

Politicizing Islamic Ontologies of Unity:
Wahdat ul-Wujud and Tawhid in Twentieth Century Muslim Political Thought

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ABSTRACT

How might troubling the analytical separations between the human, the natural, and the divine allow us to re-imagine the possibility for political liberation amidst contemporary capitalist catastrophe, ecological destruction, and secular crises of meaning? Through the writings of twentieth century intellectuals Ubaidullah Sindhi and Ali Shariati, this paper will offer a few insights to this provocation. Writing in early twentieth century India, Sindhi explored the political implications of *wahdat ul-wujud*, a perspective within Islamic metaphysics that understands differentiated worldly objects as manifestations of a single, unified consciousness. Sindhi argued that *wahdat ul-wujud* not only challenged the self-other dichotomy undergirding Hindu-Muslim communal violence but also acted as a theological basis for the formation of a religiously integrated postcolonial India. In Iran several decades later, Shariati deployed a related ontological concept in his critique of capitalism. He saw *tawhid* not only as a declaration of Islam's belief in a monotheistic God, but as a description of the blurred metaphysical separations between self and other, human and nature, and Creator and creation. Shariati's *tawhid* was not only an ontological description but also a political assertion of history's movement towards the destruction of capitalism. In and through understanding how they used these concepts in their particular contexts, both scholars demonstrated how seemingly abstracted, ontological accounts of the relationship between the self, the other, the natural, and the divine within Islamic metaphysics could be creatively articulated for concrete political projects. I argue that these political articulations of Islamic ontologies may offer creative theoretical repertoires for contemporary movements ushering vernacular spiritual idiom into the realm of liberatory political struggle.

INTRODUCTION

The present entanglement of capitalist, imperialist, and ecological catastrophe has ushered in a new age of political nihilism. While critique can powerfully name and detail these forces, we are in desperate need of something that moves beyond it. In this paper, I will argue that by re-thinking our ontological assumptions, we might open our minds (and maybe even our hearts) to new modes of understanding our connection to the other, the natural, and the divine.

Our contemporary crises re-reproduce themselves through unspoken assumptions about the metaphysical separations between the self and the other. This cognitive discursive boundary produces embodied political separations. The metaphysical self/other divide manifests itself in the social relations and dichotomies of laborer/owner, tenant/landlord, and native/settler. Within this framework, the human emerges outside of the natural. Beyond the secular, the bounded separation of the human is extended even against the divine.

To re-think these separations and produce intellectual openings for new kinds of social and political configurations, this paper will venture backwards in time to the intellectual archives of twentieth century Muslim scholars who foregrounded alternative ontologies of unity. These intellectuals, writing from India and Iran, connected the realms of political and spiritual liberation by politicizing Islamic cosmologies that troubled the boundaries between the human, the natural, and the divine. In doing so, they imagined political alternatives to post-colonial ethnonationalism and capitalism and in their respective historical moments.

Ubaidullah Sindhi, an Indian Muslim theologian, was the first of these two twentieth century thinkers to politically mobilize cosmologies of unity in his critique of Britain's plan to partition a postcolonial India into two nations, creating the Muslim-majority country of Pakistan and Hindu-majority India. Sindhi mobilized the Islamic metaphysical doctrine of *wahdat ul-wujud*, the Unity of Being, to challenge the religious nationalisms facilitating this plan. In describing difference as the manifestation of a unified divine source, Sindhi argued that this doctrine challenged the self-other dichotomy foundational to Hindu-Muslim divisions in India.

In Iran several decades later, celebrated Muslim sociologist Ali Shariati deployed a related ontological concept in his critique of capitalism. Credited with influencing the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Shariati politically mobilized the Islamic tenant of *tawhid*, the assertion of God's oneness in Islam. While *tawhid* is traditionally understood as the Islamic declaration of monotheism, Shariati expanded the definition of *tawhid*, suggesting that the concept describes not just one God, but one movement of the universe, blurring metaphysical separations between self and other, human and nature, and Creator and creation. Shariati's

tawhid acted not only as an ontological description of the cosmos, but also as a political assertion of a cosmological tendency towards unity away from the divisive propensities of contemporary capitalism.

Both Sindhi and Shariati abandon the ontological self-other dichotomy foundational to Enlightenment thought in their work, drawing instead on cosmologies of unity that express not only the oneness of God's being, but also the oneness of all being in the world. These cosmologies describe all creation as self-disclosures of a unified divine essence, blurring the ontological separations between self, other, human and nonhuman. They depict differentiated worldly objects as manifestations of a single unified consciousness reminiscent of the Neo-Platonic "One." This cosmological understanding forms the basis of each twentieth century Muslim intellectual's respective political critique.

Sindhi and Shariati's respective temporal and spatial situatedness within 1940s India and 1970s Iran enabled them to each offer unique applications of ontological concepts to concrete political projects. I call this process of arming theoretical concepts with historical and geographic texture *articulation*. Sindhi and Shariati creatively articulated *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* to challenge the colonial and capitalist forces that characterized their respective historical moments. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall understood articulation as a connection that is not predetermined or eternal but that "requires particular conditions of existence to appear" and must constantly be renewed (1985, 113). Articulations act as historically produced linkages that can displace old connections with new ones, enabling the possibility for the formation of "re-articulations" (Hall 1985, 114). I suggest that as Muslim twentieth century political thinkers, Sindhi and Shariati were engaged in re-articulating medieval Islamic metaphysical concepts to speak to modern political questions. This paper documents this process of re-articulation, tracing *how* Sindhi and Shariati bring mystical ontologies into the realm of the political preceding the Partition of India in 1947 and the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

Though the twentieth century political mobilization of Christian religious vernaculars has been well documented (Gutiérrez 1988 [1971]; Morris 2000), much less has been written about the political articulations of Islamic cosmologies. In the last decade, several scholars have begun to document how mystical *practice* acts as a site of imagining an articulation between Islam and Marxism, but little has been written on how Islamic *cosmology* has been re-articulated within Marxist projects (Raza 2022; Uddin 2016). Through the works of Sindhi and Shariati, I point to new theoretical possibilities to imagine an Islamically-grounded *metaphysical* Marxism.

Amidst our contemporary catastrophes of capitalism, imperialism, and ecological destruction, I follow the lead of Sindhi and Shariati in asking how troubling the analytical separations between the self, the other, the natural, and

the divine might allow us to reimagine the possibilities for political transformation. I argue that their historical articulations might offer our contemporary movements something by way of example, showing us how a spiritual vernacular is not a barrier to political consciousness-raising but rather an avenue through which anti-capitalist and anti-imperial struggle can be imagined.

ISLAMIC COSMOLOGIES OF UNITY: *WAHDAT UL-WUJUD* & *TAWHID*

Though *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* in the respective writings of Ubaidullah Sindhi and Ali Shariati are distinct concepts, they are connected through a shared Islamic intellectual lineage. *Wahdat ul-wujud* can itself be understood as a re-articulation of *tawhid*, the assertion of Islam's monotheism. *Tawhid* is a central tenant of Islam, expressed in the Qur'an in the statement, "There is no god but God," meant to distinguish the faith from polytheistic traditions that see the divine as multiple rather than singular.

Wahdat ul-wujud emerges out of the metaphysical writings of thirteenth century Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) and his later commentators. This doctrine refers simultaneously to the "Unity of Being" and the "Oneness of God," which is itself a way of translating *tawhid*. Both *wahda* and *tawhid* come from the same Arabic root meaning "one" (Chittick 1994, 70). While *wahda* refers to "unity" or "oneness," *wujud* can refer to "being" generally but is also considered one of the names of God (Chittick 1998, 98).

Wahdat ul-wujud, the Oneness of Being, therefore expresses both the Oneness of God's essence and the Oneness of Being more generally. While Ibn 'Arabi understands this to mean that divine *essence* is singular, he suggests that plurality exists through the *appearance* of multiplicity of forms in the everyday. That is, the unified divine essence discloses itself through self-manifestations of difference within creation. Chittick (1998) explains, "Just as light has modalities of self-disclosure that we call colors, so *wujud* has modalities of self-disclosure that are called 'names' or 'attributes'" (99).

