



Between Fidelity and Reform: Muḥammad Qāsim Nanotvi's (1833–1880) Rearticulation of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*

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Abstract: Muhammad Qasim Nanotvi (1833–1880) is primarily recognized as the founder of the Deoband seminary. His engagement with *waḥdat al-wujūd* reveals a neglected philosophical project that seeks to reconcile mystical intuition with rigorous metaphysical reasoning. Drawing on the intellectual legacy of Shāh Walīullāh al-Dihlawī and Ḥājī Imdādullāh Muhājir Makkī, Nanotvi affirms that all existence depends on God, yet rearticulates this within a theological structure that safeguards divine transcendence. This article examines Nanotvi's reinterpretation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), a foundational yet contested concept in Islamic metaphysics and Sufi thought. Employing a historical-critical approach, this study reveals that Nanotvi does not fully endorse *waḥdat al-wujūd* but rearticulates it as the unity of the attribute of existence (*ṣifāt al-wujūd*), emphasizing that all existence depends on God while preserving divine transcendence and ontological distinctions between God and creation. By focusing on the attribute of existence, Nanotvi offers a systematic response to ontological debates, avoiding the controversies surrounding *waḥdat al-wujūd*, while maintaining the spiritual depth of this concept.

Contribution: The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how Islamic thinkers navigate complex metaphysical questions, offering valuable insights for addressing the tensions between mysticism and orthodoxy.

Keywords: Qasim Nanotvi; *waḥdat al-wujūd*; *waḥdat al-shuhūd*; sufi metaphysics; qua-theoretic model

Introduction

The historical debates, particularly the tension between *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (unity of witnessing), underscore the need to examine Nanotvi's contribution to this discourse, especially given the theological anxieties surrounding pantheism and divine transcendence. The contestation is rooted in differences in understanding the relationship between God and creatures, whether in existential reality (ontology) or in inner experience (epistemology). *Waḥdat al-wujūd* emphasizes the essential unity of reality between God and creatures. In contrast, *waḥdat al-shuhūd* emphasizes the unity of spiritual perception and the recognition of the existential distinction between the transcendent God and immanent creatures. Essentially, both seek to affirm the oneness of God from two distinct perspectives; the first from a philosophical perspective, and the second from a theological perspective.¹ However, these differences between the two views have sparked serious controversy and debate. For example, the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is often considered equivalent to pantheism, which is regarded as heretical in Islam. Moreover, this issue has also given rise to theological and philosophical debates that have led to polemics among Muslim scholars, influencing how Islam is understood and practiced in India.²

This article examines the concept of *wahdat-e ṣifāt-e wujūd*, as presented by one of the preeminent intellectual figures of the 19th-century Indian-Islamic milieu, Muḥammad Qāsim Nanotwi (1833-1880). This specific topic has not yet been thoroughly examined in any Anglo-academic writing on Islam and Sufism and therefore warrants a preliminary exploration. Nanotvi was one of the founders of the Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband seminary in 1886. Trained in the rational sciences (*ma‘qūlāt*) and the traditional Islamic disciplines, he was also initiated into the Chishtī Sufi order under the tutelage of his spiritual teacher (*pīr*) Ḥājī Imdādullāh Muhājir Makkī (1817-1899).³ Nanotvi's writings reflect a deep engagement with philosophical theology, metaphysics, and Sufism, drawing on

¹ Matussein Haji Jumat, "The Doctrine of Wahdatul Wujud: The Issue of Contamination of the Study of Islamic Sufism with Greek Philosophy," *Journal of Social Transformation and Regional Development* 3, no. 2 (2020): 214–21, <https://publisher.uthm.edu.my/ojs/index.php/jstard/article/view/8028>.

² Mohammed Rustom, "Is Ibn Al-‘Arabī's Ontology Pantheistic?," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2006): 53–67, <https://doi.org/10.5840/islamicphil2006216>; Zahid Shah, "Dogmas and Doctrines of the Roshnites and the Dispute of Pantheism," *South Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2013): 151–64, <https://sasj.pu.edu.pk/9/article/view/747>.

³ For more on him, see below.

the tradition of Shāh Walīullāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1176/1762). He is notable for articulating a nuanced synthesis of scholastic rigor and mystical insight. In many ways, he was a public-facing scholar who undertook debates and public apologetics programs.⁴

Scholars have thoroughly assessed the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, and the literature is vast. However, the studies on *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the thought of Shāh Walīullāh are relatively few, with only a handful of serious English studies surveying the topic.⁵ One of the earliest examples is that of Abdul Haq Ansari in his book *Sufism and Shariah* (1985, chapter four) and the article "Shāh Walī Allāh Attempts to Revise Waḥdat al-Wujūd" (1988), albeit in a rather decontextualized way. Muhammad Umar Faruque, in his article "Sufism Contra Shariah" (2016), has largely traced the intricate metaphysical backdrop to Shāh Walīullāh's reconciliatory account, which is beneficial. In contrast, there is yet no detailed study of Ḥajī Imdādullāh's conception of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in any Western language, which is part of a wider neglect in specialised studies on him. However, a Turkish translation by Konuk of his letter on *waḥdat al-wujūd* is available (2015), and Moin Nizami (2024) presents a brief account of the doctrine in his monograph, as part of his discussion of Ḥajī Imdādullāh's Sufi thought. Similarly, there are no published studies that specifically unpack and analyse Nanotvi's methodology of Sufism, let alone his views on *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Hence, this article's intervention in opening a preliminary assessment of this matter is essential to bridge that gap. While these prior works have laid foundational insights, they are primarily descriptive or historical in orientation and do not undertake sustained philosophical analysis. This article differs in that it engages in a close metaphysical reconstruction of Nanotvi's argument; it introduces a novel model drawn from contemporary analytic philosophy of religion to resolve the experiential paradox at the heart of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, and finally, it situates Nanotvi's synthesis within a comparative theological framework that both affirms Islamic orthodoxy and preserves Sufi spiritual insight. As such, this study presents original analysis and methodology that have not been previously found in existing treatments.

⁴ For more on Nanotvi's life and times, see below.

⁵ For full references in this literature review, see the bibliography.

At its core, the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* came to be used to express the relationship between the Creator and the created world.⁶ From Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 637/1240) and his prominent Sufi interpreters through to eminent scholars of India before Nanotvi, sophisticated articulations and (re)formulations of the doctrine were offered (and popularised), emphasising the fundamental unity of all existence grounded in God's absolute reality.⁷ All things exist only insofar as they participate in or reflect the One True Existence, which is God. For Sufis of this kind of 'existentialist' (*wujūdī*) school, this insight fosters a deep sense of divine immanence, spiritual intimacy, and non-duality, encouraging a vision of the cosmos suffused with the presence of the Divine.

However, this concept had been anathematized by scholars like the Damascene firebrand and Ḥanbalī polymath Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328). In contrast, others were accused of misunderstanding the subtleties of the Sufi metaphysics underlying it.⁸ Among these misunderstandings, the most problematic was the tendency to conflate *waḥdat al-wujūd* with a pantheistic or monistic identification of God with the material world. This view collapses the ontological distinction between Creator and creation, thereby threatening the fundamental Islamic doctrines of God's unicity (*tawḥīd*) and transcendence (*tanẓīh*).

