

# **The Spiritual Turn: Modern Sufism and the Study of Islamic Art and Architecture**

by

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## **Abstract:**

This dissertation constructs a genealogy of modern Sufi discourse on art and architecture. It draws the history of a chain of writers and artists, connected through a spiritual and intellectual line of transmission, who developed a particular reading of their world- its values, its cultures and arts. Divided into five chapters, it follows the classic structure of a Sufi *Silsila*: a chain of master-disciple relationships. Each chapter is thus built around one Muslim master and one European disciple and analyzes the contribution each of them made to the Sufi aesthetic discourse. *The Spiritual Turn* argues that the work of this intellectual lineage finds its roots within a 19<sup>th</sup> century Sufi reformist movement led by Emir 'Abd al-Qadir (1808-1883) who proposed to unveil the common esoteric origins of Christianity and Islam. The Algerian anti-colonial leader and Sufi master hoped that such an ecumenical project could spare his co-religionaries further military confrontations with Western powers. Organized chronologically, the dissertation then follows the slow, rhizomatic evolution of a 19<sup>th</sup> century political stance into a rather well-structured art theory a century later. The narrative focuses on the different intellectual collaborations between Arab Sufi mystics and a group of European converts to Islam. Together, they believed in a possible mystical alternative modernity and argued for an esoteric understanding of aesthetics that would replace materialist and positivist modern art and architectural theories. The 1976 London World of Islam Festival was the culmination of this intellectual lineage. This event, considered as the largest exhibition of Islamic art and cultures ever organized in Europe, was mainly curated by Western converts to Islam directly attached to Abd al-Qadir's spiritual school. The meaning these curators ascribed to the exhibited artworks, the textual interpretations, and historical framing they provided were rooted in a purely esoteric understanding of art and architecture. This history is an opportunity to examine alternative aesthetic hermeneutics emanating from non-western, non-positivist or anti-modern perspectives. The dissertation thus uses the Sufi aesthetic discourse as one modern instance where the classical and inherently Western modes of interpretation were challenged in favor of a mystical reading of art and architecture.

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## Introduction

The Portuguese museum Calouste-Gulbenkian in Lisbon possesses a small and rich collection of artworks from the Muslim world. It brings together a well curated plethora of objects from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and showcases some remarkable examples of Persian Minai'i ware, Ottoman Iznik panels and exceptional illuminated book manuscripts from different regions of the Muslim world. Yet the uncontested masterpiece of this collection is the masterly crafted white jade wine jug commonly known as the Ulugh Beg cup (Fig. 0.1). It was made during the first half of the fifteenth century and known both for its impressive refinement and for the list of notable figures who used it. First destined for the famous Timurid Sultan, astronomer and mathematician Ulugh Beg (1394-1449), it was acquired two centuries later by the Mughal emperor Jahangir, and later used by his son, Shah Jahan; the emperor who built the Taj Mahal. The piece is indeed unique – it is the only example of a white jade jug of this quality surviving today – and the unmatched work of its craftsmen granted it the long and kingly life it enjoyed. Next to a handle in the form of a Chinese-style dragon, and on the upper edge of the rim, one can read this note written in a beautiful *taliq* Arabic script. “God is great. The emperor of the Seven Countries, the Emperor dispensing justice, learned in the mysteries both true and allegorical: Emperor



Jahangir son of the Emperor Akbar Ghazi.” Around the jug’s neck one can read another inscription, glorifying the first emperor to own this cup. It reads “The Sultan, the most mighty savior of the world and of religion, Ulugh Beg, may his reign and power endure forever.” There is as little doubt that this mug was used to drink wine as there is about the prohibition of consuming liquors in Islamic legal canon. And yet this same piece described its user to be nothing less than the “savior of religion”. This visible contradiction is not unique to this object. Instances of the sort populate Islamic art history and present scholars with the same pressing question: What is truly Islamic about Islamic art?<sup>1</sup> This interrogation is far from a futile tautology. The historiography of Islamic art and architecture reveals how thorny this question is indeed<sup>2</sup>.

One might first assume – perhaps for good reason – that an Islamic theory for Islamic art could indeed be found somewhere within the various folds of Islamic theology. And yet, turning to scripture has often proved disappointingly fruitless<sup>3</sup>. In fact, Muslim legal opinions on art followed few repetitive patterns that could hardly lend themselves to

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<sup>1</sup> On this topic, refer to Shahab Ahmad in his brilliant book *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) uses the Ulugh Beg cup, among other examples, to illustrate Western scholarship’s recurrent and endemic incapacity to account for certain apparent contradictions in Islamic history.

<sup>2</sup> The list of scholars who delved into this question is too long to be exhaustively reproduced here. Let us mention for example. Nasser Rabbat, “What is Islamic architecture anyway?” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012) 1–15,

Avinoam Shalem. “What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Islamic Art’? A Plea for a Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam.” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012) 1–18. Wendy Shaw, “The Islam in Islamic art history: secularism and public discourse.” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012) 19–34. Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on an Unwieldy Field”, *The Art Bulletin*, 85 (2003). Gülru Necipoğlu, “The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches.” in Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum* (London: Saqi, 2012). 57-75.

<sup>3</sup> This dissertation’s fifth chapter brings the figure of Abd al-Halim Mahmud (head al al-Azhar from 1973 to 1978) who offers a good example of the difficulty orthodox scholars face when trying to avoid the theological binary I mentioned here. Read for example his book *Mawqif al-Islam men al-Fan wa al-‘Elm wa al-Falsafah* (Cairo: al-hay’a al-misryyah lel-Kitab, 2009). Read also the American philosopher Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) where he amply explained the limits of a purely and exclusively theological interpretation of Islamic arts.

build a comprehensive Islamic art theory. The most prominent of these threads is the *fiqh* binary of *Ibahah* and *Tahrim* – permission and prohibition – which approaches Islamic arts as a social product that needs to be ordained and its various facets controlled in the public space. The four major schools of Sunni jurisprudence seem to agree that this legal binary is best suited to treat the aesthetic question. For example, the Salafi branch of the Hanbali school argues that the arts should be prohibited if they are suspected to potentially “distort human instincts.”<sup>4</sup> In front of the quasi-impossibility of constructing an art that forcibly eludes all human instincts, figuration was then simply prohibited, along with non-religious music, poetry, and dance<sup>5</sup>. Other scholars saw the possibility of a legitimate non-religious music and poetry and gave figurative artists some margin of action, albeit limited<sup>6</sup>. In short, the colorful subtleties behind why the name of God is written on a wine mug are nowhere to be found in Islamic theological treatises and the thick layers of legal technicalities. Building an Islamic theory of Islamic art solely rooted in the *fiqh* apparatus was and remains difficult.

A possible alternative was sometimes found in the non-legal works of medieval Muslim thinkers. Philosophers and thinkers such as Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (923-1023), al-Jahiz (776-868) and al-Farabi (870-950) were read and interpreted to find between the folds of their works the traces of an Islamic theory of art. These Muslim thinkers wrote on a wide array of topics ranging from zoology, to advice to those who sought the company of royalty, and on to mystical poems. On occasion, they discussed art and beauty in relation to

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<sup>4</sup> On the Salafi interpretations of Islamic art and its limitations, read for example Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 42-46.

<sup>5</sup> This was for example the opinion of some prominent Salafi scholars such as Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz (1912-1999), Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914-1999) or al-Shawkani (1759-1834).

<sup>6</sup> This was the case, for example of the Egyptian Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917-1996).

nature, the human body, races, pleasure, divine inspiration, and soul. These furtive passages from an otherwise enormous corpus were then extracted, combined and read as a whole by a set of enthusiastic scholars who saw in their texts the seeds – or at least the theoretical promise – of an Islamic theory of art. Examples include the Syrian art historian Afif Bahnasi's *Falsafat al-Fan 'end al-Tawhidi*; the Lebanese writer Charbel Dagher and his *Madhaheb al-Hosn, Qira'a Ma'jamyyia Tarikhyia lel-Funun al-'Arabyia*; or the French philologist Pierre Thillet with *L'esthétique chez Abu 'Hayyan al-Tawhidi*. A recent, and even more ambitious project is that of the American art historian Wendy Shaw and her book *What is Islamic Art: Between Religion and Perception*. Here, the list of Muslim scholars studied was significantly larger, the texts referenced more varied, and the project more enterprising. Shaw's remarkable and meticulous work tracing the threads of an aesthetic discourse in pre-modern Muslim sources has taken her to previously understudied grounds<sup>7</sup>. Though novel, *What is Islamic Art* belongs to the same historiographical school that sees a possible Islamic art theory in the profane works of medieval Muslim thinkers. Here, the art theory is not derived from the Islamic religious corpus but from the culture(s) that such a corpus helped produce.

Shaw's endeavor remains relatively rare in a field increasingly wary of the hidden dangers all essentialist drifts could take to. The anthropologist Dale F. Eickelman eloquently explains, "The main challenge for the study of Islam is to describe how its universalistic or abstract principles have been realized in various social and historical contexts without representing Islam as a seamless essence on the one hand or as a plastic

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<sup>7</sup> Shaw's book is for example particularly interested in the question of perception and treats it through different prisms. Through the optic of Ibn al-Haytham (965-1040) the figural art of Behzad (1455-1535) or the dichotomy between outer and inner reality in Sufi texts.

congeries of beliefs and practices on the other.”<sup>8</sup> It is indeed hard to see an Islamic theory of art emerge when faced with the dry legalistic definitions of legists/fuqaha’, the muted voices of premodern Muslim artists, the unavoidable anachronisms of aesthetics itself as a field of inquiry when projected into a distant Muslim past, and the postmodern orientalist critique that automatically points its finger toward any Western voice that claims to discover something genuinely Islamic.

This dissertation examines one instance of an Islamic theory to Islamic art that does not belong to either of the two categories described above: this is a history of the modern Sufi theory of Islamic art. Indeed, Sufism was a perfect alternative since it is as much a product of Islamic culture as it is part of Islam’s metaphysical body. As such, a Sufi art theory can potentially then be coined “Islamic” in a way that a theory relying on the work of medieval Muslim thinkers cannot. Moreover, unlike the Quran and Sunna upon which theologians relied to tackle the artistic question, the Sufi corpus with its long lyrical poems, its ecstatic proses, its philosophical nuances, and the prolific productions of its adherents is arguably fertile ground to produce a comprehensive art theory. This dissertation toys with the ontological question of the field of Islamic art and architecture, but does not come close to providing an answer. After half a century of Post-Structuralist critique, we are all well aware that a categorical response to such an ontological question is, at best, a deceitful conceptual dead end. However, shedding light on instances where an answer was

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<sup>8</sup> Dale F. Eickelman, “Changing Interpretations of Islamic Movements,” in William R. Roff eds, *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning: Comparative Studies of Muslim Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 13–30, at 18.

proposed, understanding the historical conditions of its emergence, and the interpretive horizon it offered can be a fruitful theoretical endeavor.

This dissertation traces the history of a political and aesthetic discourse of a group of Arab Sufi masters and Western converts to Islam that developed between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Spiritual Turn* writes the history of the Sufi hermeneutic of art, and maps out the evolution of this art theory through a detailed examination of group of Sufi mystics, artists, art theorists, and thinkers: Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri (1808-1883), Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh(1840-1921), Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Alawi (1869-1934), Ivan Aguéli (1869-1917) René Guénon (1886-1951), Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), and Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), all of whom produced a number of books, journal articles, poems, chronicles as well as paintings, sculptures, and prints. Their work—both textual and visual—revolves around a universal esoteric truth. They were the first to argue that Sufi Islam was the most authentic bearer of a hidden rationale—one that is situated beyond reason and science—and of which art is its principal manifestation. For them, Islamic art was not merely a historical blend of Byzantine, Persian, and Armenian influences, but a pure and distilled formal manifestation of Sufi esoteric doctrines. They argued that Islamic art forms, patterns, and colors are subtle and highly codified aesthetic manifestations of Islam’s spiritual essence. Thus, Sufi mysticism guided both craftsmen in their attempt to render esoteric truths into artistic forms, and lay Muslims who could supposedly detect the spiritual meanings behind these artworks and objects. Overall, through an intricate set of arguments, all inspired by Sufi concepts and terminologies, they aimed to create a holistic art theory that could offer a common theoretical ground for interpreting religious and profane works of art be they early Quranic manuscripts or Ulugh Beg’s wine jug.

## Muslim Protagonists and the Sufi Art Theory

Most of the early historians of Sufism concentrated on the formative periods of the movement and what they qualified as the birth of mysticism in Islam. These early general histories of Sufism share two characteristics: first, they are often based on a reading of the life and work of a particular early Sufi master or prominent medieval mystic.<sup>9</sup> Second, and most importantly, they refrained from including modern forms of Sufism in their narrative and historically constructed the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the end of an active Islamic mysticism.

Reynold Nicholson, for instance, ended his introductory book *Sufism: The Mysticism of Islam* with a discussion about the 15<sup>th</sup> century Persian master Jami, and Annemarie Schimmel examined in *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* the Sufi master Khwaja Mir Dard who died in 1785. Most of these early histories of Sufism ended with the fall of the Safavid Empire in Iran, the colonization of India, or the beginning of modern reformations in the Ottoman empire.

More recent scholarship does contextualize the mystical branch of Islam in a modern era. However, modern Sufism is often read solely through the scope of colonialism and anti-imperialist resistance and rarely as a form of spirituality with its proper aesthetic and mystical dimensions. For example, Itzhak Weisemann's study of 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>9</sup> Reynold Nicholson, for example, was the first to translate Rumi's *Masnawi* in 1925 and present the Sufi mystic to a Western audience. Louis Massignon wrote his famous work on Al-Hallaj *La Passion de Hallaj* in 1922, the British historian, Margaret Smith translated and commented in 1928 the work of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya in her book *Rabi'a the Mystic and Her Fellow-Saints in Islam*, and Henry Corbin, a student of Massignon, was one of the first experts of Suhrawardy's work. In parallel to their interest in prominent Sufi figures, some of these historians tried to offer a general introduction of the movement to a wider audience. Massignon for example wrote in 1954 his *Essay On The Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, Margaret Smith wrote her *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* in 1931, and later Annemarie Schimmel wrote her seminal book *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* in 1975.

Damascene Naqshabandi orders read Sufism in parallel to political movements from the period such as Islamism and Pan-Arabism<sup>10</sup>. Nile Green, in his learned and concise *Sufism: A Global History*, also imposed a sensible political turn on Sufism as soon as his chronological narrative reached the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>. In recent scholarship, the figure of a modern, apolitical Sufi mystic is rarely proposed, despite the presence, as this dissertation will show, of such figures and an abundant corpus attesting to this.

The few scholars who showed an interest in the aesthetic and mystical facets of modern Sufism were those who studied Muslim mystical groups in twentieth century Europe and North America. In other words, Sufi Islam is depoliticized and reverted to its spiritual nature only when it is examined as an alternative Western spirituality. Examples include Gisela Webb who studied modern mystical Sufism as an “American alternative religion” and looked at its relationship with modern Western disenchantment,<sup>12</sup> or Pnina Werbner who studied the relationship between Sufi mysticism and the role of modernity and migration in the construction of alternative cultures in the United Kingdom<sup>13</sup>. The prominent British historian of popular culture Chris Partridge included modern Sufism as an essential component to his study: *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Itzhak Weisemann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (London: Brill, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2012)

<sup>12</sup> Gisela Webb, *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women's Scholar-Activists in North America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Pnina Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult* ( Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Chris Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* ( London: Bloomsbury Clark, 2005).

It is within this body of literature – of Sufism as Western modern alternative mysticism – that the main figures of this dissertation are usually studied. Most of René Guénon’s biographers were historians of Western spiritual modernity with a clear interest in modern European spiritualist movements<sup>15</sup>. The influence of Sufism in his work is often minimized and a stronger emphasis placed on the Western background of his theories. The same could be said for Titus Burckhardt and Frithjof Schuon, studies of their lives and works are almost exclusively written by friends, adepts, and disciples who, more often than not, saw in their Sufi affiliation a detail that could potentially disturb the universalist picture they drew of their masters<sup>16</sup>.

In fact, most studies of Western converts to Islam are intellectual histories that foreground a disenchantment with Western modernity, an Orientalist interest in Islam, or the modern translation movement that acquainted European readers with Eastern religions. These interpretations, though valid, often implicitly represent Islamic cultures as placid, static entities, neglecting the fact that Sufi preachers actively pursued European students. This dissertation endeavors to unearth the voices of these Arab Sufi masters who believed in a universal and aesthetic mystical project and sought the conversion of spiritually inclined Westerners.

Three labels could have been used to qualify the art and architectural theory these Arab mystics and their disciples produced : Sufi, Traditionalist and Perennial. It is

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<sup>15</sup> See for example The work of Xavier Accart, *René Guénon ou le renversement des clartés : Influence d'un métaphysicien sur la vie littéraire et intellectuelle française (1920-1970)*, (Paris : Arché, 2005) Jean Pierre Laurent, *René Guénon, les enjeux d'une lecture* (Paris : Devry, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Harry Olmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010). James Cutsinger, *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (Albany: State University of New York Press).



important to first say that these are not mutually exclusive categories; One can be both Sufi, Traditionalist and Perennialist. However, this work argues that the word Sufi is best suited to describe the theory it examines. Perennialism is a generic word that englobes a large plethora of characters, traditions and school of thoughts that extend from Neo-Platonism to Aldous Huxley and his famous *The Perennial Philosophy* published in 1945<sup>17</sup>. They share a belief in the existence of a unique, transcendental, and perennial truth underlying all world religions and wisdoms.

Traditionalism, arguing that a primordial and unique Tradition is the hidden source of all authentic world religions, is in that sense part of the Perennialist corpus. What distinguishes Traditionalism from other Perennialist branches is its insistence that one of the world religions should be faithfully and unquestionably embraced and followed -which explains the conversion of many of them to Sufi Islam. The art and architectural theory Aguéli, Guénon and his followers proposed could then certainly be labeled as Traditionalist. This is at least what Patrick Ringgenberg did in his extensive and erudite work on the topic<sup>18</sup>.

As noted above, this dissertation contextualizes Guénon within a Muslim Sufi movement that preceded him and, in a way, enabled his work to emerge. It also uncovers the voice of Arab Sufi masters who helped shape his thought. Here, Guénon's metaphysical views are not detached from the Sufi reformist project to which, I argue, they belonged. It is therefore deemed misleading to dissociate this art theory from those Sufi concepts that,

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<sup>17</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Ringgenberg, *Les Théories de l'Art Dans la Pensée Traditionnelle : Guénon - Coomaraswamy- Schuon – Burckhardt* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2011).

while sometimes heavily reshaped, remain the ground upon which it was built. Choosing to coin the art and architectural theory produced by this school of thought as Sufi is therefore the most inclusive and appropriate choice.

### **The Sufi Art Theory and Alternative Epistemologies**

More widely, this project offers an opportunity to examine an alternative hermeneutic of art emanating from a non-Western, non-positivist, and anti-modern perspective. This dissertation is not conceived as a radical iconoclastic maneuver to dismantle a supposedly Western epistemology and offer a substitute to an old decaying certainty. The point is rather to acknowledge and historicize these peripheral epistemologies which have been largely ignored and often willingly discarded from dominant art and architectural historical narratives. I believe that tracing the history of such alternative modes of thinking art and architecture helps redraw the map of what was thought to be already explored and to critique the assumption that a neutral and universal theory of knowledge exists.

This critique of Euro-centric monopoly over truth was embraced by different emancipatory movements which believed in the necessity of an epistemic liberation that accounts for the cognitive modes of subordinated populations. For example, proponents of the theory of *negritude*, developed by the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Senghor (1906-2001) and the Martinican author Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), advanced that an authentically black and non-Western epistemology does exist. The Nigerian literary critic Abiola Irele even argued that *negritude* “contains within it a theory of knowledge. Indeed an epistemology. The Key notion in Senghor’s theory is that of *emotion*. Which he virtually

erects into a function of knowledge and attributes to the African as a cardinal principle of his racial disposition.”<sup>19</sup> The theory of *negritude* wanted to account for a black manner of living, thinking or - to use a Heideggerian terminology- inhabiting the world that escapes colonial cognitions. Recovering such native imaginary was thus considered as an ultimate act of liberation.

This dissertation, while obviously not having the same scope and ambition of the example cited above, argues that the Sufi art and architectural theory is also one of many alternative epistemologies to the Western canon that command our academic interest and attention. The academic scene has been increasingly sensitive to such broad and inclusive approaches to knowledge. One of the most recent developments of this line of thinking is the work of the African American historian Saidiya Hartman and her 2008 groundbreaking essay “Venus in Two Acts.” From a historiographical perspective, the essay is an insightful critique of the canonical reliance on archives and their inability to document the lives of black slaves in North America. Her archival encounter with a black girl named “Venus” who died on a British slave ship in 1792 led her to call for a novel historiographical approach she coined “critical fabulation,” where fiction and historical facts are willingly intertwined to respond to archival omissions. A novel type of historical speculation that, while not fully corresponding to the academic historiographical canon, allowed Hartman to “both tell an impossible story and amplify the impossibility of its telling.”<sup>20</sup> This is not to argue that Hartman is offering an alternative epistemology (this is not anyway what she claims to do) but to point to her efforts opening up the canon to new writing techniques, imaginaries and

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<sup>19</sup> Abiola Irele, Introduction to Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, trans. Henri Evans and Jonathan Ree (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) 18.

<sup>20</sup> Llllll Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, 26 (Volume 12, Number 2), June 2008. 11.

conceptual landscapes that challenge the Eurocentricity of the field and allow certain occulted truths to emerge.

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is also highly indebted to the work of the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos and his seminal work *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. De Sousa Santos shed light on the Western epistemologies' failure to recognize other forms of thinking emanating from the Global South. Like Césaire and Hartman, he inscribed his intellectual work within a wide emancipatory project and proposed "to follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory."<sup>21</sup> In his book, he eloquently called the process of rejection, dismissal and erasure of non-Western cognitive processes as "epistemicide." According to the author, an Epistemicide occurs when social practices and native knowledges are subordinated, marginalized, delegalized, or simply erased by dominant oppressive forces. The Portuguese sociologist proposes, as an act of resistance to globalization, to recover, valorize and promote such knowledges.<sup>22</sup>

*The Spiritual Turn* also reads Santos Da Sousa's work in conversation with Shahab Ahmad's brilliant book *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic*. I see Ahmad's attempt to formulate a new conceptual language for analyzing Islam as part of the ongoing efforts to critique and eventually deconstruct Western epistemological dominance over knowledge. Ahmad's book posits that pre-modern Muslims did not conceive their culture and religion using the same language and parameters Western historians of Islam used. The alternative frame Ahmad proposed to better understand Islamic history is based on the

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<sup>21</sup> Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014) viii.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

apparent “contradictions” that Western scholars liked to note in Islamic history. The Ulug Beg cup, the quasi-religious erotic poems of Hafiz or the Pantheism of Ibn Arabi are examples of such seeming contradictions. From a Western rational point of view, these anomalies are often seen as mere exceptions to “real” Islam. Ahmad sought to construct (or uncover) an Islamic epistemology where such practices were not considered exceptional aberrations but fundamental elements of an Islamic way of inhabiting the world. Ahmad, like De Sousa Santos, sees a colonial epistemological break that created a chasm between Muslims and their knowledges. For him, Western scholars reduced the rich plethora of premodern interpretive models that populated the Muslim world to a narrow legalistic frame. For Ahmad “ this conceptual incoherence with their past”<sup>23</sup> is the ultimate obstacle standing before Muslims in their quest for liberation from the Western Eurocentric gaze that they have internalized.

This dissertation thus argues that the Sufi art and architectural theory is one of many alternative epistemologies to the Western canon that deserve our academic interest and attention. The postulates of the Sufi aesthetic theory- that this work proposes to reveal and explain- can obviously be considered irrational, unprovable, and therefore rejected. This is far from being a call to believe in their historical accuracy and validity. This dissertation claims that the Sufi art theory, while arguably historically inaccurate, was and remains meaningful for large communities of Muslims who might find in it better interpretations of the art surrounding them than what Western scholarship could offer.

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<sup>23</sup> Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 245.

This fact alone, despite all the valid scientific critiques we might direct towards the Sufi theory, legitimizes the historical project proposed in this dissertation.

### **Anti-modernism, Mysticism and Art**

One of the most compelling historical surveys of Traditionalism was Mark Sedgwick's 2009 book *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. The book first sought to find the distant roots of Traditionalist thought in the Renaissance. It then looked at the different ramifications of the movement in the work of Frithjof Schuon, Julius Evola and Mircea Eliade. The book's last chapter is an articulate attempt to understand the appeal such radical anti-modernist thought had on European thinkers<sup>24</sup>. Following Sedgwick's claim, this dissertation argues that this school of thought should indeed be understood as a virulent response to the modern intellectual project. One of René Guénon's most widely circulated books, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, argues that the loss of Tradition in the Western world was the most tragic outcome of modernity<sup>25</sup>. In that regard, modernity is negatively defined around an absence: it aroused when Tradition was lost. For him, Traditionalism is as an active resistance to this loss.

It is true that anti-modernism is not a cohesive movement but rather a heterogenous conglomerate of political and intellectual schools critiquing modernity. These could include the materialist Marxist critique, environmentalism, pacifist ideologies

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Sedgwick book *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 207-263.

<sup>25</sup> René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Hilldale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 7-21

or spiritual revivalism. The disparity of origins and goals to these movements should not conceal the common theoretical grounds they share and that some scholars such as David J. Rosner or Lynda Jessup have detected<sup>26</sup>. Anti-modernist groups, they claimed, are usually more interested in the past than the future and want to retrieve some form of pre-modern purity. They are also interested in stable and perennial factors in a rapidly changing world and they deplore the loss of collective ideals following the sweeping modern upheavals.<sup>27</sup> Anti-modernism thrives In a world where, according to Robert Pippin for example “fundamental ways of mattering have died.”<sup>28</sup> and where, “the accounts provided by the ancient ‘parents’ with their God, their natural hierarchy, their metaphysics, their afterlife, their story of cosmic justice, and so on, were fairy tales, delusions, fantasies. The sun did not revolve around the Earth; there was no immortal soul; aristocratic order had no natural basis, and finally, there was no loving and providential God.”<sup>29</sup>

Akbari Sufism<sup>30</sup>, as defined by Abd al-Qadir, Aguéli, and Guénon checks most of these boxes and could thus comfortably fit within the large umbrella of anti-modernist movements. Yet this dissertation, as it is clear from its title, argues that Akbari Sufism was, in its essence, a modern phenomenon. This terminological choice could perfectly stand if one considers anti-modernism itself as nothing but, and perhaps paradoxically, a pure modernist product. In fact, the group of thinkers examined here were well aware of the

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<sup>26</sup> David J. Rosner, *Conservatism and Crisis: The Anti-Modernist Perspective in Twentieth Century German Philosophy* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012) and Lynda Jessup’s introduction in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). 3-10.

<sup>27</sup> David J. Rosner, *Conservatism and Crisis: The Anti-Modernist Perspective in Twentieth Century German Philosophy* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012), xii.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 147.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Arabi, the distant spiritual master of the Emir was also known as the al-Shaykh al-Akbar, literally meaning the great master. The school that Emir Abd-el-Kader will revive was therefore named Akbari.

epoch to which they belonged, constructed a radical break between East and West and perceived modernity as a radical break with all that preceded it. These, one might argue, are deeply modern tropes. This dissertation thus avoids the pitfall of considering that such anti-modern narratives exist within a void outside modernity itself, or opposed to it. It actively demonstrates, whenever possible, the links the Sufi masters under study had with Western modern scholars who also developed potent critiques of modernity such as Julius Evola and Martin Heidegger. It is difficult today to simply cast these two thinkers for instance, despite their open anti-modernism, as individuals who acted “outside” the modern world. Similarly, the Sufi critique of modernity, as this dissertation argues, should also be considered as a normal, predictable, and inherently modern product as well.

### **The Genesis of an Art Theory:**

This dissertation is thus a long overdue genealogy of the Sufi discourse on Islamic art. *The Spiritual Turn* is divided into five chapters and follows the classic structure of a Sufi *Silsila*: a chain of master-disciple relationships. Organized chronologically, the narrative follows the development of a modern Sufi art theory from one generation to the next. Each chapter is structured around one Muslim master and one European disciple and reveals the contribution that each made to this school of thought. The five chapters describe the slow, rhizomatic evolution of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Sufi political position into a well-structured art theory one century later. Their thoughts are inseparable from the lives they led. It was thus important to give an account of their life trajectories, the multiple networks to which they belonged, and the intellectual ramifications of their work outside of the Sufi sphere. This



history examines a set of unexpected connections between Sufi Arab preachers, Western Esoteric circles, European colonial powers, and cold war Arab oligarchies. This is a global intellectual history that relies on a close and extensive reading of the main protagonists' published books, journal articles, personal archives, correspondences, biographies and autobiographies as well as an examination of the various artistic works they produced. It also involved visiting the different *zawiya* where they studied.<sup>31</sup>

The first chapter introduces Emir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri's ecumenical project, which evolved out of his wartime experience fighting the French colonial army in the 1830s and 1840s. It follows the slow development of the Algerian anti-colonial leader from overt and armed confrontation against the French colonial power to his later project for an amiable reconciliation with Western dominant forces. This first chapter relies on early testimonies of French individuals who met 'Abd al-Qadir during the war or in the course of his exile in Amboise and reported on the Emir's interest in a possible peace between the French and their Muslim newly colonized subjects<sup>32</sup>. The chapter's focus then turns to the Emir's writings produced during his exile in Damascus. The Algerian mystic believed that an ecumenical rapprochement with the West would spare his co-religionaries further military confrontation and that esotericism could offer him and his followers an underground passage to modernity. Two main texts are then read and analyzed to explore the theoretical ramifications of 'Abd al Qadir's project. First, his letter to the French Asiatic society titled *The Reminder to the Intelligent, Warning to the Indifferent*. This is one of the

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<sup>31</sup> The Sufi shrines where they were educated to Sufism still exist today, with different branches still operating. Most notably the Zaouia Al-Alawyia in Mostaganem, Algeria.

<sup>32</sup> the chapter relies on the testimonies of Father Jacques Suchet (1795-1870) who met the Emir in 1838 to negotiate the liberation of French prisoners,<sup>32</sup> and the French minister and deputy Comte Alfred de Falloux (1811-1886)<sup>32</sup> who, curious about the reports that described the Algerian prisoner as someone who resembled Christ, visited him during his French exile.

earliest examples, and perhaps the most important, of a Muslim dignitary, addressing the colonial power in a letter, in which he explains what he thinks is the core of his religion. This attempt to essentialize Islam, frame it in a Sufi language, and address it to a Western audience is a unique precedent that will become, as the rest of the chapters prove, a recurrent tradition among the Emir's disciples. The second document is another letter, this time sent to a French Masonic lodge where 'Abd al-Qadir explained the importance of unity between nations and the role esoteric groups from different traditions could play in rebuilding this supposed unity. The art and architectural question, while being the center of gravity of this dissertation, does not appear in this first chapter. Yet it is argued that it is within 'Abd el Qadir's intellectual project of an esoteric rapprochement between Christians and Muslims that the amorphous roots of the Sufi art theory are to be found. His interest in Christianity, his belief in a possible esoteric unity between nations, his passion for Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and his advocacy of a Sufi metaphysical universalism are the solid socle the Sufi art theory relied on to emerge, years after the Shaykh's death.

During his Damascene exile, 'Abd al-Qadir recovered his interest in Sufi education after the long years of war. His Sufi scholarship was then largely centered around the thought of Ibn Arabi whose dense, allegorical and famously ecumenical thoughts helped the Algerian shaykh find the legitimate precedent to ground his project. The Emir gathered around him a faithful group of disciples which included the young Egyptian Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh who, like his master, saw the political potential of an esoteric rapprochement with the West, maintained cordial relationships with French masonic lodges, and developed close ties to Italian colonial elites in the region. The dissertation's second chapter examines his intellectual and political positions then closely look at one of

his closest disciples ; The Swedish impressionist painter and writer Ivan Aguéli. This chapter seeks to trace Aguéli's intellectual journey from an anarchist critic of Western modernity to a fierce defender of Islamic mysticism as sole source of global salvation. Aguéli, who was deeply invested in the idea of anti-modern Sufi universalism, believed that a global unity could only be achieved if all religions could perceive the oneness of the esoteric core they supposedly share. This chapter looks first at his political opinions then examines Aguéli's early attempts to give an aesthetic edge to his universalist agenda. It argues that the Swedish painter was the first to see the artistic potential of 'Abd al-Qadir's project. Special attention is given to Aguéli's concept of "pure art"; an art that, as he argued, could only be produced by artists and craftsmen who went through a rigorous spiritual initiation. The question of purity here might send the reader back to fascist aesthetics that were also characteristic of the period<sup>33</sup>. The connection is not fortuitous, and this chapter tries to sketch the different threads that linked fascism, mysticism, and art. This chapter will also look at the artistic production of the Swedish artists as a possible manifestation of the art theories he developed.

'Illysh's second notable disciple was the French metaphysician and writer René Guénon. He was introduced to Sufi Islam and the work of Ibn Arabi by Ivan Aguéli who, towards the end of his life, returned to Paris, created a secret society dedicated entirely to Ibn Arabi's thoughts and published numerous articles on Islamic esotericism in the journal *La Gnose* that Guénon had founded. The third chapter is dedicated to René Guénon's intellectual work and emphasizes the importance of this thinker as the one who formalized

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<sup>33</sup> On this topic, read for example Mark A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 102-138.

the Akbari Sufi metaphysical project and gave it its most definitive features. Through an extensive reading of his written work, this chapter will excavate the different references, fragments of texts, short articles, or simple references Guénon made about the artistic question. While he never wrote a book on the topic, Guénon relied on Aguéli's theoretical work and added an interest in questions of initiation, symbolism and craftsmanship. Three particular angles are used to examine Guénon's art theories: his critique of Western modernity, his admonition of modern sciences and his admiration for symbolic structures. To avoid casting Guénon away from the world within which he evolved, this chapter tries to draw the different connections he had with other thinkers and artists from the period: the relationship that linked him to the Cubist artist Albert Gleizes, for example, is one instance this section examines. Guénon took the Sufi stance of his predecessors and transformed it into a rich, coherent intellectual movement largely known today as Traditionalism. Thanks to his extensive writing, the novelty of his approach, and his collaboration with notable French publishing houses, Guénon's movement had a relatively large success in Europe. More often than not, Guénon invited those who expressed interest in his theoretical work to embrace Sufism. The fourth chapter examines one of his most prominent and influential followers who converted to Sufi Islam and expanded his master's theories; The Swiss artist and metaphysician Frithjof Schuon.

Schuon was a painter and craftsmen, and was therefore naturally interested in a general and comprehensive theory of arts and crafts. The chapter dedicated to him starts in Algeria and follows the traces of the Sufi mystic and founder of the 'Alawi tariqa, Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi(1869-1934). It was René Guénon who recommended Schuon to leave Europe and follow the teachings of the Algerian mystic. This chapter starts by situating al-

'Alawi within the larger political context within which he evolved and emphasizes the shift in attitude among colonial powers in Algeria vis-a-vis Sufi congregations. Al-'Alawi represents, as it will be argued, a period where a cohabitation was considered possible and Sufi ecumenism was even promoted by French officials. This chapter looks at al-'Alawi's relation to colonial authorities and French members of the Catholic clergy with whom he confided his intention to build an esoteric brotherhood between colonizers and colonized. His interest in Western converts to Sufism is read through this political prism. The Swiss artist Frithjof Schuon was his most famous disciple. Schuon was a painter who thought that his artistic practice was inherently reflective of his mystical teachings; reading his artistic work in parallel to his written texts can thus better illuminate the art theories he developed. Schuon's inclusive and erudite religious universalism remained faithful to the theoretical framing his spiritual masters and predecessors imposed; that of a clear limit separating the esoteric core of religions from their exoteric shells with a pronounced and almost exclusive interest in the esoteric potential of world religions. His art theories were more elaborated and less fragmentary than those Guénon proposed. This chapter looks at the theoretical layers Schuon added to the Sufi art theory to make it into a coherent and, most importantly, applicable whole.

Schuon, who was a figurative artist, complicated Guénon's understanding of symbolism and made it into a usable theory that could be comfortably implemented by those artists who, like him, wanted to actually produce a sacred art. After his Algerian experience, Frithjof Schuon carried a simplified and depoliticized Alawi Sufism back to his native Europe and made the universalist project of his predecessors into a Western affair. His students and disciples formed large congregations around European cities. They were

mostly educated men from bourgeois families who helped promote and expand his views on metaphysics and art. The fifth chapter looks at one major artistic event that was fully theorized and conceptualized by some of Frithjof Schuon's most devoted followers.

In 1976, the World of Islam Festival, the largest exhibition of Islamic art and cultures, ever curated in Europe opened in London to great acclaim. The festival was produced by mostly Western artists, architects, philosophers, and art historians, and the curatorial team was composed of many European Christian converts to Islam. The meaning these curators ascribed to the artworks exhibited, the textual interpretations provided, and the historical framing they offered were rooted in a purely esoteric understanding of Islamic art. To this day, the London World of Islam Festival remains the clearest curatorial attempt to make Islamic art "Islamic." The fifth and last chapter considers this event as the culmination of the intellectual lineage that this dissertation is historicizing. The festival's massive scale makes it challenging to offer a full and comprehensive picture of the entire event. This chapter is thus centered around its two central curators and theorists who were both disciples of Frithjof Schuon; Titus Burckhardt who curated the main exhibition titled Arts of Islam held at the Hayward gallery and Seyyed Hossein Nasr who organized the exhibition titled Islamic Science held at the London Museum of Science.

This chapter argues that The World of Islam festival allowed the Sufi art theory to leave the occultist and esoteric circles of its first life to be embraced by a larger, diverse, and more conventional audience. Away from the freemasonic alliances of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir, Aguéli's secret societies, and Guénon's esotericism, the festival's curators decided to nuance the language of the theory's forefathers without defacing its core. Its language, message, and overall ideology had to correspond to the role it was prescribed for; crafting

for a Western audience the image of an overly mystical, amiable, and unified Islam. Its two main tenets that were Sufism and arts worked perfectly together to convey such message. In that regard, one could argue that the festival would have had the total approval and full support of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir who was the first to see the role Sufism could play as carrier of an ecumenical project between Muslims and Westerners. It is true that more than a century separated the Algerian leader from the festival but the need to craft a marketable and disciplined Islam to appease Western audiences remained pressing. The image of a divided, complex, tentacular, and therefore ungraspable Islam had to be eclipsed. Unity was instead presented as the one true philosophical foundation of Islam and Islamic art was, this time, brought to the rescue and given the mission of proving such unity. This remains, until today, one of the main functions attributed to the Sufi art theory. This last chapter thus ends with a brief overview of the different ramifications, derivatives and migrations the Sufi art theory knew after 1976 and argues that the theory, perhaps in cryptic manners and under different names, still lives in books, galleries and museums around the world.

## Chapter One

### **Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and the Esoteric Unity Between Nations**

On May 16, 1938, *Life Magazine* invited its readers to discover the story of the Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine; a Freemasonic lodge that, according to the article, exclusively opened its doors, unraveled its secrets and “revealed its pageantry”<sup>34</sup> to journalists. A short but rich and dramatic text and a set of spectacular photographs depicted the Initiation of new members to the lodge (Fig. 1.1). The reporter described a potentate wearing a jeweled robe with a black Fez adorned with a star and a crescent, an Arab dagger and a headdress with the word “Medinah” written in golden letters on it<sup>35</sup>. The man was the master of the ceremony and it was reported that upon his entrance the crowd bowed and shouted “Salaam”. He then proceeded to walk down the aisle towards the “Divan” where the officers of the shrine joined him (Fig. 1.2). A Quran and a Bible, were placed on top of a black stone in the middle of the lodge and the initiates had to swear on both of them to finally become “brothers”. The ceremony, we are told, took place on Wabash Avenue, Chicago, in the Medinah Temple: the Shriners’ second largest sanctuary after their Manhattan lodge which they named, predictably so, the Mecca temple<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *The Secret Ritual of the Secret Work of The Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of The Mystic Shrine* (Washington D.C: Imperial Grand Potentate, 1914), 6.



The Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine had been founded by the play writer, William J. Florence (1831-1891) in New York in 1870. The Shriners, as they later came to be known, trace back the origins of their esoteric teachings to the mystical journey of William Florence. According to the lodge's initiation text, Florence who was " on a visit to Arabia, was initiated in a temple of the Mystic in that country and the secret work of the order was brought by him to the United States in the year 1870"<sup>37</sup>. The text also informs us that: " The ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of The Mystic Shrine was instituted by Mohammedan Kalif-Alee ( his name be praised, the son-in-law of the prophet Mohammet, in the year of Hegira 25; A. D. 656) at Mecca, Arabia."<sup>38</sup>

Stories of Western travelers finding a perennial authentic wisdom under the guidance of an oriental spiritual master are common in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western travel literature<sup>39</sup>. It is hard to discern truth from fiction in these texts where Orientalist fantasies and exaggeration are intertwined with historical facts. William Florence for instance reported that, while touring in Europe with his troop, he was invited to a masonic gathering organized by a certain Yusef Bey, a Persian diplomat he had met in Marseilles, and was there initiated to the teachings of the mysterious "Mystic shrine"<sup>40</sup>. Following this, Florence decided to tour the Arab world hoping to discover the esoteric roots of Islam. His journey took him first to Algiers, where he witnessed another ceremony of what he described as a "Muslim masonic group."<sup>41</sup> A ceremony that, according to Florence, occurred

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> On the interplay between modern disenchantment and the birth of a globalized modern mystical network, see Sophia Rose Arjana, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace* (London: One world Academic, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> *A Short History: Shriners of North America and Shriners Hospitals* (New York: The Shriners of North America, 2004), 5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 5.

in a shrine where the costumes and furniture were “gorgeous in Silk, wool and fine linen, decorated with embroidery in gold, silver and colors, swords and spears”<sup>42</sup>. Later that year, he visited Cairo where he took a considerable number of notes and sketches<sup>43</sup>. Back to New York and inspired by the exoticism of a spiritual and ambiguous Orient he had just left, Florence adopted Islam – or his own stylized version of the religion- as the main theme of his newly created masonic lodge. With the help of doctor Walter Fleming (1838-1913) , Florence established in 1872 New York’s Mecca Temple. Fleming drafted the ritual, designed the emblem and costumes, formulated a salutation, and declared that members would wear a red fez as a visual sign of their belonging to the newly created brotherhood<sup>44</sup>. He was designated first potentate of the temple.

The rapid and popular success of this eccentric masonic lodge that stressed “fun and fellowship” had probably pushed Fleming to better frame the supposedly Islamic basis to his lodge’s masonic teachings. The mission was complicated as he had never visited the Muslim world, did not speak Arabic, and the information Florence had brought back from his journey, while abundant, was rather hazy and tenuous. The man who nonetheless introduced much of the Islamic background to the Shriners was Albert Rawson (1829-1902), an American Orientalist and Theosophist who mastered Arabic and had traveled to different parts of the Muslim world<sup>45</sup>. Rawson claimed he entered Mecca disguised as a Muslim traveler and that he was initiated by some Sufi groups to their esoteric teachings<sup>46</sup>. After joining the Shriners, Albert Rawson created his own Western Islamophilic Masonic

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<sup>42</sup> Fred Van Deventer, *Parade to Glory, the Story of the Shriners and Their Hospitals for Crippled Children* (New York: William Marrow and Company, 1959), 33.

<sup>43</sup> *A Short History: Shriners of North America and Shriners Hospitals*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Patrick D. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, Vol.1 (Leiden: Brill, 2015),120.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

lodge with a long and evocative name: the Fraternity of the Shaykh of the Desert, Guardians of the Kaaba, Guardians of the Mystic Shrine.<sup>47</sup>

Reading through its different scriptures and founding myths, one cannot fail to notice that this Islamophilic Freemasonry often portrayed Islam as a pre-Christian Oriental mysticism. A chronological twist that arguably served as a simple discursive outlet to avoid any confrontation with Christian clergy. Islam was therefore depicted as a placid, unevolved Oriental mysticism that, since time spared it, was not far from the distant sources of Christian faith. In the introduction to their initiation text, the newly accepted Shriners were clearly invited to “redouble their courage, zeal and determination to defend and advocate the Christian religion”<sup>48</sup>. Among their stated objectives they proposed “the promotion of religious toleration among people of all nations, but especially in the United States, of the Christian religion”<sup>49</sup>. In short, this was a masonic lodge that used a distorted view of Islam as the source of its masonic esoteric knowledge and that, at the same time, required from its adherents to preach the word of Jesus within the limited boundaries of the United States of America. This well-structured, conscious, and strategic confusion in fact regulated most of the Freemasonic Orientalist discourse, that painfully positioned itself between its admiration for the oriental wisdom and the usual masonic affiliation to Christian faith<sup>50</sup>.

With this hybrid esotericism, The Shriners represented a new trend in the modern masonic landscape and revealed the growing detachment from Christianity that characterized

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *The Secret Ritual of the Secret Work of The Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of The Mystic Shrine*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>50</sup> On the theoretical problems Western Islamophilic Freemasonry faced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Read Patrick D. Bowen, *A history of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 115-139.

Western Freemasonry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A disinterest that was nourished with the import of other sources of authentic metaphysical wisdom on the ships of British soldiers and American travelers. Islam fitted well in the plethora of alternative spiritualities that characterized the modern and tireless search for new metaphysical interpretive horizons. Inflated travelogues and rudimentary translations of Muslim esoteric texts were perhaps deemed insufficient by certain Western freemasons who decided to travel to the Middle East hoping to find remnants of a cryptic freemasonic body *within* Islam. Sufism, presented as Islam's mystical branch, perfectly answered this demand and occupied the center of the masonic Orientalist interest. The American Freemason John Porter Brown who lived in Istanbul from 1832 until his death in 1872 wrote one of the first American surveys on Turkish Sufism and described its different trends and *tariqa*<sup>51</sup>. In the section dedicated to Sufi dervishes he expressed his puzzlement in front of the fact that Sufis Bektashis<sup>52</sup> saw a resemblance between their own practices and the masonic rituals<sup>53</sup> and this despite the highly negative connotation of Freemasonry in the Islamic world, usually assimilated, according to Porter, to an "atheism of the most condemnable character."<sup>54</sup> John Yarker, a British Mason, who had also traveled to the East, went as far as claiming that Freemasonry was introduced to Europe through Muslim Sufi masons who lived in Medieval Andalusia.<sup>55</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, certain Western esoteric circles understood Sufism and Freemasonry as similar forms of authentic esoteric mysticisms revealed in two different contexts. The British Orientalist Richard Burton (1821-1890) described Sufism as nothing

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<sup>51</sup> The word is derived from the Arabic word *tariq* (path) and is used to designate a Sufi organized order.

<sup>52</sup> Bektashi is a Sufi order, established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century around the teachings of a Sufi mystic known as Haji Bektash Veli (1209-1271). It is today principally based in Turkey and Southern Europe.

<sup>53</sup> Bowen, *A history of Conversion to Islam in the United States*, 117.

<sup>54</sup> John Porter Brown, *The Dervishes or, Oriental Spiritualism* (London: Trübner and Co, 1868), 60.

<sup>55</sup> John Yarker, "Chair Degree, Operative Lodges, and Templary," *The Freemason*, April 24, 1869, 9.

less but “the Eastern parent of Freemasonry.”<sup>56</sup> Modern Freemasonry, for that matter, had proved to be more friendly to Islam than perhaps the general Western public. It invited Muslim illustrious figures to join its newly created Eastern lodges and even allowed them to take their initiatory obligation on the Quran<sup>57</sup>. Recruiting prominent Muslim Individuals also served to counter the rampant demonization of Freemasonry in a newly colonized Muslim world<sup>58</sup>. The American Mason Rob Morris, back from a journey to the Middle East when he wrote his book *Freemasonry in the Holy land*, praised Muslim freemasons he met in the Arab world and most particularly, a prominent Arab Freemason and Sufi shaykh named Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir.<sup>59</sup>

On June 7 1883, *The New York Times* published a short article titled “Abd el Kader Masonic Friends” in which the Imperial Council of the Shriners announced to an American audience “The death of the Illustrious Noble El Hadji Abd El Kader, Grand Shaykh of the Alee temple, at Mecca. Arabia”<sup>60</sup> (Fig. 1.3) . The laudatory article introduced Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir as “The acknowledged head of the order in the Eastern Hemisphere.”<sup>61</sup> The well-respected Sufi Shaykh was in fact the main representative of the modern esoteric rapprochement that occurred between Western Freemasonry and Sufi Islam in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir and other prominent Muslim religious figures

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa : Or, an Exploration of Harar* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856), 361.

<sup>57</sup> Eric Anduze, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Au Moyen-Orient et Au Maghreb: fin XIX- début XX siècle* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 2005)

<sup>58</sup> On Freemasonry in North Africa and the Middle East read: Thierry Zarccone, *Mystiques, philosophes et franc-maçons en Islam* (Paris : Maisonneuve, 1993) ; Thierry Zarccone, *Le croissant et le compas. Islam et franc-maçonnerie, de la fascination à la détestation*(Paris : Dervy, 2015) ; Eric Anduze, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Au Moyen-Orient et Au Maghreb: fin XIX\_ debut XX siècle* (Paris, 2005) ; Eric Anduze, *La Franc-maçonnerie de la Turquie Ottomane* ( Paris, 2005) ; Dorothe Sommer, *Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire: A History of the Fraternity and its influence in Syria and the Levant* (London: L.B Tauris, 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Rob Morris. *Freemasonry in the Holy Land* (Chicago: Knight & Leonard, 1876), 94.

<sup>60</sup> “Abd El Kader’s Masonic Friends,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 1883.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

had in reality very good reasons to join the masonic ideal<sup>62</sup>. They saw in Freemasonry a Western universalist brotherhood that transcended national, religious and cultural differences. Yet, unlike communism for example, Freemasons were mostly Deist and defended older religious traditions while maintaining close ties to modern Western circles. For Muslim scholars who were wary of the secularizing power of the Western project, Freemasonry proposed an underground passage to modernity through esotericism. For them, it represented a form of metaphysical modernity; both religious *and* humanist. A Western organization that promised the following: undermining the colonial project in the name of a universal spiritual brotherhood and pushing away a Western modern and anti-religious universalist materialism. Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri could only be interested in such prospects.

### **The Universalism of a Warrior**

‘Abd al-Qadir was born in western Algeria in 1808 to Muhyiddin al-Hasani (1776-1834), a prominent Sufi leader of a religious family who was allegedly descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>63</sup> He followed a traditional Islamic education memorizing the Quran and

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<sup>62</sup> Abd al-Qadir was the first of a long list of Arab and Muslim dignitaries who joined Freemasonry during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The list include names such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and several members of the Egyptian royal family.

<sup>63</sup> Many biographies and studies were dedicated to the life of ‘Abd al-Qadir, I will name here some of those written by people who personally knew the Emir: *Tuhfat al-zair fi akhbar al-amir ‘Abd al-Qadir* (Alexandria: Gharzuzi wa Jawish, 1903) by his son Ahmad Pasha al-Jazairi; the biography of the Emir written by his student Abd al-Razzaq al-Bitar in his *Holiat al-bachar fi tarikh al-qarn al-thaileth ‘ashar* (Beirut: Dar al-Sader, 1993); the biography of ‘Abd al-Qadir given by ‘Abd al-Majid al’Khani in his a *al-Hadaiq al-wardiyya fi haqaiq Ajella’ al-naqshabandiyya* (Arbil: Dar Aras, 2002); *The Life of Abdel Kader* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867) of Charles Henry Churchill. In recent scholarship, the most detailed biographies and studies of Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir are: Ahmed Bouyerdene, *Emir Abd el-Kader, Hero and Saint of Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2013); Bruno Etienne, *Abd el-Kader, Isthme des Isthmes* (Paris: Hachette, 2012). John W. Kiser, *Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader* (New York: Monfish Book Publishing, 2008); Elsa Marston, *The compassionate Warrior: Abd el-Kader of Algeria* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2013);

learning theology, jurisprudence and grammar in his family's *zawiyah*<sup>64</sup>. At the age of eighteen, he accompanied his father on a pilgrimage<sup>65</sup> to Mecca, a trip to the Eastern part of the Arab world that would take the young 'Abd al-Qadir several years to accomplish.

Father and son returned to Algeria in 1827, a few months before tensions between the French consul and the Dey of Algiers escalated, leading to the invasion of the country in 1830. Some of the first attacks perpetrated against the French army were organized by the Sufi circles of 'Abd al-Qadir's family. The young man started one of the first and major Islamic rebellions against a modern Western colonial power, succeeded in uniting the local tribes around him and pushed the French to accept his sovereignty on a new state that covered all south and west of Algeria. The French army signed a peace treaty with the Emir (the commander) after several unexpected and heavy losses against the Algerian rebels. The ensuing three years period of stability offered 'Abd al-Qadir the opportunity to build a relatively stable theocratic state.

It is during this period that the early interest of 'Abd al-Qadir in Christianity appeared. We have little knowledge of the Emir's early (pre-1830) understanding of Christian theology and practices aside from what the Qur'an and other Islamic sources had to teach him about the topic. We can only assume that he had encountered Christian groups during his travels to the Middle East. It was definitely after the French invasion of Algeria that he could meet and rigorously discuss theological matters with Christian clergymen. One of the main encounters that revealed the early ecumenical interests of 'Abd al-Qadir

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Ahmed Bouyerdene, Éric Geoffroy, and Setty G. Simon-Khedis, *Abd el-Kader, Un spirituel dans la modernité* (Paris: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> A space specifically dedicated to Sufi gatherings and spiritual retreats.

<sup>65</sup> The Annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.

was his relationship to the French Catholic priest Father Jacques Suchet (1795-1870). This was an early and unique example of a meeting between a Muslim shaykh and a Christian priest discussing theological matters under the umbrella of colonial struggle.

Jacques Suchet was born in Villefranche-sur-Saône where he lived before volunteering as a missionary in a newly conquered Algeria.<sup>66</sup> Suchet stayed in Constantine until his death and most of the chronicles mentioning him describe him as a man who had a deep interest in getting in touch with local populations. In an 1839 letter he sent to the archbishop of Algiers, he mentioned finding his mission comfortable and easy. He wrote: “ I was not wrong, something incredible is happening, I am received in the interior of Arab houses, I can now, with my work, prove to them that I love them like brothers.”<sup>67</sup> The rest of the letter’s tone is imbued with the curiosity of a young Christian missionary confronted to the excitement of a new land to conquer. Two years after his appointment, Father Suchet published a collection of his letters under the title *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses de l’Algérie* (Curious and Edifying Letters from Algeria) in which he described, amongst other things, his encounter with Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir in 1840. On this occasion, The French priest reported two telling anecdotes where Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir distinguished the French colonial project from the Christian missionary endeavor that accompanied it.

During an exchange of prisoners, Suchet met with “little Mary,” a young girl made prisoner with her older brothers and sisters in the military barrack of the Emir. After her liberation, the father reportedly asked the girl if Algerians sought her conversion to Islam

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<sup>66</sup> For more details about the life of Abbé Suchet, see the biography prepared by Paul Fournier in the special number of the journal *Rencontres, Semaine religieuse d’Alger*, (July-August, 2002).

<sup>67</sup> Abbé Jacques Suchet, *Lettres Édifiantes et Curieuses Sur l’Algérie* (Tours: Ad Mame et Cie, 1840), 63.



while imprisoned. Mary replied yes, but the Emir, who had a “father affection for her”<sup>68</sup> never did. Father Suchet reported that ‘Abd al-Qadir was strongly opposed to such practices; he formally forbid his soldiers from inciting Christian prisoners to convert and, according to the same text, ordered that “fifty blows with a stick be given to an Arab who had told a Christian to become a Muslim.”<sup>69</sup> The second anecdote recounts a discussion that Father Suchet, who was also one of the delegates of the French colonial power to the Emir, had with Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir about the liberation of French prisoners. Suchet recounts:

He told me, indicating the Christ that he saw on my chest : Is that the image of our lord Jesus? - Yes, I told him, it is the image of Jesus Christ, our God. What is Jesus Christ? - He is the Word of God. And after a moment of silence I added - and this word has made himself man to save all men; for our God is the Father and the God of all men, Muslims as well as Christians. But you have only one God like the Muslims ? - We have but one God in Three persons. Then I gave him some explanations on the mystery of the holy trinity. He remained contemplative for a moment then he continued: What is the mission of Catholic priests? – As you might know, especially now that there is a Bishop in Algiers, Our mission is to continue on earth the mission of Jesus, to do good to all men, that we consider our brothers, no matter what is their religion. But if your religion is this good, and this benevolent, Why don’t the French observe it? If they followed it, they would be better people.<sup>70</sup>

To this last question the priest simply replied that Muslims, also, do not practice their religion, for the same reasons perhaps the French do not observe theirs. Father Suchet reported that the Emir was interested in a longer and deeper conversation with him, but the interpreter apologized arguing he was unable to translate a discussion on such complicated theological matters. He then asked a second favor from the Emir: that the Bishop of Algiers sends a priest to his Christian prisoners “to give these poor sheep the help

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<sup>68</sup> Suchet, *Lettres Edifiantes*, 355.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 405–409.

of our holy religion.”<sup>71</sup> The Emir agreed. Later that night, ‘Abd al-Qadir told Suchet “he had so many things in his heart, he wanted to tell him,”<sup>72</sup> and wished they did not need a translator. In his letters, Father Suchet often alluded to his hope to convert the Emir himself to Christianity, and with that to end the war<sup>73</sup>. He was not the only French catholic figure who wished for such farfetched solution to the conflict. Father Creuzat, another French priest, was arrested in Tangiers in 1846 during the Moroccan exile of ‘Abd al-Qadir and when asked about the real motives of his trip, the Priest confessed he wanted to “convey to the heart of the Emir Christian ideas, demonstrating the sublimity of our religion.”<sup>74</sup>

‘Abd al-Qadir did not convert to Christianity and ultimately lost his war against the French. In 1839, the French army ended the peace treaty they initially signed with him and reinitiated expeditionary missions in Algeria. This time, the Guerilla warfare of ‘Abd al-Qadir did not prove as effective as it did during the early years of colonization. ‘Abd al-Qadir slowly lost the territories that were under his control and was outlawed by his Moroccan neighbors and other tribal leaders of the Algerian East. He was ultimately forced to surrender in 1847, sixteen years after the beginning of war. The Algerian rebel accepted to surrender if allowed to go on exile in an Eastern Muslim city. Later that same year, the French refused to honor their promise and ‘Abd al-Qadir, his family and companions were held captive in France.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>74</sup> Jacques Caillé, “Le Curé de Mascara et l’émir Abd El-Kader,” *Revue Africaine*, no. 88 (1944), 230.

