

The Role of Islamic Sufism and Mysticism in Interfaith Dialogue: From Waḥdat al-Wujūd to Peaceful Coexistence

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical and doctrinal contribution of Islamic Sufism (taṣawwuf) to the theory and practice of interfaith dialogue, focusing on the metaphysical doctrine of waḥdat al-wujūd ("the Oneness of Being") articulated by Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabi and disseminated across the Muslim world through poets such as Jalal al-Dīn Rumi. Drawing directly on primary Sufi texts — Ibn al-ʿArabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, and *al-Tadbīrāt al-Ilāhiyya*; al-Ghazali's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*; and the *Maktūbāt* of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi — alongside the major secondary scholarship on these traditions, the article argues that Sufi metaphysics, by situating the diversity of religious forms within a single transcendent Reality, has functioned historically not merely as a private mystical philosophy but as a practical framework for religious coexistence, most visibly in the composite religious culture of South Asia under the Chishtī order and the Mughal court of Akbar and Dara Shukoh. Locating this heritage within the comparative study of mysticism and within contemporary interfaith initiatives, the article also takes seriously the doctrine's long history of internal Islamic contestation, from Ibn Taymiyya's critique to Ahmad Sirhindi's own Naqshbandī reformation, waḥdat al-shuhūd. It concludes that waḥdat al-wujūd offers Muslim societies, and South Asian Islam in particular, an indigenous, textually grounded, and theologically serious resource for religious pluralism that need not be derived from secular models of tolerance, provided its historical complexity and internal contestation are honestly acknowledged rather than elided.

Keywords: *Taṣawwuf*; *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*; *Ibn al-ʿArabi*; *Rumi*; *Interfaith Dialogue*; *Religious Pluralism*; *South Asia*; *Chishtī Order*.

Introduction

Interfaith dialogue is frequently treated, in policy literature and in the modern academy, as a distinctly contemporary project, born of twentieth-century catastrophes and articulated through the vocabulary of pluralism, tolerance, and human rights. Yet long before the term "interfaith dialogue" entered scholarly or diplomatic usage, the mystical tradition within Islam had already developed a metaphysical vocabulary capable of

situating the plurality of religious forms within a single, encompassing Reality. This tradition, generally known as *taṣawwuf* or Sufism, is not a marginal or heterodox appendage to Islamic orthodoxy but one of the most historically influential intellectual and devotional currents within the Islamic world, shaping law, poetry, statecraft, and popular piety across a geographic span running from West Africa to Southeast Asia.¹

At the doctrinal center of this tradition lies the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, usually translated as "the Oneness of Being" or "the Unity of Existence." First given systematic metaphysical expression by the Andalusian mystic Muḥyi al-Din Ibn al-ʿArabi (d. 1240) and subsequently popularized in Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and other vernacular literatures by poets such as Jalāl al-Din Rūmī (d. 1273) and ʿAbd al-Rahman Jāmī (d. 1492), *waḥdat al-wujūd* proposes that all existent things are theophanies (*tajalliyāt*) of a single, undivided divine Reality, differentiated only in the modes and degrees through which that Reality discloses itself.² On this understanding, the manifold religions of humankind are not simply competing and mutually exclusive truth-claims but partial, historically conditioned expressions of a single underlying Reality that no single tradition can exhaust.

This article argues that Sufi metaphysics, and *waḥdat al-wujūd* in particular, has functioned historically as more than a speculative doctrine confined to elite mystical circles. It has served as a practical framework that shaped concrete patterns of religious coexistence, nowhere more visibly than in the composite religious culture of South Asia, where the Chishti Sufi order and later the eclectic religious policies of the Mughal court drew directly, if selectively, on this metaphysical vision.³ At the same time, the article situates Sufi universalism within the broader comparative study of mysticism, noting structural affinities—without asserting simple identity—between *waḥdat al-wujūd* and non-dual currents within Vedantic Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and the apophatic mysticism of figures such as Meister Eckhart.⁴

A distinguishing feature of the present study, in response to the methodological concern that the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* risks being discussed only through the mediation of modern secondary scholarship, is its direct engagement with the primary Arabic and Persian texts of the tradition: Ibn al-ʿArabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, his treatise on statecraft *al-Tadbīrāt al-Ilāhiyya fī Iṣlāḥ al-Mamlaka al-Insāniyya*, al-Ghazali's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, and the *Maktūbāt* of Ahmad Sirhindi. Wherever a doctrine or interpretation is attributed to one of these mystics in what follows, the original Arabic or Persian passage is cited directly alongside its precise reference, so that the argument remains anchored in the primary sources themselves rather than resting solely on their modern interpreters.

The argument proceeds in nine stages. It first examines Ghazali's pre-history of Sufi tolerance; it then turns to Ibn al-ʿArabi's systematic ontology of *waḥdat al-wujūd*; it examines Rūmī's poetic universalization of that metaphysics; it situates Sufi thought comparatively alongside other mystical traditions; it offers two historical case studies—the Chishti order and the Mughal court under Akbar and Dara Shukoh—as evidence that this metaphysics translated into lived practices of coexistence; it assesses the contemporary uses of Sufi thought in interfaith initiatives; it acknowledges the doctrine's limits and the contested nature of its reception within the broader Muslim tradition; and it closes with a dedicated statement of findings before the conclusion. Throughout, the article maintains a position of critical appreciation: Sufi universalism is neither an uncomplicated ancestor of modern liberal pluralism nor a marginal curiosity, but a substantial and textually grounded resource within the Islamic tradition itself for thinking about religious difference.

¹Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 3–11.

²William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 3–15.

³Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1–15.

⁴Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 1–24.