Both *tawhid* and *wahdat ul-wujud* are subsequently re-articulated in the Persianate and Indic world prior to their appearance in twentieth century Muslim political thought. In the Persianate world, Shia mystic and philosopher Mulla Sudra (d. 1640) attempts to harmonize views on the transcendence of Unity of Being and insights from Ibn 'Arabi and Avicenna into a vision of Twelver Shi'ism (Nasr 1972, 177). In India, Islamic reformer and mystic Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (d. 1762) re-articulates *wahdat ul-wujud* in the context of the Mughal Empire, reconciling *wahdat ul-wujud* with a competing view suggesting that mystical encounters of divine unity are limited to the realm of subjective experience rather than describing the absolute unity of reality. Influenced by these intellectual lineages and debates,

Sindhi and Shariati bring these contested metaphysical categories to speak to the pressing political questions of their times.

UBAIDULLAH SINDHI

Situating Sindhi's Thought in 20th Century British India

In the early twentieth century, following the intellectual lineage of Ibn 'Arabi and Shah Waliullah, Ubaidullah Sindhi re-articulated *wahdat ul-wujud* to critique the religious communalism that eventually culminated in the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Sindhi was a Muslim intellectual and an Indian anti-colonial activist. As a student of the Deobandi Islamic school in India and an admirer of socialism in the Soviet Union, Sindhi's work integrated Islamic theology with critiques of political economy. Towards the end of his life, Sindhi vehemently fought British colonialism in India as well as the impending signs of the Partition that would separate India's Hindus and Muslims. This Partition was made possible by centuries of British rule that fomented antagonisms between Hindus and Muslims, culminating in a desire for the creation of the Islamic state of Pakistan.

Ubaidullah Sindhi was born in 1872 to a Sikh family in Punjab (Khan 2013). At the age of 16, after reading a set of polemical writings by an author named "Ubaidullah," he converted to Islam and joined the Islamic seminary in Deoband (Khan 2013). He was influenced by Shah Waliullah's thought and became a devoted student of the anti-British activist Maulana Mahmud ul-Hasan (Kamran 2018). Sindhi was eventually forced to leave Deoband in 1913 because of his anti-colonial political work (Zaman 2012).

He spent over two decades in exile in Afghanistan, Russia, Hijaz, and Turkey and organized with multiple revolutionary parties, including the Sindh Sagar Party and the Indian National Congress. During this time, Sindhi was involved in the "Silk Letters Conspiracy," writing letters to the governor of Russian Turkistan to form an alliance with Turkey and declare a war on the British. The letters were hidden in silk scarves to evade surveillance, but when they were discovered, the British passed the Rowlatt Act, authorizing the government to imprison and detain suspects of revolutionary activity without trial. Sindhi was also actively involved in the Ghadar Movement, the international network of Indians attempting to overthrow the British in Asia, East Africa, and even amongst Indian students at UC Berkeley.

During his time in Russia, Sindhi began to develop a theoretical merger between Shah Waliullah's re-articulation of *wahdat al-wujud* and a revolutionary socialism that would produce a classless society (Kamran 2018; Khan 2013). Sindhi wanted to abolish capitalism, private property, interest, and landlordism in favor of distributing land to the peasantry and establishing state-run industry, education,

and healthcare. At the same time, Sindhi was very critical of the irreligious perspective of the communists (Jalal 2008).

Sindhi finally returned to India in 1936 and became committed to addressing the Hindu-Muslim question and proposing a political vision of a federated India (Khan 2013). After years of advocating for Islamic universalism, Sindhi became an avid supporter of the Indian nationalist project. Sindhi saw his work as a continuation of the revivalist movement associated with Shah Waliullah and the Deobandi school and wanted to make Waliullah's ideas the basis of a new intellectual and theological movement (Zaman 2012; Khan 2013). Writing at the end of British colonial rule, he opposed the idea of Pakistan because it threatened the global unity of Muslims and the unity of Muslims with non-Muslims in their local region (Zaman 2012). Sindhi thought that the locale where tradition evolved should be acknowledged, using it as an established basis for finding an overlapping consensus with Islam. He argued that many traditional understandings of Islamic norms emerged out of their particular cultural contexts and might not be relevant for Muslims living in other places and times (Zaman 2012).

Though his contribution was by no means hegemonic, Sindhi offered an important voice to anticolonial debates amongst Indian Muslims leading up to Indian independence, Partition, and mounting interreligious violence (Jalal 2008). In 1943, the year before he died, his student Mohammad Sarwar published a compilation of his religious and political teachings. The following section explores passages in this compilation that illustrate Sindhi's political articulations of *wahdat ul-wujud*.

Sindhi's Political Re-Articulation of Wahdat ul-Wujud

Sindhi argued that *wahdat ul-wujud* could provide a philosophical basis for Hindu-Muslim unity in a federated postcolonial India. For Sindhi, this move was two-fold. First, if worldly existence was unified through its being an image, trace, or sign of the divine, then the self-other dichotomy that characterized the identification of the Hindu and the Muslim as separate was ontologically suspect. Second, Sindhi argued that the connections between *wahdat ul-wujud* in Islamic mysticism and Advaita Vedanta's non-dualism in Hinduism provided a basis for religious syncretism and political unity amongst Hindus and Muslims in India. Sindhi refers to *wahdat ul-wujud* as the "peaceful coexistence concept" in his writings because it captures this blend of non-dualism made possible through centuries of religious dialogue between Hindus and Muslims since Muslim settlement in India in the 13th century.

In his intellectual work, Sindhi not only attempts to clarify the meaning of *wahdat ul-wujud* in the writings of his predecessors, but also tries to give this concept political teeth in India leading up to postcolonial independence. This paper

offers original English translations and summaries of Sindhi's ideas as they appear in *Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi: Halat-e-Zindagi, Taleemat, aur Siyasi Afkar* (The Life, Teachings, and Political Thought of Ubadiullah Sindhi), an Urdu compilation published by student Muhammad Sarwar Ali Khan. In this text, Sarwar renders Sindhi's thoughts concisely and accessibly to the contemporary reader. Though Sarwar combines paraphrasing and direct quotes to capture Sindhi's ideas, the line between paraphrasing and quotation in the text is often unclear, so quotations have been inserted in the translations where they appear appropriate.

Unity within the Doctrine of Wahdat al-Wujud

In the chapter titled "Unity of Humanity," explores Sindhi's argument that the Qur'an represents a universal and immortal perennial philosophy that connects all religious thought. Though the Qur'an is linguistically clothed in Arabic, he argues that, like the Gita, Torah, and Bible, it represents the same human consciousness (Sarwar 1976, 42-43). However, he suggests that while revelation in its original form is always true and inclusive of all of humanity, it becomes tarnished and shackled by the introduction of custom, tradition, and national feeling.

Though not yet explicitly mentioned, this foundational theological current is summarized by *wahdat ul-wujud*. Drawing on his intellectual predecessors, Ibn Arabi and Shah Waliullah, Sindhi explains this view in greater depth:

The absolute spirit, the total universe, is one, and whatever we see or observe all came from one existence. And this existence is the reflection of the one being. Every particle contains the essence of that existence. And every particle manifests and shows that absolute being. And every human reflects the same light of God. In the lives of nations, such a time comes when all the manifestations and laws and religions become a curtain between the total spirit and its constituents. At that time, true human nature rebels when, because of these religions, this truth is veiled, and then a new age comes in which every individual's relationship with the absolute spirit becomes connected. Custom piles ashes of humanity, but the true essence of humanity asserts itself in every age (Sarwar 1976, 48).

Sindhi suggests that existence is a "reflection" of the divine form, that each particle "manifests" that form, and that each human "reflects" the energy of this form. However, Sindhi also notes that manifested forms can veil the relationship between the One from its many appearances, alluding to Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of *wahdat ul-wujud*, the Unity of Being.

Unity in the Political Party

The question of metaphysical unity was not just a theological problem for Sindhi, but a political one that had material implications for the fate of twentieth century India. As it became clearer that India was on the brink of winning postcolonial independence, it needed to politically re-imagine itself. Following the Khilafat Movement, Sindhi bemoaned the absence of a strong Muslim political community in India.