During his French exile, the idea of converting the Emir to Christianity – and thus resolving the Algerian problem- did not completely fade away. The French politician and royalist clergyman Comte de Falloux (1811-1886) believed he could achieve such mission in one unique encounter.<sup>75</sup> In his memoir, De Falloux described ‘Abd al-Qadir as a middle aged man, wearing a white large outfit, seated with crossed legs on a wooden bed in a dark corner, in one of the cold galleries of the palace where he was imprisoned. “You do not have the same God as I”<sup>76</sup> said Comte de Falloux “but you believe in yours with fervor. And you know that both Gods condemn the lack of sincerity. Do you want us to take them as witnesses in the words that we will exchange?”<sup>77</sup> ‘Abd al-Qadir’s first reaction was to object to De Falloux’s initial and tacit claim. “Our Gods are not as different as you claim,” he replied, “we are children of two different mothers, but of the same father,”<sup>78</sup>. Reading the Comte’s memoir, it seems that the Emir’s blunt and ecumenical answer quickly dissuaded the Frenchman from attempting to convert the Algerian Shaykh. The encounter was short and before leaving, the Comte asked ‘Abd al-Qadir whether he loved the French, to which the captive replied that he loved the French he knew. Comte De Falloux retorted that “to Love the French is to know their religion”<sup>79</sup> and invited the Emir to read the Gospel. The Frenchman then suggested an exile in the Vatican instead of France, a place where the shaykh could get introduced to the “authentic origins of Christianity”<sup>80</sup> under the

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<sup>75</sup> Le Comte de Falloux, *Mémoires D’un Royaliste*, Vol1, Tome.1 (Paris: Librairie academique Didier Perrin, 1888), 363.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 370

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

protection of the Pope. The Emir did apparently not oppose the idea and Comte de Falloux never insisted. A Papal exile of the Shaykh never took place.

The period 'Abd al-Qadir spent in France added to his popularity among a Parisian intelligentsia that had been following the exotic tales of the Arab warrior who lived in a tent, helped the poor, and displayed values of chivalry and nobility that a monarchical France was perhaps nostalgic for. The French journalist and politician Emile de Girardin and the more famous Victor Hugo were among the public figures who tried to pressure the French state into settling and ultimately resolving the problem of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir.<sup>8182</sup> In 1852, after five years spent in prison, the government of Napoleon III released 'Abd al-Qadir and his ninety-seven family members and followers. Together, they embarked to the Turkish city of Bursa. The Emir could never come back to his native Algeria nor interfere in the French colonial project; this was Louis Napoleon's condition for his release. 'Abd al-Qadir accepted and proposed Mecca or Medina as potential cities for his new exile but the French government feared possible contacts between him and Algerian pilgrims in the holy cities<sup>83</sup>.

In France, after the Emir's military power was neutralized and his French exile was achieved, many authors and journalists started to depict him as a repented rebel and an amiable man of peace<sup>84</sup>. Stories of his ecumenical interests started spreading and the rebel

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<sup>81</sup> See Émile de Girardin, *Questions de mon temps, 1836-1856* Vol.2 (Paris: Serrière, 1856), 455, 457 ; or Victor Hugo's poem « Orientale » in his 1853 poem collection *Les Châtiments*. Also see Arthur Rimbaud's highly evocative poem dedicated to the Emir that he titled "Jughurta."

<sup>82</sup> This list includes among many names Monseigneur Dupuch's (author of the book. *Abd el-Kader au château d'Amboise*), the French Lawyer Emile Ollivier, or the British Lord Londonderry.

<sup>83</sup> Bouyerdene, *Emir Abd el-Kader*, 146

<sup>84</sup> Among the most telling examples in that regard we should mention Suchet, *Lettres édifiantes* (Tours: Ad Mame et Cie, 1840); Antoine-Adolphe Dupuch, *Abd el-Kader au château d'Amboise* (Bordeaux : H.Faye, 1849), and the testimonies of the French prisoners 'Abd el- Qadir released during the war and collected in *Les Prisonniers d'Abd el-Kader ou cinq mois de captivité chez les Arabes* (Paris : Desesart, 1837).

was gradually transformed into an oriental wise man from whom a quasi-biblical wisdom was to be expected. This could perhaps explain the formal invitation the French Asiatic Society sent him requesting his affiliation to the newly created institution and asking him to write an essay on a topic of his choice, as a sign of his fellowship with the academic organization. This collaboration produced one of the first major intellectual works of the Emir, a short book titled *Dhikra al-'aqil wa tanbih al-ghafil* (Reminder to the Intelligent and Warning to the Indifferent). Written in the form of a letter, the text combines historical, philosophical and theological insights supporting rational and scientific thinking, criticizing undiscerning imitation (*taqlid*) and calling for a new interpretation of Islamic texts (*ijtihad*). The *Dhikra* is one of the earliest examples, and perhaps the most important, of a Muslim dignitary addressing a European colonial power in a letter in which he explains what he thinks is the core of his religion.

In 'Abd al-Qadir' *Dhikra*, the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran were not granted the spiritual superiority they usually enjoyed in Islamic texts. The Emir wrote: "Religion is one by the consensus of the prophets... who are like people that have one father and different mothers. The claim that they are all false, or that some of them are false and others true, is shortsightedness."<sup>85</sup> In this same text, 'Abd al-Qadir put himself at the center of this quasi-prophetic project to transcend the religious differences towards a spiritual brotherhood between Muslims and Christians and wrote: "If the Muslims and the Christians had wished to pay attention to me, I would have made them cease their quarrels; inwardly and outwardly they would have become brothers."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Gustave Dugat, *Le livre d'Abd-el-Kader Intitulé: Rappel à l'intelligent, Avis à l'indifférent* (Paris: Benjamin Duprat, Librairie de l'institut, 1858) 105.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

‘Abd al-Qadir’s insistence in this early treatise on the veracity of all prophets’ teachings was at the discursive brink between Islamic belief in other Abrahamic messages and, on the other side, giving a thorough and clear legitimacy to all monotheisms. The step between them, while sounding trivial, is, in Islamic theology, tremendous. ‘Abd al-Qadir was naturally aware that classical Sunni theological texts do not consider the differences between monotheisms to be minor. While insisting on the common spiritual ground between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the major schools of *fiqh*<sup>87</sup> give primary importance to *Shari’a*<sup>88</sup> as a defining element of Islam in relationship to other monotheisms. Implicitly considering *Shari’a* as an ensemble of details and rules, as ‘Abd al-Qadir did, is rare enough to be noted here.

The book showed an ecumenical spirit that naturally appealed to a French public. The Emir’s interlocutors perhaps saw in his statements the promise of a possible “reconciliation,” that could reveal itself necessary for smoothing a nascent colonial project. This is at least what Gustave Dugat (1824-1894), prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century French Orientalist and member of the French Asiatic Society, alluded to in the preface to his translation of the Emir’s text in 1858:

The impression made by reading the work of Abd al-Kader is that the moral and religious ideas of peoples are not as opposed as is commonly imagined; they do not appear as divergent except through the prism of ignorance and prejudice. What is it that most often has been lacking in them to arrive at conciliation, if not that they needed to know one another, hear one another, and establish between them the interchange of intelligence?<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Islamic jurisprudence

<sup>88</sup> Islamic religious laws

<sup>89</sup> Dugat, *Le Livre d’Abd-el-Kader*, 29.

After two years spent in Turkey, ‘Abd al-Qadir obtained from the French the permission to relocate to Damascus. Before his transfer, he was invited to attend the 1855 Paris *Exposition Universelle* where he reportedly informed different friends and French officials that his time as warrior had ended and that he was now ready to retrieve his first vocation, that of a Sufi scholar.<sup>90</sup> In 1856 ‘Abd al-Qadir arrived in Damascus where he was received with pomp and met with popular jubilation<sup>91</sup>. He was the leader of the holy war in Algeria, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad and a dignitary with an international prestige, respected at the highest levels both in Europe and the Muslim world. ‘Abd al-Qadir was also a relatively wealthy man when he arrived in the city since he enjoyed a generous pension from Napoleon III to which the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Majid added a special allowance<sup>92</sup>. For months, the Algerian Emir received the visits of Damascene notable families, local scholars and dignitaries, and also foreign consular officials, writers, and travelers.

### **Damascus and the Esoteric Rapprochement with the West**

In Damascus, ‘Abd al-Qadir dedicated most of his time to reading and studying. His entourage was primarily composed of young scholars that he supported financially and who, in return, were responsible for the education of his eight children<sup>93</sup>. It is around the Damascene circle of ‘Abd al-Qadir and his disciples that the conciliatory project of the Emir, initially sketched in his *Dhikra*, emerged in the form of a new Sufi intellectual school. An

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<sup>90</sup> Bouyerdene, *Abd el-Kader*, 139.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

elitist, and—to the extent that the Sharia permits—humanist and universalist Sufism echoing the early French testimonies regarding his ecumenical interests.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Damascus had its share of influent Sufi congregations, families and networks. Their relationship with the Ottoman political elite alternated between cautious coalitions and, on occasions, timid confrontation. The relationship between the Khalidi Naqshabandi Sufi order based in Damascus and Ottoman imperial powers in the Syrian capital were illustrative of such intricate dynamic. In fact, in 1826, after the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II disbanded the centuries old Janissary corps. The Bektashi Sufi order organizing this military body was consequently outlawed, its lodges destroyed, followers executed or exiled and the entire tariqa was ultimately replaced with another Sufi group; the more orthodox and disciplined Naqshabandi order<sup>94</sup>. A few years later, the same Sultan, Mahmud II, against all odds, decided to reprimand the Khalidi order, perhaps the most active Naqshabandi branch in the region then. He expelled them out of Damascus and limited their actions in Syria and Iraq. After his struggle with Muhammad Ali of Egypt in 1831, the Ottoman Sultan did not hesitate to reinstitute, again, the Arab and orthodox Khalidi order and sought its help and support<sup>95</sup>. In return, the founder of the tariqa Khalid al-Baghdadi discouraged all subversive movements, and asked his followers to guide, instead, the ruler towards the path of God. This path corresponded, at that time, to nothing else but a vigorous Orthodox Sufism.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> On this topic see for example Butrus Abu-Manneh, “the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi and the Bektashi orders in 1826” in *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2001).

<sup>95</sup> Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*, 11

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



These fragile and temporary coalitions continued to shape the relationships between Ottoman officials and Sufi scholars well until the fall of the empire in the early twentieth century. They notably intensified during the *Tanzimat*, a period that brought structural transformations to the social and economic life of Sufi groups<sup>97</sup>. The *Hatt-ı Humayun*<sup>98</sup> reform of 1856 went as far as taking all civil authority religious leaders had over their communities and permitted Jews and Christians to take public office and join the army: an ensemble of measures that did not always prove popular among religious circles especially in the Arab provinces<sup>99</sup>. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Sufi schools were wary of the Western modernity model the Tanzimat reforms adopted. Without questioning the authority of the Muslim emperor, they sought to tame the Westernization process Istanbul imposed on them. The Khalidi Naqshabandi branch in Damascus formed one of the most interesting examples of such resistance<sup>100</sup>.

Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir’s, who enjoyed the favors of both the Ottoman sultan and the French emperor, adopted a strategic stance that did not see in the Western world an indivisible whole to be categorically shunned or blindly emulated. The Emir saw that Europe had an exoteric rationalist and scientific shell existing alongside a hidden religious esoteric core and believed the latter to be key for a durable reformist project. The premises

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<sup>97</sup> On the relationships between Ottoman reformism and Sufi and Sunni scholars, read Richard L. Chambers, “The Ottoman Ulema and the Tanzimat,” in Nikki R. Keddie, ed., *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East Since 1500* (Berkeley, 1972) 33-46; Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Islamic Roots of the Gülhane Rescript,” *WI*, 34 (1994), 173-203.

<sup>98</sup> Ottoman Imperial rescript prepared during the reign of Sultan Abd al-Majid (1823-1861) as part of the reformist project known as *Tanzimat*. It is largely considered as an emancipation edict for non-Muslim communities living in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>99</sup> On the reactions of Arab political, religious and intellectual elites to the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms read Bruce Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 157-191.

<sup>100</sup> Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*, 50.

of such vision were already present in his *Dhikra* where he emphasized a distinction between what he called rational sciences and prophetic sciences. The first concerned for example medicine, chemistry, mathematics or different types of craftsmanship.<sup>101</sup> Prophetic sciences, however, comprised the esoteric knowledges revealed to all prophets.<sup>102</sup> The Emir believed the two sciences to be complementary.

In his book, 'Abd al-Qadir divided human populations into two categories: those who mastered sciences and those who did not.<sup>103</sup> Reading through the text, one can clearly see that the Emir, in this peculiar distinction he made, was referring to a holistic science that included both rationalist and esoteric cores. For example, in his section dedicated to Indians- that he considered a part of the world that mastered sciences- the Emir, to illustrate his argument, brought up the case of chess game. According to him, it was an Indian wise man who supposedly had invented this science and to do so, he was "divinely inspired."<sup>104</sup> Chess was thus a true science since it combined rational creativity and divine inspiration. This equal importance 'Abd al- Qadir gave both exoteric and esoteric sciences is far from trivial. While 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim scholars, politicians, and reformers were solely interested in European exoteric sciences and the means and methods to adopt them, 'Abd al-Qadir arguably thought that such endeavor was too complicated, uncertain, and pricy. Instead of competing with secular Europe on technological grounds, Abd al- Qadir saw it was more convenient to try and unite with Christian Europe upon a divinely shared ground

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<sup>101</sup> Dugat, *Livre d'Abd-el-Kader*, 57.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

he called “prophetic sciences.” His ecumenical stances should partly be understood through this prism.

‘Abd al-Qadir’s ecumenical approach furtively expressed in the *Dhikra* was further consolidated in Damascus. His theories certainly needed a *ta’ṣīl* (rooting) in Islamic tradition, and the main ground upon which ‘Abd al-Qadir based his approach was the work of one of the most prominent medieval Sufi mystic and scholar: Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi, who was also known as al-Shaykh al-Akbar, literally meaning the great master. The school that Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir helped revive was therefore named al -Akbariyya. Before delving into the mystical commonalities between Ibn ‘Arabi and ‘Abd al-Qadir, let us first notice the biographical similarities between the two men that arguably helped the Algerian shaykh identify with his distant Sufi master. In fact, Ibn ‘Arabi, like Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir, was also born in a western Islamic world in times of political upheavals and witnessed the unfolding events of the Reconquista. For both men, the questions of jihad, the integrity of Islam, and its relation to other faiths surrounded their mystical paths. Both spent their last days in Damascus, died there and were buried next to each other. It was in the metaphysical doctrines of Ibn ‘Arabi that ‘Abd al-Qadir found an antecedent to his own variety of an intra-monotheistic brotherhood.

Ibn ‘Arabi was born in Murcia, in 1165 to a family of Arab notables from Andalucía<sup>105</sup>. He grew up among the ruling court and received a proper military education.

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<sup>105</sup> On the life and work of Ibn ‘Arabi see Henri Corbin, *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabi in the later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical image in medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); James Morris, *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Meccan Illuminations*, (Louisville, 2006) William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* ( New York, 1989). The most compelling text remains until today is Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Cambridge: The Islamic texts Society, 1993)

At the age of fourteen he reportedly had repetitive visions of Jesus Christ. This encouraged him to initiate numerous mystical journeys in Andalusia and North to meet living Sufi masters. In the year 1200 he decided to move east. He traveled to Tunis, Cairo then Mecca and Baghdad where he met with Omar Suhrawardi (1145-1234) and with the disciples of Abd-al Qadir al-Gilani (1078-1166). In Anatolia he initiated Sadr al-Din Qunawi (1209-1274) who will later become closely linked to the more famous Rumi (1209-1274).

Ibn 'Arabi lived in a period of unprecedented Sufi vitality with some of the major Sufi masters meeting, discussing and commenting on each other's works.<sup>106</sup> It was also a period where Sufi heavily organized their practices around brotherhoods and orders. The wandering Sufi hermit was replaced with a network of Sunni scholars who, in parallel to their classical teachings, formed and sustained tariqas.<sup>107</sup> Sufism in the 13<sup>th</sup> century formed a new social and religious stable organization that helped structure a Muslim world that the Christian crusades, Spanish Reconquista, and Mongol invasions had deeply shaken.

It is necessary to view Ibn 'Arabi's famed Sufi universal message under the light of the social and political upheavals he personally witnessed. A central Akbari philosophical principle 'Abd al-Qadir used to promote a tolerant inter-Abrahamic unity is the concept of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being). Ibn 'Arabi's concept affirms that only God truly, and in absolute terms, exists. Everything else "is" due to the divine existence—a form of a Muslim pantheism that, unlike its Western counterpart, acknowledges the plurality of other "existing" entities and transforms the possible unity with the divine into a necessary goal

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<sup>106</sup> Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn Arab*, Trans., Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: The Islamic texts Society, 1993) P.240-242

<sup>107</sup> Read for example Lloyd Ridgeon "Sufi Orders in the Medieval Period," *The Routledge Handbook on Sufism* (London: Routledge, 2021) 203-217.

for humans. “Becoming one with the One” emerged as the cornerstone of the Akbari Sufi metaphysics. A first conceptual ramification of Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy of unity is what one might call his proto-universalism, probably best illustrated in these famous verses from his collection of mystical poems titled *Tarjuman al-ashwaq* (The Discloser of Desires):

My heart has become capable of every form:  
it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,  
And a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Ka’ba  
and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Quran.  
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion  
and my faith.<sup>108</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufi ecumenical leanings could also be found in his *Futuhat al-makiyyah* (Meccan Revelations) where he states: “Created beings have formed various beliefs about God, and for me, I believe everything they have believed.”<sup>109</sup> In that sense, the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi was a “new” Sufism, with a relatively explicit and clear sense of universal brotherhood based on divine love. Examples of the sort populate the mystic’s impressive body of work. one can mention here one last example that illustrate how his ecumenical penchants imbued his interpretation of the Quran. For Ibn ‘Arabi, the Quranic verse stating “And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him” is not an order as it was understood by classical commentators, but an assertion where God was rather stating a fact. This verse, for Ibn ‘Arabi signifies that any “worshiper” independently of what he or she worships is adoring, in fact, nothing but God- as nothing else but God could be worshiped<sup>110</sup>. For Ibn ‘Arabi, all revealed religions are true, authentic and legitimate. He

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<sup>108</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *Tarjuman al-ashwaq* (London: Royal Asiatic society, 1911), 67.

<sup>109</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, *Meccan revelations*, vol. 3, 132. Cited in Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*. 66.

<sup>110</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, *Ahkam al-Qur’an* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘elmyyia, 2014), 184.

argued elsewhere that God has ninety-nine attributes and that each mystical and religious tradition is in reality responding to one of them<sup>111</sup>. This divine being, from which emanates all theophany and to which all worshipers try to unite, is too vast to be reduced to only one attribute or name. Religions in that sense become mere manifestations of the same, unique, absolute and inescapable truth: God exists.

Unlike many other masters, Ibn 'Arabi did not offer a clear and comprehensive study of the Sufi path with its different stages and halts but proposed instead a complex and highly cryptic set of doctrinal principles. His intricate style and his lyrical writing style interested major Sufi masters who succeeded him. Starting from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, studies, and commentaries of Ibn 'Arabi's dense corpus started to emerge in the Muslim world. The Baghdadi mystic Abd al-Karim al-Jili (1365-1424), for example, wrote a comprehensive commentary fully dedicated to Ibn 'Arabi's concepts of unity of being and the perfect man (*al-Insan al-Kamil*)<sup>112</sup>. The Persian mystic Jami (1414-1492), among many others, also showed great efforts interpreting and spreading the mystical work of Ibn 'Arabi<sup>113</sup>.

When Emir 'Abd al-Qadir arrived in Damascus, the city had already undergone a renewed interest in the work of Ibn 'Arabi with Shaykh Abd-al-Ghani al-Nabulsi (1641-1731)<sup>114</sup> and his disciples. Al-Nabulsi elaborated for example ample scholarly responses to

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<sup>111</sup> For example, in his book *Fusus al-Hikam* Ibn 'Arabi attached a divine attribute to each prophet (and a chapter to each prophet) from the monotheistic tradition and claimed that the revelations they brought were the divine emanation of that divine attribute.

<sup>112</sup> 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili, *al-Insan al-kamil fi ma'rafat al-awakher wa al-awael* (Beirut: Muasasat al'tarikh al-'arabi, 2000).

<sup>113</sup> Paul Smith assembled a rich collection of poems of several mystics where they treated, poetically, the concept of the Unity of Being. *The Unity of Being: Ibn 'Arabi and his followers/poets -Auhad ud-din, 'Iraqi, Shabistari, Maghribi, Jili, Shah Da'l & Jami* (Victoria: New Humanity Books, 2008).

<sup>114</sup> On Shaykh Abd al-Ghani Nabulsi read Elizabeth Sirryieh, *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus: 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi* (New York, 2005).

those who attacked Ibn ‘Arabi’s belief that non-Muslims could go to heaven.<sup>115</sup> He argued that even Sunni orthodoxy made a difference between *wa’d* (promise of heaven made by God to Muslims) and *wa’id* (threat of hell addressed to non-Muslims) and that while God has to honor his *wa’d*, he does not necessarily have to put his threat into execution. God, in a paternal way will thus withdraw his threat out of divine generosity.

Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir, who is until now considered a central knot in the Akbari chain of transmission,<sup>116</sup> did obviously not discover Ibn ‘Arabi upon his arrival to Damascus. He received the Akbari tariqa from his grandfather, who in his turn received it from an Indian born shaykh named Muratada al-Zabidi (1732-1790) that he met in Egypt on his way to the hajj.<sup>117</sup> This is how the Emir described the influence Ibn ‘Arabi had on him: “The Shaykh Ibn ‘Arabi is our treasure from whence we draw that which we write, drawing either from its spiritual form or from that which he himself writes in his books.”<sup>118</sup> The Akbari views of ‘Abd al-Qadir were best expressed in his book commonly known as *Kitab al-Mawaqif* (Book of Stages). It is composed of seemingly aleatory text passages with no titles, each depicting a specific topic related to Sufi metaphysics. These texts were posthumously collected and combined by ‘Abd al-Qadir’s family and disciples and published twenty years after his death. The texts display a clear poetic and quasi ecstatic style clearly emulating Ibn ‘Arabi’s

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<sup>115</sup> In 1692, The Damascene scholar wrote a book he titled *al-Radd ‘ala man takallam ‘an Ibn al-‘Arabi* (Reply to the One Who Spoke against Ibn al-‘Arabi) twenty years after writing a shorter treatise with the evocative title *Hadha kitab al-radd al-matin ‘ala muntaqis al-arif Muhyi al-Din* (The Book of Solid Reply to the Belittler of the Learned Muhy al-Din).

<sup>116</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Doctrine,” *The Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, 9 (1991). In his article, Chodkiewicz reports having examined numerous Near Eastern and Maghribi *silsila* and found that the name of ‘Abd al-Qadir appeared in most of them. For him, this was a proof of his “wholly central importance in the propagation of the akbarian heritage since the end of the nineteenth century.”

<sup>117</sup> Bouyerdene *Abd-el-Kader*, 153.

<sup>118</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Spiritual Writings of Amir ‘Abd al-Kader* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 24.

writing. The volume ends with transcribed answers the Emir gave his students on questions related to Akbari terminology and concepts. Amongst the different topics and themes it decrypts, this book offers a constant emphasis on the idea of polysemy: God's attributes are diverse, the paths leading to him are infinite, no vessel can encompass alone the divine presence, God is beyond human collective truths and the Quran is a book of infinite meanings and symbols. In *al-Mawaqif*, 'Abd al-Qadir wrote, for example, this passage that reveals his deep affinity with Ibn 'Arabi's Sufi ecumenical thinking. He explained: "we all obey God and believe in him, and there is no absolute denier of God in the world... all the infidelity in the world is but relative."<sup>119</sup>

The polysemy of the divine message was one of the cornerstones of Abd al-Qadir's Sufi thought. Emphasizing the relative nature of belief and the undeniable authenticity of all acts of worship; "No one knows him in all of His aspects; no one is ignorant of Him in all His aspects." He wrote in *al-Mawaqif*. "Therefore each person necessarily knows Him in a certain respect and worships Him in the same respect. Consequently, error does not exist in this world except in a relative manner."<sup>120</sup> Muslims are right, others are not wrong, and the proof is taken from an Akbari reading of the Quran.

One of the most telling passages of *al-Mawaqif* relates a vision the Emir had while sleeping in the Umayyad Mosque. In his dream, Ibn 'Arabi was presented to 'Abd al-Qadir in the form of a lion who commanded him to put his hands in his mouth. The Emir complied and Ibn 'Arabi turned into a *majdhub*<sup>121</sup>, confused and uttering incomprehensible

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<sup>119</sup> 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri, *Kitab al-mawaqif fi al-wa'dh wa al-'irshad*. Vol.1 (Cairo, 1911). *Mawaqif* 246, 496.

<sup>120</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Spiritual Writings of Amir 'Abd al-Kader*, 128.

<sup>121</sup> The word is often translated as "raptured in God" and designates in Sufi literature a form of quasi-constant ecstasy some Sufis live during certain periods of their initiation. In Sufi texts, a *jadhb* is usually assimilated to madness.



sentences. Ibn ‘Arabi repeated that he would perish; he then fell on the ground<sup>122</sup>. For ‘Abd al-Qadir, the confused Great Master fainting and predicting his perishing was nothing but a visual metaphor of a decaying and troubled Islam. For him, the new, and troubling reality of a Muslim world under threat provoked the anguish and disappointment of all Muslim saints represented here by Ibn ‘Arabi<sup>123</sup>.

Along with the Egyptian scholars Hassan al-‘Attar (1766-1835) and al-Jabarti (1753-1822) who witnessed Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, ‘Abd al-Qadir was one of the first modern Muslim scholars who lived an actual, prolonged encounter with Western modern technological, military and scientific superiority. The sense of crisis that one can detect in his vision and his Akbari ecumenical statements written in *al-Mawaqif* prove that ‘Abd al-Qadir believed that his Sufi universalism could help tame an otherwise aggressive and invasive European colonialism. This optimism was behind his controversial affiliation to Western Freemasonry.

### **The Sufi Freemason**

Damascus by the middle of the nineteenth century was also going through a period of socio-economic upheavals. Starting from the 1830’s, Syrian traditional economy greatly suffered under the pressure of an adventurous European cross-continental trade. As a result, the center of wealth partly left the urban Muslim elite, traditionally specialized in crafts, and slowly joined a growing rural but also coastal economy where Christian

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<sup>122</sup> ‘Abd al-Qadir, *Kitab Al-Mawaqif*, 364- 369.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

populations had a historical prevalence<sup>124</sup>. The newly enriched Christian population benefited both from the support of influential Western embassies and the protection of the 1856 Ottoman edict promising equality between the empire's different religious groups. The Muslim resentment that followed these events culminated with the 1860 massacre of Christians in Damascus.<sup>125</sup>

In July of that year, the local Druze community attacked the Christian Maronite district and the carnage that followed ended with more than three thousand civilian victims. According to local testimonies, Emir 'Abd al-Qadir sheltered during the riots many Christian refugees in his own house and urged his Algerian followers and family members to do the same. Reportedly The head of the French consulate, the vice consul of Russia, the vice consul of Greece and the American consul found shelter in 'Abd al-Qadir's home<sup>126</sup>. Priests and sisters of the neighboring church also joined the safe household of the Emir. (Fig. 1.4) Following ten days of riots and after order was progressively reestablished, testimonies from survivors, missionaries, diplomats, and journalists started coming in.

In his book *Abd-el-kader*, Alexandre Bellemare reported that, when the rioters demanded to have the Christian refugees in the Algerian quarter delivered, Abd al-Qadir replied "The Christians you shall not have, they are my guests" to later add "his home became the most secure of shelters."<sup>127</sup> Another testimony that appeared in the French journal *Le Siècle* from one of the French eyewitnesses reports: "in those indescribable moments of anguish, heaven, however, sent us a savior! Abd el-Kader appeared,

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<sup>124</sup> The example of Beirut is very telling in that regard. Read for example Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Beirut, Capital of Trade and Culture (1820-1918)" in *A History of Modern Lebanon* (Pluto Press, 2012) 52-72.

<sup>125</sup> On the massacre of 1860 see Leila Fawaz, *An Occasion for War* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press, 1994).

<sup>126</sup> Bouyerdene, *Abd el-Kader*, 108.

<sup>127</sup> Alexandre Bellemare, *Abd-el-Kader*, 445.

surrounded by his Algerians, around forty of them. He was on horseback and without arms: his handsome figure calm and imposing made a strange contrast with the noise and disorder that reigned everywhere.”<sup>128</sup>

Charles Henry Churchill, the British biographer of the Emir, emphasized the ecumenical nature of the Emir’s action in a peculiar form and wrote : “A descendant of the prophet had sheltered and protected the Bride of Christ”<sup>129</sup>. The Emir’s reputation as an amiable man of peace fully came to the fore on a global level on that summer of 1860. He was awarded the French Grand Cross of the Legion d’honneur and the Greek cross of the redeemer. The pope bestowed him with the order of Pius IX and Abraham Lincoln, as a sign of gratitude sent him a pair of inlaid pistols.<sup>130</sup> (Fig. 1.5) The newly acquired global fame of ‘Abd al-Qadir as a man of inter- religious dialogue also prompted the interest of another Western group of influence: Freemasonry.

For Freemasonry, recruiting ‘Abd al-Qadir was a suitable occasion to encourage likeminded Muslim notables to join the masonic brotherhood in the region. Freemasonry was already present in the Middle East by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century with a first lodge *Les Pyramides d’Egypte* established in Alexandria in 1847. Istanbul had its first lodge *L’Étoile du Bosphore* in 1858<sup>131</sup>, but the organization, as John Porter Brown noted in his book on Turkish Sufism, had a pejorative reputation in Muslim religious circles and was associated with “Christian imperial powers.”<sup>132</sup> Most of these lodges were Christian-centered and refrained first from enrolling local Muslims.<sup>133</sup> In a sense, Freemasonry in the Middle East

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<sup>128</sup> Testimony published in the French newspaper *Le siècle*, August 2, 1869.

<sup>129</sup> Charles Henry Churchill, *The Life of Abd-El-Qader* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1867), 317.

<sup>130</sup> Bouyerdene, *Abd el-Kader*, 113.

<sup>131</sup> Eric Anduze, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Au Moyen-Orient et Au Maghreb*, 26.

<sup>132</sup> John Porter Brown, *The Dervishes or, Oriental Spiritualism*, (London: Trübner and Co, 1868), 182.

<sup>133</sup> Anduze, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Au Moyen-Orient et Au Maghreb*, 32.

and until the recruitment of 'Abd al-Qadir was a Christian affair. Local Masonic lodges often alerted their European peers of the supposed religious intolerance of Muslim Ottoman officials and reported to their European brothers the unfolding events of the Circassian genocide (1864) as well as the massacres that followed the Great Eastern crisis (1875).<sup>134</sup> The by then well-established orientalist vocabulary describing a barbarian and sanguinary Turkish soldier imbued these letters and reports. For example, in a letter sent by the Beirut Lodge to the Parisian central lodge of the Grand Orient de France, one can read:

“ The Christians of the Ottoman empire are to be pitied, , we shiver here to the idea of the massacres of 1860 and those of 1876, committed by carnivorous men. All what we described earlier is nothing compared to the real barbarities they commit inside the country where the Christian peasant is nothing but the slave of a soldier, the rich and the government... Finally, the Christian, the dog, the infidel of the Turk and the Muslim, is subject to all what sweeps humanity, civilization and freedom”<sup>135</sup>

'Abd al-Qadir, within this dark picture Eastern freemasons were depicting of the region, was perceived as the only possible interlocutor in an otherwise bloodthirsty and uncooperative Muslim world. In November 1861, the French Henri IV lodge affiliated to the Grand Orient de France sent an official letter to Emir 'Abd al-Qadir inviting him to join the Freemasonic brotherhood<sup>136</sup>. In the letter, one can discern a good grasp masons had of the Emir's political and religious ecumenical positions. The writers quickly clarified that it was in the name of that “God that we all adore”<sup>137</sup> that this invitation was sent<sup>138</sup>. The Emir was

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>135</sup> letter sent by the Loge de Beyrouth, to the grand Orient de France, cited in Eric Anduze, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Au Moyen-Orient et Au Maghreb: Fin XIXe - Début XX Siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), 92.

<sup>137</sup> “La loge Henri IV et l'émir 'Abd al-Qadir” (Impr. de C. Noblet, 1861), département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme, FOL-LN27-36, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>138</sup> The documents in Arabic of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir 's initiation were first owned by Dr.Mathelete then later acquired by P. Zoumernoff who gave them to the French archives in Aix en Provence. The letters owned by

made aware this was not a French, republican, and secular fraternity that addressed him,<sup>139</sup> but a Freemasonry that “has for principles the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, and as basis for its actions, the love of humanity, the practice of tolerance and of universal brotherhood.”<sup>140</sup> One could only imagine this list of perennial principles could only tantalize the Emir who in his *Dhikra* had already expressed his trans-Abrahamic ecumenical ambitions. A Freemasonry that could promote the dream of a modern monotheistic reconciliation between Muslims and Christians could only appeal to the Algerian Sufi Shaykh.

‘Abd al-Qadir belonged, according to his French interlocutors, to an authentic Islam where figures such as “Omar, Averroes, Alfarabi”<sup>141</sup> were simply summed up in him. He was “the warrior, the erudite and the philosopher.”<sup>142</sup> The letter, according to its writers, was sent from the “Civilized world”<sup>143</sup> to a Muslim man who could solely prove through his “actions, magnanimity and character”<sup>144</sup> that his “race was not degenerate.”<sup>145</sup> Noticeably, the uncivilized “other” this letter construed was not Islam, which would have perhaps offended the Emir, but a deformed and fanatic version of this religion advanced by a groups of “ignorant” and “fanatics” who the lodge hoped with the help of the Emir to transform into a “civilized population.”<sup>146</sup> The letter ends with a telling sentence that lyrically sums

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the French national archive are only two and the Tunisian historian Abdeljelil Temimi offered the unique transliteration of these two letters available to this day.

<sup>139</sup> The 1860’s was the beginning of the Deist controversy in continental Freemasonry concerning the place and nature of God in the organization’s doctrine.

<sup>140</sup> “La loge Henri IV et l’émir ‘Abd al-Qadir.”

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

up the Lodge's intention: "Tell yourself that, there, in that distant West, there are men whose hearts are beating in unison with yours, some brothers who love you already as one of theirs."<sup>147</sup> The letter, although short, managed to avoid all contentious points and possible linguistic pitfalls. It introduced Freemasonry as a Deist organization that respected and acknowledged Islam's true core, and while coming from a "Distant West" could appreciate the essence of Abd al-Qadir's universalist message previously sketched in his *Dhikra*.

The Emir could naturally not remain insensitive to a letter posing the existence of a secret universal brotherhood of men who shared with him his esoteric beliefs, values and reformist intentions. Three months later, 'Abd al-Qadir answered,<sup>148</sup> and after thanking the lodge for their letter, he tacitly conformed to the metaphysical framework they proposed. He even translated to Arabic some elements of the Masonic jargon such as the "great architect of the universe"<sup>149</sup> that he used as *Sani' al-'alim al'adhim*<sup>150</sup>. The Emir then praised the letter that showed, according to him, the interest the lodge had for values of "justice, equality and brotherhood."<sup>151</sup>

'Abd al-Qadir did not hide his enthusiasm in front of what he described as "a blessed communion between his ideas and theirs." Reading their letter amounted for him to nothing less than "discovering the treasures of the world."<sup>152</sup> Drawing from the Sufi jargon

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> The text in Arabic was transliterated by Dr. Temimi and published in Abdeljelil Temimi, « Lettres inédites de l'émir Abdelkader », *Revue d'histoire maghrébine*, n° 10-11, 159-202 and 308-343.

<sup>149</sup> "La loge Henri IV et l'émir 'Abd al-Qadir."

<sup>150</sup> It is important to mention here that this expression, which could be translated as the "Omniscient maker of the world" do not correspond to the vast list of expressions usually used to describe God in Islamic religious texts. The novelty of such expression must be understood as part of Abd al-Qadir's attempts to conform with the Masonic jargon and doctrines.

<sup>151</sup> "La loge Henri IV et l'émir 'Abd al-Qadir."

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

and commenting on the 1860 events, he solemnly stated that “love is the foundation of religion, God is the God of all, and he loves us all” to later formally accept to join the masonic “brotherhood of love.” Love thus was the main theme of a letter that did clearly not resemble other masonic texts in its tacit eschewal of all clear Christian and Islamic theological divergences.

In April 1862, the Masonic lodge answered with a letter exposing “the essence of the masonic code.”<sup>153</sup> The first two articles of the canon they shared with their Sufi guest emphasized the Deist, moralistic and universalist nature of their mission. The first article even argued for the existence of a “universal morality”<sup>154</sup> that they aimed to pursue. The second article- that they described as their institution’s “most solid foundation”<sup>155</sup>- stipulated that freemasonry “does not regard the diversity of cults, it admits those who have faith in the creator of everything, under whatever name they invoke him.”<sup>156</sup> The French masons then gave ‘Abd al-Qadir the heavy mission bringing a “moral regeneration to the Orient”<sup>157</sup> hoping that through his work, the Emir will allow Freemasonry to reach “the place that was its cradle.”<sup>158</sup>

The letter also offered a thorough description of an actual initiatory ceremony that the French hoped the Emir will go through one day. The ritual, as explained in the letter, required from the neophyte to enter a dark empty room where he would find a standing human skeleton, a table, a pen and a paper where he has to write his answers to a few

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<sup>153</sup> “L’initiation de l’Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir, Brochure Editée Par La Loge Henri IV,” 1865, Brochure 293, Cf. Annexes, n11., Archives of the Grand Orient de France. 14.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.,14.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

questions. The walls of the room were reportedly decorated with inscriptions reminding the initiate of the “vanity of life.” The Emir, who was given the quasi-messianic mission of saving the Orient, was also granted an exception; he had the right to be initiated remotely from his house in Damascus. He was then asked to simply send elaborate answers to three crucial questions on man’s duties towards God, fellow men and himself. At the end, the Emir had to write his opinion on three philosophical topics: the immortality of the soul, equality of human races in front of God, and finally his understanding of the concepts of tolerance and fraternity.<sup>159</sup>

It is likely that the initiation ceremony as described in the French letter had raised the Emir’s interest even further. The Sufi tradition is rich in similar symbolic protocols. This is not the unique resemblance one might notice between the two esoteric movements. Freemasons believe in a chain of esoteric transmission that connects them to a primordial and divine truth which is comparable to the Sufi notion of *Silsila*. Both doctrines were also founded on the belief in an order of supernatural realities and the possibility of realizing an intimate and direct union with the divine secret based on a mode of existence and knowledge that are radically different from the rational understanding of the sensible world. Both instructed a methodological development - structured around ranks and stages - to uncover this truth. Finally, they both require a ceremony of initiation imbued with cryptic and esoteric actions and performances. In a way, the letter presented the Emir with a Western and modern counterpart to Sufism. His enthusiasm for such prospect could be tangibly felt reading his replies to the initiatic questions he was asked to answer.

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 16-17.



The Emir's answers are very much aligned with what one can find in his *Mawaqif*. He emphasized the unity of being as developed by Ibn 'Arabi arguing that all beings share the same soul and that the multiplicity of creatures only concerns "their envelops with which they appear, and their forms through which they shine."<sup>160</sup> borrowing a recurrent metaphor Ibn 'Arabi liked to use, Abd al Qadir compared God and all creatures to a circle where the divine essence remains in the center and creatures are the interconnected points forming the shape of the circle.<sup>161</sup> Most interestingly, the Emir, answering the question around his understanding of tolerance and fraternity, divided the world into ten major "sects and religions" that span from the idolaters as first category to Muslims at last. The list includes Jews, Christians, Brahman and philosophers. 'Abd al-Qadir, clearly deviating from Islamic Sunni orthodoxy claimed that God "chose men for heaven and men for hell."<sup>162</sup> From each of these sects.

His replies were accepted, and his initiation was put on hold until 1864. The French lodge, which was informed of the Emir's trip to Mecca, coordinated with a French masonic lodge in Alexandria, *les pyramides d'Egypte*, to perform the initiation in its name. On his way back from pilgrimage the Emir traveled to Egypt where he was initiated. On September 1<sup>st</sup> 1864 the Parisian lodge Henri IV announced solemnly that 'Abd al-Qadir was officially a brother in the lodge<sup>163</sup>. The written description of the event depicts a thrilling moment where freemasons warmly welcomed their first Muslim brother. The masters of the Egyptian lodge reiterated their admiration for the Emir's work and for the values of

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>161</sup> Ibn 'Arabi wrote a full book on this topic. See Ibn 'Arabi, *Insha' al-Dawaer* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-Dinyia, 1998).

<sup>162</sup> "Initiation de l'Emir 'Abd al-Qadir," 24.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 42.

universalism and tolerance he represented. In a long succession of lyrical and laudatory sentences, the French recounted Abd al-Qadir's Damascene epopee where the "descendant of the Prophet" replaced the day of the massacre "the armies of civilization."<sup>164</sup> His words destined to calm the angry crowd were described as "the summary of the masonic doctrine in religion."<sup>165</sup>

One last remark that, although seemingly incidental, reveals both parties strong desire to push the limits of their respective doctrines and find- or build- a common theoretical ground. Reading the exchange of letters between Abd al-Qadir and the Henri VI lodge, one can quickly notice a set of minor linguistic twists and semantic choices that worked to facilitate the desired rapprochement. For example, when the Emir praised masonic wisdom and shared his fascination with their work, he stated that their ideas "surpassed Aristotle's wisdom."<sup>166</sup> When he described the honor that was bestowed on him by such invitation, he stated that this was in his eyes "bigger than the crown that ornated the head of Alexander, son of Philip the Greek." On the other side, the words of the Emir, after their translation to French had to be brought closer to a Western jargon and rationale when for example 'Abd al-Qadir's ideas on divine love were described as 'Pascalian' concepts.<sup>167</sup>

Overall, the French letters were impregnated with an obvious admiration for the Sufi master and consistently opposed him to a decadent, violent, ignorant and superstitious Orient described as "the cradle of ignorance and fanaticism."<sup>168</sup> 'Abd al-Qadir was in a sense

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>166</sup> "La loge Henri IV et l'émir 'Abd al-Qadir."

<sup>167</sup> "Initiation de l'Emir 'Abd al-Qadir," 20.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 37.

stripped of his Muslim identity and elevated -in the eyes of his interlocutors- to a humanist and universalist ideal figure. This antinomy -between an enlightened quasi-Westernized Sufi and his native retrograde Islam- produced some perplexing statement when, for instance, the French described the Emir as someone who would hold the flag of tolerance “in front of the banner of the prophet.”<sup>169</sup>

Freemasonry was solely interested in the Emir’s Islam. An Islam that, one might understand from these letters, would hopefully be, at a later and utopic stage, diluted within the Freemasonic universal. One should however not see the Emir’s interest in the French lodge as naïve and misinformed. As noted earlier, the Emir was aware of the role prescribed to him and of the Western nature and origin of the organization he wanted to join. His references to Aristotle and Alexandre the Great give us telling hints of the Emir’s desire to please his interlocutors. Emir ‘Abd al Qadir arguably saw in Freemasonry a platform from which he could achieve his project initially enunciated in his letter to the French Asiatic Society where he proposed to “unite Muslims and Christians both esoterically and exoterically.” It is likely that he perceived his masonic affiliation as an initial step towards executing the first half of his reconciliatory project: achieving an esoteric union.

The story of the Emir does not end here. His different written exchanges and dialogues with other religious dignitaries about his now famous ecumenical interests remained present during and after his masonic initiation. In a letter he sent in 1862 to the French archbishop of Algiers, for example, he wrote: “All religions brought by prophets from Adam to Muhammad are based on two principles. The exaltation of God and

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 38.

compassion for other creatures. Out of these two principles, there are only ramifications upon which divergences are with no importance."<sup>170</sup>

Back in Damascus, 'Abd al-Qadir saw in his Akbari teachings a local and Islamic component of his larger project of esoteric union between colonizers and colonized. In a period where the Middle East was shaken by different reformist agendas calling to either emulate the West or to blindly shun its projects, 'Abd al-Qadir hoped for an esoteric rapprochement with Christians and saw in metaphysics an underground passage to the twentieth century: a hybrid model where scientific rationalism is bound to a Sufi esoteric rationale. Emir 'Abd al-Qadir readapted Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy to cope with the undeniable Western military and technological supremacy that he had witnessed in his native Algeria and during his exile in France. Islam without a proper revision would be at the brink of perishing, as predicted by his vision of a troubled Ibn 'Arabi and a reformist project without Islamic mysticism would probably be reduced to an aimless and blind materialism with no soul.

Emir Abd al-Qadir created a reformist trend that had a considerable impact on the Syrian capital in the second half of the nineteenth century. The list of his disciples who took prominent roles in the intellectual and political life of the region is telling in that regard. 'Abd al-Razzaq Bitar (1837-1917) for example took Abd al-Qadir's critique of imitation (*taqlid*) and his call for rationalism to construe a Proto-Salafi<sup>171</sup> position towards the Ottoman reformist project. He is until today considered as one of the earliest theorists of

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<sup>170</sup> Letter of 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1862, cited by Mgr Teissier, Archbishop of Algiers, in his lecture in front of the 'Abd al-Qadir foundation in Algiers on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>171</sup> Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*, 6.

the Sunni Salafi school who arguably laid the ground for the fundamentalist turn certain Muslim scholars took by the end of the nineteenth century.

Today some of the descendants of the Emir, clearly inspired by Salafi doctrines, go as far as denying the Sufi teachings of their ancestor and only recognize his most orthodox views. They deny any affiliation 'Abd al-Qadir had with Freemasonry and claim that his Sufi book *al-Mawaqif* was wrongly attributed to him by his enemies who wanted to tarnish his image.<sup>172</sup> Other disciples continued the Sufi path of 'Abd al-Qadir such as 'Abd al-Majid al-Khani (1847-1900) who wrote numerous mystical poems and a famous obituary of his Algerian master and continued to promote the Akbari views in Damascus.<sup>173</sup> One of 'Abd al-Qadir's closest students, decided to pursue his master's project of an esoteric rapprochement with the West, formed an Egyptian Akbari branch and gave the movement a new and prosperous life in Cairo. 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh's proselytism, his close ties to Egyptian masonic lodges and friendly relations with European colonial authorities gave the Emir's project a new turn and opened it to an audience of Western free souls whom 'Illaysh actively sought to convert. Two of his Western disciples will end up giving a global edge to Abd al-Qadir's ecumenical project thus realizing, perhaps, the dream of the Algerian master. (Fig. 1.6)

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<sup>172</sup> The Emir's Great granddaughter is leading these efforts. She wrote numerous books claiming that both the book *al-Mawaqif*, the letter to the French Asiatic Society and the exchange of letters between the Emir and Freemasonic lodges were forged. Read for example her 2014 book *Bara'at al-Amir Abd al-Qadir men Kitab al-Mawaqif wa Kitab Dhekra al-'aqel*.

<sup>173</sup> Nizar Abada, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi, al-'alimu al-Mujahidu* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al Mu'assir, 1994) 34-38.

## Chapter Two

### **'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh and Ivan Aguéli: The Sufi Master and the Swedish Artist**

Emir 'Abd al-Qadir spent the first months of the year 1883 in his palace in Doummar near Damascus suffering from urinary retention that caused his health to deteriorate, ultimately causing his death on May 26, 1883. The day after, the body of the Algerian Shaykh was carried to the Umayyad Mosque for the funeral prayer then to the Salhiyeh district where he was buried next to his spiritual master under the dome of Ibn 'Arabi's shrine. In a letter to Marie D'Aire<sup>174</sup>, Emir El-Hachemi recounts his father's death: "At sunrise, the body of the Emir was transported to Damascus in the omnibus that Napoleon III gave him. A large crowd gathered, and the consuls of powerful nations were there. El Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh, his equal in sanctity, as well as his nephew, the pious Sid-Ahmed ben El Maki, washed his body."<sup>175</sup>

Shaykh 'Illaysh was described here, by the son of the Emir, as nothing less than "equal in sanctity" to his father: responsible for washing and preparing the body of the

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<sup>174</sup> Marie D'Aire: born Boissonnet, niece of Baron Laurent Estève Boissonnet (1811- 1901) who was the commander of the army detachment that was responsible for the protection of the Emir during his detention in Pau and Amboise. He later became a close friend of the Emir. Marie compiled and edited a collection of letters, testimonials, notes and other documents about Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and published them in a book.

<sup>175</sup> Marie D'Aire, *'Abd al-Qadir, Quelques documents nouveaux lus et approuvés par l'officier en mission auprès de l'émir* (Amiens: Imprimerie Yvert & Tellier, 1900), 247.

dead for burial, a mission often reserved for the family of the deceased or to his closest friends. Shaykh al-Hafnaoui, in his biography of Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir<sup>176</sup>, also reported that ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh was responsible for organizing the burial ceremony, adding that the Egyptian shaykh was the Emir’s guest at the moment of his death. If ‘Abd al-Qadir truly hosted ‘Illaysh, then this would have happened during a relatively short period and in very special circumstances. In fact, by the end of the year 1882, Shaykh Muhammad ‘Illaysh, the great Maliki *mufti*<sup>177</sup> of Egypt was imprisoned with his son ‘Abd al-Rahman<sup>178</sup>, due to their support for the Urabi revolt.<sup>179</sup> The father died in jail shortly after, and his son was sent into exile, possibly traveling to Damascus where he would have been hosted by Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir, an old friend of his father<sup>180</sup>.

The traceable interactions between ‘Abd al-Qadir and Muhammad ‘Illaysh date back to 1844, when the Emir asked the scholars of Cairo to formulate a *fatwa* (legal opinion) on the hostile position the Moroccan Sultan NAME took against the Algerian colonial struggle. The Moroccan sultan, after supporting and even hosting the rebellion of ‘Abd al-Qadir, had

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<sup>176</sup> Muhammad al-Hafnaoui, *Ta’rif al-khalaf birijal al-salaf* (Algiers: Imprimerie Pierre Fontana, 1906), 312.

<sup>177</sup> Jurist qualified to interpret Islamic law

<sup>178</sup> In a letter to Marie Huot from 1907 (Serie IA4, Box 3:4, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden) Ivan Aguéli mentions that ‘Illaysh was sentenced to death along with his father who died before the execution. In his article *L’Islam et la fonction de René Guénon* (*Etudes Traditionnelles*, n 305, Jan-Feb 1953), Michel Valsan quotes an article from *Il Convito* where Aguéli states that “the two shaykhs ‘Illaysh, father and son, were thrown in prison and condemned to death. The father died in prison, the son was pardoned and exiled..” In her richly documented book *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), Indira Falk Gesink does not mention the possible imprisonment of Abd-al-Rahman with his father.

<sup>179</sup> The nationalist uprising that was led by the Colonel Ahmed Urabi aimed at ending Western interference in Egyptian affairs and deposing the Khedive Tewfik Pasha. It lasted between 1879 and 1882 and ended with the British invasion of the country. In the aftermath of the invasion, a large wave of reprisals against the supporters of Urabi took place. Many scholars and Shaykh were imprisoned, killed or exiled.

<sup>180</sup> This part of ‘Illaysh’s life remains relatively ambiguous. The little information we have about his multiple peregrinations after his exile in 1883 and the circumstances of his encounter with ‘Abd al-Qadir come from Michel Valsan’s article “L’Islam et la fonction de René Guénon.” (see footnote above).

turned against him following French pressure<sup>181</sup> and expelled him from Moroccan territory. Shaykh 'Illaysh, grand Mufti of the Egyptian Maliki school, declared the acts of the Moroccan king unlawful and contrary to Islamic law.<sup>182</sup> The exchange between the Emir and Muhammad "Illaysh was not restricted to this *fatwa* and took other forms over the years. 'Abd al-Qadir's book *Husam al-Din li-Qat' Shubah al-Murtaddin* (The Religion's Sword Cutting the Claims of the Apostates) includes, in its final pages, a section described as "an exchange of letters and fatwas with Shaykh Muhammad 'Illaysh al-Maliki"<sup>183</sup> dating back to 1847. The cordial relationship between 'Abd al-Qadir and Muhammad 'Illaysh was old and firm which might explain the facility with which the exiled 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh found himself hosted by 'Abd al-Qadir in Damascus. Other scholars argue he was in fact part of the group of young Sufi disciples that formed around the Emir in Damascus even prior to his exile from Egypt.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> In the 1844 treaty of Tangiers, the Moroccan kingdom officially recognized French sovereignty over Algeria. After fighting along the troops of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir, the Moroccan cavalry endured several serious defeats. The French army also bombarded the ports of Tangiers and Mogador. The Sultan 'Abd al-Rahman decided then to outlaw Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and his men, expelled them and settled with the French a final agreement on the Moroccan- Algerian borders.

<sup>182</sup> The fatwa of 'Illaysh reads: " ... Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds and may prayers and peace be upon our prophet Muhammad and his guided companions, yes the mentioned Sultan – may God repair his state - is forbidden (haram) to do the things you mentioned he did. Its prohibition is a known fact, and no one will doubt it among those who have a grain of faith in their hearts. And we never expected that our master Sultan 'Abd al-Rahman- may God guide him to success- will commit such acts with someone like you... especially that you are now a bridge between him and his enemies."

<sup>183</sup> "Husam Al-Din Li-Qat' Shubah al-Murtaddin," n.d.,

[https://www.alukah.net/manu/files/manuscript\\_6208/makhtotah.pdf](https://www.alukah.net/manu/files/manuscript_6208/makhtotah.pdf). This is the document that was mentioned by Michel Chodkiewicz in his book *the Spiritual Writings of Amir 'Abd al-Kader*" ( New York: SUNY Press, 1995),196. The writer mentioned that this manuscript was then not available to him to read, and that it comprised an exchange between 'Abd al-Qadir and 'Abd al-Rahman. The truth is that it was his father Muhammad 'Illaysh to whom 'Abd al-Qadir was answering.

<sup>184</sup> In his *Emir 'Abd al-Qadir, Hero and Saint of Islam* (World Wisdom,2012), Ahmed Bouyerdene wrote: "A small nucleus would increasingly form around the Emir and would meet regularly in one of his residences in the center of the city. The existing documents enable one to have a rather precise idea regarding the participants at these sessions: Let us mention those who are present most often: Al-Khani, Al-Baytar, At-Tantawi, At-Tayyib, "Illaysh." 157.



After 'Abd al-Qadir's death, and towards the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ilaysh, after long peregrinations, finally returned to his native Egypt where he would live until his death in 1922.<sup>185</sup> Aside from his participation in the Urabi revolt in the shadow of his more prominent father, little is known of the political inclinations and life of 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ilaysh prior to his exile. After his return to Cairo, 'Ilaysh's political activities took an important turn as he increasingly adopted the political ecumenical project of Abd al-Qadir. 'Abd al-Rahman, unlike his father, proved less worried about the Western presence in Egypt and preferred a politic of assimilation rather than the blunt and aggressive anti-colonial approach 'Urabi and some of his contemporaries adopted. He was close to the Christian European circles of Cairo and had a particularly good relationship with Enrico Insabato (1878-1963) an Italian anarchist, journalist, writer, and according to other sources, a notorious spy working for the Italian government and serving its expansionist policies in North Africa.<sup>186</sup>

Insabato, whose declared and ambitious goal was to unite the nascent Italian imperialism with Islam,<sup>187</sup> was interested in the Akbari ecumenical approach that 'Ilaysh inherited from Emir 'Abd al-Qadir. In his turn, 'Ilaysh was likely intrigued by the Italian young anarchist who believed the colonial project could be in total correspondence with the precepts of Islam and who advocated for an imperialism where both the interests of European military powers and those of Muslims are served<sup>188</sup>. But this was not the sole reason behind 'Ilaysh's affection for Insabato. The Italian agent was also an active

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<sup>185</sup> In the introduction to *'Abdul-Hadi, Écrits pour La Gnose* ( Milan: Arché, 1988) it is stated that 'Ilaysh died on May 11, 1922 and that this date was found in "Arab manuscript" p.XIV.

<sup>186</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 61.

<sup>187</sup> See Enrico Insabato, *L'Islam et la politique des alliés*, (London: Forgotten books, 2017)

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

freemason in Cairo<sup>189</sup> and 'Illaysh had arguably inherited from his spiritual master an interest in metaphysically-inclined Westerners and European esoteric societies. Freemasonry was again the most notable organization of the nineteenth century that offered the illusion of a possible modernity that included Islam.<sup>190</sup>

### **The Akbari School in Cairo: Between Islamic Universalism and Western Secret Societies**

The birth and growth secret societies in Egypt is symptomatic of the intellectual dilemmas the country and the region faced starting from the 19th century; the material gain that certain modern inventions brought was paralleled with the unrest the political and ideological project of modernity aroused. Egyptian secret societies provided then an outlet for those resisting both local conservatism and foreign interventionism. Freemasonry was a safe and novel space where different classes of urban elites discussed sensitive matters while protected by the sworn secrecy of the brotherhood<sup>191</sup>. Illicit agreements, conspiracies, coups and revolutions were, if not prepared, at least alluded to in these circles<sup>192</sup>. This partly explains the rather pronounced interest of Muhammad Ali's family in

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<sup>189</sup> Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 61.

<sup>190</sup> On modernist narratives in 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic Freemasonry read Thierry Zarcone "Freemasonry and Islam," in H.Bogdan, J.Snoek, eds., *Handbook of Freemasonry*, (Brill, 2014) 233-257

<sup>191</sup> On the birth and development of Egyptian freemasonry read Jacob M. Landau, "Prolegomena to the Study of Secret Societies in Modern Egypt", *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.1, No.2, (Jan. 1965) pp. 135-186.

<sup>192</sup> The example of Prince Halim Pasha is illustrative of the different uses of Freemasonry for political maneuvering. Around 1867, most masonic chapters fused into one grand political Freemasonic power: the united Grand Orient of Egypt. The first grandmaster of this lodge was the son of Muhammad Ali Pasha, Halim Pasha, who had a claim to the throne and wanted Ismail Pasha, his nephew, to be deposed. Halim used the power of these lodges to lobby and collect money to pursue his plotting against his nephew. The Khedive, according to a letter of the Italian consul general in Cairo, was aware of the role masonic lodges played in his uncle's plotting. Khedive Ismail, himself a mason, promised to use the masonic circles as well "to fight against the secret machinations of his adversary." (Landau,150). Halim Pasha was also a fervent supporter of the

Freemasonry. Muhammad Ali's youngest son, the French educated Prince Halim was, in 1867, elected as Grand Master of the local French Lodge in Cairo itself affiliated with the Grand Orient de France rite<sup>193</sup>. Khedive Muhammad Tewfik and Idris Ragheb were also affiliated with European masonic lodges established in Egypt.

The early developments of an Egyptian Freemasonry occurred prior to 'Illaysh's return to Cairo and coincided with the reformist movement driven by Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849).<sup>194</sup>The project to modernize Egypt was partly channeled through scholarships given to Egyptian students to travel to Europe. Their role was to study modern science, engineering and other disciplines the state judged necessary to Egypt's development. The young scholars had then to lead a modernization movement in Egypt, inspired by their experience in European capitals. The reports of these scholars and their testimonies reveal an impressive mix of fascination, frustration, discontent, and an undeniable desire to build a new Islamic world capable of competing with the West.<sup>195</sup>

The texts and testimonies produced by the early strata of Egyptian modernists, if one sets aside their lyrical exaggerations, contain certain recipes for modernity based on their observation of European societies. Egyptian scholars, sponsored by Muhammad Ali himself, did not shed sufficient light on the democratic system as a tool of political governance. Rather, they chose to direct their gaze toward more organic and horizontal structures of social organization. They believed that improvement (modernism?) was

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nationalist and anti-Western Urabi revolt. He hoped the Ottoman Sultan, if the revolt succeeds, would depose his nephew and declare him as viceroy. His plans ultimately failed. See Landau, "Prolegomena to the Study of Secret Societies in Modern Egypt" (1965), 150.

<sup>193</sup> Albert Kudsi-Zadeh, "Afghani and Freemasonry in Egypt," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 92, no. 1 (March 1972), 26.