Before Nanotvi, *waḥdat al-wujūd* in India took root, primarily through the writings of Persianate Sufis and scholars such as ‘Azīz al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d. circa

⁶ On *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see William C. Chittick, “A History of the Term Waḥdat Al-Wujūd,” in *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), 71–88; William C. Chittick, “Rūmi and Waḥdat Al-Wujūd,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, ed. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabbagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70–111.

⁷ William C. Chittick, “Waḥdat Al-Wujūd in India,” in *Ishraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook 3* (Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura Publisher, 2012), 29–40.

⁸ Ibn Taymiyya's polemics against Ibn Arabī's monist theosophy is thoroughly documented by Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition. The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 87–111. See also Haruka Cheifetz, “Al-Sha‘rānī's Defence of Ibn ‘Arabī in Context: Interpreting ‘the Oneness of Existence’ (Waḥdat Al-Wujūd) as Experiential Oneness,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 12, no. 2 (October 10, 2023): 182–215, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105956-bja10033>.

700/1300),⁹ the Kubrāwī Sufi Sayyid ‘Alī al-Hamadānī (d. 766/1385),¹⁰ and eventually the widespread influence of the Chishtī and Qādirī orders, many of whose teachings bore a strong Akbarian imprint.¹¹ However, the popularity of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in devotional circles also generated theological anxieties, particularly when mystical utterances (*shaṭaḥāt*) or ecstatic claims were seen to blur the necessary distinction between the Creator and the created. These tensions reached a significant turning point in the writings of the 15th-century revivalist (*mujaddid*) and Naqshbandī Sufi reformer Shaykh Aḥmad al-Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624). Al-Sirhindī launched a critical re-evaluation of the doctrine. He acknowledged the insights of the Akbarian tradition but insisted that *waḥdat al-wujūd*, if left unqualified, could lead to ontological ambiguity and doctrinal error. To remedy this, he introduced the category of *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (unity of witnessing), which preserved the mystic's phenomenological experience of divine oneness while affirming God's absolute transcendence and ontological independence.¹² In al-Sirhindī's schema, *waḥdat al-shuhūd* represented a more mature and theologically sound station than *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which he reinterpreted as an early stage on the spiritual path rather than its culmination. The Sirhindian intervention set in motion a primary dialectical current in Indian Sufi and scholastic thought. While some orders, particularly the Mujaddidī branch of the Naqshbandiyya, elevated *waḥdat al-shuhūd* to orthodoxy, others defended the metaphysical validity of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a sophisticated articulation of *tawḥīd* intelligible only to the spiritually initiated.

Among those who attempted to bridge these positions was Shāh Walīullāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1176/1762), whose immense influence extended across jurisprudence, hadith studies, theology, and Sufism, marking a major synthesis in Indo-Islamic thought. Shāh Walīullāh sought to reconcile the metaphysical

⁹ See Mohammad Amin Mansouri, “Sufism vs. Monism in ‘Azīz-i Nasafī’s Works,” *Iranian Studies* 57, no. 3 (July 4, 2024): 360–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2024.2>.

¹⁰ See Gerhard Böwering, “‘Alī Hamadānī,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 1985, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ali-b-32/>.

¹¹ See Hujjat Allāh Javānī, “Sufism in the Indian Subcontinent,” in *Sufism: An Entry from Encyclopædia of the World of Islam*, ed. Gholamali Haddad Adel, Mohammed Jafar Elmi, and Hassan Taromi-Rad (London: EWI Press Ltd, 2012), 79–108.

¹² On al-Sirhindī’s account of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, see Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism and Sharī‘a: A Study of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī’s Efforts to Reform Sufism* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1986), 110–14; Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufi Perspectives on Experience and Reality* (New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers, 2010), 257–300.

insights of Ibn ‘Arabī with the theocentric caution of al-Sirhindī, arguing that *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* were not mutually exclusive, but reflective of different aspects or stages of the same spiritual reality. His writings reframed *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a doctrine of metaphysical dependence, where all contingent realities are rooted in and sustained by the Necessary Being, while reaffirming the fundamental distinction between the Creator and creation. In doing so, he prefigured a new hermeneutical approach that would permit metaphysical speculation while safeguarding theological boundaries.¹³ It is within this complex and multi-layered intellectual milieu that Nanotvi's view is situated and subsequently explored in the article. Thus, the study aims to analyze how Nanotvi rearticulates *waḥdat al-wujūd*, moving beyond traditional interpretations to focus on the unity of the attribute of existence (*ṣifāt al-wujūd*). This objective seeks to clarify his approach to reconciling mystical unity with divine transcendence, ensuring no compromise to Islamic *tawḥīd* (unicity) and *tanzīh* (transcendence).

Literature Review

The Views of Shāh Walīullāh

To understand Nanotvi's account of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, it is essential first to consider that of Shāh Walīullāh of Delhi (d. 1176/1762), a key figure to whom Nanotvi traced his intellectual and spiritual lineage.¹⁴ Shāh Walīullāh stands as one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the Indian subcontinent, synthesising Sufism, philosophy, and theology into a coherent metaphysical system.¹⁵ His approach to *waḥdat al-wujūd* aimed to harmonise the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī and Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624), whose differing emphases on unity and distinction had led to centuries of debate.¹⁶

¹³ See the next section for Shāh Walīullāh's account of *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

¹⁴ Fuad S. Naem, "Interreligious Debates, Rational Theology, and the 'Ulama' in the Public Sphere: Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī and the Making of Modern Islam in South Asia" (Georgetown University, 2015), 39–42, hdl.handle.net/10822/761512.

¹⁵ See Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Shāh Walī Allāh and His Times* (Canberra: Ma'arifat Publishing House, 1980); Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

¹⁶ On an analysis of Walīullāh's harmonisation attempts, refer to Abdul Haq Ansari, "Shah Waliy Allah Attempts To Revise Wahdat Al- Wujud," *Arabica* 35, no. 2 (1988): 197–213, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157005888X00341>; Muhammad U. Faruque, "Sufism Contra Shariah? Shāh Walī Allāh's Metaphysics of Waḥdat Al-Wujūd," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5, no. 1 (May 23, 2016): 27–57, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105956-12341282>; Rifqi Miftahul Amili, "Waḥdat Al-Wujūd in The Perspective of Shāh Walī Allāh Al-Dihlawī,"

Shāh Walīullāh's metaphysics revolves around the relationship between Absolute Existence (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and contingent beings (*al-wujūd al-mumkin*). He posits that existence (*wujūd*) underlies all things and cannot be rigidly bifurcated into God versus creation. All things share in *wujūd*, much like different forms of wax share the same substance.¹⁷ Yet he also maintains that contingent beings have no independent being - they are sustained by the *wujūd* of the Real (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*). While affirming unity, Walīullāh strongly cautions against conflating God with creation, primarily through the concept of *al-wujūd al-munbasit* (the all-expansive being).¹⁸ He critiques figures like the Akbarian Sufī poet ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492) for equating this expansive being with the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhī*), which risks undermining divine transcendence.¹⁹

Central to Shāh Walīullāh's harmonisation – like that of his predecessor al-Sirhindī - is the distinction between two dimensions of unity: metaphysical (*ontological*) and mystical (*experiential*).²⁰ The former concerns the fundamental unity of being itself, while the latter describes the mystical state of absorption in divine reality during spiritual journeying. In the state of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the seeker perceives only divine reality, where distinctions vanish. However, Shāh Walīullāh does not consider this state final or complete. He insists that the seeker must progress to a higher station - *waḥdat al-shuhūd* - where the recognition of multiplicity tempers the experience of unity.²¹

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¹⁷ Shāh Walīullāh Al-Dihlawī, *Al-Taḥīmāt Al-Ilāhiyya [The Divine Understandings]* (Uttar Pradesh: Madīna Barqī Press, 1936), 219.