1. Al-Ghazali and the Pre-History of Sufi Tolerance

Long before Ibn al-ʿArabi gave systematic metaphysical form to Sufi universalism, the towering theologian and jurist Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) had already begun to shift the center of gravity of mainstream Sunni theology away from reflexive excommunication (takfīr) of doctrinal opponents and toward a more differentiated, ethically serious engagement with religious difference.⁵ Trained as a jurist and theologian at the Nizamiyya madrasa in Baghdad before undergoing a well-documented spiritual crisis that led him toward the Sufi path, Ghazali occupies a unique position in Islamic intellectual history as a figure whose authority within both the exoteric legal-theological tradition and the esoteric Sufi tradition has rarely been disputed, giving his writings on tolerance a weight that purely Sufi authors could not always claim.⁶

Ghazali's own magnum opus, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* ("The Revival of the Religious Sciences"), opens its Book of Knowledge (*Kitāb al-ʿIlm*) with a direct discussion of precisely this tension between the exoteric and esoteric sciences. Surveying the positions of the theologians, the jurists, the exegetes, and finally the Sufis on which branch of knowledge constitutes an individual religious obligation (*farḍ ʿayn*), Ghazali reports that, for the Sufis, this knowledge is «العلم بالإخلاص وآفات النفوس وتمييز لمة الملك من لمة الشيطان», that is, "the knowledge of sincerity (*ikhhlās*), the afflictions of the soul, and the discernment of the angelic prompting from the satanic one" — what some of them called simply «العلم الباطن», "the inward science."⁷ This passage is significant for the present argument because it shows Ghazali, writing as a jurist cataloguing competing scholarly definitions rather than as a committed partisan of any one of them, nonetheless placing the Sufi definition of obligatory knowledge — a knowledge of the heart's sincerity rather than of external doctrine — on an equal evidentiary footing with the theologians' and jurists' own definitions, thereby lending the esoteric path an institutional legitimacy that later universalist readings of taṣawwuf would draw upon.

In his treatise *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* ("The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity"), Ghazali developed a careful jurisprudential argument restricting the grounds on which a fellow Muslim, let alone a non-Muslim, could be formally charged with unbelief, insisting that the presumption must always favor a charitable interpretation of another's professed faith unless a specific, unambiguous denial of a necessary tenet of religion could be demonstrated.⁸ Sherman Jackson, the treatise's English translator, has argued that Ghazali's framework, developed initially to manage disputes among competing theological schools within Islam, established interpretive habits and juristic precedents subsequently available to Sufi authors seeking to extend similar charitable presumptions toward non-Muslim traditions as well.⁹

Frank Griffel's intellectual biography of Ghazali situates this argument within his broader theological project of placing philosophical rigor in the service of religious moderation, arguing that Ghazali's insistence on the primacy of ethical intention (*niyya*) and sincerity (*ikhhlās*) over narrow doctrinal conformity supplied later Sufi universalists with a theological vocabulary they would draw upon extensively.¹⁰ While Ghazali did not himself articulate anything resembling a doctrine of the ontological unity of religions, his juristic restraint regarding takfīr, combined with his own turn toward Sufi epistemology in works such as *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (Deliverance from Error), and the primacy he accords in the *Iḥyāʾ* itself to *Tazkiyat al-Nafs* (purification of the soul), *Mujāhadah* (spiritual struggle against the lower self), and *Dhikr* (remembrance of God) over mere external

⁵Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 98–107.

⁶W. Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963), 141–150.

⁷Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, *Kitāb al-ʿIlm*, al-Bāb al-Thānī (Cairo: Lajnat Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1356–57/1937–38), 17–18 (digitized ed., Internet Archive, item 1_20211218_20211218).

⁸Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*, trans. Sherman A. Jackson as *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90–104.

⁹Jackson, translator's introduction to *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 15–34.

¹⁰Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*, 111–120.

observance, prepared the theological ground on which Ibn al-ʿArabi's more radical metaphysical universalism could later be constructed without appearing wholly discontinuous with mainstream Sunni orthodoxy.

2. Ibn al-ʿArabi and the Doctrine of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*

Although the phrase *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not appear verbatim in the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabi himself, it was extracted by his immediate interpretive tradition—above all his stepson and systematizer Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (d. 1274)—as a convenient shorthand for the metaphysics elaborated across his vast corpus, most importantly the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Bezels of Wisdom) and the multi-volume *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations).¹¹ The doctrine's basic claim is that *wujūd*, "being" or "existence," is ontologically singular and belongs properly to God alone; all other things—the entirety of the created cosmos—do not possess independent being but are loci of manifestation (*maẓāhir*) through which the single Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) discloses its otherwise hidden Names and Attributes.¹²

The opening chapter (*faṣṣ*) of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, the *Faṣṣ Ḥikma Ilāhiyya fī Kalima Ādamiyya* ("the chapter of divine wisdom in the Adamic word"), states this doctrine of theophany in terms of the celebrated image of the cosmos as an unpolished mirror which God, through the creation of Adam, brings to a state of polish and clarity. Ibn al-ʿArabi writes: «فاقتضى الأمر جلاء مرآة العالم، فكان آدم عین جلاء تلك المرأة وروح تلك الصورة» — "the Command thus required the polishing of the mirror of the cosmos, and Adam became the very polish of that mirror and the spirit of that form." The angels, Ibn al-ʿArabi continues, correspond to the particular faculties within that cosmic form, so that each divine Name is reflected, prior to Adam, only partially and imperfectly, «فكان كمرآة غير مجلوة» — "it [the world] was like an unpolished mirror" — until the advent of the all-comprehensive human form made possible a total, rather than merely partial, theophany.¹³ This image — the cosmos as a mirror brought to clarity specifically through the human recipient of all the divine Names together, rather than through any single created form in isolation — is the primary textual basis for the later universalist reading of Ibn al-ʿArabi's cosmology: no single religious or metaphysical form, on this reading, discloses the Names in their totality, which is why the tradition speaks of a plurality of theophanies rather than a single, exhaustive one.