<sup>194</sup> Landau, "Prolegomena to the Study of Secret Societies in Modern Egypt," 155.

<sup>195</sup> The most illustrative text of this trend is the book of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, *Takhlis al-ibriz fi talkhis Bariz*. and Ali Pasha Mubarak's 1882 book *Elm al-Din*.

possible simply by adopting European institutions and patterns of cooperative association.<sup>196</sup> The idea of extra-governmental societies of citizens, each aiming to fulfill a specific purpose, was often presented as a Western invention that could be easily emulated in Muslim societies. Associations, for that matter, took an important place in their depiction of the engines of a so desired European social vitality. Descriptions of museums, academic institutions, professional guilds, philanthropic organizations were consequently abundant in their texts<sup>197</sup>. The development of freemasonry was the natural consequence to this trend. The fact that these modes of organizing society were independent from the government greatly impressed Riffa Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), the most notorious of all the young Egyptians who visited Paris as part of the Muhammad Ali scholarships program. al-Tahtawi wrote a book about his experience commonly known as *Journey to Paris*<sup>198</sup>. There, he dedicated some of his most voluminous and crucial chapters to French associations, organizations, and societies.<sup>199</sup>

Backed by its European experience, the new elite formed the core of a larger professional bureaucracy that also included talented Egyptians from different social milieus.<sup>200</sup> The growing influence of the administrative Egyptian elite was an important

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<sup>196</sup> For a good overview of the opinions developed by early Egyptian modernists on European modes of social organization, see for example Robert L. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882-1914* (Princeton University Press, 2015) or the older but still relevant Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *Arab rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.) 109-112.

<sup>197</sup> It is important to note that numerous institutions were consequently adopted by Muhammad Ali Pasha. The list includes the technical school (based on the model of the French *École Polytechnique*), the hospital and medical school of Qasr el-Ainy, many linguistic academies, and centers of translations. The Bulaq printing press was also created in 1821 and with it the first official governmental gazette.

<sup>198</sup> His book was recently translated to English by Daniel L. Newman and titled *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in Paris by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)* (Saqi Books, 2012).

<sup>199</sup> See for example the tenth and thirteenth sections of the book respectively titled "On charity in the city of Paris," and "On progress by the people of Paris in the sciences, arts and crafts, the way these organized, as well as an explanation of related matters."

<sup>200</sup> On the development of a new elite in nineteenth century Egypt see Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ibrahim Abu

factor in the later development of Freemasonry in Egypt. Prior to Muhammad Ali's rule, the Turko-Circassians Mamluks, a military caste whose members were concentrated in Cairo, monopolized all positions of state power<sup>201</sup>. In this context, the indigenous elite, composed of religious scholars, wealthy traders, or landowners, rarely directly participated in political affairs. However, Muhammad Ali, founder of the new dynasty, not only surrounded himself with the Albanians of his contingent but also had a remarkably better relationship with indigenous Egyptian populations than his predecessors. The old Mamluk elite was scattered throughout the territory, often becoming landowners in remote villages<sup>202</sup>. Young boys from these same rural areas were, almost simultaneously, sent to major cities to be educated, and would later form the core of Muhammad Ali's state bureaucracy. This local Egyptian elite was composed of skilled administrators and technicians who supervised and assured the implementation of large state projects and policies. Muhammad Ali's choice to replace the Turko-Circassian old elite with native Egyptian recruits to the state administrative and military apparatus proved relatively successful. Skilled members of the indigenous community slowly attained the highest positions in the state and the governing structure was heavily Egyptianized by the 1870s<sup>203</sup>.

The fact that the aristocratic ruling class used Masonry as a network of national and extra-national connections and the lodges as spaces of free expression was neither surprising nor improbable. But the novelty lies elsewhere: they were, in fact, joined both by

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Lughod, "The Transformation of the Egyptian Elite: Prelude to the Urabi Revolt". *Middle East Journal*, Vol 21.No. 3 (1967) 325-344.

<sup>201</sup> See Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, his Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (American University of Cairo Press: 2010)

<sup>202</sup> Khaled Fahmy, *Mehmed Ali* (Oxford: A Oneworld Book, 2009), 21-38.

<sup>203</sup> See Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

the newly created bureaucratic class of *efendis*<sup>204</sup>, and by the religious clergy of al-Azhar mosque. Freemasonry was a safe place where the political and economic elite of the country was joined by high administrative and military officials and by influential Muslim scholars, especially those who showed an early interest in Western-inspired internal reforms. The most notorious of these figures is the thinker, political activist, writer and religious scholar Jamal al-Din al-Afghani.

Al-Afghani (1838-1897) is commonly considered as one of the founders of Islamic modernism and one of the early proponents of Pan-Islamism as the most suitable response to Western colonial pressures<sup>205</sup>. He called for a return to the original principles of Islam coupled with the adoption of Western technological and scientific discoveries and methods of social and political organization<sup>206</sup>. Freemasonry as a modern European framework, independent from classical clerical structures yet preserving a form of Deism as one of its founding dogmas, interested Jamal-al-din al-Afghani. He recognized the great socio-economic changes taking place in Egypt during the second half of the nineteenth century under the rule of Ismail Pasha between 1863 and 1879.<sup>207</sup> Following the major reforms initiated by Muhammad Ali and some of his followers, the traditional societal framework was slowly eroding, and the religious milieu was not prepared to absorb the growing revolutionary and modernist ideas. Other structures offered more flexibility in accepting

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<sup>204</sup> An Efendi is a title usually attributed in late Ottoman Egypt to men of high education and social standing.

<sup>205</sup> On the life and work of Afghani the most elaborate critical works are still those of Nikki R. Keddie and her two books *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din al-Afghani: A political biography*, University of California Press, 1972. And *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al Afghani*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1968)

<sup>206</sup> Al-Afghani's writings were collected and translated in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al Afghani*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1968).

<sup>207</sup> On the social and economic changes that occurred in Egypt prior and during the reign of Khedive Ismail see Robert Hunter, *Egypt Under the Khedives 1805-1879: From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 80-178.

novel ideals while welcoming the rising local non-Turkish elite of *efendi*. Apart from the army and the state bureaucracy, one of the rare choices then offered was Freemasonry.

Al-Afghani arrived in Cairo in March 1871, stayed until 1879, and during the last two years of his Egyptian experience he was affiliated to several Masonic lodges and was, most notably, a principal member of the Italian lodge known as *Kawkab al-Sharq* (the Star of the East) created in 1871. The latter distinguished itself from the eight English lodges that preceded it in Egypt for its proceedings were led in Arabic rather than in a European language.<sup>208</sup> Al-Afghani rose in prominence to become president of *Kawkab al-Sharq* in 1878.<sup>209</sup> This position offered him both a stage and a public to disseminate his politically subversive and novel ideas and his call for a general revolt against the ruling class. In front of the immediate danger that an open contestation of Khedive's power could occasion, Masonic lodges, due to the sworn secrecy of their members, represented a protected and powerful milieu in which subversive ideas could be shared and discussed. The most notorious example is the case of Tawfiq Pasha (1852-1892) who joined the Masonic lodge headed by Afghani and could lobby there (with the French consul in particular) to replace his father Khedive Ismail who was eventually forced to abdicate in 1879.<sup>210</sup> al-Afghani, definitely shared with Tawfiq Pasha certain reformist ideas, but perhaps most important, the latter was a "brother" in his Masonic lodge. Khedive Tawfiq's later unwillingness to promote the line of reforms demanded by the nationalists pushed al-Afghani to support his replacement by another brother of the Masonic lodge, his uncle Halim Pasha (1865-1921). Al-Afghani's palace intrigues and his political militancy provoked the outrage of several

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<sup>208</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (London: One World publications, 2010), 43.

<sup>209</sup> A. Albert Kudsi-Zadeh, "Afghani and Freemasonry in Egypt," 27.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

masonic members who rejected the activist turn the lodge took under the leadership of al-Afghani and argued Freemasonry should remain above politics<sup>211</sup>. The shaykh was thus expelled from the lodge and the declared reason of his dismissal was rather improbable: his disbelief in the existence of a Grand Architect of the Universe or in the presence of a Supreme Being<sup>212</sup>; doctrines that remain fundamental to the fraternity. On August 24, 1879, al-Afghani was captured by the police and sent into exile in India. An official government statement was issued shortly after his expulsion from Egypt and accused al-Afghani of leading a secret society based on violence and aimed at nothing less than “corrupting religion and the world.”<sup>213</sup>

Al-Afghani’s strategy to internally politicize Egyptian Masonry was paralleled with his effort to convince his disciples amongst religious scholars and young educated efendis to join Freemasonry. Muhammad Abduh is the most famous of them<sup>214</sup>. Born in the northern shore of the Nile Delta in 1849 to a Turkish father from the local landowning elite, he was at the age of seventeen enrolled in the al-Azhar University to later attend there some philosophy, logic and Islamic mysticism classes with Jamal-al Din al-Afghani. The latter shaped the intellectual opinions of Abduh and his early ideas on rational analysis of Islamic tradition, his anti-colonialism and his belief in Pan-Islamic unity as a unique political strategy to overcome European imperialism. It was under the influence of al-Afghani that Abduh considered tools such as political activism, and journalistic writing to

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>212</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 20-21.

<sup>213</sup> Albert Kudsi-Zadeh, “Afghani and Freemasonry in Egypt,” 34.

<sup>214</sup> On Muhammad Abduh’s life and work see Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (London: One World publications, 2010); Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The political and Legal Theories of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida* (University of California Press, 1966).



push for reforms in Egypt. In 1877, he was appointed professor in al-Azhar and taught logic, ethics and theology. He used his articles in the newspaper *al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyya* to become a strong critical voice of state corruption, foreign interventionism or other “social diseases” as he preferred to call them such as popular and religious superstition<sup>215</sup>.

Abduh also saw in Freemasonry a Western-inspired organization that could promote a reformist political agenda without openly contradicting the metaphysical foundations of Islam. Abduh joined the Masonic lodge *kawkab al-sharq* led by al-Afghani.<sup>216</sup> The interest the young shaykh and his peers had for Freemasonry is perhaps better explained in the words of Muhammad Abduh’s friend, the British lawyer Alexander Broadley, and Freemason himself, in 1884: “The Egyptian patriots found a strange fascination in the mystic tie which was to unite all men in the common bond of liberty, and believed the same machinery which had helped the Italians in their struggle for freedom and unity would materially assist the Egyptian cause.”<sup>217</sup> This ideal of working together for the betterment of humanity by merging Islam and other religions within a universal spirituality was also perceptible in Abduh’s other texts including his letter to the British priest Isaac Taylor where he hoped “to see the two great religions, Islam and Christianity hand-in-hand, embracing each other. Then the Torah and the Bible and the Qur'an will become books supporting one another being read everywhere and respected by every nation.” He added that he was “looking forward to seeing Muslims read the Torah and the Bible.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 64.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>217</sup> Alexander Meyrick Broadley, *How We Defended Arabi [‘Urabi] and His Friends: A Story of Egypt and the Egyptians* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1884), 262.

<sup>218</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “Risala ila al-Qiss Ishaq Ṭaylur,” in *Al-A‘mal al-Kamila*, Vol.2 (2006), 357– 58; Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “Risala Thaniyya ila al-Qiss Ishaq Ṭaylur,” in *Al-A‘mal al-Kamila*, Vol.2 (2006) 359–60.

Predictably, both Afghani and Abduh's ideas of reforming Islam by instigating a monotheistic brotherhood with Christianity was not completely embraced by zealous orthodox scholars. One of the most interesting Orthodox figures who opposed Abduh and Afghani's interventions was 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh's father and Abduh's teacher at al-Azhar. Shaykh Muhammad 'Illaysh was the chief Mufti of the Maliki legal school in Egypt for twenty-eight years between 1854 until his death in 1882. 'Illaysh came to prominence by the end of his career when al-Azhar's students, then constituted mainly of Maliki Maghribi fellows, voted in December 1881 to depose the Hanafi Shaykh Muhammad al-'Abassi as head of their university and replace him with Shaykh Muhammad 'Illaysh. The Khedive refused the results of this vote and decided to neither appoint the Maliki nor the Hanafi Shaykhs and chose the neutral Shafi'i Shaykh al-Inbabi instead<sup>219</sup>. The new democratic process of choosing the head of the most important Sunni institution in Islam was part of a larger political and social tumultuous period where religious reformers, Western-minded republicans and other actors participated in what would come to be known as the Urabi revolt<sup>220</sup>.

Muhammad 'Illaysh took an important role during the revolt as the strongman of al-Azhar, and went as far as accusing the Khedive in a closed meeting of collaboration with the French and the British<sup>221</sup>. He later sent a telegram to the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul denouncing the Khedive's attitude towards Cairo's religious scholars.<sup>222</sup> 'Illaysh later issued a fatwa against the Egyptian ruler and called for a holy war against the invaders. The

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<sup>219</sup> Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 90.

<sup>220</sup> Ahmad Urabi forced the Khedive Tawfiq Pasha to accept an elected government where Urabi himself was Minister of War and led an internal opposition to the heavy Western interference in local affairs.

<sup>221</sup> Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism*, 92.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

European armies sponsored the Khedive and helped him defeat the Urabi nationalists. The movement's leaders including Ahmad Urabi, Muhammad Abduh, Muhammad 'Illaysh<sup>223</sup> and his son 'Abd al-Rahman were either exiled or imprisoned. Shaykh Muhammad 'Illaysh died very quickly after his incarceration in prison, and his son 'Abd al-Rahman, found refuge in the house of the influential and old Maliki and Maghribi friend of his father: Emir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri.

Abd-al Rahman 'Illaysh was part of this late nineteenth century Egyptian educated milieu with its various reformist trends, that while adopting radically different approaches to modernity, were often ready to unite for "practical reasons." Among the most central divergences between these reformist movements was their stance on the nature of a possible relationship with the West. While Muhammad 'Illaysh considered it in one fatwa as simply "the land of infidels" and prohibited his followers from moving to Europe or even learning anything from Westerners (science, in that same fatwa, was judged superficial and not worthy of the journey to Europe, a stay that could threaten the morals of the traveling Muslim)<sup>224</sup>. Others, such as Abduh and Afghani had a more nuanced approach. While critiquing European interference in local Egyptian affairs, they also saw within the cloudy heterogeneous West the hand of a friend. For them, Freemasonry was a European

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<sup>223</sup> The fact that 'Illaysh participated in the Urabi revolt should not veil the ideological rivalry between him and other reformists who also took part in this revolt. Muhammad Abduh himself considering 'Illaysh one of his chief opponents, and it is reported that 'Illaysh forbid Abduh, then a student in al-Azhar to teach books that were not part of the official Azhari curriculum, Abduh having previously taught courses to other younger students about Muslim thinkers who did not belong to the dominating Ash'ari school of thought. Rashid Rida reports in his *Tarikh* that 'Illaysh even insulted Abduh in the courtyard of al-Azhar while some of the Shaykh's students snatched Abduh's turban from his head and others laughed at him. According to Abduh, 'Illaysh also sabotaged his graduation process and strongly lobbied not to allow Abduh pass. The student had a second-rank pass as a compromise between all the Shaykhs of al-Azhar and Muhammad 'Illaysh. See Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism*, 94-96.

<sup>224</sup> Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism*, 97.

institution that held high Western republican values while -allegedly at least - showing respect to Muslim religious beliefs in the name of a universal metaphysical brotherhood. For many reformists, Freemasonry served as a safe esoteric connection between them and the Western world.

'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh found in the Akbari school of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir a *juste milieu* between the "stiffness" of his father and the alienating approach of Afghani and Abduh, both accused of apostasy by some of the scholars of their time<sup>225</sup>. The young 'Illaysh took the reformist Akbari school of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and its emphasis on the esoteric rapprochement with the West to a new and different direction. Unlike the Algerian master who was interested in European esoteric institutions- such as Freemasonry- the young Egyptian scholar was clearly keen on addressing simple Western individuals in whom he saw the potential of carrying and spreading the project of 'Abd al-Qadir. His best target were European young free souls who were already interested in esoteric Western movements and thus had the capacity to absorb an Oriental metaphysical doctrine. Westerners who had a relationship to Freemasonic, Occultist and Theosophical or even utopian anarchist circles were the first to integrate the Akbari project of 'Abd al-Qadir in its Egyptian version. The first was the modernist Swedish painter, Ivan Aguéli, member of the Occultist French society and active member of Parisian anarchist groups. Aguéli who adopted the Akbari Sufi tariqa under the mastership of 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh sometime between 1903 and 1907 was one of the first Westerners ever to translate the works of Ibn 'Arabi into a European language. Beside his translations of Ibn 'Arabi's original texts from

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<sup>225</sup> On the question of apostasy in relation to Abduh and Afghani see Elie Kedourie in his *Afghani and Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam*.

Arabic to French, his scholarship included historical surveys of Arabic Sufi literature, political essays on colonialism, articles on feminist and anarchist theories, but also, and perhaps most importantly in the context of this research, a short yet revealing essay on the concept of purity in art seen from an Akbari perspective. A concept that will later evolve to reach its full potential with distant disciples of 'Illaysh and Aguéli such as Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr<sup>226</sup>.

### **Ivan Aguéli, al-Akbariyya and the Concept of Pure Art.**

Aguéli, the first Westerner to promote the Sufi universalist project of 'Abd al-Qadir, was not born in any of the known European urban beacons of Humanist and universalist philosophies. He was born in 1869 in Sala, a small mining village in central Sweden where silver extraction and trade formed the main if not the unique activity of the villagers.<sup>227</sup> His mother, Anna Kristina Nyberg was presumably a descendant of the famous Swedish theologian and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Impressed with Russian literature at an early age, he adopted the Slavic version of his original name John to become Ivan. He was a gifted child interested in botany, geography but also in drawing, and later chose, despite father's objections, art as a profession. In 1888, he was enrolled at the

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<sup>226</sup> Their work is the focus of this dissertation's fifth chapter.

<sup>227</sup> The first academic work entirely dedicated to Ivan Aguéli in English language had recently been released: Ed., Mark Sedgwick, *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painitng, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Besides this volume, The most compelling English texts about Aguéli were written by Mark Sedgwick in his two books *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). In Swedish two well-elaborated biographies of the artist have been produced. Viveca Wessel in *Aguéli* (Stockholm: Forfattarförlaget, 1988) and Axel Gauffin in his *Ivan Aguéli – Människan, mystikern, målaren I-II*, (Stockholm: Sveriges Allmänna Konstförenings Publikation, 1941).

Practical Work School in Stockholm where it was decided he was unsuited for higher studies due to his hearing problems. In 1889, he started painting, and his first works consisted of simple landscapes of Gotland Island where he used to spend his summers, along with some other drawings of Stockholm where he was pursuing his art studies. (Fig. 2.1)

One year later, in 1890, Aguéli had the approval of his father to travel to France and study painting. He was quickly introduced to the Parisian artistic milieu, partly through Père Tanguy, the famous paint grinder in Montmartre who sold art supplies to famous artists from the new impressionist wave. He was then introduced to the work of Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh among others and joined the atelier of the then adulated young impressionist painter Emile Bernard (1868-1941). The influence of his mentor quickly manifested in Aguéli's art. Starting from the summer of 1891, dark and thick contours or *cloisons*<sup>228</sup> separated the body of his paintings into relatively clear and edged compartments. (Fig. 2.2) The impressionist fuzziness of his early paintings was replaced by a more geometrical understanding of the pictorial space and increasingly resonated with the work of Paul Cézanne, one of the rare painters for whom Aguéli kept a constant and profound admiration throughout his life.

Emile Bernard, like several other impressionist painters, was not insensitive to modern metaphysics and the growing spiritual and religious hermeneutics of art developed at the end of the nineteenth century. He was, for example, actively involved in modern

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<sup>228</sup> Cloisonnism is a painting style that flourished during the late impressionist and post-impressionist period, and characterized with the dark contours or *cloisons* (French term for walls) that separated the painted surface into different clearly differentiated bodies. Emile Bernard was one of those who championed this technique along with Paul Sérusier and Paul Gauguin.

spiritual circles such as the Theosophical Society of Paris. Aguéli, who was already a close reader of Swedenborg<sup>229</sup>, was naturally attracted to spreading ideas about an art that preserves a Christian essence and that renders visible the essence of the universe<sup>230</sup>. The young disciple of Bernard thus also joined the Theosophical Society of Paris, and by the year 1891 Aguéli had already a clear and undeniable interest in Christian theology and Eastern spiritualities with particular attention given to Buddhism and Islam<sup>231</sup>. Besides the spiritualist current, anarchism was the other radical anti-materialist alternative offered to the Parisian intellectual scene, and Ivan Aguéli combined his interest in modern metaphysics with a full and radical adherence to leftist and anarchist ideals. In Paris, he joined revolutionary political circles while deepening his knowledge of Islam, Buddhism and non-European Eastern arts. This intricate and improbable relationship between Eastern mysticism and anarchism has remained a main constituent of Ivan Aguéli's project and a constant component of the psychological portrait that one can draw of him. In a letter to his friend Marie Huot<sup>232</sup>, he compared anarchism to the Malamati Sufi group<sup>233</sup> and claimed to see in the latter a developed form of anarchism. Describing this Medieval

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<sup>229</sup> In one of his letters to Marie Huot, one can read "Swedenborg has given me the spiritual upbringing through which I have defended myself and liberated myself from all Protestantism and Germanization," Letter to Marie Huot, March 18, 1908.

<sup>230</sup> Many similarities are to be noted between Swedenborg's mystical views and Aguéli's opinions on Sufism. The belief that earthly realities are mere reflections of a transcendent world, and that "Divine light" is the only capable of revealing the secrets of such heavenly work are some of the main themes Aguéli and Swedenborg share. Swedenborg's major work sought the possible correspondences between the physical and the metaphysical worlds. For him, reuniting with this distant, esoteric yet original was becoming increasingly difficult because of the fragmentations caused by civilization. Swedenborg's mystical views are mostly explained in his *magnus opus Heaven and Hell* (1758).

<sup>231</sup> This is also testified by the list of books Aguéli borrowed from the Swedish Royal academy during his visit to Stockholm in 1891 which also included a French translation of the Quran.

<sup>232</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," 1907, 777:1, Serie IA4, Box 3:4, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>233</sup> Malamati is a Sufi order that appeared first in Iran around the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The word *malama* means to "blame" in Arabic. This order posited self-blame as one of its central pillars. The Malamati disciples actively concealed their spiritual ranks and made their faults known to people as part of their philosophy of "blame."

Muslim mystic group, Aguéli wrote: "they are at the same time, the most cynical, stoic and dynamic group in Islam. Instead of escaping life, they think you should address it under the same form under which it presents itself to you. It is the school of all scandals, and they are a little moral gospel to all true anarchists."<sup>234</sup>

Aguéli took an active part in the series of anarchist terrorist attacks that shook Paris at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The most famous of them involved the bombing in April 1894 of the Foyot restaurant in Paris that injured four people. Felix Fénéon, prominent art critic, a friend of both Emile Bernard and Ivan Aguéli was arrested after the police found explosives in his apartment. Thirty other anarchist theorists and activists were also arrested and judged in what later came to be known as the trial of the thirty<sup>235</sup>. Aguéli was subsequently sent to prison in Paris before then being acquitted in August of the same year. (Fig. 2.3) He spent most of his time in prison reading books and intensively studying Eastern literatures, religions and it is most likely during his stay in prison that his particular interest in Arabic literature and Islamic theology was crystallized. His close friend, with whom he shared the same interest in both art and spirituality, the Finnish artist and later president of the Finnish Anthroposophical society Werner von Hausen was responsible for supplying Aguéli with what he needed in prison and maintained a regular correspondence with him during these four months. Aguéli first requested from his friend a copy of the Arabian Nights, a book whose writing style often surprised him as "a modern

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<sup>234</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," 1907.

<sup>235</sup> On the trial of the thirty see the work of Jean Maitron and his book *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France* (Gallimard, 1975) or the insightful work of Joan Halperin on the relationship between artistic and anarchist discourses in Paris in the nineteenth century, *Félix Fénéon. Art et anarchie dans le Paris fin de siècle* (Gallimard,1991).



form of narration."<sup>236</sup> This supposed modernity he believed emanated from the esoteric underlying meanings this collection of stories was bearing. And unlike the novel itself, the esoteric nature of the writing was not simply "Arabian," it rather transcended racial considerations towards a larger mystical humanism. He wrote "There is a hidden meaning under all this, because the group of symbols (in the Arabian nights) is in perfect accordance with the universal science of connections."<sup>237</sup>

For Aguéli, Islam was the universalizing factor that homogenized this rather eclectic compilation of folk tales from Persia, India, the Arabian Peninsula and sometimes even Greece. In a rather blunt vocabulary, Aguéli explained to his friend the reason behind this oeuvre's supposed consistency: "They are Mahometans, and monotheism heals all the blood and race impurities. It purifies everything, it is a belief and for that reason it receives primordial and perennial energies."<sup>238</sup> Islam as the one monotheistic religion capable of imposing a tone of universalism on all that it touches would also remain a constant tenant of Aguéli's thought. As one might expect from a young anarchist in jail, the monotheism that he defended also had a modern twist; It presupposed the possibility of a universal brotherhood that could best be reached by following a monotheistic tradition. Islamic doctrines were for him the best ideas to achieve this goal, but he did not wholly deny Christianity this same faculty and continued during several years defending both religions as valuable sources of universal wisdom. The interchangeability of Islam and Christianity within a broader monotheistic universal concept is palpable in all the prison notes of Aguéli

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<sup>236</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Werner von Hausen," 1894, 777:1, Serie IA3, Box 4:1, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

where he stated in many instances that, ultimately, the pious Muslim is more Christian than most Christians<sup>239</sup>.

Aguéli was certainly neither immune to modern critiques of religious doctrines nor the rise of individualism as a defining vector of industrialized western societies. For that reason, his definition of modern monotheism was viscerally personal and left very little space for collective experiences of the divine. For Aguéli, religions, and Islam in particular, were only attractive to a modern mind when understood as a centuries-long accumulation of *individual* experiences of the divine reality<sup>240</sup>. Religion is therefore comparable to a gigantic social collection of intimate and personal experiences of God. Modern monotheism, for that matter, consisted in each believer's individual capacity to be "fanatical towards oneself, tolerant towards the others."<sup>241</sup> Religion, far from its usual communitarian understanding, was thus restrictively defined as a spiritual guideline nurtured over the centuries with the experience of pious men, whether they were Christian or Muslim. This synthetic definition of monotheism and the essential tension between the individual and the collective it created irked Aguéli. To resolve it, he tried to create an artificial opposition between what he believes and what he claims to believe, or in other words, between his intimate religious convictions and the social image he projected. The larger the gap between the two, the truer the religious experience would be. This well-crafted, conscious antagonism between inner beliefs and social image is a pillar of Aguéli's definition of monotheism. Modern monotheism, he wrote in one of his letters to von Hausen "adores the

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<sup>239</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Werner von Hausen," April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1894, 777:1, Serie IA3, Box 4:1, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

unique God with the heart, while denying him with the tongue.... words take more value when heart and tongue are not in agreement."<sup>242</sup>

This antagonism is also what ignited Aguéli's later interest in Sufism and in the Malamati school in particular, a trend built precisely on this opposition between public and private spiritual lives and that he did not seem to know yet while in prison. Aguéli, who was, as it is clear from the frequency of his letters to von Hausen<sup>243</sup>, eager to share his metaphysical findings with his friend, asked for more books and manuals. He requested a copy of the Quran, any book on Islamic theology, and a manual to learn Arabic<sup>244</sup>; a language of which he will surprisingly get a relative mastery during his short months in prison.

His brief incarceration was more instructive than rebuking. Out of prison, Aguéli found his leftist and anarchist acquaintances again and most notably Marie Huot (1846-1930). A French poet, feminist, and animal rights activist, Huot, who was his friend, and later lover and patron, sponsored his first journey to Egypt only one month after his release from prison. Upon his arrival to Egypt, Aguéli made numerous trips discovering the south of the country and the rural towns of upper Egypt. He then lived in a small village near Alexandria, later in al-Marg, a mostly Christian village south of the Delta, before finally settling in Cairo a few weeks later. In Egypt, Aguéli resumed his artistic activity and painted Egyptian landscapes where the influence of his French master and the precepts of the Cloisonist School were still perceptible. (Fig. 2.4) A few pictorial changes are to be noticed;

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<sup>242</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Werner von Hausen," May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1894, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>243</sup> It appears from his personal archives that he sent him a letter almost every day.

<sup>244</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Werner von Hausen," May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1894, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

The thick lines compartmenting the pictorial space of his earlier landscapes are now less marked, the brush more subtle and colors less pronounced. The Egyptian landscapes of Aguéli maintained the synthetic technique of Bernard, but the contours here are diluted, slowly merging with the blocs it was supposed to delimit. His paintings became more aerial, with a reduced palette mainly composed of diluted tones that assimilated his landscapes to abstract watercolors. (Fig. 2.5)

This distinct change was not the product of an on-site discovery but predicted and planned by Aguéli from his Parisian cell. The painter who had never left Europe before wrote in one of his prison letters to von Hausen that he heard from people who travelled south that the tropical sun imposes a "hierarchy of plans"<sup>245</sup> on landscapes. There, when the sky is clear "what is far appears growing, and the sky appears immense, but the first plans are shrunk. In our horrible northern landscapes"<sup>246</sup>, he wrote "it is the opposite, the sky appears small, and horizon retracts, tightens, and the objects on the foreground take excessive proportions."<sup>247</sup>For Aguéli, this comment was far more than a visual comment made by an acute Western traveler who had the chance to be in the tropics. It was more of a spiritual revelation, or a metaphor of the power that an eternal source of truth- the sun in this case- has in reorganizing concepts, ideas, priorities. The metaphysical corollary of the tropical sun was for him nothing else but monotheism, and the clear enlightened and divinely organized landscape was Islam and "Arabness" in their broader sense, or, in his

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<sup>245</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Werner Von Hausen," May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1894 , Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

own words: "Religion is the sun of my interior landscape. This is why I like monotheism and the Arab spirit."<sup>248</sup>

In a sense, Aguéli's Egyptian landscapes of Aguéli were conceived before he set foot in Africa and his new metaphysical and artistic orientations were decided while in prison. If Aguéli had already pictured the bright Egyptian landscapes from his cell, his letters indicate that after his trip there he was also happily surprised and deeply appreciative of Egyptians themselves. He enthusiastically went at the encounter of locals, trying to improve his Arabic and to draw as many portraits as he could. The fascination he had for them, and for the "monotheistic ideal" behind the faces of the farmers was not only perceptible in his drawings and paintings but in his letters as well. He wrote to his mother: "I have never in all my life seen more peaceful people, their faces bear the mark of peace and inner light that does one good to see."<sup>249</sup> The words of Aguéli indeed bear the marks of a fetishist fascination that characterized many of his European contemporaries who, like him, visited Egypt. His paintings however distinguish him from the classical orientalist trends. His portraits were, and it is rare enough to be remarked upon, simply realistic. The Egyptian subjects were rarely drawn entirely, (Fig. 2.6) it was mostly the faces of women and children, dressed casually with no exuberance, and in most cases with their eyes facing the viewer. The background is usually monochromatic without any indication that could give a hint into the location where the painting was made. The Egyptian portraits of Aguéli were in this regard similar to those he drew in Gotland. The few differences were simply stylistic, and one can easily detect the influence of Picasso and the sculptural facial features that the

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Abdul-Hadi, *Écrits pour La Gnose*, ed., Gianni Rocca (Milan : Archè, 1988), x-xi

latter was already experimenting with back in Paris. Picasso was a painter for whom Aguéli had a profound respect and who, at least according to his notebook, he knew personally<sup>250</sup>. But overall, in Aguéli's art the Egyptian subject, while provided with a "divine light" as he claimed, was not represented differently, and there was nothing fantastic about an Egyptian farmer that deserved a different treatment than that accorded to a Swedish daughter of a fisherman.

Of course, one might argue here for a pictorial manifestation of Aguéli's universalist beliefs revealed in his Egyptian portraits, but this might seem far-fetched as Aguéli never expressed it himself in his writing, although he wrote abundantly. The fact is that Aguéli, if one insists on describing him as an Orientalist, was of a particular type of Orientalists. One whose admiration of Arabs and Muslims was so intense that portraying them in a good light was not enough, he wanted to become one of them, even if this would entail converting to Islam, learning Arabic, changing his name, wearing a tunic and a turban and living in Cairo. Aguéli, or then, Abd al-Hadi Aqili, later became one of the first Westerners to ever to follow a training as a Muslim from al-Azhar University. (Fig. 2.7)

But Aguéli did not convert to Islam in Egypt, and nothing in his notes and letters from Cairo suggests the idea of converting even tempted him. After about a year spent away from Europe, he returned to Paris in 1895 at the request of his friend and patron Marie Huot.<sup>251</sup> With her and under her influence, he resumed his engagement with leftist and animal rights causes, an involvement that will culminate with him shooting a matador

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<sup>250</sup> Picasso's personal address is inscribed in Aguéli's notebook. The notebook is preserved as part of his personal archives in the Stockholm National Museum. 777:1, Serie IA4, Box 3:4.

<sup>251</sup> Sedgwick, *Anarchist, Sufi, Artist*, 25.

during a bullfight event in southern France<sup>252</sup>. This practice caused the outrage of animal rights activists, and most notably Marie Huot who staged the event. Aguéli, who was interviewed by the police before being released since the matador was not fatally injured, declared that he shot the bullfighter because he could not shoot towards those far guiltier: the public<sup>253</sup>. The young Swedish man was only sentenced to a fine and bullfighting was temporarily banned in France.

Aguéli's discontent with what he referred to as Western materialists<sup>254</sup> only grew after his return from Egypt. He spent his time in Paris in the *École pratique des hautes études* and in the *École spéciale des langues orientales vivantes* where he perfected his Arabic, learned Sanskrit, took classes in Hindu history and spirituality, and deepened his knowledge of the Quran and Islamic theology<sup>255</sup>. He converted to Islam in somewhat ambiguous conditions around 1898<sup>256</sup>. He left Paris back again to Cairo in 1902 and upon his departure asked Marie Huot to tell all those who will ask about him to say that "Ivan left a long time ago, probably to Yemen." and that he "became more and more savage, and all relationships with him were interrupted."<sup>257</sup> He later described this legend as a shield against the judgments of a Parisian bourgeoisie that he despised<sup>258</sup>. The next eight years of his life Aguéli spent them as Abd-al Hadi Aqili, A half-deaf Swedish Sufi who dressed like a

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<sup>252</sup> « L'affaire Aguéli," *La Gazette du Palais*, July 19, 1900.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," 1907, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden

<sup>255</sup> Sedgwick, *Anarchist, Sufi, Artist*, 25.

<sup>256</sup> Nothing is known around the circumstances of his conversion. His letters to his family and friends do not indicate the clear circumstances around his conversion. In 1899, he traveled to Ceylon and lived in an Islamic Madrasa. In his letters, references to Sufism will start increasing after his return from Ceylon.

<sup>257</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," 1903, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

Moroccan, spoke Arabic with a thick accent, lived in a small apartment on top of an old building behind al-Azhar and adopted a sizable number of cats that he raised and fed. It is in Cairo, around the year 1902 that Aguéli met ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh, the man who became his Sufi master and who introduced him to the work and thought of Ibn ‘Arabi.

Little is known of the life of ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh between his return from his Eastern exile and his meeting with Aguéli. He clearly regained prominence in al-Azhar where he was back teaching and mentoring students.<sup>259</sup> The influence of ‘Abd al-Qadir's ecumenical teachings on ‘Illaysh could partly explain his radical conversion from a young Shaykh who revolted against the foreign presence in Egypt with his father in 1882, to become after his exile the first Muslim scholar ever to dedicate an entire mosque to a European monarch in 1907<sup>260</sup>. This last event was the most controversial of all ‘Illaysh's actions in support of a monotheistic brotherhood between Islam and Christianity. An action that attracted more support in the corridors of the Khedive's palace than in Cairo's mosques and madrasas. Dedicating the mosque to the Italian king Umberto I (1869-1900) provoked the outrage and anger of almost all the religious establishment in Egypt. Condemnation rose from the most conservative circles to the most virulent modernizers of the time represented by the famous reformer Rashid Rida who publicly disclaimed Shaykh ‘Illaysh for his acts in his widely spread journal *al-Manar*<sup>261</sup>. Rida, compared the unwavering orthodoxy of Muhammad ‘Illaysh's views and his anti-colonial stances to his son who “did not inherit from him neither his knowledge nor his ethics.” Rida then lamented that ‘Illaysh organized a Sufi ceremony in front of the mosque with a heavy

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<sup>259</sup> Michel Valsan, “l'Islam et la fonction de René Guénon.” 80.

<sup>260</sup> Sedgwick, *Anarchist, Sufi, Artist*, 112.

<sup>261</sup> Rashid Rida, “Bed'a ghariba fi mesr,” *al-Manar* ( Jumada al-awal 1325 H) (June-July 1907).



Western presence and angrily described 'Ilaysh and his sons as "the first to represent Islam before Westerners in this fair of ridicule, when they gathered some of the Tariqa's fools who started singing and dancing so that Westerners take them in photo while they are in that state, and then archive their photos in their books to argue that their despicable dances are part of Islam's rituals."<sup>262</sup> Rida argued that 'Ilaysh's' intention was to gain Italian colonial powers favors and support. Which he did when their journals wrote about his action and introduced him as "as a famous and influential scholar while in reality he is not, has no power and is barely known."<sup>263</sup> The response came, as predicted, from the western leaning urban elite of Cairo, smaller in number yet more vocal. In one article he wrote for the Italian journal published in Cairo *Il Convito*, (Fig. 2.8) a student of Shaykh 'Ilaysh, Muhammad al-Sharbatly, defended his teacher against Rashid Rida by describing 'Ilaysh as an enlightened leader who only wanted to refute the European claim about Islam's fanaticism and wanted "to invite everyone to gather around values of brotherhood, exchange love and friendship with no difference between Easterners and Westerners, between Muslims, Christians and Jews." He later added in the same tribute to 'Ilaysh that "Muslims are the most devoted of all nations to their brothers in humanity from all other groups."<sup>264</sup>

The article published in *Il Convito* was clearly addressed to an audience of Arabic speaking Westerners or Western minded Muslims, as these formed the main core of the journal's readers. Conservatives, on the other hand, also had to be addressed and with something else than the humanist call for a universal brotherhood, an argument that would

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Muhammad al-Sharbatly, "Ad'ia'al-islam al-dini," *Al-Nadi*, no.3.4 (July, August 1907), 106-114.

have probably found very little resonance within the Azhari conservative crowd. To root his text within Islamic scriptures, the writer offered an argument that was, to say the least, far-fetched and unusual from a purely orthodox perspective. The article stated that 'Illysh's mosque is legitimate from a purely orthodox perspective since "Muslims anyway pray for all the believers from the time of Adam to the end of times" and that mosques are not only meant for Muslims but " for all those who believe in eternal truth."<sup>265</sup> To finally rhetorically ask " how could Muslims be described as fanatical when one of their greatest scholars offered a mosque to one of the greatest Christian kings of Europe."<sup>266</sup>

Eternal truth, brotherhood between religions, human friendship, inward and outward reality; the terminology and ideas used are more than comparable to those employed by Emir 'Abd al-Qadir forty years earlier. 'Illysh, after the death of his father, clearly inscribed himself within the ecumenical heritage of the Algerian Shaykh and did not merely adopt his Akbari tariqa but also his active involvement with colonial powers for the sake of a religious trans-colonial brotherhood. In a letter published in *Il Convito*, one can read 'Illysh addressing his friend Salvago Raggi the governor of Italian Eritrea in 1907 and solemnly announcing to his correspondent that despite being Christian he was "appointed by God to serve the interests of Muslims."<sup>267</sup> An opinion that was also shared by Shaykh Muhammad al-Sharbatly who seemed perplexed by the overplayed outrage of his coreligionist and did not see any harm if the king of Italy offered a mosque to his "Muslim subjects"<sup>268</sup> as he described them. He argued in the same article that obedience to a ruler is

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illysh, "Akhlaq al-Islam," *Al-Nadi*, no.3.4 (July, August 1907): 102-105.

<sup>268</sup> Muhammad al-Sharbatly, "Ad'ia'al-islam al-dini," *Al-Nadi*, no.3.4 (July, August 1907): 106-114.

independent from his religious affiliation and rather contingent on his behavior towards the Muslim community living under his sovereignty<sup>269</sup>. And to illustrate his rather peculiar opinion he quoted a fatwa issued by 'Illysh himself where the latter supposedly stated that: "if their rulers, independently of their religion, gave them the care, respect and help they need, true Muslims will love their rulers inwardly and outwardly."<sup>270</sup>

Aguéli also stood by his master during this controversy and asked Huot to write about the incident in *l'Encyclopedie*, a journal she edited in Paris, and to defend the Shaykh<sup>271</sup>. But Abd-al-Rahman 'Illysh, overly optimistic perhaps, did not seem to suspect that the Italians' Islamophilic actions were destined to polish their image amongst Muslim populations and facilitate their ongoing project to invade Libya. Italian leaders were hoping to soften their relationship with Sufi religious groups in North Africa and with that be welcomed as both liberators from the Ottoman rule and as a better alternative to French and British colonialisms<sup>272</sup>. This strategy ultimately failed, and the Sanusi Sufi Tariqa became one of the main engines of resistance to Italian colonialism in Libya. But the project nonetheless seemed promising for many years and attracted different individuals from various backgrounds and nationalities such as 'Illysh and Aguéli. At the heart of the propagandist chapter of the Italian colonial project lay Enrico Insabato (1878-1963), a close friend and collaborator of Aguéli and likely the person who introduced the Swedish

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," 1907, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>272</sup> See Alessandra Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics: Ivan Aguéli and Il Convito," in Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli* (London: Bloomsbury: 2021) 115-126.

painter to Abd-al Rahman 'Illysh<sup>273</sup>. Aguéli met with Insabato in Paris before moving to Egypt, where it is assumed that the young Italian activist worked as an undercover agent for the Italian government. Insabato founded the journal *Il Convito* mentioned earlier. The journal was called *al-Nadi* in Arabic and ran from 1904 to 1912. It was published in Italian, Arabic and Turkish and had a relatively large reading for the time with an estimated print run of 5000 copies<sup>274</sup>. Both Ivan Aguéli and Shaykh Abd al Rahman 'Illysh were major collaborators of *Il Convito*. The journal had a peculiar editorial line defending Sharia law, inciting Muslims to reject various aspects of Western culture, attacking modernist Egyptian trends and their anti-Sufi stance. At the same time it called for a brotherhood between Abrahamic religions and proposed long biographical texts and commentaries on the work of Ibn 'Arabi; ultimate symbol of this brotherhood. In general, and despite the diversity of its articles, the journal was an assortment of various texts subtly promoting Italian colonialism either through the promotion of a Sufi ecumenical project or by way of a conservative defense of Islamic theological, spiritual and social traditions.

Aguéli, whether willingly or not, participated in this peculiar and somewhat naïve Italian imperial propagandist project. As a matter of fact, his views on colonialism significantly diverged from the usual anarchist stance of his Western contemporaries who categorically rejected the overall imperial aspirations of their countries. Aguéli was rather aligned with the opinion of his spiritual master who saw a possible benefit of colonialism if the imperial project was centered around a spiritual and religious core. In an unpublished article he wrote in French, Aguéli methodically enumerated what he thought were the best

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<sup>273</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," September, 1907, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>274</sup> Alessandra Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics: Ivan Aguéli and *Il Convito*," 99.

strategies to create a peaceful and "good" colonial experience. The French – who according to Aguéli neither had the excessive British firmness nor the Italian naïve smoothness – were the best qualified to have an Iron hand in a velvet glove<sup>275</sup>. Adopting a quite peculiar hedonistic approach to colonialism, Aguéli defined in this text the tools and nature of an "imperial art of combining the happiness of the colonizers with that of the colonized."<sup>276</sup> And for him, the principal instrument of this art is to rather make the Muslim world "more Muslim" instead of pushing it towards Westernization<sup>277</sup>. For Aguéli, Muslims were not interested in material progress and were rather eager to have all the means possible to fulfil a perfect spiritual life. Hence to obtain their obedience, it sufficed to offer them the necessary practical tools towards the achievement of their spiritual goals. At the end of the article, Aguéli openly embraced 'Illaysh's conciliatory and universalist Sufism where he stated that "If any Western government could give solid guarantees of protecting Islam, all Muslims, with the Ulema first, will run to accept being governed by this European power."<sup>278</sup> On a practical level, this Islamophilic colonial strategy he suggested to his French interlocutors entailed very simple steps to take. The first was to avoid interfering in Muslim theological matters, something the British did when they supported the religious reforms of Muhammad Abduh and consequently did nothing but nurture the nationalist sentiment against them<sup>279</sup>. The other three steps were to create Islamic banks in colonies that will facilitate the financial and economic integration of local Muslim populations, and

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<sup>275</sup> "Essay on Colonialism," undated, 777:1, Serie IA4, Box 4:3, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

finally to both facilitate the pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims and to build a mosque in Paris<sup>280</sup>.

In a considerable amount of his letters and notes, Aguéli asked his French friends and collaborators to raise awareness about Islam in their country through different actions that should not be restricted to writing journal articles about Islam. He asked them, for example, to also address European liberal associations and societies such as those protecting minorities, indigenous populations or animal rights and advised to generally target all "the anti-colonialists, anti-materialists, anti-military, the internationalists, anti-clergy, those who resist against the power of money and those who aim to abolish the fanaticism of races and casts"<sup>281</sup>. These actions should be monitored by Islamophilic organizations that unite the "friends of Islam"<sup>282</sup> as he liked to call them. These organizations had to incite scholars to work on Islamic history and art, give prizes to the best literary, artistic or academic work that presents the most "authentic" version of Islam on a good light to a Western audience<sup>283</sup>.

This question of "authenticity" crosses all of Aguéli's writing. The Swedish painter liked to locate a small "unsullied" group from the present and then describe a supposedly glorious past when this now isolated group used to be the norm. Using this method, Aguéli often defended Europe, for example, claiming the existence of a contemporary truer West. In one of his articles named *Les Europes et les Musulmans*, Aguéli argued the existence of a

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> "Essay on Islam," undated, 777:1, Serie IA4, Box 4:3, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> In one of his letters, he asked for financial help and personal assistance letter from the Ottoman statesman and ambassador Cherif Pasha. The project Aguéli exposed in this letter was to gather around him French prominent intellectuals and politicians who have interest towards the East. The letter is most probably from the end of 1913. There he mentions the recent creation of the *Société des arts Musulmans* created by a group of French intellectuals such as Max Van Berchem and Octave Homberg in the summer of 1913.

plurality of Europes and that the Europe that Muslim despised was no less hated in the West as it was in the East<sup>284</sup>. The real Europe is republican, democratic and revolutionary and true Europeans are only those who can rightfully describe themselves as the “legitimate sons of the French revolution.”<sup>285</sup> Mirroring the image of an authentic Europe that Aguéli defended in the East, there also was an authentic Islam that the Swedish artist was trying to promote in the West. And if French republican values were true Europeanism, authentic Islam for Aguéli perfectly and solely corresponded to Islamic mysticism, and more precisely, as it will be exposed, to its Akbari version proposed by the Sufi mystic Ibn ‘Arabi.

Aguéli was first introduced to Ibn ‘Arabi through ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh who was himself attached to the Akbari tradition through Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir; the “true heir of Akbari sciences”<sup>286</sup> as described by his contemporaries. Aguéli was in that sense a direct spiritual descendant of the Algerian Shaykh and later became the main representative of the Akbari Sufi school of thought in Europe. After settling in Cairo in 1902, Aguéli wrote to Marie Huot that he was poorly dressed, wearing white cotton clothes, and was required to shave his head<sup>287</sup>. Judging from this description, one can assume he was going through a relatively rigorous Sufi training in Cairo under the guidance of ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh. The young Swedish artist manifested much love and respect for the Egyptian shaykh, as it is clear in his letters to Huot. In different instances, Aguéli described his spiritual master in

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<sup>284</sup> “Les Europes et les Musulmans,” undated, 777:1, Serie IA4, Box 4:3, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> ‘Abd al-Majid al-Khani, *al-Hadaiq al-wardiyya fi haqaiq ajella’ al-naqshabandiyya*, 369.

<sup>287</sup> “Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot,” 1903, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

glorious terms and even invited his correspondent to visit the Sufi saint in Egypt<sup>288</sup>. Although the visit never happened, it remains clear through this long-running correspondence that ‘Illaysh and Huot knew of each other through Aguéli. Responding to a letter of Huot where she inquired about ‘Illaysh's health, Aguéli wrote: "Cheikh Alech [‘Illaysh] is doing very well and was delighted to receive your greetings,"<sup>289</sup> adding immediately after, as a reminder of the high stature of the man Huot was receiving greetings from, "He is the current representative of Ibn ‘Arabi, that is to say his school."<sup>290</sup> Aguéli ended his letter describing to his friend his desire to come back to painting and the reluctance of ‘Illaysh, "The great man," he wrote, "will first take me through an isolation."<sup>291</sup> Referring most probably to a *khalwa*; a Sufi exercise of solitary retreat that a master could require from his disciple. Although ‘Illaysh was a Shadhili Sufi, it was the Akbari doctrine that he transmitted to his Swedish disciple. By introducing a European artist to the work of Ibn ‘Arabi, ‘Illaysh was still perpetuating a "Qaderi" tradition based on an esoteric rapprochement between spiritual circles from the Christian world and Sufi Akbari Islam. And while ‘Abd al-Qadir, father of this approach, was interested in institutions such as masonic lodges,<sup>292</sup> ‘Illaysh turned to particular individuals to whom he ascribed the role of understanding, translating and spreading the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi in the West. Ivan Aguéli, of course, fit within this category.

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<sup>288</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," 1907.

<sup>289</sup> "Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot," 1903, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> There are, of course, the comparative notes he supposedly wrote on the esoteric resemblance between masonic and Islamic symbols. They are mentioned, among others, by Michel Vâlsan in his *l'islam et la fonction de René Guénon* ( Paris: Science sacrée, 2016), 81.



The admiration that Aguéli had for Ibn ‘Arabi was visible in his letters to Huot. He described him as superb and staggering, compared him to Edgar Allan Poe and Auguste Villiers de l’Isle Adam, and added that “he is in art and emotions absolutely similar to Swedenborg.”<sup>293</sup> For Aguéli, Ibn ‘Arabi sometimes appeared as a resurrected hero who had his place in the modern era. “While reading him,” he wrote, “you feel he is a man of our times, with the breadth of his ideas, and with his warmth and elegance of which we lost the secret a long ago.”<sup>294</sup> Aguéli was the first Westerner to ever initiate a large project of translation and analysis of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work. But his bond with the great master was not simply intellectual, the artist also thought of himself as the true heir of the Akbari secret and nothing less but the spiritual successor of Ibn ‘Arabi after ‘Abd al-Qadir and ‘Illaysh. This claim was not merely speculative, Aguéli himself liked to emphasize his prominent role within the Akbari *silsila*. In one of his letters to Marie Huot, he described his relationship with his spiritual master in these words: “You know the affection that Shaykh Alech [‘Illaysh] has for me. Now, Shaykh Alech was the closest friend of Emir Abdul Qâdir, the Algerian. The Shaykh Alech himself bathed his dead body and buried him next to Ibn ‘Arabi in Damascus. Both were the possessors of the secret doctrine of the great master. The Shaykh has always called me Mouhhyid-edine, which was one of the names of Ibn ‘Arabi, and this was before I even became one of his disciples.”<sup>295</sup>

Ivan Aguéli thus positioned himself within a spiritual chain that contained him, his direct shaykh (‘Ilaysh), and Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi. All are described, in more or less

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<sup>293</sup> “Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot,” 1907, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

clear terms, as heirs of the Akbari doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi. The legitimacy of this claim did not rely simply on the work he was doing for the Akbari cause. It was also spiritual in nature. Aguéli believed he was chosen by Ibn 'Arabi himself for this mission and the signs of this appointment were even older than his conversion to Islam. In one of his letters to Huot he related this vision:

*Fourteen years ago, I saw an unknown man in a dream. When I read the biography of Ibn 'Arabi that one of our Arab collaborators made, I recognized him. I never talked about my dream to anyone for the simple reason that it was a mystery for which I did not have an explanation yet. Something particular about his eye, the colour of the clothes he usually wore, the exact nuance of his hair and his carnation. All was in there.<sup>296</sup>*

For Aguéli, there was an authentic spiritual connection that linked him to Ibn 'Arabi. What he considered a unique, unparalleled giftedness he had understanding the words of the medieval mystic was sufficient proof of such mystical bond. He wrote to Huot in another letter:

*I haven't read much of the master (Ibn 'Arabi), but I could guess it all. And all the thoughts I developed about him turned out to be perfectly correct. I have now translated all my articles on Ibn 'Arabi into Arabic (they are now under press). The rare persons of our time who understand the master, recognize that I perfectly understood him, but in an absolutely novel manner.<sup>297</sup>*

And it is precisely this "novel manner" that 'Illaysh was hoping to obtain from the Swedish convert. Aguéli, a polyglot writer, disenchanted with the West and in full admiration of the supposed capacity of Ibn 'Arabi to resolve the problems of modernity was the perfect candidate to promote the "Akbari solution" in the West. Along those lines, the

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

Swedish artist had indeed initiated a project that would have had the full support of ‘Abd al-Qadir were he alive; in 1911 Ivan Aguéli founded a Paris-based Akbari secret society. Not much is available about this organization but an archival document where Aguéli defined its goals and rules<sup>298</sup>. Al-Akbariyya as he named it, was dedicated to the study of the life and work of Ibn ‘Arabi. The idea had apparently tempted him while in Cairo but was only formally realized in June 1911 in Paris. The society that specifically addressed a Western audience was supposed to be "international, and beyond races, casts, and nations."<sup>299</sup> It was partly responsible for collecting, translating, and printing the work of Ibn ‘Arabi both in Muslim and Western countries. A library was then supposed to be created in Paris, with a periodical dedicated to the Sufi master and several workshops were expected to be held among orientalist scholars to study the Akbari doctrine<sup>300</sup>.

Aguéli was not interested in studying Ibn ‘Arabi's oeuvre as a simple historical enquiry which will consequently risk dissociating it from its alleged contemporary relevance. He carefully insisted that the role of this secret society is to ultimately determine the positions Ibn ‘Arabi would have taken concerning modern problems were he alive in the twentieth century<sup>301</sup>. For Aguéli, the modern pertinence of Ibn ‘Arabi had to be the core engine of a global cosmopolitan movement that "will assemble the elite of all races and languages in one intellectual community that will in its turn unite all religious traditions with the universalist movement of our days."<sup>302</sup> The organization was also supposed to be equipped with a mosque and a center for studies with spaces for Sufi spiritual retreat in the

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<sup>298</sup> "Al-Akbariyya," 1911, 777:1, Serie IA4, Box 4:3, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

French capital. This modern Akbari universalism that, as he claims, transcends races and casts does not ultimately aim at creating a simplified form of deism that escapes historical inter-religious conflicts. This universalism is unapologetically Islamic, and precisely like Emir 'Abd al-Qadir, Aguéli believed that Akbari Sufi Islam, far from being a small and restrained religious group, is nothing less than a gate towards universality. This particular form of Islam, he believed, will only dissolve itself when it reaches its ultimate goal, that of a modern unification of all authentic religious traditions. In that sense, Al-Akbariyya required from its members to believe in "the unity of the supreme being"<sup>303</sup> while at the same time to "recognize the prophetic mission of Muhammad and declare on honour not belonging to any Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Pagan clergy."<sup>304</sup> To emphasize even more the Islamic nature of his universalist project, Aguéli noticed at the end of his letter that Islamic Sharia would be considered as "the main and supreme law organizing the relationship between members of the society."<sup>305</sup>

Al-Akbariyya chose the French journal *La Gnose* to publish its first translations of Ibn 'Arabi. These were the earliest texts of the Sufi master ever to be translated to French<sup>306</sup>. And in one of its earliest explicative articles published in *La Gnose* and titled "the

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Aguéli's first published translation of Ibn 'Arabi to French was "Risalat al-Ahadiyah," translated as le *Traité de l'unité* and published in *La Gnose*, (N 6, 7, 8 June, July, August, 1911). At the end of his introduction Aguéli affirmed that a translation of Ibn 'Arabi has been published in English before he could finish his work and stated not knowing when, where and who did it. He was most probably referring to the British orientalist Reynold A. Nicholson who published the same year his translation to English of Ibn 'Arabi's "Tarjuman al Ashwaq," (London: Royal Asiatic Society: 1911). Aguéli and Nicholson were the first to publish a full translation of an *entire* text of Ibn 'Arabi in a Western language. Their work was only preceded by that of Miguel Asin Palacios (1871-1944) who translated a selection of passages from Ibn 'Arabi's work ( the earliest we have of any Western language) in his article "Mohidin" published in *Homenaje a Menéndez y Pelayo* (Madrid: Suarez, 1899). His second article to offer a study and commentary of Ibn 'Arabi was published in 1906 under the title "La psicología de éxtasis en dos grandes místicos musulmanes, Algazel y Mohidin Abenarrabi," published in the journal he founded *Cultura Española* (Madrid, 1906) 209-235. The same year

Universality of Islam”<sup>307</sup> Aguéli explained that the reason he chose Islam as the entrance to universalism is the vast array of "spiritualities" Islam supposedly allows<sup>308</sup>. A religion that, according to Aguéli, offered one form or another of spiritual revelation both to those who practice its most basic exoteric version or those who chose its most spiritual and esoteric aspect<sup>309</sup>. Ibn ‘Arabi was in that sense the ideal hero of this theological versatility and thus deserved his role as the main representative of Islam's universality. The primacy Aguéli gave to Ibn ‘Arabi in his reading of Sufi history is up to this time visible in Western academia where the medieval mystic is still considered a major cornerstone of Sufi thinking despite the actual secrecy and limited spread of his Tariqa in the Muslim world<sup>310</sup>. The marks of Aguéli's peculiar and innovative reading of Ibn ‘Arabi also remained visible in the later translations offered of the Sufi master. In the personal archives of Aguéli remains a loose page containing a handwritten list of the major Akbari themes and concepts translated from Arabic to French. (Fig. 2.9) The list is admirably exhaustive and the translations he offered denote a full mastery of both Arabic and French. Only one expression had its translation slightly deviated from its most natural literal translation. Instead of rendering Ibn ‘Arabi's pivotal concept of *al-Insan al-kamil* as "the perfect man," Aguéli preferred to use "the universal man." A translation that remains widely used in

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the British orientalist Reynold A. Nicholson published his famous "Historical Enquiry concerning the Origin and Development of Sufiism, with a List of Definitions of the Terms 'Şufi' and 'Tasawwuf,' Arranged Chronologically," in *The journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: April 1906) but Nicholson did not translate nor even reference Ibn ‘Arabi in this text. Muhammad Iqbal, the student of Nicholson, briefly mentioned Ibn ‘Arabi in his discussion of Abd al-Karim al-Jili in his PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Munich in 1908 and published the same year under the title "The development of Metaphysics in Persia."

<sup>307</sup> Ivan Aguéli, "L'universalité de L'Islam," in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 81-101.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Read Carl W. Ernst, "Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy and Islamic Studies," *Review of Middle East Studies*, no.2, 28 (December 1994), 176-180.

Western literature despite originating from the peculiar perspective of a Swedish artist who believed that a modern universal brotherhood in times of colonial upheavals was possible if men followed the path of 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh, Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and the Sufi master, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi.