¹⁸ On *al-wujūd al-munbasit*, see Mukhtar H. Ali, *Philosophical Sufism: An Introduction to the School of Ibn Al-‘Arabī* (London & New York: Routledge, 2022), 85–86.

¹⁹ Shāh Walīullāh Al-Dihlawī, *Al-Khayr Al-Kathīr [The Abundant Good]* (Uttar Pradesh: Madīna Press, 1933), 38; Faruque, “Sufism Contra Shariah? Shāh Walī Allāh’s Metaphysics of Waḥdat Al-Wujūd”; Amili, “Waḥdat Al-Wujūd in The Perspective of Shāh Walī Allāh Al-Dihlawī.” On Jāmī’s account of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Naqd Al-Nuṣuṣ Fī Sharḥ Naqsh Al-Fuṣuṣ [Critique of the Texts in Commentary on the Engraving of the Gems]*, ed. William C. Chittick (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), 64–75. and *al-Durra al-Fākhira*, translated by Nicholas L. Heer, *The Precious Pearl: Al-Jāmī’s Al-Durra al-Fākhira, Together with His Glosses and the Commentary of ‘Abd Al-Ghafūr Al-Lān* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1979), 33–42.

²⁰ Al-Dihlawī, *Al-Khayr Al-Kathīr [The Abundant Good]*, 36–37.

²¹ Al-Dihlawī, *Al-Taḥīmāt Al-Ilāhiyya [The Divine Understandings]*, 218–19.

In *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, the mystic regains awareness of the Creator-creature distinction, recognising creation's dependent reality without collapsing it into the Divine. While God is the only True Existent (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*), created things possess a contingent, relative existence (*wujūd 'araḍī*). Shāh Walīullāh thus preserves both the spiritual insight of unity and the theological necessity of distinction. The *shuhūd* perspective integrates God's immanence with His transcendence, safeguarding Qur'ānic *tawḥīd* from the dangers of pantheism. This dual approach—affirming ontological unity while protecting theological transcendence—defines Shāh Walīullāh's framework. He continually emphasises that all contingent realities, though manifestations of divine being, are not identical with the Divine Essence. By distinguishing between emanation and essence, he maintains the Creator-creation boundary and avoids the pitfalls of radical monism. His nuanced synthesis enables a spiritual journey that honours the insights of mystical experience while upholding the theological commitments of Islam.²²

Imādullāh Muhājir Makkī

The second figure to consider is Ḥājī Imdādullāh Muhājir Makkī (d. 1899), Nanotvi's spiritual mentor. He was an émigré to the city of Mecca, from where he orchestrated a religious and spiritual agenda for a network of North-Indian scholars, mainly from the newly founded Deoband seminary in 1866, but also included many others outside of it.²³ In a letter titled *Risāla dar Bayān Waḥdat al-Wujūd* (1882), addressed to Maulvī 'Abd al-'Azīz Ṣāḥib Amrohī, Imdādullāh offers a lucid and penetrative account of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, drawing on the metaphysical legacy of Ibn 'Arabī while remaining grounded in Islamic orthodoxy.²⁴

²² Al-Dihlawī, *Al-Khayr Al-Kathīr [The Abundant Good]*, 39; Faruque, "Sufism Contra Shariah? Shāh Walī Allāh's Metaphysics of Waḥdat Al-Wujūd."

²³ On his life, works, and thought, refer to Moin Ahmed Nizami, *Haji Imdādullāh* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2024). On his printing endeavours, refer to Sohaib Baig, "Printing a Transregional Ṭarīqa: Haji Imdadullah Makki (d. 1899) and Sufi Contestations from Thana Bhavan to Istanbul," *International Journal of Islam in Asia* 3, no. 1–2 (September 14, 2023): 21–42, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25899996-20230011>.

²⁴ Ḥājī Imdādullāh Muhājir Makkī, "*Risāla Dar Bayān Waḥdat Al-Wujūd*", *Kullīyyāt-e Imdādiyya [The Comprehensive Works of Imdād]* (Karachi: Dār al-Ishā'at, 1976). A Turkish translation by Ahmed Avni Konuk is available based on three manuscripts: (i) Konya Mevlana Müzesi Kütüphanesi, Ms. No. 3849; (ii) Istanbul Belediyesi Atatürk Kitaplığı, Ms. Osman Ergin 31 and (iii) Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Tahir Ağa Tekke Ms. 772. See Ḥājī Imdādullāh Muhājir Makkī, *Tasavvuf Kütüphanesi*, trans. Ahmed Avni Konuk, 2015, 117–291. For a brief overview of *waḥdat al-wujūd* according to Ḥājī

At the heart of Imdādullāh's exposition is the claim that only God truly exists (*lā mawjūd illā Allāh*); multiplicity is a manifestation of the One.²⁵ The apparent world (*ẓāhir*) is distinct only at the level of perception, while in essence (*ʿayn*), it is non-other than divine reality. He emphasises that dualities such as light and darkness, servant and Lord, or attributes and essence are conceptual constructs (*i'tibān*) rather than ultimate realities. Actual realisation involves piercing through these distinctions to attain direct experiential knowledge.²⁶ This transformation is achieved through *fanā*' (annihilation), which Imdādullāh describes as a spiritual combustion—burning away the illusions of selfhood through struggle (*mujāhada*) and purification (*tazkiyat al-naḥs*).²⁷ Without this process, the seeker remains caught in conceptual duality. The aim is to reach *baqā*' (subsistence in God), where all multiplicity dissolves, and unity is realised inwardly.²⁸

Despite this emphasis on experiential unity, Imdādullāh consistently roots his vision in Islamic orthodoxy. He insists that even at the highest station of unity, the Prophet remains the servant of God (*ʿabd*), not united with the divine in an ontological sense.²⁹ The seeker must remain committed to the *Shariʿa* and the *Sunna*, which safeguard against mystical excesses. Adherence to the Prophet's example is what keeps spiritual experience aligned with revelation and prevents it from drifting into pantheistic or antinomian error.³⁰

He also engages critically with the conceptual problems inherent in articulating *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Terms like Creator and created, *maʿbūd* and *ʿābid*, *ṣifāt* and *dhāt*, are tools of language that suggest separation, but at the level of reality, they point to unity. He differentiates between unity as a conceptual

Imdādullāh, see Nizami, *Haji Imdādullāh*, 87–92. Interestingly, he writes in his letter that some people were insinuating that his senior representatives, among whom is Muḥammad Qāsim Nanotvi, diverged from his spiritual doctrines and teachings (*maslak*) and those of the masters of the Sufi order he represented—the Chishtī-Ṣābrī path. He flatly denies this being possible. See Makkī, “*Risāla Dar Bayān Waḥdat Al-Wujūd*”, *Kulliyāt-e Imdādiyya [The Comprehensive Works of Imdād]*, 219. Moreover, Ḥajī Imdādullāh also attests to the spiritually accomplished status of Nanotvi in “*Ḍiyāʾ al-Qulūb*” [The Light of the Hearts], Makkī, 73–74.

