

## Oneness of Being

(chapter V from *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*)

“Since Mysticism in all ages and countries is fundamentally the same, however it may be modified by its peculiar environment and by the positive religion to which it clings for support, we find remote and unrelated systems showing an extraordinarily close likeness and even coinciding in many features of verbal expression... Many writers on Sufism have disregarded this principle; hence the confusion which long prevailed.”

In the light of this timely remark by Nicholson,<sup>1</sup> no one should be surprised to find that the doctrine of the Oneness of Being (*Waḥdat al-Wujūd*), which holds a central place in all the orthodox mysticisms of Asia, holds an equally central place in Sufism.

As is to be expected in view of its centrality, some of the most perfect, though elliptical, formulations of this doctrine are to be found in the Qur’ān, which affirms expressly: *Wheresoe’er ye turn, there is the Face of God.*<sup>2</sup> *Everything perisheth but His Face.*<sup>3</sup> *All that is therein*<sup>4</sup> *suffereth extinction, and there remaineth the Face of thy Lord in Its Majesty and Bounty.*<sup>5</sup>

Creation, which is subject to time and space and non-terrestrial modes of duration and extent which the human imagination cannot grasp, is “then” (with reference to both past and future) and “there”, but it is never truly “now” and “here”. The True Present is the prerogative of God Alone, for It is no less than the Eternity and Infinity which transcends, penetrates and embraces all durations and extents, being not only “before” all beginnings but also “after” all ends. In It, that is, in the Eternal Now and Infinite Here, all that is perishable has “already” perished, all that is liable to extinction has “already” been extinguished leaving only God, and it is to this Divine Residue, the Sole Lord of the Present, that the word *remaineth* refers in the last quoted Qur’ānic verse. From this verse, amongst others, come the two Sufi terms *fanā’* (extinction) and *baqā’* (remaining)<sup>6</sup> which express respectively the Saint’s extinction in God and his Eternal Life in God, or rather *as God*.

The doctrine of Oneness of Being is also implicit in the Divine Name *al-Ḥaqq*, the Truth, the Reality, for there could be no point in affirming Reality as an essential characteristic of Godhead if anything other than God were real. The word “Being” expresses this Absolute Reality, for it refers to That which is, as opposed to that which is not, and Oneness of Being is the doctrine that behind the illusory veil of created plurality there lies the one Divine Truth—

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1. *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 384.

2. II, 115.

3. XXVIII, 88.

4. In the created universe.

5. LV, 26–7.

6. “The spiritual state of *baqā’*, to which Sufi contemplatives aspire (the word signifies pure ‘subsistence’ beyond all form), is the same as the state of *moksha* or ‘deliverance’ spoken of in Hindu doctrines, just as the ‘extinction’ (*al-fanā’*) of the individuality which precedes the ‘subsistence’ is analogous to *nirvana* taken as a negative idea” (Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, p. 4, published by Muḥammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1959—a book which is almost indispensable to anyone who wishes to make a serious study of Sufism and who does not read Oriental texts).

not that God is made up of parts,<sup>7</sup> but that underlying each apparently separate feature of the created universe there is the One Infinite Plenitude of God in His Indivisible Totality.

*The Treatise on Oneness*<sup>8</sup> says: “When the secret of an atom of the atoms is clear, the secret of all created things both external and internal is clear, and thou dost not see in this world or the next aught beside God.”<sup>9</sup>

If there were anything which, in the Reality of the Eternal Present, could show itself to be other than God, then God would not be Infinite, for Infinity would consist of God *and* that particular thing.<sup>10</sup>

This doctrine is only concerned with Absolute Reality. It has nothing to do with “reality” in the current sense, that is, with lesser, relative truths which the Sufis call “metaphorical”. Ghazālī says: “The Gnostics rise from the lowlands of metaphor to the peak of Verity; and at the fulfilment of their ascent they see directly face to face that there is naught in existence save only God and that *everything perisheth but His Face*, not simply that it perisheth at any given time but that it hath never not perished... Each thing hath two faces, a face of its own, and a face of its Lord; in respect of its own face it is nothingness, and in respect of the Face of God it is Being. Thus there is nothing in existence save only God and His Face, for *everything perisheth but His Face*, always and forever... so that the Gnostics need not wait for the Resurrection in order to hear the summons of the Creator proclaim: *Unto whom this day is the Kingdom? Unto God, the*

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7. It is probably a failure to grasp this point which is at the root of most Western misunderstandings. Massignon for example says that *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*—which he unhappily translates “existentialist monism”—means that “the totality of all beings in all their actions is divinely adorable” (Encyclopaedia of Islam, *Ṭaṣawwuf*). But there is no question here of the *sum* of things being any more divine than each single thing. The least gnat has a secret which is divinely adorable with total adoration. In other words, for those possessed of mystical vision, *there is the Face of God*.