In 1909, Aguéli left Egypt after a long period of financial troubles. He first stayed in Marseille then moved to Geneva where he spent the winter of 1910. There, and in fortuitous circumstances, he met with then young Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), the political activist who later became the leader and president of the Republic of China from 1928 to 1975. In 1910 when they met, Chiang was a member of the *Tongmenghui*, a secret society organizing a resistance movement aiming to expel the emperor and build a new and free Chinese republic. Aguéli, who apparently expressed his wish to visit China found the help he needed in Chiang who recommended him to his brothers in the secret society and asked them in a letter to take good care of him<sup>311</sup>. Chiang who held high the principle of opening China to the rest of the world invited his comrades not to act with Aguéli as if he were "just an ordinary Western traveler"<sup>312</sup> and described him as a half-deaf erudite who perfectly understood Eastern languages and philosophies. He added that Aguéli was sympathetic to the Chinese cause and is ready to write articles in European journals in favor of the Chinese revolutionary movement<sup>313</sup>. But Chiang did not fail to emphasize the eccentricity of Aguéli to his friends and warned his Chinese correspondents that they were not to expect a European diplomat or journalist. Aguéli, as Chiang described him in his

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<sup>311</sup> "Recommendation letter from Chiang Chi," 7 March 1910, 777:1, Serie IA3, P3/ Volume 5, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

letter, was poor, had difficulties adapting himself to the modern world, was considered mad by many Europeans and, to top it all, "believed that Islam was the best religion on earth."<sup>314</sup>

And Chiang was right, Aguéli after leaving Egypt kept tirelessly promoting Islam in Europe and his enthusiasm for the Islamic version of monotheism was now more political than ever. The grand lines of Aguéli's project were rather novel for the period. Building a mosque in Paris, creating a Parisian secret society around the thought of a medieval Arab Sufi mystic, pushing for an Islamic banking system and helping Muslims from all over the world perform hajj were not the only original proposals of the Swedish artist<sup>315</sup>. Aguéli also insisted on collecting and exhibiting Islamic art in European capitals. "Europeans never forget those who gave them aesthetic pleasure,"<sup>316</sup> he argued in defense of this last project. This correlation between aesthetic enjoyment and a durable gratitude did not only arise from a supposed superiority of Islamic art-which Aguéli indeed believed superior - but also from an aesthetic and spiritual blankness that he argued characterized modern Europe. For him, Islamic art is fundamentally spiritual and is, therefore, the perfect medium to introduce the de-spiritualized European public to Islamic doctrines<sup>317</sup>. For Aguéli, Islamic Aesthetic was not merely the product of a Muslim culture; it was also the main sustainer of the same religion that gave it birth. Islamic art was both the fruit of an authentic Islamic spirituality *and* source of its eternal regeneration<sup>318</sup>. This dialectical loop was to become

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> "Essay on Colonialism," undated, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>316</sup> "Essay on Islam," undated, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> "Les Europes et les Musulmans," undated, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

the main foundation of the art theories around Islamic art later developed by Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and Hossein Nasr.

In his article "Europes and Muslims" Aguéli responded to a text written by a certain Shaykh Abd al-Haq in which, the Azhari religious scholar had apparently attacked European colonialist projects in Egypt and confounded in multiple times in his text Christians and Europeans<sup>319</sup>. It appears from Aguéli's response that the Shaykh had stated in his diatribe preferring Eastern Christians to their Western coreligionists -while also stating that he eventually despised both. Aguéli's reply did not come to defend both Christian groups but rather to invert the order proposed by Shaykh Abd al-Haq. And Aguéli's argument for that purpose was "artistic". Oriental Christians alone, he explained, deserved the anger and despise of Muslims because they lived under Muslim rule and resided in Muslim cities. Daily observing Islamic art should have been enough, for Aguéli, to convert any sensible heart to the religion of Muhammad<sup>320</sup>. Western Christians, however, had a good reason not to convert, after all, he wrote " how do you want him to pray? While he never heard the voice of the Muezzin, there alone in his cold, sad damned country, left out by God."<sup>321</sup> Islamic Art inculcates Eastern Christians and clears Westerners. European art, on the other side, was parallelly responsible for the radical materialist turn that Europe undertook in Modern times. " the absence of sacred architecture, decors and colours "<sup>322</sup> He argued in the same text "makes it difficult to have profound and religious emotions or to have any perception of the eternal world."<sup>323</sup> Ivan Aguéli even added to his argument the

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid



anecdote of a fellow Western convert who, when Insidiously asked why he converted, replied simply preferring minarets to factory chimneys<sup>324</sup>.

Art as a metaphor for the Divine is not an eccentric reading of art,<sup>325</sup> examples of such interpretations find their roots in Platonic and later Christian neo-Platonic philosophies. Aguéli's contribution was to both revert and widen the scope of such a theory. Reversing it by arguing not only art leads to God, but God is also responsible for guiding the believer towards understanding the essence of art<sup>326</sup>. Widening the theory occurred when Aguéli opened the scope of his argument to art in general and did not restrict it to religious forms of aesthetic expression<sup>327</sup>. These twists that Aguéli performed on classical religious interpretations of art will reveal themselves fundamental to the work of his successors. They will all use the umbrella term that Aguéli was the first to introduce of "Pure Art"- An art that testifies to God's presence and where both the artist and the viewer need a certain degree of initiation to either be able to create or appreciate art<sup>328</sup>.

For Aguéli, pure art helps humans decode abstract, esoteric meanings and offers to its observers a clear and limpid "graphology of human soul."<sup>329</sup> The purity of the oeuvre stems from the purity of the artist who has to disappear as the agent of his or her own creation<sup>330</sup>. The anonymity of the creator is the first step towards the purity of the work of

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Brian Keeble offered a comprehensive anthology of philosophical texts exploring this topic and going from Ancient Greece to the twentieth century, see Brian Keeble, *Every Man an Artist* (Bloomington: World Wisdom: 2005).

<sup>326</sup> "Les Europes et les Musulmans," Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>327</sup> It is in fact very rare to read Aguéli specifying what art he is describing or theorizing, with the exception of few references to Islamic and Christian arts, all his texts treating the aesthetic question use the word art with no adjectives or qualifiers.

<sup>328</sup> Ivan Aguéli, "L'art Pur," *Écrits pour La Gnose*.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 36.

art. Many writers have already attributed the beauty of ancient or Medieval monuments to the absence of an individual genius responsible for the work of art -a whole community and an entire era is standing behind Gothic churches for example. The anonymity that Aguéli is calling for is rather personal and conscious. The artist has to deliberately engage in an act of erasure that liberates the work of art from the burden of its creator. Only when achieving namelessness that both the artist and his work can reach universality<sup>331</sup>.

It is important to remember that this same question of purity cannot be disentangled from the spiritual and theosophical questions that we know helped shape the twentieth-century European artistic discourse<sup>332</sup>. The "will to purification" found in modern metaphysics a proper philosophical ground and in modern art a suitable space of expression. Transcendental philosophies and modern art crossed path on more than one occasion. The figure of Julius Evola, who was at the same time a fervent esotericist, a Dadaist painter and perhaps the most prominent theorist of Italian Fascism in the thirties, is more than telling in that regard<sup>333</sup>. Evola was also an admirer of René Guénon, the Muslim Sufi convert who will be examined in the next chapter of this work. Many modern artists ascribed to themselves the mission of discovering the purest limit of plastic expression, a point beyond which art forms will become inconceivable. Abstract art was then born between the brushes of Hilma af Klint who liked to experiment drawing in spiritualist settings<sup>334</sup>, the aquarelles of Wassily Kandinsky who believed in the imminent

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> On the influence of modern metaphysical themes and concepts on the early developments of modern art, read Charlene Spretnak in her *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art : Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) or the essay of Harry Lesser titled "Spirituality and Modernism" in the collections of essays edited by Rina Arya and titled *Contemplations of the Spiritual in Art* ( Peter Lang, 2013)

<sup>333</sup> Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar: The intellectual Autobiography of Julius Evola* (London: Arktos, 2010) 19-26.

<sup>334</sup> Ed., Kurt Almqvist, *Louise Belfrage, Hilma af Klint: Seeing is Believing* (Koeing Books, 2017).

arrival of a global and spiritual synthesis between science, religion and art<sup>335</sup>, and the compositions of Piet Mondrian who advocated for a “pure plastic art” that will ultimately create a “universal beauty.”<sup>336</sup> Aguéli was also close to these discourses around spirituality, purity and abstraction. In his article “Pure Art” published in *la Gnose* in 1911 he offered scattered descriptions of the formal characteristics that a pure art should take, and these often perfectly coincided with abstract forms of plastic expression. He wrote that “any emotion coming from the subject of the painting is extra-artistic and therefore harmful”<sup>337</sup> and that both the form and the subject of a painting have to be reduced to “questions of contrasts, repetitions and rhythms.”<sup>338</sup> For Aguéli “everything that art says through other means besides eloquent proportions and the harmony of numbers is wicked.”<sup>339</sup> At the end of the article, he clearly stated that purity is synonymous to abstraction and held “clarity” as the essence of a pure work of art even if this clarity pushed the oeuvre to a “brutal nudity.”<sup>340</sup>

Theorizing pure art was only one facet of his work, Aguéli also aimed to become himself a pure artist, and he saw his Akbari involvement as the most suitable way to achieve this goal. During his years in Egypt, Aguéli continued painting. First, he drew landscapes that were slowly replaced by portraits, and later female nudes. ‘Illaysh tried to deter Aguéli from painting, but the artist did clearly not comply and rather preferred the harder path of convincing his fellow Sufis that painting is not contrary to the precepts of

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<sup>335</sup> See Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946).

<sup>336</sup> See Piet Mondrian, “Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art”, in Robert Herbert, ed., *Modern Artist on Art: Second Enlarged Edition*, (New York: Dover fine Art, 1999).

<sup>337</sup> Ivan Aguéli, “L’art Pur,” Gianni Rocca, ed., *Écrits pour La Gnose* (Milan : Archè,1988), 36.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid, 39.

Islam<sup>341</sup>. In that regard, one of Aguéli's most revealing essays consisted in a long and witty explanatory text addressed to Muslim scholars where he tried to explain the essence of Western art and its compatibility with Islamic and Arabic traditions. To win over his audience, Aguéli explained that painting is ultimately nothing but a genre of poetry where lines and colours have simply replaced words and argued that great Western artists are no very different in nature and kind from Al-Nabigha, al-Chanfara and al-Hariri<sup>342</sup>. He ended with what is perhaps his most solid argument when he wrote, in the pure Akbari tradition, that "painting is not an impious attempt to do something better than the creator, but a way to understand the oeuvre of God and find the creation in the creator."<sup>343</sup> Here, Aguéli did nothing less but tie artistic work to Sufi initiation and pose painting as an instrument of faith.

Aguéli, the convert and the artist, established one of the earliest Islamic theories of art in his century. Through learned theological twists, he defined the role of a good painter as someone capable of "finding the essence of the thing represented."<sup>344</sup> Instead of reproducing creatures, which Aguéli qualified as an inferior plastic expression, true art represents the spiritual state of the artist more than it depicts the observed object<sup>345</sup>. The Sufi concept of *hal* then fully takes its place. *Hal* was often described as a form of transient spiritual state that affects the disciple during his journey towards God, and that could go from a simple feeling of peace or sorrow to full ecstasy. The object represented is therefore nothing but an excuse that the painter uses to convey his or her *hal* (spiritual state), and

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<sup>341</sup> "Essay on Painting," undated, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

while drawing an object might be illegal in the eyes of scholars, drawing a *hal* should not only be permissible but had to be encouraged and cultivated. Aguéli, to settle his argument and definitely prove the relationship between Islamic spirituality and art, ended with this evocative passage:

“A man who is close to God does not see things in the same way a man far away from him does. The more he is elevated in spirituality his way of seeing changes, and then his painting will change. His way of seeing will indicate his spiritual rank. If one day a Shaykh was to paint, his Sufi disciples would only have to contemplate his paintings to reach his spiritual rank. And contemplating works of art is a real initiation.”<sup>346</sup>

A shaykh painting his *hal* to expose in colours and shapes the degree of purity his *nafs* achieved was indeed improbable. It shows nonetheless the extent to which Aguéli genuinely believed in a natural and organic relationship between universalist Sufism and pure forms of art. It is important here to say that Aguéli’s notion of pure art was inherently Akbari in its formulation. At the end of his article “Pure Art” Aguéli wrote that those unable to understand what he means by “mental perspective” – the capacity of pure art to illustrate the *hal* of the artist- should not be reading his article<sup>347</sup>. Instead, they should study the work of Ibn ‘Arabi who will guide them to a better understanding of the human soul and the stages of spiritual consciousness<sup>348</sup>. And if the reader is not fluent enough in Arabic to understand the work of the great master, Ivan Aguéli suggested to simply observe artistic and architectural works from the Muslim world. Islamic art and Akbari philosophy being dialectically intertwined, it suffices to understand one to be able to both examine or produce the other<sup>349</sup>.

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ivan Aguéli, “L’art Pur,” in Gianni Rocca, ed., *Écrits pour La Gnose* (Milan : Archè, 1988), 42.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

Islamic art became here a direct and clear manifestation of Islamic spirituality and the philosophy of Ibn 'Arabi in particular. Weaving Akbari Sufism and art is what inspired Aguéli's concept of the erasure of the artist who to be able to produce a pure form of art that transcribes well his *hal* had to terminate the interference of his ego in his art. The death of the ego or *nafs* is one of the cornerstones of Sufi thought. The concept of *fana* or the annihilation of the self, very dear to Ibn 'Arabi, is a form of slow and well-codified purification the Sufi undertakes. Through numerous stages, the ego of the Sufi gradually disappears to leave him with a nothingness that corresponds best to the unicity of God-only entity supposed to exist. Aguéli understood the true artist in these same terms; someone whose ego and identity had been eroded to the point that they can become "universal beings."

Other Sufi concepts populate Aguéli's theories of a pure art. *Dhikr*, for example, the main exercise performed by Sufi initiates and consisting of short prayers repeatedly recited in a particular rhythm, was compared to the rhythms one can find in a beautiful and authentic piece of art. Both the soul of a disciple chanting dhikr and the composition of a true painting were linked to a hidden pulse of the universe<sup>350</sup>. A pulse that was, of course, only accessible to the initiates. The notion of *Nur* or divine glow was also shortly used and associated to questions of light in art where he stated: "Artistic truth in a painting is only rendered through the exact and intelligent distribution of light in a painting."<sup>351</sup> Finally, and to add a note of universalism to his Sufi understanding of art, Aguéli explained that finding the proper amount of light in a work of art needed certain superior faculties that "permit a

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 45.

synthesis between the divine glow and the light in a painting”<sup>352</sup>. For him, these faculties corresponded to the Islamic concept of *hikmah* or esoteric wisdom. And to the question of whether non-Muslims could acquire this *hikmah*, Aguéli was convinced that anyone could benefit from the divine innate *hikmah* without necessarily undertaking a thorough Sufi initiation<sup>353</sup>. This short conceptual adjustment helped Aguéli introduce artists he admired such as Paul Cézanne, Picasso and Gauguin among his list of potential producers of pure art. These artists are consequently benefiting from what he called an “unconscious esotericism.”<sup>354</sup>

This last category is perhaps revelatory of Aguéli’s discomfort with some of the paradoxes inherent to his art theories. Seating between his radical critique of a de-spiritualized modernity and his admiration for radical and new modern trends such as cubism,<sup>355</sup> Aguéli had to argue that his favorite artists obeyed some hidden metaphysical doctrines even if they did not know. Yet Cubist and abstract artists’ reliance on spiritual doctrines was not as “unconscious” as Aguéli seemed to think. In fact, esotericism and art were far from seating at two ends of the modern aesthetic discourse and held more commonalities than what modern historiography depicted<sup>356</sup>. The idea that sometime around the second half of the nineteenth century, art forced its way into modernity and cut its ties with bourgeois values and religious traditions is partly erroneous. Yet it seems that modern historiography deliberately eclipsed the spiritual, esoteric, and religious

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>356</sup> On modern historiography’s dismissal of spiritual influences on modern art, see for example Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* ( New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

undercurrents that had participated, although cryptically, in shaping the modern world. Very little writing has been produced until the end of the Twentieth century about the religious and spiritual affiliations of major figures of modern art. It is only during the past three decades that some apprehensive attempts were made to uncover such unexpected, although arguably crucial, spiritual influences. The Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom was the first to tackle the question in his 1966 pioneering article "Art in 'The Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting" where he treated Kandinsky's spiritual leanings. In 1977, he continued exploring this topic unraveling this time Mondrian's veiled spiritual inclinations in an article titled "Paul Klee and the Inner Truth to Nature." The Dutch art historian Carel Blotkamp relied on this article to write his 1994 compelling biography of Piet Mondrian where he emphasized the latter's attachment to Theosophical teachings<sup>357</sup>. According to Blotkamp Mondrian's grids were mirroring Madame Blavatsky's understanding of the mystical horizontals and verticals<sup>358</sup>. On a curatorial level, the major event that challenged an exclusively secular reading of modern art was the 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Modern Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985* held in the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art. More recently, the 2008 *Traces du Sacré* exhibition in the Paris Centre Georges Pompidou showcased 350 works of art from the modern corpus emphasizing the "Influence of spirituality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art."<sup>359</sup>

And yet, even with this relatively recent and timid resurgence of an interest in the spiritual components of modernity, Ivan Aguéli appears in none of these texts or

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<sup>357</sup> Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>359</sup> "Exposition Traces du Sacré," *Centre Pompidou*. Accessed June 18<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/programme/agenda/evenement/cdqqqopo>



exhibitions. This cannot be solely attributed to Aguéli's years spent in Cairo, away from the European scene. After all, the Swedish artist continued to write in French journals and maintained close ties to the Parisian artistic milieu. Aguéli even joined the cubist circle in 1913, and was invited by the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918)<sup>360</sup> to become a contributor in an art book series he directed.<sup>361</sup> Aguéli's exclusive reliance on Sufism in his theories could perhaps explain, at least partly, his marginalization. It is in fact important to notice that the recent interest in the spiritual foundations of modern art was solely focused on Western modern esoteric schools with the notable example of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy. A school that had influenced to different degrees, artists like Gauguin, Kandinsky and Mondrian<sup>362</sup>. Aguéli' Sufi universalist project to transcend the divide between East and West had arguably participated in alienating him from Western artistic discourse, even when this discourse showed interest in the relations between esotericism and modern art.

'Abd al-Rahman 'Illysh lived an arguably similar disavowal. Rashid Rida's description of 'Illysh as a someone deprived of power and prominence<sup>363</sup>, while simply meant to defame the Sufi shaykh, was not completely devoid of truth. The difficulty historians have finding traces of his work and archives reveals the marginalization he

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<sup>360</sup> Apollinaire's undated note with proposal of collaboration, Aguéli' personal archives. Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>361</sup> It is important here to notice that Apollinaire, who was the foremost advocate of Cubism among the Parisian critics, was also interested in the spiritual dimensions of modernity. For example, to establish the historical significance of Cubist art, Apollinaire observed, "Greek art had a purely human conception of beauty. It took man as the measure of perfection. But the art of the new painters takes the infinite universe as its ideal . . . .

They discard more and more the old art of optical illusion and local proportion, in order to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms." Apollinaire, *The Cubist painters: Aesthetic Meditations*. (London: 1913), 18.

<sup>362</sup> See Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 40-44; 125-150.

<sup>363</sup> Rashid Rida, "Bed'a ghariba fi mesr," *al-Manar* ( Jumada al-awal 1325 H) (June-July 1907).

endured. The somewhat ambiguous positioning he took within the modern Egyptian reformist landscape of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century could help explain this marginalization. It is, of course, difficult to pin down the large variety of reformist schools that lived and thrived in the Egyptian capital during this period but one can mention here two prominent trends. First, a reformist movement that sought to modernize the Egyptian state from within relying on a Western inspired developmental program centered around economic reforms, education, health, and urbanization. Many of those who led such movement belonged to the bureaucratic body of *efendy* mentioned earlier or part of an urban entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. The example of Ali Pasha Mubarak (1823-1893) is telling in that regard<sup>364</sup>.

Born in a relatively poor family, he was part of the Egyptian students who benefited from Muhammad Ali's scholarships to pursue his studies in France. Upon his return, he held different governmental positions. Mubarak served as minister heading the state department of education, and led construction projects of railroads, modern irrigation systems and most importantly a large urban program for the country. His book *al-Khitat al-Tawfiqia* where he copiously described and analyzed Egypt's urban and rural layers remains a revealing example of this technocratic reformist trend. Instead of relying on the state's bureaucrats, the second reformist trend was mostly centered around the body of Ulema and the al-Azhar's religious institution. al-Afghani, Abduh and, at a later stage Rashid Rida could comfortably seat within this category. While a sense of urgency in front of Western growing interference in the region moved both groups, their responses were

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<sup>364</sup> On the reformist plans of Ali Mubarak read Nezar alSayyad, "Ali Mubarak's Cairo: Between the Testimony of 'Alamuddin and the Imaginary of the Khitat," Eds., Nezar alSayyad, Irene A. Bierman, Nasser Rabbat, *Making Cairo Medieval* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 49-68.

relatively different. Without wanting to draw a thick line between these two trends -much interchange happened between both- It is safe to assert that, unlike Mubarak who saw that the body that needed to be reformed first was the Egyptian state and its institutions, The main locus of reform according to the Ulema was Islam and the religious establishment.<sup>365</sup> Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh did not belong to any of these two categories. The Sufi shaykh was neither a Western educated bureaucrat nor member of the young Azhari reformist vanguard. His Sufi reconciliatory project was subsequently marginalized and very little of his writings and opinions were preserved. 'Illaysh and Aguéli's views and theories will only be codified, expanded and promoted thanks to their most notable follower; René Guénon, to whom they both owe today much of their renown.

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<sup>365</sup> Read for example Malcolm H. Kerr *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

## Chapter Three

### **The Anonymous Artist: René Guénon and the Birth of Traditionalism**

In March 1910, Ivan Aguéli returned to Paris. His new identity as a Sufi shaykh named ‘Abd al-Hadi did not seem to prevent him from reuniting with the Parisian urban intelligentsia he abruptly left in 1902<sup>366</sup>. He was active in Paris, he wrote for Marie Huot in her *Encyclopédie Contemporaine Illustrée*, and for René Guénon in his newly created journal *La Gnose*. His paintings are exhibited publicly and for the first time in Sweden by the *Konstnarsforbundet* association in 1912 , and even obtained a commission of twenty paintings from Swedish prince Eugene, Duke of Närke. And yet in 1914, Ivan Aguéli dropped what seemed to be an increasingly successful career and left back to Egypt. He escaped the European turmoil of the First World War to find the same conflict striking his adoptive country as well. His financial situation was difficult. He painted with much energy and made more than twenty paintings in two years. The eccentricity of his demeanor and his call for a politically driven Islamic universalism did not last long before raising the

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<sup>366</sup> Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Marie Huot,” 1903, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

suspicion of local authorities in times of war. The Egyptian and British governments accused him of being a pro-Turkish spy operating in Cairo<sup>367</sup>.

He was eventually ordered to leave Egypt in 1915. The Swedish consul offered to lend him money for a journey home but without his paintings. Aguéli preferred to go on boat to Barcelona with his artworks<sup>368</sup>. He arrived in Catalonia in February 1916. Exile worn him out, he was strapped for cash, knew almost no one in Barcelona and his fragile health deteriorated even further. Aguéli was almost half deaf when he was run over by a train, he could not have heard arriving. It was October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917, he was forty-eight years old. Before his death and particularly during his last three years in Paris, Aguéli raised the interest of young Westerners eager to know more about Sufism and Eastern spirituality. René Guénon, a young metaphysician that Aguéli introduced to Sufism and to the ecumenical doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi, was one of them. Guénon grew to become the thinker who expanded and exposed most the esoteric and universalist thought of Ivan Aguéli, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh and Emir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri.

René Guénon was born in Blois in central France on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1886<sup>369</sup>. He was raised in a religious Roman Catholic family of the French local bourgeoisie. His father was an architect descending from a family of wine growers from the region. Despite a fragile health that often prevented him from attending school, Guénon was a good young student who pursued his studies in Blois then Montivault before moving to Paris in October 1904 to

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<sup>367</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 91

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>369</sup> Several biographies were dedicated to René Guénon. Paul Chacornac was his friend and collaborator and wrote in 1958 one of the earliest and arguably most informative biographical text on Guénon titled *The Simple Life of René Guénon* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004); see also Xavier Accart, *René Guénon ou le renversement des clartés : Influence d'un métaphysicien sur la vie littéraire et intellectuelle française (1920-1970)* (Paris: Arché, 2005); Jean-Pierre Laurant, *René Guénon, les enjeux d'une lecture*, (Paris : Dervy, 2006) ; Eric Sablé, *René Guénon, Le visage de l'éternité*, (Paris : Éditions Points, 2013).

study advanced Mathematics in the College Rollin. The eighteen years old Guénon arrived to the French capital at the dawn of the twentieth century. The first Metro line had just opened in Paris connecting the north of the city to its south, the Dreyfus affair was slowly unfolding, *A Trip to the Moon* has just premiered, and the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 opened the city to fifty million visitors. One year after Guénon's arrival, the law of 1905 was promulgated separating the church from the state and officially proclaiming France a secular nation. Paris was witnessing the peak of what will later come to be known as *la belle époque* where technological advances, social changes, economic growth and colonial expansions rhymed with a blind faith in progress.

But the technological optimism of Western industrial societies of *la belle époque* did not charm all Western young free souls. The bohemianism of Montmartre or the modern spleen of Baudelaire had certainly appealed to a sizeable crowd in the capital but were incapable to attract all those indifferent to the narratives of modern progress. Two years before Guénon's arrival to Paris, Ivan Aguéli for instance left the capital and joined what he hoped were Muslim lands that modernity left untarnished. But self-exile was not the sole way out of an overwhelming modern project. Resisting modernity from within its European cradle remained a viable option for many, and the strategies employed did not lack variety<sup>370</sup>.

These strategies often revolved around the belief that the materialist turn Europe took in modern times occulted other forms of knowledge that proved their veracity for centuries. Some of these disenchanted souls believed in the possibility of a happy union

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<sup>370</sup> On the effervescence of Occultist movements during *la belle époque* Read for example René Alleau, *Histoire des Sciences Occultes* (lausanne : Editions Rencontre, 1965).

between esoteric ancient practices and modern sciences and in a large reconciliatory project that will preserve what they saw as the spiritual foundations of the Western world. The Theosophist group created around Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891) is the most active example of such organizations. Founded in New York in 1875, it was self-described as "an unsectarian body of seekers after Truth, who endeavor to promote Brotherhood and strive to serve humanity."<sup>371</sup>

The modern esoteric circles of Paris tried, perhaps in convoluted manners, to resolve the difficult conflict between science and metaphysics both by enlarging the scope of science- to include esoteric forms of knowledge- and by liberating metaphysics from the dominance of the church. This resulted in a rather heterogeneous set of groups, sects, associations and secret societies that were rejected or simply disregarded by scientific orthodoxies<sup>372</sup>. Several figures succeeded in gathering a relatively large audience, collecting funds and creating heated controversies despite the disdain they provoked among the academic public. One of them was a French physician and hypnotist named Gérard Encausse, more famous by his esoteric pseudonym: Papus (1865-1916)<sup>373</sup>.

Papus graduated from the Medicine School of Paris with a strong background in pharmacy and chemistry. He was a learned man from the local urban bourgeoisie who followed a peculiar path that took him from the seats of Parisian universities to the court of

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<sup>371</sup> G. J. Melton, ed., "Theosophical Society," *New Age Encyclopedia* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, 1990).

<sup>372</sup> On this topic, read Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Antoine Faivre & Jacob Needleman, ed., *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (Freiburg : Herder & Herder, 1995).

<sup>373</sup> On the life and thought of Gérard Encausse, read Marie-Sophie André et Christophe Beaufiles, *Papus, biographie, la Belle époque de l'occultisme* (Paris : Berg international, 1995) and Philippe Encausse, *Papus, sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris : Pythagore, 1932.)

Tsar Nicholas II and his wife to whom he presumably predicted the end of their empire<sup>374</sup>. This last event while unproven reveals the desire of Papus's followers to depict their master as a better version of Rasputin. The French master was an occultist who knew modern sciences, a modern scientist who could foresee the future, and a mystic with an academic degree. This urgent desire to draw a possible conjunction between modern sciences and ancient esoteric knowledges is one of the main traits characterizing the French esoteric circles of late nineteenth century. Papus was of course at the center of this effort and he vehemently resisted the promotion of modern science as the only possible vehicle of reliable knowledge<sup>375</sup>.

It is difficult to enumerate all the occultist and esoteric groups to which Papus belonged, created or helped found. When Guénon met Papus and joined his order, the latter was a member of the French Gnostic church, an ex-collaborator of Madame Blavatsky in her Theosophical society, a regular contributor to occultist periodicals and a staunch member of the Freemasonic Swedenborgian rite. This multiplicity of affiliations and belongings was not unusual. These lodges, orders, churches and societies formed a relatively loose network of groups who contested the monopoly of science over truth at a time when the Christian church seemed incapable of standing as a legitimate source of an alternative knowledge. The critiques they formulated, the solutions they proposed and the tools they used to propagate their message remained loosely similar. Besides the reformist tone they often used, the universalist stretch they generally adopted and the historicity they all claimed,

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<sup>374</sup> The story appears in numerous texts but fully reported in Henri Rollin, *l'Apocalypse de notre temps* (Galliamrd, 1938)

<sup>375</sup> This argument is at the center of one of his most famous works titled *Traité élémentaire de science occulte* published first in 1888.



this amalgam of groups had a pronounced interest in Eastern spiritualities. Hinduism and Buddhism in particular gained the attention of the esoteric circles of Paris.

### **Tradition, Traditions and Traditionalism**

The young Guénon whose fragile health had again prevented him from continuing his formal studies in Paris, had immersed himself in the studies of Eastern spiritualities. His encounter with Papus, while short and conflictual, helped direct his interest partly towards non-Western metaphysical constructs. Guénon was an avid reader of Hindu and Taoist texts and published in the journal *La Gnose* between 1909 and 1912 many of his commentaries on Hindu and Taoist sacred books. He ultimately produced in 1921 his first book titled *General Introduction to Hindu doctrines*. Guénon first wrote this text with the intention of defending it as a doctorate dissertation in La Sorbonne University. Sylvain Levi (1863-1935), prominent Indologist and professor of Sanskrit and Indian mysticism encouraged Guénon to pursue his researches on Hindu Vedanta and had presumably promised him to support his work in case he wished to present it as an independent dissertation project. Later, Levi had only reluctantly fulfilled his promise to Guénon. And while formally writing an official statement for the text to be considered by an academic committee he criticized in the same letter Guénon's work for its lack of academic rigor. Levi who was interested in the idea of a full and thorough study of Hindu Vedantic texts seemed perplexed by Guénon's incapacity to read the Vedanta within the larger context of Hindu

scriptures. “He wants to exclude all other elements that do not correspond to his understanding of Hinduism. For him, all is in the Vedanta,”<sup>376</sup> Levi wrote in his letter.

Guénon never obtained his doctorate and had later developed a fierce critique of academia that he placed at the center of most of Western modern problems. The link between this early disappointment and his pronounced distaste for academic writing and research methods is more than probable<sup>377</sup>. The second argument Levi proposed justifying his reluctance regarding Guénon’s work was the latter’s firm belief in “the mystical transmission of some primordial truth that had appeared to humans since the very first ages of humanity.”<sup>378</sup> Indeed, the first chapter of his dissertation -and later book- was dedicated to the idea of a perennial universal truth he coined as Tradition – with a capital T. Traditionalism will later become the school of thought gathering all the followers and disciples of René Guénon.

For Guénon, Tradition with capital T is a nonhuman metaphysical knowledge that crossed different regions, eras and civilizations adopting various manifestations yet maintaining an inalterable core<sup>379</sup>. The core of this transhistorical verity cannot be enunciated verbally but could only be truly known through the direct experience of an esoteric tradition. On the other hand, traditions - with a lower-case t - refers to the religious, mystical and metaphysical doctrines that humanity knew since its creation. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity are, for example authentic traditions. While Tradition is

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<sup>376</sup> From the letter sent by Sylvain Levi to Dean Ferdinand Brunot cited by Jean Pierre Laurant in « l’argumentation historique dans l’œuvre de René Guénon,” *L’annuaire Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, Vol.80-81 (1971), 45.

<sup>377</sup> This connection was for instance defended by Jean Pierre Laurant in his *René Guénon : les enjeux d’une lecture* (Paris : Devry, 2006), 110.

<sup>378</sup> Jean Pierre Laurant, « l’argumentation historique dans l’œuvre de René Guénon,” 45.

<sup>379</sup> René Guénon, *Introduction to the Hindu Doctrines* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perrenis, 2004), 54-57.

unique, traditions vary on their exoteric manifestations. For Guénon, belonging to an existing mystical tradition remained a central requirement that he pushed his disciples to follow. The first universal and ultimate Truth, while accessible through a large variety of religious systems, is anterior to all religions. For Guénon, all esoteric movements, from the most widely spread religions to marginal freemasonic secret societies are more or less recognizable manifestations of the primordial Tradition. These traditions are therefore different in their regional and historical specificities and united in their reference to a first Tradition. In one of his earliest articles published in December 1909 in *La Gnose* and titled “Gnosis and the Spiritualist Schools”, Guénon was already building the foundations of his concept of a timeless universal wisdom and wrote that Tradition is “contained in the sacred books of all people, a Tradition which in reality is everywhere the same, in spite of all the diverse forms it assumes to adapt itself to each race and period.”<sup>380</sup>

The idea of a primordial universalist essence to religions is not foreign to a European mind, St Augustine and Plotinus, just to name two of the major thinkers of classical antiquity had already pointed to the idea of a perennial truth to Christianity that preceded Jesus’s message.<sup>381</sup> Christianity as practiced by the Roman church was understood as a temporal manifestation of a “truer” Christianity that is as old as human

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<sup>380</sup> René Guénon, “Gnose et les écoles spiritualistes » in his book *Melanges* (Paris : Gallimard, 1990), 107.

<sup>381</sup> Augustine wrote: “ Again, when I said: “In our times, this is the Christian religion which to know and follow is most secure and most certain salvation,” I did so with reference to the name only, not to the thing itself of which this is only the name. For what is now called the Christian religion existed even among the ancients and was not lacking from the beginning of the human race until “Christ came in the flesh.” From that time, true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian. For, after the Resurrection and the Ascension into heaven, when the disciples had begun to preach Him and many believed, “the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch,” as is written. For this reason, I said: “In our times, this is the Christian religion,” not because it did not exist in former times, but because it had received this name in later times.” Augustine of Hippo, *The Retractions*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Mary Inez Bogan,(Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 52.

race. For Augustine, the mutability of this primordial truth is what permitted the birth of Christianity. As far as Guénon is concerned, *all* authentic religions, myths, symbols, icons and sacred art emanate from the capacity Tradition has to constantly recast. This was not an exclusively Christian affair.

For Guénon's followers, the existence of such original supra-human Tradition is an unprovable axiom from which all other arguments emanate. And despite the oddness of the first axiom, the resulting arguments traditionalists made are connected to each other in a strictly rational and coherent manner. Islam, for example, was always interpreted by many of Guénon's followers such as Frithjof Schuon and Martin Lings in rather rigorous historical terms relating it to the historical, geographic and socio-political conditions of its inception in seventh century Arabia<sup>382</sup>. At the same time, they never contest the divine authenticity of Muhammad's message. In that sense, Traditionalism appears as an overall coherent and rational construct built on top of one single metaphysical and de facto irrational claim revolving around the existence of a perennial wisdom. And when traditionalists interpret the ways in which this Wisdom flows, migrates and transforms, they scrupulously follow logical patterns of argumentation. A rational drive that never reaches the basis of their argument- which remained unapologetically Illogical. One can assume that the historical readings Guénon and his followers offered were appealing to a large crowd of readers both because of their logical consistency and their inherent foundational irrationality.

Guénon , as noted above, was not foreign to what can be loosely termed as modern European esotericist circles. Theosophists, Occultists, Spiritists, Martinists, Freemasons,

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<sup>382</sup> Martin Lings, *Muhammad, His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2006) 8-35; Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity / Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2008). 97-98.

Christian reformists and others shared many of Guénon's claims. The belief in the existence of an esoteric truth lying beyond the scope of science added to a harsh critique of modern materialism are the most common characteristics joining him to most of these movements. Yet, after his first published text on tradition and Hinduism, Guénon wrote two books where he intended to debunk the claims of his contemporaries from the esoteric milieu: *Theosophism: History of a Pseudo Religion* in 1921 and *The Spiritist Fallacy* published two years later in 1923. As obvious from their titles, the two books offer a heavy and frontal attack on both Theosophism and its founder Madame Blavatsky (1831-891) and Spiritism with its main theorist known under his pen name as Allan Kardec (1804-1869). Guénon argued that these two spiritual trends constituted a bigger threat to authentic metaphysical religions than atheism or anticlerical secularism.

Unsurprisingly, Guénon did not reprobate the two movements for the absence of a scientific basis to their claims, he simply denounced incoherencies they showed within their mystical logic. For example, he blamed spiritists for claiming to evoke during their seance "a presence that does not at all represent the real, personal being"<sup>383</sup> of the deceased person invoked. Simply because the souls of dead individuals "pass to another state of being"<sup>384</sup> after their death and are thus inaccessible to living humans. While those attending the séance think they are communicating with the soul of a dead person, they are in fact, according to Guénon, in contact with merely "the inferior elements that the individual has left behind in the terrestrial domain following the dissolution of the human composite which we call death."<sup>385</sup> What he condemned the Theosophists for was their

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<sup>383</sup> René Guénon, *The Spiritist Fallacy* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perrenis, 2004),47.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

appropriation and distortion of Eastern metaphysical concepts without acquiring the necessary knowledge to interpret foreign mystical notions. He argued for instance that the concept of reincarnation as presented by Blavatsky was far removed from its Eastern origin and was nothing but a modern idea that “appears to have materialized around 1830 and 1848 in certain French socialist circles.”<sup>386</sup> Across his book, Guénon blamed the Theosophists for numerous historical inaccuracies that he attributed to their reliance on “uninitiated orientalist”<sup>387</sup>. These mistakes range from a distorted understanding of Karma to a fallacious interpretation of the notions of Mahatma<sup>388</sup> or Lamaism<sup>389</sup>.

The hostility held against these European esoteric schools is predictable and arguably natural. Guénon, Blavatsky, Kardec and others performed on a common theoretical ground and frictions were to be expected. Despite the similarities these movements manifested, Guénon greatly differed from his contemporaries when he openly dismissed the possibility of building a new universal mystical movement. For him, there was nothing to be invented because the modern world, corresponding to a dark age of Western civilization, offered very little space for an authentic spirituality to be conceived from scratch<sup>390</sup>. Wisdom and truth, as he argued in his writings, were to be rather found in existing religions. Instead of constructing a new global spiritual project like the Theosophists were proposing, Guénon was advocating for a better understanding of the esoteric universal core of existing metaphysical traditions<sup>391</sup>. These traditions, in their exoteric manifestation should be protected and respected. Forcing them to a formal visible

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<sup>386</sup> René Guénon, *Theosophy; History of a Pseudo Religion* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perrenis, 2004), 104.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. Footnote 16.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-50.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>390</sup> René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perrenis, 2004), 7.

<sup>391</sup> Guénon, *Introduction to Hindu Doctrines*, 54-57.

unity is neither possible nor, if ever attained, beneficial. For Guénon, what needs to be constructed is neither a new universal religion, a mystical Esperanto nor a modern conglomerate of old traditions, but a new consciousness where some individuals, through gnostic training, could observe the inherent unitive Truth at the core of each existing metaphysical tradition. And for the twentieth century, these authentic traditions only existed in the Orient, Hinduism being the most unaltered example alive<sup>392</sup>.

Despite the predominant role Guénon gave to Hinduism, only one third of his first book was actually dedicated to Hindu doctrines to which, according to the name of the book, he was proposing an introduction. The majority of the book's chapters were dedicated to a historical overview of what "East" meant and to the methodological errors classical orientalists committed in their interpretation of Eastern religious traditions. The acuity and originality of his critiques reveal an early and already deep understanding of the methodological and ethical problems a European academic might face when studying the East. First, Guénon advised orientalist writers to assimilate Eastern cultures "by placing oneself as far as possible at the viewpoint of those who conceived it."<sup>393</sup> He argued that "the erudite orientalism"<sup>394</sup> of his contemporaries, while well informed and academically constructed, misses the "true idea"<sup>395</sup> behind the doctrine studied. Mastering a language, its grammar, rhetoric and its linguistics can only channel a sophisticated orientalism that drowns the reader with an encyclopedic knowledge without offering a glimpse into the truth of that tradition.

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<sup>392</sup> René Guénon, *Studies in Hinduism* (Hillside: Sophia Pernennis, 2001) 86.

<sup>393</sup> Guénon, *Introduction to Hindu Doctrines*. 3.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

For Guénon, this truth was invisible to classical orientalists due to the unsuitable historical method they employed. He blamed his contemporaries for “studying Eastern civilizations as one might study some civilization long since extinct.”<sup>396</sup> According to Guénon, a valid historical study of the East requires a close examination of current living Eastern societies, considering them as a good and honest replica of their ancestors. For that purpose, he proposed a rather novel conception of time. History as Guénon conceived it did not follow a linear scheme of development but, to use a metaphor he favored, consisted of a succession of “concentric circles, arranged hierarchically according to their greater or lesser removal from the primordial Principle”<sup>397</sup>. Reading history consisted thus in determining the distance separating one period, civilization or culture from the original and central verity. Most importantly, this distance does not follow an evolutionary scheme where all civilizations are constantly progressing towards a better future. Some civilizations are closer to the center and therefore considered more authentic to eventually recede and lose their shine centuries later. This set back has nothing stable as regaining a closer position to the center is always possible<sup>398</sup>. The pace, rhythm, repetition and frequency of these civilizational leaps is contingent to each society. For Guénon, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe was on the outer shell of history, receding since the end of the Middle ages<sup>399</sup>. India and the Islamic world were, on the other hand, close to the center. Studying the East was therefore more informative, studying their present was a legitimate tool for that purpose.

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>397</sup> René Guénon, “The idea of the Center in the Traditions of Antiquity,” *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol 15, No.3 & 4 ( Summer-Autumn, 1983).

<sup>398</sup> René Guénon, *East and West* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perrenis, 2004), 16.

<sup>399</sup> Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 15.



Instead of following the fluid dynamics of historical processes, Guénon chose to trace the contours of its unchanged core. The strong belief in one transcendent unity between religions had caused him to turn a blind eye to both the historical frictions between religions and to the fundamental differences within each spiritual tradition. The quest of unity as fundamental premise to historical enquiry led, predictably one might say, to a tantalizing yet untextured narrative. Guénon escaped the empirical academic approach to history that he qualified as “mere scholarship and pointless research into questions of detail”<sup>400</sup> to prefer a philosophical attitude where the immutable concept replaces material facts in historical enquiries. Mircea Eliade, prominent historian of religions and renowned sympathizer of the traditionalist thesis of Guénon wrote in that regard:

“ What Guénon say of the tradition should not be understood on the level of historical reality. These speculations constitute a universe of systematically articulated meanings: they are to be compared to a great poem or a novel. It is the same with Marxist or Freudian ‘explanations’: they are true if they are considered as imaginary universes. The ‘proofs’ are few and uncertain – they correspond to the historical, social and psychological ‘realities’ of a novel or of a poem.<sup>401</sup>”

It is therefore a history liberated from the burden of proofs that Guénon offered; taking shelter within the realm of fiction and thinking the universe as one entity and all history as one multilayered unit. This global, trans-religious and trans-ethnic history would have probably been unimaginable in Europe a few centuries before Guénon whose universalism remains inherently modern. The historical shell of Guénon’s ahistorical narratives remained one of the major internal contradictions in the French author’s work.

In 1924, six years before leaving France and settling in Egypt for the remaining days of his life, Guénon published *East and West*. The book further pushed the arguments

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<sup>400</sup> Guénon, *East and West*, 16.

<sup>401</sup> Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 291.

already proposed in his *Introduction to Hindu Doctrines* and confirmed his reputation as one of the most prominent and widely read metaphysicians of the French capital. As the title of the book suggests, East and West are placed as opposite elements in an equation where universal Truth is the central component. The book's structure mirrors this dichotomy; divided in two parts, the first named "Western Illusions" debunking Western claims of superiority and progress followed by a second part he called "How the Differences Might be Bridged" and proposing practical ways in which this rapprochement could be properly effectuated. In his book Guénon manifested a strong prejudice in favor of the East, portrayed as the sole authentic receptacle of wisdom in front of a lost and decaying West. But Guénon subtly avoided depicting the chasm between East and West as fundamentally irresolvable and argued that, despite the dark age the West was undergoing, there were few remaining spaces where a properly Western authentic wisdom survived. Freemasonry was the most notable of these spaces.

The exception Guénon gave to masonic lodges help reveal the nuanced approach the French metaphysician had for the East and West divide. Guénon did not conceive the difference between the two as fundamentally religious, racial, ethnic or even geographical. The split is rather related to a general attitude towards existing metaphysical traditions. What is called Western world is generally and with few exceptions hostile to its own spiritual legacies while the East has, also with few exceptions, a close and uninterrupted tie to its traditions. In a sense, the West became a large metaphor to anti-traditionalism and the East to an attachment to revealed spiritual messages. There was then an East in the West represented by a few esoteric groups, and a West in the East manifested in burgeoning modernizing political groups in the Islamic world. Without completely falling in

a simple anti-Europeanism or a blind idealization of the East, Guénon was developing a critique of the Western modern world that he thought could be happily restored and united with the East through acknowledging the latter's spiritual superiority. To further develop the idea of a necessary Eastern spiritual tutelage to the Western world, Guénon published in 1927, three years after *East and West*, his book titled *The Crisis of the Modern World*. The authors' best seller is a pessimistic account of the post-Renaissance Western drift into a dark age of ignorance and decadence.

Lamenting over a degenerate Western world and predicting its imminent perishment under the weight of modernity was a common intellectual exercise in the twenties of the past century. In 1926, A year before Guénon's book, André Malraux published his epistolary essay titled *The Temptation of the West* where a Chinese young man living in Europe was exchanging letters with a French friend in China. The essay situated China as the perfect counterpart to the Western world and the letters of the French imaginary traveler abound in concubines, eunuchs, and magical creatures corresponding to the orientalist stereotype of a dream-like and inherently mysterious Far East. The Chinese character, on the other side, delivers in his letters a rather accurate portrayal of the city of Paris in the interwar period. Despite the different imaginaries they offer, the two fictional friends share in their letters a contempt for modernity that they accuse of crushing both the semi-magical East and drowning Europe even further in a Godless materialism. Modernity is thus viewed as a universal problem, created in the West but ultimately reaching the Far East with the same destructive results.

This idea of modernity as a cross-cultural global misadventure was also shared around the same time by other European thinkers such as Nicolas Berdiaev who wrote his

*New Medieval Ages* in 1924 where he proposed the Medieval social and political system as a valid model to retract to. A model that will ultimately save the world from the global damages humanist modernity provoked. In His *Crisis of the Modern World* Guénon, while inscribing himself within this dark messianic atmosphere of some of his contemporaries, did not see modernity as an all-encompassing irreversible and global calamity. Unlike the characters of Malraux, only the Western world was suffocating under the burden of modernity. The East -understood essentially in the context of this book as India, China and the Islamic world- were still partially constructed around traditions that protected them. Guénon did not only contest the universality of modernity; he also redistributed the roles and ascribed to the East the mission of saving the West from its crisis. Some civilizations are fully traditional, as Guénon argued, some are less and others are completely detached from their traditions, and “As far as the East is concerned, the identification of tradition with the entire civilization is fundamentally justifiable.”<sup>402</sup> Guénon, in his crusade against the West, did not define modernism in different terms than those offered by modernists themselves. All what had consciously, and sometimes proudly, constituted the core of modernism was attacked: progress, humanism, rationalism, relativism, positivism, individualism, materialism, egalitarianism. All past are accused of fueling the seeds of Europe’s decadence. The Industrial revolution, Enlightenment and the Renaissance are the sad milestones marking the beginning of this regression. Guénon considered that on a global scale, and in comparison to all previous human civilizations, the philosophical foundations of Western modernity were simply the most absurd.

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<sup>402</sup> Guénon, *Introduction to Hindu Doctrines*, 89.

Modern science was not spared Guénon's diatribes. The sciences of his time were inherently modern and Western, and as far as Guénon is concerned, there is nothing gratifying about these two adjectives. Modern sciences were nothing but "degenerate 'residues' of the ancient traditional sciences."<sup>403</sup> Claiming that modern science is a disinterested, detached objective examination of the material world is, as Guénon argued, fundamentally wrong<sup>404</sup>. The idea of science as an autonomous and closed system only referring to itself for answers was a cornerstone of modern science and formed for Guénon the reason behind Europe's blindness. Guénon does not deny some of the advances in human's living conditions that modern sciences permitted. Nor does he exclude them from his project of a new and better world. Guénon contested modern science's monopoly over knowledge and its incapacity to acknowledge its own limits. The critique of rationalist totalitarianism was not uncommon in European academic and intellectual circles of the interwar period. Let us be reminded that Karl Popper has also published his *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* in 1934 where he criticized the classical scientific method and its reliance on Induction and called for a more critical approach to science based on falsability. Shortly after, Friederich Hayek started developing his critiques of the invasive nature of modern scientific methods and their incapacity to interpret social movements for example. The critique of 'scientism', or the forceful application of modern scientific methods as the sole way for constructing knowledge, was thus visible from within scientific and academic circles- Both Popper and Hayek were renowned university professors. What Guénon reproached to modern sciences was different, he criticized scientism for its simple and

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<sup>403</sup> René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (Hillside: Sophia Perennis, 2004) 5.

<sup>404</sup> Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, 45.

radical rejection of Traditional metaphysical and religious learning as possible vectors of knowledge.

Unlike Modern science, Traditional learning as defended by Guénon studies permanence rather than change. It is concerned only with the perennial essences and principles behind the historical and cosmic changes in the universe. It takes a synthetic form and goes across scientific disciplines to examine the common ground between *all* forms of knowledge. But most importantly, traditional learning comfortably accepts religious, and metaphysical knowledges within its limits. The compatibility that Schuon, close follower of Guénon, saw between “symbolic expressions of tradition and the material discoveries established by modern science”<sup>405</sup> is at the center of this new epistemological approach. It does not aim to contradict or replace modern science, but to enlarge the array of possible channels of knowledge where modern science becomes one component among others. To put it simply, traditionalists would never argue the earth is flat. They would rather claim there is a different imaginary where earth is symbolically flat and central to the universe and that, viewed from that specific perspective, the claim of earth’s flatness is ‘true’. The radicality of such claims is what made *La Gnose*, the journal directed by Guénon, attractive to eccentric, revolutionary and militant figures from the Parisian intellectual scene. One of them, an anarchist Sufi convert found in the pages of Guénon’s journal a proper venue to spread his ideas about Sufism, Ibn ‘Arabi and the radical universality of Islam.

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<sup>405</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003) 8.

## Leaving the Modern World : The Sufi Life of René Guénon

René Guénon met with Ivan Aguéli in early 1910. The Swedish painter had just arrived in Paris coming from Geneva where he spent a difficult winter. Aguéli's financial situation was complicated since his departure from Egypt in 1909, relying almost uniquely on his mother's help. Back to Paris, he reconciled with Marie Huot and quickly reintegrated in the Parisian artistic and intellectual milieu<sup>406</sup>. But this was not the young Swedish anarchist revolutionary who left to Egypt in 1910, he was 'Abd al-Hadi 'Aqili, The Sufi artist and the *Muqaddim*, that is to say representative, of Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman -'Illaysh and of the Akbari tradition in the European continent. It was under this name and this title that he met with René Guénon and convinced him to follow the Sufi path of his master. Guénon, who just founded the journal *La Gnose* in November 1909, converted to Sufi Islam in 1910<sup>407</sup> and invited Aguéli to publish his work in his newly created periodical. The first text of Ivan Aguéli to be published in *La Gnose*, was also the first text of Ibn 'Arabi to ever be translated and introduced to a French audience called "An Epistle Called « The Gift » On the Manifestation of the Prophet."<sup>408</sup>

Twenty years passed between Guénon's conversion and his decision to settle in Cairo in 1930. During these two decades, Guénon's views on Islam did not particularly change and very little could indicate a stronger inclination towards Islamic esotericism. As

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<sup>406</sup> Sedgwick, *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 26.

<sup>407</sup> Paul Chacornac, in his biography of René Guénon stated that he converted in 1912. He deduced this date from the dedication Guénon wrote for his book *The Symbolism of the Cross* where he specified the year of his conversion to Islam which was 1329 in the Islamic calendar. Chacornac in his conversion from Islamic to Georgian calendars made a mistake since the year 1329 H fits entirely within the year 1911. But Guénon's letters published by Michel Chazottes in *René Guénon et la Provence: Correspondance inédite avec son ami Tony Grangier (1924-1939)* 109 revealed that Guénon wrote to his friend Tony Grangler he converted in 1910. Guénon even underlined the date on the document.

<sup>408</sup> Ivan Aguéli, "Épître intitulée le Cadeau sur la manifestation du prophète, » *La Gnose*, no. 12 (December 1910), 270–5.

a matter of fact, and during all these years, Guénon continued writing mostly about Hindu theology and modern spiritual movements. Islam was frequently mentioned in his early books and articles but only as an example amongst others of an authentic Eastern spirituality. It seems that prior to 1930 Guénon's affiliation with Sufi Islam did not prevent him from adhering to other esoteric schools. He refused to think that one tradition could hold a full monopoly over truth and according to some of his contemporaries, Guénon's decision to adopt Islam rather than Hinduism was simply because "one is born Hindu and cannot become one."<sup>409</sup> Before his final move to Egypt, he often described Islam as a spirituality that could comfortably "occupy an intermediary position between East and West"<sup>410</sup> and as a religion that is both geographically and spiritually closer to Western civilization than other oriental religions.

Like Aguéli, Guénon was also impressed by the supposed complete fusion between religion and social, political and cultural practices in the Muslim world. The secular West, unable to understand the nature and extent of this fusion, committed political plunders in the region.<sup>411</sup> Curiously, Guénon considered Islam an Eastern religion while often describing Christianity and Judaism to be Western. For him, what made Islam an oriental religion is the sharp and clear distinction it imposed between esotericism and exotericism. Guénon does not deny Christianity and Judaism this duality, visible for example in the Kabbalah and in the Catholic Scholastic tradition, he simply argued in his books that the line between esotericism and exotericism in the West was partly erased because of the

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<sup>409</sup> Chacornac, *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, 35.

<sup>410</sup> Guénon, *Introduction to Hindu Doctrines*, 81.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.



aggressive advent of modernity. Islam, guarding both its inward and outward cores, was therefore more oriental, or in other words, more authentic.

In Cairo, Guénon was noticed for his strict observance of Islam's exoteric religious requirements, fasting and praying daily in the Al-Hussein mosque.<sup>412</sup> But it was the esoteric Sufi teachings of Islam that he used to further push his traditionalist and ecumenical philosophy. In his texts, Guénon was rarely interested in the legal or exoteric teachings of Islam. All his references were attached to Sufi doctrines, schools and masters. Unsurprisingly, Guénon considered Ibn 'Arabi and his concept of a universal man to be the main tenet of an Islamic esoteric universalism. Interpreting the work of the Sufi Medieval mystic in a revealing paragraph, Guénon wrote.

"Mohyddin Ibn 'Arabi says :” A real sage does not bind himself to any belief”, because he is beyond all particular beliefs, having known their common principle. The one who has reached this point is the one who has understood the common base of all the traditional doctrines and found the truth that lies behind the diversity and multiplicity of the external forms. Because there is only one truth. and as Muslim insiders say: The Doctrine of Unity is unique.”<sup>413</sup>

One of Guénon's most eloquent articles on Sufi esotericism was titled “The Shell and the Kernel.” The title is borrowed from Ibn 'Arabi who used the same metaphor for one of his treaties; the expression is of course referring to exotericism as the casing of a fruit and esotericism as its pith. Guénon argued this distinction exists in all authentic traditions. Confucianism for example represented China's exoteric school of spirituality and Taoism its esoteric variant<sup>414</sup>. The distinction between esotericism and exotericism and the

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<sup>412</sup> William Rory Dickson, “René Guénon and Traditionalism,” in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 596.

<sup>413</sup> Cited in « René Guénon et la Provence: Correspondance inédite avec son ami Tony Grangier (1924-1939) » *Les Cahiers Verts*, no.4 (2009). 109.

<sup>414</sup> René Guénon, *Insights into Islamic esotericism and Taoism* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 10.

universality of the esoteric core of all religions remained the central tenet of Guénon's understanding of metaphysics. This idea cannot be dissociated from the Akbari ecumenism proposed by Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and his later students, Shaykh 'Illysh and Ivan Aguéli. The latter was the first, and for a long time the only Westerner to advocate for a new reading of Ibn 'Arabi. Ivan Aguéli, one should be reminded, had published in *La Gnose*, then directed by René Guénon, an article he titled "The Universality of Islam", where he argued that Islam's balance between the esoteric and exoteric realms and therefore its capacity to address the "average man" is the source of its universality.<sup>415</sup>

The story of a Westerner who, at the beginning of the Twentieth century, saw in Sufi Islam a gateway towards a mystical universalism brings Guénon close to the Louis Massignon (1883-1962) as well. The French scholar is one of the early Western historians of Sufism and offered the first, and perhaps to this day the most compelling study of the early Muslim mystic known as al-Hallaj (858-922). His studies took him to different parts of the Arab world and it was in Iraq, in 1907, while living with a Muslim tribe and studying Sufi texts that he had a mystical epiphany which led him to convert (or revert) to Christianity. Massignon then spent much of his work and energy uncovering the commonalities between Muslim and Christian mysticisms. Guénon and Massignon met furtively in 1925, but had in reality aside from some biographical similarities little to share<sup>416</sup>. The most obvious difference is that Guénon, unlike Massignon, converted to Islam and argued that Christianity, perverted by modern influences, was not a viable mystical

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<sup>415</sup> Ivan Aguéli, "L'universalité de L'Islam" in Gianni Rocca, ed., *Écrits pour La Gnose* (Milan : Archè, 1988), 81-101.

<sup>416</sup> Xavier Accart, *René Guénon ou le renversement des clartés : Influence d'un métaphysicien sur la vie littéraire et intellectuelle française (1920-1970)* (Paris: Archè, 2005), 105.

option anymore. The second and more primordial divergence concerns the kind of interest they had in Sufism. Massignon's work on Islamic mysticism was mainly scholarly; he wanted Sufism to be studied more and better. Guénon, however, remained suspicious of academic debates and intellectual productions. Despite the similarities linking their intellectual and spiritual paths. The two men represent, in fact, two divergent Western attitudes towards Islam.

René Guénon lived in Cairo for twenty one years from 1930 until his death in 1951. Upon his arrival in Egypt, he changed his name from René Guénon to 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya, started wearing a traditional costume long ago abandoned by the local learned elite and quickly mastered the Egyptian dialect. He married the daughter of a Sufi Shaykh and together had four children. But before arriving to Cairo, Guénon had already started writing a book on Christian symbolism titled *The Symbolism of the Cross*. The book was published in France in 1931, a year after Guénon's arrival in Cairo. Guénon's biographers often settled on the first page of the book comports a dedication that reads: "To the venerated memory of al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ilaysh al-Kabir al-'Alim al-Maliki al-Maghribi, to whom I owe the first idea of this book. Mesr al-Qahirah 1329-1349 H."

