

The Contribution of Sufism to the Construction of Contemporary Europe's Islam

Eric GEOFFROY

University of Strasbourg

Some history

If we want to define correctly the current role of Sufism in Europe, we have to go back to the Middle Ages, as we have known for the last few decades that Islamic spirituality had something of an influence on medieval Christendom. For instance the legend of the female saint Râbia al-‘Adawiyya (d. 801), who lived in Irak, reached the court of Saint Louis, in France, and the Divine Comedy by the Italian author Dante Alighieri (d. 1321) bears the mark of the story of the heavenly Ascension of the prophet Muhammad (*Mi‘râj*)¹. Furthermore, the mystical doctrine of Saint Theresa of Avila and of Saint John of the Crew, in sixteenth Century Spain, may have borrowed some elements from Maghrebo-Andalusian Sufism².

Later, in the nineteenth century, European expansion in the Muslim world, through exploration and colonialism enabled some European “seekers of truth” to encounter Sufism. These individuals were rejecting the positivist ideology of Europe, its mechanistic and materialistic civilization as well as the secularization of Western Christianity which, they said, had lost its esoteric content. In what they perceived as a “loss of meaning”, they found a metaphysical revival in Oriental forms of spirituality like Sufism. Take the English explorer Richard Burton (d. 1890), the French Orientalist painter Etienne Dinet (d. 1929), the Swiss writer Isabelle Eberhardt (d. 1904), or the native Swede Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917).

As a result of the spread of European colonialism there was a wave of Asian and African immigration in Europe, and from the 1920's Sufism appeared in Europe. One of the first Sufi orders to emerge in Europe in that period was the ‘Alâwiyya order initiated by the

¹ Chodkiewicz, M., (1995), ‘La sainteté féminine dans l’hagiographie islamique’, in D. Aigle (ed), Saints orientaux, Paris : De Boccard, pp. 99-100.

² Chodkiewicz, M., (1994), ‘La réception du soufisme par l’Occident : conjectures et certitudes’, in C. Butterworth and B. Kessel (eds), The Introduction of Arabic Philosophy into Europe, Leiden : Brill, pp. 136-149.

Algerian shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alâwî (d. 1934)³. This shaykh came to France in person in 1926, and participated in the inaugural ceremony of the Great Mosque of Paris, which was built in gratitude for the sacrifice of the Muslim soldiers during the First World War. In the atmosphere of “disenchantment” which prevailed after this appalling war, spiritualities like Hinduism and then Sufism were given the task of “colonizing people’s hearts”, as said shaykh ‘Udda Bentounes (d. 1952), the successor of shaykh al-‘Alâwî.

Not all Sufism in contemporary Europe is the result of recent migrations, however. Some Sufi orders, such as the Bektashis of Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia, have been present in the region since the Middle Ages. Indeed, the religious culture of Muslim communities in the Balkans has largely been shaped by the legacy of Sufism.

Traditionalism : René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon

One of the greatest references in this period was René Guénon, a French author who explained to the European public that the modern West was in crisis or, worse, in a state of terminal decline, as a result of its loss of transmission of tradition during the last half of the second millennium A.D. So, for Guénon, the West had to go back to the roots of primordial truth, the primordial Tradition which underlies each of the historical religions. Having been initiated into Sufism himself in Paris in 1912 by Ivan Aguéli, he aimed to set out the metaphysical thought of Perennial Philosophy in a series of books, in order to form a Western elite and to restore “traditional civilization” in the West. He settled in Cairo in 1930 and died there in 1951 but, as an universalist Sufi, he wrote much more about Hinduism for instance than about Islam or Sufism. Yet he has had great influence until now on some Europeans who have subsequently chosen to follow the path of Sufism⁴. His books have been recently translated into Arabic and he got nowadays more and more audience in some Arabic and Turkish milieus.

In the wake of Guénon, some Traditionalists moved to Islam, since they saw in it the last expression of Revelation for this age. They all stressed the universalism of the Islamic

³ See Geoffroy, E., (2009) the articles ‘Ahmad b. ‘Aliwa’ and ‘ ‘Alâwiyya’, Encyclopaedia of Islam, 3rd edition, Leyden: Brill.