In the chapter “Congress,” Sarwar documents Sindhi’s concerns with the Indian National Congress party and offers an alternative model for Indian political organization (Sarwar 1943, 360-365). Sindhi worried that Gandhism within the party confined Indianness to the Hindu nation, making it difficult for Muslims to maintain a national identity. Sindhi wanted Hindus and Muslims to work together to establish a single political party that would represent all Indians, without the domination of any one religious group (Sarwar 1943, 360-365). He argued that a *philosophical* principle of some sort was needed to coherently link together many different nations and peoples within India. For him, *wahdat ul-wujud* was the principle that could serve as a basis of political unity, while also signifying a theologically salient ontological unity.

Sindhi’s vision for India’s postcolonial future was a federated union of many independent nations. This union would link together autonomous Indian nations rather than attempting to absorb the differences of individual nations into a homogenous whole. On the basis of this linguistic and geographically defined notion of nation, Sindhi argues that every Indian nation should have their own freedom, autonomy, and existence (Sarwar 1976, 415). Sindhi argues that a federated India should form a union or “*wahdat*,” comprised of linguistically and culturally defined nations. To unite this *wahdat*, Sindhi proposes *wahdat ul-wujud* as its shared philosophical basis:

The foundational truth of all religions is one and all of India’s religions accept and agree to this truth to a certain extent. This is the real soul of religion and the philosophy of *wahdat al-wujud*, which explains both material and transcendental lives in a satisfactory way to people of all religions. The mentality of science and the industrial revolution also cannot dare to refuse this. In order to create political and economic uniformity, along with harmony in thought, mental compatibility, and true tolerance among various nations, cultures, races, and religions of a continent like India, it is necessary for the philosophy of *wahdat al-wujud* be the rationale basis for this proposed union (Sarwar 1976, 416, emphasis added).

Sindhi suggests that *wahdat al-wujud* could form the basis for the new united federation of India because of its doctrinal connection to Indic religious traditions, acting act as a philosophical and political glue uniting the many different nations within India.

Sindhi's Vision of a Federated Postcolonial India

In the final chapter of Sarwar's compilation titled, "The Future of Indian Muslims," Sindhi takes on one of the most pressing questions of his time: what should be the fate of Indian Muslims in a new, postcolonial India? He argues that the condition of Muslims in India has declined because they have been chasing a desire to create an ideal *Muslim* state and, in the process, have forgotten their *Indian* history. Though this identity was beginning to be articulated during the Mughal era, it remains unfinished due to the arrival of the British. Following the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the subsequent formal establishment of the British Raj in India, Sindhi argues that Indian Muslim scholars prioritized a vision of Islamic identity substantiated in faraway lands. In their efforts to understand the international Islamic world, they failed to understand the Indian Muslim world in which they lived, leaving them without a particular national identity (Sarwar 1943, 382).

At the same time, Sindhi argues that the dialectic tension between the revolutionary force of Muslim thought and its encounter with Hindu thought gave birth to an Indian Sufism which also introduced elements of progressivism into Hinduism. This argument can be corroborated by considering how the Hindu revivalist Bhakti Movement may have emerged out of an encounter with Sufi saints who centered love in their devotion to the divine and challenged caste as a theological mediator of Hindu practice. Sindhi, reiterates that Shah Waliullah's philosophy could form the basis of a federated India. Without suppressing the beliefs of non-Muslims, this philosophy of *wahdat al-wujud* would produce a politics of harmony predicated on peace, friendship, love, and mutual respect (Sarwar 1943, 384, ¶3). Sindhi tries to amalgamate Waliullah's philosophy with Marxism to produce a new articulation of *wahdat al-wujud* for twentieth century post-colonial India (Sarwar 1943, 386).

Sindhi offers a critique of the current religious institutions in India and argues that the principle of *wahdat al-wujud* can offer a corrective to the religiosity that emerges from these institutions. Quoting Sindhi, Sarwar writes,

At this time, we are becoming the victim of religiosity. This religiosity has already become sick. It makes Sunnis fight with the Shias. It creates bad feelings in the hearts of the believers of the Hadith towards the Hanafis. It makes Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis hate each other. And it makes Hindus and Muslims each other's mortal enemies. Because of religiosity, people have become thirsty for each other's blood. I want to erase this sick religiosity. My aim is that through the principles explained by Shah Waliullah, we shall become Muslims. This will not only erase the sectarianism of Muslims with each other, but also a Muslim's heart could grow so vast that they could

cooperate with Hindus on political and economic matters. Between both groups, the common religious thought of *wahdat al-wujud* will be the foundation of their cooperation. And then I want to see Indian Muslims as the bearers of this conception of international progressive humanism (Sarwar 1976, 429-430, emphasis added).

Sindhi is critical of the *ulama*, the institutionalized Muslim theological establishment, who use religiosity to produce internal divisions in the Muslim community. He argues that this religiosity divides not only sects groups like Sunnis, Shias, and Ahmads, but also Muslim and Hindu communities. The existing religious classes themselves become conduits for conservatism and stand in the way of embracing socialist and postcolonial movements political (Sarwar 1976, 430). Sindhi argues that *wahdat ul-wujud*, as a metaphysical principle of unity, could also be a principle of political unity.

However, Sindhi also argues that the contemporaneous political and economic movements should not be completely secular. He argues,

I want to make the basis of these movements a more extensive *divine imagination*, which should embrace all the religions, races, nations, and total humanity. From this, the unnecessary prejudice and stubbornness of differences of rank, religion, and nation which has made all of humanity the enemy of itself will be erased. And the caravan of humanity will move forward on the path of progress” (Sarwar 1976, 430, ¶1, emphasis added).

Sindhi highlights the importance of “a more extensive divine imagination” which he suggests must act as an ethical and spiritual foundation through which the movements for postcolonial independence and socialism can succeed. He suggests that this divine imagination is none other than the philosophy of Shah Waliullah which sees *wahdat al-wujud* as its basis and argues that this principle itself contains the meaning of many religious practices and can form the basis of a national identity for Indian Muslims (Sarwar 1976, 430).

Sindhi admits that while, in some sense, the ideas of Shah Waliullah are tailored to Indian Muslims, there is general political appeal to them as well. He notes that though the great Indian empires of Ashoka and the Mughals had come to an end centuries earlier, the principle of *wahdat ul-wujud* could form the basis of a new form of governance, a new sultanate, in the subcontinent. Sarwar (1976) offers the following summary of this idea:

Institutions are always a manifestation of some thought. The basis of this Indian sultanate needs some kind of thought which is common to all these nations. And everyone shall be part of its building, grooming, and growing, so that every group can adopt it. Moulana’s command is that Shah Waliullah’s

philosophy can be the common basis of Indian thought. Prior Hindu thought did not totally reject this philosophy, but rather it accepted its basic principles. It adopted the virtuous part and it made it a respectable component of Indian Islamic thought. If this philosophy adopts the good influences of Europe, and could reshape itself according to the needs of its time without canceling out its own existence, then it could build the perfect meeting point of Vedic, Muslim, and contemporary India (431).

Sindhi is clear in arguing that to imagine any kind of vision of a unified India, there needs to be some foundational principle through which to articulate the connections between many different nations into one whole. He reiterates that this principle is *wahdat al-wujud*. Because the re-articulation of this idea in Shah Waliullah's philosophy already contains Vedic and Indic influences, Sindhi argues that it is the principle that can unify Hindus and Muslims, not just on the basis of classical theological beliefs, but also in the contemporary. Despite Sindhi's vehement anti-colonial position against the British empire, he is also very much a Muslim modernist who seeks to reconcile Islamic thought with particular tenets of European thought, especially with respect to industrialization and socialism.

Nonetheless, Sindhi holds firm that *wahdat ul-wujud* itself can form the basis of a united, federated India that is simultaneously humanist, but also rooted in the particular principles of Vedic and Muslim traditions in the subcontinent. He argues:

This will be the total comprehensive thought under which Hindus can live life based on their own principles and Muslims should make the detailed Islamic rules the principles of their collective life. And Hindus can believe their own rules of dharma. But this comprehensive thought should be based on all religions, ethical systems, and immutable facts (Sarwar 1976, 431-432).