Central to this architecture is the concept of *tajallī*, divine "self-disclosure" or theophany. For Ibn al-ʿArabi, the cosmos is best understood not as a collection of self-subsistent substances but as a continuous unfolding of divine self-revelation, in which each existent thing—each human being, each religious community, each scripture—discloses a particular constellation of the ninety-nine divine Names.¹⁴ In *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn al-ʿArabi links this disclosure directly to the epistemic condition of the recipient rather than to any uniform external process, writing of those whose hearts have turned wholly toward God in the second chapter of the work, "On the Ranks of Letters": «فعندما توجهت قلوبهم وهمهم إلى الله تعالى ولجأت إليه... تجلّى الحق لهم معلماً فأطلعهم تلك المشاهدة على معاني تلك الأخبار» — "when their hearts and aspirations turned toward God Most High and took refuge in Him ... the Real disclosed Himself to them as Teacher, and that witnessing (*mushāhada*) unveiled to them the inner meanings of those reports." *Tajallī*, in other words, is not a single uniform event but a differentiated pedagogy in which the Real discloses Himself to each heart according to its specific capacity and preparedness — a principle Ibn al-ʿArabi applies, in the surrounding passage, to explain why the same scriptural reports yield different, non-contradictory meanings for different recipients of unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*).¹⁵ William Chittick has argued that this logic supplies Ibn al-ʿArabi with a theological basis for affirming that God is in some sense worshipped,

¹¹William C. Chittick, *Ibn ʿArabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 20–29.

¹²Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 79–93.

¹³Ibn al-ʿArabi, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, *Faṣṣ I (al-Ḥikma al-Ilāhiyya fī Kalima Ādamiyya)* (Cairo, n.d.), 49–50 (digitized ed., Internet Archive, item *abeer_20160509*); cf. the standard critical edition, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. Abu'l-ʿAla ʿAfīfī (Cairo: Dar Ihya al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1946), 1:48–50.

¹⁴Ibn al-ʿArabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 24–36.

¹⁵Ibn al-ʿArabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 1, *al-Bāb al-Thānī (Fī Maʿrifat Marātib al-Ḥurūf)*, ed. Ahmad Shams al-Din (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1994), 139 (digitized ed., Internet Archive, item *FTMAKIA*).

knowingly or unknowingly, in every act of worship directed at any conceivable object, since no object of worship stands wholly outside the single reality of *wujūd*.¹⁶

This does not mean, for Ibn al-ʿArabi, that all religions are doctrinally equivalent or equally efficacious as vehicles of formal salvation; he remained, throughout his life, a jurist trained in the *Zahiri* school and an observant follower of the Islamic revelation, and he did not counsel abandoning the *Sharīʿah* in favor of some generic mysticism, nor did he treat the *Sulūk* — the disciplined spiritual path by which the aspirant advances through successive stations toward God — as dispensable simply because its ultimate object was a unity transcending all those stations.¹⁷ What his metaphysics does provide is a framework in which the formal particularity of religions—their laws, rites, and doctrines—can be affirmed at the level of religious practice while their ultimate object is affirmed to be single at the level of metaphysical reality. This double structure—formal multiplicity, ontological unity—is captured in Ibn al-ʿArabi's famous verses from the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* describing a heart that has become "capable of every form," a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks, a temple for idols, the pilgrim's *Kaʿba*, the tablets of the *Torah*, and the pages of the *Qurʾān*, concluding that the poet follows "the religion of Love," whichever direction its caravans may take.¹⁸

Ibn al-ʿArabi's cosmology also elaborates the concept of *al-insān al-kāmil*, the "Perfect Human Being," understood as the microcosmic locus in which all divine Names achieve their most complete simultaneous manifestation.¹⁹ In his treatise on statecraft and spiritual governance, *al-Tadbīrāt al-Ilāhiyya fī Iṣlāḥ al-Mamlaka al-Insāniyya* ("The Divine Governances in the Reform of the Human Kingdom"), Ibn al-ʿArabi extends this same vocabulary of theophanic vicegerency to the human spirit itself, which the treatise's second chapter, devoted to the nature of the ruling faculty it calls "the *khalifa*," describes as a reality over whose essence the theologians themselves have long disputed: «اختلف العلماء رضي الله عنهم في هذا الروح الذي عتبرنا عنه بالخليفة» — "the scholars have disagreed concerning this spirit, which we have designated as the *khalifa* [vicegerent]."²⁰ Ibn al-ʿArabi's extension of *khilāfa* — vicegerency over the "kingdom" of the human microcosm — to the governing spirit within every human being, irrespective of confessional affiliation, provides a further textual basis for treating the capacity for theophanic disclosure as a universal human endowment rather than one confined to a single community of believers.

Prophets and saints across religious traditions are, on this reading, differentiated instances of a single prophetic reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*) that discloses itself progressively through history, culminating, for Ibn al-ʿArabi as a Muslim thinker, in the Muhammadan revelation, yet without thereby nullifying the genuine theophanic status of earlier revelations.²¹ It is precisely this dual commitment—doctrinal fidelity to Islam combined with metaphysical openness to the theophanic status of other religions—that later Sufi thinkers, and still later modern scholars of comparative religion, would draw upon in constructing frameworks for interfaith engagement that remain recognizably Islamic rather than borrowed wholesale from secular pluralism.

It is also worth situating Ibn al-ʿArabi's universalism within its own immediate historical context. Born in Murcia in 1165 and raised in Seville during a period in which Muslim al-Andalus still contained substantial Jewish and Christian populations living under Islamic rule, Ibn al-ʿArabi grew up within a religiously plural society whose everyday texture of coexistence, however unequal in formal legal status, differed markedly from the more

¹⁶Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 337–348.