⁴ See for instance ‘René Guénon, l'éveilleur (1886-1951)’, Connaissance des Religions n° 65-66 Juillet-Décembre 2002 ; Accart, X., (2001), L'Ermite de Dokki. René Guénon en marge des milieux francophones égyptiens, Milano: Archè, 354 p.

message, in such a way that it appears to be the first real bridge between East and West, in the modern times at the least. Some worked at extricating it from its oriental or Arabic context. Frithjof Schuon, a prolific spiritual author and a Sufi master of Swiss origin, highlighted the “Transcendental Unity of Religions”, but in a quite distinct way from Guénon. The Sufi path he founded is devoted to Virgin Mary and took the name of “the Maryamiyya”, which explains the great influence he gained on some Western Christian circles. It might be worthwhile to note that Schuon has been first affiliated to the ‘Alâwiyya order, which has a “Christic” character, according to the Sufi doctrine of the “inheritance” of the prophets by Muslim saints⁵. Schuon, who left Europe for the USA in 1981 and died there in 1998, left behind him some celebrated successors in the field of Sufism and academic islamology alike, such as Martin Lings (d. 2005) in England and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who has been teaching at George Washington University. Other representatives of Traditionalist Sufism, although less well known in America, were or are still active in Europe, adopting various positions towards exoteric Islam and sometimes having contacts with Western esoteric organizations, like Freemasonry in its spiritual tendencies⁶.

For some scholars like Mark Sedgwick, the Traditionalist movement is an integral part of what they call “Neo-Sufism”, which might differ significantly from the standard models found in the Islamic world. It’s true to say that, like Traditionalist Sufism, Neo-Sufism promotes religious and cultural pluralism and therefore the relativization of claims to religious truth. However Traditionalist Sufism takes its roots in the Qur’ân and classical Sufism while Neo-Sufism should be considered as a modern syncretism⁷.

The raise of Sufi orders in the West

Since the 1970’s, the presence of Sufism has increased rapidly in Europe. This phenomenon was not believed to be an accident by the “oriental” Sufi masters. They saw in

⁵ Chodkiewicz, M., (1986), Le Sceau des Saints, Paris : Gallimard, chapter V.

⁶ On Schuon, see Connaissance des Religions, Numéro Hors Série Frithjof Schuon, 1999 ; Laude, P. and Aymard, J.B. (eds), (2002), Le Dossier H Frithjof Schuon, Lausanne : L’âge d’Homme.

⁷ For a critical vision of Guénon and Schuon, see Sedgwick, M., (2005) ‘The Traditionalist Shâdhiliyya in the West: Guénonians and Schuonians’, Une voie soufie dans le monde : la Shâdhiliyya, under the direction of E. Geoffroy, Paris: Maisonneuve& Larose, pp. 453-472 (new edition by Gnosis – Editions de France, Paris, 2011); and Sedgwick, M., (2004) *Against the Modern World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the West a providential land, observing that the socio-political pressure which weighs on Muslim countries may impede personal development. At the same time, and rather paradoxically, the West is truly fallow land from the spiritual point of view, where people have lost their bearings, but precisely for this reason it's also a space of freedom with broad horizons where Sufis, amongst others, can sew new spiritual seeds. For instance, by virtue of this freedom studies of the works of the great Sufi Ibn 'Arabî (d. 1240) are flourishing in the West whereas they are denigrated and stigmatised in some Islamic countries because of the threat of fundamentalism and even forbidden in Saudi Arabia. This explains why a few "oriental" Sufi masters settled in the West, while some Westerners who trained in the East became representatives of oriental masters or even became Sufi masters themselves.

Regardless of their origins, Sufi groups in Europe are deeply embedded in the cultures of many Muslim communities – so deeply, in fact, that it is often difficult to distinguish them from particular cultures and ethnic groups. The Tijânî and Murîdî orders, for instance, are thoroughly woven into France's West and North African communities. A slight majority of the U.K.'s predominantly South Asian Muslim community are Barelwis, followers of a broad Sufi-oriented movement that encompasses a variety of orders, including the Chistis, Qadiris and Naqshbandis.