The dates at the end of the dedication refer successively to the year of Guénon's conversion to Islam and the year of his departure to Cairo. Concerning the ways in which 'Ilaysh inspired Guénon "the first idea of the book," it seems that the two men exchanged letters between 1910 and 1922 and that 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ilaysh gave Guénon a written masonic interpretation of the word Allah in which the Sufi shaykh claimed that the letters of the Divine name written in Arabic corresponded respectively to a ruler, compass and a

triangle<sup>417</sup>. Comparing the written name of God to masonic symbols is both rare and courageous emanating from a Muslim religious scholar. This becomes even more peculiar when one knows that this interpretation was addressed to a French metaphysician that 'Illysh had never personally met. This capacity to produce unusual hermeneutic twists with the aim of attracting European esotericists to Islam is in perfect continuity with Emir 'Abd al-Qadir's project of an esoteric rapprochement between East and West. 'Illysh, one might say, succeeded and Guénon ended up choosing Sufism as his path towards metaphysical universalism, thus becoming one of the major figures of Islamic Sufi revival in the twentieth century. Immediately after settling in Cairo, Guénon joined the Sufi Shadhili Arabi tariqa and became the disciple of Shaykh Salama, the successor of 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illysh at the head of this Sufi group<sup>418</sup>.

In his book *The Symbolism of the Cross*, Guénon argues the Christian symbol is a perfect graphic representation of Ibn 'Arabi's concept of the universal man<sup>419</sup>. Making this statement, Guénon said being inspired by the words of "a personage who occupied a very high position in Islam" and who supposedly said "if Christians have the sign of the cross, Moslems have the doctrine of it."<sup>420</sup> The man he is alluding to is with no doubt 'Abd al Rahman 'Illysh. And the translation of *al-insan al kamil* as the universal man -and not as the perfect man- is the same formulated by Ivan Aguéli. In this book, Ibn 'Arabi's universal man is assimilated to the figure of the *Jivanmukta*<sup>421</sup> in Hinduism: the one who have reached during his life the state of full self-realization, self-knowledge and union with the

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<sup>417</sup> Michel Valsan, *L'Islam et la fonction de René Guénon* (Paris: Editions de l'œuvre,1984), 31.

<sup>418</sup> Chacornac, *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, 78

<sup>419</sup> René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross* ( Hillside: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 17.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 82.

divine. Guénon argued that the horizontal line of the cross represents the individual and human path towards perfection, the vertical line corresponding to the ascension of the initiate into superior states of being. The Islamic counterpart to the Christian cross is the night journey of Muhammad, known as the *al-Isra' wa al-Mi'raj*, where the prophet is said to have travelled “horizontally” from Mecca to Jerusalem where he led the prayer with other prophets, then ascended vertically towards heavens. Muhammad, Jesus, and Hindu Yogis are thus all manifestations of the universal man. All traditional doctrines as Guénon has argued “symbolize the realization of the universal man by a sign that is everywhere the same, because it is one of those? directly attached to the primordial tradition. That sign is the sign of the cross.”<sup>422</sup> Guénon recuperated Ibn ‘Arabi, the Sufi saint that ‘Abd al-Qadir chose to be the cornerstone of an Islamic esoteric rapprochement with Christianity, and used him to help the Akbari project reach non-monotheistic faiths (Hinduism and Taoism in this last case). In *The Symbolism of the Cross*, Guénon pushed Sufi universalism outside of a comfortable inter-monotheistic dialogue and rendered it into a truly global metaphysical stance.

### **Sacred Art: Its Nature, Function and Science.**

Art is one of the discursive instruments Guénon used to reinforce his argument about a universal esoteric bond between all spiritual traditions. Overall, *The Symbolism of the Cross* is a learned and detailed exploration of the supposedly graphic varieties of the Christian cross found in other traditions. The chapters of the book smoothly move from Indian Swastikas, to Chinese Yin and Yang symbols, Sufi numerology and Taoist triads. All

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 16.

considered as formal iterations of the cross. For Guénon, all traditions, since related to a first and unique origin, shared a plethora of religious basic symbols that have a non-human origin. His conception of art is strictly linked to this interest in the divine nature of symbolic languages. Guénon, who believed metaphysics has to refer to the ineffable and express in human forms a truth that lays beyond human reasoning, imagined the role of art consequently. For him art must “constitute a kind of symbolic language adapted to the expression of certain truths by means of forms which are of the visual order for some, and of the auditive or sonorous order for others.”<sup>423</sup> And if the function of art is to be symbolic, the role of symbols is “to serve as supports for meditation, and as foundations for as deep and extensive an understanding as possible, which is the very *raison d'être* of all symbolism; and everything, even to the smallest details, must be determined by this consideration and subordinated to this end, without any useless addition emptied of meaning or simply meant to play a ‘decorative’ or ‘ornamental’ role.”<sup>424</sup>

Unlike language, often analytical and only addressing reason, Symbols, thanks the multiple readings they offer, address an intellectual intuition<sup>425</sup> and open the viewer to unlimited hermeneutic possibilities<sup>426</sup>. They offer “Possibilities of expression that lie beyond those to which ordinary language is confined.”<sup>427</sup> This metaphysical overture is thus the central function of symbols. Following in the footsteps of Aguéli, Guénon believed certain visual representations are gateways to a higher universal truth.

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<sup>423</sup> René Guénon, “The Arts and their Traditional Conception,” In Brian Keeble ed., *Every Man an Artist*, (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 23.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> René Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 146.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>427</sup> René Guénon, “The Arts and their Traditional Conception,” 23

The universality of Symbols offers them an objective value that cancels individual preferences. For Guénon, an art that seeks subjective aesthetic pleasure, reckons on individual taste and conveys no meaning can hardly be categorized as art. He saw “art for art’s sake” as a dangerous modern slogan that facilitated the deviation of Western art from the line of its noble predecessors,<sup>428</sup> thus turning it into a self-absorbed and self-referential endeavor, dissociated from the esoteric world it was supposed to point to. The dome, in that regard, is a telling example of an architectural element with a symbolic function. In an article titled “The Symbolism of the Dome”, Guénon explained that a dome is not a simple architectural element with a structural function but a shape that has a “cosmic significance.”<sup>429</sup> If in Oriental traditions domes are also found in non-religious buildings it is because there was anyway “nothing profane in a fully traditional civilization.”<sup>430</sup> Following this argument, domes have an undeniable sacred symbolic value whether they are covering a mosque, Stupa, hammam or a palace. For Guénon, a dome is a symbol with different possible formal iterations. This variety includes pyramidal stupas, pointed Persian domes or the ancient imperial garments in China, supposedly conceived as a square around the feet of the emperor and a circle around his upper body<sup>431</sup>. The diversity of domes and cupolas across regions and periods is illustrative of the formal potential of symbols.

Guénon did not intend to reduce art to a small plethora of recognizable symbols. A suggestion that would have confined artistic production to a simple and plain repetition of old models. He rather saw infinite possibilities of reimagining symbols if one relies on the

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> René Guénon, « Symbolisme du Dôme, » in *Symboles Fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée*. (Paris : Gallimard, 1962), 226.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 228.

science of rhythms. A science that according to him “lies at the heart of all the arts.”<sup>432</sup> This statement would have had the full agreement of Ivan Aguéli who wrote in an article Guénon published in *La Gnose* that “rhythm is at the heart of pure art.”<sup>433</sup> Guénon also emphasized the importance of a divine science of rhythms in the process of creating traditional art. And rhythm here, far from its arithmetic understanding, follows a cosmological definition supposedly comprised in traditional texts such as the Kabbalah, Pythagorean treatises or Sufi esoteric numerology.

Symbols can be skillfully rearranged and repeated to create patterns, shapes and models that while comprising in their essence the initial form are not a simple work of mimicry or reproduction. For Guénon, the mathematical basis of these iterations and reformulations is not random, it follows the cosmic science of numbers found in esoteric numerology. In plastic arts, the discipline that illustrates best the rhythmic potential of symbols is architecture. Not only because it englobes painting and sculpture but because in architecture “rhythm is directly expressed by the proportions existing between the various parts of the whole, and also through geometric forms, which, when all is said and done are from our point of view only the spatial translation of numbers and their relations.”<sup>434</sup>

Guénon conceived arts as part of a larger grid that included arithmetic, astronomy, astrology and other modes of knowledge. He even went to argue that art is ultimately a science and that all sciences are interconnected to become “expressions of the same truths in different languages.”<sup>435</sup> Guénon for instance saw a “correspondence between alchemy

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<sup>432</sup> René Guénon, “The Arts and their Traditional Conception,” 24.

<sup>433</sup> Ivan Aguéli, “L’art Pur,” in ed. Gianni Rocca *Écrits pour La Gnose* (Milan : Archè, 1988), 36.

<sup>434</sup> René Guénon, “The Arts and their Traditional Conception,” 24.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



and architectural symbolisms, explained by their common cosmological character."<sup>436</sup> The line between art, architecture, engineering and magic is thus blurred and symbols are the central vectors of this indistinctness. But unlike the Swedish artist who believed that cubism was a good rough outline of a pure art, Guénon was more dubitative about a strictly human artistic production holding a transcendental quality. Only symbols could claim such privilege and, as he argued in his work, all symbols are divine, anterior to humanity and ultimately eternal. Artists can use these graphic representations with a certain degree of flexibility but never fully create them. But Guénon did not strip artists from any power, he constrained their mission to interpreting and readjusting perennial symbols. the radicality of Aguéli's claim was lost in Guénon's understanding of art and architecture. A restriction of the agency of the artist that will remain palpable in the work of perennialists far until the end of the twentieth century.

And yet, despite the doubts he shed on the creative genius of artists, Guénon was close to the artistic avant-garde of Paris and influenced many of the modernist intellectuals of his milieu such as the surrealist writer and theorist André Breton, the novelist Raymond Queneau and the dramatist Antonin Artaud<sup>437</sup>. Most interestingly in the context of this dissertation is the relationship that linked René Guénon to Albert Gleizes (1881-1953). The French Cubist painter and co-author with Jean Metzinger of the *Du Cubisme* manifesto met Guénon for the first time in 1927<sup>438</sup> soon after both published their two notorious books: *The Crisis of the Modern World* for Guénon and *Life and Death on the Christian West* for

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<sup>436</sup> René Guénon, « La Pierre angulaire, » in *Symboles Fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée* (Paris : Gallimard, 1962) 252.

<sup>437</sup> On the relationship between Guénon and the French intellectual milieu, see Xavier Accart. *Guénon ou le renversement des clartés. Influence d'un métaphysicien sur la vie littéraire et intellectuelle française (1920-1970)* (Paris :Edidit, 2006).

<sup>438</sup> Barbanegra, Paul and Jean-Pierre Laurant, *René Guénon* (Paris :Cahiers de l'Herne, 1985), 391.

Gleizes. Both books are virulent critiques of materialistic modern philosophies impregnated with a visible nostalgia for a Christian Medieval past. Gleizes quoted Guénon several times in his book *Homocentrism or the Return of the Christian Man* where the Cubist artist reiterated his interest in Medieval aesthetics and his disdain for the Renaissance and its lasting influence in France.

Gleizes, in an article titled “Cubism and tradition”<sup>439</sup> attached the movement he helped found to what he qualified as a French tradition while rejecting any affiliation to both Renaissance and modernism. He did not refrain from using a military jargon to describe the “official invasion called renaissance”<sup>440</sup> and the French “sharpshooters who stood up to the invaders”<sup>441</sup>. The invaders here are Italian artists and Gleizes argued in his article that Italian Renaissance, adopted by a small French aristocratic elite, attempted to erase France’s Celtic roots. Frenchness, in that sense, was protected and preserved for centuries by Gothic artists and craftsmen<sup>442</sup>. This rivalry between the French and Italian school ended with the adoption of Renaissance aesthetics by the French *Academie des Beaux-Arts* thus alienating France from its true artistic identity. Cubism was nothing less than the authentic holder of a true pre-Renaissance French-Celtic identity. For Gleizes, the French Gothic impulse did not completely disappear with the advent of the Renaissance. It found its manifestation in the hands of brilliant artists such as Le Nain brothers, Claude Lorrain whom he described as “one of us,”<sup>443</sup> Delacroix and finally Paul Cézanne. These painters had in common a disdain for the painting’s subject and a valorization of the “the

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<sup>439</sup> Albert Gleizes, « La Tradition et le Cubisme, » in Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader, Documents and Criticism, 1906-1914*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 460.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 465.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 463.

lyrical dynamism in line and color.”<sup>444</sup> . It is indeed surprising to read one of the main theorists of Cubism considering his movement to be a Neo-Medieval, anti-modern aesthetic project. Imagining a historical thread emanating from Celtic-Medieval France, trespassing Renaissance and leading directly to Cubism is a trope that can hardly be dissociated from the then flourishing anti-modernist, Christian conservative, identitarian French milieu. An intellectual territory that Guénon helped shape.

René Guénon who also adopted a narrative of European decadence originating from the Renaissance and leading to Western modernism had a particular appreciation for Cubism. Like Aguéli, who admired Picasso for his capacity to produce a pure art, Guénon thought Cubism was right to claim its status of Medieval art’s legitimate descendent. Robert Pouyaud (1901-1970) a French artist and close student of Gleizes wrote a book he titled *From Cubism to Traditional Painting* where the word traditional seemed to follow the exact metaphysical definition Guénon gave of it. Guénon, wrote a laudatory review of the book praising its clarity and commending the author for offering a thorough reading of “painting considered from a traditional perspective.”<sup>445</sup> Pouyaud’s insistence on the necessity to analyze paintings through the prism of rhythm, colors, numbers and symbols is obviously what earned him Guénon’s praises. In his review, The French metaphysician quotes an entire paragraph of Pouyaud and claims these lines summarize very well the proximity between traditionalist doctrine and Cubist art. “A Painter, if he wants to make a traditional oeuvre, has to adapt the universal symbols to the techniques of painting on a plan surface, as the first Cubist intended, making your oeuvre a microcosm at the image of the larger

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>445</sup> Robert Pouyaud, « Du « Cubisme » à la peinture traditionnelle » in *Comptes Rendus* (Montréal : Editions Kariboo, 2015), 293.

macrocosm using cosmic laws.. but he should not forget that to fully benefit from the illumination of the Traditional path, the artist has to constantly keep in mind the Universal. At this level, individualities do not matter.”<sup>446</sup>

René Guénon and Pouyaud seem to agree that among the artistic movements of their time Cubism was the most respectful of the Traditional requirements. What granted Cubism this privilege was its supposed esoteric and universal qualities but also, and perhaps most importantly, its evocative capacities; alluding to the subject while avoiding realistic depictions corresponded perfectly to Guénon’s understanding of symbols. Symbolism, universalism, and an esoteric harmony of numbers and proportions are the same themes Aguéli used to build his definition of a “pure art”. The influence of the Swedish artist on Guénon’s understanding of aesthetics was predictable knowing their spiritual affiliation. What Guénon added to Aguéli’s theory of an esoteric pure art was a concept to which the latter only alluded to, that of initiation.

In February 1939, from his small apartment in Cairo, Guénon wrote a short review of Gleize’s text “On the Human significance of Cubism”<sup>447</sup> where he joined the artist in his call for a new movement that could change the “unilateral sensibility coming from the Renaissance,”<sup>448</sup> and ultimately recreate a new “religious expression.”<sup>449</sup> For both men, Cubism could legitimately claim a contemporary esoteric function because of its reliance “on the work of true artists and on manual work.”<sup>450</sup> To what degree Cubism relied on “manual work” more than its contemporaries remain unclear. Guénon, despite the

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid.

<sup>447</sup> René Guénon, “On the Human significance of Cubism,” in *Comptes Rendus* Montréal : Editions Kariboo, 2015) 170.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

blurriness of Gleize's last claim, did not miss the opportunity of repositioning artistic manual craftsmanship and professional initiation at the center of his theoretical project. He dedicated a major part of his work to explain, defend and sometimes promote a traditional understanding of initiation. He maintained a firm interest in forms of learning that escape the rationalist scrutiny of modern epistemologies.

Guénon believed that the primordial Tradition could only stream down to the twentieth century through well preserved hermetic esoteric epistemological channels. But these channels are not all exclusively abstract and conceptual. Certain professions are in fact blended with mysticism and work as a proxy towards a deeper esoteric knowledge hidden within the folds of their seemingly profane practices. Art and architecture are the perfect manifestations of such blending. In an article published in 1927 and titled "Concerning Medieval Builders,"<sup>451</sup> Guénon blamed Freemasonry, built around the conjunction of mysticism and craft, for transforming into a purely "speculative masonry"<sup>452</sup> where the theoretical concerns dissociated the ideals from their practical support. An authentic Freemasonry, he argued in this article, had to protect and maintain its professional chapter, and thus allow the perpetuation of esoteric knowledges through the transmission of craftsmanship.

The role and domain of art are thus amplified to include a didactic spiritual sacred function. And to accentuate this broadening of art's scope, Guénon often used the words artist and artisan interchangeably simply because he saw no difference between the two. The distinction, as he argued, is a "modern deviation that had no meaning outside of

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<sup>451</sup> René Guénon, « À propos des constructeurs du Moyen Âge, » in *Études sur la Franc-Maçonnerie et le Compagnonnage*, tome I (Paris : Gallimard, 1991), 12-18.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 15.

modernity.”<sup>453</sup> In his article “Initiation and the Crafts” published in 1932, he explained that “for the ancients, the *Artifex* is indifferently a man who practices either an art or a craft; but in truth he is neither artist nor craftsman in the current sense of these words, but something more than either.”<sup>454</sup> This distinction gives an unfounded automatic superiority to artists to the detriment of craftsmen. The blurring of the lines delimiting arts and craftsmanship was also valid between arts and sciences. For Guénon, both are similar forms of traditional knowledge and both are “susceptible of a transportation giving them a real esoteric value; and what makes such a transportation possible is the very nature of traditional knowledge, which, whatever its order, is always connected to transcendent principles.”<sup>455</sup> The fact that astronomy, arithmetic or geometry are part of the classical definition of liberal arts is for him enough proof of the modernity – and thus profanity- of the distinction between arts and science.<sup>456</sup>

Guénon faced one paradox, if Traditional art was indeed smoothly traversing centuries through the labor of anonymous artisans, then can one suppose that *all* craftsmen were learned esotericists capable of consciously expressing a complex esoteric truth in an artistic form? It is hard to argue so, and Guénon did not. He rather chose to drown the craftsmen within a larger “Medieval traditional society” that had supposedly tainted the life of all its members with sacrality with or without their consent or even knowledge. A true Traditional civilization englobes the totality of its citizens and transforms the lives and actions of all individuals into a manifestation of larger esoteric verities. Artists and artisans

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<sup>453</sup> René Guénon, “Initiation and the Crafts,” 17.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> René Guénon, “The Arts and their Traditional Conception,” 22.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

are key to this process of revelation. Their names, social status, level of education or race are irrelevant. They are mere vehicles of a Truth that chose them to reveal itself aesthetically. The anonymity of artists in traditional societies becomes then a collective decision of effacement and not of a lack of individual genius. According to the French metaphysician the supposed placidity of certain artistic forms was not a conservative attitude, but a conscious will to preserve what is eternal and, in absolute terms, true.

Guénon wrote:

“If for example, one looks at a civilization like that of Islam or the Christian civilization of the Middle ages, it is easy to see the “religious character” which the most ordinary acts of existence assume. Their religion is not something that holds a place apart, unconnected with everything else, as it is for Modern Westerners (those at least who still consent to acknowledge a religion); on the contrary, it pervades the entire existence of the human being, or, better yet, all that constitutes this existence; and social life in particular is included in its domain, so much so that in such conditions there cannot really be anything “profane,” except for those who for one reason or another are outside of the tradition and whose case is then a simple anomaly.”<sup>457</sup>

Art for Guénon was a social affair; bathed in the anonymity of thousands of individuals bound to each other through a solid line of esoteric initiation. This does not mean that Guénon conceived art’s mission to be a simple and placid social manifestation of an esoteric tradition. The French thinker offered a model similar to that proposed by Aguéli and drew a dialectical loop where art is both product and sustainer of metaphysical traditions. The sequencing Guénon offered is rather simple: the artist, initiated to a craft, will be imbued with the esoteric verities associated with his practice, he will consequently advance in the path of spiritual awakening, then produce a better art and ultimately, to close the loop, the work of art will function as “support for spiritual realization to

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<sup>457</sup> Guénon, “Initiation and the Crafts,” 17.

come.”<sup>458</sup> Following the steps of Aguéli, who claimed that a Sufi Shaykh - assuming he knew how to paint- could convey his esoteric knowledge in a painting, Guénon offered a similar understanding of the dialectic between art and artist: a masterpiece is a “truly adequate expression of the one who have conceived and executed it.”<sup>459</sup> And the work of art serves as platform for further mystical developments of the artist. Some individuals will traverse this loop rapidly and multiple times -showing giftedness- others will simply not. All, however, remain anonymous and fundamentally connected to the initiatic path they belong to.

An authentic work of art is at the heart of a complex grid where the spiritual rank of the artist, the traditional symbols at his disposal and the type of initiation he received are all at play. Anonymity is key to the activation of this complex artistic process. A true artist would not claim to himself the work of art he produced<sup>460</sup>, and not out of sheer modesty, but simply because “his ego has effaced itself and disappeared completely before the ‘Self’.”<sup>461</sup> Only the personal spiritual status of the artists should emerge, but not his selfish ego commonly known in Sufi terminology as *nafs*. For Guénon, this spiritual traditional anonymity is at the antipodes of modern industrial anonymity. The latter alienates the worker from the product of his hands and drowns the laborer in a profane and virulent namelessness where the worker is transformed into a “numerical unit with no qualities of his own, and he could be replaced by any other equivalent ‘unit’, that is by any other worker, without any change in what is produced by their work.”<sup>462</sup> In his discussion of labor and modern anonymity, René Guénon brought the ultimate reference of his Sufi

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<sup>458</sup> Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, 63.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 65



spiritual lineage: Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi. And bringing Ibn 'Arabi to a critique of industrialization needs much imagination and an indulgent use of the Sufi mystic's theories. For Guénon, those who "penetrated to the principal unity of all the traditions"<sup>463</sup> are ranked at the highest stage of spiritual realization and thus deserve the titles of *Insan al-kamil*, or "universal men." True artists, using their initiatic practices can aim to reach such stage, thus achieving a form of unity with the divine thanks to their art and work. For modern proletariat, however, it is a radically different unity they are confronted to; the unity of the masses where all forms of spirituality were erased in favor of a mechanistic understanding of humanity<sup>464</sup>.

The arguments Guénon proposed and the facts he related are far from being historically flawless. But the factuality of his assertions, or the lack thereof should not obstruct Guénon's real aim, that of constructing a holistic interpretive model explaining the decadence of modern arts and proving the fundamental spirituality of all that deserves to be called art. Guénon's theories mirror Aguéli's concept of pure art; he used identical concepts, sometimes utilized a similar terminology and overall sketched the same artistic project. The Swedish painter was in fact the first to argue that an art is considered pure when emanating from an esoteric and sacred core. He was also the first to emphasize the importance of anonymity in artistic productions and to argue that modern art, with few notable exceptions, was neither pure nor sacred. Aguéli introduced the idea of an objective nature to sacred art and argued, years before Guénon, that the "science" of a pure art was to be found between the different folds of esoteric texts.

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<sup>463</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

Guénon introduced to the Sufi art theory three major paradigms that will reveal themselves fundamental in the following decades. First, Guénon argued that symbols are the major formal and perennial element organizing arts. Second, he offered craftsmanship – to which Aguéli gave little importance- a central role and equated artists with artisans arguing that the difference between both is only modern and artificial. Finally, Guénon was the first to introduce the concept of a Traditional society that, according to him, produces somewhat collectively, sacred art. This last maneuver allowed him and his followers to argue that an artist can produce a pure and sacred art almost unwillingly if he or she happens to live in an authentically Traditional society.

With this being said, Guénon's main contribution to the Sufi art theory was not strictly artistic. In reality, the French metaphysician posited the larger metaphysical structure within which the art theory could seat. Guénon, successfully transformed Abd al-Qadir's ecumenical project into an organized, methodic and well-structured doctrine based around the initial Akbari belief that an esoteric core unites all religions. But unlike Abd al-Qadir who believed that such esoteric rapprochement should first concern Islam and Christianity, Guénon included all other forms of mysticism that, to his judgement, modernity left untarnished. The Sufi art theory, while maintaining the main features Aguéli developed, enjoyed now a clear and stable position within a well-crafted supra-monotheistic and global ecumenical project.

Guénon proposed a new paradigm where each art form was inherently related to the esoteric tradition from which it emanates. For him, reading art and reading scriptures were two necessarily intertwined practices if one aims to understand a Traditional artistic tradition. Aguéli argued indeed that Islamic art was inherently Islamic -in the sense where

it emanates from Islam's esoteric core- but Guénon was the first to assert that this same argument could be applied to all other mystical traditions.

This conceptual twist opened the Sufi art theory to a new global audience and raised the interest of various figures who were tempted by an esoteric reading of their own artistic traditions. Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) falls within this category. The Ceylonese art historian was a close follower, friend and admirer of René Guénon and the first to apply the Sufi art theories to a non-Islamic context. His early works concerned Ceylonese art, architecture and craftsmanship that he actively sought to preserve from the British industrialized commodities, and modern construction techniques that invaded his native island<sup>465</sup>. During the same period, he gathered an impressive collection of Rajput and Mughal paintings that he later took to Boston when he was appointed curator in the city's museum of fine arts in 1917<sup>466</sup>. Coomaraswamy used Guénon's theories to develop a novel cross-cultural comparative reading of arts. In his learned and intelligent texts, he aimed to demonstrate the formal and thematic commonalities between Hindu, Buddhist and Christian artistic traditions thus challenging the thick disciplinary -and often racist- lines that characterized art history in the beginning of the twentieth century. Reading into myths, sacred scriptures, symbolical constructs, and religious doctrines, Coomaraswamy was one of the earliest and most faithful followers of Guénon who saw the artistic potential of the Akbari ecumenical project.

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<sup>465</sup> Between 1908 and 1913, Coomaraswamy wrote numerous texts on this topic. See for example *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Camden: Essex House Press, 1908); *The Indian Craftsman* (London: Probsthain, 1909); *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (Edinburgh: Foulis, 1913)>

<sup>466</sup> Ed., Rama Coomaraswamy, *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), 4.

Guénon's other major contribution was historiographical. Adopting a radical anti-modernist stance, he believed it was incongruous for him to write history using the same methodologies of his modern contemporaries. Guénon then posited a new historiographical model that firmly stood against the idea of progress and linear temporality. He argued that time works in historical cosmic cycles and that modernity, seen by its proponents as the epitome of Western progress, was in fact a dark period of decadence. The claim of a decadent West whose degeneration is visible in its art, and whose deliverance could partially be envisioned through the reform of its aesthetics had attracted a large crowd around René Guénon. Groups of Guénonian faithful followers, close disciples and distant interlocutors started forming around him during his lifetime. Many of them tried to visit him in Cairo and almost all faced his refusal. An attempt to live anonymously and disappear within the Muslim Egyptian society that earned him the title of the hermit of Duqqi.<sup>467</sup> Several political figures were also impressed by Guénon's claims and found in his work a firm and coherent critique of modern liberal politics.

One of the most intriguing characters who detected in Guénon's thought the seeds of a large reformist political project was Julius Evola (1898-1974). According to this major theorist of Italian Fascism, Guénon played a crucial role in the intellectual path that took him from being a young and engaged Italian Dadaist painter to become a central figure of the global far right movement<sup>468</sup>. In 1934, Evola wrote a book that through its title and content, mirrors the work and thought of René Guénon. He titled it *Revolt Against the*

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<sup>467</sup> Eds., Xavier Accart, Daniel Lançon and Thierry Zarcone, *L'Ermite de Duqqi. René Guénon en marge des milieux francophones égyptiens* (Milan :Arche, 2001).

<sup>468</sup> Julius Evola wrote many articles on the importance of Guénon in his intellectual development. They were gathered in one volume titled *René Guénon: A Teacher of Modern Times* (Edmonds: Sure Fire Press, 1994).

*Modern World*. This book, considered to be the major work of Evola, follows a recurrent Guénonian argumentative scheme. The first part is titled “The Traditional World.” It depicts a pre-modern ideal past where authentic spiritualities supposedly gave a metaphysical coherence to societies. There, he argued that secret organizations, initiatory doctrines, symbolic expressions, and traditional family structures permitted the endurance of this pre-modern model. Unsurprisingly, the second and last part of the book titled “Genesis and Face of the Modern World” offers a dark pessimistic picture of a decaying West. While the structure of the argument, the nostalgic tone of the text and the use of Traditionalist terminology are all reminiscent of Guénon, Evola’s book proposed few novelties. The Fascist writer called for a patriarchal society centered around notions of manhood and chivalry and explained the natural superiority of certain races and casts over others while partially blaming the Jews for Europe’s modern decadence. These additions to Guénon’s thought fueled an unexpected right-wing diversion of his intellectual work. Guénon, in that sense, had multiple afterlives, he is today championed by Steve Bannon<sup>469</sup>, canonized by certain freemasonic groups, and at the same time celebrated every year as a Sufi saint in Cairo. This dissertation will look at one of these intellectual branches stemming from his thought: A Sufi universalist Traditionalist school that evolved first in Algeria, then Switzerland and finally in Bloomington, Indiana. The main protagonist in this long migration was also an artist and a Sufi convert, His name was Frithjof Schuon and the fourth chapter is dedicated to his artistic and intellectual work.

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<sup>469</sup> See for example Joshua Green, “Inside the Secret, Strange Origins of Steve Bannon’s Nationalist Fantasia,” *Vanity Fair*, July 17, 2017. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/07/the-strange-origins-of-steve-bannons-nationalist-fantasia>

## Chapter Four

### **Frithjof Schuon and Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi: Sacred Art and the Transcendent Unity of Religions.**

*La Prise de la Smalah d'Abd-el-Kader* was arguably the largest European painting made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>470</sup>. (Fig. 4.1) Its splendid dimensions of 21,39 meters of width over 4,89 meters height served its painter, the French artist Horace Vernet, to depict the raiding expedition that occurred on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1843 against the private encampment of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir. The Algerian anticolonial rebel opted for an ingenious moving capital for his newly formed state. The *smalah* represented in this painting was a mobile urban settlement composed of nearly five thousand tents hosting more than thirty thousand followers of 'Abd al-Qadir and organized within a well-structured and reproducible pattern of concentric circles formed around the leader's tent.<sup>471</sup> (fig. 4.2) Each tribe was assigned a quarter and the ensemble was easily reassembled every time the *smalah* settled

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<sup>470</sup> François Pouillon, « La peinture monumentale en Algérie: un art pédagogique.» *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* .no.36 (1996).

<sup>471</sup> See the Drawing of General Eugène Daumas (1803-1871), reproduced by Gabriel Esquer in *Iconographie historique de l'Algérie depuis le XVI siècle jusqu'à 1871* (Alger: Collection de Centenaire de l'Algérie, 1930), Planche 259.

somewhere new. The moving capital of 'Abd al-Qadir patrolled the towns and villages under his control to ensure his sovereignty over the territory he ruled and to escape, whenever needed, the much heavier and slower French army. In May 1843, the smalah was settled in the region of Taguine in Western Algeria when the Duc d'Aumale took it by surprise, killed more than three hundred of 'Abd al-Qadir's closest allies and disintegrated his capital, thus announcing the beginning of the end of the first large Algerian resistance movement against the French.

Vernet's large painting narrates from left to right the unfolding events of the battle; the surprised Algerian cavalry in disarray, the collapsing tents, the frightened families attempting to escape, and in the back, contrasting with this chaos, the French army organized in lines behind and around the heroic and Napoleonic figure of Duc d'Aumal who led the battle. The Duc is none other than Henri d'Orléan; the fourth son of Louis-Philippe king of France who personally commended Vernet to depict his son's victory in a gigantic painting to be displayed in Versailles. Louis Philippe who was deposed five years later was already contested in France when this battle took place<sup>472</sup>. Advancing the military conquests of his son in Algeria was part of his attempt to regain the prestige of a monarchy that was increasingly suffering a large and suffocating financial and economic crisis. Four years later, Emir 'Abd al-Qadir, who was abandoned by most of his allies, could not convince the king of Morocco to offer him the protection he needed despite the fatwa Shaykh 'Ilaysh issued in his favor from Cairo. He surrendered to the French and urged his reticent companions to follow his example. In a last fatalistic statement, he reportedly

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<sup>472</sup> Philippe Darriulat, " La gauche républicaine et la conquête de l'Algérie, de la prise d'Alger à la reddition d'Abd el-Kader (1830-1847)» *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, no.307 (1995) 129-147.

explained to his followers that God has not given them victory simply “because he has judged that this land must belong to Christians.”<sup>473</sup>

One year before capitulation, a French military officer, capitaine Edouard de Neuveu, travelled across Algeria collecting written sources and oral testimonies explaining what he considered to be “the truth about Sufism”.<sup>474</sup> It is undeniable that the secret behind the large alliance of heterogenous tribes behind ‘Abd al-Qadir partly lied in the unifying power his Sufi Qadiri affiliation offered him. Sufism was then identified by the French as an obscure, esoteric and ferocious enemy to be dealt with without delay. His?? book written in 1846 was titled *The Brothers: Religious Orders among Muslims in Algeria*. It was one of the earliest French texts attempting to explain to a Western audience the role Sufi doctrines play in the social and political life of Algerians. Aside from the few short ethnographic accounts it offered, the book is a rather long diatribe reminding French officers of the inherent hatred Sufis hold for Christians. Here is for example a description he gave of a Sufi Disciple “ This Muslim with a pale face, tight lips who crosses your path with a rosary in his restless hands is a fekir reciting his Dhikr. Seeing you irritates him, he looks away and spits on the ground as a sign of contempt. Here is a fanatic, a foolish man, you would say. Agreed. But how many men of this type do we see in Algeria? They daily cross our paths in public places.”<sup>475</sup>

In a twisted attempt to link all Sufi groups to the medieval sect of Hashashin, de Neuveu reminded his readers that this supposedly esoteric ancestor of Sufism gave to

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<sup>473</sup> Charles H.Churchill, *La vie de ‘Abd el Kader*, 271.

<sup>474</sup> Charles Brosselard, *Les “Khouans » : De la constitution des ordres religieux musulmans en Algérie* (Alger: Imprimerie de A.Bourget, 1850).

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid*, 25.



French language the word assassin that crusaders brought back to Europe from the East<sup>476</sup>. Surprised that this etymological link and the supposedly uninterrupted historical thread connecting Sufis to the Hashashin was overlooked by his contemporaries, de Neuveu wrote “the faqir, consumer of Hashish trifles with all forms of extravagance. Even crime changes nature before his eyes. What would spilled blood cost him? what is the life of his fellowmen worth for him, especially if he is a Christian? burning alive a worshiper of the Cross is a meritorious act in the eyes of the God he serves.”<sup>477</sup> Congratulating himself and his brothers in arms for the “material conquest”<sup>478</sup> of Algeria, the military officer urged the French to initiate a more difficult yet more fundamental “moral conquest”<sup>479</sup> that the spiritual dominance of Sufis in the country is preventing. De Neuveu finally proposed his own solution to the Sufi problem in Algeria. It was a blunt, clear and urgent call to “ attack heads-on these subversive doctrines, to put an end to these aberrations, to annihilate the influence of these hostile associations that are more dangerous when they appear unarmed.” For him, Sufism’s hold on hearts and minds explains France’s incapacity to « raise the Arab race from the moral decadence it fell into”<sup>480</sup>. Sufi orders, in that regard are “ the most serious obstacle that reformist ideas have to overcome.”<sup>481</sup>

The aggressive and military stance taken against rebellious Sufi groups continued until the end of the nineteenth century when the French government estimated its war against Sufis was close to an end. Jules Cambon, French governor of Algeria (1891-1897) mentioned in an official circular of April 25, 1896 that Sufi orders should henceforth be

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 36.

simply “surveilled and not bothered without reason.”<sup>482</sup> He later added that the Zaouias will become an official “teaching establishment where we will find loyal and educated subjects to nurture ours schools from where they will be imbued with the feelings we want them to acquire, and well aware of the benefactions our government is procuring.”<sup>483</sup> If the young Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir before his Damascene exile represented the epitome of that bellicose Sufism, Shaykh Ahmad al-’Alawi (1869-1934) was the main representative of a late ecumenical Sufism that sought a pacific and esoteric rapprochement with the French.

### **Spiritualizing Colonialism: The Sufi Solution of Shaykh Ahmad al-’Alawi.**

The same year Ivan Aguéli was born in a small town of the cold Swedish taiga, Shaykh Ahmad al-’Alawi (Fig. 4.3) was born in an Algerian poor family of Mostghanem. Shaykh al-’Alawi did not receive a full religious education during his youth, His father home taught him reading and writing and helped him memorize a good part of the Quran but not the whole book as a thorough religious education would have led him to. He memorized a tenth of the Quran and then had to join the workshop of a local shoemaker due to the difficult financial situation his family went through especially after the death of his father when Al-’Alawi was sixteen<sup>484</sup>. His serious introduction to Sufi teachings happened after he met Shaykh al-Buzidi around the year 1894. Al-Buzidi was a Sufi master who reportedly took part in the Algerian resistance against the French invasion under the leadership Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir. Captured by the French, he was imprisoned and tortured before leaving Algeria to

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<sup>482</sup> « Rapport du gouverneur d’Algérie sur la mission de Coppolani du mois de septembre 1898, » cited in Slimane Ould m’bareck, « *Cheikh Siddiyya Baba et les élites musulmanes maures face à la pénétration française 1900-1924.* » Ph.D. Diss. Université de Toulouse le Mirail, 2004.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> Martin Lings, *Un saint soufi du XXe siècle, Le cheikh Ahmad al-’Alawi* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1990).

find refuge in Morocco where he joined the growing Sufi Shadhili Darqawi Tariqa. It was this particular Sufi lineage that he will later transmit to his student and spiritual heir Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi. The young disciple later reshaped the Darqawi tariqa to build a new sub-Shadhili school named after him and known today as al-Tariqa al-'Alawiyya.

Two years after Shaykh 'Alawi's death, The French writer and state official Augustin Eugene Berque, father of the more famous Jacques Berque, wrote in the journal *la Revue Africaine* a long essay about al-'Alawi he titled "a Modernist Mystic, Shaykh Ben Aliwa<sup>485</sup>." This was the first major text to be written about al-'Alawi after his death and inaugurated a long list of writings that insisted on the modern character of the Shaykh. A trope that reduced the Shaykh to a harmless agent of interfaith dialogue and restricted modernity to a simple universal brotherhood where very few traces of the colonial struggle were made visible. Overall, his acclaimed modernity consisted in his capacity to address and attract Western disciples coupled with his apparent lack of interest in direct confrontations with the French. Berque described al-'Alawi as a Shaykh who gathered around him " at the same time, masses of ignorant affiliates and a number of European disciples of great culture"<sup>486</sup> and considered his doctrine to be nothing less than a "modern Gospel."<sup>487</sup> Berque argued that al-'Alawi pushed Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy to its limit declaring all religions equal in the eyes of God.<sup>488</sup> While the French orientalist oversimplified the ecumenical stance of the Algerian Shaykh, he did not fail to notice the reliance of al-'Alawi on Ibn 'Arabi to build a modern universalist Sufi discourse. Like his compatriot 'Abd el-Qadir, his desire for an

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<sup>485</sup> Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi was also sometimes called Shaykh Aliwa or Ben Aliwa.

<sup>486</sup> Jacques Berque, « Un mystique moderniste, Le cheikh Ben Alioua, » *Revue Africaine*, no 79, (1936), 692.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid., 701.

Akbari revival of Islam and his plea for brotherhood between religions and nations is not independent from the colonial question. In the journal *al-Balagh* that he created and minutely edited, he openly invited the French to simply face Islam's de facto presence as constitutive element of the French colonial reality. He wrote: "Half of the French empire is Muslim, Islam is now part of France and France is required to trust this religion in the same way it trusted the rest of its devoted children. This distrust is due to an ignorance of Islam's truths and to the fact that this religion has always been wrongly considered by the vast majority of Westerners as an 'assemblage' made by anarchists whose religious motto is bloodshed."<sup>489</sup> Beside appealing to France to openly assimilate its "Muslim children,"<sup>490</sup> Shaykh 'Alawi required from his co-religionaries an open and frank ecumenism where they would "recover the feeling of a true intra-confessional brotherhood."<sup>491</sup>

The striking resemblance that brings al-'Alawi even closer to 'Abd al-Qadir is his firm belief that the West is a model of social and political progress to be emulated in the Islamic world after an authentic spiritual revival is realized. In a long article he wrote in *al-Balagh* in 1931, he first called for Muslims to recover the true meanings of Islam then added towards the end of the text: "O believers ! nations only reached the summits of glory and sovereignty through brotherhood, solidarity, paying respect to their leaders, and the help they provide to the weak."<sup>492</sup> al-'Alawi was indeed actively invested in a large ecumenical and political project aiming to reconcile Christianity and Islam. A project that earned him the respect and interest of French priests and, simultaneously, the animosity of

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<sup>489</sup> Ahmad al-'Alawi, *Jaridat al-balagh al-jazairi*, January 14, 1927.

<sup>490</sup> Ahmad al-'Alawi, *Jaridat al-balagh al-jazairi*, December 4, 1931.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Ahmad al-'Alawi, *Jaridat al-balagh al-jazairi*. June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1931.

Muslim theologians and scholars<sup>493</sup>. During the last decade of his life, al-'Alawi organized and participated in several congresses around the idea of a possible peaceful co-existence between Christianity and Islam in Algerian lands. The Catholic journal of the Oran Diocese described one of the congresses in which al-'Alawi participated as a " a sign of the new spirit that could bring Christianity and Islam closer."<sup>494</sup> It is even reported that al-'Alawi, who was an avid reader of the gospels, intended to translate the bible to Algerian dialect<sup>495</sup>. His bold project to render Christian sacred texts accessible in a local tongue and not to classical Arabic reveals a rather peculiar interest in opening the dense and rural Algerian countryside to his ecumenical project while turning his back to the educated urban elite.

Christian proselytism in Algeria, following the European monastic tradition, was close to rural small communities<sup>496</sup>. Al-'Alawi's calling for the translation of the bible to the local Algerian dialect seemed to oddly correspond to the Christian evangelical mission in the country. The reasons behind his call for such controversial measure -knowing the ineluctable backlash from Muslim orthodox circles this will induce- are difficult to know. What can be safely stated is that al-'Alawi and his followers had a close and cordial relationship with many of these rural cloistral circles and the global monastic tradition in general. The admiration the American theologian, writer and monk Thomas Merton had for the Shaykh is quite telling in that regard. Merton was close to the 'Alawyyia tariqa partly through his friendship with Sidi 'Abdesslam<sup>497</sup>, a Moroccan disciple of al-'Alawi that Merton

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<sup>493</sup> Berque, « Un mystique moderniste, Le cheikh Ben Alioua,» 737.

<sup>494</sup> Introduction, *Le journal de la semaine religieuse d'Oran*, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1930.

<sup>495</sup> Berque, « Un mystique moderniste, Le cheikh Ben Alioua, » 735.

<sup>496</sup> On the French colonial project in Algeria and its relationships to the Catholic church, see Darcie Fontaine's *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria* ( New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 23-68.

<sup>497</sup> Baker Rob and Gray Henry.eds.. *Merton and Sufism: The untold story* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), 19.

met in Philadelphia. Merton who pressed in his writings and sermons Christian institutions to adopt a more open and inclusive approach towards Eastern mysticisms described al-'Alawi as a "great saint and a man full of the Holy spirit. May God be praised for having given us one such, in a time when we need many saints."<sup>498</sup> Like al-'Alawi, Merton was also an admiring reader of Ibn 'Arabi whom he often qualified as simply "remarkable."<sup>499</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi was one amongst the few medieval Sufi scholars who obliquely and often in convoluted manners acknowledged the possible validity of Christian gnosis. He frequently recounted his visions of Jesus proudly admitting that Christ was his first guide towards the true esoteric path of Islam<sup>500</sup>. Shaykh al-'Alawi was also an avid reader and commentator of Ibn 'Arabi's work and, like his Algerian predecessor, saw the ecumenical potential of the Akbari doctrine. Ibn 'Arabi and Emir 'Abd al-Qadir called for a larger understanding of Islamic esotericism that could possibly embrace Christian gnosis. Yet they both subtly avoided delving into the intricacies of biblical texts and the unresolvable theological conflict of the trinity that firmly divided Christians and Muslims for centuries. al-'Alawi, however, found no problem commenting on some of the Gospels' verses that Muslim scholars would have simply dismissed and classified as blasphemous. The most conspicuous example occurred when the Sufi Shaykh interpreted a verse from the Gospel of John that reads "I and my Father are one." al-'Alawi started his text stating that these words "require interpretation and commentary; for to understand them literally would be harmful to ordinary people, and to reject them would be even worse, for they are not

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid., Cover page.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>500</sup> Jaume Flaquer, "The Akbarian Jesus, The Paradigm of a Pilgrim in God", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, no.57 (2015).

without wisdom which the wise cannot understand.”<sup>501</sup>For al-'Alawi, Jesus was an impressive manifestation of Divine light and the uniqueness of this manifestation was behind the 'confusion' Christians suffered from. Unable to see God behind Christ they believed Jesus was himself God<sup>502</sup>. al-'Alawi considered Christian trinity to be an innocent and to an extent understandable misreading of Jesus's extraordinary and dazzling presence<sup>503</sup>. The theological doctrine that separated Muslims and Christians for centuries is here reduced to a simple exegetic technicality that should be surpassed towards the more fundamental esoteric core of the two religions.

Father Antoine Giacobetti (1869-1956), a member of the Algerian Evangelical Society known as the White Fathers, related his encounter with Shaykh al-'Alawi on a boat taking them from Algiers to Marseilles in July 1926 to attend the inauguration of the first mosque to ever be built in modern France; the Paris Grand Mosque. Ahmad al-'Alawi was appointed by the French government to lead the very first Friday prayer to be held in the newly built space of worship<sup>504</sup>. Father Giacobetti went to the encounter of the Shaykh who was seating on a sheepskin his disciples laid for him on the boat's deck. During what Giacobetti described as a long and cordial conversation, al-'Alawi showed the French priest a manuscript of a book he was writing about the possible "entente between French Catholics and Muslims."<sup>505</sup> The book was supposed to comprise a first chapter collecting and commenting on the various Quranic verses addressing the question of monotheistic brotherhood, and a second chapter collecting texts from "European authors who showed

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<sup>501</sup> Khaled Williams, *The Qur'an and the Prophet in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 46.

<sup>502</sup> Ahmad al-'Alawi, *al-Minah al-Qudusiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2009), 55.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 86.

<sup>505</sup> Berque, « Un mystique moderniste, Le cheikh Ben Alioua, » 737

their admiration towards Islam.”<sup>506</sup> During this encounter, al-'Alawi reportedly asked father Giacobetti to help him translate all these texts to French. The priest accepted without great enthusiasm. At the end of their conversation, al-'Alawi addressed the French priest a rhetorical question asking him if eventually “ Christians and Muslims could not agree to finally be only one religion.”<sup>507</sup> A hope that, according to Berque, al-'Alawi energetically expressed every time he had the opportunity to.

Al-'Alawi did not see himself as a simple saint of the Algerian countryside but as the one true reviver of Islamic mysticism in his time. His disciples described him in laudatory terms that corresponded to the rank he saw himself worthy of: “the enlightened, source of mystical knowledge, pillar of wisdom, the performer of proven miracles, detainer of God’s Grand name and the only person able to reveal it. Known during his life as Shaykh Ben Aliwa.” <sup>508</sup> Not only was he described as the true bearer of God’s secret supreme name, but his disciples believed he was the *only* saint of his generation to detain such secret and was for that matter “the only spiritual master alive, and the only person qualified to initiate his contemporaries”<sup>509</sup>

These religious qualifications are not foreign to the Sufi genre of *manaqib* or Sufi hagiography. Each order believed their master was the *Qutb* ( pole of his generation) and true detainer of the keys to mystical realization. al-'Alawi, perhaps unlike many other Sufi mystics to whom such honors were posthumously attributed, had good reasons to claim an exceptional character. He was born in a poor family, had relatively little religious education

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> Ahmad al-'Alawi, *al-Qaoul al-ma'ruf fi al-radd 'ala man ankar al-tasawuf* (Tunis: al-Manar, 1934), 11.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 18.



and spent all his life in a small Algerian town. Yet through his writings, his active proselytism, his good relationships with colonial powers and, one might suspect, a remarkable charisma, he could rise to global prominence and attract to him a large number of Western disciples who travelled to Algeria to follow his Sufi school. The British scholar and writer Martin Lings (1909- 2005) who followed 'Alawi's Sufi path, wrote a remarkable book on the life and work of Shaykh al-'Alawi he titled *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy*. In it, he reported the presence of an important group of Western converts around the Shaykh in his shrine of Mostghanem. Amongst them he mentioned the French painter and caricaturist Gustave Jossot (1866-1951), and a French sculptor named Alphonse Izard.<sup>510</sup>

In Algeria al-'Alawi had 6,425 disciples spread around thirty local Zaouias managed by 18 Muqaddam.<sup>511</sup> In 1933, more than three thousand Moroccans from the Rif region alone made a pilgrimage to Mostghanem to visit the Shaykh<sup>512</sup>. These numbers reported by French administrative officials are perhaps tainted by the colonial fascination for local mystical groups and might be exaggerated. Berque, on the other hand, insisted the real numbers are actually double what the French officials declared<sup>513</sup>. His fame reached other Muslim Sufi circles from the Arab world. During his lifetime, he already had numerous active Zaouias created and animated by his disciples in Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Syria, Ethiopia and elsewhere around the Muslim world<sup>514</sup>. Copies of his journal *al-Balagh* were sent to different parts of the Arab world, but also England (Liverpool, South Shields,

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<sup>510</sup> Aymard Jean Baptiste and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teachings* (Albany: SUNY press, 2004), 19.

<sup>511</sup> Berque, « Un mystique moderniste, Le cheikh Ben Alioua » 763.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., 761.

Birmingham) The Netherlands (The Hague) France ( Paris, Marseille) and the US.<sup>515</sup> al-'Alawi published the work of prominent Arab figures such as the Lebanese Druze leader Chakib Arsalan<sup>516</sup> and the Tunisian anti-colonial thinker and politician 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Th'albi<sup>517</sup>. His global fame was also nurtured by his regular encounters with educated members of the French Algerian Bourgeoise who often reported an enthusiastic summary of their discussion with the Shaykh. The conversations they had seemed to be far from trivial, some reports mention a fine understanding the Sufi Shaykh had of Henri Bergson, a man he only knew through the descriptions his Western guests offered. Al-'Alawi, we are told, regretted being unable to read the texts of the French philosopher.<sup>518</sup>

A French Sufi convert living almost anonymously in Cairo was one of those who did not remain insensitive to the daring ecumenical ideas of al-'Alawi. René Guénon, had a profound admiration for the Algerian Shaykh. The two men never met in person but knew of each other's work. Despite his apparent seclusion, Guénon was well informed of the larger mystical and religious debates happening in the region during that period. He maintained regular and sometimes prolific correspondences with major religious and intellectual figures such as Mircea Eliade, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Julius Evola but also with young European aspiring metaphysicians who sought the guidance of the French hermit cloistered in Cairo. It is within this context that Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) started a correspondence with the man he addressed in his first letters as "my very honored and dear master."<sup>519</sup> The young Swiss craftsman was deeply shaken by Guénon's theoretical

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<sup>515</sup>Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> *Jaridat al-balagh al-jazairi*, June 20, 1930, and 29, January 1932.

<sup>517</sup> *Jaridat al-balagh al-jazairi*. March 18, 1932, and July 1, 1932.

<sup>518</sup> Berque, « Un mystique moderniste, Le cheikh Ben Alioua, » 709.

<sup>519</sup> Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon*, 67.

work on a perennial truth connecting all revealed spiritual traditions. Later in his life he admitted that after reading Guénon's work at an early age he quickly came to realize that the man was "the profound and powerful theoretician of all that he loved."<sup>520</sup> Schuon would later recall that Guénon had "the noteworthy merit of presenting and making explicit crucial concepts of pure metaphysical science, of integral tradition and traditional orthodoxy, of symbolism, and of esotericism."<sup>521</sup>

### **Across the Mediterranean: Frithjof Schuon and the Sufi Maryami Tariqa.**

Schuon started his correspondence with Guénon in 1931. The French metaphysician just left Paris and settled in Cairo. Schuon was only twenty-four years old and was looking for a spiritual master who could guide him through the mystical journey he was embarking on. René Guénon was arguably his most natural and favored choice. By that time, both Ivan Aguéli who introduced Guénon to Sufism and 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ilaysh who was the head of the Shadhili branch to which Guénon belonged passed away. Guénon, then young initiate himself could not formally introduce Schuon to the Shadhili Sufi order. He did not ask Schuon to join him in Cairo but insisted the young man embraces Sufi Islam and not any other Eastern religion. In one of his early letters to his remote disciple, Guénon wrote " as for the adherence to an Eastern tradition, it is clear that not only is Islam the form least removed from the West, but it is also the only one for which the question of origin does not arise and is not an obstacle."<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>520</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid., 13.

For Guénon and his followers, Islam was close enough to the West for European converts to comfortably adopt it, yet sufficiently far from this same West to offer them an alternative mystical model. Schuon was thus convinced that his longing for a spiritual experience, his disdain for European culture and his contempt for Western modernity could only be resolved if he follows the path of his remote teacher and convert to Islam. In a revealing letter he sent to his childhood friend Johann Jenny, Schuon wrote in his usual lyrical style “Islam is looking at me with its golden eyes. Am I going to plunge into it without return, exhausted by my resistance to the vile atmosphere that gnaws at me like poison?”<sup>523</sup> Not only was he certain about the religion he wanted to adopt, Schuon was also sure about the destination he wanted to take. In another letter to the Swiss artist and sculptor Albert Oesch informing him about his imminent trip to Algeria, he wrote: “I should like to reach Biskra, an oasis in the desert, not in order to die, but to be decanted according to the will of the All-One. I no longer need anything. Perhaps I will evaporate like a song never heard. The West has run over me like a wheel, and broken my ribs. Now there can be no more concessions, there is only the Supreme Solitary, the Lord of the living and the dead.”<sup>524</sup>

In a surge of faith, he decided to leave Basle for Marseilles where he would embark to Algeria without a clear plan of his stay in North Africa after reaching its shores. In the port of Marseilles, Schuon was wandering around the docks when he met an Algerian traveler whom he inquired about Sufis in his country. The man took Schuon to a large ship where a group of Muslims set up a small shrine to perform their Dhikr ceremonies during a

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid., 15.

long trip that was taking them to China<sup>525</sup>. The Sufi group welcomed Schuon and pointed that their boat was about to leave and that some members of their Sufi order settled in Marseilles and used a space near the port to perform their Dhikr ceremonies. Schuon was with his childhood friend Lucy von Dechend when he was surrounded by an enthusiastic group of Yemeni Sufis who informed him they were all followers of the same Algerian Sufi master called Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi. Schuon embarked from Marseilles to Oran and from there to Mostghanem to meet the man that will eventually change the course of his life.

(Fig. 4.4)

In October 1932, When Schuon reached the Sufi shrine of al-'Alawi, the Shaykh had just arrived from a tiring pilgrimage to Mecca. His encounter with the Sufi master was all but anodyne for the young Swiss metaphysician. A year after al-'Alawi passed away in 1934, Schuon wrote an article he titled "Râhimahu 'Llah" dedicated to the memory of the deceased Shaykh in which one can read this evocative passage describing his encounter with Ahmad al-'Alawi:

"One could compare the meeting with such a spiritual messenger with what, for example, it would have been like, in the middle of the twentieth century, to meet a medieval saint or Semitic patriarch; such was the impression given by him who, in our own time, was one of the great masters of Sufism: Shaykh Al-Hâjj Ahmad Abu 'l-'Abbas ibn Mustafa 'l-'Aliwa... dressed in a brown *jellabah* and white turban- with his silver beard, visionary eyes and long hands, the gestures of which seemed laden with the flow of his barakah- he exhaled something of the pure and archaic ambience of the time of Sayydnâ Ibrâhîm al-Khalîl (Abraham). He spoke in an enfeebled, gentle voice, a voice of crackled crystal, letting his words fall drop by drop. His eyes, two sepulchral lamps, appeared to settle on nothing, but through whatever objects might lie in their path, to see only one sole reality, that of the infinite- or perhaps, only one sole void, within the husk of things: a very straight gaze, almost hard in its enigmatic immobility, yet full of goodness.. He was surrounded by the veneration due to a saint, to a leader, to an old man, and to one who is dying."<sup>526</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>526</sup> Frithjof Schuon, "Râhimahu 'Llah" in *Cahiers du Sud*, August-September (1935).

A few weeks after arriving in Algeria, Schuon received a letter from René Guénon: “I wonder if you have already realized your plan of leaving for Algeria, or if you are going to do so... I would advise you to go to Mostghanem and see Shaykh Ahmad ibn ‘Aliwa, to whom you can introduce yourself from me.”<sup>527</sup> Reading the description Schuon gave of his first impressions meeting al-‘Alawi, it would be vain to look for another reason explaining his immediate affiliation to the ‘Alawi order besides the mystical charism of the Sufi saint. Yet one could also assume that Guénon’s letter trusting him to the Algerian Shaykh in a quasi-mystical coincidence had an impact on Schuon’s decision. From his Algerian retreat, Schuon confirmed in a letter to Guénon his affiliation to the Shadhili Sufi order through Shaykh al-‘Alawi. In his reply, Guénon did not fail to notice that the young man must have been “surprised to see that I advised you to go precisely the place where you are now, and yet this ‘coincidence’ has nothing strange about it.”<sup>528</sup> Schuon stayed in Mostghanem for about four months until March 1934. Upon Conversion, al-‘Alawi gave him an Islamic name that clearly set the tone for the mission this young disciple was to undertake. He was now ‘Issa Nur al-Din or Jesus light of the faith. al-‘Alawi hoped Schuon would introduce his tariqa to a Christian European crowd. As noted above, Schuon was not the only Western disciple of the shaykh but the young Swiss showed a clear interest in Sufism that exceeded a normal Western orientalist curiosity. al-‘Alawi’s intuition was not misplaced; amongst all the Western disciples of the Shaykh, only Schuon dedicated his life entirely and solely to mystical studies.

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<sup>527</sup> Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon*, 18.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

The presence of this Western audience among the close circle of al-'Alawi alarmed the French. Despite the relatively good relations colonial authorities entertained with him, fear of powerful organized religious groups remained rooted within the colonial military apparatus and Schuon had to suffer the consequences of this French inherent and lingering distrust of Sufi orders. After a few police interpellations, Schuon had to leave Mostghanem to France. In Paris, upon his return, he wrote his first article as Sufi convert publishing it in *Le Voile D'Isis*, the journal René Guénon created. The article was titled "The Ternary Aspect of the Monotheistic Tradition." The influence of his stay in Mostghanem was already palpable in this early text and this is where for the first time, Schuon adopted what will later become the cornerstone of his metaphysical thought: the idea of an essential and transcendental unity of the three monotheistic religions. The article will later become the sixth chapter of his first major book *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*.