²⁵ Also, see his highly monist remarks in “*Ḍiyāʾ al-Qulūb*”, 35–36.

²⁶ Makkī, “*Risāla Dar Bayān Waḥdat Al-Wujūd*”, *Kulliyāt-e Imdādiyya [The Comprehensive Works of Imdād]*, 221–22.

²⁷ Makkī, 220.

²⁸ Makkī, 234.

²⁹ Makkī, 221.

³⁰ Makkī, 219, 220.

insight (*i'tibān*) and unity as a realised truth (*ḥaqīqī*). Conceptual unity remains at the level of discourse; realised unity dissolves those categories altogether.³¹

A final element in his letter is the recognition of doubt (*shakk*) that often accompanies the path. The seeker, grappling with the limits of reason, may struggle to reconcile the paradox of unity and multiplicity. To move beyond this, Imdādullāh underscores the necessity of gnosis (*ma'rifa*) and heart-vision (*ru'ya*). Certainty emerges not from intellectual resolution but from spiritual illumination. Only by surrendering to God's will and transcending the veils of duality can the seeker attain the certainty of divine unity.³²

Thus, Imdādullāh's account synthesises philosophical depth with practical Sufi discipline. He integrates Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics with the spiritual ethics of the Prophetic path, presenting *waḥdat al-wujūd* not as a speculative doctrine but as a lived reality, one that demands humility, purification, and alignment with the *Shari'a*.

Nanotvi's own exposition of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, to which I now turn, reflects a confluence of these two models. From Walīullāh, he inherits a metaphysical precision concerned with the ontological structure of existence and the distinction between the Creator and creation. From Imdādullāh, he adopts a transformative, experiential orientation—an insistence that *waḥdat al-wujūd* is not just a doctrine to affirm, but a reality to be realized. Together, these influences allow Nanotvi to affirm divine unity while maintaining the full force of transcendence and *tawḥīd*.

Method

This study employs a historical-critical approach to understanding Qāsim Nanotvi's rearticulation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in his letter, as contained in *Jamāl-e Qāsimī*. Rather than treating Nanotvi's ideas in isolation or as mere doctrinal assertions, this method allows us to trace the genealogical development of Sufi metaphysics—from the Akbarian tradition of Ibn 'Arabī, through the reformist interventions of Aḥmad Sirhindī and the harmonizing metaphysics of Shāh Walīullāh, to Nanotvi's own synthesis. Thus, *Jamāl-e Qāsimī* forms the primary data from which the analysis is made. By contextualising Nanotvi's writings against the backdrop of theological anxieties surrounding pantheism, the historical-critical lens can help reveal how his nuanced metaphysical grammar—

³¹ Makkī, 222.

³² Makkī, 223.

such as the distinction between the unity of the attribute of existence (*waḥdat ṣifāt al-wujūd*) and the unity of existents (*waḥdat al-mawjūd*)—emerges as a strategic response to both inherited mystical insights and the imperative to safeguard Islamic orthodoxy. This approach thus not only clarifies the conceptual architecture of Nanotvi's thought but also highlights its significance as a historically embedded intervention in the ongoing dialectic between Sufi experience and theological precision.

Result and Discussion

Nanotvi's Underlying Ideas and Principles

Muḥammad Qāsim Nanotvi (1833–1880) was an Indian Muslim scholar, theologian, metaphysician, and Sufi, best known as the co-founder of the Dār al-'Ulūm Deoband seminary in 1866. Born in Nanauta (Uttar Pradesh), he was trained in the traditional Islamic sciences, including logic, philosophy, and theology. He later became a disciple of the prominent Sufi master Ḥājī Imdādullāh Muhājir Makkī. Nanotvi played a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual outlook of Indian Sunnī Islam in the colonial period. His writings reflect a distinctive synthesis of Sufi metaphysics and Islamic orthodoxy, particularly as we shall see here in this article, in his nuanced treatment of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. He interpreted this doctrine not as a literal ontological collapse of God and creation but as an affirmation of the singular divine source from which all contingent beings derive. Through innovative theological arguments, he sought to preserve the transcendence of God while affirming the experiential truths of mystical insight. Nanotvi's legacy endures in the Deoband movement's ongoing engagement with Islamic metaphysics, spiritual ethics, and anti-colonial polemical thought.³³

In a letter on *waḥdat al-wujūd*, Nanotvi confronts the same complex metaphysical and theological problem that was addressed by his teacher, Ḥājī Imdādullāh, and the latter's eminent Indian Sufi predecessor, Shāh Walīullāh. Nanotvi's letter revolves around resolving the meaning and implications of the term *waḥdat al-wujūd*. He writes:

³³ For information on his life and works, refer to Mohd. Azam Qasmi, "Molana Mohd. Qāsim Nanautvi's Contribution to Islamic Thought with Special Reference to Al-Kalam" (Aligarh Muslim University, 1988), 72–99; Nacem, "Interreligious Debates, Rational Theology, and the 'Ulama' in the Public Sphere: Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī and the Making of Modern Islam in South Asia," 55–59.

Respected Sir! When the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* is spoken, it easily rolls off the tongues of both the elite and the ordinary people. Yet, upon examining this single term, we find that for some - due to a particular kind of knowledge - it conveys meaning, while for others - due to a lack of understanding - it conveys no meaning at all. The people of spiritual states (*ahl-e-ḥāl*) and the young passionate ones (*javān*) tend to affirm its usage without reflection. They utter *waḥdat al-wujūd*, but what they actually intend is *waḥdat al-mawjūd* (unity of all things that exist). On the other hand, those who deeply study the etymology of words and investigate the contexts of their semantic development would never accept this interpretation. They understand that *waḥdat al-wujūd* cannot possibly mean the unity of existents or objects in the sense that all things that exist are absolutely identical.³⁴

It is precisely this tension - between the profound insights of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and the risk of heretical pantheism - that forms the crux of the issue addressed by Nanotvi in his letter. Recognising both the potential truth in the concept and the dangers inherent in its misinterpretation, Nanotvi seeks to clarify the doctrine's meaning and to reconcile it with orthodox Islamic theology. His letter thus represents an effort to preserve the inherited mystical and spiritual insights of *waḥdat al-wujūd* while safeguarding divine transcendence and maintaining the coherence of Islamic theology.