¹⁷Chittick, *Ibn ʿArabi: Heir to the Prophets*, 62–70.

¹⁸Reynold A. Nicholson, trans., *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muḥyi'ddīn Ibn al-ʿArabi* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), 19, 67.

¹⁹Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 364–376.

²⁰Ibn al-ʿArabi, *al-Tadbīrāt al-Ilāhiyya fī Iṣlāḥ al-Mamlaka al-Insāniyya*, *al-Bāb al-Thānī* (Damascus/Beirut, n.d.), 101 (digitized ed., Internet Archive, item [Tercha.amm2018_20180325_1044](https://www.archive.org/details/tercha.amm2018_20180325_1044)).

²¹Chittick, *Ibn ʿArabi: Heir to the Prophets*, 125–136.

religiously homogeneous environments of much of the eastern Islamic world.²² Addas's biography suggests that this Andalusian formation, together with Ibn al-ʿArabi's extensive travels through North Africa, the Hijaz, Anatolia, and greater Syria before his eventual settlement in Damascus, exposed him directly to a wide range of religious communities and left an imprint on a metaphysical vision unusually well disposed, by the standards of his time, to affirming the theophanic value of forms of worship and belief beyond the boundaries of his own juridical school.²³

3. Rumi and the Poetics of Universal Love

If Ibn al-ʿArabi supplied the metaphysical architecture of Sufi universalism, it was Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) who translated that architecture into a poetic idiom accessible far beyond the circles of professional metaphysicians, ensuring its transmission across Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and eventually English-speaking publics.²⁴ Although Rumi does not employ Ibn al-ʿArabi's technical vocabulary as systematically as later commentators such as ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami, William Chittick has shown that the theological substructure of Rumi's *Mathnawī* and *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī* is deeply congruent with *waḥdat al-wujūd*, transmitted to Rumi's circle largely through his companion Sadr al-Din al-Qunawī, who was himself Ibn al-ʿArabi's direct disciple.²⁵

Rumi's most celebrated image for the relationship between the diversity of religious forms and their single divine referent is that of the reed flute (*nay*) in the opening lines of the *Mathnawī*, whose plaintive music expresses the pain of separation (*firāq*) from its origin—a symbol, Rumi tells us, of every soul's estrangement from the divine source to which it ultimately belongs, regardless of the particular religious vocabulary in which that estrangement and its remedy are articulated.²⁶ Elsewhere Rumi offers the well-known parable of four travelers—a Persian, an Arab, a Turk, and a Greek—who quarrel bitterly over how to spend a single coin, each demanding a different word for "grapes" in his own tongue, until a linguist reveals that all four desired the identical fruit; their conflict, Rumi concludes, arose not from a difference in what they sought but from a difference in the words available to name it.²⁷

Lewis has noted that this parable, though not explicitly about the world religions, has been read by later commentators and by Rumi's modern global readership as a paradigmatic statement of Sufi universalism: that the apparent contradictions between religious vocabularies may mask an underlying convergence of religious intention.²⁸ Rumi's universalism, like Ibn al-ʿArabi's, is not indifferentism. He remained a practicing jurist's son, a teacher within a Hanafī legal milieu, and the founder of an order, the *Mevlevī*s, organized around specifically Islamic ritual practice, including the *samāʿ* (whirling ceremony), understood as a form of *Dhikr*, remembrance of God.²⁹

What his poetry offers is not a dissolution of religious particularity but a repeated insistence that the outward forms of religion (*ṣūrat*) are instrumental to, and must not be mistaken for, the inward reality (*maʿnā*) toward which they point—a reality Rumi identifies with divine Love (*ʿishq*), treated as ontologically prior to, and more fundamental than, any of its particular doctrinal articulations.³⁰ This poetic universalism found fertile ground for reception outside strictly Perso-Islamic contexts. In the Indian subcontinent in particular, Chishtī Sufi masters

²²Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ʿArabi*, trans. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 27–41.

²³Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, 82–96, 210–225.

²⁴Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 30–41.

²⁵William C. Chittick, "Rumi and *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*," in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70–86.

²⁶Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Mathnawī of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, vol. 2 (London: Luzac & Co., 1926), Book I, lines 1–18.

²⁷Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 396–403.

²⁸Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, 408–415.

²⁹William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 217–226.

³⁰Chittick, "Rumi and *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*," 88–95.

incorporated Rumi's verses into vernacular devotional practice attended by Hindus as well as Muslims, a pattern of shared ritual participation that Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence have documented extensively for the Chishti shrines of Ajmer, Delhi, and the Deccan.³¹ The historical reception of Rumi thus illustrates a broader pattern in the Sufi tradition: doctrines formulated in relatively technical philosophical language by figures such as Ibn al-ʿArabi were repeatedly translated by poet-saints into devotional and performative registers that circulated across confessional boundaries far more readily than formal theology could.

4. Sufism in Comparative Perspective: Convergences with Other Mystical Traditions

The universalist thrust of *waḥdat al-wujūd* has long invited comparison with non-dual currents in other religious traditions, a comparative project pursued by scholars working within what is sometimes called the "perennialist" or "traditionalist" school, most notably Frithjof Schuon, whose 1953 study *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* argued that the world's mystical traditions converge at the level of what he termed the "transcendent unity," even where their exoteric doctrines and rites diverge sharply.³² Schuon's distinction between an esoteric core, shared in some measure across traditions, and an exoteric form, which remains properly particular to each religion, echoes Ibn al-ʿArabi's own distinction between *wujūd* and its differentiated theophanies, though Schuon's framework has been criticized by scholars of comparative mysticism, notably Steven Katz, for underestimating the degree to which mystical experience itself is shaped, rather than merely expressed, by the doctrinal categories of the tradition in which it occurs.³³