Sindhi suggests that the intellectual development of *wahdat ul-wujud* itself is something that marks the progression of Indian history. Sarwar (1976), notes,

Moulana says that, in this way, a continuity can be established from the beginning to the end of Indian history. From the Aryans until now, the intellectual evolution of all of its [*wahdat al-wujud*'s] links can be connected with each other. Indian history's evolution of Vedic, Islamic, and present times can build chronological stages along the highway of history. According to Moulana, every link of this long chain of thousands of years is an unbreakable part of India's history. If this were not the case, our country would not have become that which it has at this time (432, ¶1).

Sindhi sees *wahdat ul-wujud* itself as the great connector of eras within Indian history, from the Vedic period, to the Islamic period, to the contemporary period.

The concept, through its traversal amongst the chronology of Indian history, is itself sedimented with the marks of each era. For this reason, *wahdat ul-wujud's* universalism is deeply rooted in its constant re-articulation within the Indian landscape.

Sindhi returns to the idea of *wahdat ul-wujud* by evoking the notion of *spirit*. Sarwar (1976), summarizes,

Whatever we see is all the appearance of that *spirit* which animates the whole universe. And from the beginning of the world until now, the enlightened of every nation are interpreting this *spirit*. Maulana wishes that the new construction of India should build itself on this thought. In this way, India must have the ambition to complete the unfinished business of Ashok, Akbar and Aurengzeb and it should introduce the whole world to this elevated, universal, and humanity-enlightening view. According to Moulana, this is his idea of India's future, in which Indian Muslims can finally offer an important and effective service (432, ¶2, emphasis added).

This spirit is what drives the universe forward, and on this basis, Sindhi imagines a new political imaginary of India. With the end of over two centuries of secular British imperial extraction and colonial governance, Sindhi argues that the new foundation of India must once again have soem basis in divine thought, like the Buddhist and Muslim empires of Ashoka and the Mughal emperors, Akbar and Aurengzeb. This thought is *wahdat ul-wujud*, the view that the divine spirit is that which animates everything – human life, non-human life, and all forms of being.

In a move that seems reminiscent of the oft-quoted characterization of the contemporary crisis, “that the old is dying and the new cannot be reborn,” Sarwar's compilation of Sindhi's ideas ends with a more hopeful sentiment that returns to the role of divine imagination in emerging out of our interregnum. Referencing Muhammad Iqbal's verse¹, Sarwar writes,

“The New World” is actually waiting for someone to unveil its destiny, but there is a need of “New Thought” to do this at this time, and it is [precisely] Moulana's life's purpose to acquaint his people with this “New Thought” (Sarwar 1976, 432, ¶3).

Sindhi died before Indian independence in 1947, but his articulation of *wahdat al-wujud* as a basis of Hindu-Muslim unity offered a much needed vision of

¹ The Muhammad Iqbal verse referenced is:

The New World is as yet
behind the veil of destiny,
In my eyes, however
its dawn has been unveiled.

religion syncretism against the visions of religious nationalism during his time. Though this religious nationalism eventually culminated in the violent Partition of the subcontinent, the establishment of Pakistan as a Muslims state, and the displacement of over 10 million people, Sindhi's writings still offer important insights in thinking about Hindu nationalism in India. Sindhi offers an alternative political worldview predicated on unity that is based on a localized religious syncretism rather than empty secular humanism. Several decades later in Iran, Shariati would follow suite, using *tawhid* to articulate a critique of Pahlavi repression and to argue for socialist future predicated on the political recognition of ontological unity.

ALI SHARIATI

Situating Shariati in Twentieth Century Iran

Ali Shariati was a celebrated Iranian Marxist sociologist often described as the ideologue of the 1979 Iranian Revolution for his eclectic merger of Shia theology and anti-capitalist thought. He emerged as a thinker during the Pahlavi dynasty, which tried to forcibly secularize Iran with American support. Shariati saw this as a form of cultural imperialism and actively resisted the state's repression. Influenced by the mystical ontology of Ibn 'Arabi and 16th century Persian philosopher Mulla Sadra, Shariati centered the concept of *tawhid* in his critique of capitalism. While *tawhid* traditionally refers to the assertion of Islam's monotheism, Shariati re-articulated *tawhid* into its own spiritual ontology that placed humans, the world, and the divine within a single framework of being.

Born in Eastern Iran in 1933 to a father who was a reform-minded cleric, Shariati was exposed to Shi'ism and socialism early on. In college, he studied Arabic and the Qur'an and then pursued a Master's in Arabic and French before pursuing a Ph.D. in Sociology and Islamic History at Sorbonne at 27. Shariati was exposed to Sartre, Fanon, and Che Guevara at Sorbonne and inspired by the Algerian resistance movement, organizing demonstrations with the Iranian Student Confederation in support of the revolutionaries (Purohit 2023). Unlike Fanon, Shariati believed in the revolutionary potential of religion (Callewaert 2019). When he returned to Iran in 1964, he was arrested and then released six months later before beginning to lecture at *Husayniya-yi Irshad*, a celebrated religious center in Tehran (Algar 1979).

Shariati criticized the political passivity of the Shia clerical establishment in Iran. He worried that the contemporary clerics emphasized the metaphysical aspects of Shia theology without discussing its liberatory political potential and criticized the clerics for their corruption. At the same time, the Shah's suppression of a secular leftist alternative to Islam had allowed it to emerge as a contentious public religion. In this context, Shariati sought to articulate a revolutionary vision of Shi'ism that mobilized the young Iranian Marxist intelligentsia, using his public

lectures in Tehran as a platform to reach this generation from 1967 to 1972 (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004).

Shariati was also very critical of the Iranian Left because of its failure to consider Islam a legitimate mobilizing force. The Marxist-Leninists saw the state as a coercive apparatus that needed to be fully decapitated and Shariati worried they were not incorporating Iranian's cultural resources into their political theorization. He saw Shia Islam as an organic link to the Iranian people, envisioning political mobilization from the reformation of the existing cultural tradition (Callewaert 2019, 213). Shariati wanted to restore the core of Shi'ism to the traditions and legacies of Imam Ali, the first successor of the Prophet, arguing that Islam had influenced Marxism through its tradition of revolutionary asceticism (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004).

To politically re-articulate Shi'ism into a revolutionary ideology, Shariati followed the legacy of Muslim reformers and re-interpreted *tawhid*. Influenced both by twentieth century Muslim reformers and the students of Persian mystic and philosopher Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), he re-articulated Sadra's spiritual ontology into a call for contemporary political action (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004). Shariati imagined the role of the Muslim intelligentsia as organic intellectuals who might more openly practice *ijtihad*, or critical reasoning within Islamic law (Callewaert 2019).

Though Shariati never started a political party, he succeeded in influencing a generation of young Muslim Marxist intellectuals in Tehran in the years leading up to the Iranian Revolution (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004). His lectures were transcribed into pamphlets and booklets circulated to young college and high school students, making his ideas accessible and widely popular (Purohit 2023). He was considered a subversive force who was constantly surveilled during his years as an active public lecturer (Callewaert 2019). By the early 1970s, *Husayniya-yi Irshad* was closed, and he was imprisoned for 18 months. Soon after his release, Shariati left for England in 1977, but mysteriously died there shortly after his arrival at the age of 43, suggesting the possible involvement of the secret police (Algar 1979).

Shariati saw the human as a principal agent within a universe moving towards *tawhid*, or unity. He was not only influenced by Marxist teleology, but also by existentialist thought which brought a humanist element to his political ontology. Shariati's *tawhid* placed man rather than the divine at the center of its narrative. He saw *tawhid* as "the sum of ideas that an individual...holds towards the universe" which "focuses on a self-perception and on confronting the self with the universe" (Machlis 2014, 191). The relationship between man and the divine was defined by a dialectic between earthly and transcendent substance. Through the contradiction and struggle of religious practice, man sought to approach the divine (Kanaaneh 2021).

Shariati's Re-Articulation of Tawhid

The World View of Tawhid

Shariati connects the ontological to the political with his re-articulation of *tawhid*. Though *tawhid* is understood as an assertion of God's uniqueness, Shariati, like Ibn 'Arabi, takes *tawhid* to refer to the oneness or united form of Being. In his 1977 lecture, "The World View of Tawhid," Shariati fleshes out this conception of *tawhid*:

Tauhid in the sense of oneness of God is of course accepted by all monotheists. But *tauhid* as a world view in the sense I intend in my theory means regarding the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and the hereafter, the natural and the supernatural, substance and meaning, spirit and body. It means regarding the whole of existence as a single form, a single living and conscious organism, possessing will, intelligence, feeling and purpose (Shariati 1979, 82).