8. *Risālatu ’l-Aḥadiyyah*, also entitled *Kitāb al-Ajwibah* or *Kitāb al-Alif*. It is ascribed in some manuscripts to Muḥyi ’l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī and in others to his younger contemporary ‘Abd Allāh al-Balyānī (d. 1287—see the prefatory notes to the French translation by ‘Abd al-Hādī in *Le Voile d’Isis*, 1933, pp. 13–4, and to the English translation by Weir, from which I quote, in the *Journal to the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1901, p. 809). It is one of the most important of all Sufi treatises. Hence the large number of existing manuscripts, although until now it has only been published in translations.

9. We may compare the following Buddhist formulation: “When a blade of grass is lifted the whole universe is revealed there; in every pore of the skin there pulsates the life of the triple world, and this is intuited by *prajna*, not by way of reasoning, but “immediately”. (D. T. Suzuki, *Studies in Zen* }, p. 94.)

10. This is implicit in the following formulation of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* by Al-Ḥallāj, who literally takes the ground from beneath the feet of those who accuse the Sufis of localizing God (*ḥulūl*): “It is Thou that hast filled all ‘where’ and beyond ‘where’ too. Where art Thou then?” (*Diwān*, p. 46, 1.4.) The Shaykh Al-‘Alawī quotes at some length (*Al-Nāṣir Ma’rūf*, pp. 112–5) Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s formulations of the doctrine in question from pt. 2 of his *Wāridāt*, ending with the words: “Do not think that this is a doctrine of localization, for there can be no localization without two beings, one of which occupieth a place in the other, whereas our doctrine is: ‘There is no being but His Being.’”¶ Over 2000 years previously the Taoist Chuang Tzu had said: “A boat may be hidden in a creek; a net may be hidden in a lake; these may be said to be safe enough. But at midnight a strong man may come and carry them away on his back. The ignorant do not see that no matter how well you conceal things, smaller ones in larger ones, there will always be a chance for them to escape. But if you conceal Universe in Universe, there will be no room left for it to escape. This is the great truth of things” (ch. 6, Yu-Lan Fung’s translation).

*One, the Irresistible*,<sup>11</sup> for this proclamation is eternally in their ears; nor do they understand from His Utterance *God is Most Great (Allāhu Akbar)* that he is greater than others. God forbid! For there is nothing other than Himself in all existence, and therefore there is no term of comparison for His Greatness”.<sup>12</sup>

This doctrine is necessarily present whenever there is explicit reference to the Supreme Truth—the Absolute, the Infinite, the Eternal. In Christianity the goal of mysticism is most often conceived of as union with the Second Person of the Trinity. Here the Supreme Truth is not explicit but implicit: who has Christ has indeed All; but for those who follow the path of love this Totality is not usually the direct object of fervour. Yet when it is conceived more directly, then in Christianity also<sup>13</sup> we find inevitably the doctrine of the Oneness of Being.

On the other hand, when the Supreme Truth recedes into the background, then in all religions this doctrine also necessarily recedes, since apart from the Infinite and Eternal Present it is meaningless. No one can hope to understand the formulations of the mystics without bearing in mind that there is liable to be a continual shifting of the centre of consciousness from one plane to another.

One of the first things that a novice has to do in the ‘Alawī Ṭarīqah—and the same must be true of other paths of mysticism—is to unlearn much of the agility of “profane intelligence” which an ‘Alawī faqīr once likened, for my benefit, to “the antics of a monkey that is chained to a post”, and to acquire an agility of a different order, comparable to that of a bird which continually changes the level of its flight. The Qur’ān and secondarily the Traditions of the Prophet are the great prototypes in Islam of this versatility.

