

Jamā'at al-'adl wa l-ihsān of Abdessalam Yassine between Morocco and France

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As it appears in its name, the Moroccan *Justice and Spirituality (Al-'adl wa l-ihsān)* Association is a “Sufīslamist” movement. I borrowed this expression from Alix Philippon. The latter is, under the direction of François Burgat, currently writing a PhD thesis untitled *Le soufīslamisme: l'invention paradoxale d'une nouvelle modernité politique en islam?* In English: *Sufīslamism : the paradoxical invention of a new political modernity in Islam?* His work deals essentially with the case of the Pakistani *Minhaj-ul Quran*. I took up this expression because I think *Sufīslamism* is really appropriate to describe the *Al-'adl wa l-ihsān* movement.

The *Justice and Spirituality Association* has been founded by Abdessalam Yassine¹ who was born in 1928 in Morocco. He first made a distinguished career in education during which he has been appointed as school inspectors for the Ministry of Education. As far as Islamic sciences and some human sciences like sociology, psychology, and philosophy were concerned, Yassine was rather an autodidact. In 1965, he had a serious spiritual crisis, which his followers tend to compare to what happened to Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111).² Since then, Yassine joined the Butshishī Sūfī order which is up to now, according to the Moroccan political scientist Mohamed Darif, the official Sūfī brotherhood of the Moroccan monarchy.³ Yassine has for years been a leading member of this order. But after the death of his sheikh al-Hajj al-'Abbās in 1972, he left the brotherhood because of some disagreements he had with Sidi Hamza, the successor of his sheikh, that is to say because of some leadership problems. Officially, it is claimed that Yassine “noticed that the Sūfī order was moving away from the *Sunna*, tending more towards material aspects, superficial, and outward appearances of Sufism to the detriment of its essence: spirituality”.⁴

¹ His name is always transcribed in this way in Morocco and in France.

² See the Internet site www.yassine.net, “A Short Biography of Imam Abdessalam Yassine”, p. 2.

³ Beat Stauffer, “Mysticism as a Means of Fighting Religious Extremism”, web site *Qantara.de*, 2007, p. 2.

⁴ “A Short Biography”, p. 3.

So Yassine chose to leave the narrow Sūfī *tarbiya* circles to spread a spiritual education in the whole society in reviving the Prophet's model (*Sunna*). We may notice that Hasan al-Bannā's Muslim Brothers movement also began in a *tarīqa* form of group. Salafism, I mean the return to the *Sunna*, in the case of Yassine, is nothing else than a way to lean on the Prophet's authority in order to pass the Butshishī order's own authority. Let us add that Yassine emphasizes that he is a *sharīf* (descendant of the Prophet), and that in Morocco any spiritual authority can hardly be assumed without being from Sherifian lineage. Abdessamad Dialmy notices that power in Morocco is constituted by three kinds of a "symbolic capital": *'ilm* (juridical science), *baraka* and *sharaf* : to accumulate these three kinds [of power] is to realize a total power.⁵ Relatively speaking, Yassine's wide call reminds us of the Imam Jazūlī revivalist movement in Morocco sixteenth century which was based on a largely spread exaltation of the Muhammadian model.

The *Justice and Spirituality (Al-'adl wa l-ihsān) Association (JSA)* has been actually founded in 1987, but the balance between these two terms or topics was found when Yassine left the Butshishī order. For the members of the JSA, commitment in the city and spirituality, temporal and spiritual affairs, body and soul, external predication (*da'wa*) and inner recollection (*dhikr*), *al-jihād al-asghar* and *al-jihād al-akbar*, politics and ethics, are totally linked and interdependent. It is somehow a contemporary version of the old pattern of the *al-'ālim al-'āmil*, the Muslim scholar who is involved in both inner spiritual practices and social field.⁶

JSA and Sufism

What does Yassine share with traditional Moroccan Sufism and what does he deny in it? His most important book *Al-Minhāj al-nabawī* ("the Prophetic Method"), which remains the JSA main doctrinal reference, presents a structure very close to the one of classical Sūfī treatises. Indeed, in this book Yassine quotes mainly authors like al-Ghazālī and 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166) who both correspond to two Sūfī

⁵ A. Dialmy, « L'islamisme marocain : entre révolution et intégration », *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 110, Paris, 2000, p. 6.