More textually grounded comparative work has been undertaken by scholars examining specific doctrinal parallels rather than asserting a generic mystical unity. Toshihiko Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism* undertook a rigorous structural comparison between Ibn al-ʿArabi's ontology and the metaphysics of the Taoist classics attributed to Laozi and Zhuangzi, arguing that both traditions independently arrive at a conception of an undifferentiated absolute reality that becomes differentiated through a process of self-manifestation, even though the two traditions developed in complete historical isolation from one another.³⁴ Izutsu's method—careful philological comparison rather than assertion of an *a priori* unity—has been influential in establishing that structural parallels between mystical traditions need not rest on unverifiable claims about a shared underlying experience, but can instead be established through close reading of each tradition's own technical vocabulary.³⁵

Reza Shah-Kazemi's *Paths to Transcendence* undertakes a comparable exercise with respect to the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara, the *waḥdat al-wujūd* of Ibn al-ʿArabi, and the apophatic theology of the Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart (d. c. 1328), arguing that all three thinkers articulate, through distinct doctrinal vocabularies, a common structural move: the relativization of ordinary, phenomenal reality (*māyā* for Shankara, *khalq* or "creation" for Ibn al-ʿArabi, "creature" for Eckhart) in relation to an absolute Reality that alone possesses true being.³⁶ Eckhart's teaching that "the eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me" bears a striking structural resemblance to Ibn al-ʿArabi's teaching on the relation between the Divine Names' self-knowledge and the created world's disclosure of those Names—a resonance that led to Eckhart's posthumous condemnation by ecclesiastical authorities in 1329, in a manner not unlike the controversy that has periodically attended *waḥdat al-wujūd* within segments of the Islamic scholarly tradition, discussed further below.³⁷

³¹Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 108–119.

³²Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 1–17.

³³Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22–74.

³⁴Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 23–41.

³⁵Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 469–479.

³⁶Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 45–72.

³⁷Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence*, 210–235.

Shah-Kazemi has extended this comparative project to Buddhism in *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism*, arguing that the Sufi conception of *fanā'*, the "annihilation" of the ego-self in the encounter with the Real, exhibits functional parallels with the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* ("no-self") and with the Mahayana teaching of *sūnyatā* ("emptiness"), notwithstanding the very different metaphysical frameworks—theistic in the Sufi case, generally non-theistic in the Buddhist case—within which each doctrine is embedded.³⁸ Such comparative work, whatever its limitations, demonstrates that Sufi metaphysics does not stand in isolation; it participates in a broader, cross-culturally attested pattern of contemplative reflection on the relationship between the absolute and the relative, a pattern that furnishes contemporary interfaith dialogue with genuine points of doctrinal, and not merely diplomatic, contact between traditions.³⁹

5. The Chishti Order and Religious Pluralism in South Asia

The metaphysical universalism examined above did not remain confined to philosophical treatises; it shaped concrete institutional practices of religious accommodation, nowhere more clearly than within the Chishti Sufi order as it developed on the Indian subcontinent from the twelfth century onward.⁴⁰ The earliest major Persian Sufi treatise composed in South Asia, the *Kashf al-Mahjūb* of 'Alī ibn 'Uthman al-Hujwiri, known as *Data Ganj Bakhsh* (d. c. 1077), written in Lahore roughly a century before the arrival of the Chishti order proper, already articulated the principle that sanctity could be recognized across communal boundaries by its ethical and spiritual fruits rather than by formal affiliation alone, establishing an interpretive horizon within which the later Chishti ethos would develop.⁴¹

The order's founding figure in India, Khwaja Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1236) of Ajmer, and his successors, including Qutb al-Dīn Bakhtiyar Kākī, Baba Farid al-Dīn Ganj-i Shakar, and Nizam al-Dīn Awliya, developed a distinctive institutional ethos centered on the *khānqāh*, a hospice open to visitors regardless of religious affiliation, and on principles the tradition itself termed *ṣulḥ-i kull*, "peace with all."⁴² Richard Eaton's study of the shrine of Baba Farid at Pakpattan documents how the shrine attracted, and continues to attract, Hindu and Sikh devotees alongside Muslims, with local perceptions of the saint's sanctity constructed through idioms shared across confessional lines rather than through exclusively Islamic categories.⁴³

Simon Digby has emphasized that the authority exercised by Chishti shaykhs in medieval India rested substantially on their reputation as sources of *barakah*, or spiritual blessing, flowing from a recognized *Wilāyah* (sainthood) available in principle to anyone who approached the shrine, an ethos reinforced by the Chishti masters' well-documented reluctance to accept positions or patronage from the state, which they regarded as compromising the order's independence and its openness to the general population.⁴⁴ Chishti practice also incorporated, particularly at the level of ritual and devotional life, elements of the surrounding devotional (*bhakti*) culture, including forms of vernacular hymnody and musical practice (*qawwali*) that drew Hindu as well as Muslim participants into shared performative space.⁴⁵

Ernst and Lawrence argue that this pattern of shared devotional participation constituted a genuine, if informal and largely unsystematized, mode of interfaith engagement centuries before the term existed, rooted not in a

³⁸Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), 15–42.

³⁹Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism*, 130–148.

⁴⁰Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 4–13.

⁴¹'Alī ibn 'Uthman al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac & Co., 1911), 1–14.

⁴²Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 19–35.

⁴³Richard M. Eaton, "Court of Man, Court of God: Local Perceptions of the Shrine of Baba Farid," in *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 214–232.

⁴⁴Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaykh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India," in *India's Islamic Traditions, 711–1750*, ed. Richard M. Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 234–262.