Three distinct levels of intelligence are imposed methodically twice a day in the three formulae of the ‘Alawī rosary which are (each being repeated a hundred times) firstly asking forgiveness of God, secondly the invocation of blessings on the Prophet, and thirdly the affirmation of Divine Oneness.<sup>14</sup> The first standpoint, which is at what might be called the normal level of psychic perception, is concerned with the ego as such. This is the phase of purification. From the second standpoint this fragmentary ego has ceased to exist, for it has been absorbed into the person of the Prophet who represents a hierarchy of different plenitudes of which the lowest is integral human perfection and the highest is Universal Man (*Al-Insān al-Kāmil*),<sup>15</sup> who personifies the whole created universe and who thus anticipates, as it were, the Infinite,<sup>16</sup> of which he is the highest symbol. The disciple aims at concentrating on perfection at

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11. Qur’ān, XL, 16.

12. *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, pp. 113–4 in *Al-Jawāhīr al-Ghawālī* (Cairo, 1343 AH); in Gairdner’s translation, which however I have not followed, pp. 103–5.

13. “However vile the dust, however small its motes, the wise man seeth therein God in all His Greatness and Glory.” (Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*).

14. According to Ḥasan ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, one of the Shaykh’s disciples, this triple rosary is used in all branches of the Shādhilī Ṭarīqah (*Irshād al-Rāghibīn*, p. 31). The same formulae are also used, with some variations, by many branches of the Qādiri Ṭarīqah and others. See Rinn, *Marabouts et Khouan*, pp. 183–4, 252–3, 441, 503.

15. See Titus Burckhardt’s introduction to his *De l’Homme Universel* (translated extracts from Jīlī’s *Al-Insān al-Kāmil*), P. Derain, Lyons, 1953.

16. The first formula of the rosary may also open on to the Infinite, but in a negative sense, for the end of purification is extinction (*fanā*). The Shaykh Al-‘Alawī often quotes the saying attributed to Rābī‘ah al-

one of these levels. From the third point of view the Prophet himself has ceased to exist, for this formula is concerned with nothing but the Divine Oneness.

All mysticism necessarily comprises these different levels of thought, because it is, by definition, the passage from the finite to the Infinite. It has a starting point and an End, and cannot ignore what lies between. It follows that the formulations of any one mystic are unlikely to be all from the same standpoint,<sup>17</sup> and this is especially true of the more spontaneous utterances such as those of poetry. But it is natural that spiritual Masters should stress *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* above all, because it is the Supreme Truth and therefore the ultimate goal of all mysticism, and also because, for that very reason, it is the point of view that is “furthest” from the disciple and the one he most needs help in adopting. Relentless insistence upon the doctrine has therefore a great methodic, not to say “hypnotic” value,<sup>18</sup> for it helps the disciple to place himself virtually in the Eternal Present when he cannot do so actually. *The Treatise on Oneness* says: “Our discourse (that is, the formulation of Oneness of Being) is with him who hath resolution and energy in seeking to know himself in order to know God, and who keepeth fresh in his Heart the image of his quest and his longing for attainment unto God; it is not with him who hath neither aim nor end.”

It has been remarked—I forget by whom—that many of those who delight in the poems

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‘Adawiyyah, one of the greatest women Saints of Islam (d. 801): “Thine existence is a sin with which no other sin can be compared” (*Minaḥ*, p. 41). It is this point of view which Al-Ḥallāj expresses in the words: “Between me and Thee is an ‘I am’ which tormenteth me. O take, by Thine Own *I am*, mine from between us” (*Akḥbār Al-Ḥallāj*, Massignon’s edition, no. 50).

17. The refusal to see that mysticism is never a “system” and that mystics are consciously and methodically “inconsistent”, taking now one standpoint, now another, has led to much confusion, especially as regards *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*. In his preface to his translation of *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (p. 61). Gairdner says: “The root question in regard to al-Ghazzali, and every other advanced mystic and adept in Islam, is the question of Pantheism (i.e. *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*, now usually translated, with some advantage, ‘monism’): did he succeed in balancing himself upon the edge of the pantheistic abyss?... Or did he fail in this?” Massignon, for his part, has devoted much of his output to exculpating Al-Ḥallāj from the “unorthodoxy” in question, that is, to pinning him down to the dualism expressed in certain of his verses, and turning a blind eye to his affirmations of the Oneness of Being, or in other words denying that he ever made the transcension from what Ghazālī calls the metaphor of union (*ittiḥād*) to the truth of the realization of the Oneness (*tawḥīd*—*Mishkāt*, p. 115). Nicholson pleads for Ibn al-Fāriḍ (*Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 193–4). Gairdner, feeling that Ghazālī is in great “danger”, pleads for him and by charitable extension for all other Muslim mystics on the grounds that they do not mean what they say! (*Ibid.*, pp. 62–3). The truth is that all the Sufis are “dualist” or “pluralist” at lower levels; but it is impossible that any of them should have believed that at the highest level there is anything other than the Divine Oneness, for though the Qur’ān changes the plane of its utterance more often even than the Sufis themselves, it is absolutely and inescapably explicit as regards the Eternal that *all things perish but His Face* and *all that is therein suffereth extinction, and there remaineth the Face of thy Lord in Its Majesty and Bounty*. This last word is a reminder that for the Sufis Oneness of Being is That in which there is no loss but only pure gain or, otherwise expressed, That in which all that was ever lost is found again in Infinite and Eternal Perfection. Therefore let those who shrink from this doctrine as a “pantheistic abyss” or what Nicholson calls “blank infinite negation” ask themselves if they really understand it.