Nanotvi's solution to the *waḥdat al-wujūd* dilemma is grounded in a carefully structured set of theological, metaphysical, and ontological principles that collectively frame his analysis. These principles function both as the scaffolding of his argument and as safeguards against potential theological error. Here, I will outline the key doctrines, ideas, and axioms that inform his position on *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Cumulatively, they allow us to see his overall perspective on the doctrine.

Divine Unicity

First, central to Nanotvi's reasoning is the doctrine of divine unicity, simplicity, independence, necessity, and transcendence—a commitment to the idea that God is one, necessary, unique, perfect, utterly non-composite, and

³⁴ Muḥammad Qāsim Nanotvi, *Jamāl-e Qāsimī [The Beauty of Qāsim]* (Raipur: Kutub Khāna-e Raḥīmīyya, n.d.), 2. A full translation of this letter can be found at <https://independent.academia.edu/SafChowdhury>.

transcends all forms of categorization, division, or multiplicity.³⁵ In the letter, he summarises what he takes the meaning of God to be:

The meaning is that God is that Pure Essence who is the source of existence itself, and the existence of others is by His gift, emanates from Him, and is conferred upon others. If the source of existence were itself an attribute that arises externally (i.e., not essential to God's essence), and if the unity of that source were not a necessary consequence of God's essence, then God's unity would not be intrinsic or necessary. And if it were not required, then it would depend on some external cause, which would contradict divine unity. And it is evident that when an attribute depends on an external cause, it cannot be considered the source of that attribute in relation to its subject; in other words, it would not be an inherent consequence of the essence itself, but rather a contingent product of an external cause.³⁶

This passage is a metaphysical defence of divine unicity and a form of divine simplicity. Nanotvi says God is the source of existence itself (*ṣadr-e-wujūd*), meaning that all being originates from Him and is sustained by Him. All other existents derive their being through His gift - that is, he gives their existence and emanates from Him. They are not self-existent because they are contingent upon external factors. For God's unicity and simplicity to hold, His being the source of existence cannot be something externally acquired or contingent, because if it were acquired from an external cause, it would mean God's unicity and simplicity depend on something outside Him, which contradicts unicity and the doctrine of God's self-sufficiency. In addition, if God's unicity were contingent on something external, His oneness would be conditional and not necessary. Therefore, true divine unicity (*waḥdat*) requires that God's attributes - including being the source of existence - be inherent consequences of His essence, not derived or dependent on any external cause. Thus, just as a

³⁵ For Nanotvi's theosophical account of God's essence based on the technical terminology of the people of penetrative verification (*ahl-e ḥaqīqat*), see Muḥammad Qāsim Nanotvi, "Qiblah Numā" [*The Qibla Direction*] in *Maqālāt-e Ḥujjat Al-Islām [Works of Ḥujjat Al-Islām Qāsim Nanotvi]* (Multan: Idāra-e Ta'lifāt-e Ashrafiyya, 2019), 11: 140-150. God's existence, unicity, and attributes are also concisely discussed by Nanotvi in a short treatise titled Muḥammad Qāsim Nanotvi, *Ḥujjat Al-Islām [The Proofs for Islam]* (Uttar Pradesh: Kutub Khāna-e I'zāziyya, 1940). and his philosophical theology is broadly set out in his *Taqīr-e Dilpadhīr [Interesting Discourses]* in *Maqālāt-e Ḥujjat al-Islām*, volume 8.

³⁶ Nanotvi, *Jamāl-e Qāsimī [The Beauty of Qāsim]*, 3.

contingent attribute that is externally conferred on a subject cannot be considered an essential part of that subject, so too God's sourcehood of existence cannot depend on an external cause.

Ontological Dependence

Second, Nanotvi insists on the fundamental causal relationship between God and all created beings. This relationship is one of ontological dependence, where every created entity exists solely by virtue of God's continuous sustaining power. This ontological dependence can be analysed in terms of rigid existential dependence (RED), stated as follows:

(RED): x depends on y for its existence. Necessarily, x exists if y exists.

In formal terms,

$$\Box \forall x (Ex \rightarrow Ey).^{37}$$

Put simply, all contingent beings derive their existence from the Necessary Being, who is self-sufficient and independent. In Nanotvi's framework, this principle guarantees that while creatures manifest various attributes (e.g., mercy, knowledge, power), these attributes are not autonomous or self-subsistent. Instead, they reflect the divine attributes as they are disclosed in creation. Crucially, even though creation is plural and multifaceted, its existence and properties are wholly dependent on God's singular act of sustaining.³⁸

Substance-Accident Metaphysics

Third, Nanotvi assumes a substance and accidents metaphysics as held in Kalām theology.³⁹ Attributes in contingent things are accidental - they arise from external causes rather than being inherent. This contrasts with God's attributes, which are essential. Nanotvi writes on the nature of accidents that “an accidental

³⁷ Where the subscript ‘R’ denotes *rigid* existential dependence, i.e., an object cannot exist at all without that specific other object. ‘E’ is the one-place predicate for existence, and ‘ $\rightarrow$ ’ is the two-place sentential operator for implication. On rigid dependence, see Tuomas E. Tahko and E. J. Lowe, “Ontological Dependence,” *Philosophical Papers* 23, no. 1 (April 1994): 31–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568649409506409>.

³⁸ Nanotvi, *Jamāl-e Qāsimī [The Beauty of Qāsim]*, 5–6.

³⁹ On this, refer to Alnoor Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalām: Atoms, Space, and Void in Basrian Mu‘tazilī Cosmology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); Abdelhamid I. Sabra, “The Simple Ontology of Kalām Atomism: An Outline,” *Early Science and Medicine* 14, no. 1–3 (2009): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157338209X425506>.

attribute remains subject to change.” This is why, for example, “any attribute which is acquired externally - like heat acquired from fire, or from the sun - disappears. Thus, the existence of such an attribute depends on the presence of its external cause. And the reason is that the true source of that attribute is the external cause itself.”⁴⁰ Accidents, such as those caused by fire, are by their nature impermanent because they depend on an external cause. If creation’s attributes are not self-sufficient but externally conferred, it maintains God’s status as the sole necessary being.

Attributes have a single Cause.

Fourth, and a critical metaphysical axiom in Nanotvi’s thought, is that no attribute can have more than one independent source or cause (*maṣḍar*). His principle of singular cause or source asserts that a single attribute or effect cannot have multiple ultimate sources without undermining ontological unity and coherence. Suppose an attribute appears to originate from various sources. In that case, these so-called “sources” are, upon closer analysis, merely conduits or channels - pathways through which the attribute passes - rather than true causal origins. Hence, even if multiple intermediaries seem to contribute to the manifestation of an attribute, they do not constitute real, independent sources but rather serve as dependent or relative conduits, lacking the inherent capacity to generate the attribute themselves. This means that what appears to be multiplicity of sources is actually notional or relative (*i’tibān*), and the attribute in question has, in essence, only a single, trustworthy source. Nanotvi illustrates this with the analogy of an accounting ledger, where the same number may appear on both the debit and credit sides but in reality is one - an analogy that underscores his commitment to divine unicity and simplicity by ensuring that God, as the necessary existent, is the sole trustworthy source of all attributes and existence itself.⁴¹

Fifth, Nanotvi insists that a single attribute can have multiple manifestations. This is the idea that a single attribute can manifest itself in various ways across different contexts and recipients, without compromising the unicity or simplicity of its source. Nanotvi argues that divine attributes such as power (*qudra*), knowledge (*‘ilm*), or mercy (*raḥma*) are not confined to a single locus but can be displayed through numerous acts, beings, or phenomena in the

⁴⁰ Nanotvi, *Jamāl-e Qāsimī [The Beauty of Qāsim]*, 4.