⁴⁵Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 63–78.

relativist indifference to doctrine but in the metaphysical conviction, inherited ultimately from Ibn al-ʿArabi's school, that sanctity and divine presence could not be confined to a single institutional or doctrinal boundary.⁴⁶

6. Akbar, Dara Shukoh, and the Confluence of the Two Oceans

The Sufi metaphysics of unity found its most consequential political expression in the religious policies of the Mughal Empire, particularly under the emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) and, a century later, in the intellectual project of the crown prince Dara Shukoh (1615–1659). Muzaffar Alam has argued that Akbar's religious eclecticism—expressed institutionally in the abolition of the *jizya* tax on non-Muslims, the establishment of the ʿIbādat Khāna ("House of Worship") for interreligious debate, and the promulgation of the syncretic Dīn-i Ilāhī ("Divine Faith")—drew substantially on the intellectual resources of the Sufi orders patronized at court, including Chishti and Naqshbandi masters, whose metaphysics of unity provided a theological vocabulary for state policies of accommodation that went well beyond ordinary considerations of political pragmatism.⁴⁷

This trajectory reached its most systematic expression in the work of Dara Shukoh, Akbar's great-grandson and the eldest son of Shah Jahan, whose 1655 treatise *Majmaʿ al-Baḥrayn* ("The Mingling of the Two Oceans") undertook a direct, terminologically precise comparison between the technical vocabulary of Ibn al-ʿArabi's school and the Sanskrit vocabulary of Advaita Vedanta, arguing that Hindu concepts such as *brahman*, *ātman*, and *mokṣa* corresponded systematically to the Sufi concepts of *wujūd*, *rūḥ*, and *fanāʾ*.⁴⁸ Dara Shukoh went further still in his *Sirr-i Akbar* (1657), a Persian translation of fifty Upanishads undertaken with the assistance of Sanskrit pandits at Banaras, prefaced by his claim that the Upanishads constituted a "hidden book" (*kitāb-i maknūn*) referred to in the Qurʾān, and therefore stood within, rather than outside, the framework of authentic revealed scripture.⁴⁹

Supriya Gandhi's intellectual biography situates Dara Shukoh's project within the broader Naqshbandi and Qadiri Sufi milieu of seventeenth-century Mughal India, arguing that his comparative theology was not an idiosyncratic personal enthusiasm but a serious extension of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* tradition into new textual territory, made possible precisely because that tradition already possessed the conceptual resources—the distinction between a single *wujūd* and its differentiated theophanies—needed to accommodate an entirely new scriptural corpus within an Islamic metaphysical framework.⁵⁰ Dara Shukoh's execution in 1659 on charges of apostasy, following his defeat by his brother Aurangzeb in the Mughal war of succession, is frequently read—by Gandhi among others—not simply as a political liquidation but as a marker of the genuine theological controversy that his universalist project provoked within the Muslim scholarly establishment of his time, a controversy this article returns to in its discussion of the limits of Sufi universalism below.⁵¹

7. Sufism in Contemporary Interfaith Dialogue

The historical resources examined above have been redeployed, over the past several decades, in a range of contemporary interfaith initiatives that explicitly invoke Sufi metaphysics as an Islamic resource for religious pluralism, rather than relying solely on categories imported from Western liberal political theory. The theologian Mahmoud Ayoub, writing from within the Twelver Shiʿi tradition but drawing extensively on the broader Sufi heritage, argued across several decades of published dialogue with Christian theologians that the Qurʾānic affirmation of a plurality of prophets and revealed books (Q 2:136, 3:84) provides an authentically Islamic

⁴⁶Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 79–91.

⁴⁷Muzaffar Alam, "The Mughals, the Sufi Shaikhs and the Formation of the Akbari Dispensation," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 135–174.

⁴⁸Dara Shukoh, *Majmaʿ-ul-Bahrain*, or, *The Mingling of the Two Oceans*, trans. M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1929), 1–22.

⁴⁹Supriya Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 210–228.

⁵⁰Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was*, 240–258.

⁵¹Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was*, 289–305.

scriptural basis for interreligious respect, one that Ayoub treats as complementary to, rather than dependent upon, the more contested metaphysics of *waḥdat al-wujūd*.⁵²

At the institutional level, the "A Common Word Between Us and You" initiative launched in 2007 by a broad coalition of Muslim scholars addressed to Christian religious leaders, while grounded primarily in shared ethical commandments to love God and neighbor rather than in Sufi metaphysics as such, drew signatories from across the Sufi intellectual tradition and was explicitly framed by several of its contributors, including Reza Shah-Kazemi, as continuous with the older Sufi universalist project examined in this article.⁵³ Shah-Kazemi's own contribution, drawing on Ibn al-ʿArabi's doctrine of the single *wujūd* manifesting through multiple theophanies, argued that the Sufi metaphysical tradition supplies contemporary Muslim participants in interfaith dialogue with an indigenous theological rationale for engagement that does not require Muslims to import a secular or religiously neutral framework of pluralism from outside their own tradition.

In South Asia specifically, the continuing popular vitality of Sufi shrine culture continues to function, as it did historically, as a site of interreligious devotional practice. Robert Rozeznal's ethnographic study of contemporary Pakistani Sufism documents how Sufi orders, and the shrine networks associated with them, have positioned themselves in public discourse as an indigenous counter-model to sectarian exclusivism, mobilizing precisely the vocabulary of *ṣulḥ-i kull* examined above in section five.⁵⁴ Pnina Werbner's anthropological study of a transnational Naqshbandi Sufi network centered on a Pakistani shaykh similarly documents how contemporary Sufi communities, even while remaining doctrinally and ritually rooted within Islamic practice, cultivate an ethic of universal compassion that participants explicitly connect to the metaphysics of divine unity underlying apparent human and religious diversity.⁵⁵

Carl Ernst has cautioned, however, against a tendency within some popular and academic presentations to flatten this heritage into a generically "spiritual" universalism detached from its specifically Islamic doctrinal and legal moorings, a tendency he associates with certain strands of Western popular reception of Rumi's poetry in particular, where Rumi's explicitly Qurʾanic and Islamic vocabulary is frequently excised from best-selling English translations.⁵⁶ A responsible contemporary retrieval of Sufi universalism for interfaith purposes, Ernst argues, must resist this decontextualization and instead present *waḥdat al-wujūd* as what it historically was: a rigorously argued position within, not outside or against, the juridical and theological structures of the Islamic tradition.⁵⁷

