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God or the Light of Existence: Mīrzā Mahdī Iṣfahānī on the Unity of Existence (*Waḥdat al-Wujūd*)

The unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) has proven to be one of the most, if not the most, challenging theories in the Islamic intellectual sphere leading to divergent reactions among Islamic scholars, from plain acceptance, various modifications, and total rejection. Mīrzā Mahdī Iṣfahānī (b. 1303/1885 – d. 1365/1946), the founder of the theological school of *Maktab-i Ma'ārif* (the School of *Ma'ārif*) or *Maktab-i Taḥkik* (the School of Separation), is known to be one of the severe critiques of this idea in the contemporary Shi'i seminary. By teaching in the seminary of Mashhad and crafting treatises on Islamic scholarly disciplines, Iṣfahānī gained prominence for his critique of *falsafa* (philosophy) and *ʿirfān* (mysticism) as propagated in the Shi'i seminary. His main contention was that philosophical and mystical theories fundamentally contradict authentic Islamic teachings found in the Quran and Hadith. In contrast, he propagated alternative ideas he termed '*ma'ārif-i ahl-i bayt*' (the Prophet's household's knowledge), resulting in the appellation '*Maktab-i Ma'ārif-i Ahl-i Bayt*' (the School of the Prophet's Household's Knowledge) for his theological school, abbreviated as '*Maktab-i Ma'ārif*'. This school of thought stands as a prominent exponent of anti-philosophical and anti-mystical Islamic theology in the contemporary milieu, particularly within the intellectual landscapes of Iran and Iraq.

Iṣfahānī's main motive for opposing the theory of the unity of existence was to preserve a classical monotheistic conception of God as a totally transcendent being distinct from the world and all creatures, which he believed to correspond to the innate knowledge of God (*fiṭra*) as well as Islamic scriptures. Nevertheless, he does not deny the epistemic validity of the mystical experiences that were thought to support the theory. Instead, he reinterprets such experiences as perceptions of the 'light of existence,' (*nūr al-wujūd*) as he calls it. According to Iṣfahānī, the light of existence is the action of God and belongs to a category distinct from creatures' essence. The light of existence, in his proposal, is the vast impersonal reality that all the existing creatures possess and receive from God, as the original possessor of the light, to come into existence. Still, Iṣfahānī criticises mystics for committing two fatal errors. First, neglecting their genuine essence; namely, the essential darkness that has no light in itself, and confusing it with the light of existence. Second, supposing that the light of existence is identical with God and consequently claiming that all beings are identical with God. The aim of this paper is to shed light on Iṣfahānī's two-fold approach towards the unity of existence by explaining his objections to the theory with due consideration to his broader theological framework.



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Amir Mohammad Emami is a PhD candidate in Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He holds a BA in Philosophy and an MA in Philosophy of Religion from the University of Tehran. His research interests include the intellectual history of the Islamic world, particularly Iran since the 17th century, and the intersections of Islamic intellectual disciplines with contemporary philosophy. His first publication in the field is "Tajarrī as Religious Luck," published in *Philosophy and Jurisprudence in the Islamic World* (ed. Peter Adamson, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019). He is genuinely interested in the contribution that Islamic intellectual traditions might have to the global philosophy of religion and relevantly, the methodological issues on the relation of intellectual history to philosophy. He is currently working on his PhD thesis on the thought of Mīrzā Mahdī Iṣfahānī (d. 1365/1946), the founder of the theological school of *Maktab-i Ma'ārif*, also known as the *Maktab-i Taḥkik*.