⁴¹ Nanotvi, 4.

created world. This is because attributes, while rooted in the divine essence in a singular and undivided way, manifest themselves in accordance with the hierarchical order (*tartīb*) of creation, thus producing a diversity of effects. For instance, the attribute of divine power might be manifested in the rotation of the heavens, the growth of plants, and the movement of atoms - all these phenomena reveal the same underlying divine power, though in different forms and intensities. Nanotvi's focus in the letter is how the attribute of existence (*wujūd*) can remain the same while there can be different existent things (*mawjūdāt*). He writes:

Generally, the source of an attribute is one, even though its manifestations may be many. It is their multiplicity that causes the attribute to spread across its subjects. For this reason, there is unity in the attribute itself and multiplicity in its subjects. The motion of a boat illustrates a clear example of this: if a ship is stationary, its motion does not affect anything around it. But when it moves, its motion affects everything, every place, and every side. Similarly, the attribute itself is one, but its subjects are many, and in this way, every attribute influences others, and vice versa.⁴²

His other analogy is that the sun emits light that reflects in diverse objects without compromising its own unity; each object receives illumination according to its own capacity and circumstances, yet all derive from the same singular source of light:

Yes, the multiple created things (*khalq-e muta'addida*) are conceived as coming from the One True Being, just as various shapes of sunlight appear in different windows and courtyards. However, to analogise the emanating source (*ṣudūr*) to creation (*khalq*) is an error in itself. In *ṣudūr*, the very essence of the thing that is emanated exists, and at the moment of emanation, only its appearance occurs; giving it to others depends upon this manifestation. In *khalq*, however, there is first non-existence (*'adam*), and then existence comes about; otherwise, what would be the need for creation at all? For a helpful example, sunlight emanates from the sun (*ṣudūr*), but in *khalq*, it is necessary to accept that creation occurs, and one cannot say that these various shapes of sunlight are *ṣudūr* from the sun. Otherwise, one would have to assume that those shapes were pre-existing in the sun itself, which is not the case. Instead, these shapes arise from the sun's rays.⁴³

⁴² Nanotvi, 5.

⁴³ Nanotvi, 4–5.

This concept of having many from one is crucial to his overall project of explaining *waḥdat al-wujūd* because it demonstrates that the plurality of existents and their qualities does not compromise the essential unity of the divine source. Instead, the multiplicity of manifestations arises naturally from the singularity of the divine attribute and the interaction of the divine will with contingent realities. Thus, through this concept, Nanotvi upholds the transcendence and simplicity of God while simultaneously accounting for the rich diversity of creation that emerges from God's attributes. This, in turn, will enable him to explain how Sufi experiences of unity in multiplicity do not contradict the theological imperative to maintain the absolute oneness and incomparability of God.

Nanotvi's Resolution

Nanotvi affirms the basic intuition behind *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which posits that all existence is ultimately grounded in God's reality and sustained by His continuous creative act. However, he clarifies that when he speaks of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he does not mean that all *things* share a single, undifferentiated being in the way some interpretations of *waḥdat al-wujūd* might suggest. Instead, he interprets it as the unity of the *attribute* of existence (*waḥdat-e šifat-e wujūd*). This is crucial because by focusing on the attribute rather than on an undivided essence, Nanotvi preserves the distinction between God (the Necessary Existent) and the created world (the plurality of contingent existents). As already mentioned, he illustrates this point with the example of motion: while the attribute of motion is unified - it is the same quality across all moving things - the things that move (a boat, a passenger, and so forth) remain distinct from each other. Similarly, God's existence is unique and essential, while created things derive their existence from Him but retain their own individuality and dependence. By framing *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a unity of the attribute of existence rather than a literal oneness of all beings, Nanotvi both affirms divine unicity (*tawḥīd*) and upholds the real multiplicity of the world. Any other interpretation, he insists, would collapse the essential difference between the Creator and the created, thus leading to theological confusion. This nuanced reading allows him to harmonise the Sufi emphasis on divine immanence and manifestation with the strict Islamic principle of divine transcendence.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Nanotvi, 6.

While firmly rejecting the pantheistic misreading of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, Nanotvi also affirms the legitimacy of *waḥdat al-shuhūd*. Central to his analysis here is the doctrine of Divine love (*maḥabbat*).⁴⁵ He draws a distinction between ordinary relational closeness, such as that between parent and child, and the unique proximity and intimacy established by God's essential love. Unlike contingent relationships that depend on spatiotemporal or causal intermediaries, Divine love is immediate, direct, and unmediated. This immediacy is rooted in God's absolute independence and transcendence (*ghinā' dhātī*), which allows Divine love to transcend all intermediary limitations. In addition, Nanotvi acknowledges the phenomenological experience in Sufism where the seeker may become overwhelmed by the sense of oneness - where all distinctions between self, world, and God seem to collapse into a single experiential unity. He refers to this as *ghalabat-e maḥabba* (overpowering love), explaining that in this state of overpowering love, distinctions between the lover and the Beloved become effaced, leading to a perception of undifferentiated unity. Nanotvi emphasises that this overpowering experience of unity is not to be mistaken for actual ontological unity in the strict metaphysical sense. Instead, it is a state in which the seeker's perception is so thoroughly absorbed in the Beloved that they do not see anything else, even though multiplicity remains at the level of reality. He insists that the experiential oneness is subjective—a matter of perception and state (*ḥāl*). Ontologically, multiplicity persists because all attributes, entities, and phenomena remain contingent upon God as their ultimate cause. The true unity is God's own absolute oneness (*waḥdāniyyat*), which transcends all relational and accidental attributes. Moreover, for Nanotvi, overpowering love does more than produce an overwhelming feeling; it also functions epistemologically by revealing a dimension of God's closeness to the seeker. This is consonant with the Qur'ānic declaration, "We are closer to him than his jugular vein" (Q. 50:16). Nanotvi interprets this as indicating God's absolute immediacy and inextricable presence with all beings. Within his mystical framework, love (*maḥabbat*) opens the heart to direct, experiential awareness (*shuhūd*) of the

⁴⁵ For a survey of divine love in Sufi thought, refer to Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of Al-Ghazālī and Al-Dabbagh* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 25–41; J. E. B. Lombard, "From Hubb to LhringIshq: The Development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 345–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etm030>. and his extended analysis in J. E. B. Lombard, *Aḥmad Al-Ghazālī, Remembrance, and the Metaphysics of Love* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 116–49.