Some large Sufi orders cross multiple ethnic groups. The Naqshbandis, for example, are strongly represented across many Muslim communities in Europe. Today, it is one of the most prominent orders in the U.K. Through annual visits to Britain he was used to do from his home base in Cyprus, the Naqshbandis Haqqânî' leading *shaykh*, Nazim al-Qubrûsî, has developed a diverse following of Turks, South Asians and white or Afro-Caribbean converts in London and Sheffield, as well as a group of South Asian followers in Birmingham. In this case as in others, we can speak of "transnational" or "translocal" orders⁸.

Nowadays the West is the place where Sufi orders from different geographical origins can meet, as is the case for religions as a whole. Oriental religions like Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam have fruitful exchanges in the West, since here they can leave aside their different sociocultural environments which often generate conflicts.

The role of the academic studies in the XXth Century

⁸ Malik, J. and Hinnels, J., (2006), Sufism in the West, London-New York: Routledge, pp. 40, 104.

Another main factor which has contributed to a greater knowledge of Sufism in Europe and thus the spreading of its practice is the plethora of academic studies in this field. Though some Muslims criticize the European orientalists – often without discernment – there is evidence that firstly these orientalists knew the Islamic tradition better than these Muslims, and secondly that they were most likely not ill-intentioned. Famous scholars are to be found in the studies of Sufism, and those who had charismatic personalities involved themselves in spiritual quests, in Christianity or in Islam, or rather at the meeting-point between these two religions. This was the case for Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003) in Germany and, in France, for Louis Massignon (d. 1962), Henry Corbin (d. 1978), Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch (d. 1999), etc. Let's take the French example of Michel Chodkiewicz (born 1929), and succeeded in being at the same time the general manager of a famous publishing house, a recognized specialist of Ibn 'Arabî and Sufism, as well as being a Sufi guide himself. We could not miss William Chittick, an American scholar devoted to the studies of Ibn 'Arabî and Rûmî (d. 1273). You will not find such personal implication from scholars in the other fields of Islamic study. Many people in Europe, whether of European or Arabic origin, are still closely guided by the studies and the translations of these prominent academics and their current successors: we now have access to most major works of the universal Sufi legacy, in both French and English.

Which kind of Sufism?

From a doctrinal point of view Sufism may be seen as the inner dimension of Islam, as the incarnation of Spirit in the body of the Islamic religion. It means that Sufism should be inseparable from Islam. For this reason, Guénon underlined the necessity, for a spiritual seeker, to follow one of the world religions and to aim at congruence between esoteric and exoteric practices. One can't take a narrow, uphill path like Sufism without the protection of the wide path of a particular religion, assert Sufi masters. But, on the other hand, Sufism is not confined to the Islamic religion. So you can hear in some Islamic countries like Egypt that the mystic dimension of Christianity is called "Christian Sufism" and such is the case for Jewish mysticism.

Thus each Sufi milieu in Europe positions itself specifically in relation to Islamic orthodoxy. Most of the Sufis there remain attached to general Islamic prescriptions, and keep in contact with one Muslim country or another. Some of them have been taught in Islamic teaching institutions abroad and are well versed in Islamic sciences. But this raises the

question of the adaptation of those groups to western culture, since when you have an Arabic, a Turkish or an African shaykh (master), you are inclined to adopt his way of life or thinking. Of course, spirituality is universal and crosses all borders, yet it is conditioned by each cultural context. Most “oriental” Sufi masters are well aware of these cultural barriers and therefore they let their Western representatives adapt their teachings to their own environment, but some of these representatives refuse to take on such freedom, contenting themselves with imitating what they have seen and experienced in the East.

