the same meaning. See *Maktûbât*, v. I, 286th letter, p. 311.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 266th. letter, p. 272.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 266th. letter, p. 272.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 266th. letter, p. 272.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 286th. letter, p. 311.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 266th. letter, p. 265; v.I, 286 th. Letter, pp.311-312.



In this context, one may say that the criterion of the truth is the creed upheld by the people of tradition. Any Sufi teaching that is contrary to it is the result of an incomplete and faulty unveiling. Thus such Sufi teachings are false. Indeed, one can easily discern this point upon looking at Sirhindî's criticism against Ibn 'Arabî and the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* since he justifies his criticism on the basis of their being contrary to the views of the people of truth. "It is interesting that Shaykh Ibn 'Arabî is regarded well by the people of unveiling. Many things of which he claims to have knowledge and runs contrary to the views of the people of truth, he seems mistaken and faulty".<sup>45</sup> This is why the thing that Imam Sirhindî attempts to do by criticizing Ibn 'Arabî and the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* is to establish the Sufi experience based on unveiling on a ground which is not contradictory to the creed of the people of the tradition. Indeed, in his *Maktûbât*, he states that in the commentary he wrote on the *Rubâ'îyyât* of his Shaykh Bâqî-Billâh (d.1012/1603), he erased the points of conflict between the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* and the views of the people of truth and made up a synthesis out of them: "This poor man, with the help of God, made this issue (of *wahdat al-wujûd*) coherent to the creed of the people of truth in his commentary on the *Rubâ'îyyât* of our honorable Shaykh. He combined them together; he wrote down the discussion between them and certainly solved the difficulties of both sides".<sup>46</sup> We think that he does the same thing in the *Maktûbât*, and the combination or the synthesis is the theory of *wahdat al-shuhûd*. This is why one can describe the theory of *wahdat al-shuhûd* as a revised form of the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*, such that it is coherent with the creed of the people of the tradition.

We see Sirhindî, who considers the points of conflicts between the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* and the creed of the people of the tradition on the criteria of the people of truth and who attempts to correct the incoherencies, highlights the following points. Ibn 'Arabî has various faulty unveilings such as the identity of the divine names and attributes to the divine essence, the identity of the universe to God, the unity of the universe and God, the unity of the necessary being and the possible being, that God surrounds the universe by his being and that the hell is not endless etc. These views contradict the essential principles of the people of tradition. Thus, we may conclude that Sirhindî's theory of *wahdat al-shuhûd* is based on the negation of Ibn 'Arabî's theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*.

Sirhindî's emphasis on the religious law and the creed of the people of the tradition as well as his criticism against the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* cannot be correctly understood if its historical background is ignored. In this context, one should keep in mind that Imam Sirhindî lived in an atmosphere where Hindu beliefs were effective, and Akbar Shâh had the project of the divine religion. Sirhindî must have been aware of the fact that there is a similarity between the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujûd* and Hindu beliefs, and also that the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* provided the ground for Akbar Shâh's project to unite religions. It is very plausible that Sirhindî had such concerns at least in his subconscious. This is why, I think, the fact that Sirhindî criticizes the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* from the perspective of the scholars of external things, the fact that he considers the Sufi path at the service of the religious law, and underlines the importance of the religious law and the creed of the people of the tradition are the results of the historical background indicated above. Furthermore, the work he has accomplished is a revolution in the Naqshbandî Sufi path in particular and in the Indian Sufism in general.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The criticism against Ibn 'Arabî and the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* raised by Sirhindî, who may be considered to follow Alâ' al-Dawlah al-Simnânî, is based on two issues. The first is the criticism on the basis of experience. According to this, since Ibn 'Arabî stopped at the station of declaring the unity of God and could not go up to the station of servitude, which is the endpoint of the Sufi experience, his unveiling (*müşâhede*) which ended at the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* is incomplete and faulty. Perhaps the worse is the fact that Ibn 'Arabî built upon his Sufi experience (of the unveiling of unity) his rather theoretical and philosophical theory of *wahdat al-wujûd*. For Sirhindî, Ibn 'Arabî did not have the right to do this, since philosophical doctrines cannot be obtained through mystical experience.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 266th. letter, p. 265.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, v. I, 266th. letter, p. 265. In the other letter he described the application of *Wahdat al-Wujûd* to *sharî'a* (religious) sciences in detail. See *Maktûbât*, v. II, 44th. letter, pp. 72-76.

The second is the criticism from a rational point of view. In this regard, his argument is that the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* has erroneous results concerning the conception of being and non-being, the relationship between the essence on the one hand and names and attributes on the other, and the identity of God with the universe. I think it is quite remarkable that there is conformity between the external form of the religious law and the Sirhindî's doctrine of *wahdat al-shuhûd*, which is based on the principles that being is an attribute additional to the essence, that names and attributes are not identical to the essence, that the universe, which is a shadow-being, has a relatively independent existence, and thus God is not identical to the universe. One sees that he aimed at making Sufism to a large extent coherent with the religious law in general and the basic principles of the scholars of the people of the tradition in particular. In fact, religious confusion and the weakening of the religious law in the period when Sirhindî lived urged him to pull the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* into the axis of the external principles of the religion. This is why his criticism of the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* cannot be understood if one ignores the mission he assumed as the renewer (*mujaddid*) of the second millennium.

In the period after Sirhindî, we see that many debates took place whether Ibn 'Arabî or Sirhindî was right. This discussion has also a hinterland beyond the land of India. While some defended Ibn 'Arabî, some others considered Sirhindî to be right. A minority group argued for a compromising position saying that there is no substantial difference between the positions of both Sufis.

It should be accepted that the criticism raised by Sirhindî, who is affiliated with the Naqshbandî Sufi path, and with its Mujaddidiyya branch, against Ibn 'Arabî and the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* became a point of break. Consequently, the interest of the followers of the Naqshbandî Sufi path in Ibn 'Arabî's heritage became weaker, and furthermore this Sufi path became needful of philosophical wealth since it tended to close its ties to others. In this regard, Sirhindî's criticism of the theory of *wahdat al-wujûd* caused dynamism within the Sufism in general by generating intellectual debates and paradoxically withdrawal of the Naqshbandiyya into itself. Especially the latter issue, i.e., the course of the Naqshbandiyya after Sirhindî, is an important issue deserving serious investigation.