Divine presence. This experiential disclosure, while profound, must be distinguished from philosophical claims about God's essence and attributes. Thus, love both discloses and simultaneously veils, i.e., revealing God's immanence and transcendence, yet veiling the metaphysical distinction that remains necessary for orthodox theism.

Finally, Nanotvi's astuteness lies in his ability to integrate this experiential dimension with his commitment to God's absolute transcendence. He employs key metaphysical principles, such as the dependence of all contingent realities on God and the impossibility of a single attribute having multiple authentic sources, to argue that the Sufi experience of unity is a legitimate and authentic *ḥāl*. However, it must be carefully interpreted to avoid falling into metaphysical monism or pantheism. Love is a genuine means of knowledge (*ma'rifat*), but it requires rational and theological clarification to safeguard Divine transcendence. Ultimately, love serves as both an epistemic disclosure of God's nearness and a reminder of the necessary distinction between Creator and creation.

Nanotvi and Akbarian Influences

In this section of the article, I observe Nanotvi's understanding of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* doctrine, namely its Akbarian overtones. Nanotvi's explanation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is deeply embedded within an Akbarian ontological and metaphysical framework, though arguably more toned down relative to what we find in Ḥajī Imdādullāh and Shāh Walīullāh. One long passage from Nanotvi's letter is significant in making my point.⁴⁶ From this passage, we glean a particularly illuminating feature of Nanotvi's ontological vision, namely his employment of the philosophical distinction between intermediary in actualization (*wāsiṭa fi-l-'urūd*) and intermediary in affirmation (*wāsiṭa fi-l-thubūt*). These two technical terms, drawn from classical Islamic philosophical and theological discourse, serve a critical role in Nanotvi's explanation of the relationship between the Necessary Being (*wujūd-e bān*) and contingent realities (*ḥaqā'iq-e mumkina*). Their use reveals his commitment to preserving both divine immanence and transcendence, a balance characteristic of all thinkers who have attempted to navigate the tensions between *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, as previously outlined.

In one of his key metaphysical analogies, Nanotvi compares God's relationship to contingent beings to the way dye colours paper through direct

⁴⁶ Nanotvi, *Jamāl-e Qāsimī [The Beauty of Qāsim]*, 6–7.

contact. He refers to this as an actual cause (*'illat ḥaqīqī*), which in philosophical terminology is described as *wāsiṭa fī-l-'urūd*. This type of intermediary brings about the actual manifestation or occurrence of a thing into reality. It is not a distant or figurative cause, but an immediate and efficacious one. In this framework, God's proximity to creation is not mediated by external agents or secondary causes; rather, it is a direct ontological causality that undergirds the very existence of created things. Just as dye directly imparts colour to paper, divine existence imparts being to the contingent world without the need for intermediaries in the order of actualisation. By contrast, Nanotvi also identifies another kind of causality, which he terms a figurative cause (*'illat majāzī*), corresponding to the concept of *wāsiṭa fī-l-thubūt*. This refers not to a cause that brings something into existence, but rather to a conceptual or attributive intermediary. This relation explains how something is affirmed or intelligible within a given framework, without being its trustworthy ontological source. Nanotvi offers examples such as genealogical descent or species lineage—relations that may explain association or attribution, but do not serve as real causes of existence. They are, in effect, mental or relational constructs rather than sources of actual being. Nanotvi's invocation of these two kinds of intermediaries allows him to articulate a metaphysical position that maintains divine unity and nearness while preserving ontological distinctions. By distinguishing between instrumental causes that affect actual being (*'urūd*) and attributive causes that merely describe conceptual dependence (*thubūt*), he affirms that all contingent realities derive both their existence and their intelligibility from the Necessary Being, but through different modes. Ontologically, God is nearer to contingent things than they are to themselves, because He is their direct cause; epistemologically, the intelligibility of contingent beings depends on the prior intelligibility of God's own existence. This distinction underpins Nanotvi's broader theosophical commitment to a non-dualistic ontology that nonetheless avoids the pitfalls of pantheism. It enables him to argue that the Real Being of God pervades all things without compromising divine transcendence or collapsing the distinction between Creator and creation. Thus, while Nanotvi clearly draws on the Akbarian metaphysical grammar of ontological gradation and proximity, he tempers it with a critical sensitivity to epistemological hierarchy and causal integrity. His deployment of the categories of *wāsiṭa fī-l-'urūd* and *wāsiṭa fī-l-thubūt* is therefore not merely terminological; it is a precise and sophisticated tool that

enables him to bridge *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* in a conceptually coherent manner.

This metaphysical schema, grounded in the dual structure of causality and affirmation, places Nanotvi squarely within the orbit of Akbarian ontology. Like Ibn ʿArabī, Nanotvi affirms the absolute ontological priority of the Necessary Being and the contingent status of all other realities. The Akbarian doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* holds that existence in its true and unconditioned sense belongs solely to God. At the same time, all else subsists as modes, reflections, or determinations of that singular reality.⁴⁷ Nanotvi's insistence that contingent realities are only intelligible through the intelligibility of the Real Being resonates with this vision: the relation between the Real and the contingent is not one of separation, but of disclosure, gradation, and manifestation. Moreover, his analogies—such as the relation of dye to paper, light to sunlight, and body to redness—mirror the Akbarian language of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*) and ontological determinations (*taʿayyunāt*), wherein multiplicity unfolds within and through unity.⁴⁸ Yet, Nanotvi's careful differentiation between modes of causality—between the real and the figurative, the immediate and the attributed—introduces a precise philosophical vocabulary that guards against metaphysical conflation. While Ibn ʿArabī and his followers often favour symbolic and intuitive expressions to articulate the ontological dependence of creation on the Real, Nanotvi's formulation employs a scholastic clarity that allows him to distinguish systematically between ontological, epistemological, and causal registers. In doing so, he preserves the metaphysical insights of Akbarian thought while simultaneously integrating them within a structured, rational framework, thus offering a distinctive, subcontinentally inflected version of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that remains both grounded and conceptually rigorous.

A Qua-Solution to the *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* Paradox

In this final section, I offer philosophical support for any account upholding a *waḥdat al-wujūd*/*waḥdat al-shuhūd* polarity, especially as it appears in the

⁴⁷ Toshihiko Izutsu, "An Analysis of Waḥdat Al-Wujūd: Toward a Metaphilosophy of Oriental Philosophies," in *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things: Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1994), 66–97.

⁴⁸ William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-ʿArabī's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 1998), 52–57; Caner K. Dagli, *Ibn Al-ʿArabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture. From Mysticism to Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 60–62.

metaphysical outlook of Qāsim Nanotvi. More specifically, I propose a qua-theoretic model—not merely as an external interpretive tool borrowed from analytic philosophy of religion, but as a conceptual strategy that helps clarify and formalise Nanotvi's own reconciliatory metaphysics.⁴⁹ Nanotvi, drawing from both Shāh Walīullāh's emphasis on ontological balance and Ḥājī Imdādullāh's experiential mysticism, affirms the Sufi insight that all contingent beings derive their existence from God, while simultaneously insisting on divine transcendence and the ontological distinction between Creator and creation. His analogies—such as sunlight and redness—reveal that distinct predications can refer to the same subject, depending on the aspect or state from which they are considered. The qua-theoretic model renders this insight into a formal framework: a way to parse experiential metaphysics without contradiction.