In contrast, a few groups broke away from the Islamic form, believing it necessary to stress the universalism of Sufi wisdom. Opening the door to syncretism, these so called “Neo-Sufi” groups aspire to a kind of globalization of the Spirit. Seeing in Sufism the “pure essence of all religions and philosophies”, they don’t speak of God but of personal development, and then present Sufism without an Islamic face. Based in England, the Indian born Idries Shah (d. 1996) taught a philosophy inspired by his personal view of Sufism, and you may know the “Universal Order” of Pir Vilayat Khan (d. 2004), established in the USA as well as in France: if you attend one of their seminars you will not hear a word about Islam or the Prophet Muhammad⁹. This Islam-free Sufism has had more success, no doubt, in the USA than in Europe. Amongst the reasons that explain this phenomenon, we can put forward the old historical links between the Muslim world and Europe and, concerning France, the role of Guénon in promoting a rather strict observance of a religion – whatever it might be. French Guenonism, for instance, gave birth to a highly Islamic tarîqa, or Sufi order, directed in Paris by the Romanian Michel Vâlsan (d. 1974), whose disciples have had a strong impact on the orientation of French Islamology. Generally speaking, European Sufism doesn’t intend to depart from the heritage of baraka, the spiritual influence which comes from God and the Prophet through the initiatory lineages of the Sufi orders and which is still to be found in the Muslim world. The rituals that European Sufis need daily are also preserved in these areas. Thus, to sum up, between these two extremes which are strict adherence to Islamic prescriptions on the one hand and Islam-less Sufism, on the other, one can find a highly nuanced range of approaches¹⁰.

The roles that Sufism assumes or may assume in Europe

¹⁰ See Geoffroy, E., (2010), chapter « Sufism in the West », Introduction to Sufism (translation from the French by R. Gaetani), Bloomington, USA: World Wisdom, pp. 200-202.

Although some Salafî Sufi groups exist, which are narrow-minded, quite fundamentalist and anti-Western, European Sufism is undoubtedly a great way of opening up to universality, firstly for the young Muslims of North African origin who are numerous in some European countries. For instance, the Sufi doctrine of the “Universal Man” (al-insân al-kâmil), expressed in terms adapted to our time should allow some of them to attain the inner freedom which spirituality provides. The Algerian Emir Abd El-Kader (d. 1883) should be a model for them, as he embodies the Islamic value of spiritual humanism, as shown by the fact that he was holding out the hand of friendship to the French Christian authorities while the French army was destroying his country in the 1830’s and 1840’s. The Emir carried out a “small” military jihâd (al-jihâd al-asghar in Arabic) against the invading French troops, but his true vocation was the “great” spiritual jihâd (–al-jihâd al-akbar), that’s to say the struggle against the passions of the soul, which may lead to the enlightenment of the soul by following the Sufi path. The Emir, who was very popular in France during the five years of his detention before he left for the Near-East, is an example which merits contemplation in contemporary Europe¹¹.

More and more young Muslims in Europe reject the vision of Islam they inherited from their parents, an Islam which is often confined to a catalog of prescriptions and prohibitions, and which appears as a kind of formalistic and insipid catechism, whereas the notion of spiritual taste” (dhawq in Arabic) is central to the Sufi experience. Furthermore, this one dimensional Islam is mixed with Arabic, Berber, African or Turkish customs, and the seminal and perennial values of Islam are absent from it. Like other social strata in Europe, these young Muslims are seeking true spirituality which makes them free from a blind religious and ritualistic observance as well as from Western materialism and consumerism. In the process of a “theology of liberation” which is occurring in some European Muslim milieus, Sufism may play a decisive part¹². I have personally met a lot of Maghreban students in France who grew up in traditional Sufi families in their country but had subsequently given up the practice of Islam because it was a routine one and in the end they considered Sufism as

¹¹ See Bouyerdene, A., (2008), Abd el-Kader – L’harmonie des contraires, chapter « Une éthique à l’épreuve des faits », Paris: Le Seuil, pp. 105-134 (this book has just been published in English in 2012 with this title: Emir Abd El-Kader: Hero and Saint of Islam; Bloomington (USA): World Wisdom); cheikh Bentounes, K., (2010), ‘Abd el-Kader, un modèle pour aujourd’hui’, Abd el-Kader – Un spirituel dans la modernité, under the direction of E. Geoffroy, Paris: Albouraq, pp. 15-20.