⁶ E. Geoffroy : *Le soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels*, Institut Français d'Etudes Arabes de Damas, Damascus-Paris, 1995, p. 293-297.

authorities undisputed by orthodox Islam.⁷ In another of his major book, *Al-Ihsān* which was printed in Morocco in 1993 but written some years before, Yassine evokes without any complex his Sufī past.⁸ He even seems to be very grateful to his late master, and shows a wide and strong knowledge in classical Sufī culture. He quotes a lot of ancient masters, and praises the Shādhiliyya School for its fine balance between orthodoxy and spirituality. It is quite significant that he ascribes to the Butshishiyya order an initiation method (*tarīqa*) from Shādhilī origin.⁹ Nevertheless, Yassine criticizes the *al-turuqiyya*, which I would translate into French by “confrérisme”¹⁰, and opposes it to the *sunni tasawwuf*.¹¹ We can note that in most of his books and speeches he avoids the word *tasawwuf* and instead uses terms like *tazkiyat al-nafs* (“purification of the soul”), *tarbiya* (“spiritual education”) and of course *ihsān*, which we should translate by “spirituality” – as the JSA members do - and not by “welfare” or “charity” as we can find in some studies.

Anyway, the *Al-‘adl wa l-ihsān* movement may be qualified as a general spirituality process but never as an esoteric path. In this regard it is quite logical that Yassine quotes in his book *Al-Ihsān* a lot of Salafī Sūfī scholars like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, al-Shawkānī, Hasan al-Bannā’, al-Nadawī, Saïd Hawwā, who all disagree with the esoteric aspect of Sufism but are in favor of an ethical spirituality in Islam called *al-tasawwuf al-akhlāqī*. In the same way, Yassine is said to only accept the prayer formulae ascribed to the *Sunna*, like *Lā ilaha illa Llāh*, and to refuse any *dhikr* using *Allāh* or *Huwa*.¹² Members of JSA do not call Yassine *shaykh*, but *imām* or *murshid* – which was the title given to Hasan al-Bannā' in his group – and *suhba* (“companionship”) is a term suitable in both Sūfī and merely *Sunni* contexts.

Still have we really left the ancient Sūfī atmosphere? It appears that Yassine has artfully integrated some of Moroccan Sūfī traditions such as the cult of personality, retreats (during collective sessions, from three to forty days), psychological preparation... His followers see Yassine as a saint and as the

⁷ This book has been published in Egypt several times since 1982. See on it Youssef Belal, “Mystique et politique chez Abdessalam Yassine et ses adeptes”, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 135, Paris, 2006, p. 175-179.

⁸ Abdessalam Yassine, *Al-Ihsān*, Rabat, 1993, I, p. 7-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 8, 60. Though the Butshishiyya order claims to be only Qādirī.

¹⁰ E. Geoffroy, article « Tarīka », *Encyclopédie de l’Islam*, Leyde, IX, p. 265 ; *Initiation au soufisme*, Paris, 2003, p. 290-293, to be translated into English in 2008 (World Wisdom, USA).

¹¹ Muhammad Darīf, *Jamā‘at al-‘adl wa l-ihsān : qirā’a fī masārāt*, Rabat, 1995, p. 29.

¹² I have been told that by a Moroccan PhD student of mine.

messenger of the Prophet¹³, and he himself claims to be the Renewer (*Mujaddid*) of Islam of our era.¹⁴ In this sense, he has the same charisma as shaykh Hamza's, and in both cases the disciples (of the JSA and the Butshishiyya), although in different manners, assume quite well the cult of personality of their leaders. Among the various JSA groups Yassine, as a *walī*, seems to have gained a real role of "mediator between God and men".¹⁵

But despite this external similarity, some political stakes keep bringing the JSA and the Butshishiyya into conflict. While the latter is de facto the official brotherhood of the Moroccan monarchy, with two ministers coming from its ranks and especially the minister of religious affairs, the JSA absolutely refuses to enter the political game. Indeed, the JSA tries more than ever to challenge the Moroccan power and because of that suffers serious human rights abuses. When Nadia, Yassine's daughter, opposes the "virile Sufism" of her father against "anesthetizing speeches of a convenient quietism", she makes special allusions to the Butshishiyya. Thus, at the same time, the JSA seems to criticize Sufis for confining themselves into a spiritual call, and the Islamist activists for being only practicing an external *jihad*. The JSA movement claims to be the synthesis of both of these tendencies: "Soldiers during the day, monks during the night, so are the militants of *Al-'Adl wa l-Ihsān*."¹⁶

From the Sufi virtues to the Islamist claims

Abdessalam Yassine's passage from the Sūfī milieu to a propagandist Islamist association has actually been very quick. Yassine, as we said, left the Butshishiyya in 1972, and started his 'political' career in 1974, with the famous letter "Islam or the Flood" (*Al-islām aw al-tūfān*) to Hassan II, the then-king of Morocco. In this missive of more than a hundred pages, "he exhorts the king to fear God in his management of the affairs of the Moroccan people and to make up for the wrongs committed against a large number of Moroccan citizens".¹⁷ As an answer to this warning, Hassan II put him not in jail but in a psychiatric asylum for three years...Yassine reiterated the

¹³ For the followers of Sheykh Yassine "to imitate the Prophet is in fact to imitate Si Abdessalam"; Y. Belal, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁴ See the Internet sites www.yassine.net and www.aljamaa.com.