The apparent contradiction at the heart of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* can now be clearly stated. On the one hand, Sufis report a state of absorption (*jam*) or annihilation (*fanā*) in which they experience that "God alone exists." On the other hand, the same tradition affirms, particularly in states of subsistence/return (*baqā*) or differentiation (*farq*), that "God is distinct from creation." These two claims appear contradictory if taken as unqualified assertions about reality. However, Nanotvi's language suggests they are not unqualified; instead, they are deeply context-sensitive, conditioned by the epistemic and mystical state of the subject. The tension, therefore, is not metaphysical but *phenomenological*—resolved once we clarify the scope of predication and the perspectival index under which each claim is made.

To express this formally, let us introduce the following notational shorthand:

- $P(x)$ = 'God alone exists; all things are manifestations of the One.'
- $S(x)$ = 'God is distinct from creation; there is a real distinction between Creator and created.'

⁴⁹ Qua-solutions in Christology are a way of resolving apparent contradictions - like Christ being both omniscient and limited in knowledge - by indexing predications to Christ's two natures. For example, 'Christ is omniscient' is true qua divine nature, and 'Christ is limited in knowledge' is true qua human nature. This approach enables conflicting attributes to coexist within a single person by clarifying the scope of predication, ensuring logical consistency, and preserving key doctrinal commitments. For details on these and their effectiveness, refer to Daniel Rubio, "In Defence of Qua-Christology," *Religious Studies*, January 10, 2024, 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523001075>; Guus H. Labooy, *Christology and Atonement: A Scotistic Analysis* (London: Lexington Book and Fortress Academic, 2024), 41–46.

- *Ej* = the unitive experiential state of mystical absorption (*jam*’).
- *Ef* = the experiential state of differentiation or subsistence/return (*farq*, *baqā*’).

We may now assert:

- *P(x)* qua *Ej*: In the state of *jam*’, the Sufi's consciousness is overwhelmed by the immediacy of divine presence, and thus it is experientially true that only God exists; all else is subsumed under the unity of divine being.
- *S(x)* qua *Ef*: In the state of *farq*, the Sufi perceives the distinction between Creator and creation as fundamental to the order of being, while still recognising the latter's dependence on the former.

This qua-theoretic structure ensures that both predications are accurate without contradiction, since they are indexed to distinct epistemic or experiential modes. What appears as a contradiction is revealed to be a matter of shifting spiritual horizons.

Importantly, this is not a novel or external imposition on Nanotvi's thought. His writings already imply a perspectival metaphysics: the unity of existence is an attribute, not the essence, and what the mystic sees depends on the state they occupy. The qua-theoretic model simply makes this structure precise. It highlights Nanotvi's view that different aspects of truth become manifest to varying stages of spiritual realisation, without collapsing them into a single ontological schema. In doing so, it preserves both the experiential depth of Sufi metaphysics and the logical clarity of scholastic theology.

Moreover, the qua-theoretic model is in strong parallel with the Arabic-Islamic logical traditions. Arab logicians, for example, were aware of qua-propositions, especially the reduplicative and specificative cases, the latter relating to the fallacy of *secundum quid et simpliciter* explicated by Aristotle in the *Sophistical Refutations*.⁵⁰ In addition, classical Islamic logic distinguishes between essential predication (*ḥaml dhātī*) and conditional predication (*ḥaml sharṭī*), recognising that propositions often hold only under certain conditions. Sufi psychology also affirms that truths are unveiled in accordance with the seeker's *ḥāl* (state) and *maqām* (station). Nanotvi's account reflects this

⁵⁰ See the discussion around the views of al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd in Allan T. Bäck, *On Reduplication: Logical Theories of Qualification* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 86–109. and for a summary on the topic, see Allan T. Bäck, “Qualification,” in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Richard Cross and JT Paasch (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 19–30.

epistemic layering: the perception of unity and multiplicity is not about ontological contradiction but about the shifting lenses through which reality is encountered. The model also mirrors the logician's distinction between *i'tibān* (considerational/perspectival) and *ḥaqīqī* (real) judgments—a distinction here employed to caution against taking mystical utterances at face value without regard to their context.

By indexing statements about God's unity and distinction to different experiential states, this model avoids both the extremes of absolute pantheism and radical dualism. It remains faithful to Nanotvi's metaphysical realism and theological orthodoxy. In short, the qua-theoretic strategy not only resolves the apparent contradiction but also illuminates the structure of Sufi epistemology itself, revealing how the soul's movement across spiritual states gives rise to different, yet non-contradictory, modes of theological insight.

The model thus strengthens our reading of Nanotvi as a thinker who navigates mysticism and metaphysics with intellectual precision. His deployment of analogies and his careful articulation of metaphysical principles are not ad hoc attempts at synthesis; they are grounded in a conceptual framework that anticipates perspectival logic and conditional reasoning. The qua-theoretic model makes this framework explicit, showing how Nanotvi's account allows multiple predications to coexist in harmony, each reflecting a valid facet of the Sufi path toward divine knowledge.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this article is how a significant figure of the Deoband movement and a student of Ḥājī Imdādullāh, Qāsim Nanotvi, inherited a legacy shaped by both the metaphysical aspirations of Akbarian Sufism and the reformist concerns of the Mujaddidī tradition. His writings reflect a keen awareness of the doctrinal sensitivities surrounding *waḥdat al-wujūd* and a deep commitment to rearticulating its truths in a manner that aligns with rigorous theological clarity and, importantly, fundamental Sunnī doctrines. Engaging both the experiential and philosophical dimensions of the debate, Nanotvi does not simply echo the positions of his predecessors; instead, he advances a carefully structured account that draws from Shāh Walīullāh's harmonising metaphysics and the emphasis on spiritual realisation from his teacher, Ḥājī Imdādullāh, while also introducing a precise ontological grammar of his own. In doing so, this article has shown how Nanotvi offers a distinctive intervention in the Indian discourse on divine unity, one that reframes *waḥdat al-wujūd* not as a dogmatic

assertion or a discarded heresy, but as a carefully delineated metaphysical principle grounded in divine simplicity, causal unicity, and the absolute dependency of all existence on God. This article contributed more than a historical study of a key South Asian scholar; it has also offered a fresh intervention in the intersection between Islamic metaphysics and analytic theology. This study also contributes to current debates in Islamic metaphysics and analytical theology by demonstrating how Nanotvi's reinterpretation transcends the traditional division between scholasticism and mysticism. Nanotvi's perspective challenges oversimplified interpretations of Sufi philosophy within Islamic thought, encouraging fresh contemplation on the unity of life as both a theological discipline and a metaphysical fact. However, further investigation is required to examine how his metaphysical synthesis influenced subsequent Deobandi philosophy and its reception within the broader context of Muslim intellectual history.

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