The main event that will mark his Parisian stay was not academic or intellectual but rather mystical. In different instances and for the rest of his life, Schuon recalled this day: after more than a year spent in the French capital, while in his little hotel room, he felt that the Divine Name of Allah that his Shaykh transmitted to him during his mystical initiation was being actualized in him with an overwhelming intensity. He later said that the Name had "swooped down in him like an angel on its prey."<sup>529</sup> For more than three days, Schuon whether in his hotel room or during his promenades along the Seine, could not escape the heavy presence of what he described as a dense inspiration that made him see everything "transparent, fluid, infinite."<sup>530</sup> A few days later he learned from some Algerian friends that

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

the Shaykh 'Alawi died on that same date, July 11, 1934. Unsurprisingly, René Guénon with whom Schuon shared this anecdote did not see in this a fortuitous coincidence<sup>531</sup>. And it seems that Schuon also perceived this mystical experience as a highly codified yet clear message that he is an authentic successor of the deceased Algerian Shaykh. The local heir of al-'Alawi, a man called Shaykh Adda Bentounes, recognized Schuon as a true successor of the order's founder. Bentounes, consequently appointed Schuon Muqaddam or representative of the order in Europe and presented him with a diploma in March 1935 in which he wrote : "I have authorized him to spread the call to Islam among his own people, the Europeans, transmitting the word of Tawhid."<sup>532</sup> A sentence that puts in clear , indisputable and eloquent words the bare intentions of Sufi modern ecumenism under colonial rule; that of reaching Western individuals who are willing to adopt and later spread a message of esoteric unity between Muslims and Christians. It also locates the 'Alawi tariqa comfortably within the lineage of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illaysh; Two Sufi Shaykhs who through their association with Western groups could facilitate their ecumenical projects.

Schuon was thus able to initiate and train Western disciples into the 'Alawi tariqa. He was attached to the Silsila connecting him to Ahmad al-'Alawi and then, through an uninterrupted chain of masters and disciples to Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili and finally to the Prophet Muhammad. From 1935 onward, René Guénon directed many of his European correspondents seeking a spiritual initiation towards Frithjof Schuon whose age then was no more than twenty eight years. The role of transmitting the tariqa was exclusively given

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<sup>531</sup> Ibid., 140, Footnote 23.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 21.



to the heads of the Sufi order and was nonetheless attributed to Schuon despite his young age and the very short period he spent with the Shaykh in comparison to other disciples. An honor that was unexpected and quickly contested by other members of the community. It seems that shortly before his death the Algerian Shaykh directly asked his successor Bentounes to appoint Schuon as his Muqaddam in Europe. This would explain Bentounes's refusal to remove this function from Schuon, which he could practically do when the latter started his tariqa and embraced metaphysical opinions that were, to say the least, far from Islamic orthodox Sufi doctrines. Starting from the mid-thirties. Frithjof Schuon asked those who addressed him to simply call him Shaykh Issa.

Thirteen years after he was appointed Muqaddam of the 'Alawi order in Europe, Schuon wrote his first major book titled *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*. There, he exposed his ideas of a universal, perennial and eternal unity between religions. The theories he sketched in this volume constituted the unchanged core of Schuon's philosophy during the half century that separated the publication of the book in 1948 and the death of its author in 1998. Schuon's advocacy for a transcendental unity between religions was a lively and clear echo of the ecumenical project 'Abd al-Qadir proposed nearly a century earlier. Crucial differences are to be noted. The Emir's initiative was formulated within a particular colonial context and mainly concerned an Abrahamic esoteric rapprochement between Christianity and Islam. René Guénon later introduced Hinduism, Shintoism and Western Freemasonry to this universal ecumenical project while excluding Christian Catholicism for example. Schuon, on the other side, opened the floodgates of the esoteric rapprochement to its fullest and included all religions with no exclusion. Abrahamic faiths, Dharmic religions, Far Eastern spiritualities, African animistic traditions and Native

American mysticism, all gained the favors of the Swiss metaphysician who saw in each one a possible path towards a global absolute Truth.<sup>533</sup>

The radical ecumenism of Schuon did not merely emanate from a simple desire to enlarge the list of authentic faiths, it is also the result of a more comprehensive academic knowledge of non-Western religions that scholars had accumulated over the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Schuon's inclusive and erudite religious universalism remained faithful to the theoretical framing his spiritual masters and predecessors imposed; that of a clear limit separating the esoteric core of religions and their exoteric shell with a pronounced and almost exclusive interest in the esoteric potential of world religions. Schuon often insisted in his writing that the primary function of religion is that of the Latin root of the word; *religat*, or binding men to God<sup>534</sup>. Compared to the nobility of this transcendental binding mission, the exoteric differences between religions were reduced to simple circumstantial, cultural and linguistic manifestations. For Schuon, these exoteric shells, while authentic and necessary, are only secondary to the esoteric verity lying behind them. Unlike René Guénon who remained authentically bound to Islamic orthodoxy while admitting the superior nature of Sufi esotericism, Schuon was less eager than his predecessor to show a clear attachment to Islamic orthodoxy. While admitting their necessity, a mild disdain characterized his relationship to exoteric manifestations of religions in general, relating them to a primitive attachment to passions that the mass of people needs. "If the average man or collective man were not passionate" he wrote in his

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<sup>533</sup> It is important here to notice that Schuon shared with René Guénon his disdain for modern spiritual and mystical schools such as Theosophism, Spiritism and others. Both firmly believed that only existing orthodoxies can be accepted within a true perennial philosophy.

<sup>534</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (London: Perennial Books, 1966), 143.

1978 book *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, “revelation would speak the language of the intellect and there would be no Exoterism, nor for that matter esoterism considered as an occult complement.<sup>535</sup>”

With Schuon, the line delimiting exotericism and esotericism was thus stretched to separate mystical elitism from a religious orthodoxy destined to the plebe. His following was thus almost exclusively composed of well-educated Western individuals who lived, worked and taught in European capitals. Schuon’s circle of disciples grew especially amongst those who, after reading Guénon, believed in the necessity of adopting a Sufi initiatic path in order to access universal truths. Schuon, benefitting from the legitimacy both Ahmad al-‘Alawi and René Guénon bestowed upon him was therefore a good, authentic and accessible option. After settling in Basle, Schuon’s relationship to Islamic orthodox circles diminished over the years to almost completely disappear after he decided to create his own Sufi Tariqa that, while attached to the school of al-‘Alawi, enjoyed a large margin of theological freedom.

al-Maryamiyya was the name Schuon chose to a Sufi school he initiated after a series of visions he presumably had of the Virgin Mary<sup>536</sup> where she gave him a metaphysical and universal mission to achieve. The circumstances around Schuon’s first vision of the Virgin perfectly resonate with the ecumenical spiritual mission he attributed to himself. He recounted that in 1965, while sitting in the cabin of a boat traversing the Mediterranean and taking him from Europe to North Africa, he “was overcome by Divine mercy in a special

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<sup>535</sup> Frithjof Schuon, “Esoterism and Mysticism,” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *Frithjof Schuon, The Essential Frithjof Schuon* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 89.

<sup>536</sup> Known as Maryam in the Quranic text.

way”<sup>537</sup> and that this revelation came to him “internally in a female form.”<sup>538</sup> He immediately identified this presence as that of the Virgin Mary<sup>539</sup>. Schuon craftily summarized his mystical mission and his role within the Sufi silsila to which he belonged in the evocative image of a boat traversing the Mediterranean, leaving the Christian West towards the Muslim East, carrying a Swiss Sufi Shaykh meditating in a small cabin and having nothing less than the mother of Jesus manifesting herself to him not as an image but as an essence. The universalist tone of this narrative transcending geographies, genders and orthodoxies was too powerful not to entice Schuon to build an entire Sufi tariqa around it. And the official name he chose for his Sufi branch perfectly mirrors his desire for a new universalism that connects a modern global imaginary to scrupulous preservation of religious orthodoxies. His tariqa was officially labeled al-‘Alawiyya al-Maryamiyya. In the 1980’s, several Sufi shrines of the Maryamiyya order were settled in Switzerland, France, England, Argentina and the USA<sup>540</sup>. The Zawiya of Bloomington, Indiana remains until today the most active and vocal amongst them all. It is there that Schuon lived the last years of his life and where he was buried. The story of the Bloomington shrine illustrates the elitist turn the Sufi esoteric universalism took with Schuon. Victor Danner, professor at the Indiana University in Bloomington subtly included texts of Schuon and his most famous disciples such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Martin Lings in his classes’ curriculum. Without revealing he was a Muslim and Sufi convert, Danner encouraged his students to keep the class discussions alive even after their graduation which resulted in nothing less than fifty

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<sup>537</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 149.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> The female and Divine manifestations of Maryam occurred several times after his trip to Morocco. In Lausanne for example when it was ignited by a small statue of the Virgin Mary he saw in a shop window or when he saw Madeleine, a friend he intensely loved in his young years, carrying her newly born child.

<sup>540</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 162.

Maryamis in Bloomington alone, most of whom were ex-students of Danner and two other professors at the same university who adopted the same proselytizing strategy.<sup>541</sup>

The elitism of Schuon's tariqa is not unfamiliar to Sufism. Throughout its history, Sufi scholars often sought to reserve an elitist gnosis destined to a privileged class of learned mystics able to follow the intellectual ramifications of esoteric Sufi sciences. The mass, on the other side, were offered a less restrictive version based on easy rituals and ceremonials where a thorough Sufi initiation was not required<sup>542</sup>. The structure of Sufi Shrines, despite the social and cultural differences between regions remains relatively similar across the Muslim world. If one is to use a 'Aalwi -and to an extent North African-terminology, a zawiya is composed of a central and unique Shaykh (master) surrounded by a small group of muqaddam (assistant) then a larger group of murids (seekers or disciples) and finally zuwar (visitors). This last group forms the core of the 'ammah while the other three are loosely coined as the khassah of the tariqa<sup>543</sup>. One could argue that Sufism's capacity to embrace different groups independently of their education or level of commitment ensured the long life and expansion of the movement.<sup>544</sup> This duality was intrinsic to a large number of tariqas including those most popular such as the Naqshabandi, Qadiri or Shadhili schools. Amongst the rare exceptions that escaped this rule

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>542</sup> The distinction between the elite Khassah (elite) and the 'ammah (commoners) and sometimes Khassat al-Khassah (the elite of the elite) is a recurrent theme in the work of prominent Sufi writers. See for example the work of the Medieval Sufi mystic Bayazid Bastami (804-874) whose sayings were collected by Abdelwahab Meddeb in *Les dits de Bastami* (Paris: Fayard, 1989). See sayings 91, 99 and 456 for example. Books dedicated to the tabaqat (hierarchies) are common in Sufi literature and they also make this difference between the Khassah and the 'ammah. See for example the famous work *Tabaqat al-Sufiyyah* of the Medieval Sufi scholar Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Salmi (937-1021).

<sup>543</sup> On the structure of the 'Alawi Tariqa, read Foad Khatir's « Le changement de politique algérienne à l'égard des confréries religieuses musulmanes : de la persécution à la réhabilitation, le cas particulier de la confrérie 'Alawiyya, 1909-2009 », PhD Diss., (Université Toulouse, 2016).

<sup>544</sup> A point that Ivan Aguéli for examples often made. See "Al-Akbariyya," 1911, Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

and adopted an exclusively elitist approach to mysticism was the Akbari tariqa of Ibn 'Arabi<sup>545</sup>. If one is to compare the Akbari school to more popular Sufi tariqas, one must admit that little is actually known about this branch that navigated centuries through a restrained and selective process where the 'esoteric secret' was transmitted based on capacity and not simply on willingness. The elitism of the Sufi Akbari way lies both in the notoriously inaccessible nature of its foundational texts and the high intellectual capacities required from its followers. In that regard, Schuon falls within a perfectly Akbari elitist logic of recruitment. Not only were his disciples educated young males and females, but the nature of his writings was only accessible to readers who benefited from a certain mastery of philosophical and theological jargon.

Schuon's critique of modern rationalism is a perfect illustration of the relatively inaccessible and elitist spirit that characterized his written work. He contested the largely accepted claim that reason is at the heart of the philosophical act and preferred Traditional thinking – and Traditional here must be understood in its Guénonian meaning. Schuon saw that the Western philosophical heritage was in fact rich in figures who respected a Traditional epistemology such as Plato, Pythagoras and Aristotle whom he considered to be "Philosophers in the real and innocent sense of the word."<sup>546</sup> The immaculate authenticity Schuon attributed to a few Greek philosophers was inscribed within a narrative of historical decadence that Guénon and Aguéli developed before him. From a philosophical perspective this decadence manifested in blind and fanatical reliance on reason alone for

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<sup>545</sup> On the elitist nature of Ibn 'Arabi's tariqa, read the article of Michel Chodkiewicz, « The diffusion of Ibn al-'Arabi's Doctrine, » *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 9 (1991), 36-57. And of the same author « The Esoteric Foundations of Political Legitimacy in Ibn 'Arabî », in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, eds., Stephen Hirtenstein et Michael Tiernan (Shaftesbury-Rockport: Element, 1993), 190-198.

<sup>546</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Essential*, 534.

the construction of truth. Pre-modern philosophers, Schuon argued, remained anchored within an epistemology that accepted and acknowledged the limitations of pure reason<sup>547</sup>. Acknowledging the fallibility of reason, besides being a 'reasonable' position, was key to the conversion of philosophers into sages; an obviously higher position in the scale of Traditional knowledge. Schuon approved of some Sufi's claim that Plato and other philosophers were sages and saints. A deduction that often pushed him to use the words sage and philosopher interchangeably and to "use the term rationalists for profane thinkers."<sup>548</sup>

One might think that thus acknowledging the limits of pure reasoning might bring Schuon to a Kantian position and therefore force him to acknowledge at least one valid modern philosophical tradition. And yet Schuon had a particular disdain of the German philosopher whom he often accused of inaugurating a revolting "suicidal rationalism."<sup>549</sup> Schuon blamed Kant for acknowledging the limitations of reason while denying men their ability to ultimately know things as they are<sup>550</sup>. Human capacity to touch the true essence of things being the cornerstone of the Traditionalist thought, Schuon could only vividly oppose Kantian rationalism. For him, Kant was simply not a philosopher and "if Kant is a philosopher, then Plotinus is not, and vice versa."<sup>551</sup> For the Swiss metaphysician, profane thinkers will inevitably remain blinded to primordial Truths if they don't adhere to a more comprehensive Traditional epistemology. An epistemology that he put much effort interpreting and, to a certain extent, constructing. If one is to compare him to Guénon and

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 89.

<sup>549</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009), 31.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Essential*, 534.

Aguéli, Schuon's texts offer a more sophisticated and advanced response to the question 'How do we know'. He argued that Logic alone, being the unique engine of modern philosophy, could only usher thinkers to purely rational conclusions thus leading them astray from transcendent Truths. For him, a good logician can only accept the quite logical limits of his or her method of investigation. A natural question would then arise: how can one know transcendent truths if the only tool innately available to humans is that of logic, and that logic has an inevitably limited scope. For that, Schuon argued that the intellect was another valid inborn instrument able to guide humans to metaphysical knowledge. The intellect for Schuon was the closest term he found in the Western philosophical jargon to translate the Islamic concept of *fitra*.

Quranic Exegesis has debated at length the meaning and uses of the word *fitra*. Theologians roughly agreed it referred to an innate human nature and disposition that, unless altered, leads men to believe in the oneness of God. The Quranic verse that sparked this debate is the following "So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition (*fitra*) God instilled in mankind—there is no altering God's creation— and this is the right religion, though most people do not realize it."<sup>552</sup> A debated and ambiguous Hadith of Muhammad also stated that men are born within the *fitra*, but their parents make them Jews, or Christians or Magaians<sup>553</sup>. Both texts were often cited to argue for a human innate capacity to recognize the unicity of God. Schuon used this theological debate to argue for an Islamic root of the supra-religious truth he was advocating and selected the Quranic *fitra* for the definition he gave of the intellect.

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<sup>552</sup> Quran 30:30, Oxford World's Classics Edition.

<sup>553</sup> "Kitab al-Jana'iz" in Sahih al-Bukhari.. ( Riyad: maktabat al-malik Fahd, 2008), P384.



This maneuver was not merely linguistic, Schuon aimed to escape the theological literalism of classical Muslim scholars and offer a more nuanced and complex understanding of the *fitra* than his predecessors. First, to use an Aristotelian jargon, Schuon considered the intellect as a potential to be actualized<sup>554</sup>. As much as reason is moved and nurtured by logical deductions, the Intellect needs esoteric and perennial sciences to grow and prosper. The Intellect is then affirmed as an innate corollary to reason, similar in nature but with different roles and targets. For Schuon, Kant's deviance resided entirely there; in his incapacity to recognize another innate human instrument of knowledge but reason and his subsequent inability to reckon with human's Divine capacity to know things as they are.

In Schuon's epistemology, confusing reason with intellect amounts to a dangerous "deviation comparable to the false inspirationalism of heretical sects."<sup>555</sup> Thinking that perennial knowledge pre-exists birth and that all humans are thus naturally disposed to know the true nature and essence of things is, of course, not a novel idea. When he argued that the "strict data for a metaphysical science pre-exist in pure Intellect,"<sup>556</sup> Schuon's words resonate with Plato's theory of reminiscence. Plato believed this pre-natal knowledge could be actively retrieved through philosophy, Schuon, on the other side, claimed the truths of the *fitra* could only be 'remembered' through authentic spiritual practices. Mystical initiation was then the instrument Plato and his followers could not detect, and *fitra* the source of knowledge Kant could not admit.

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<sup>554</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Essential*, 89.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 492.

“There is little likelihood of the intellect being actualized without the help of revelation.”<sup>557</sup> Schuon argued. The Swiss Shaykh performed Dhikr ceremonies and Khalwas throughout his life and considered these exercises necessary to stimulate his intellect. While often insisting all forms of authentic mystical paths were legitimate, Schuon, like his predecessors, claimed Sufism was the most authentic and efficient of all these paths. Throughout his life, and despite his pronounced interest and often active involvement with different mystical traditions, his daily spiritual practices remained close to the Sufi tradition of Ahmad al-‘Alawi. Schuon saw in these Sufi rituals and prayers a quasi-scientific process stripped of any ambiguity or inconsistency. For him, the actualization of the intellect - possible through these rituals- depended solely on the assiduity and commitment of the initiate. He was even outraged that theologians often argued that mystery was always necessary to gnosis, as if “Divine truths were made not to be known”<sup>558</sup>. He insisted the power of the intellect was infinite and, in a sense, horizontal since every disciple has the virtual capacity to fetch out Divine knowledge preciously hidden in his or her intellect. The intellect, or what Schuon eloquently described as “the eye of the heart,”<sup>559</sup> only required for its actualization a Divine revelation, a path, a Sufi master, an initiation and a committed disciple. Schuon admired Sufism’s capacity to adjust its practices depending on the ‘readiness’ of each initiate. It certainly prioritized the elite but did not deny the *‘ammah* (commoners) the right to experience a form, albeit rudimentary, of metaphysical

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 354.

realization. The universality of the intellect was, for Schuon, the reason behind this horizontality.<sup>560</sup>

Despite the complexity of his texts, Schuon was notably more lyrical than Guénon. His written work abounds in poetic imagery, colorful metaphors, and gracefully narrated myths, tales and allegories. But most importantly, Schuon was radically more interested than his first master in the anthropological aspect of the Traditionalist theory. If Guénon was tirelessly trying to express what the Tradition *is*, in its most ontological and abstract way, Schuon was eager to explore the human manifestations of the primordial Tradition. An interest that naturally led him to a more sophisticated and nuanced reading of art. Without dissociating the artistic question from the Traditionalist epistemology he construed, Schuon gave a primary role to the intellect both in the creation and interpretation of sacred art. In his book *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, he attributed the ancient “Greek miracle” to a healthy “substitution of the reason for the Intellect, of the fact for the Principle, of the phenomenon for the Idea, of the accident for the Substance, of the form for the Essence, of man for God.”<sup>561</sup> Schuon then specified the range of this Greek metaphysical revolution and stated that it “applied to art as well as to thought.”<sup>562</sup> The birth of Greek sacred art was therefore a clear and direct consequence of a sane epistemology that embraced esotericism as a legitimate form of knowledge.

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 534.

<sup>561</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence*, 98.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

## **Integral Aesthetics : A Sufi Master who Could Paint**

Schuon was also an artist; another difference separating him from Guénon. Son of a German musician, he was also a textile designer during his young years. Talented draftsman, his first sketchbooks abound in portraits of men and women from different countries revealing an early interest in non-European cultures and spiritualities. Indian Maharajas, Japanese Samurais, Chinese monks and Sufi Shaykhs populated his early sketchbooks<sup>563</sup>. Actual and active interest in painting only started after his marriage in the early 1950s. The coincidence between his marriage and the beginning of his artistic career can partly clarify the largely feminine nature of Schuon's pictorial work. At certain periods of his life, Schuon depicted almost exclusively female figures in his paintings and after his vision of Mary in 1965, the women he drew slowly took the facial features, postures and expressions of the Virgin Mary as Christian icons imagined her. But the Mary Schuon venerated was liberated from the Christian discursive monopoly. After all, the mother of Jesus revealed herself to him on his way from Europe to Africa thanks to a Sufi *barakah* he received from an Algerian Shaykh. Moving the figure of the Virgin Mary out of restrictive white and Christian identities was essential to Schuon who wanted his paintings to perfectly correspond to his perennialist and universalist teachings. On a practical level and to 'provincialize' (or universalize) Mary, Schuon opted for a rather eccentric aesthetic choice; He decided that the feminine symbols of his painting should resemble a Native American female. (Fig. 4.5)

This choice is however not surprising if one knows the utmost fascination Schuon held for Native American spirituality. The Swiss metaphysician had already entertained

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<sup>563</sup> See his drawings of the year 1928 published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Houston: Abodes, 1992) 185-200.

since the 1940's a correspondence with the Native American medicine man and mystic known as Black Elk (1863-1950). Schuon saw in Black Elk the source of unaltered Traditional and authentic knowledge and requested his friend, the anthropologist Joseph Epes Brown, to collect and record the testimonies of the old mystic<sup>564</sup>. Schuon's interest in Native American wisdom ignited the excitement of Guénon who wrote to him in 1947 that "as far as the American Indian tradition is concerned, things are developing in a most important and, from all points of view, extremely satisfying way. I confess that for me at least, this was entirely unexpected, as I had never had occasion to look into what might still remain of this tradition. There is no doubt that all of this has, as you say, profound reasons."<sup>565</sup> Before his first visit to North America, Schuon was actively seeking to meet with Native American individuals who happened to be close to Basle.

He met in 1953 with Thomas Yellowtail who was touring Europe and the Middle East with a dancing troop of Crow dancers. A strong friendship linked the two men until the death of Yellowtail in 1993<sup>566</sup>. In 1959, When Schuon and his wife Catherine visited North America for the first time, Black Elk had already passed away and his son Benjamin along with Thomas Yellowtail took the responsibility of introducing Schuon to the esoteric knowledge of their respective tribes. Schuon thus met with members of the Shoshone and Cheyenne tribes as well as with the grandson of the Sioux Chief Red Cloud who adopted him and gave him the name 'Brave Eagle.'<sup>567</sup> Presumably, Schuon was thus the first Sufi Shaykh to ever be adopted by a Native American tribe.

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<sup>564</sup> The testimonies and interviews Joseph Epes Brown collected are compiled in his seminal book titled *The Sacred Pipe* ( Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

<sup>565</sup> Letter from René Guénon to Frithjof Schuon of December 16, 1947. Cited in Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon, Life and Teachings*, 29.

<sup>566</sup> Aymard, Laude, *Frithjof Schuon*, 39.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

The Native American vast plains, tipis and garments and most importantly local ceremonial and sacred dances had the deepest impact on Schuon. His paintings, often imbued with a Native American ambience with the persistent presence of brown, bear-chested Maryams are the visual proofs of the power and durability of this impact. (Fig. 4.6) After his vision of Mary, Schuon acknowledged that he “could scarcely paint anything other than the Holy Virgin.”<sup>568</sup> His feminine paintings often represented two women, one naked and another covered, both supposedly symbolizing “the antithesis between sacred form and sacred content, or between the veiling and the unveiling of the holy.”<sup>569</sup> After he initiated the Maryamiyya Sufi tariqa, Schuon blended his symbolic Native American female figures with his newly found admiration for the Virgin Mary. According to Schuon, His brown Maryam was not a simple aesthetic and subjective choice but rather a didactic artistic process through which he intended to propagate his universalist teachings. He wrote. “I painted her, not as she is portrayed in Christian religious art, but as I had inwardly experienced her, that is as Virginal Mother or as motherly Virgin and beyond all theological forms; as the embodiment of the Divine Mercy and at the same time of the Religio-Perennis, somehow uniting in her person Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, in conformity with my own nature.”<sup>570</sup>

The Virgin Mary Schuon depicted was usually presented in a frontal position, with long, thick and straight black hair, a dark skin complexion and Native American or sometimes Indian facial features.<sup>571</sup> She is either directly looking at the viewer or faintly

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<sup>568</sup> Michael Oren Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), 102.

<sup>569</sup> Michael Pollack, *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 3.

<sup>570</sup> Cited in Michael Oren Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, 103.

<sup>571</sup> See for example his 1963 painting “The Sun Lodge” published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 77 or his painting titled “Salutation to the Great Spirit” of the same year.

closing her eyes while holding a male child in her arms. (fig. 4.7) Both characters are surrounded by an aureole while floating in a flat and usually monochromatic background. Mary and her child take most of the canvas and the presence of deep blue and golden thick surfaces around them remind the viewer of the Christian and Byzantine iconic tradition<sup>572</sup>. Over the course of thirty years of artistic production, Schuon experimented with different compositions, formats, color palettes but the main theme remained relatively stable; a Divine like feminine presence, a mystical ambience evoking an earthly paradise, immobile characters taking firm postures, a constant allusion to a primordial and Virginal innocence, objects floating freely in an aerial composition and human figures surrounded with thick contours in a clear intention not to let them dilute within the background.<sup>573</sup> (Fig. 4.8) These pictorial choices, far from being random aesthetic decisions, are inscribed within a larger symbolic logic that organized Schuon's artistic work. Nudity was then the symbol of the untouched authentic nature of perennial truths, the garments of a covered woman reflected the exoteric shell covering the esoteric core of religions, and the old Native American man represented the masculine nature of Divine Wisdom<sup>574</sup>. (Fig. 4.9) The different physical postures of his characters, whether sitting, standing, opening their arms, or closing their eyes were also part of Schuon's symbolic codes.<sup>575</sup> A standing woman with

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<sup>572</sup> See his painting titled "Celestial Virgin" published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Houston: Abodes, 1992), 240.

<sup>573</sup> See for example his 1962 painting titled "The Encounter of the Chiefs" published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 23. Or his 1959 painting titled "Apparition of the Buffalo Calf Maiden" published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 123.

<sup>574</sup> See for example his 1953 painting titled "The Thunderstorm" published in the book *The Feathered Sun* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990), 95. Also, his 1967 painting titled "Waiting for the Enemy" published in the same book in page 37.

<sup>575</sup> Frithjof Schuon, "Principle and Criteria of Art" in *Language of the Self: Essays on the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1999), 61.

her eyes closed standing next to a seated old man giving his back to the viewer,<sup>576</sup> a naked woman looking at a standing warrior,<sup>577</sup> animals traversing the background, a soft wind moving the garments of the character, tipis, campfires, melting snow,<sup>578</sup> all find their meaning within a Schuonian esoteric artistic lexicon. (Fig. 4.10)

Guénon was the first to argue that symbolism was the main structure organizing sacred art. Without distinctly specifying what he meant by perennial and eternal symbols, Guénon seemed to refer to recognizable religious signs such as the cross, the star, the circle, the compass, or the crescent. Aware of the quasi-impossibility of an art entirely based on a limited number of symbols, he believed rhythm and repetition are sufficient venues allowing for some form of creativity. On how an art based on a rhythmic repetition of symbols could be performed, Guénon did not offer any clear lead to those of his followers who wanted to actually create sacred art. In his theorization of symbolism, it seemed that Guénon aimed to merely emphasize the objective and supra-personal nature of sacred art without caring about the practical implication of such theory to artists. Schuon also argued that symbolism was Divinely objective and that it was “a real and rigorous science.”<sup>579</sup> A science that relies on an authentic and esoteric understanding of “forms, spatial directions, numbers, natural phenomena, positions, relationships, movements, colors, and other properties or states of things.”<sup>580</sup> Both Guénon and Schuon agree on the matter yet the Swiss man, unlike his spiritual master, was an artist and therefore faced the reality of an

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<sup>576</sup> See for example his 1966 painting titled “We are All Relatives” published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 33.

<sup>577</sup> See his 1953 painting titled “Chiefs with pipe in camp scene.”

<sup>578</sup> See his 1966 painting titled “Tipis at the Rising of the Sun” published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 193. Or his 1961 painting titled “So that My People May Live” published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 13.

<sup>579</sup> Cutsinger, *Advice to the Serious Seeker*, 126.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*



impossible art based on a scientific repetition of supposedly eternal symbols. His definition of symbolism was consequently broader than Guénon's. While retaining the 'scientific' character Guénon believed existed, Schuon's understanding of objective symbolism allowed for a large margin of creative impetus to be implemented. His paintings abounded in male, female and animal figures, fantastic settings and heavenly ambiances. What he called stylization was one of the concepts Schuon used to free symbolism from the burden of literalism that Guénon imposed.

For Schuon, his figural art was not naturalistic- a description he would have considered offensive. Mimicking the world does nothing but hide the Real; Reality should instead be stylized. Schuon liked to take the example of Byzantine icons to clarify his definition of stylization. There, the exaggerated length of Mary's eyes, her unnaturally small mouth or the odd dimensions of her child are unlike anything we would see in nature. For Schuon, these distortions<sup>581</sup> are clear symbolic choices and not a mere lack of skill<sup>582</sup>. Schuon was often surprised modern art historians considered the lack of naturalism- that he defined as the artistic effort to mimic reality- in Byzantine, Medieval or Islamic art as a temporary infirmity. For him, stylization was a conscious artistic choice inspired by Traditional and esoteric sciences. In the same way the invention of perspective for example derived from the erosion of Traditional knowledges and their replacement with secular Humanist philosophies<sup>583</sup>. Medieval Western art, compressed between Roman naturalism and Renaissance humanism was thus viewed as a brilliant, though temporary,

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<sup>581</sup> Frithjof Schuon, "Principle and Criteria of Art," 71.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 64.

manifestation of a healthy Christian esoteric Tradition that traversed Europe during that period.<sup>584</sup>

Symbolism was thus not restricted to a set of known diagrams and signs, but a whole process of ‘deformation’ that he eloquently once described as an active and conscious act of “scorching by the essence.”<sup>585</sup> In his understanding of symbolism, artists are allowed to imitate, but only if they “imitate the creative act and not the thing created.”<sup>586</sup> Widening the scope and definition of symbolism while emphasizing its Divine, objective and scientific nature allowed Schuon’s disciples to better use this concept in their historical reading of Christian, Hindu and Islamic art for example. It also allowed Schuon to indulge himself in the creation of symbolic compositions without denying the Divinely inspired nature of his artistic work. Schuon resolved the contradiction between the individual creative genius and Divinely inspired art by claiming that a true esotericist can become the tool God could utilize to manifest himself artistically. In his 1995 book *The Transfiguration of Man*, Schuon wrote, “As regards sacred art, it must be said that painted and sculpted images also have God as their author since it is He who reveals and creates them through man; He offers the image of Himself by humanizing it.”<sup>587</sup> God is naturally unrestricted to a specific set of symbols and diagrams, the art he creates can then take an infinite number of forms without contradicting Divine essence. The agency of the artist was therefore displaced from an individual will to create towards an active union with God who then creates through the artist. For Schuon, this voluntary erasure was much simpler to

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<sup>584</sup> Ibid., footnote 60.

<sup>585</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Essential*, 70.

<sup>586</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 2005), 78.

<sup>587</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1995), 49.

achieve in a Traditional society than it is in the modern world. He argued that in the Traditional world “every formal element is a gift from heaven.”<sup>588</sup> In the modern world however that Divinely ambience where men are naturally destined to produce sacred art is perturbed. In a perverted modern world, artists are disoriented by the heavy and invasive presence of profane forms. A true artist can only try to “keep an eye on the formal integrity of his ambience in order to avoid as far as possible the presence of forms that are contrary to the Truth, the Path, and Virtue.”<sup>589</sup>

While modeling the formal Sufi practices of his new ecumenical tariqa, Schuon subtly invited his disciples to contemplate his paintings as part of their ritual prayers. “No one is forced to be interested in them,”<sup>590</sup> wrote one of the Maryami disciples, “but everybody is obliged to respect them since they emanate from the Shaykh and reflect aspects of his personality and experience.”<sup>591</sup> Art for both Aguéli and Schuon is not a diversion from modern lassitude, it is rather a tool made available to the intellect so it performs its true mission; that of approaching the Absolute. Schuon’s new perennialist epistemology centered around the intellect found its place within a general theory of sacred art. The first premise of such theory is the following: since the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art is immediate and escapes logical reasoning, then a direct connection arguably exists between beauty and the intellect. After dissociating reason from aesthetic judgment, Schuon could then assert the intellect was the main engine behind the creation and appreciation of a true work of art. He contended that reason, a faculty he

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<sup>588</sup> Cited in Cutsinger’s *Advice to the Serious Seeker*, 132.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid.

<sup>590</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 152.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

disdained, was only linked to naturalism; an art that he despised. For Schuon, Naturalism was too rational, accurate and precise to be associated with Divine infinity<sup>592</sup>; a dimension that only the ambiguity of the deformed and stylized symbol can offer access to. Naturalism was hence connected to reason alone, whereas symbolism stemmed from the innocent purity of the *fitra*/intellect. And according to Schuon an art that bases its creativity around the finitude of rationality can only “share with reason itself a flatness refractory to all mystery.”<sup>593</sup>

Art is therefore simultaneously a product and “support to intellection.”<sup>594</sup> The epistemological dichotomy Schuon built between reason and intellect found its extension in art with the distinction he made between profane and sacred art. Sacred art finds its authentic locus within the intellect, while profane and modern (arts are inherently rational. As noted earlier, Schuon claimed the intellect is sensitive to some individual’s desire to reach *kamal*, or earthly perfection. In that sense, the intellect while Divine and objective is also humanly subjective and prone to change and refinement. This dual characteristic of the intellect pushed Schuon to tune his definition of the artist’s role and agency and to assert that “the foundations of art lie in the spirit, in metaphysical, theological and mystical knowledge, not in knowledge of the craft alone nor yet in genius.”<sup>595</sup> Mastery of craft, individual creative talent and a good grasp of mystical knowledge are the tools accessible to the hands of an authentic artist. In that regard, being acquainted with the technicalities

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<sup>592</sup> Frithjof Schuon, “Principle and Criteria of Art,” 71

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

of artistic production and evolving in the spiritual Sufi path are of equal importance for a true artist.

Schuon was committed to realizing Aguéli's eccentric dream of seeing a Sufi master paint. For years, he claimed he was himself a shaykh, thus traversed by Divine Grace, and eventually a legitimate candidate to become the painting hand of God. This duality linking art to gnosis and its obvious rarity put him in front of an urgent question; were all artists and craftsmen of the past fully initiated, like him, to the secrets of esoteric wisdom?

Schuon's reading of art history, while largely contestable, was too refined to accept such a statement. And to resolve this conundrum, he associated his theory of the intellect with Guénon's definition of a Traditional society and argued for a "collective intelligence."<sup>596</sup> In his article "Principle and Criteria of Art," Schuon argued that "the genius is at the same time Traditional and collective, spiritual and racial, and then personal. Personal genius is nothing without the concurrence of a deeper and wider genius."<sup>597</sup> For Schuon, a rather cryptic 'genius' can smoothly traverse a Traditional society thus rendering its gifted members able to produce sacred art. In that sense, there is no possibility of a fully profane art emerging within a Traditional society.<sup>598</sup> On the other hand, a non-Traditional society, even if what it produced is dedicated to a religious function, is unable to carry sacred forms.<sup>599</sup> Schuon went even one step ahead and argued for the possibility of seeing sacred art within a purely Traditional society even if the subject of the work of art is devoid of a religious function. a decorated plate from the medieval period can be considered sacred if it

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<sup>596</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid.

obeyed the rules of Godly aesthetics. At the same time, an icon in a modern church will not be read as sacred if the visual means and symbols it used are not directly emanating from Traditional esoteric knowledge.

Art becomes then both a sign and instrument of Sufi initiation. Schuon here reestablished the dialectical loop his predecessors built between sacred art and Traditional artists; God manifesting himself through Traditional artists who, in their turn, help themselves and others advance on their initiatic way towards Divine perfection. In a letter to his friend and disciple Leo Schaya in 1982, Schuon wrote : “ If I were asked why I paint images of the Holy Virgin, I would answer: to transmit, and thus make accessible to others, an inward vision: and to make possible a participation in this vision.”<sup>600</sup> These paintings, Schuon wanted them to mirror the degree of realization he reached and then to serve his disciples as a medium to pray and meditate. Profane art, on the other hand is bluntly accused of leading artists astray and replacing “ the soul of the Man-God or of the Perfected Man, by that of the artist and of his human model.”<sup>601</sup> Ivan Aguéli was the first to argue that authentic Islamic art mirrored the *hal*, (initiatic degree) of the artist and that in return, the work of art served the artists first and then other initiates to evolve in the path using art as a visual crystallization of a Sufi state. Guénon later argued that this dialectical loop could not be restricted to a restrained group of artists, initiates, and Sufi masters but should be extended to include Traditional societies as a whole. For Guénon, authentic art was a social affair, he argued for a much larger dialectic linking Traditional arts to Traditional societies;

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<sup>600</sup> Cited in Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon*, 42.

<sup>601</sup> Frithjof Schuon, “Principle and Criteria of Art,” 67.

One producing the other in a constant repetitive cycle. Schuon, while approving of Guénon and Aguéli's art theories, went one step further; he planned to produce a sacred art.

If he often condemned the naturalism of the Renaissance artists, it was modern art that Schuon saw as the epitome of the naturalistic deviancy. The presumably rapid and radical decadence of modern art, while arguably astonishing, did not come as a surprise to the Swiss metaphysician. He deplored its effects, lamented its impacts but ultimately understood its emergence. For Schuon the depravity of modern art was a natural result of "artistic relativism"<sup>602</sup> which according to him will ultimately "destroy the very notion of art just as philosophical relativism destroys the notion of truth."<sup>603</sup> The relativism Schuon deplored is bound to the pervasive place the artist's persona took in modern artistic narratives. Art becomes relative the moment it is centered around the choices and tastes of its creator instead of relying on objective metaphysical truths. The inflated ego of modern artists, the cult around their work, the exhibitions dedicated to their art, the biographies, interviews and aura surrounding them, all are manifestations of the problem modern art is suffering from. Schuon, despite his pronounced hostility towards modernity, could maintain a relatively subtle, objective and calm critique of an era he thought utterly immoral. He seemed however to lose this composure when addressing the specific question of modern art. Critiquing an art he thought dangerously deviant and thoroughly subjective Schuon wrote: "Everyone believes himself obliged to be a great man; novelty is taken for originality, morbid introspection for profundity, cynicism for sincerity and pretentiousness for genius, so that a point is even reached where a diagram of microbes or

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<sup>602</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

some zebra-like striping may be accepted as a painting.”<sup>604</sup> Schuon often argued that a well-executed copy of an old Traditional masterpiece is more valuable than a modern work of art doing nothing but revealing the subjective views of its creator. The birth of modern artistic critique equally frustrated the Swiss Sufi mystic. The textual attempts to interpret works of art that had no value in his eyes exasperated him more than the works of art themselves: “But in our day a nobody can in the name of art for art's sake show us anything he likes and, if we cry out in protest in the name of truth and intelligence, we are told we have not understood, as though some mysterious deficiency prevented us from understanding, not Chinese or Aztec art, but some inferior daub by a European living in the next street.”<sup>605</sup>

The immediate nature of Aesthetic pleasure and its connection to the intellect fueled Schuon’s condemnation of modern art critique. Understanding being reason’s domain, art could not be understood or critiqued, but simply experienced using the Divine wisdom installed in each human’s intellect. For Schuon, one particular style embodied the modern artistic catastrophe. Between its reliance on intimate and sometimes unconscious individual experiences and its dependence on art criticism and psychoanalytic theories, surrealism was Schuon’s constant subject of disdain and mockery. For him, “The great mistake of the surrealists is to believe that profundity lies in the direction of what is individual, that it is this, and not the universal.”<sup>606</sup> Surrealist’s belief in a form of unconscious intimate authenticity is the main reason behind Schuon’s despise for the movement. Not any authenticity was worth expressing and definitely not the modern

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<sup>604</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid., 78.



zeitgeist Surrealists were attached to. "To claim that a work of art is good because "it expresses our times" amounts to affirming that a phenomenon is good simply because it expresses something; in that case crime is good because it expresses a criminal tendency, an error is good because it expresses a lack of knowledge and so forth"<sup>607</sup>

Schuon liked to coin artists who operated outside of a Traditional society as "isolated artists."<sup>608</sup> An artist fully immersed within a non-Traditional society is paradoxically facing his or her inevitable solitude. It thus comes as no surprise that the few modern artists Schuon seemed to appreciate had notorious problems including themselves within their immediate urban and social settings, namely Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin<sup>609</sup>. In the absence of modern European Traditional society, their self-imposed seclusion, in Southern France or in Tahiti, was for Schuon a legitimate inclusion within a Divine artistic economy.

This view of Traditional society as a comprehensive, coherent, and conscious whole is one of the main traits of the Sufi perennial philosophy that traversed the chain of writers this dissertation is examining. Believing in the existence of an authentic society that will dissolve all individuality within an all encompassing Divine Grace remained an uncontested tenant of their work. This belief arguably finds its roots within the political early roots of the movement. 'Abd al-Qadir, while aware of the personal and intimate nature of the Sufi exercise, wanted his project of an esoteric rapprochement between nations to transcend the individual and transform into a cohesive and vigorous political collective project. While retaining this social trope within his perennialist texts, Schuon was the most de-politized

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid., 80.

figure amongst all his predecessors in the Sufi silsila. Despite his emotional attachment to Algeria and his recurrent trips to Northern Africa, Schuon barely spoke in his texts about the colonial question, Western imperialism, European Fascism or other burning political topics of the first half of the twentieth century.

By the 1940s, the political core of Abd el-Qadir's project lost its shine. Far from 'Illaysh who dedicated an Egyptian mosque to an Italian king, Aguéli who believed Sufism was the most appropriate remedy to Western imperialism or Guénon who thought the Western world in its entirety should be politically reformulated, Schuon was remarkably uninterested in the political question. Unlike Aguéli and Guénon, Schuon refused to see in the West an evil entity to be fought, resisted, reconverted, or purified. The thick line separating East and West that his predecessors built thinned across the years, and he preferred to criticize modernity alone, in all its manifestations whether in its European cradle or the East.

Schuon's depoliticized reading of his predecessors' work was not a simple personal preference, it was rather inscribed within a larger trend where Sufism in general was increasingly emptied of its subversive potential and Sufi masters pushed to portray themselves as amiable Eastern sages.<sup>610</sup> A period where the revolutionary potential of Sufism in colonized countries shrunk under the influence of a more modernizing, secular and Western influenced narrative of liberation<sup>611</sup>. This pacified Sufism that colonialism

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<sup>610</sup> As noted earlier in this chapter, Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi was himself a good representative of this pacified Sufism that found the approval and support of French authorities – His repetitive trips to France and his role during the official inauguration of the Mosquée de Paris testify to that. For more on the modern global role Sufi Shaykhs played in the twentieth century read Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>611</sup> On the pacification of Sufi movements in colonized countries read for example Knut Vikor's "Sufism and colonialism" in Lloyd Ridgeon, ed., *the Cambridge Companion to Sufism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

promoted enticed numerous Sufi masters to embark to Europe and North America instead of patiently waiting to see possible Western disciples land in the Muslim world. Starting from the 1920's Sufi Shaykhs were thus allowed to travel across Europe and promote a spiritual and apolitical version of their school to a curious Western crowd who did not have the courage Aguéli and Guénon had. The case of Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927) is very telling in that regard. The Indian Sufi master and touring musician left his native country then under British occupation in 1910 and toured Europe and the United States spreading a message of unity between nations, love and harmony based on Sufi universalist teachings. He married a young American lady, settled in Europe and built multiple shrines in Western urban centers before dying at the age of forty four and leaving a Sufi tariqa that remains active in Western countries until this day.

Frithjof Schuon, on his turn, carried a lightened and depoliticized 'Alawi Sufism across the Mediterranean and made the universalist project of his predecessors into a European affair. His critique of Kantian rationalism in the name of an innate and universal intellect, his views on Western modern art, and his pronounced medievalism reveal the new elitist Euro-centricity that characterized Sufi Traditionalism under Schuon's influence. Faithful to the Traditionalist essentialist drive, Schuon also liked to reassemble different ideas under the same conceptual umbrella in the name of an overarching, holistic and unified perennialist philosophy. His work on a new Traditionalist epistemology revolving around the intellect reveals a genuine concern for a theoretical comprehensiveness that his predecessors sometimes lacked. His theories about sacred art did not escape his acute desire for a unifying intellectual ground to Traditionalist concepts. One might argue that the essence of Schuon's artistic theories is already found in Guénon's work and that,

despite being more prolific than his master on the topic, Schuon was far from being inventive. Some truth might reside in such statement if one disregards Schuon's impressive work polishing, extending, and piecing together Guénon's ideas into what he often called integral Aesthetics. For him, art can reach some form of 'integrality' if it is born within a Traditional society, obeys the objective rules of Symbolism, emanates from the artist's intellect, uses stylization as legitimate gate towards creativity, and finally if art is both product and support of esoteric initiation. Other instances can testify of Schuon's role homogenizing a disparate Traditionalist thought; an intellectual effort that rendered his work simpler, more coherent and approachable to the circle of faithful Schuonian devotees who gathered around him.

As noted above, Schuon attracted an audience of wisely selected followers who rose to fame during his life and carried his message after his death. Most of his Western disciples joined his tariqa after René Guénon's suggestion. Withall Perry, a Harvard graduate became acquainted with the work of Guénon during his years in college. He then decided to embark on a spiritual journey to the East and to visit, for that occasion, René Guénon in Cairo. The French metaphysician introduced Perry to Schuon. From Basle to Bloomington, Perry and his wife followed closely Frithjof and Catherine Schuon in their travels and offered them substantial financial help when needed<sup>612</sup>. Bloomington, where both Withall Perry and Schuon are today buried, is still the headquarter of World Wisdom; a publishing company established in 1980 and dedicated to the publication and promotion of Schuon's work and that of his disciples. The British writer and historian Martin Lings was also one of the Western followers of Schuon who found their master after consulting

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<sup>612</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 148.

with René Guénon. Lings remains popular in Muslim circles for his noted biography of the Prophet Muhammad that he wrote in 1983<sup>613</sup>. Lings lived near Guénon in Cairo and was his personal assistant for more than ten years between 1939 and 1952 when he had to leave due to the anti-British riots that preceded the revolution of 1952<sup>614</sup>. Perry and Lings attended and helped organize Guénon's small burial ceremony in Cairo in 1951. After several years accompanying Schuon, both Perry and Lings wrote extensively on perennial philosophy, sacred art, symbolism of colors, the universalism of Ibn 'Arabi's teachings, Sufi poetry and Quranic exegesis. Lings was also the muqaddam of Schuon; a position that other converts such as Michel Valsan or Leo Shaya also occupied each in a different European city.

One of the closest muqaddam of the Maryami tariqa who took it upon himself to spread the metaphysical message of his master was Schuon's childhood friend Titus Burckhardt. Both met in school in Basel. Unlike Schuon who came from a poor family of immigrants, Burckhardt descended from a wealthy lineage of local notables<sup>615</sup>. Titus was the son of Carl Burckhardt (1878-1923), locally famous neoclassicist sculptor, himself descendant of Jean Louis Burckhardt (1784- 1817) Swiss orientalist and convert to Islam who played a major role in the exploration of Petra's archeological site. Titus was also the grandnephew of the art historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) who wrote one of the paramount academic contributions to Renaissance studies titled *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Ironically, Titus Burckhardt will do nothing but contradict the thesis of his great uncle who regarded the emergence of Renaissance as a triumphal moment in

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<sup>613</sup> Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*.

<sup>614</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 130.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

European history. Titus joined the view of Aguéli, Guénon and Schuon who believed the Renaissance to be the sad endpoint of a Medieval golden age. After his return from Mostghanem, Schuon met with Burckhardt in Basel and advised him to join a Sufi tariqa and find a spiritual master. Back then, Schuon did not consider himself a Shaykh and rumors about al-Alawi's declining health and imminent death dissuaded him from guiding his friend towards the Alawi path. Instead, he invited him to find a Shadhili master in Morocco. In Fes, Burckhardt was introduced to several Shaykhs from the Shadhili Darqawi tariqa; the same one al-Alawi grew up in. The young Swiss art historian then became a disciple of Shaykh Ali ibn al-Tayyib al-Darqawi and developed a lasting and fervent attachment to Moroccan art and culture<sup>616</sup>. It did not take Titus Burckhardt much time after Schuon declared he was a legitimate Sufi spiritual master to join his childhood friend and faithfully follow his spiritual teachings. Burckhardt was also behind the introduction of the Schuonian tariqa to an Iranian academic, a graduate of Harvard and MIT and perhaps the most famous of Schuon's disciples: Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933). Nasr adopted the Maryamiyya tariqa most probably around 1957 during a visit to Morocco. Being the only born Muslim amongst the close disciples of Schuon and an academic of great renown. Nasr helped spread, advance and most importantly normalize the work of Schuon within Muslim audiences.

To a certain degree, Schuon's group of disciples thought of themselves as a cohesive body. They were deeply attached to their spiritual master; following him in his trips, meeting with him regularly in Basel, Paris or Bloomington, promoting his tariqa as muqaddams all over the Western world, occasionally fundraising money and tirelessly

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid., 88.

writing books and articles inspired by the work of Schuon. The elitism of the tariqa and the homogeneity of the cohort mostly composed of Western white men helped create a relatively smooth and constructive network of individuals who were devoted to the cause of their Sufi master. One of the major events that epitomized the efficiency and solidity of the Schuonian circle was the London world of Islam festival of 1976; the largest exhibition of Islamic art and cultures ever curated in Europe. Burckhardt, Nasr, Lings and Perry were major actors in the curation of the festival. The meaning they ascribed to the artwork exhibited, the textual interpretations provided, and the historical framing they offered were rooted in a purely esoteric understanding of art. For them, Islamic art was not a simple historical blend of Byzantine, Persian or Armenian influences, but rather a pure and distilled formal manifestation of Sufi esoteric doctrines. They argued that Islamic art forms, patterns, and colors are subtle and highly codified aesthetic manifestations of Islam's spiritual essence. To this day, the London World of Islam Festival remains the clearest curatorial attempt to make Islamic art 'Islamic.' It promoted an art theory that finds its amorphous root in the political project of 'Abd al-Qadir and its most prominent advocates in the group of Sufi converts and disciples who revolved around Frithjof Schuon.

## Chapter Five

### **In the Name of Unity: Islamic Arts and the 1976 World of Islam Festival**

When the second World war broke out in 1939, Frithjof Schuon was a thirty-two year old Sufi master with, despite his young age, a sizeable following. He headed organized Sufi congregations in Basel, Amiens and Lausanne along with a number of faithful devotees who loyally accompanied him in his multiple peregrinations.<sup>617</sup> John Levy, one of his wealthy and close disciples, helped organize and finance a trip to India for himself and his master. A natural and indispensable station in this mystical journey to the East was Egypt where the two men were supposed to meet with René Guénon<sup>618</sup>. This was not Schuon's first encounter with his old friend and master. A year earlier, in 1938, Schuon met with Guénon for a very short period after seven long years of corresponding (Fig. 5.1). At the insistence of Guénon, this second visit was meant to be longer. Reportedly, the old Shaykh wanted to discuss various mystical matters with his young and now famed disciple.<sup>619</sup> When Schuon and Levy arrived to Egypt, Guénon was seriously ill, unable to converse, and lay at a mat

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<sup>617</sup> Aymard and Laude, *Frithjof Schuon*, 22.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*



floor in his poorly furnished Cairo apartment. (Fig. 5.2) The old and bedridden Guénon did however not fail to impress his visitor who described him after this shortened visit as someone who “radiated a spiritual greatness.”<sup>620</sup> Before leaving Egypt, Levy contributed a large sum of money to help Guénon buy a decent house in Cairo. The two young men then continued their trip to reach Bombay on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1939. One day before they reached the Indian coasts, the Nazi German troops were ordered to invade Poland thus announcing the beginning of what will become the deadliest armed conflict in human history. On September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, France and Britain declared war against Germany. John Levy, a British citizen, could stay in India, then still a colony. Schuon, however, holding a French citizenship was called to immediately join his regiment. A long trip took him back to Marseilles after three days spent in India where he could, at least, visit two Hindu temples and buy a Sanskrit copy of the Bhagavad Gita that he carried like a protective amulet during wartime<sup>621</sup>. Upon his arrival to Europe in December 1939, Schuon was sent to the Rhine near the Maginot line to help protect France from a possible German land invasion.

Since the beginning of 1939, France started preparing for the imminent and inevitable war to come. The army, city workers and benevolent groups built trenches and shelters in parks, public gardens and squares. Civilians were handed gas masks and parents encouraged to evacuate children from the capital city. In the summer of 1939, the staff members of the Louvre were called to interrupt their vacations, return to Paris and help pack the museum’s major art works to be transported to safe stores outside the city. Meanwhile, workmen hurriedly surrounded the most prominent architectural monuments

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

with sandbags and took down the stained glass windows of the city's major churches. When Schuon reached France, the Phoney War had already started. In February 1940, the government ordered food rationing in the country and all foreigners residing in France were hastily escaping the country. In June 1940, the German lightning attacks took the French army by surprise, the Maginot line fell and the regiments on the borders had to escape or surrender. Frithjof Schuon was sent to a Nazi prisoner war-camp in early June. German troops entered Paris on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

In Paris, in the middle of this turmoil and only one week before the Nazi occupation of the capital, a young Egyptian student was one of many foreigners preparing to leave a city crumbling under the weight of the coming invasion. 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, a student in La Sorbonne University, defended in the first week of June 1940 a Doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Louis Massignon on the life and work of the Sufi Iraqi mystic Harith al-Muhasibi (781-857). The day of his defense, he met on the entrance of La Sorbonne a Russian friend who handed him a book and asked him to deliver it, once safely returned to Egypt, to a man named Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahia<sup>622</sup>. After eight years in the French capital, 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud hastily left Paris only one day after his defense and one week before the German invasion. The book his friend handed him was titled *The Esoterism of Dante*, and written by René Guénon. The writer needed to receive a printed copy of his own book and Mahmud was entrusted with this mission. After a first short and formal meeting, Mahmud, intrigued, demanded to meet again with Guénon but the latter kindly asked him to write him letters instead. Mahmud later stated that he did not know

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<sup>622</sup> 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, *Qadhyyat al-Tasawwuf: al-Madrasah al-Shadhilyyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1999), 281.

that ‘Abd al-Wahid Yahia and René Guénon were the same person until he discussed his misadventure with a French high official working in Cairo<sup>623</sup>. Finally, it was the Argentinian ambassador in Egypt, an acquaintance of the Egyptian young Sorbonne graduate, and himself an admirer of Guénon, who could arrange a meeting between Mahmud and the French metaphysician. That was the beginning of a friendship that lasted until Guénon’s passing in 1951 and that deeply marked the Egyptian scholar who, according to his students, never missed the opportunity to reiterate his admiration for the man he always described as his “Sufi master.”<sup>624</sup>

Mahmud later became the first Muslim scholar to translate Guénon to Arabic thus introducing his master’s intellectual work to a local audience. The first written reference Mahmud made of Guénon came in the introduction he wrote for a Medieval Islamic philosophical treatise titled *al-Munqidh min al-Dhalal* by Imam al-Ghazali. In his text, Mahmud acknowledged the influence Guénon had on his understanding of Islamic Mysticism and invited his readers to discover the Shaykh’s perennialist philosophy<sup>625</sup>. In 1968, in a book on the four major historical figures that shaped the Shadhili Sufi order, Mahmud dedicated the last chapter to René Guénon thus considering him as one of the four pillars the tariqa knew since its inception in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In this work, Mahmud used different articles from *al-Nadi*, *La Gnose* and *Etudes Traditionnelles* to trace the Islamic lineage that linked Guénon to Ivan Aguéli and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh . There, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud praised Guénon whom he described as a “true Muslim

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<sup>623</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>624</sup> Youssef al-Qaradhawi, *Fi Wada’ al-A’lam* (Beirut: Dar al-fikr al-mu’aser, 2003), 20.

<sup>625</sup> ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud, *Qadhyyat al-Tasawwuf: al-Munqidh min al-dhalal* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 2003), 262.

gnostic.”<sup>626</sup> He considered Guénon’s conversion to Islam to be nothing less than “a true revolution that shook all the intelligent souls who followed his example and embraced Islam, forming groups of devoted believers, worshipping God in the fortresses of Catholicism that are France and Switzerland.”<sup>627</sup> Here, Mahmud is clearly referring to the different groups of Schuonians scattered between Amiens, Lausanne and Basel.

Reversing the balance of power between East and West while giving a clear ascendant to the former was obviously at the heart of Mahmud’s interest in Guénon’s work. The Shaykh often praised the French convert for his capacity to “revert Western supremacy,”<sup>628</sup> describing Guénon’s book *East and West* as “an immortal work that makes every oriental proud of his Orientality.”<sup>629</sup> Guénon, due to his association both with the modern West and the Muslim East, was one of the rare scholars who, according to Mahmud, could legitimately help “erase from the soul of each Easterner the inferiority complex that colonialism anchored in them. Colonialism convinced Easterners that they were less civilized, nay less human than Westerners. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahid Yahia came to reverse positions upside down.”<sup>630</sup> At the end of his text, Shaykh Mahmud published a series of journal articles, testimonies and obituaries dedicated to Guénon. Mahmud spent years collecting these texts both from Arabic and French journals and his meticulous efforts reveal, once again, the admiration he always had for his French Sufi master. Mahmud, perhaps to remind his readers of the importance the Western world gave to the man he was revering, decided to include an article published in the French journal *La Nouvelle*

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<sup>626</sup> ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud, *Qadhyiat al-Tasawwuf: al-Madrasah al-Shadhilyyah*, 300.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

*Revue Française* that related a discussion between the two French writers Henri Bosco and Andre Gide where the latter had supposedly admitted that “Guénon’s arguments are irrefutable.”<sup>631</sup> and that his decision not to adopt Guénon’s views at his age could simply be explained in one sentence: “if Guénon is right, then all my oeuvre will fall apart.”<sup>632</sup> Such powerful confession from a French intellectual of André Gide’s stature was meant to confer a Western layer of legitimacy upon the secluded Sufi master. Mahmud’s Arab and Western educated readers were, obviously, the main target of this maneuver.

Upon his return from France, the young Mahmud joined al-Azhar university in 1941, started as a teacher and slowly advanced in the ranks of his institution to become rector of al-Azhar university in 1973, which is arguably the highest clerical rank one could achieve in all Sunni Islam. Straddling between a Guénonian Sufism and al-Azhar’s conformist views, Mahmud came to be known as “the Ghazali of his time” in reference to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the prominent Muslim theologian and philosopher of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century who aimed to merge in his intellectual work Sufi theories with Muslim Sunni orthodoxy. Mahmud’s tenure in al-Azhar was thus meant to represent a happy and renewed compromise between different and increasingly divergent schools within Islam itself. Thanks to his education both in al-Azhar and La Sorbonne, Mahmud could also emblemize the new and necessary accommodation between the religious clergy and a Western educated Arab elite.