For Shariati, *tawhid* is a metaphysical description of the cosmos, the worldview that "the whole universe" is itself moves as "a single form". Tawhid does not only refer to the divine's unified form, but to the single form of all existence. The *tawhidic* view therefore sees the world and the universe itself as a "living being" (Shariati 1979, 82).

What is the relationship between the human and the divine according to this view? Shariati likens it to the relationship of "light with the lamp that emits it" or "an individual's awareness of his limb and the limb itself" (Shariati 1979, 83). These analogies are reminiscent of Ibn 'Arabi's description of divine light and its self-manifestation as color or or Spinoza's illustration of nature perceiving itself. In fact, Shariati's re-reading *tawhid* explicitly juxtaposes man, the world, and the divine and re-imagines all three entities as forming a single unity of being:

Tawhid represents a particular view of the world that demonstrates a universal unity in existence, a unity between three separate hypostases – God, nature, and man – because the origin of all three is the same. All have the same direction, the same will, the same spirit, the same motion, and the same life (Shariati 1979, 83, emphasis added).

Shariati describes *tawhid* as a "universal unity in existence" between the human, the natural, and the divine. This ontological unity is defined not only by origin but also by "direction" and "motion." Shariati suggests that *tawhid* is not merely a description of static forms, but a teleological assertion which "regards all the particles, processes and phenomena of existence as being engaged in harmonious movement toward a single goal" (Shariati 1979, 86).

This cosmological unity, *tawhid*, is constantly opposed to contradiction and disunity, whether in essence or political categorization:

According to the world-view of *tawhid*, therefore, there is no contradiction in all of existence: no contradiction between man and nature, spirit and body, this world and the hereafter, matter and meaning. Nor can *tawhid* accept legal, class, social, political, racial, national, territorial, genetic or even economic contradictions, for it implies a mode of looking upon all being as a unity (Shariati 1979, 86).

In this section, Shariati moves *tawhid* from metaphysical description to political prescription. On an ontological level, Shariati argues that there is no distinction between human, natural, psychic, or corporeal forms, even if these may appear as distinct “signs.” He, like Ibn ‘Arabi and Sindhi, suggests that difference in manifestation or appearance is not a difference in form. This is where Shariati’s ontology becomes political. The worldview of *tawhid* rejects contradiction based on class, race, nation, or other forms of difference because to acknowledge a contradiction in these categories would regard them as different essences, rather than as different appearances. This is antithetical to a view of the world where all essence is unified, even if it manifests itself differently.

For Shariati, to recognize *essence* through contradiction is *shirk*. Shariati takes the idea of *shirk* in Islam, which refers to the sin of associating God with a multiplicity rather than unity (idolatry), and likens it to the worldview of contradiction. In relation to *tawhid* as a worldview of unity, Shariati explains,

I regard *shirk* in a similar fashion; it is a world-view that regards the universe as a discordant assemblage full of disunity, contradiction, and heterogeneity, possessing a variety of independent and clashing poles, conflicting tendencies, variegated and unconnected desires, reckonings, customs, purposes and wills (Shariati 1979, 82).

For Shariati, viewing the world through the contradiction and disunity of *shirk* is only logically consistent with harmful separations latent in Cartesian dualism, secularism, feudalism, racism, imperialism, nationalism, and capitalism. On this basis he disavows the worldview of *shirk*:

Contradiction between nature and metanature, matter and meaning, this world and the hereafter, the sensible and the suprasensible, spirit and body, intellect and illumination, science and religion, metaphysics and nature, working for men and working for God, politics and religion, logic and love, bread and worship, piety and commitment, life and eternity, landlord and peasant, ruler and ruled, black and white, noble and vile, clergy and laity, eastern and western, blessed and wretched, light and darkness, inherent

virtue and inherent evil, Greek and barbarian, Arab and non-Arab, Persian and non-Persian, capitalist and proletarian, elite and mass, learned and illiterate-all these forms of contradiction are reconcilable only with the world-view of *shirk-dualism*, trinitarianism or polytheism-but not with tauhid-monotheism (Shariati 1979, 86).

To be clear, Shariati is not denying the social salience of the categories he lists here. These categories of difference are what Shariati would call “signs” of the unified essence. He notes that while there are many *epistemological* divisions between forms of “manifest” and “unseen” existence, *tawhid* suggests that there is an *ontological* unity between these forms (Shariati 1979, 83-84). He summarizes this succinctly by arguing, “What is knowable and accessible to our experience, knowledge and sense-perception, is ‘appearance,’ not ‘being’”(Shariati 1979, 84).

Shariati also, interestingly, makes a point to distinguish *tawhid* from “Islamic mysticism,” despite being clearly influenced by this tradition. He argues that this tradition depicts the world as “a series of waves or bubbles on the face of the vast, colorless and formless ocean that is God or the true essence of being” (Shariati 1979, 85). For Shariati, the worldview of *tawhid* follows the lead of the Qur’an in describing all natural objects, contingencies, and processes as “signs,” which are manifestations of Truth in a particular form rather than illusions or veils obscuring the Truth. For this reason, he explicitly distinguishes “the *wahdat al-wujud* of the Sufis” from his “*tauhid-i wujud*, scientific and analytical” (Shariati 1979, 85). Like Ibn ‘Arabi and Shah Waliullah, Shariati tries to both maintain divine transcendence and immanence by arguing that the Oneness of existence still involves immanent self-manifestations of “signs,” “attributes,” or difference, even while divine essence remains unified.

This idea of entities separate in appearance but united in form moving in a unified direction is what allows Shariati to articulate the nexus between the ontological and the political. He says, *tawhid* cannot accept “legal, class, social, political, racial, national, territorial, genetic or even economic contradictions, for it implies a mode of looking upon all beings as a unity”. Despite the political construction of categories of difference and their apparent coherence, Shariati emphasizes that these boundaries have no metaphysical reality in the *tawhidic* ontology. The next section of this paper will explore how Shariati uses his conception of *tawhid* to offer a critique of contemporary capitalism in his re-reading of the story of Cain and Abel.

Tawhid as a Political Movement towards the Class of Abel

The political stakes of *tawhid* are captured in Shariati’s re-reading of the story of Cain and Abel. The story, whose narrative is relatively preserved from the Hebrew Bible to the Qur’an, describes the violent relationship between Adam’s two

sons, Cain and Abel. Cain becomes jealous of Abel because he prefers Abel's fiancée to his own. To resolve this conflict, the two brothers approach their father, Adam, who asks them to each offer a sacrifice to God to determine who should be wedded to Abel's fiancée. When Cain roguishly offers withered corn as his sacrifice and Abel offers his best camel, only Abel's sacrifice is accepted. Out of envy, Cain threatens to kill Abel, but Abel tries to explain that God only accepts the sacrifices of the righteous and, even if Cain did try to kill him, he would not retaliate because he is God-fearing. Cain, unaffected by his brother's preaching, slaughters Abel and commits the first murder on Earth.

While the story is often allegorically interpreted as a warning against the killing of the righteous, Shariati sees it as an interpretation of the struggle between *tawhid* and *shirk*. For Shariati, the conflict between Cain and Abel represents a historical dialectic whose initiating contradiction begins with Cain's murder of Abel. In his re-articulation of the story, each brother represents a particular mode of production and a set of social relations. While Abel, the pious brother, represents the era of primitive socialism, Cain symbolizes the era of private ownership. On this basis, Shariati offers the following re-telling:

Abel the pastoralist was killed by Cain the landowner; the period of common ownership of the sources of production – the age of pastoralism, hunting and fishing – the spirit of brotherhood and true faith, came to an end and was replaced by the age of agriculture and the establishment of the system of private ownership, together with religious trickery and transgression against the rights of others. Abel disappeared, and Cain came to the forefront of history, and there he still lives (Shariati 1979, 99-100).