8. Critiques, Limits, and Contested Readings

Any responsible scholarly treatment of Sufi universalism must acknowledge that *waḥdat al-wujūd* has been, since at least the fourteenth century, one of the most contested doctrines within Islamic intellectual history, and that its interfaith applications cannot be presented as an unproblematic consensus position within the tradition. The Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) mounted an extensive and influential critique of Ibn al-ʿArabi's ontology, arguing that the collapse of the ontological distinction between Creator and creation implicit in a strong reading of *waḥdat al-wujūd* verged on, or actually constituted, a form of pantheism (*ittiḥād* or *ḥulūl*) incompatible with

⁵²Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 3–18.

⁵³Reza Shah-Kazemi, "Divine Mercy and the Unity of Religions," in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 172–195.

⁵⁴Robert Rozeznal, *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First-Century Pakistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1–22.

⁵⁵Pnina Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 1–19, 245–260.

⁵⁶Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 197–213.

⁵⁷Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 214–222.

the strict Qur'anic doctrine of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*).⁵⁸ This critique has been sustained and elaborated by successive generations of scholars within the Salafī and broader reformist traditions, for whom waḥdat al-wujūd represents a philosophically compromised deviation from scriptural monotheism rather than its most sophisticated metaphysical elaboration.⁵⁹

Even within the Sufi tradition itself, the doctrine met significant internal resistance. The Naqshbandi reformer Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), writing at the Mughal court roughly contemporaneously with Akbar, proposed an alternative formulation, waḥdat al-shuhūd ("Unity of Witnessing," or "Apparent Monism"), arguing that the experience of ontological unity reported by Sufi adepts reflected a subjective state of consciousness rather than an objective metaphysical fact, and that maintaining the full reality of the Creator–creature distinction was essential to preserving orthodox Islamic theology against what he regarded as the dangerously eclectic drift of Akbar's court.⁶⁰

Sirhindi presents this reformation not as an abstract doctrinal preference but as the record of his own spiritual itinerary, recounted at length in one of his most frequently cited letters. Describing the period of his life in which he himself had been immersed in the Sufi experience of ontological unity, Sirhindi writes that his early conviction was shaped entirely by "the way of those devoted to unity" (مشرب اهل توحید), a state of mystical intoxication (*sukr*) so complete that, as he confesses, he once composed verses declaring that "the Law (*sharīʿat*) is but the parable of a blind community; the path of unbelief and the path of faith are, in the end, one single path." He then describes the decisive reversal: «علوم سابق که منیبی از اتحاد و وحدت بودهاند، رو به زوال آوردند» — "the earlier sciences, which had proceeded from [the experience of] union (*ittiḥād*) and unity (*waḥdat*), began to recede," replaced by a sober awareness of the Creator's unbridgeable distinction from creation.⁶¹ Sirhindi's own testimony is thus not a purely external polemic against Ibn al-ʿArabi's school but an insider's report of having passed through, and ultimately beyond, the very state of consciousness that waḥdat al-wujūd describes — a biographical detail that gives his critique of the doctrine's interfaith extension considerable internal weight within the Sufi tradition itself.

Sirhindi's critique, and the broader Naqshbandi reform movement associated with his name, is frequently cited by historians as a contributing factor in the more restrictive religious policies pursued by Akbar's great-grandson Aurangzeb, in explicit reaction against the universalist experiments of Akbar and Dara Shukoh discussed above.⁶²

These internal Islamic debates carry direct implications for the contemporary use of waḥdat al-wujūd in interfaith contexts. First, invoking the doctrine as though it represented an uncontested Islamic consensus in favor of religious pluralism risks obscuring the genuine and long-standing theological objections that a substantial portion of the Muslim scholarly tradition has raised against it, objections that cannot simply be dismissed as obscurantism without engaging their own considerable jurisprudential and theological sophistication.⁶³ Second, even sympathetic interpreters such as Chittick have cautioned against reading Ibn al-ʿArabi's own texts as endorsing anything resembling a modern doctrine of the equal salvific validity of all religions; Ibn al-ʿArabi's affirmation of the theophanic status of other revelations operates within, and is subordinated to, a hierarchical framework in which the Muhammadan revelation retains a position of unique

⁵⁸Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 87–104.

⁵⁹Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 130–148.

⁶⁰Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), 59–72.

⁶¹Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktūbāt-i Imām Rabbānī*, *Daftar-i Awwal*, *Maktūb* 31 (Lahore, n.d.), 127–129 (digitized ed., Internet Archive, item 77-ketabeerfani).

⁶²Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi*, 73–89.

⁶³Alam, "The Mughals, the Sufi Shaikhs," 168–174.

finality, a qualification frequently elided in popular and interfaith-oriented presentations of his thought.⁶⁴ A rigorous scholarly and pastoral use of this heritage for the purposes of interfaith harmony must therefore present waḥdat al-wujūd not as a simple solvent of religious difference but as what it actually is: a sophisticated, internally contested, and theologically demanding metaphysics that offers grounds for respect and engagement across religious boundaries precisely because, and only because, it takes religious and metaphysical claims with full seriousness.

9. Findings

The textual and historical evidence assembled in this article yields six specific findings, stated here before the concluding discussion.

First, the doctrine of waḥdat al-wujūd is not merely inferred by modern interpreters from scattered remarks of Ibn al-‘Arabi, but rests on an explicit, sustained textual architecture — the mirror-polishing passage of the opening faṣṣ of the Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam and the differentiated-tajallī passage of al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya examined in Section 2 above — in which the plurality of theophanies, rather than a single uniform disclosure, is built into the doctrine from its primary source rather than added to it by later sympathetic readers.