Al-Azhar, a major center for Islamic learning, has always been reactive to the social and political upheavals that touched Cairo, Egypt and the Muslim world in general since its

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<sup>631</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

founding in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>633</sup> Its relationship with central political powers was often complicated, balancing cautious coalition and overt confrontation. The Egyptian revolution of 1952 was not an exception to the rule. The socialist modernization fever that shook Egypt under the leadership of the young and ambitious Gamal Abd al-Naser did not fail to target al-Azhar and push the millennial institution to 'adjust' to the new reforms. After nationalizing the Waqf, thus depriving al-Azhar of all economic autonomy, the Egyptian state contested the institute's historical control over the judicial system and excluded its Ulema from Egyptian courts in 1955. The peak of these reforms came in 1961 when al-Azhar was forced to reshape its internal structures and hierarchies to be completely included within Egypt's state bureaucracy. From that date on, the head of al-Azhar was appointed by, and only held accountable to, the Egyptian president.<sup>634</sup>

Nasser died in 1970 and the decade that followed was an eventful and pivotal period in the social and political history of both al-Azhar and Egypt. Anwar al-Sadat, the army officer who succeeded Nasser, initiated with his appointment a violent purge of the state apparatus targeting all those attached to the Socialist pan-Arabist doctrine of Nasser. Ties to the Soviet Union were subsequently dissolved, a liberal market emerged, all leftist groups were countered, and their leaders jailed. To achieve his goals, al-Sadat, later labelled *al-ra'is al-mo'men* (the believer president) sought the help of al-Azhar<sup>635</sup>. The mission of the religious institution was two pronged; first, declare leftist ideologies simply

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<sup>633</sup> See for example, the letter - mentioned in the first chapter- that Emir 'Abd al-Qadir sent to al-Azhar's scholars to give their legal opinion concerning his disagreement with the Sultan of Morocco.

<sup>634</sup> Malika Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952-94)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no.3 (1999), 374.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

incompatible with Islam -which they did-<sup>636</sup>, second, help tame the rampant Islamist groups that saw in the 1967 definite defeat by Israel a clear sign of God's anger and called for a 'return' to an Islamic rule in Egypt. After what many described as "the capitulation of the Ulema to the State"<sup>637</sup> under Nasser, al-Azhar made a striking return to the local political scene. Within this intricate context, Anwar al-Sadat decided to appoint a French educated Sufi scholar as head of al-Azhar. <sup>638</sup> Mahmud, who famously opposed Nasser's leftist reforms, was a Francophone Shaykh who would likely be favorable to stronger diplomatic ties with the Western world rather than the Soviet bloc. From 1973 until his death in 1978, Shaykh Mahmud took a leading role in the Egyptian political arena and invigorated his institution's diplomatic actions in the Muslim world and beyond.

### **The Traditional World of Islam: Sufism Behind the Curtains**

In 1976, Shaykh Mahmud was invited to write a book introducing Islam to a Western audience on the occasion of a festival that Western scholars and curators were preparing in London with the grandiloquent title: "the World of Islam Festival." This event amply surpassed the famous 1910 Munich exhibition of Islamic arts in scale, length, political support and media attention to simply become in 1976 the largest exhibition of Islamic arts

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<sup>636</sup> After the 1972 students demonstrations, al-Azhar described leftist students as "unbelievers." In 1975, 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud made a fatwa against communist groups who were targeted by al-Sadat anti-leftist campaign.

<sup>637</sup> Daniel Crecelius, "Non Ideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to modernization," in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis. Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East Since 1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) 208.

<sup>638</sup> This is not to say that al-Azhar did not use this closeness to gain more political leverage, 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud himself refused for example to come under the jurisdiction of a minister of waqf and claimed he was only under the supervision of the president. In another instance the Shaykh formerly called the parliament to lawfully and exclusively adopt Sharia in Egypt.

ever curated in Europe. (Fig. 5.3) The festival took place mainly in London but several events were also organized for the occasion in major British cities. The preparation and the logistics of an exhibition of such amplitude had also required the help and collaboration of major art institutions, museums and private collectors from across the world. More than 6,000 objects from 250 public and private collections coming from 32 countries were exhibited, 20 music recitals convened, 162 lectures organized, and more than 50 publications generated.<sup>639</sup> Besides the books published by the newly created World of Islam Festival publishing company, other publishing houses reprinted old editions of books tackling the arts and culture of the Muslim world. Some authors delayed the publication of their books to correspond with the opening of the festival<sup>640</sup>. It is estimated that a half million persons visited the different exhibitions and attended the events, concerts and conferences organized for the occasion. Simultaneously, a six-episode television documentary series titled "the Traditional World of Islam." Shot over a period of two years in different regions of the Muslim World, it was broadcast on BBC between April and May 1976 each week presenting a different aspect of what they believed to be the "basic ideas of the Islamic Civilization"<sup>641</sup> to over one million viewers. (Fig. 5.4) This rich plethora of exhibitions, events, conferences and public programs was scattered around a period of 3 months from April to June 1976 and formed the first and last time such a number of British cultural institutions were united under one theme. Queen Elisabeth inaugurated the festival, in person, before the Archbishop of Canterbury and 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, the head of al-Azhar.

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<sup>639</sup> John Sabini, "The World of Islam Festival" in *Aramco World Magazine* 27. no. 3 (1976), 3.

<sup>640</sup> George Michell, "More on Islam." *The Financial Times*, June. 18, 1976. 19.

<sup>641</sup> Sabini, "The World of Islam Festival," 6.



One might assume that ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud did not feel alienated by such large-scale celebration as the Shaykh was well aware that the minds that organized the festival and decided its curatorial direction and overall goal and message shared with him a deep admiration for Sufi Islam and the work of René Guénon in particular. Although this was not explicitly announced in any of the official statements the curators and the board of trustees wrote, it is safe to assert that the World of Islam Festival relied in its theoretical framing on the teachings of the Akbari Sufi school of thought represented by Aguéli, ‘Ilaysh, Guénon, al-‘Alawi, Schuon and initiated by Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir. In fact, the three central and most influential curators of the festival were direct disciples of Frithjof Schuon; Martin Lings curated the exhibition of Islamic manuscripts and calligraphy at the British Library, Titus Burckhardt oversaw the Islamic arts exhibition at the Haywood Gallery and Seyyed Hossein Nasr organized the Festival’s exhibition of Islamic science and technology at the Science Museum. Once again, Akbari Sufism was brought to the rescue and given the responsibility of representing an amiable, peaceful and civilized Islam to a Western audience seeking mainly to be appeased. In that regard, the festival is a distant and loud echo of ‘Abd al-Qadir’s letters addressed to the French Asiatic Society and to French Masonic lodges. This time, instead of seeking partners in the European modern esoteric circles, some distant disciples of the Algerian national hero were themselves European and took the mission of brightening Islam, yet another time, from their native Western capitals.

It is hardly surprising to see that the festival was initiated after a clear surge of Islamophobic sentiments in Europe and the Western world. Of course, portraying Muslims as the barbarian other is not a novelty in itself, but the discourse around the inherent savagery of Muslims had intensified after the Second World War and the decolonial process.

A series of events helped nurture such discourse. One should mention for example the 1956 Suez canal crisis where Nasser was openly compared to Adolf Hitler, the 1967 war against Israel with the subsequent demonization of the defeated Arab forces in Western media, the rise of Islamist movements and the resurgence of terrorist attacks in Western soil as in the Munich 1972 summer Olympics. The oil embargo of 1973 when Arab OPEC members abstained from selling oil to some Western countries came to accelerate an already growing and renewed anti-Muslim feeling. The long queues in front of gas stations in the US, the heating oil and electricity rationing system imposed in certain European countries, the skyrocketing prices of gasoline and the immediate impact of such conditions on world economy helped reposition the Muslim world as the immediate enemy that shamelessly used what came then to be known as the “oil weapon” against Western countries.

A large number of newspaper articles from the period show the swift amalgam then made between Islam, described as a set of retrograde religious doctrines, and the 1973 oil shock. Let us mention here one telling example where David Levine, caricaturist for the New York Review of Books drew the Saudi king Faisal, sitting on the ground joining his hands in clear reference to Muslim prayers, with his nose taking the form of gasoline pump nozzle. The drawing clearly implied that Muslim piety can hardly be distinguished from the Arab rulers’ supposed greediness and blatant opportunism.<sup>642</sup> This can partly explain the heavy financial sponsorship offered by Arab Gulf states to the festival. The United Arab

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<sup>642</sup> In a special issue the *Financial Times Survey* dedicated to the festival, the Syrian writer Aziz al-Azmeh, for example, wrote that “ For instance, during the oil embargo, any recollection of the defiant desert Arab as portrayed by T.E. Lawrence instantly fell away to be replaced by the portrait of the greedy and essentially dishonest oil Sheikh.”

Kingdom participated with 1.25 million British pounds while the governments of six other Muslim countries offered a total of 600 000 pounds to give the festival the unprecedented scale it had<sup>643</sup>. One should however not see a clear and simple line of causality between the oil crisis and the birth of the festival. Ahmed Paul Keeler, young founder and director of this event, was already pitching the idea of a large festival dedicated to the art and cultures of the Muslim world since 1971, two years before the oil crisis<sup>644</sup>. In 1973, Keeler addressed Mahdi al-Tajir, non-resident ambassador of the UAE in several European capitals, who enthusiastically accepted to support the project and lobbied for further funding from other Muslim countries. The gulf states' support greatly expanded the festival's scale and length but was not behind the original idea of such colossal project. The first intention and later planification of the festival remained in the hands of Western converts to Sufism and zealous Schuonian scholars whose views on Islam were backed by an Arab oligarchy that agreed *this* version of Islam was most appropriate for this event.

The festival's inauguration ceremony took place in the Royal Albert Hall on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1976 with a list of 7000 guests that included royalties, diplomats, scholars, artists, donors, and members of London's political coterie. Smaller inaugural ceremonies were later organized for each of the festival's events. The largest exhibition titled *Arts of Islam* was inaugurated by Queen Elisabeth (Fig. 5.5) Shaykh Mahmud inaugurated an exhibition titled *The Quran* showcasing a vast array of Islamic religious manuscripts from different regions and time periods (Fig. 5.6). The Egyptian guest used the occasion to present the book he wrote for the festival and that he titled *The Creed of Islam*. (Fig. 5.7) The volume was

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<sup>643</sup> Klas Grinell, "Framing Islam at the World of Islam Festival, London, 1976," *Journal of Muslims in Europe*. no. 7 (2018), 78.

<sup>644</sup> Ahmed Paul Keeler, *A Life's Journey, The Story Behind the Book* (Cambridge: Equilibria Press, 2022), 37.

forwarded by Martin Lings, close disciple both of Guénon and Schuon. The major argument of the book, and by extension the entire festival, was introduced in the foreword's first pages. Lings accused Western modernity of nurturing a "tendency to think that every domain of life should be made to 'conform' to modern times."<sup>645</sup> In front of this modern urge to change and update, religions, according to Lings, had to offer a rare "rocklike stability"<sup>646</sup> and to become an "unfailing constant" in an age of "drastic change and turbulent unrest."<sup>647</sup> According to Lings, amongst all the religions that are still able to offer a perennial constancy to their followers, Islam was simply the best because it has "been endowed in particular with what might be called a 'built-in safeguard' against change."<sup>648</sup> and that "immutability is one of its integral and basic aspects."<sup>649</sup>

Merging Quranic verses, Hadith, scientific commentary, Sufi literature, Islamic philosophy and figures as diverse as Emmanuel Kant, David Santillana, and al-Kindi, Shaykh Mahmud endorsed Lings's claims and bluntly declared in his book that the major principles of Islam are "universal, absolute and unlimited in time and space."<sup>650</sup> Not to disturb the serenity of a narrative promoting Islam's unity and universality, the book avoided all conflictual topics, politically contentious statements and remained vaguely neutral, leaving its readers with the impression that it was specifically tailored for the festival. Mahmud even ended his book with a chapter he titled "Believers and Unbelievers" where he roughly defined non-believers as those who bear certain moral sins and vices such as greed, envy or pride. The haziness of such statement allowed his readers to think

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<sup>645</sup> 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, *The Creed of Islam* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976), 9.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid., 25.

that belief is an ethical matter, and that non-Muslims could potentially be regarded as believers. An ecumenical view that, to say the least, would not have had the full agreement of his colleagues in al-Azhar. Frithjof Schuon's *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* was, along with Mahmud's book, the only other work concerned with Islamic theology and metaphysics that the festival selected for publication. This editorial choice confirmed the curatorial line upon which everyone seemingly agreed; the Sufi school of 'Abd al-Qadir and his followers must be the sole legitimate voice of Islam in this event. Frithjof Schuon claimed wanting in this volume to "demonstrate the unity of all true religions on the plane of metaphysical truth."<sup>651</sup> His book was, unlike Mahmud's work and according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr himself who wrote its preface, "not meant for beginners."<sup>652</sup> Indeed, Schuon shed light on a rich set of rather intricate Islamic theological themes such as the question of evil, the nature of paradise or even the Sunni Shia divide. Despite the different degrees of complexity between the two authors, the argument they wanted to convey remained roughly the same: Islam is perennial, universal, united and undividable.

Ahmed Paul Keeler, who converted to Islam one year before the festival's inauguration in 1975, was in the 1960's a British art curator without any real interest in Islamic arts. He dedicated most of his time and effort promoting and exhibiting artists from the booming Kinetic art scene. One of his acquaintances prepared a presentation on the geometrical patterns of Alhambra and their possible relevance to contemporary kinetic art. Shortly after, Keeler met in London with the Indian sitar master Ustad Mahmud Mirza. Following these two encounters, Keeler received what he described as nothing less than

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<sup>651</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976), back cover.

<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

“the major inspiration of his life.”<sup>653</sup> He recounts realizing that Moorish Spain and Mughal India were “one culture and that the two worlds were one world, with the same aesthetic, same ethical and visual culture that went from Cordoba to Delhi.”<sup>654</sup> Keeler decided to act upon this aesthetic epiphany and in 1971 produced with the help of the London Institute of Contemporary Art a first and small exhibition titled *The World of Islam Festival*.<sup>655</sup>

The second event of the same name was, as we know, incomparably larger in scale and scope. But the central theme that organized the first festival continued to structure the second as well. The idea of a supposed unity of Islam in time and space obsessed Paul Keeler who kept promoting such understanding of Islam even in his most recent interviews and publications<sup>656</sup>. Advocating for Islam’s perennial and undividable unity led Keeler and the festival’s board of trustees to seek the help of a sillier of Sufi thinkers who promoted such trope for over a century. According to Keeler, Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr were indeed the “main theorists of the festival”<sup>657</sup> (Fig. 5.8) . Keeler explained the central role given to these two thinkers arguing that they “understood unity and the idea of wholeness, and looked at it from an Islamic perspective, not from outside.”<sup>658</sup> This sentence reveals a second yet primordial tenet of the festival’s overall narrative: The unity of Islam can only be truly appreciated and recognized by thinkers who come from within this unity. Burckhardt and Nasr’s Muslim background was the alibi everyone needed to evade the

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<sup>653</sup> Ahmed Paul Keeler, “The festival’s Vision.” In *Revisiting the 1976 World of Islam Festival*. Filmed [2016] 3:05

<sup>654</sup> Ibid., 3:30

<sup>655</sup> Keeler, *A Life’s Journey*, 38.

<sup>656</sup> See for example his autobiography *A Life’s Journey, The Story Behind the Book* (Cambridge: Equilibria Press, 2022) and his interviews in *Revisiting the 1976 World of Islam Festival*. Filmed [2016]

<sup>657</sup> Ahmed Paul Keeler, “The festival’s Vision.” 14:10

<sup>658</sup> Ibid.,14:30.

scrutiny of those critics who were ready to hastily sweep away the festival's message of unity for being an orientalist trope.

The festival's visitors and reviewers did not remain unsensitive to the curators' plea for a spatial and temporal unity of Islam. Caroline Tisdall, *The Guardian* journalist, wrote a positive review of the festival where she, enraptured by the exhibition, compared the whole Muslim world to "a carpet of many colors or an intricately carved trellis."<sup>659</sup> "The world of Islam," she continued with her metaphor "weaves its way from Africa across the Middle East to Asia." Another reporter congratulated the curators for allowing him to finally "gather together the fragmentary ideas and appreciation of Islam"<sup>660</sup> he always had. John Sabini, writing for a special issue the *Aramco World Magazine* dedicated to the festival did not fail to notice the emphasis on unity that permeated most of the festival's events. He wrote:

"Unity, indeed, was the key to the Festival's aesthetic success. For although it was a sweeping panorama of historic, geographic and artistic diversity, it was also a model of simplification and unification. As in the form of Islamic art called the arabesque, a handful of themes appeared and reappeared, turned back on themselves, intertwined with one another and, by reinforcing each other, imposed a recognizable unity on the whole Festival—a unity that is the central idea of Islam and that runs like a bright thread through 1,300 years of diverse art, science and society."<sup>661</sup>

The curators' quasi obsessive promotion of a unified and monolithic Islam is perhaps best illustrated in the translation Seyyed Hossein Nasr made of a book titled *Shi'ite Islam* and published in the occasion of the festival. The original Farsi text was written by the prominent Iranian Shia scholar Muhammad Hussein Tabatabai (1904-1981). According

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<sup>659</sup> Caroline Tisdall, "The World of Islam," *The Guardian*, April 8, 1976, 10.

<sup>660</sup> William Feaver, "Absorbing Arabesques," *The Observer*, April 11, 1976, 32.

<sup>661</sup> Sabini, "The World of Islam Festival," 3.

to commentators who mastered both languages, Nasr in his English translation deliberately toned down several passages of the original text in order to accommodate the festival's Sunni audiences<sup>662</sup>. For example, the Sunni Umayyad dynasty, classically accused in Shia literature for being behind Islam's decadence, was exonerated of its sins in the English version. Ali was described in the original Farsi text as the *only* true companion of Muhammad and Nasr's translation subtly replaced "only" with "particularly."<sup>663</sup> Alistair Duncan, the festival's secretary, published in 1976 a short article where he openly explained that the effort they put eclipsing intra-Islamic doctrinal and political divergences was meant "to enlist the support and aid of governments in order to finance and present national treasures and the work of national institutions and scholars. This meant that our appeal was pan-Islamic—covering the whole extent of the Moslem world—and not a geographical area divided by political frontiers."<sup>664</sup> The second reason Duncan advanced to legitimate their curatorial choice was rather didactic. The curators, echoing 'Abd al-Qadir's old desire to render Islam accessible to Western audiences, wanted to "avoid regional and schismatic controversies, which would have made the presentation of Islamic civilization too complicated for the majority of non-Moslem recipients."<sup>665</sup> To a certain extent, drawing the image of a pacified, unified and understandable Islam had the effect Keeler and his collaborators intended. The British Journalist and art critic William Feaver, for instance, was one of those who appreciated such simplification and praised the festival in words that could be easily mistaken for harsh criticism. He wrote: "The eye is led from

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<sup>662</sup> Julian Baldick, "The Way of the Twelve," *The Times Literary supplement*. April 30, 1976, 526.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid.

<sup>664</sup> Alistair Duncan, "Some Thoughts Upon the World of Islam festival- London 1976," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, no.3, 10 (1976).

<sup>665</sup> Ibid.



one millennium to the next, from one culture to another, from Umayyad to Ottoman, to Mamluk to Mughal, without pause or break.”<sup>666</sup>

This curious dismissal of historical categorization that Feaver credited in his review is indistinguishable from the festival’s overall desire to defend the unity of Islam. Unity, as the festival’s theorists saw it, was in fact both spatial and temporal. Predictably, the unity in time rhymed with a clear rejection of historical divisions, accidents and breaks. The central exhibition, titled *Arts of Islam*, epitomized such understanding of a unified and monolithic history. Curated by Titus Burckhardt, it took place in Hayward Gallery between April and July 1976. It showcased 650 objects ranging from carpets to rock-crystal, calligraphy to metal-work. In the center of the gallery, the curators built a small theatre where multiple screens showed the visitors more than 800 photographs of buildings, sites, and construction details with no inscriptions or written specifications about what was being projected. Reportedly, the curator deliberately omitted nearly all historical specifications of the artworks exhibited, and displayed them based on typology, origin, and sometimes even size and color.<sup>667</sup> (Fig. 5.9) Only at the entrance to the exhibition, could one find an introductory room that explained to the visitors what the curator saw as the four unifying and essential tenets of Islamic design and architecture: calligraphy, geometrical patterns, the arabesque, and the figurative. The visitors would then roam through a large gallery where they were invited to appreciate the unity of an art that supposedly emanates from Islam’s esoteric core and that could care less about historical stratas or geographical boundaries. (Fig. 5.10) For many, The exhibition was a baffling maze of objects floating in

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<sup>666</sup> Feaver, “Absorbing Arabesques,” 32.

<sup>667</sup> Oleg Grabar, “Geometry and Ideology: The Festival of Islam and the Study of Islamic Art” in *Islamic art and Beyond* (Lincolnshire: Variorum Collected Studies, 2006), 50.

space, and certain observers such as the historian Oleg Grabar admitted to being deeply puzzled by such curatorial choices.<sup>668</sup>

### **An Islamic Theory for Islamic Art: On the Role of Titus Burckhardt**

The exhibition's catalogue offered a somewhat learned and scholarly basis to the curatorial choice Burckhardt opted for. The British art historian Basil Gray wrote the catalogue's introduction. Gray's text was a rather large and comprehensive historical overview of Islamic arts and architecture. But Gray's intention to portray the unity of Islam and Islamic art subtly permeated the smooth and erudite historical narrative he offered. Gray started by describing Muslim societies as a "community of taste and skill"<sup>669</sup> that had developed a distinct appreciation for certain art forms, techniques, materials, and visual expressions. Effortlessly tying Umayyad palaces to Ottoman Izniks, Gray explains that Islamic arts could be easily interpreted using certain coherent art categories (calligraphy, miniature, illumination), materials (wood, ivory, ceramics, stucco panels, pottery) and symbols (palm tree, lotus, lions, eagles). After expounding the nature and characteristics of what was presented as the essential tenets of Islamic art, Gray almost apologetically acknowledged that his attempt to "identify and demonstrate the essential unities within the varied expressions of Islamic art"<sup>670</sup> was the "principal aim" of the exhibition's organizers. This aim was reiterated in Paul Keeler's preface to the catalogue where he confidently stated that "the festival attempt was to represent the totality of Islamic culture and civilization."<sup>671</sup>

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<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

<sup>669</sup> Basil Gray, "Introduction to the Exhibition," in *The World of Islam Festival, The Arts of Islam Exhibitions Catalogue*, (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976), 36.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>671</sup> Ibid., 18.

Drawing this *totality*, he insisted, was the role of “scholars, institutions and governments from both the Islamic world and the West.”<sup>672</sup>

Gray’s text on the “essential categories” that unified Islamic arts was in fact a long preamble that prepared the conceptual ground for Titus Burckhardt’s central essay titled “Introduction to Islamic Art.” If Basil Gray shyly acknowledged some form of unity within the diversity of Islamic art forms, Burckhardt pushed this rationale one step ahead and argued that the unity Basil Gray helped conceptually shape was in fact above time periods, dynastical changes, geographical boundaries, and stylistic affinities<sup>673</sup>. The Swiss metaphysician was aware that such radical claim, proposed on such large setting in the capital of Britain, will be an easy and privileged target for critics. He then wittily started his text by dissociating the Islamic artistic question from the Western canon altogether. He argued that the Muslim world was ontologically different, if not opposed, to the modern Western world. Consequently, their arts and cultures could not be read using the same analytical tools. He argued that as opposed to the modern West that only allowed a place for “artistic manifestations which are profane and therefore religiously indifferent,”<sup>674</sup> The Muslim world, saw no separation between profane and sacred spheres of life. This fundamental difference gave, according to him, a de facto right to Muslims alone to interpret their art. Western scholars, despite their best intentions, were fundamentally unable to interpret Islamic arts simply because they “instinctively value the artistic level of other cultures by applying the scale of values which is habitually applied in a European

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<sup>672</sup> Ibid.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid.

<sup>674</sup> Titus Burckhardt, “Introduction to Islamic Arts” in *The World of Islam Festival, The Arts of Islam Exhibitions Catalogue*, (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976), 31.

milieu.”<sup>675</sup> Islam is a “total order”<sup>676</sup> that regulates cult, common law, matters of everyday life and, of course, art. For Burckhardt, dissociating aesthetics from metaphysics is a historiographical aberration that he often denounced. Islamic arts could thus harmoniously fit within this meta structure called Islam for they, according to the author, naturally “conform to a certain hierarchy of values.”<sup>677</sup>

Burckhardt’s text, while not particularly long, aimed to offer readers a thorough introduction to this “hierarchy of values” that, according to him, made Islamic art Islamic. The values Burckhardt enumerated reproduced, and to a high degree of fidelity, the criteria his Sufi predecessors used to define what a true, sacred and authentic art should be. First, Islamic art is an objective practice that tries in a quasi-scientific manner to draw the most comprehensible and comprehensive representation of complex realities. Islamic art in Burckhardt’s words “never creates illusions.”<sup>678</sup> The second value Burckhardt analyzed concerned the question of anonymity in true traditional Islamic arts. Like his predecessors, he argued that the personal ego of an artist ought to disappear in front of the supra-human and cosmic realities he or she is led to represent. He argued that “The Muslim is not fascinated by the drama of individual artistic creation; rather his soul vibrates through the idea of the unity and immensity of God which are reflected in the cosmic order and also in the artefacts shaped by the hand of man.”<sup>679</sup> Arguably, this old Sufi theory of an anonymous complicity between Muslim artists and spectators was never as tangibly meaningful as it was during the festival. Through a discursive twist, Muslim visitors were invited not to see

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<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

themselves as neutral and distant observers of those artworks protected behind glass frames. Their 'Islam' alone allowed them to actively partake, in an oblique and cryptic manner, to the works exhibited before them. Being intuitively bathed in an Islamic hermeneutic, they were told, enabled them to understand the intrinsic meanings of the exhibited works.<sup>680</sup>

The third value Burckhardt advanced concerned a cyclical understanding of art and architectural history. As a good perennialist, Burckhardt opposed a linear history that would attach Islamic art to non-Muslim precedents. In the catalogue's text, he refused to acknowledge the natural accumulation and stratification of historical periods. For him, the variety that characterized Islamic arts across historical periods and geographical regions was simply accidental. For example, the formal and structural distinctions between Ottoman and Persian mosques were due to climatic and environmental differences between regions<sup>681</sup>. A set of differences that, while considered primordial to most historians, were deemed unworthy of much interest. Instead, what moved Burckhardt's historiography was Guénon's cyclical reading of time according to which periods of religious golden ages help crystallize the true and timeless artistic features of religious arts. The historian's gaze should then be directed to those periods of prosperity to discern and then portray the perennial elements of art."<sup>682</sup> Burckhardt, following this method, claimed discovering the true basis of the art he was exhibiting during the festival. They are, according to the Swiss scholar "the centrality of calligraphy and the predominant place given to geometry in the Islamic artistic imaginary. The combination of these two

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<sup>680</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid.

<sup>682</sup> Ibid., 38.

principles, have no direct precedent in other civilizations- whatever some historians may believe, who want to trace Islamic forms to foreign influences.”<sup>683</sup>

The festival was not the first instance where Burckhardt applied Sufi esoteric thought to art in general and Islamic art in particular. It was rather the culmination of a long career that prepared him to help curate an event of such magnitude. Titus Burckhardt was born in 1908 in a Swiss family of local notables and artists<sup>684</sup>. As noted in the previous chapter, Burckhardt was a childhood friend of Frithjof Schuon who advised him to convert to Islam and find a Sufi master in Morocco. Burckhardt, settled in his adoptive country for five long years<sup>685</sup> and built a lasting link with its Sufi circles. He started first as a shepherd in the rural areas of Northern Morocco to later become an assiduous student in the prestigious al-Qarawiyyin school. Burckhardt was also a disciple of Shaykh Ali ben Tayeb al-Darqawi, grandson of Shaykh ‘Arbi al-Darqawi (1760-1823) founder of the tariqa to which Schuon and al-‘Alawi themselves belonged. Burckhardt was undoubtedly the most orthodox and least adventurous compared to all his previous masters. His interest in non-Islamic mystical traditions was less pronounced and his Sufi practice remained close to the teachings of al-Darqawi. In return, Burckhardt was the figure who summed up the metaphysical conclusions of his predecessors and worked on fully and rigorously applying them to Islam. Lacking the ambition and perhaps the charisma of a Schuon or Guénon, Burckhardt did not mean to reinvent a new Sufi and universalist mystical mold for his contemporaries. Instead, he concentrated his efforts on the simpler task of introducing Sufism as understood and practiced by Arab Sufi masters to Western audiences. Heavily

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<sup>683</sup> Ibid.

<sup>684</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009), ix.

<sup>685</sup> Ibid.

relying on the work of Aguéli, he translated from Arabic to French, different works of Ibn ‘Arabi and his medieval disciples and commentators.<sup>686</sup> He was the first to offer simple, didactic and accessible introduction to Sufism in French, German and English language<sup>687</sup>. Burckhardt was also, due to his academic training as art historian, the most rigorous of all. Burckhardt organized, classified and structured the art theories of his predecessors and gave them, when needed, a proper Sufi jargon.

Burckhardt wrote three books about Morocco, the first published in 1941 was titled *Land at the Edge of Time*. The book is an illustrated summary of his first trips to Morocco. Combining historical notes and written observations with his own sketches and photographs, he depicted his early fascination with what we described as an authentic Traditional Muslim society. The second work was a travel guide titled *Morocco: Western Orient*. Published first in German in 1972, it aimed to reveal to travelers what Burckhardt saw as the Traditional core of the country they are visiting. The most famous of these books was published in 1960 and titled *Fez: City of Islam*. The book was first written in German and was supposed to be translated to English during the 1976 World of Islam Festival before a last decision was made to publish Burckhardt’s *Arts of Islam* instead<sup>688</sup>. Some of the book’s content was rendered into a short movie under Burckhardt’s direction and screened during the festival for a Museum of Mankind exhibition titled *Nomad and City*.<sup>689</sup> For Burckhardt, Fez was the perfect and honest expression of what a true Islamic city is.

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<sup>686</sup> In 1953, Burckhardt translated for example the magnum opus of Ibn ‘Arabi’s disciple ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jili’ titled *Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil*. Notably, he rendered the book’s title into “the universal man” thus using the Akbari vocabulary that Aguéli developed five decades ago. Burckhardt was also the first to translate Ibn ‘Arabi’s *The Wisdom of Prophets*.

<sup>687</sup> See for example Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Press, 2008).

<sup>688</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Fez: City of Islam* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2008), Foreword.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid.

His fascination relies on the Guénonian concept of a Traditional society; one where people's behaviors, attires, food, and artworks are nothing but formal revelations of a religious traditional core. Fez, in that regard was a unified, pure and integral Islamic city. Burckhardt used this example to push the discourse around unity to its fullest. According to him, Fez was such a unified Islamic body that it could be, at least metaphorically, compared to an individual who has an inward and outward consciousness and presence. In the introduction to his book, Burckhardt rhetorically asks himself if Fez had "inwardly changed"<sup>690</sup> in all the years during which he knew it. And the answer, to his great relief, was negative. Fez according to him had "Inwardly remained true to itself."<sup>691</sup> This unchanged inner core to the city, we understand later, was not a bit concerned with formal, physical features. It was purely spiritual. Burckhardt almost indistinctively confounds objects, humans and urban landscapes within a single unified category of 'Islam' that has an inward and outward existence<sup>692</sup>.

A prolific writer, Burckhardt wrote more than ten books in German and French, most of which are today translated to English. Fez was not the only city Burckhardt considered to be fully Traditional and sacred. He also wrote about the Italian Sienna (1958) the Swiss Ticino region (1943) and the French city of Chartres and its cathedral (1962). Working for the Swiss publishing house *Urs Graf*, Burckhardt helped during his career

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>691</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>692</sup> When the festival was being prepared, Titus Burckhardt was in fact settled in Fez working as a UNESCO expert along with a team of Moroccan and foreign architects, planners, sociologists, and economists to protect the old city of Fez. The group called ASDUF (*Atelier du Shéma Directeur d'Urbanisme de Fes*) was responsible for inventorying principal palaces, shrines, mosques and other buildings, to prepare a set of recommendations for the rehabilitation of the historic center and produce a master plan for the future development of the city. Burckhardt was according to many of his collaborators, more than a cultural advisor but a central thinker, theorist, and actor in this team. Reportedly, his was around the role craftsmanship should take in the revitalization of the city.



translate, edit and direct different collections and books mainly focused on the spiritual, artistic and urban traditions of both East and West.<sup>693</sup> Burckhardt's major personal and theoretical work was published in German in 1958 and translated to English as *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods*. Considered alone, the book's title is a succinct and condensed summary of Burckhardt's art theory and its major theoretical threads: there is an art that could be coined as 'sacred', The East and West divide exists and this divide is partly aesthetic, art is an objective science that obeys a specific set of rules and principles and these rules could be known if properly examined. In each of the book's seven chapters, Burckhardt looked at one religious tradition and ambitiously tried to discover the foundation and later formation of the arts linked to the religion in question. Four chapters are each dedicated to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism while the remaining three examined the arts of the Christian world. Burckhardt, of course, believed that each of these religions was intrinsically linked to an aesthetic model that, in return, offered the observer a glance into the religion's most esoteric core. For Christian art, this model revolved around the image of Christ. Taoist art relied on the cyclical transformations of the universe, Buddhism on the eternal beauty of Buddha, and Islam on the idea of unity.

Burckhardt's obsession with the idea of unity around which he, along with his collaborators, themed the entire festival was therefore not new. Around twenty years prior to the festival, Burckhardt already argued that the supposed unity of Islamic art was both product and vehicle to Islam's metaphysical unity. Islamic art, it was argued, offered a clear,

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<sup>693</sup> The book collection that Burckhardt edited was titled « Hauts lieux de l'esprit » and included: *Athos. Berg des Schweigens* by Philip Sherrard (1959), *Sinai* by Heinz Skrobucha (1959), *Ireland: Wegbereiter des Mittelalters* by Ludwig Bieler (1961) *Wien. Die Stadt der Musik* by Emerich Schaffran (1963), *Konstantinopel. Bild einer heiligen Stadt* by Philip Sherrard (1963) and *Kyoto : Die Seele Japans de Heinz Brasch* (1965).

tangible, and undeniable proof of Islam's essential indivisibility. For Burckhardt, this artistic terrestrial unity, unlike its celestial corollary, was rather self-evident. In a 1967 article, Burckhardt wrote that "no one deny the unity of Islamic art, either in time or in space; it is much too evident: whether the work of art be the mosque at Cordoba, the great madrasa at Samarkand, a saint's tomb in the Maghrib, or a saint's tomb in Chinese Turkestan, it is as if the same light shone forth from all of them."<sup>694</sup>

Relying on the work of al-Suhrawardy, a medieval Sufi scholar and contemporary of Ibn 'Arabi, Burckhardt sees that a divine and consistent 'light' is behind the undeniable formal unity of Islamic art. In the same text, Burckhardt denied the possibility of a simple human and terrestrial reason behind the unity of Islamic arts, he insisted that sacred art transcends "religious feelings" that are inherently "unable to fashion a whole world of forms into a harmony that is both rich and sober, both overwhelming and precise."<sup>695</sup> This 'mystical light', smoothly traveling through time and space on its way to unify the arts of all Muslims needs a proper epistemological vessel. For Burckhardt, it was the intellect, in its most Schuonian definition, that carried this unifying light. Drawing from his Swiss friend and master, he defined the intellect as "a faculty more comprehensive by far than reason and thought, and involving the intuition of timeless realities."<sup>696</sup> And argued that all Muslim artists and craftsmen were in fact in constant connection with an "intellectual vision" that allow them to produce a true and sacred Islamic art.

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<sup>694</sup> Titus Burckhardt, "Perennial Values in Islamic Art." In William Stoddart Ed., *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art by Titus Burckhardt* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987), 219.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid.

A man of Burckhardt's intelligence was definitely aware that such statements do not correspond to the actual nature of Muslim societies and their arts in the twentieth century. The Swiss metaphysician, to resolve such conundrum, argued that his theories are mainly applicable to a pre-modern Islamic world or to those surviving hermetic spaces that remained immune to Western modern pervasions. Burckhardt believed that, besides small and valuable exceptions, Islamic art simply died decades ago and it was modern industry that dealt them a deadly blow<sup>697</sup>. He wrote "If the arts of Islam have now died, it is because their very foundations, the traditional crafts, have been destroyed."<sup>698</sup> Burckhardt, who adhered to the Guénonian cyclical reading of history, believed that this death was temporary and the resuscitation of Islamic art was possible. This anticipated reanimation of the past and its inclusion in the present happens through a close look into the timeless features of art. Studying history, perhaps paradoxically, is only useful if it leads the observer to detect what is ahistorical in the past. In an attempt to guide artists of the Muslim world towards a possible route connecting them to their own aesthetic identity, Burckhardt suggested: "let us ask what is timeless in the art of our spiritual ancestors. If we recognize this, we shall also be able to make use of it within the inevitable framework of our age."<sup>699</sup>

For Burckhardt, if Muslim craftsmen needed such a reminder, it is due to the forced amnesia pushed on these cultures by Western modernity at large, and Western art history in particular. Burckhardt, whenever he had the chance, contested the analytic tools and writing techniques Western art historians used to historicize Islamic art. He blamed them

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<sup>697</sup> Titus Burckhardt, "The Role of Fine Arts in Moslem Education," 215

<sup>698</sup> Ibid.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid., 217.

for examining historical details separately from the larger framework unifying them all.

And this unifying space is, of course, mystical in nature. He wrote that Western art history:

“has a tendency to stop short at details at the expense of more comprehensive views, rather as if a man who looked at a stone wall tried to understand the *raison d’etre* of the wall by tracing back each individual stone to its origin. This is exactly what has happened with many scholars who have tried to explain the origin of Islamic art by tracing back each of its elements to some precedent in Byzantine, Sassanid, Coptic or other art. They have lost sight of the intrinsic and original unity of Islamic art. They have forgotten the ‘seal’ that Islam conferred on all borrowed elements.”<sup>700</sup>

It is essential to read the London World of Islam as an attempt to recover this unity and offer an Islamic alternative epistemology to Western art historical methodologies. A linear historiography relying on a reading of precedents, similitudes, archeological evidence, chronological facts, and periodization is deemed obsolete. Burckhardt invites his readers to consider a history centered around a reading of all that is timeless, perennial and essential in art and architecture. He reproved modern art historian’s reliance on “Dissection”<sup>701</sup> and argued that such analytic method, “may deliver objective results,” but it does not necessarily lead to an essential view of things.”<sup>702</sup> Clearly, an essential history can neither be linear nor chronological. It is a history that transcends time and blurs the fictional lines historians supposedly built between past and present. Burckhardt write: “for the Moslem, the great mosques of Kairawan, Cordoba, Cairo, Damascus, Isfahan, Herat and so on belong as much to the present as to the past.”<sup>703</sup>

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<sup>700</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>701</sup> Titus Burckhardt, “Perennial Values in Islamic Art,” 219.

<sup>702</sup> Titus Burckhardt, “The Role of Fine Arts in Moslem Education,” 210.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid., 217.

Burckhardt, as noted earlier, was one of the most prolific and accessible writers of the Sufi lineage that connected him to Emir 'Abd al-Qadir. His writing style was agreeable, using a lightened jargon, an approachable prose with a clear interest in having a wide range of readers. One of his major and most widely circulated books was written for the 1976 World of Islam festival. Titled *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, the book was printed by the World of Islam Festival publishing company and later translated to seven languages, making it the most popular and widely spread book of Burckhardt. Written at a late phase of his career, the Swiss scholar used it to explain and expand the art theories he developed during his long years of research and study. The book shares with the festival its main argument: the inherent and essential unity both of Islam and Islamic art. It also examines other central themes of the Sufi theory of art such as the place of esoteric symbols in Muslim aesthetics constructions, the impersonal nature of true art, the contemplative function of artworks, and the centrality of craftsmanship.

Wanting to offer an approachable Sufi perennial reading of Islamic art, Burckhardt added to his texts lavish depictions of buildings, sites and construction details. The Swiss scholar was also the first to apply the Sufi art theory to a large selection of art and architectural examples from the Muslim world. His concern for clarity and his academic background pushed him to offer his readers some of the fewest tangible instances of a Sufi hermeneutic applied to well-known and documented artworks and buildings. It was in these examples that one could finally detect the substantial differences between modern Western art history and Sufi art hermeneutics.

For example, Burckhardt sees that the Mihrab is not, as most historians would argue, an offshoot of the niche that one finds in Roman and Byzantine architecture, and that

Muslims inherited. For him, the Mihrab was in fact intended by Muslim architects to be a metaphor of the “sacred cave of the heart”<sup>704</sup>, which, in Sufi literature, is the place where God could fully manifest to the believers. Burckhardt describes the Minbar, a pulpit where the imam stands to deliver his sermons, as “reminiscent of the awaiting throne which, in both Islam and Christianity, represents the unseen presence of the Logos.”<sup>705</sup> As for the Sultan Hasan complex in Cairo, he argued that the central cubic courtyard of this building from the Mamluk period is an empty cube made of light, and that it was imagined as an inverted Kaaba<sup>706</sup>. For the Ottoman Mosque, “the Dome betokens peace and submission, while the vertical movement of the minarets is an active attestation to Divine Unity.”<sup>707</sup> The Shah Mosque of Isfahan is famous, aside from its monumental scale and its magnificent tiles, for its distorted entrance. What is usually understood in Islamic architecture as an intelligent attempt to align the façade of the mosque with the public square facing it, and the mosque itself oriented towards Mecca is here interpreted as an esoteric attempt “to express the transition from the outward to the inward world, it is a swift reorientation of the believer’s soul.”<sup>708</sup> One final example, the Dome of the Rock, uncontested masterpiece of Umayyad architecture and arguably a true heir of Byzantine architecture in the region is also, suspended from history altogether. For Burckhardt, the Dome represents the celestial skies and the forty columns of the building “correspond to the number of Sufi saints who, according to a saying of the Prophet, constitute the spiritual “forty pillars” of the world in every age.”<sup>709</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, 90.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>707</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>708</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

One last element of Burckhardt's art theories should be emphasized. Relying on Guénon's critique of modern science, Burckhardt thought it was necessary to read sacred art and pre-modern science in parallel. The thick line separating them was, for both thinkers, artificially constructed by modernity. Art, for that matter, is a science and science, in return, could be artistic if seen from a mystical angle. In an article published in 1972, Burckhardt argued that art and science are often two faces of one and the same tradition<sup>710</sup>. One can hardly read Burckhardt referencing sources from outside the strictly Sufi and esoteric intellectual milieu. Yet it is unlikely that the Swiss scholar was unaware of the heated debates that shook mid-century Western academia around the question of art, science and their limits. Already in 1959 C.P Snow gave his famous inaugural lecture titled "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution" in which he argued that opposing scientific and humanistic knowledge -the latter including art history- is ultimately noxious for both<sup>711</sup>. The mid- twentieth century was also the period where the Austrian art historian Ernest Gombrich believed that Karl Popper's theory of falsification could also be applied to the study of art<sup>712</sup>. Blurring the line between art and science was not a radical novelty Burckhardt and his collaborators brought. The originality of their thinking resides in arguing that both arts and sciences emanated from a unique divine and esoteric source.

To illustrate his point, Burckhardt took the example of architecture, medicine and alchemy that he believed exemplified this happy and sacred union between arts and science. He argued that in pre-modern eras medicine was considered as a form of craftsmanship and physicians were often also mystics concerned with the inner beauty of

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<sup>710</sup> Titus Burckhardt, "Perennial Values in Islamic Art," 227.

<sup>711</sup> C.P Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001) 1-52.

<sup>712</sup> Eds., Caroline A. Jones, Peter Galison, *Picturing Science Producing Art* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 5.

their medicinal practices. And as much art was not deprived of scientific rules, scientific objects were often produced with a clear preoccupation for their aesthetic value.

Astrolabes and medicinal manuscripts are, for Burckhardt, good and illustrative examples for such argument.<sup>713</sup> It perhaps came as no surprise that the second most important exhibition of the London World of Islam festival was dedicated to Islamic sciences and that the curator was Burckhardt's friend and disciple; the Iranian historian of science: Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

### **Crossing the Atlantic: Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the Festival's lasting Effects**

Nasr was born in Tehran in 1933 to a family of Shia scholars and physicians with close ties to the Iranian royal Pahlavi court<sup>714</sup>. In 1950, he was the first Iranian to ever join the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he obtained a bachelor's degree in physics followed by two master's degrees both in geology and geophysics from Harvard University. Nasr's academic education was completed with a PhD in the history of science from the same university. Shortly after completing his doctorate, Nasr published his very first book in 1958 titled *Science and Civilization in Islam* and it was mainly around this book that Nasr built the major theoretical threads of the exhibition he curated for the London World of Islam Festival. Nasr explains his shift of interest from geology to the history of science by the encounter he had at MIT with professor Giorgio de Santillana. According to Nasr, The Italian philosopher was the first to introduce him to the work of René Guénon and the Sufi

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<sup>713</sup> Titus Burckhardt, "Perennial Values in Islamic Art," 227.

<sup>714</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "An Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, 200), 2.



Traditionalist theories. In Cambridge, Nasr met Ananda Coomaraswamy's widow, Dona Luisa, who gave him access to the library of her late husband. There, Nasr came to realize, as he describes it in own words, that a "Truth exists."<sup>715</sup> During his years in America, Nasr started a spiritual quest that slowly led him to the then major living actors of Guénonian traditionalism who were Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt. In 1957, one year before completing his doctorate, Nasr followed Burckhardt on a trip to Morocco where he joined the Sufi tariqa of Ahmad al-'Alawi and met with its local representatives in Fez.<sup>716</sup> A pivotal moment that, according to him, allowed his "intellectual and philosophical orientation to receive its final and enduring formation."<sup>717</sup> Upon his return to Iran in 1958, Nasr followed the Traditionalist recommendation to fetch the traces of local oral and Traditional wisdom. After his years at Harvard and MIT, Nasr sought to obtain another strain of knowledge that "could only be learned at the feet of traditional masters."<sup>718</sup> Amongst the multiple Shaykhs Nasr followed, one can mention the notable example of the Shia theologian, reformer and philosopher Muhammad Hussayn Tabatabai whose book Nasr translated on the occasion of the festival. Nasr had the occasion to examine and discuss with Tabatabai, along with major Sufi esoteric texts, central written works from other Eastern esoteric traditions such as the Taoist Tao Te-Ching or the Hindu Upanishads.<sup>719</sup> These discussions took place in Tabatabai's private house in the outskirts of Tehran and Nasr was not the only student to attend. Along his other Iranian disciples, Henry Corbin, the French philosopher and

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<sup>715</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid.

<sup>718</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>719</sup> Ibid., 43.

Iranologist was assiduously attending these classes and often sought the help of Nasr to help translate the words of the venerated Shia scholar.<sup>720</sup>

In the 1950's, Corbin was a professor in the Sorbonne University and holder of the Louis Massignon chair of Islamic studies at the French Ecole des Haute Etudes. Simultaneously, this ambitious scholar was director of the Iranian Studies section at the Institut Franco-Iranien in Tehran and would therefore spend every fall season in Iran. Besides the bi-weekly conversations with Tabatabai that lasted for almost two decades, Corbin collaborated with Nasr on a doctoral seminar in philosophy at Tehran University and they conjointly wrote the popular and widely printed and translated *History of Islamic Philosophy*. On the other hand, Corbin helped introduce Medieval Persian philosophy to a French academic audience and often invited Nasr to lecture in La Sorbonne. In the French intellectual scene, along with his expertise in Persian Islamic history, Corbin was known for being the first to ever translate Martin Heidegger to French. Jean Paul Sartre, major figure of the French phenomenologist and later existentialist school, stated being indebted to Corbin for introducing him to the German philosopher.<sup>721</sup> Corbin did not consider his two academic expertise to be fundamentally different and actively sought to bridge between Islamic mysticism and phenomenology. Indeed, the interest both schools had in reason, intuition, consciousness, essence and human experience allowed Corbin to argue for a common conceptual ground joining Persian medieval scholars and Western modern philosophers. For example, Corbin, in his French translation of a Mulla Sadra 16<sup>th</sup> century work, elaborated a comprehensive comparison between the Islamic mystic concept of

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<sup>720</sup> Ibid.

<sup>721</sup> Ibid., 49.

*Wujud* and the metaphysics of Being as presented by Heidegger. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his memoirs, even recalls Corbin stating “I am a phenomenologist but I use this term in the traditional sense of one who carries out the process of *kashf al-mahjub*.”<sup>722</sup> a well-known Arabic and Sufi term that literally means removing the veil of that which is veiled. Corbin saw perhaps a commonality between the Sufi primacy given to ineffable mystical experiences<sup>723</sup> as true source of knowledge and the phenomenologist interest in non-scientific hermeneutics<sup>724</sup>.

Nasr was not the only young Iranian thinker to find interest in such parallel reading of two philosophical traditions that were, for centuries, portrayed as incompatible. Two close collaborators of Nasr in Tehran, Dariush Shayegan and Ahmad Fardid, were also intrigued by a possible phenomenological reading of Islamic mysticism. Interestingly, such intellectual project did not ultimately result in the construction of a supposedly shared vocabulary and rationale linking the two traditions. Seemingly, what interested Iranian intellectuals in phenomenological thinking is the latter’s suspicion of modern Western claims to a universal objective truth.<sup>725</sup> Shayegan, a student of Corbin and graduate of La Sorbonne, often referred in his book *Idols of the Mind* and *Eternal Memories* to the famed anecdote where Heidegger reportedly criticized a Japanese student for analyzing Japanese art from the perspective of Western aesthetics. Heidegger wrote “The name aesthetic and what it names grow out of European thinking, out of philosophy. Consequently, aesthetic

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<sup>722</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>723</sup> Corbin translated a book with this same title of a 10<sup>th</sup> century Persian Ismaili esoteric philosopher known as Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani. See Henri Corbin, *Kashf al-Mahjub Traité Ismaélien du IV Siècle de l’Hégire* (Institut Franco-Iranien, 1949).

<sup>724</sup> Andreo Paktul, “Phenomenology and Scientific Knowledge,” *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, Vol-54 (2016), 81-82.

<sup>725</sup> On the Heideggerian critique of humanist modernity see for example Gail Soffer’s article “Heidegger, Humanism, and the Destruction of History,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, no.3, 49 (1996), 547-576.

considerations remain alien to East Asian thinking.”<sup>726</sup> Heidegger, thus drawing an ontological gap between Eastern and Western discourses on art, was the Western prominent voice perhaps needed to legitimize non-western art hermeneutics. Having attended the theological classes of Shia scholars and collaborated with Corbin and Shayegan, it comes as no surprise that Nasr could clearly perceive the intellectual potential of a non-Western interpretation of Islamic arts and sciences.

During the years he spent in Iran between 1958 and the Islamic revolution of 1979, Nasr became a full Professor of Islamic science and philosophy at the University of Tehran and later head of the Imperial Iranian Academy of philosophy where he was joined by Corbin, Shayegan and Fardid. During his multiple academic tenures, Nasr strove to bring Islamic philosophy to the fore and introduce Islamic texts in an otherwise heavily Westernized curriculum.<sup>727</sup> He started by publishing an academic multi-language journal *Sophia Perennis* which promoted the perennial thought of Schuon and Guénon. A journal that became according to the words of its inceptor “a unique forum for the encounter between the philosophies of East and West.”<sup>728</sup> He also led the efforts to translate the works of Guénon, Schuon and Burckhardt to Farsi and introduce the Traditionalist writers to Persian audiences<sup>729</sup>. Nasr described his overall pedagogical strategy as an attempt to “have Persian students study other schools and traditions of philosophy from the point of view of their own tradition rather than studying their tradition from the perspective of Western thought.”<sup>730</sup> In 1972, the Shah appointed him head of the Sharif University of

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<sup>726</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 2.

<sup>727</sup> Nasr, “An Intellectual Autobiography,” 40.

<sup>728</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

Technology and asked him to mold it into an institution similar to MIT. Nasr, instead of emulating the scientific paradigms that shaped MIT's reputation sought to "create a strong humanities program, not in the same way as President Killian had sought to achieve one at MIT during [his] own students days there, but by establishing a program in Islamic thought and culture with an emphasis upon a philosophy of science drawn from the Islamic philosophical tradition rather than positivism in one form or another."<sup>731</sup>

When Paul Keeler invited Nasr to curate the exhibition on Islamic sciences as part of the 1976 London World of Islam Festival, the Iranian scholar was already well advanced in his attempts to find and rebuild localized understandings of Islamic culture. The idea of an exhibition promoting the unity of Islam and advocating non-Western interpretive framework to read Islamic history could only appeal to Nasr. For the festival, Nasr edited Frithjof Schuon's book *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* and published his own book *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*. The exhibition was inaugurated by the empress of Iran, Farah Pahlavi, in person. Nasr clearly stated his desire to exhibit Islamic sciences not as an antecedent to Western modern science- which is a common historical argument- but simply as "another philosophy of science", different from that developed in the modern West. What Nasr wanted to showcase was, according to him, a "sacred science"<sup>732</sup> The exhibition was held in the London Museum of science which offered 450 sq meters of its central space to Nasr and his collaborators to use. The exhibition proposed the most important collection of Islamic celestial globes and astrolabes ever displayed along with a large number of medieval mathematical manuscripts, medical treatises, botanical

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<sup>731</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>732</sup> Ibid., 40.

illustrations, geographical maps and large numbers of scientific instruments. The exhibition also included reconstructions of medieval mechanical devices such as water clocks, musical automata, water pumps, and astronomical indicators. More than 40 000 person visited the exhibition.<sup>733</sup> The Iranian historian, according to visitors, could successfully prove in his London exhibition that Islamic sciences and technology are not mere bridges between classical antiquity and Western modernity but “ a distinct cultural activity deriving its inspiration from the Holy Quran.”<sup>734</sup>

To better explain the philosophical background that guided his curatorial choices, Nasr published during the festival a book largely inspired by his previous academic works and titled *Islamic Science: an Illustrated Study*. In the preface to the book, Nasr clearly stated that the science he aims to exhibit is Traditional and that Traditional science as he intended was “not limited in scope or meaning as is the modern discipline with the same name.”<sup>735</sup> And to better explain the difference between sacred Islamic science and its modern western corollary, Nasr stated that the knowledge he wanted to display was “intimately related to metaphysics, gnosis and art.”<sup>736</sup> This last sentence, while short, summarizes the large intention of Nasr’s entire intellectual project. A project that sees all Islam as one single homogeneous and divinely inspired unity. An intellectual venture where art, science and gnosis are deemed inherently inseparable within a purely Islamic epistemological unity. When Nasr described Islamic sciences to be exclusively Traditional,

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<sup>733</sup> David B. Thomas, “World of Islam Festival: Science and Technology in Islam”, *Museum*, no.1, 30 (1978), 21.

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>735</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Science, an Illustrated Study* (London: The London World of Islam Publishing Company, 1976), xiii.

<sup>736</sup> *Ibid.*

he willingly dissociated them from a Western narrative of progress that, at best, considered them as one temporary and intermediary step towards a glorious Western Renaissance.

This dissociation helped him escape the modern grid of evaluation usually imposed in Western academic circles. Nasr could then freely claim, for example, that “no understanding of the Islamic sciences is possible without a comprehension of Islam itself.”<sup>737</sup> As a result, and instead of the usual introductory section presenting the Greek and Roman antecedents to Islamic sciences, Nasr dedicated the first chapter of his exhibition catalogue to a large theological overview of what he called Islamic doctrines. The catalogue is lavishly illustrated and after a long succession of scientific exuberant drawings and colored photos of beautifully crafted scientific instruments, Nasr reminded his readers that Islamic sciences are, besides their reliance on a mystical reading of the world, inherently artistic. He states “not only Islamic art is a science but that Islamic science is in the most profound sense an art, a sacred art which enables man to contemplate the visible cosmos as an icon revealing the spiritual world beyond it.”<sup>738</sup> The London World of Islam festival’s unique exhibition that was not dedicated to art, was in fact, cryptically artistic.

This holistic and metaphysical understanding of sacred knowledge led Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a historian of science by training, to dedicate an entire volume to the artistic question in Islam eleven years after the festival. In 1987, Nasr wrote his book *Islamic Art and Spirituality* and added one of the final layers to the Sufi art theory his masters helped shape over the course of a century. The book’s first page is already telling of the spiritual and intellectual lineage to which this work belongs. Right after the cover, one can read the

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<sup>737</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>738</sup> Ibid., 66.

saying of Muhammad that Burckhardt often noted to be the discursive basis to artistic creation in Islam “God has inscribed beauty upon all things.” In the short introduction to the book, Nasr singled out Burckhardt as the one true exception to an otherwise orientalist art history that refused to take into consideration the “spiritual meaning and significance”<sup>739</sup> of Islamic arts. Nasr’s book does not go much astray from the arguments the festival had previously drawn. *Islamic Art and Spirituality* shows the same emphasis on unity as the main theological concept organizing both Islamic mysticism and, simultaneously, Islamic art.

In this volume, Nasr argued that true Islamic societies could only and exclusively produce Islamic artworks. He defended the contemplative function of sacred art and acknowledged the special place Burckhardt gave to ornaments, abstract patterns and calligraphy. Nasr’s main contribution was not methodological but thematic. Unlike his predecessors who limited their investigation to plastic arts and architecture, Nasr enlarged the scope of Traditional Islamic arts to include music and literature to which he dedicated two chapters in his book. On the other hand, the question of craftsmanship and initiation is barely discussed. As a matter of fact, this theme never found the importance it acquired in the past and the central role of craftsmen disappeared from Nasr’s work and that of his disciples. This seemingly negligible change is symptomatic of the slightly academic turn the Sufi art theory took with Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The Iranian author, as opposed to his Sufi masters, did not draw, sculpt or paint and visibly lacked the passion Aguéli, Schuon and Burckhardt had for manual craftsmanship and artistic practices. Nasr pushed the theory away from the world of artisans and artists and turned it into a theoretical and academic

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<sup>739</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), ix.



affair. The Iranian historian, since he left his native country after the Islamic revolution of 1979, held different academic positions in American prominent universities. His scientific stature pushed him to reframe the ideas of his predecessors into a more nuanced and rigorous language thus opening the Sufi art theory to a Western educated academic audience.

Unlike Aguéli, Guénon, Schuon and Burckhardt who were all educated in North African Sufi schools, Nasr was Iranian. As a result, Persian mysticism took an unprecedented and major role in his art theory. While Ibn 'Arabi remained the uncontested distant Sufi master of all the *silsila*, Nasr gave prominent roles to Persian mystics such as Rumi, al-Attar, and Suhrawardy. It was also Nasr who brought Persian art to the fore and often reduced all Sufism to its Persian component and Islamic art to the Iranian school. The Persian turn the Sufi art theory took after the World of Islam festival is particularly visible with Nasr's students and disciples. The main two examples remain Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar and their book *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi tradition in Persian Architecture*. The book, which was prefaced by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and reviewed by the American architect Louis Kahn,<sup>740</sup> was first published in 1973 when Ardalan was a young colleague to Nasr teaching in the architecture school of Tehran. Laleh Bakhtiar was a 19 year old Christian American of Iranian descent when she first met Nasr who convinced her to pursue Islam both spiritually and academically<sup>741</sup>. She was married to Ardalan when the book was first published to celebrate, according to the authors, the Twenty fifth centenary

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<sup>740</sup> Ardalan, Nader and Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xvii.