Cain's murder of Abel is no longer merely a conflict between brothers, but the "disappearance of man's original system of equality and brotherhood" and "the formation of the first class society, the system of discrimination and exploitation, the worship of wealth and lack of true faith, the beginning of enmity, rivalry, greed, plunder, slavery and fratricide" (Shariati 1979, 105). Shariati argues that the complex tools and relations of production that emerged through the agricultural system produced new social divisions and private ownership, which ushered in a new era of division and antagonism.

Shariati argues that history moves towards the victory of the oppressed and the system of Abel, human equality, and classless society. Though since its inception, human history has been defined by the struggle between the religion of awareness and that of deceit, Shariati suggests that the victory of the system of Abel over the system of Cain is inevitable. The dialectical contradiction represented by this struggle and manifest in all societies will eventually culminate in a revolution of the oppressed against their oppressors. Shariati offers the following description of this moment of rupture:

The end of time will come when Cain dies and the "system of Abel" is established anew. That inevitable revolution will mean the end of the history of Cain; equality will be realized throughout the world, and human unity and brotherhood will be established, through equity and justice. This is the inevitable direction of history. A universal revolution will take place in all areas of human life; the oppressed classes of history will take their revenge. The glad tidings of God will be realized: "We have willed that we should place under obligation those who have been weakened and oppressed on the earth, by making them the leaders of men and heirs to the earth" (Qur'an, 28:5) (Shariati 1979, 110).

Shariati's repeated description of the revolution as "inevitable" suggests that he, like Marx, sees history as a teleologically progressing towards a final moment of rupture that will culminate in complete liberation and freedom. This freedom is worked out through the unraveling dialectical tension between the oppressed classes and their oppressors. The rupture involves the victory of the system of Abel, or socialism, communal ownership, unity, and equity. Shariati defends this re-reading of Cain and Abel's story with a verse from the 28th surah, or chapter, of the Qur'an. This verse references the struggle between Moses and the Pharaoh and suggests that the oppressed have been divinely willed to be the leaders and inheritors of the earth. Shariati re-reads this verse in reference to *all* oppressed peoples of history, especially those who have suffered at the establishment of systems of private property.

The movement of history in Shariati's writing is itself like the emanation of the metaphysical essence that constitutes the cosmos's unity. This is why the story of Cain and Abel is emblematic of broader metaphysical forces. Shariati explains,

The trans-historical struggle between Abel and Cain is also the struggle between *tawhid* and *shirk*, between justice and human unity on the one hand, and social and racial discrimination on the other (Shariati 1979, 109-110, emphasis added).

The dialectical contradiction between the systems of Abel and Cain and the eventual victory of the class of Abel is itself a working out of *tawhid* and its metaphysical movement towards unity, both on a cosmological and historical level. Shariati describes history as representing "an unbroken flow of events" which moves in a united front, ushered along by the motor of dialectical contradiction. He elaborates:

History is the movement of the human species along the course laid down by time, and the human species itself is a microcosm, representing the most perfect expression of being, the most evident manifestation of creation. In it,

nature attains to awareness of self, and it moves toward perfection as man himself advances - nature, living, conscious and aware (Shariati 1979, 98).

In this view, history is the movement of connected events constituting the human and the social. This movement itself is part of a larger cosmic movement towards unity of essence, which is described in Shariati's worldview of *tawhid*. The *historical* timescale is but a moment in what Dipesh Chakrabarty might call a *planetary* timescale, which itself is a moment in a cosmological time scale (Chakrabarty 2021). Shariati would argue that all of these timescales are united by an internal movement towards unity, one which governs the unfolding of the cosmos, but is also synecdochally mimicked in the relatively microscopic lens of human history.

Shariati's *tawhid*, then, is not only a metaphysical description of the nature of things in the universe, but also a political assertion that history moves away from the logics of difference and private ownership and towards conceptions of unity, equality, and a re-imagination of the human commons. It is in this way that his ontology of *tawhid* moves from metaphysical description to political project.

DISCUSSION

Historical Contingency in Sindhi and Shariati's Articulations

Despite their appeals to universal cosmologies of unity, Sindhi and Shariati's articulations are born from the particular nexus of intellectual and historical forces that made their visions of political ontologies "thinkable." Both authors' textual insights involved what Benedict Anderson might describe as, "the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces" which become "modular, capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" in his own discussions of nationalism (Anderson 2006). Sindhi and Shariati's ontologies emerge from the twentieth political movements resisting colonial, imperial, and capitalist rule, but also from a centuries-long intellectual history in the Islamic world committed to parsing the nature of Being and its relationship to the divine.

For this reason, I am not at all arguing that *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* are such flexible signifiers that they are essentially empty. This would be to adopt Laclau and Mouffe's conception of *articulation*, suggesting that anything can be articulated for anything else. Sindhi and Shariati are products of their historical moments and their ability to articulate religious concepts like *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* in their writings emerges because they themselves are sites of the sedimentation of their Islamic lineage that came into contact with the historical discourses and conditions of religious syncretism, anti-colonialism, and anti-capitalism. These *historical* conditions are what made it possible for them to engage in the re-articulations that they do! And these articulations matter, not because

they necessarily represent a worldview that is true for all times and places, but because they are depictions of a *vernacular* worldview that meant something to the those moved by Sindhi and Shariati's work.

Sindhi and Shariati are fascinating because they engage in re-articulations that are deeply conjectural while also making claims about the universal. I argue that this move towards universality is useful because while re-articulations are squarely rooted in a particular tradition, time, and place, it is the *appeal* to the universal that is able to move the hearts and minds of their audiences.

Critiques of the Ontological Turn and the Move towards the Universal

What, then, distinguishes Sindhi and Shariati's appeal to universality from that of the Enlightenment and the age of European expansion? It is this type of question that activates recent debates surrounding the so-called "ontological turn." This intellectual move has characterized much of the recent scholarship that attempts to grapple with human and more-than-human relations, especially in the anthropological literature of the last two decades (Bateson 1984, Descola 2013, Kohn 2013). This turn to ontology has been met with three broad sets of criticisms.

First, critics express a genuine concern that the exploration of ontology as a first-condition for politics produces a universalist worldview that elides difference in its wake. Given the weaponization of universalist thought during the Enlightenment and the age of European conquest, critics worry of the contemporary repetition of this kind of intellectual universalism, albeit in new clothes.

In her book *Sunni Chauvinism and the Roots of Muslim Modernism*, Teena Purohit argues that this claim to universality also undergirds Muslim modernism. Muslim modernism was a movement concerned with bridging Muslim thought at the tail-end of the three major Muslim empires (the Mughals, the Safavids, and the Ottomans) with Western Enlightenment thought in the wake of European imperial control of these regions. Muslim Modernism is a response to the crisis produced with the fall of the Muslim empires and the desire amongst modernist *ulama* to reconcile Islam with Enlightenment values (Purohit 2023, 3). Purohit argues that Muslim modernists use the notion of uniting the *ummah*, the international community of Muslims, through *tawhid*. In this sense, *tawhid* signifies not only divine or ontological unity, but also represents a political unity and conception of civilizational progress. The desire to imagine a unified *ummah* through the language of *tawhid* stemmed from Sunni anxieties produced thereby by non-Sunni minority groups, such as the Ismailis, Ahmadis, and the Baha'is, establishing recognized leadership and organized institutional structures (Purohit 2023, 19). The move towards producing a unified *universal* Muslim community is predicated on the erasure of groups that are not part of the hegemonic Sunni bloc.

This connects to the *second* major argument critics pose against the ontological turn: that it views a revealed metaphysical truth in one instance as applicable to all people in all times and all places, regardless of local or customary differences. This critique is made poignantly by Vine Deloria, the Native American theologian and historian who argues,

In the western tradition, revelation has generally been interpreted as the communication to human beings of a divine plan, the release of new information and insights when the deity has perceived that mankind has reached the fullness of time and can now understand additional knowledge about the ultimate nature of our world. Thus, what has been the manifestation of deity in a particular local situation is mistaken for a truth applicable to all times and places, a truth so powerful that it must be impressed upon peoples who have no connection to the event or to the cultural complex in which it originally made sense (Deloria 2003, 65).

For Deloria, the moment of revelation in a particular time and place within the Christian tradition is believed to be so powerful that it is seen as something which must apply to *all* times and places. This had obviously violent consequences for indigenous peoples in the Americas. It also sat in marked contrast to indigenous traditions in which revelation was seen as an ongoing adjustment to one's natural surroundings mediated by a relationship with a particular place (Deloria 2003).