¹⁵ Y. Belal, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁶ A. Dialmy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁷ See www.yassine.net, "The Guide".

same act with King Mohamed VI, when the latter ascended the throne in 1999, in a document untitled “Memorandum To Whom It May Concern”. Yassine spent somehow over a decade in prison and under house arrest for having dared to question the religious legitimacy of the monarchy and its authority, and for having labelled the regime as corrupted and immoral. Here we may pass over the Sūfī quest for ecstasy to come back to the basic Islamic notion of moral asceticism or *zuhd*. On a theoretical point of view, as noticed by A. Dialmy, the JSA Sūfī references “should push it into clash with Moroccan authorities, not in order to take power but to say that true Islam lays in the renunciation of any kind of power. By the religious ‘deligitimization’ of the established regime, the JSA breaks with this Sūfī ideal.”¹⁸

Originally, the JSA used to recognize the king on a temporal level, not on a spiritual one. To be more precise, the association used to contest the sovereign’s title of “commander of the believers” which is not without a meaning in Morocco. For few years, the movement went even further in assuming that the Moroccan monarchy should be replaced by a 'second Islamic Caliphate as promised by the Messenger of God'. This claim has with no doubt a messianic resonance: “Under the guidance of the spiritual guide [Yassine], the *jamā'a* invites people to God and endeavours, in cooperation with the other Islamic movements and all people of goodwill, to reunite the *umma* in fulfilment of God's promise that announces the advent of a second Caliphate in line with the Method of the Prophets. The second Caliphate will be a union that will live abreast of the other civilizations and cultures of the world, working in unison to establish peace, security and prosperity for the whole mankind”.¹⁹ During the year 2005, the association reportedly developed the idea of a *qawma*, a revolution, which was to occur in 2006 or 2007, after a series of dreams made by imam Yassine and other members of the association. Many followers think these dreams refer to the immediate abolition of the monarchy in Morocco and the instauration of the Caliphate. We know that dreams and visions – which are very relevant in Sufī milieus - often serve the cause of messianic or political movements. In spring 2005, Yassine's daughter, Nadia, who heads the feminist branch of the organisation but who has in fact succeeded her father, said in an interview to the Moroccan newspaper *Al-Ushbu'iyya al-jadīda* that she believed that 'Monarchy is not

¹⁸ A. Dialmy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁹ See www.yassine.net, “The Guide”.

appropriate for Morocco', and that the country would be better as a republic than as a kingdom. Consequently, she is today facing prosecutions in Morocco.²⁰

The JSA is nowadays the largest opposition group in Morocco. It is said to be made up of 25,000 active members and over 140,000 supporters in the country. It is made up of several sub-sectors focusing on new technologies, students, women, trade unions and so on. It has always refused to enter the political game and to take part to the elections under the current political practices which it sees as being illegitimate while other islamist parties did join the Parliament. However, Moroccan authorities tolerates the association firstly because it is a non-violent resistance movement (JSA three principles are the rejection of violence, clandestine methods and external finance), and mostly because of its grassroots popularity. In response to the increasing pressure put by the authorities and the press reports linking the group to radicalism, the JSA organized what they describe as an extensive 'Open Doors' campaign. This effort was made to reach Moroccans and refute such allegations associating them to radicalism and terrorism. Abdessalam Yassine displays an indisputable and impressive ability of mobilizing people. Since his release in 2000, the few road trips he has made inside the country have sometimes given rise to scenes of mass hysteria. Although he is not regarded as a modernizer or a democratic reformer, he continues to be revered by Moroccans opposed to the king for standing against the monarchy, and speaking on their behalves about vital social and economic issues.

In Europe

At the end of the 90s, the JSA movement decided to 'export' their ideas outside their national borders towards Europe, noting that as 'undesirables' the development of their ideology was limited and even blocked by the authorities. The JSA managed to do that in creating an association, PSM (Participation et Spiritualité Musulmanes /Muslim Participation and Spirituality), with branches in Europe and the USA. The establishment of this movement was in part the result of the activism of some political refugees who had fled repression in their countries – not only in Morocco - but also of the political engagement of some students who came to Europe

²⁰ See www.nadiayassine.net.

to pursue further education. The PSM in voicing from the outside its views on the situation in Morocco, hoped to manage to put pressure on the monarchy, and to make use of its presence in Europe to have its Moroccan organisation legalised and thus to secure the respect of human rights and democracy. For the JSA members, a presence in Europe was a strategy to spread their political action being limited to the confines of their own country. So we can here witness a “deterritorialization”²¹ and a relocalization of islamist activity away from its centre towards Europe, in order to avoid repression in Morocco and to get in Europe resources that they could use in future negotiations with the monarchy.