<sup>741</sup> Laleh Bakhtiar, "I Follow the Religion of Love," *Muslim American Leadership Alliance*. Nov. 26, 2021. <https://malanational.org/i-follow-the-religion-of-love/> .

of the foundation of the Persian empire. Besides its exclusive focus on Persian Islamic arts, the book is clearly more architectural than its predecessors. It contained plans, sections, sketches and architectural details. These technical drawings are put side to side with images of symbols from the Muslim esoteric tradition, Sufi poems and analytical texts. Bakhtiar and Ardalan helped the Sufi theory further crystallize through clear, accurate and detailed examples of buildings and artworks. In that regard, their book helped advance Burckhardt's work who, as noted earlier, provided a rich selection of examples to sustain his theories yet remained quite metaphorical and poetically unspecific in his descriptions. The book which was divided into multiple sections with clear and direct architectural connotations such as space, surface, color, order. *The Sense of Unity* was one of the titles selected to be reprinted and republished on the occasion of the World of Islam Festival.

The World of Islam festival allowed the Sufi art theory to slowly leave the occultist and esoteric circles of its first life to finally be embraced by a larger, diverse, and more conventional audience. Away from the freemasonic alliances of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir, Aguéli's secret societies, the esotericism of Guénon and Schuon's Native American fantasies, the festival's curators decided to nuance the language of the theory's forefathers without defacing its core. After all, The World of Islam festival was a monumental event that witnessed the presence of the Queen of England, the empress of Iran, the Shaykh of al-Azhar and a considerable number of ministers, ambassadors, princes and other members of a newly globalized political elite. Its language, message, and overall ideology had to correspond to the role to which it was ascribed: crafting for a Western audience the image of an overly mystical, amiable, and unified Islam. Its two main tenets, Sufism and art, worked perfectly together to convey such message. In that regard, one could argue that the

festival would have had the total approval and full support of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir who was the first to see the role Sufism could play as carrier of an ecumenical project between Muslims and Westerners. It is true that more than a century separated the Emir from the festival but the need to craft a marketable and disciplined Islam to appease Western audiences remained paramount. Unity was therefore presented as the one true philosophical foundation of Islam and Islamic art was, this time, brought to the rescue and given the mission of proving such unity.

Thinking of Islamic art as one perennial unity that remained, for over fourteen centuries, immune to all changes can be qualified as yet one more Orientalist trope. And indeed, the festival and its curatorial choices did not convince some of the most notable thinkers of Islamic art. Oleg Grabar, for example, heavily criticized Burckhardt's essentialist categorization and his incapacity to see variety in Islamic art as an expression "of cultural wealth rather than a regrettable weakness."<sup>742</sup> What Grabar regretted most in his review of the festival was the message of unity that the curators wanted to convey using a set of "normative and prescriptive statements" that Grabar saw as a real threat to rigorous scholarship<sup>743</sup>. Interestingly, despite the festival's effort to portray itself as a purely Islamic manifestation, Grabar regretted this was "far too Western a show."<sup>744</sup> A judgment that would have had the support of Edward Said, who wrote in 1976 a review for the New York Times dedicated to the books published during the festival. Said criticized the event and

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<sup>742</sup> Grabar, "Geometry and Ideology: The Festival of Islam and the Study of Islamic Art," 50.

<sup>743</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>744</sup> Ibid., xx.

most of the books published on the occasion for reproducing old orientalist techniques of representation and narration<sup>745</sup>.

While on a first reading the festival had indeed adopted some of the main Orientalist themes and tropes, its long history should help us nuance such observation. The London World of Islam festival was also the product of a different intellectual lineage that finds its roots, not in a Western attempt to produce the 'other', but simply in a Muslim Sufi reaction to European imperialism. A lineage of mystics who believed that a message of esoteric unity and metaphysical essentialization could help debunk the Western colonial project. If the festival was an orientalist product, then here we have an orientalism that was created in Arab Sufi circles, sponsored later by Arab states and approved by the highest religious and political authorities of the Muslim World. A 'negotiated orientalism' of sort that Western scholars, Sufi masters and post-colonial Muslim decision makers jointly validated and helped propagate. Some of the old orientalist essentializations were thus allowed if the final product was overall sympathetic to Muslims and their religion. The festival's central themes are still perceptible today in journals, exhibitions, and documentaries discussing Islamic art. In that regard, the festival helped shape a rather cohesive art and architectural theory that claimed to be Islamic. Drawing the long intellectual lineage that connected this glamorous event to its unsuspected roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century Damascus, one can only see some legitimacy to such claim.

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<sup>745</sup> Edward Said, "Arabs, Islam and the Dogmas of the West" *The New York Times*, Oct 31, (1976).

## Conclusion

In 1888, Papus, a major figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French esoteric scene and René Guénon's first mentor in Paris, wrote *Elementary Treatise of Occult Science: Understanding the Theories and Symbols Used by the Ancients, the Alchemists, the Astrologers, the Freemasons & the Kabbalists*. The book, as its name suggests, offers a large and ambitious overview of the different streams of Occultism found in the Western tradition. Chronologically organized, it provides a historical survey of the various contributions each tradition added to the Occultist corpus. The narrative follows the classic Judeo-Christian temporal scheme arguing that the seeds of all mysticisms are rooted in ancient Egypt and Moses' revelation of the Tablets. Papus then draws a thread linking Jewish esotericism to Christianity, medieval scholastic traditions, and finally modern Freemasonry. Through this long and detailed history, Papus aimed to prove that, like all sciences, modern Occultism was also the natural product of a cumulative historical process. According to the French writer, each generation brought its own distinct contribution to a science that followed a linear and progressive pattern of evolution, and where modern esotericism was the final, and therefore, most developed form.<sup>746</sup> The parallelism between Occultism and science is not fortuitous and Papus believed that separating them was dangerous and misleading. In the preface of *Elementary Treatise of Occult Science*, the French philosopher and expert in Jewish mysticism Adolphe Franck tellingly observed: "I don't believe in the existence of an

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<sup>746</sup> Papus, *Traité Méthodique de Science Occulte* (Paris : Georges Carré, 1891), 1032-1040.

Occult science that is distinct by essence from ordinary science... This idea, while having found in the past numerous partisans, is absolutely irrational, or in other words unscientific.”<sup>747</sup> The rest of the book is an erudite and forceful attempt to prove that, despite the diatribes of modern scholars, esoterism is not only a science, it is the most authentic, primary, and important of all knowledges.

On April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1894, Ivan Aguéli wrote a letter from his prison cell in Paris to Werner Von Hausen urging his friend and companion to read Papus’ *Elementary Treatise of Occult Science*<sup>748</sup>. His notes in jail show the impact this book had on his metaphysical views and his early interest in the scientific potential of esotericism. For example, in a letter where he explained his appreciation of *The Arabian Nights*’ narrative style, he argued that the book was a work of esotericism organizing cryptic literary symbols around a “universal science of connections.”<sup>749</sup> In another letter sent a week later he described Arabic as a language “saturated with an instinctive science of correspondences.”<sup>750</sup> Later in life, he carried the project of building a French secret society “dedicated to the scientific study of the life and work of Ibn Arabi.”<sup>751</sup> This fascination with the scientific nature of esoteric knowledges was a recurrent element in Aguéli’s thought, that was later followed by Guénon who openly objected to modern science’s monopoly over knowledge.

In 1927, René Guénon published *The Crisis of the Modern World* with one of its longest chapters entirely dedicated to the fundamental opposition he perceived between sacred Traditional sciences on the one hand and modern profane knowledges on the other.

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<sup>747</sup> Ibid., VI.

<sup>748</sup> Correspondence from Ivan Aguéli to Werner von Hausen,” Archives of the National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden. Letter from April 24<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid., Letter from 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1894.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid., Letter from 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1894.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid., Document titled “al-Akbariyya.”

In this text, Guénon vigorously condemned the independence of the modern sciences from other forms of knowledge. In Traditional societies, he argued, sciences are only regarded “as dependencies, prolongations, or reflections of absolute or principal knowledge.”<sup>752</sup> Modern sciences, however, are anomalously built around a principle of “subdivision”<sup>753</sup> and its scholars unable to understand things in their “entirety.”<sup>754</sup> Modern sciences, he claimed, “deny everything that transcends them.”<sup>755</sup> which “lead them down to a blind alley, by enclosing them, as it does, in a hopelessly limited realm.”<sup>756</sup> Moreover, his critique of modern science and its tendency to break the Supreme and Divine unity was also, for Guénon, applicable to the arts. One of the founding texts of the Sufi art theory examined in this dissertation is called “The Arts and their Traditional Conception.” There, Guénon insisted that art is “certainly not a game. Nor is it simply a means of procuring for man a special kind of pleasure”<sup>757</sup>, for it cannot be “reduced to purely individual preferences.” And it can never be a “vain and sentimental declamation.”<sup>758</sup> For the protagonists of the Sufi hermeneutic, art is a systemic enterprise with its own set of perennial axioms, principles, and postulates that can be learned and applied. But perhaps, most importantly, for Guénon and his followers, art, thanks to its scientific nature could – and should – convey truth.

As such, this dissertation offered a perfect site to discuss the role reason and science could hold in art and architectural discourses. Here, we had a group of scholars who, as part of their critique of Western modernity, deplored the subjectivism that humanist

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<sup>752</sup> René Guénon, “Sacred and Profane Science” in *Every man an Artist: Readings in the Traditional Philosophy*. Ed. Brian Keeble (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 2006),16.

<sup>753</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>754</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>755</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>756</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>758</sup> *Ibid.*,

philosophy brought to aesthetics and called for the recovery of what they claimed to be the lost objective nature of art. The chapters in *The Spiritual Turn* followed the various attempts made by Sufis to discover the inner rules of the artistic science or, as was the case with Schuon and Aguéli, to simply produce a sacred art. Arguing that art is a science requires remodeling both categories: art and science. Art, for that matter, was deprived of all individual agency (the artist is an anonymous agent of a higher objective truth) and science was stripped of its rationalist core (science is not limited to material thinking and rational analysis). Needless to say, the scientific nature of arts and the irrationality of science are both claims that have been and continue to be rejected. However, by taking these claims seriously, I put forward the idea that the study of such radical theoretical propositions can help us rethink the often implicit relationships between science, truth, and art in modern historical discourses.

The relationship between art and truth is neither foreign nor new to the Western canon. John Ruskin's famed remark that "nothing can be beautiful which is not true"<sup>759</sup> is a reminder of the omnipresence of this binary in Western thinking.<sup>760</sup> For this Victorian philosopher and art critic, an art that refuses to disseminate knowledge and offer a channel to truth would then simply convey pleasure, which does not correspond to the popular idea of the high and noble function of art. But if art is concerned with truth, and thus in competition with science, wouldn't this endanger both the veracity of scientific methods and tremendously limit the creative impetus of the arts? Neither Ruskin nor the Sufi art

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<sup>759</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1848), 24.

<sup>760</sup> The question is as old as Aristotle who was the first to argue that poetry- and by extension arts- while not relating sheer facts can be truer, in their very fictionality, than history for example. Rising above factuality, can lead according to the Greek philosopher, the artist to reach an 'ideal' truth that would be situated on a higher level than the conjectural truth the historian might reach.



theorists offer us a compelling answer to this question. The notion that art must convey truth is indeed a tricky affair as Alexander Sesonske noted in his eloquent 1956 essay where he described the views of those who saw a correlation between truth and art, stating: "But, lest this seem to put art into losing competition with science, defenders of this view usually claim that the truths which are the concern of art are extra-scientific, or pre-scientific, or super-scientific, so that art complements, and does not compete with science."<sup>761</sup> This is precisely where we should conceptually situate the Sufi art theory: within a liminal space where both the nature of science and the function of art are contested. A space where art, along with other seemingly irrational knowledges, are together necessary to attain Truth in its totality. Let us not forget Guénon's claim that chemistry is not the heir of alchemy just as astronomy is not the scientific substitute to astrology. These are four sciences that co-exist altogether: each propose one facet of truth. Art is nothing but another carrier of knowledge on par with physics, mathematics, and magic<sup>762</sup>.

This statement might sound far-fetched, exaggerated, unfounded, or overly metaphysical for a modern mind. However, we should see such assertions as a breach from which to ask: If we are to reject the idea that these sciences co-exist, how far should we go in this rejection? And if we contend that art conveys a truth – and that this truth is not metaphysical – then what kind of truth does art convey? it is difficult to argue that Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, in its attempt to expose the horrors of the Spanish civil war, does not convey any truth. Or that Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, in its sardonic critique of

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<sup>761</sup> Alexander Sesonske, "Truth in art", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 53, No. 11 (May 24, 1956), 346.

<sup>762</sup> René Guénon, "Sacred and Profane Science,"

capitalism, is devoid of verity. What distinguishes the truth that the Sufi thinkers brought is its supposed esoteric universality. In a post-metaphysical world, to use Jürgen Habermas' expression,<sup>763</sup> these authors went against the tide and argued for the existence of a supra human, universal, and perennial Truth that could be known if all sciences – including art – were evenly explored and pursued. All humans were thus equally concerned by such endeavor. This dissertation argued that this universalism was not the product of a colonial global imaginary, or a modern intercultural consciousness. It rather was the Muslim Sufi response to the Western Humanist project and its exclusive rights over truth. This was an epistemology from the South born out of an unexpected reaction to colonialism and that, almost inadvertently, birthed an art theory.

What I call the Spiritual turn is a moment in the art and architectural historiography where the field was momentarily imbued with Sufi mysticism, offering a radically new hermeneutic. This turn stems from a larger Sufi reformist project that objected to colonial epistemological hegemony, offering an alternative universal truth. Countering modernity's progressivism, rationality and materialism, this truth was esoteric, perennial, and shared by all world nations, both colonizers and colonized. In a moment where the art and architectural European vanguard was increasingly fragmenting into multiple schools, styles, concepts, and protagonists, the Sufi art theory aimed to first unify all these various forms of art, then unify art with all sciences as part of a global and holistic effort to find truth. The Sufi discourse on art was one modern instance where a group artists, theorists, and mystics challenged traditional Western modes of interpretation in favor of a spiritual reading of art and architecture. In this dissertation, I proposed to interpret these Sufi

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<sup>763</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Post metaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

figures as a distinctive intellectual movement and offered a close examination of their arguments as well as historically situating the intellectual conditions that permitted the genesis of this particular hermeneutic of art. Accused by prominent academics and art historians of their time of ahistoricism and irrationality<sup>764</sup>, this chain of thinkers has been grossly ignored and the intellectual ramifications of their work overlooked. As a result, a comprehensive history of the Sufi mode of constructing knowledge of art has never been written; this dissertation came to rectify this historiographical lacuna. It was an attempt to illuminate specific artistic discourses that, because of certain historical conditions, were pushed to the periphery of the field. Consequently, I inscribe my research within the larger field of global history of art and architecture, and I argue that ongoing attempts to widen the temporal and geographical boundaries of the field must consider non-Western forms of knowledge in all their manifestations. These peripheral epistemologies emanating from the global South were often erased during the colonial period to the benefit of Eurocentric hegemonic forms of knowledge. I hope thus that this dissertation will contribute to the growing interest in alternative epistemologies, and open up new theoretical pathways to a transdisciplinary effort to remedy what Boaventura De Sousa Santos eloquently calls, “ a cognitive injustice.”<sup>765</sup>

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<sup>764</sup> See for example Oleg Grabar, “Geometry and Ideology: The Festival of Islam and the Study of Islamic Art” in *Islamic art and Beyond*. (Lincolnshire: Variorum Collected Studies, 2006)

<sup>765</sup> See Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2014)

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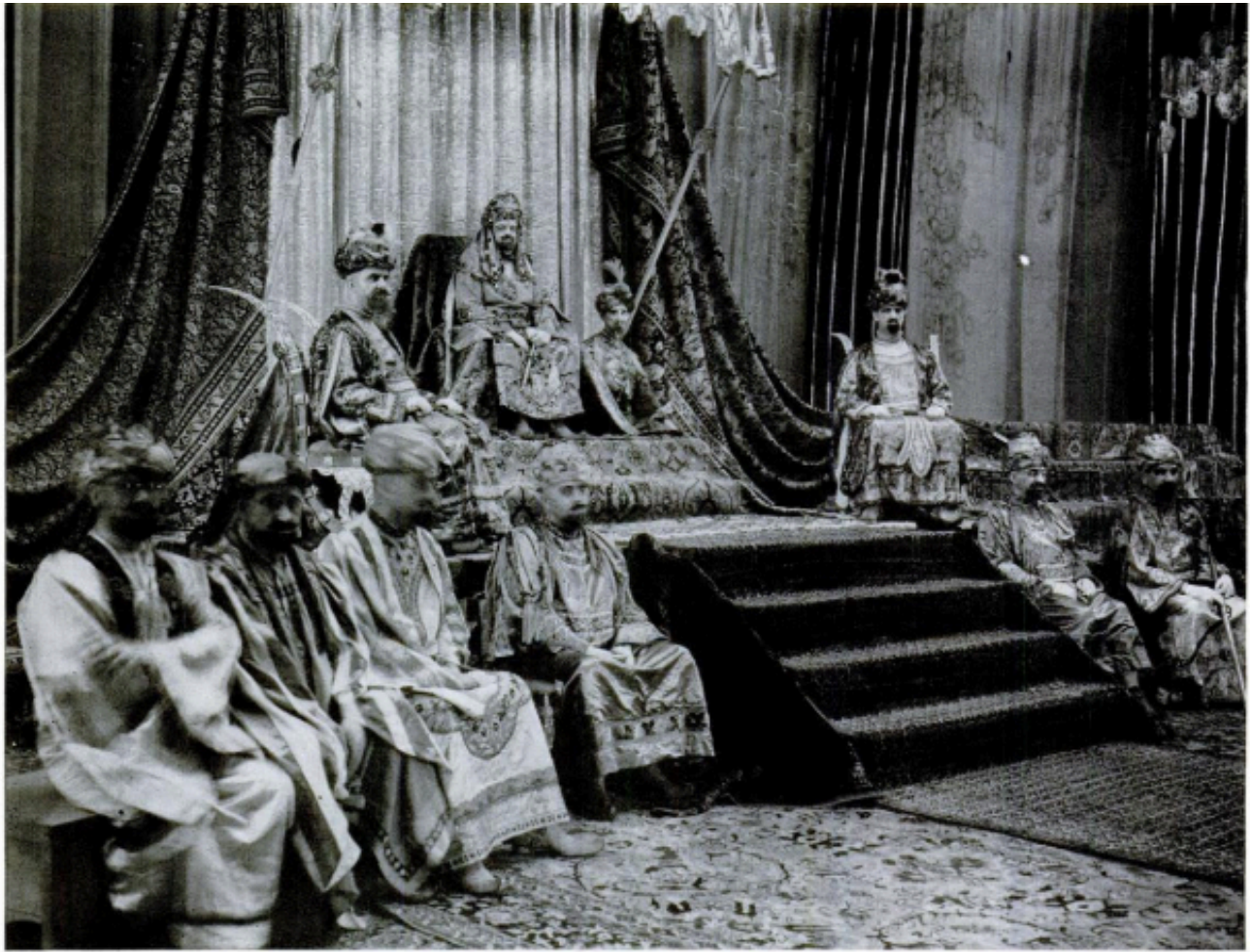
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## Figures



**Figure 0.1**

The Ulugh Beg Cup. Central Asia, Samarqand, Timurid period, 1417-49. White jade (nephrite). Collection of the Calouste-Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon.



**The Divan** of Officers of Medinah Temple, in full regalia, is a sight to awe new members. The Divan sits amid real Arabic splendor, for the Oriental rugs are thick and expensive, the one on the Potentate's chair having cost \$4,500. During the 1920's, when most Shriners were more prosperous, each of the larger Temples tried to outdo the others in richness of settings and costumes. Illustrious Potentate Edward William Shepherd wears a regalia of silk, velvet,

gold braid, spangles and jewels which cost the Temple \$830.

Next to the Potentate, the two top officers of the Temple are Chief Rabban Joseph G. Rowley, a paper company executive, who sits at the left of the platform, and Assistant Rabban William N. Boller, president of a machine company, who sits at right. Squatting beside the Potentate's chair is his aid, George E. Diersson, who bears the title of Remembrancer. In the front row, the two men at left are

Orators. The other four, left to right, are High Priest and Prophet James McVittie, president of McVittie Plating Works; Treasurer Arthur Vincent, an insurance company executive; Recorder Norman J. Kissick and Oriental Guide Arthur M. Gullickson, head of a lumber company.

The elaborate costumes are worn in all of the larger Temples but the artificial beards and mustaches and the skill in make-up are the special pride of Medinah Temple.

**Figure 1.2**

"The Shriners: Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles' Reveals Its Pageantry," *Life Magazine*, May 16, 1938. 54.

### **ABD EL KADER'S MASONIC FRIENDS.**

The Imperial Council of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine of the United States held its annual session at the Masonic Temple yesterday afternoon. The order is composed of members of the Masonic fraternity who have attained to the thirty-second degree in the Ancient and Accepted or Scottish Rite or who have taken the Templar degrees. Dr. Walter M. Fleming, the Imperial Potentate, presided, and there were present 48 active members, representing 13 States and 17 temples. Reports were received from the various temples, showing that the order is in a flourishing condition in the United States. Charters were issued for the creation of four new temples. The Imperial Potentate announced the death of the Illustrious Noble El-Hadjji Abd el Kader, Grand Sheik of Alee Temple, at Mecca, Arabia, which occurred at Damascus on May 26. He was the acknowledged head of the order in the Eastern Hemisphere. Eulogies were delivered by several members of the council, in which the life and services of the renowned Arab chief were fitly spoken of. A committee of three was appointed for the purpose of preparing a memorial of the deceased Sheik, to be placed in the archives of the Imperial Council. The triennial election for the chief officers of the council was held, and resulted in the re-election of Dr. Fleming as Imperial Potentate, and William S. Paterson, Imperial Recorder. Samuel Driggs, Joseph B. Eakins, and George W. Miliard were elected Directors for the ensuing three years. The newly elected officers were installed by Illustrious Noble C. T. McCleachan, an emeritus member of the Imperial Council, and the council, having concluded its labors, adjourned.

Figure 1.3

"Abd El Kader's Masonic Friends," *The New York Times*, June 7, 1883. B8.



**Figure 1.4**

Jean-Baptiste Huysmans, *Abdelkader Saving Damascene Christians in 1860*, 1861. oil on canvas. Private collection. In *Abdelkader*, by Bruno Etienne, plate 42, Paris: Fayard, 2012.





**Figure 1.5**

Etienne Carjat. « Portrait d'Abd el-Kader, » 1875. Courtesy of the French National Archives collection, Paris. [https://francearchives.fr/fr/pages\\_histoire/39663](https://francearchives.fr/fr/pages_histoire/39663)



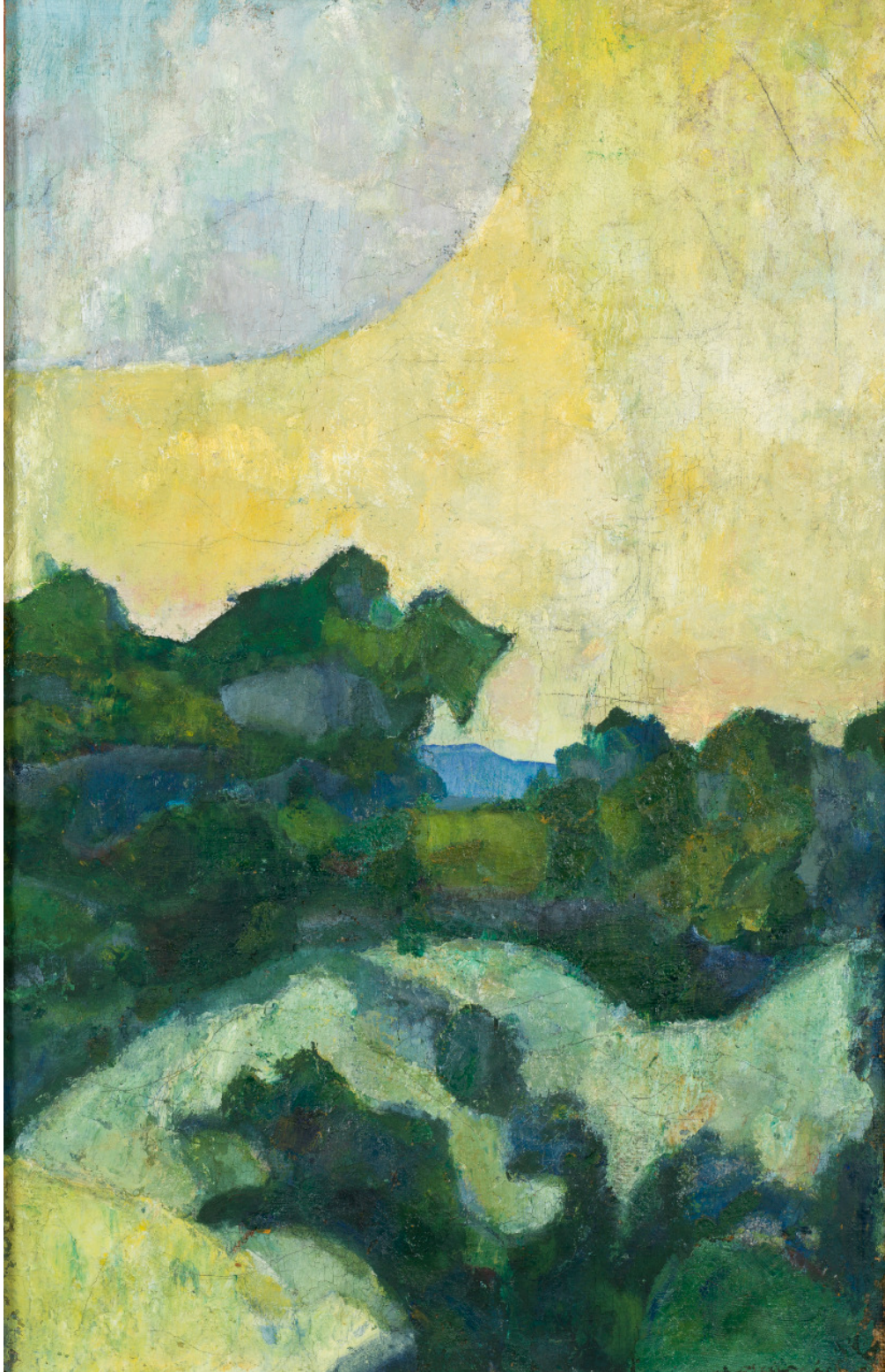
**Figure 1.6**

Photo of Abd al-Qadir (center) with Ismail Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt, and Ferdinand de Lesseps at the inauguration of the Suez Canal. Port Said, Egypt, 1869. In *Abdelkader*, by Bruno Etienne, plate 56, Paris: Fayard, 2012.



**Figure 2.1**

Ivan Aguéli, *Stockholmsutsikt* (View of Stockholm), 1892. Oil on canvas, 46 x 58 cm. Private collection. Photo courtesy of Stockholms Auktionsverk.



**Figure 2.2**

Ivan Aguéli, *Gotlandic landscape*, 1892. Oil on panel, 53,5 x 34. Aguéli museum. Photo courtesy of the Thiel gallery.



**Figure 2.3**

French police photograph of Ivan Aguéli, March 1894. Made by Alphonse Bertillon. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 10.5 x 7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gilman Collection, Museum Purchase, 2005.



**Figure 2.4**

Ivan Aguéli, *Hus mellan palmer*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 31 x 38cm. Private collection. Photo courtesy of the Thiel Gallery.



**Figure 2.5**

Ivan Aguéli, *Mosque I*, 1914. Oil on canvas attached to paper board, 21 x 30 cm. Waldemarsudde museum collection. Photo courtesy of the Thiel Gallery.



**Figure 2.6**

Ivan Aguéli, *Egyptian II*, 1914-15. Oil on canvas. Waldemarsudde museum collection. Photo courtesy of the Thiel Gallery.





**Figure 2.7**

Group photograph in Cairo with Aguéli and others, circa 1904. Made by Studio of Bernard Edelstein, Cairo. Original in the Picture Archive of the National Museum, Stockholm. Photo: National Museum.



**Figure 2.8**  
 Il Convito as a newspaper. Photo courtesy of Paul-André Claudel. In *Anarchist, Artists, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, by Mark Sedgwick, editor. Bedford: Bloomsbury, 2021. 100.

Handwritten:	الاحدية
Entite: ذات	Quintessence كنه
Substance	Véritable nature ذات
Quiddité	Substance.
Essent.	Identité: الوحدة
Support, support =	La véritable حقيقة
Substratum	Nature.
La Bieistence. الاثنية	La Primauté: الواحدية
Temporité indivi. أنية	الحقيقة المحمدية
Quelle. ولا تخصيص وقت دون وقت	الانسانية
الكلمة الطبية من غير اشتراط الوقت	Espit: روح اروح
La bonne Parole exonerée	Le monde المثال
d'ablation ostensible.	des formes prim
"Le Contrôle des sens" المراقبة	المرتبة الجامعة
l'homme	universel
universal.	الانسان الكامل
universalité: كمال	universal.
Disparité: الضمنية	universalité: كمال
La Sufi: الضمني والفضاء	Disparité: الضمنية
sainte, la pericite:	= اشتروك
Le Cosmos: العالم وما فيه	La Sufi: الضمني والفضاء
ou la nature.	sainte, la pericite:
Substance عين	Le Cosmos: العالم وما فيه
Indivinité des	ou la nature.
التحقق	Substance عين
الظهور	Indivinité des
l'expansion	التحقق
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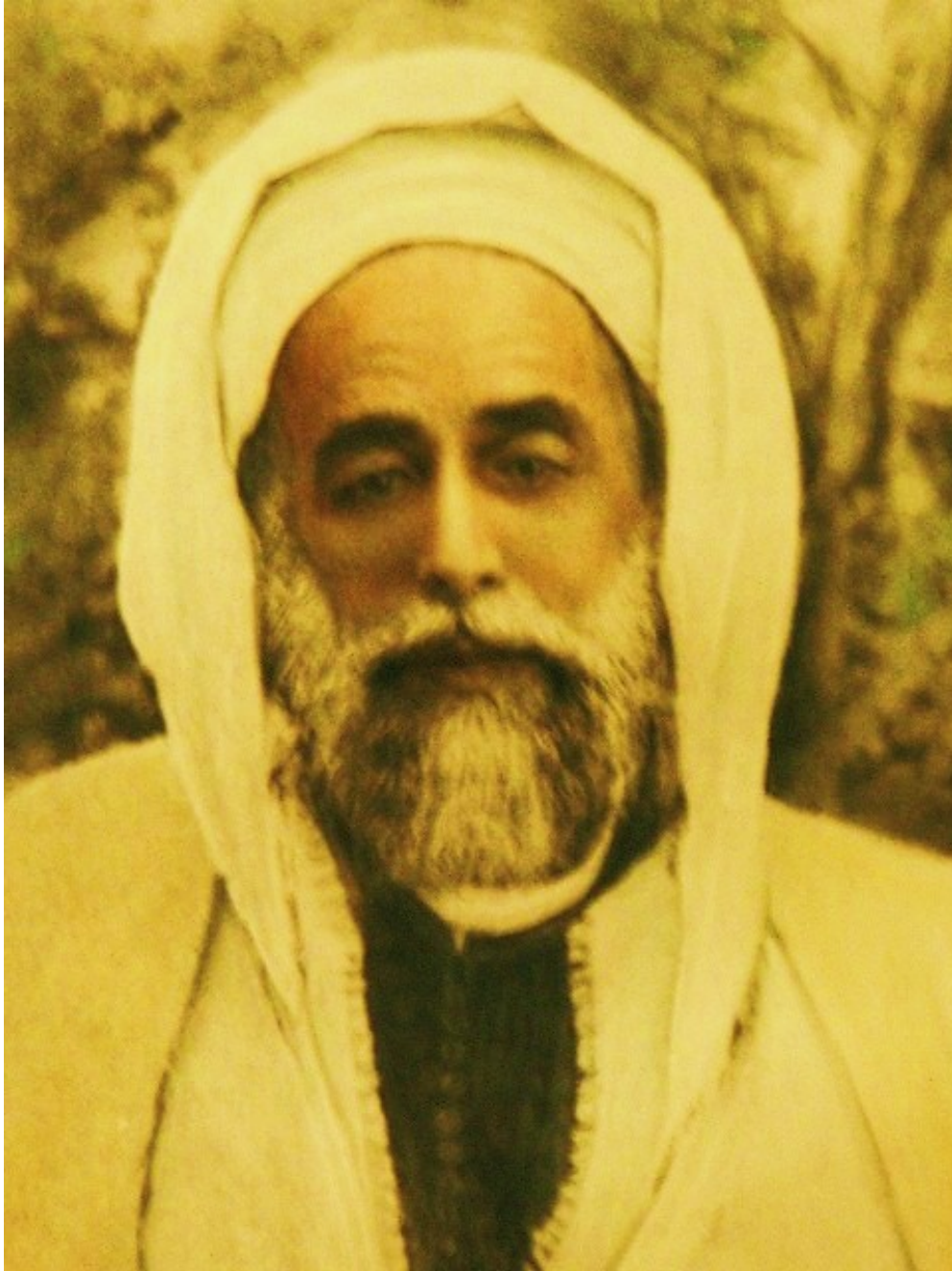
Figure 2.9

Ivan Aguéli, handwritten note. Original in the Ivan Aguéli Archive of the National Museum, Stockholm. Photo: author.



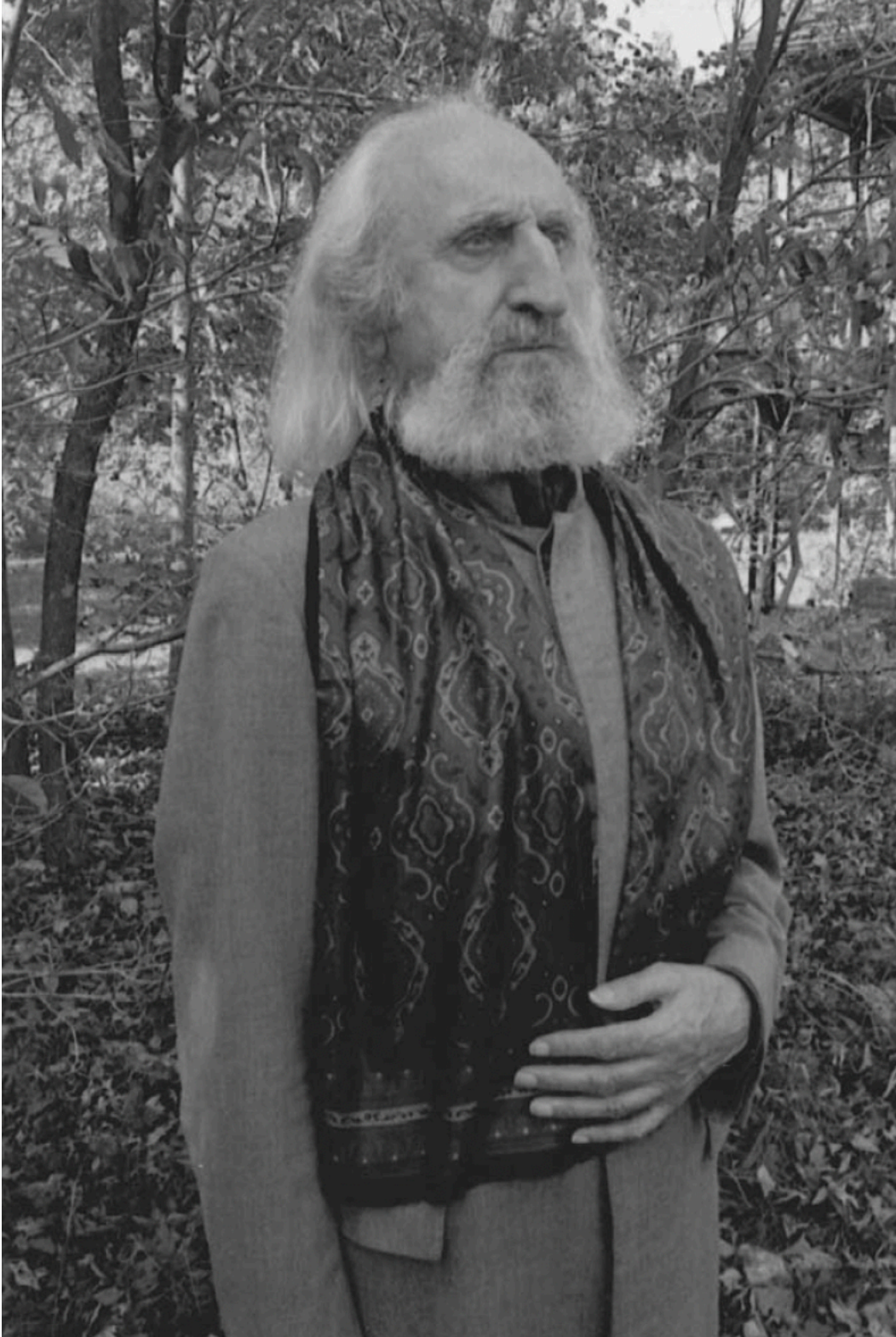
**Figure 4.1**  
Horace Vernet, *Prise de la smalah d'Abd-el-Kader*, 1844. Oil on canvas, 21,39m x 4,89m.  
Musée de l'Histoire de France, Versailles.





**Figure 4.3**

Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi, 1934. In *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* by Martin Lings (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 4.



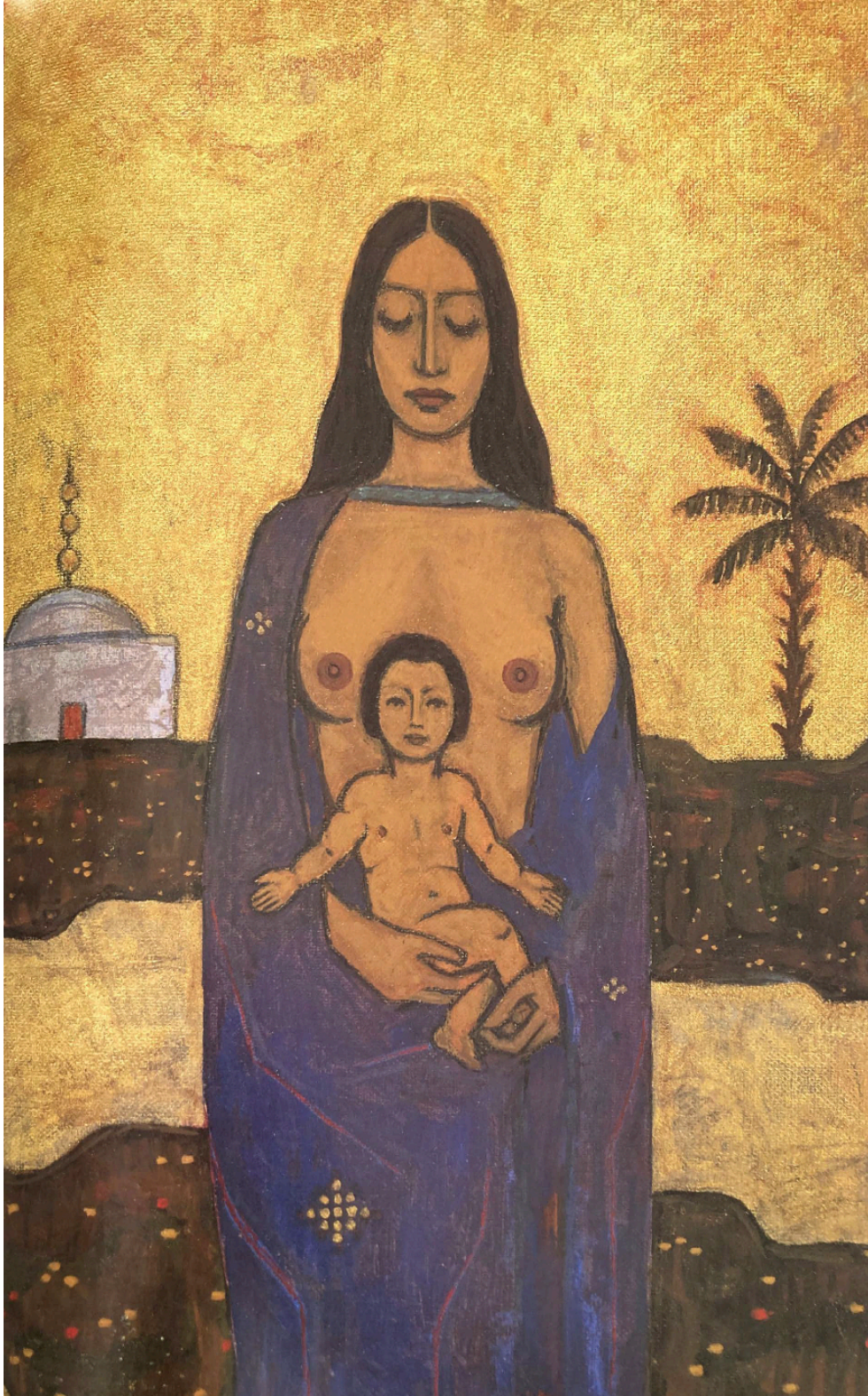
**Figure 4.4**  
Schuon in Bloomington, 1990. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.



**Figure 4.5**

Frithjof Schuon, *Celestial Virgin*, 1990. 9 x 15 in. In *Paintings by Frithjof Schuon, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington: Abodes, 1992), 273.





**Figure 4.6**

Frithjof Schuon, *Celestial Virgin*, 1967. 9 x 13 in. In *Paintings by Frithjof Schuon, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington: Abodes, 1992) 243.

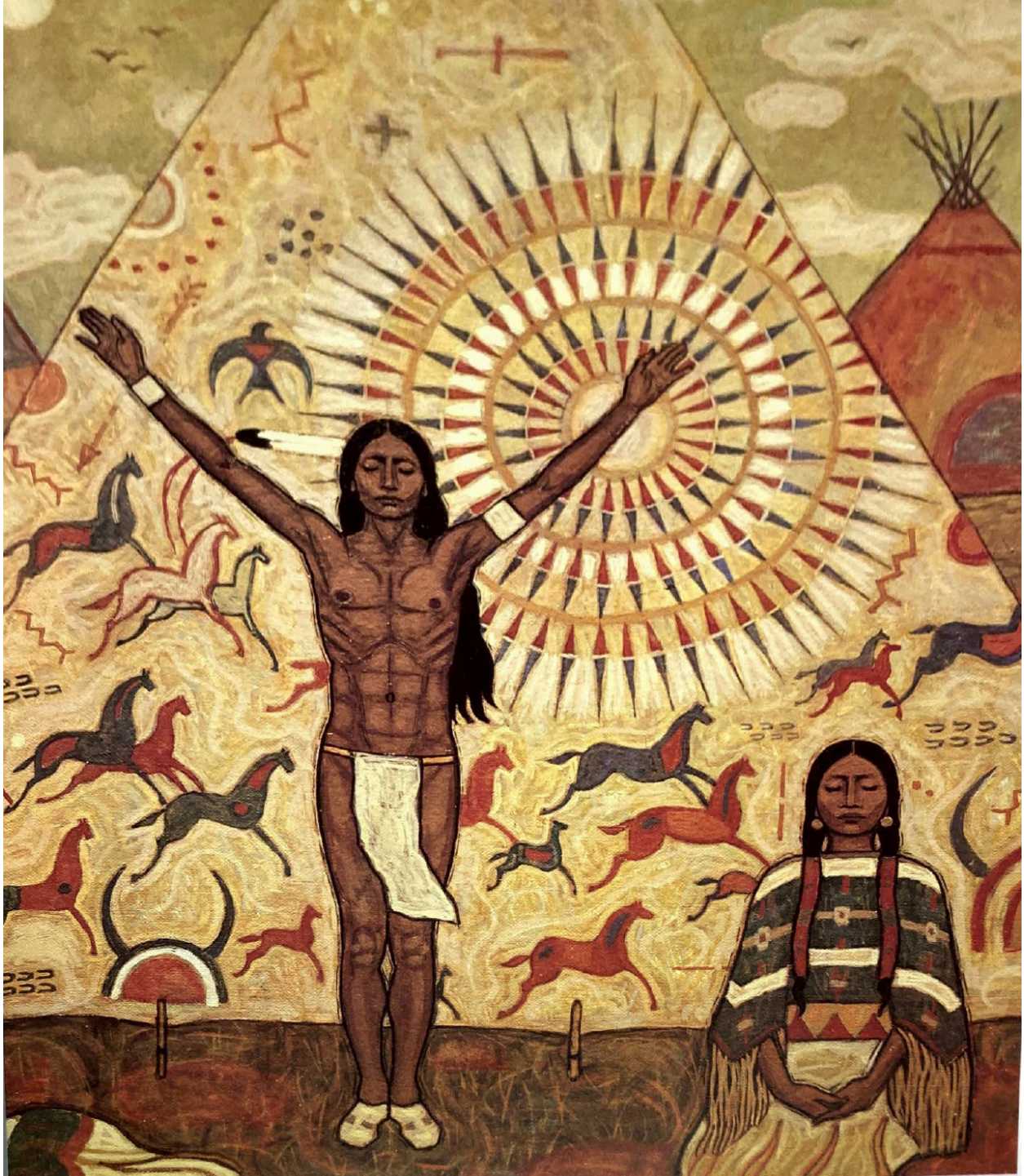


**Figure 4.7**

Frithjof Schuon, *Celestial Virgin*, 1973. 11 x 15 in. In *Paintings by Frithjof Schuon, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington: Abodes, 1992), 231.



**Figure 4.8**  
Frithjof Schuon, *Red Indian World*, 1962. 18 x 15 in. In *Paintings by Frithjof Schuon, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington: Abodes, 1992) 23.



**Figure 4.9**  
Frithjof Schuon, *Red Indian World*, 1961. 11 x 13 in. In *Paintings by Frithjof Schuon, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington: Abodes, 1992), 49.



**Figure 4.10**

Frithjof Schuon, *Red Indian World*, 1987. 19 x 27 in. In *Paintings by Frithjof Schuon, Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington: Abodes, 1992), 127.



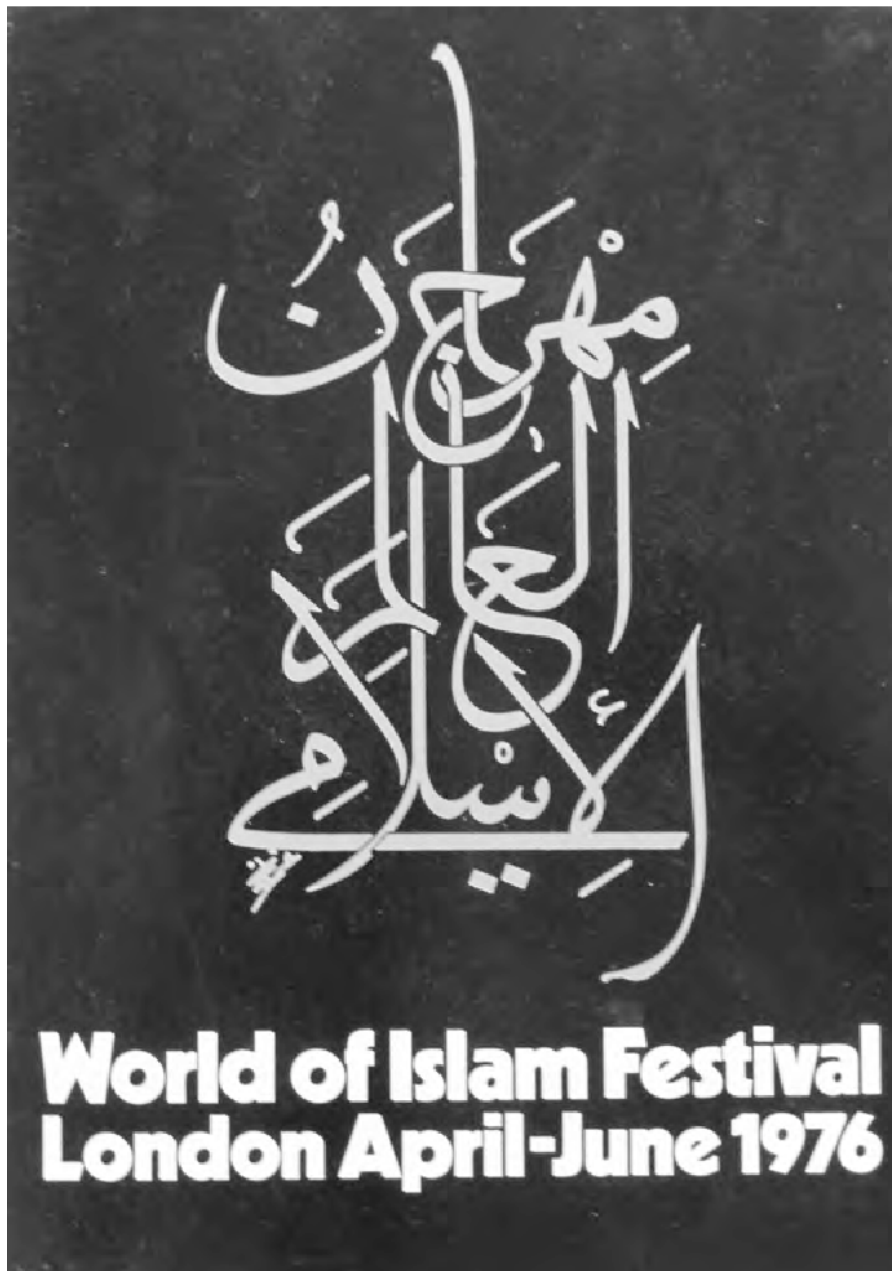
**Figure 5.1**  
Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon. Cairo, 1938. In *René Guénon: Some Observations*, by Frithjof Schuon (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), Cover.



**Figure 5.2**

Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon, Cairo, 1939. In

<http://alsimimah.blogspot.com/2013/07/biographie-de-frithjof-schuon.html>



**Figure 5.3**

The 1976 London World of Islam Festival. In "Jean Jenkins, Music and the 1976 World of Islam Festival," by Rachel Ainsworth and Sarah Worden. *Journal of Museum Ethnography* no.28 (2015) 184-197.





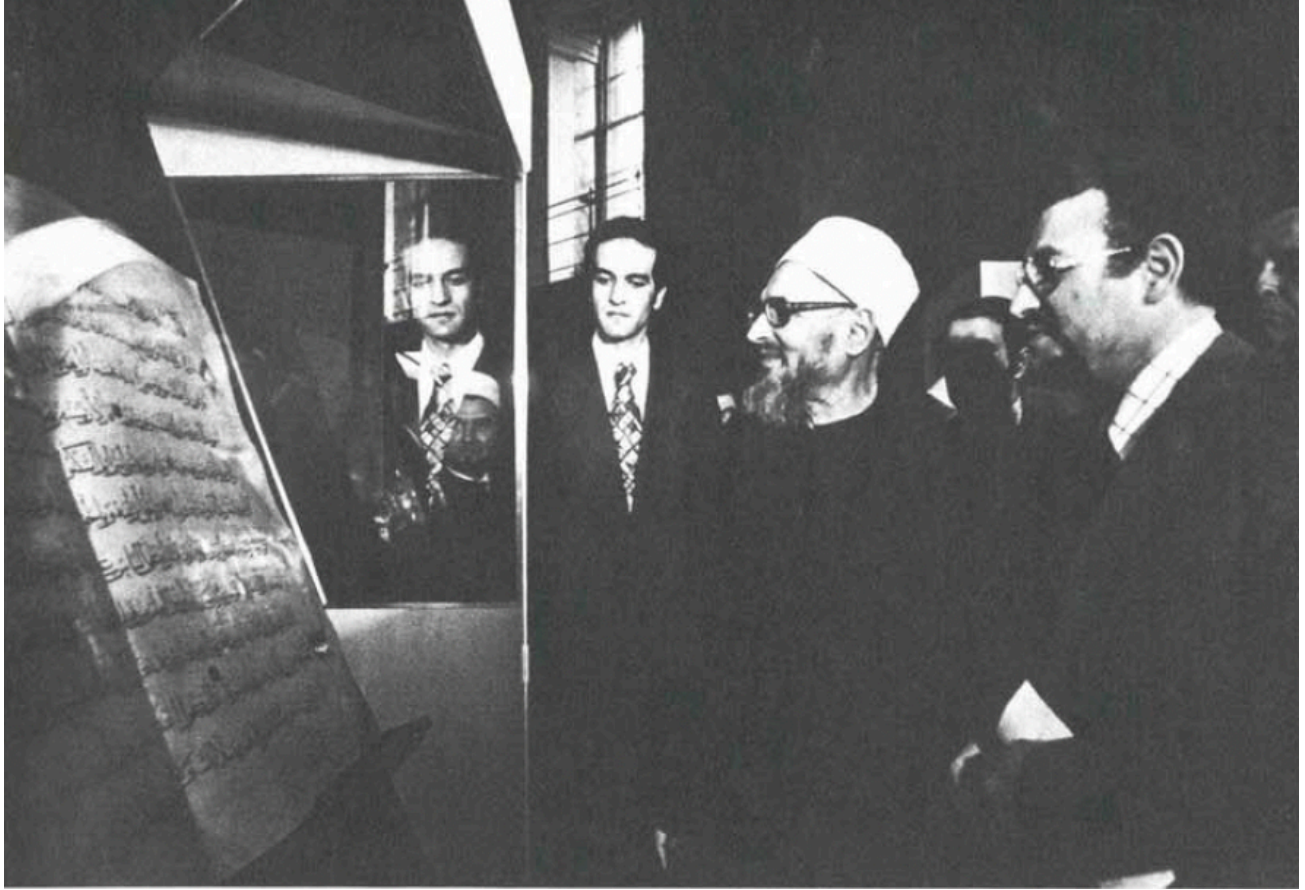
**Figure 5.4**

*The Traditional World of Islam* (London: landmarks Films, 1976),  
[youtube.com/watch?v=OAX4F7fesME](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAX4F7fesME)



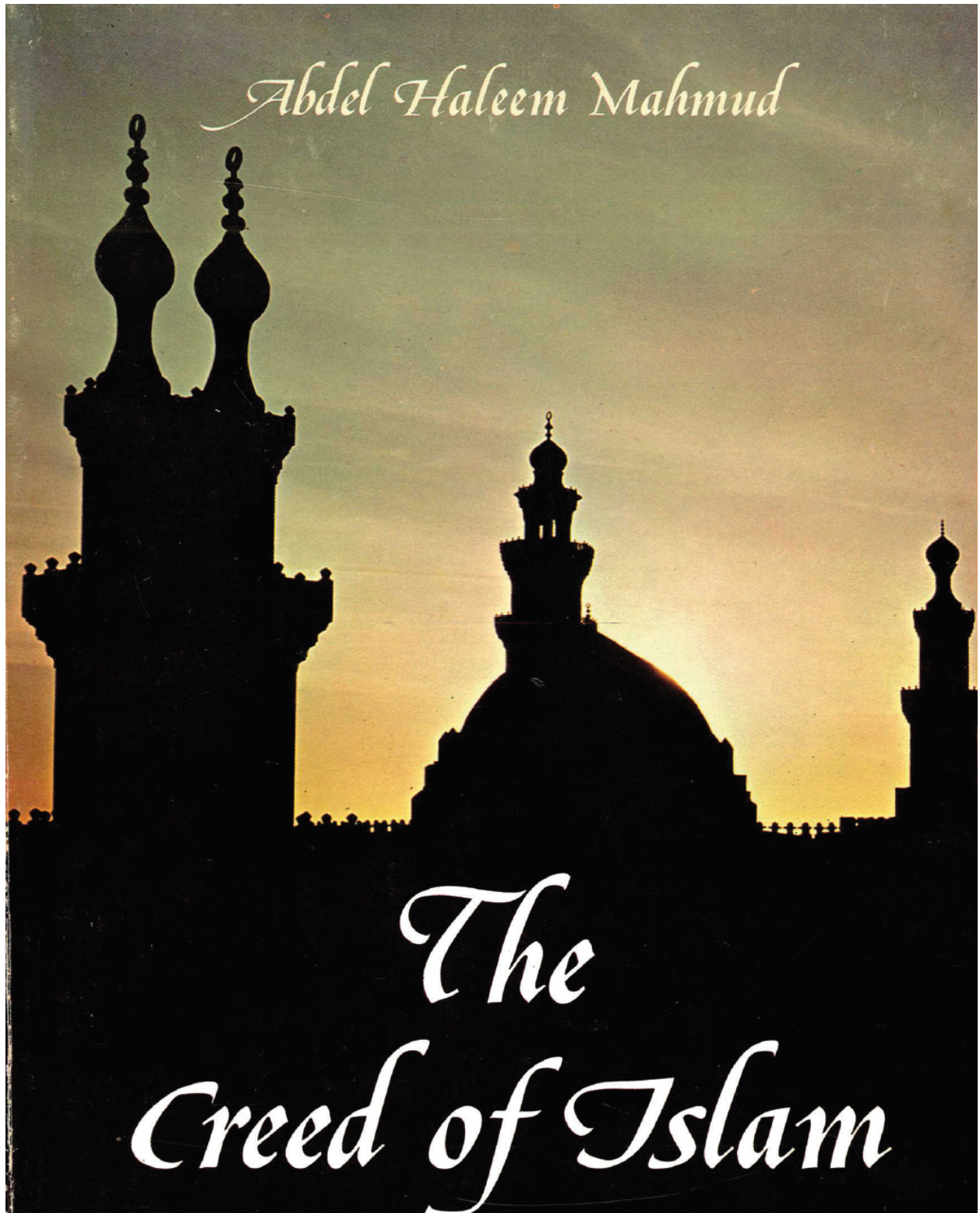
**Figure 5.5**

Queen Elisabeth inaugurating the Arts of Islam exhibition. In John Sabini, "The World of Islam Festival." *Aramco World Magazine* 27. no. 3 (1976), 8.



**Figure 5.6**

Shaykh Abd al-Halim Mahmud during the 1976 London World of Islam Festival. In John Sabini, "The World of Islam Festival." *Aramco World Magazine* 27. no. 3 (1976), 8.



**Figure 5.7**

Cover, *The Creed of Islam*. London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976.



**Figure 5.8**

Titus Burkhardt (left), René Guénon (middle) and Jacques Albert Cuttat (right), Cairo, 1940. In *Esotérisme et Christianisme autour de René Guénon*, by Marie France James (Paris :Lanore, 2008), Cover.



**Figure 5.9**

A reconstructed corner of a mosque from San'a. In John Sabini, "The World of Islam Festival." *Aramco World Magazine* 27. no. 3 (1976), 26.



"The Arts of Islam" at London's Hayward Gallery (above) was the largest of the exhibitions and Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the Festival there in April. Opposite, top and bottom: The rector of Cairo's al-Azhar University opened the exhibition of Korans at the King's Library and the Empress of Iran opened "Science and Technology in Islam," at the Science Museum.

**Figure 5.10**

The Arts of Islam exhibition at London's Hayward Gallery. In John Sabini, "The World of Islam Festival." *Aramco World Magazine* 27. no. 3 (1976), 8.