18. When Ibn ‘Arabī for example criticizes some of the formulations of his great predecessors, such as Junayd and Al-Ḥallāj, as regards the Supreme State, it is clearly not because he thought that they had not attained to that State, but because the formulations in question are not sufficiently rigorous to be, in his opinion, methodically effective.

of ‘Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ and Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī would recoil from them if they really understood their deeper meaning. The truth is that if the author of this remark and Western scholars in general really understood the deeper meaning of such poetry, that is, if they really understood the doctrine of the Oneness of Being, they would cease to recoil from it. Massignon attacks it because it seems to him to deny both the Transcendence of God and the immortality of the soul. Yet in affirming the Transcendence and immortality in question he implicitly affirms the Oneness of Being. The difference between him and the Sufis is that he does not follow up his belief to its imperative conclusions, but stops half way. For if it be asked: “Why is the soul immortal?”, the answer lies in Meister Eckhardt’s “There is something in the soul which is uncreated and uncreatable... This is the Intellect.” The soul is not merely immortal but Eternal, not in its psychism but in virtue of the Divine Spark that is in it. The Shaykh Al-‘Alawī says in one of his poems:

Thou seest not who thou art, for thou art, yet art not ‘thou’.

and he quotes more than once Shushtarī’s lines:

After extinction I came out, and I

Eternal now am, though not as I.

Yet who am I, O I, but I?<sup>19</sup>

As to the Divine Transcendence, I will leave him to show that far from denying It, the doctrine of the Oneness of Being comes nearer than any other doctrine to doing justice to It.

Massignon writes<sup>20</sup> that this doctrine was first formulated by Ibn ‘Arabī. It may be that the term *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* was not generally used before his day, but the doctrine itself was certainly uppermost in the minds of his predecessors, and the more the question is studied the further it recedes along a purely Islamic line of descent. The already quoted passage in Ghazālī’s *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār* is closely followed up by: “There is no he but He, for ‘he’ expresseth that unto which reference is made, and there can be no reference at all save only unto Him, for whenever thou makest a reference, that reference is unto Him even though thou knewest it not through thine ignorance of the Truth of Truths... Thus ‘there is no god but God’ is the generality’s proclamation of Unity, and ‘there is no he but He’ is that of the elect, for the former is more general, whereas the latter is more elect, more all-embracing, truer, more exact, and more operative in bringing him who useth it into the Presence of Unalloyed Singleness and Pure Oneness.”<sup>21</sup>

The Shaykh Al-‘Alawī quotes<sup>22</sup> from the end the *Manāzil as-Sā’irīn* of ‘Abd Allāh al-Harawī (d. AD 1088) with regard to the third and highest degree of *Tawḥīd*:

“None affirmeth truly the Oneness of God, for whoso affirmeth It thereby setteth himself in contradiction with It... He, He is the affirmation of His Oneness, and whoso presumeth to describe Him blasphemeth (by creating a duality through the intrusion of his own person)”.

This recalls the almost identical saying of Al-Ḥallāj (d. AD 922):

19. *Wa-man anā yā anā illā anā*.

20. Encyclopaedia of Islam, *Taṣawwuf*.

21. pp. 117–18. Although written at the end of Ghazālī’s life (he died in AD 1111), this treatise is about 100 years earlier than Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*.

22. *Al-Nāṣir Ma’rūf*, p. 99.