¹² See Geoffroy, E., (2009), L’islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus, Paris : Le Seuil, pp.119-136.

mere superstition: we can observe that they rediscovered Islam and Sufism in Europe, in a renewed context¹³. Now European Sufism has itself begun to inseminate Arabic lands. In these countries Islam is often alienated by a legalist mentality as well as by ideologies like Arabic nationalism or Islamism. The every day real-life experience of Islam there suffers from socio-political obstacles.

In the present context of globalization, religion and spirituality need to get a holistic view of the world, that takes into account the interdependence between man and cosmos, and this is especially possible in the West nowadays. Institutionalized religions in the world face big challenges. What is their attitude, for instance, towards modern science, economy, politics, ecology, bio-ethics and so on? We know the sentence attributed to the French author André Malraux (d. 1976): “The 21st Century will either be spiritual or will not be¹⁴”. Most of the Third World countries have neither the economic nor the psychological means to provide answers by themselves. They need the mirror of the West. We do realize that Euro-Mediterranean relations, which have increased considerably these last few years can’t get away from taking the spiritual dimension into account. This is why politicians and company directors from both shores of the Mediterranean Sea, as well as international institutions like Unesco, are actually more and more interested in direct intervention of Sufism in the social field. In the last few decades, the West has become a big “market” of spirituality which has aroused new forms of expression, and Sufism finds stimulation in these exchanges¹⁵. Many Westerners are indeed attracted to this discipline, the most sensitive in Europe generally being women from Christian or Jewish backgrounds.

Sufi universalism: the sense of alterity

Drawing from the imaginal world (‘âlam al-khayâl), or the world of spiritual imagination, Sufism knows how to apply its creativity to remove religious and cultural blocks. Being grounded in the vertical axis of Unicity (tawhîd), the Sufi should be able to contemplate multiplicity around him serenely, I mean the horizontal pluralism of cultures and religions. And it is quite obvious that Sufism serves nowadays as a link, as a necessary interface between Islam and the West, a role that it played in the past in some areas : for

¹³ Roy, O., (2002), L’Islam mondialisé, Paris : Le Seuil, p. 197.

¹⁴ See Geoffroy, E., (2009), L’islam sera spiritual ou ne sera plus, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁵ For these topics, see van Bruinessen, M., and Day Howell, (2007), J., Sufism and the Modern in Islam, London - New York: Tauris; E. Geoffroy, L’islam sera spiritual ou ne sera plus, op. cit., p. 164.

instance in India, between Hindus and Muslims, in Central Asia between Buddhists and Muslims, in Africa between animists and Muslims, etc. Being the living heart of Islam, Sufism has always managed to adapt to new contexts and absorb ancient spiritual substrata of surprising diversity, ranging from Neo-Platonism to Shamanism.

These days, interreligious dialog is all but a fashion: it is an obvious necessity, which concerns all believers. Those who aspire to an Islamo-Christian dialog, for instance, assert that we are not facing a “shock of civilizations” between the Muslim world and the West, but a “shock of ignorances”. Sufis have always been involved in interreligious dialog, by virtue of the Quranic concept of Dîn qayyim, that is to say the Immutable Religion, the Adamic Religion considered as the trunk from which all historical religions branch off¹⁶. Islam claims the authenticity of the Old and the New Testaments, though most Muslim scholars consider them altered and distorted historically by the Jews and the Christians. Note that for some ulémas (scholars of Islam) living in the Eastern territories of the Muslim world, the Veda, the ancient holy book of Hinduism, is recognized as a part of Revelation. Despite this founding universalism of Islam, most ordinary Muslims see in creeds other than Islam mere miscreance (kufr).

It is not the case for Sufis. In the Middle Ages, at a time when every civilization was focused on itself, Sufis like Ibn ‘Arabî were professing that no single religion holds the whole truth, and that each one is a specific theophany, a specific manifestation of God. True religion, in their eyes, is not to be contained in any historical belief because of its narrowness and its deficiencies. It is the universal religion of Love, as Ibn ‘Arabî said¹⁷. Love not as sentimentalism but as an intuitive way of knowing God. Medieval Sufis called that “transcendental unity of religions” (wahdat al-adyân), and Frithjof Schuon expressed it in a modern way in his famous De l’unité transcendante des religions¹⁸. So no surprise that nowadays Sufis like Ibn ‘Arabî and Jalal al-Dîn Rûmî get an increasingly favourable reception in the West¹⁹. Many non Muslims are inspired by the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabî, whose works are now translated more and more in Western languages, and Rûmî is nowadays the most widely read poet in the USA.