The JSA and the PSM movements, in becoming a force against the monopoly of the Moroccan regime in terms of religious and political expression in Europe, appear quite as the actors of a *democratisation*. The French and the Belgian wings of the PSM regularly organise demonstrations denouncing the political situation in Morocco. The PSM communications officer in France, ‘Abd al-Rahman Makhluḥ, said that “Nobody talks about the catastrophic political situation in Morocco. With our means, we wanted to alert French public opinion about the very bad situation in Morocco for the movement of our Sheikh Yassine. That is why we decided to put on our website an article dealing with the subject.” Along the same lines, Nadia Yassine – who is western-educated but not westernised - also regularly travels to Europe in order to denounce the political situation in her country and the repression that suffers her movement. On 17 June 2006, New Friendship Europe-Morocco, an association close to the islamist movement of Sheikh Yassine, made public the Moroccan government repressive policy towards the movement in organising in Brussels a conference made by Nadia Yassine, on 'Human rights flouted in Morocco'. A month later, while the JSA continued to suffer abuses in Morocco, Nadia Yassine began a European tour to denounce the police repression her movement was subjected to. In one of the speeches she made in France, she said: “The conditions for political and democratic participation in Morocco do not exist. How can you expect people to vote and choose their leaders when a significant proportion of the people are illiterate? To talk of free elections in these conditions is a joke. The political set-up is a closed shop and all elections in Morocco are a joke.” Despite a structure that is presented as autonomous, the PSM is guided by Nadia Yassine, who spreads the ideology of the

²¹ Olivier Roy, *Vers un islam européen*, Paris, 1999, p. 51 ; *L’islam mondialisé*, Paris, 2002, p. 185.

party, notably via conferences on Islam's compatibility with modernity (democracy, secularism, women's rights, etc.)²²

Nadia Yassine is now a leading democracy and human rights activist. Indeed, she takes part in forums and meetings organised by anti-globalization movements such as the 4th European Social Forum held in Athens in May 2006, or the first Congress on Islamic Feminism held in Barcelona in October 2005. In 2006, she completed a speaking tour in a number of leading U.S. universities. For such figures who are not officially recognised by their states, and consequently not by the European states either, expressing themselves as 'intellectuals' or as 'academics' is also a possible mean of getting access to the public space.

Islamist movements know how to accommodate themselves to the available political structures in Europe, through councils such as the CFCM (the French Council of the Muslim Religion), the presence of imams in local mosques, and through the integration in islamic associations that is already existing there. The JSA, for example, through the PSM, decided to implement its policy of criticising the Sherifian regime not on the illegitimacy of the monarchy, but on Human Rights and public freedoms. In 2006, supporters of the PSM movement living in Belgium and in France created under the 1901 law, an association called the Alliance for Freedom and Dignity (AFD) aiming at defending and promoting human rights and democracy in Muslim countries and especially in Morocco via different events and conferences. Nadia Yassine has of course been invited to express her views on human rights within this association.

The political contexts in their countries of origin also shape the approaches chosen by these parties concerning their actions in Europe. Through its external relations work, the Moroccan PJD (Parti de la Justice et du Développement / The Justice and Development Party), targets European political and institutional parties, given its electoral representativeness and its status as an official political party recognized by the Moroccan monarchy. But the JSA and the PSM prefer to establish semi-diplomatic relations with Europe via alternative political networks. Much more discrete in its activities than the UOIF, the French Muslim Federation closed to the

²² See for instance A. Boubekour and S. Amghar, *Islamic parties in the Maghreb and their links with the EU : Mutual Influences and the dynamics of democratisation*, Brussels-Rabat, 2006, p. 1.

Muslim Brothers, find new members among the emerging re-islamised middle classes (students, young professionals, etc.). They work at 'opinion-building' among academics, intellectuals and representatives of the Sūfī trend in Europe (mainly in France and in Belgium). They obviously try to take over the prominent figures of spiritual Islam, in order to get their moral support and to show that their involvement in the social and political field does not dim the former spiritual background of imam Yassine. In doing this, they dissociate their public image from any fundamentalist or even terrorist connotation.

By the personal acquaintance I made with some members of the JSA and the PSM, I can say that they are driven by a real probity and integrity that make them gaining such popularity. However, it remains that their positions are quite ambiguous, and that there are some ongoing tensions between their Sūfī educational practices and their action which they claim to be a worldwide revolution. This in the sense that their associations do not fall any more within the *tasawwuf* discipline – I mean a true initiation path – and that their islamist ideology is characterized by a relatively poor thought.

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