Purohit levels a similar critique against the Muslim modernists. Sunni intellectuals saw revelation as complete in the text of the Qur'an rather than continuously interpreted and mediated by a contemporary spiritual leader, as in the Shia tradition. Muslim modernism's commitment to an *ummah* unified through a final account of revelation is also only made possible by denouncing groups who are outside of this constructed unity. These "others," namely the Ismailis, Ahmadis, and Baha'i's, are themselves marked by traditions of esotericism and spiritual mediation through centralized, contemporary leadership (Purohit 2023).

A *third* major critique haunting the turn towards ontology is that it is potentially depoliticizing. Critics argue that emphasizing ontology, cosmology, and metaphysics moves us out of the realm of the historical, social, and empirical and into the realm of abstraction. Elizabeth Povinelli argues that the ontological turn puts ontology primary to politics, returning the human to an untainted blank slate in connection with the other and the natural. This thereby casts aside the *lived* history of racial and colonial capitalism in the contemporary. The move towards the ontological thus elides historical violence by suggesting a return to some notion of primordial unity. Povinelli worries that proponents of the ontological turn repeat the classical Aristotelian move of abstracting to a thing (Being) and then describing its properties (unity), thereby losing hold of the political. The ontological, in this way, might cast a disproportionate focus on the "what" at the expense of the "so-

what". Even if being is described as a unity, this does not undo the manifest experience of difference or existing violent entanglements (Povinelli 2021).

Finally, critics of the ontological turn argue that it sits outside of the fundamental disciplinary suppositions of the social sciences. This is exactly Kant's response to Descartes: before we can describe the content of *Being* (ontology) we must understand how we can even know what we know (epistemology). In *the Critique of Pure Reason*, (Kant 1781) argues that humans cannot know independent of their own epistemology, because everything is conditioned by intuition. In this way, the turn to epistemology directly confronts the domination of theological thought that characterized Kant's time. The birth of sociology is itself the Durkheimian socialization of Kant's turn to the epistemic. In sociology, the truth about the human is situated within a symbolic framework in which knowledge is always mediated by something, whether it is called intuition (Kant), the social (Durkheim), alienation (psychoanalysis), or power-knowledge (Foucault). The social sciences emerges out of this rift between epistemology and ontology, which is the rift between a phenomenon of the *thing* and the *thing itself*. Therefore, when social scientists gesture towards the ontological, their critics worry that they are attempting to point towards some Truth outside of their epistemic reach.

Critics suggest that an alternative approach to the ontological turn might be to imagine being not as a unified essence, but rather as *entanglement*. From here, we might ask what the nature of this entanglement is. This is where politics could emerge. In this way, the relational approach is social and historical. In *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe poetically describes a politics built not on essences or substances but on the basis of relationality. In reference to the age of perceived global apocalypse, he writes,

"In ancient African traditions, for example, the point for questioning of human existence is not the question of being but that of relation, of mutual implication, that is to say of discovery and the recognition of a different flesh from mine...From this perspective, identity is a matter not of substance but of plasticity. It is a matter of co-composition, of opening onto the over-there of another flesh, of reciprocity between multiple fleshs and their multiple names and places" (Mbembe 2019, 28).

Povinelli argues that this idea of starting with "mutual implication" and "reciprocity between multiples fleshs" might mean that we use our historical entanglement of violence as our theoretical starting point for unpacking our relationship to each other, so that we do not fall prey to an apologetic of unity that tacitly permits the continuation of the contemporary racialized neoliberal order (Povinelli 2021).

Especially where the attention to "difference" has reigned the dominant mode of critical analysis in the humanities and humanistic social sciences over the last

several decades, the turn to unity seems overdue but also raises warnings for some. The marker of the universal, as during the Enlightenment and the age of European conquest, threatens to obliterate the local and the vernacular in its wake. This is what critics of the ontological turn fear.

A Defense of Vernacular Universality

This paper, however, asks if it might be possible for more benign conceptions of the universal to be part of the sense-making of peoples in particular times and places. In this sense, I argue that we can resurrect Sindhi and Shariati's thought in light of these critiques of ontological thinking, because they engage in discourses of what we might call *vernacular universality*. They use the spiritual and cultural vernaculars of their time and place to produce a vision of the universal that appeals to their Muslim audiences in India and Iran.

It is this vernacular universality of the articulations of *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* that shield them from the first set of critiques of the ontological turn's unity being predicated on an excluded margin. This is what gives *wahdat ul-wujud* its immense political appeal to Sindhi – its universalism and abstraction is not a view from nowhere, but one that emerges out of the particular political and historical conditions of the subcontinent, namely the sedimentation of the concept over time. *Wahdat ul-wujud*'s contemporary meaning has been influenced by every period of recent Indian history, from the conceptions of non-dualism in Vedic thought in the 9th century, to the celebrated saint Kabir's poetic attempts to trouble the boundedness of the concept within the Hindu, Islamic, and Sikh traditions in the 16th century, to the linkages between Vedic and Islamic thought articulated under Mughal empire in the 17th century to Shah Waliullah's re-articulations which are then read and re-made by Sindhi in the 20th century. Its traversal across these many historical traditions means that *wahdat ul-wujud*, itself, is a concept that is already hybrid and sedimented, even as it claims to represent an ontological, universal essence.

I would also argue that the process of mediating universalist thought to a particular intended audience is crucial to understanding the distinction between the *vernacular universality* of Sindhi and Shariati and the violent universality of Enlightenment. For Sindhi and Shariati, Muslim Indian and Iranian intellectuals and students were subject to their appeals to the universal. As people who, themselves, were part of the same intellectual tradition, the appeal to the universal could produce a sense of completeness of their respective onto-political philosophies. During the age of Enlightenment, conquest, and empire, colonized peoples around the world were not subject to appeals to the universal born out of their own traditions, but rather a kind of universality that was particular to European Christianity. Through the imposition of this universal, the colonial subject experienced material conditions of domination that were psychically mediated by a

Truth completely foreign to their own. This universality mediated by violent encounter and structural dominion are obviously very worthy of critique.

In the case of the Islamic empire's encounter with India, we see a different relationship between the universal and local which culminates in a kind of hybridity that is sensitive to local custom. As Sindhi describes in his own writing, the reign of the Mughal dynasty from the 16th to the mid-19th century, was marked by an effort to merge Muslim theological and aesthetic symbols with the Indic vernacular. It is on this basis that Sindhi can argue for *wahdat ul-wujud's* connection to both the Islamic and Vedic tradition – because in India, three centuries prior, the Mughals were, indeed, invested in producing a theological amalgamation of Hindu, Muslim, and broader Indic thought in their notion of *Din-i-Ilahi*.

In response to the second set of critiques of universal revelation applying to all times and places, Sindhi would argue that *wahdat ul-wujud* itself is a principle that is attentive to local custom. Like Deloria, Sindhi also noted that, even in the context of Islam law, many norms emerge out of the cultural contexts they evolved in and might not apply to Muslims living in all times and places. In this way, Sindhi's articulation of *wahdat ul-wujud* is deeply attentive to the local. He would agree with Deloria that there is a problem with accepting the universality of revelation for all times and places. The teachings of Islam, for Sindhi, have to be adaptable to modern times and particular places to forge a conception of local consensus. This was precisely the question Indian Muslims were facing in the wake of Partition: should they try to define their identity on the basis of their Muslimness or a hybrid identity that was made possible through the melding of Islamic heritage and Indic locales and landscapes? Sindhi, advocated for the latter approach and proposed *wahdat ul-wujud* itself as the basis for an interfaith, overlapping consensus (Zaman 2012). This is exactly why Sindhi became a supporter of an Indian nationalism over a Muslim universalism, resisting the need to Arabize what he saw as a perfectly legitimate Indian Islam.

It is precisely because both *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* are attentive to both the universal and the particular that they are politicizing concepts. This speaks directly to the third set of critiques that suggest the move towards the ontological is inevitably depoliticizing. If anything, ontology's universalism opens the possibility for coalition-building. This is evident in Sindhi's writing, where the thread of the ontological in both Vedic and Islamic thought forms the basis for his conception of Hindu-Muslim unity in India. In this sense, it is *wahdat ul-wujud's* ambiguity that explains its applicability to many times and places.