“Whoso claimeth to affirm God’s Oneness thereby setteth up another beside him.”<sup>23</sup>

Al-Kharrāz, in his *Book of Truthfulness*, quotes the Companion Abū ‘Ubaidah (d. AD 639) as having said:

“I have never looked at a single thing without God being nearer to me than it.”<sup>24</sup>

Only one who stops short at the outer shell of words could maintain that there is a real difference between this and the following more analytical formulation from the thirteenth century *Treatise on Oneness*:

“If a questioner ask: ‘Supposing we see refuse or carrion, for example, wilt thou say that it is God?’, the answer is: ‘God in his Exaltation forbid that He should be any such thing! Our discourse is with him who doth not see the carrion to be carrion or the refuse to be refuse; our discourse is with him who hath insight (*baṣīrah*) and is not altogether blind.’”<sup>25</sup>

Al-Kharrāz’s quotation, made about AD 850, spans the first two centuries of Islam with the Qur’ānic doctrine of Nearness–Identity–Oneness. We have seen that in the early Meccan Surahs the highest saints are referred to as the *Near*, and that what the Qur’ān means by “nearness” is defined by the words *We are nearer to him than his jugular vein*. In the following already quoted Holy Tradition this nearness is expressed as identity: “My slave seeketh unremittingly to draw nigh unto Me with devotions of his free will until I love him; and when I love him, I am the Hearing wherewith he heareth and the Sight wherewith he seeth and the Hand wherewith he smiteth and the Foot whereon he walketh.” It cannot be concluded from this Tradition that this identity was not already there, for the Divinity is not subject to change. The “change” in question is simply that what was not perceived has now been perceived.<sup>26</sup> These two levels of perception are both referred to in the verse: *We are nearer to him than ye are, although ye see not.*<sup>27</sup> The lower of these two is perception of the merely relative reality of God’s absence which is pure illusion in the face of the Absolute Reality of His Presence. For there is no question of relative nearness here. *We are nearer to him than his jugular vein* and *God cometh in between a man and his own heart*<sup>28</sup> mean that He is nearer to him than he is to his inmost self. The Oneness here expressed exceeds the oneness of union.

It may be convenient for certain theories to suppose that these flashes of Qur’ānic lightning passed unperceived over the heads of the Companions, and that they were only noticed by later generations; but is it good psychology? No men have been more “men of one book” than the Companions were, and there is every reason to believe that no generation of

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23. *Akhbār*, no. 49.

24. Arabic text, p. 59; Arberry’s translation, p. 48.

25. We may compare the following third century BC formulation: “asked Chuang Tzu: ‘Where is the so-called *Tao*?’ Chuang Tzu said: ‘Everywhere.’ The former said: ‘Specify an instance of it.’ ‘It is in the ant.’ ‘How can *Tao* be anything so low?’ ‘It is in the panic grass.’ ‘How can it be still lower.’... ‘It is in excrement.’ To this Tung Kuo Tzu made no reply. Chuang Tzu said: ‘Your question does not touch the fundamentals of *Tao*. You should not specify any particular thing. There is not a single thing without *Tao*.’” (Chuang Tzu, ch. XXII, Yu-Lan Fung’s translation).

26. It has been perceived only because the agent of perception is God, not the mystic. “I am... his Sight”, or to use the Qur’ānic phrase: *The sight overtaketh Him not, but He overtaketh the sight* (VI, 103).

27. LVI, 85.

28. VIII, 24.

Islam has ever surpassed them in weighing the phrases of that book and in giving each one its due of consideration. They would have been the last people on earth to suppose that the Qur'ān ever meant *less* than it said. This does not mean that they would necessarily have interpreted as formulations of Oneness of Being all those Qur'ānic verses which the Sufis so interpret, for some of these verses admit more readily of other interpretations. But there are some which do not. If we take, for example, in addition to the already quoted formulations of "Nearness", the verse: *He is the First and the Last and the Outwardly Manifest and the Inwardly Hidden*,<sup>29</sup> it is difficult to conceive how the Companions would have understood these words other than in the sense of Ghazālī's, "there is no object of reference other than He", though they may never have formulated the truth in question except with the words of the Qur'ān itself, or with expressions such as Abū 'Ubaidah's: "I have never looked at a single thing without God being nearer to me than it," or the Prophet's: "Thou art the Outwardly Manifest and there is nothing covering Thee."<sup>30</sup>



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29. Qur'ān, LVII, 3.

30. Muslim, *Da'wāt*, 16; Tirmidhī, *Da'wāt*, 19. This is not incompatible with other Traditions in which he speaks of "veils" between man and God. It is simply a question of two different points of view, the one being absolute and the other relative.