Exploring Qāsim Nānotwī’s Engagement with the Akbarian Tradition: Interpreting Waḥdat al-Wujūd

This paper proposes to delve into the profound legacy of the Akbarian tradition, an intellectual tradition rooted in the works of Ibn ʿArabī, which extensively contemplates the central doctrine of tawḥīd (the oneness of God) and has exerted a lasting influence on subsequent Islamic theological discourse. However, the reception of this tradition within Muslim scholarship has engendered multifarious responses, sparking contentious debates primarily revolving around the perceived incompatibility of distinguishing between the Creator and the created. These ongoing debates have seen scholars either championing Ibn ʿArabī as the “The Greatest Saint” (Shaykh al-Akbar) or denouncing him as a heretic.

Within this context, Qāsim Nānotwī, a pivotal figure in the formation of the Deobandi school of thought, emerges as a noteworthy scholar who engages with the Akbarian tradition. His scholarly pursuits are steeped in the kalām tradition, where he seeks to reconcile apparent theological inconsistencies in revealed texts, the Quran and hadith literature, employing the methodology of burhān (demonstrative logical knowledge) while also incorporating a mystical perspective.

Nānotwī’s writings unveil not only his profound reverence for Ibn ʿArabī but also his intimate familiarity with the conceptual paradigms of the Akbarian tradition. It is this reverence for Ibn ʿArabī that motivates Nānotwī to offer a rejoinder to prevalent misconceptions surrounding the doctrine of waḥdat al-wujūd (oneness of being) and to clarify its differentiation from waḥdat al-mawjūd (oneness of existents).

This presentation aims to explore Nānotwī’s writings, not only in terms of his comprehension of waḥdat al-wujūd but also in his innovative use of this concept to establish the existence of God, elucidating how all facets of creation are inherently ontologically dependent on their Creator and derive their reality from the Divine existence. As a scholar hailing from the Indian subcontinent during the late Mughal and early British Raj era, this paper endeavours to illuminate the interpretation and integration of the Akbarian tradition within the corpus of Sunni Muslim literature, particularly through the lens of one of the founding figures of the Deoband school of thought.

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