Second, al-Ghazali's own primary text, read in the Kitāb al-‘Ilm of the Iḥyā’, shows that the distinction between an exoteric and an esoteric religious knowledge — later foundational to Sufi universalist argument — was already granted standing within mainstream Sunni juristic literature a full century before Ibn al-‘Arabi, which weakens the objection that Sufi universalism is a philosophical import external to normative Islamic scholarship.

Third, the extension of theophanic and vicegerential (khilāfa) vocabulary from the cosmos as a whole to the individual human spirit, documented in al-Tadbīrāt al-Ilāhiyya, provided the Chishti order and the Mughal court with an available conceptual bridge from metaphysics to the governance of a religiously plural "human kingdom," helping to explain why this particular metaphysical school, among the various currents of Islamic thought, proved so exportable into institutional and political practice in South Asia.

Fourth, the internal Islamic critique of Sufi universalism is not a later or external imposition but contemporaneous with its moment of greatest political influence: Ahmad Sirhindi's Maktūbāt show that waḥdat al-shuhūd was formulated by a thinker who had himself undergone, and reports retrospectively on, the very experiential state that waḥdat al-wujūd describes, which means the debate examined in Section 8 is best understood as an intra-Sufi disagreement over the correct interpretation of a shared mystical experience, not a dispute between mysticism and anti-mystical orthodoxy as such.

Fifth, the comparative material surveyed in Section 4 indicates that the structural features of waḥdat al-wujūd most relevant to interfaith application — the relativizing of all particular forms before a single underlying Reality, and the practice of fanā’ as a dissolution of the boundary between self and Real — have independently documented analogues in Advaita Vedanta, Mahayana Buddhism, and Rhineland Christian mysticism, which supports treating Sufi universalism as a serious participant in, rather than an isolated Islamic curiosity alongside, the broader comparative study of mysticism.

Sixth, the historical record of the Chishti order and the Mughal court demonstrates that Sufi metaphysical universalism translated into durable institutional practice — shared shrine devotion, abolition of discriminatory taxation, a comparative theological treatise such as the Majma’ al-Baḥrayn — only when it was carried by specific institutions (the khānqāh, the court) and individuals (Akbar, Dara Shukoh) willing to bear real political risk, and that this translation was neither automatic nor permanent, as the Aurangzeb-era reversal driven in part by the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi reaction shows; contemporary retrieval of this heritage for interfaith purposes should therefore expect comparable institutional and political resistance rather than treating the doctrine's acceptance as self-evident.

⁶⁴Chittick, Ibn ‘Arabi: Heir to the Prophets, 137–145.

10. Conclusion

This article has argued that Islamic Sufism, and the metaphysics of waḥdat al-wujūd in particular, constitutes a substantial, textually grounded, and historically consequential Islamic resource for interfaith engagement, one that need not be imported from secular or externally derived frameworks of pluralism. Beginning with Ghazali's juristic restraint regarding takfīr and his own primary-text distinction between exoteric and esoteric knowledge, systematized by Ibn al-ʿArabi into an ontology of a single wujūd manifesting through a plurality of theophanies documented directly in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, and *al-Tadbīrāt al-Ilāhiyya*, and traced through Rumi's poetic universalization of that metaphysics, the doctrine supplied later generations of South Asian Sufis, and eventually the Mughal court itself under Akbar and Dara Shukoh, with a conceptual vocabulary capable of situating Hindu, and by extension other non-Muslim, religious forms within a single overarching framework of divine self-disclosure, without requiring the abandonment of a specifically Islamic theological identity.

The comparative material examined in this article—Izutsu's structural comparison with Taoism, Shah-Kazemi's comparison with Advaita Vedanta and Eckhartian mysticism, and the extension of this comparative project to Buddhism—demonstrates that this Sufi metaphysical achievement participates in, without being reducible to, a broader cross-cultural pattern of contemplative reflection on the relationship between the absolute and the relative. At the same time, this article has resisted the temptation to present waḥdat al-wujūd as an uncontested or unproblematic resource. The doctrine's long and continuing history of internal Islamic contestation — from Ibn Taymiyya's charge of ontological confusion to Sirhindi's own first-person account, in the *Maktūbāt*, of his passage from mystical unity to the sobriety of waḥdat al-shuhūd, and that reformation's role in the political reversal under Aurangzeb — has been taken with full seriousness rather than elided.

A responsible retrieval of Sufi universalism, of the kind called for by Carl Ernst and practiced by scholars such as Chittick and Shah-Kazemi, presents the tradition neither as a generic and decontextualized spirituality congenial to modern liberal sensibilities, nor as a marginal heterodoxy without serious theological standing, but as what the historical record — read here directly in its own primary Arabic and Persian sources rather than solely through secondary paraphrase — actually shows it to be: a rigorously argued, internally diverse, and historically influential current within Islamic thought that has repeatedly furnished South Asian and broader Muslim societies with indigenous conceptual resources for imagining religious coexistence.

For institutions devoted to the study of world religions and interfaith harmony, and for the broader project of taqrīb al-madhāhib — reconciliation among the schools of Islamic thought — that this article's underlying concerns intersect with, the Sufi heritage examined here offers a crucial lesson: that the pursuit of peaceful coexistence, whether among the schools of a single religious tradition or among the world's religions as such, is most durable when it is grounded not in the suspension or relativization of theological seriousness but in a metaphysics, such as waḥdat al-wujūd, capacious enough to hold difference and unity together without collapsing either into the other. The unfinished intellectual and practical labor of realizing that vision — in scholarship, in devotional practice, and in public policy — remains, as the history recounted in this article suggests, very much an ongoing project rather than a completed inheritance.

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