¹⁶ See Qur’an, for instance 30 : 30.

¹⁷ See Chittick, W., (1994), Imaginal Worlds – Ibn al-‘Arabî and the Problem of Religious Diversity, Albany: State University of New York Press.

¹⁸ First published in France in 1948. Translated into English.

¹⁹ As for Rûmî, see Chittick, W., (2005), The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi, Bloomington: World Wisdom.

The therapeutic function of Sufism

Another main role of Sufism is a therapeutic one. From the beginning, the Sufi master is called “the doctor of the soul”, of the lower soul which is the seat of all passions and illusions. In the past, some masters practised a kind of psychoanalysis on their disciples, to free their mind from its impurities and fill it with positive thoughts and sacred knowledge²⁰. In Europe and in the West generally speaking, the human mind is caught up in the whirl of “post-modernity”, “post-Christianity” and so on, so it has largely lost its moral guidelines and the psychological protection that the old frameworks of reference provided. People in the West must learn how to handle their personal freedom as it sometimes makes them lose their heads!

Furthermore, many individuals sensitive to the spiritual dimension are vulnerable and ill adapted to modernity, precisely because of this sensitivity. Some of those who converted to Islam or Sufism, for example, are former drug addicts. Young Muslims of immigrant origin are confronted with specific psychological handicaps such as: an often crude and rigid parental education in Islam, a cultural integration which is not accompanied by real acceptance by European societies and which generates a feeling of resentment against the West as a whole, etc. So, before committing to an initiatory path, which may be perilous, they have to recover psychological health and mental stability. That is why such the ‘Alâwiyya Sufi order set up a special research group called “Therapies of the soul”, which organizes seminars on Sufi therapy for various health professionals²¹.

For some years, more and more political and social leaders, in the Muslim world as in Europe, have been aware that the peaceful and open Islam which the Sufis are promoting is no doubt the best antidote to the sclerotic and rigid ideas that Islamism conveys. On the other hand, some are tempted to totally separate Sufism from Islam, and this tendency certainly represents a big danger, since, as we asserted before, spirituality without religious grounding may become sterile and artificial. Sufism should not be split off from Islam, but should help it reform itself and recover its initial universalism. In the West generally speaking, the success of Sufism makes it an easy target for mercantilism : here and there, leaflets promise to put you in a trance or in a state of being possessed, and thus the psychical and spiritual levels become totally confused. So the ‘Sufi business’ is in good health, and the West may change Sufism in the next few years or decades into an object of consumption as it did for other oriental

²⁰ See Geoffroy, E., Introduction to Sufism, op. cit., p. 149.

²¹ See the site www.therapiedelame.org/.

techniques like Yoga or Zen. In French we call this “ésotourisme”. It may also become absorbed into the New Age spiritual tendency. Between extreme openness which dilutes the outlines of religious belonging and sectarianism which claims exclusive salvation, Western Sufism is experiencing great difficulty in finding a balance. Even then one must distinguish between American Sufism and European Sufism, the latter reputed to be more sober and undoubtedly more islamized.

Conclusion

As it did in the Muslim world, contemporary European Sufism is able to contribute to the spiritualization of everyday Islam, which is followed now by more than fifteen million people (the estimated number for just the European Union, not whole Europe). Besides it may provide initiatory nourishment to a few. It may also favour the emergence of an essential Islam, freed from allegiances to the native countries (in particular the North African states) and of the search for ethnic identity. Even Islamic identity may become a factor of confinement: one must now seek universal identity. Primitive Islam witnessed such a rapid spread in the known world of that time that we can describe it as early religious and cultural globalization. But contemporary Muslims often forget that it was precisely due to the strong interest and curiosity that the first Muslims showed for all the world cultures and religions. Most of all, Sufism may offer to the Western public another view of Islam, and help European societies to consider the spiritual dimension with more interest.

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