Sindhi's move to forge unity in the political party is also very Gramscian. It involves producing a hegemonic bloc that articulates unity in difference. But unlike Gramsci, this unity is not *only* historically contingent and produced; it is always

already there theologically and is merely being *recovered* in a given historical moment. This might offer a tangible way to think about the synthesis between an ontological view of unity and difference-mediating view of entanglement. This, I argue, is what makes the articulation of ontology for political aims a unique form of articulation.

Finally, in response to the view that ontology sits outside of the realm of the social sciences, I argue that this separation between the onto-theological and the epistemic reveals the latent secularism of the social sciences. The gesture towards unity that characterizes contemporary scholarship on the ontological is often also grounded in something beyond the social, such as a spiritual or materialist unity. Perhaps this is not a bad thing. Perhaps people need some basis on which to feel connected to each other that is not only predicated on historical entanglements of violence. For analysis and critique to *be* political, rather than just discuss the political, it must be moving enough for people to be motivated to act. Naming the historical modes of entanglement is often not enough to mobilize people to action. When this is the case, I argue that we must explore other modes of conjuring an actionable affect.

Examples of this are being explored by a nascent scholarship interested in an Islamic Liberation theology motivated by the ontological suppositions of *tawhid* and *wahdat ul-wujud*. As Timani (2019) argues, *tawhid* can act as an acknowledgment of the divine essence in the other, thereby threatening the stability of the self-other dichotomy. In this sense, “*Tawhid* is not only the oneness of God, but it is also the unity of man with man or, in a broader sense, the unity of the other with the self” (Timani 2019, 14, emphasis added). The dissolution of “empirical selfhood” tied to domination is de-centered through the process of acknowledging *tawhid*, enabling encounters both with the “other” and the ineffable (Timani 2019, 21, emphasis added). Shah-Kazemi (2006) argues that this dissolution of selfhood does not obliterate difference, but rather unifies multiplicity. The doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, in this sense “projects, embraces, encompasses, penetrates and re-integrates the many” (Shah-Kazemi 2006, 97).

I argue that the move towards the ontological in this kind of theological scholarship can cultivate a feeling of embodied connection that might mobilize us to address the demands for remedy and repair within our own traditions. If we begin from the relationality produced by history violence, we may only be left to mobilize on the basis of guilt in our complicity to violence. I suggest that another possible approach is to acknowledge the horror of violent relationality *in and through* what is understood to be a broken, but repairable ontological connection to the other.

Where the critiques of the ontological remain unsatisfied by these responses, I suggest that there is intellectual space to synthesize a view of ontological unity with a recognition of historical entanglement. Perhaps we might take seriously the

entanglements of violence that connect us while also acknowledging the need for redress, healing, and a “return” to a kind of primordial unity in being. This approach takes contemporary difference seriously while also acknowledging ontological disconnection that has been produced by systems of violence - enclosure, colonialism, imperialism. Moreover, we might explore how these two modes of thinking relationality – through unity vs. through entanglement – are connected to each other. It might in fact be possible for us to articulate the parallels between being enclosed in unity and being entangled through difference. In this sense, I argue that Sindhi and Shariati’s approach to a *vernacular universality* might offer us insights by way of imagining this synthesis.

CONCLUSION

Even in the contemporary, Shariati and Sindhi are exemplars of how spiritual ontologies can be creatively re-articulated for political projects. Both thinkers show us how abstracted ontologies of unity can be re-thought in the struggles against capitalism and empire. These authors also stage a fruitful dialogue between Marxist and Muslim spiritual traditions. Instead of distancing themselves from religion as many Marxists did in India and Iran, both thinkers argued that religion needed to be folded into the realm of the political to make a compelling critique that would resonate with the local Muslim publics.

What might a contemporary reading of Sindhi’s and Shariati’s historical attempts to connect political and spiritual liberation look like in the present? How might naming our contemporary assumption of the metaphysical separation between the self, the other, the natural, and the cosmic shape the contours of ongoing struggles against capitalism, ecological destruction, and imperialism? What could an awareness of the social production of the analytical separations between the self and the other, the human and the natural, and the worldly and cosmic offer contemporary political organizing efforts? Could it perhaps disrupt the logics of capitalist accumulation predicated on the separation of the human and the natural? Or force us to re-think our understanding of secularism as we re-think our cosmic relationship with non-human forms, both living and non-living? While this paper cannot satisfyingly take on all of these huge questions, it aims to create an opening for us to explore these and other political implications that might emerge from our ability to revisit taken-for-granted ontological separations by engaging the ways that ontological conceptions in Islamic mysticism challenge the separations between the human, the natural, and the divine. Sociology might take the lead of anthropology, geography, and other humanistic social sciences by daring to delve into these kinds of ontological questions.

Today, as we bear witness to the brutal occupation, displacement, and genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza, we see the ways that Islamic slogans become an accessible and important vernacular for the movement for Palestinian

resistance. Though, of course, we know the attack on Gaza has little to do with religion and more to do with the occupation and settlement of land, at marches and rallies around the world, protestors invoke divine guidance with the resistance movement through their repetition of takbir, *Allahoakbar*, “God is Great,” and the shahadah, *la illahah illaha*, “There is no God but Allah.” These declarations are not based in a vision of ethnonationalism but rather in the theological practices of an oppressed people which provides theoretical resources for them to articulate their resistance through their connection with their land and the divine.

This deployment of religious idiom in the realm of the political exemplifies the kind of religious articulation through which Shariati and Sindhi brought the ontological into the political. Shariati and Sindhi politicized the centuries old concepts of *tawhid* and *wahdat ul-wujud* in ways that parallel each other but are also particular to their projects in twentieth century Iran and South Asia. This suggests that these ontological signifiers of *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* are flexible but have enough signified substance that they can be politicized in related but distinct ways in particular times and places. The specificity of what they end up meaning depends on the historical conditions in which they are re-articulated.

Especially in a contemporary moment when Islam is theologically and politically caricatured as violent and regressive, this project documents progressive and liberatory political articulations of a core concept in the Muslim mystical tradition. I argue that this sort of documentation is essential not only to subvert the latent Islamophobia within contemporary Western political discourse, but also in contemporary India, where the Hindu Right is engaged in an ongoing struggle to extract Muslim histories, theologies, and peoples from their homeland by describing Islam as antithetical to Indic culture. Sindhi’s work documents how Muslim theology might provide a compelling justification for Hindu-Muslim unity and the rejection of the violence of religious nationalism. More generally, this paper adds to the nascent scholarship documenting an Islamic theology as a discourse of resistance against the forces of religious nationalism, empire, and capitalism. This paper therefore centers *wahdat ul-wujud* and *tawhid* not just concepts, but also as historically mediated bridges connecting spiritual worldviews to anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist political projects.

Sindhi and Shariati’s method of deploying vernacular spiritual idioms can offer us a creative repertoire in contemporary struggles against capitalism and imperialism. Their writings take us beyond mere critiques of Enlightenment ontologies towards an ontology that not only acknowledges the appearance of *difference* but also sees metaphysical *unity* in its form. How might naming our contemporary assumption of the metaphysical separation between the self, the other, the natural, and the cosmic shape the contours of our ongoing political struggles? Could it perhaps disrupt the logics of capitalist accumulation and ecological destruction predicated on the separation of the human and the natural?

Or force us to reconsider our understanding of the secular as we re-imagine the ontological relationship between human and non-human forms, both living and non-living?

Fundamentally, if the theological accounts of *tawhid* and *wahdat-ul-wujud* really call into question the metaphysical boundary between self and other, then the exploitation of the oppressed at the hand of the oppressor renders a harm to the oppressor that not only involves the recognition of the relations of domination (as Hegel suggests in his description of the master-slave dialectic), but rather something more fundamental that stems from the total non-separation of the two entities in the first place. That is: the destruction of the other is a fundamental, ontological destruction of the self.

What might this ontologically inflected reading of relations of dominations mean for us today? I suggest that our conception of political liberation must be bound up in questions of the metaphysical which begin by taking seriously the possibility of our deep ontological connection to each other.

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