



CO.RE.IS. (*Comunità Religiosa Islamica*) ITALIANA

The meeting between genius and holiness

The connection between René Guénon and Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawi is definitely not an arbitrary one, these two people lived contemporaneously and had the possibility, if not to meet personally, to communicate between Mostaghanem and Cairo. Although little or nothing is known of their epistolary relationship a lot is known of the impact they both had, not only on their countrymen or those who had the chance to meet them personally during their life, but also, on those who have had the opportunity to benefit from their teachings in a more or less direct way.

Shaykh al ‘Alawi is the founder of a *tariqah*, an Islamic fraternal order, that bears his name, the ‘Alawiyyah (not to be confused with the Alawite Syrian sect) that is a derivation of the *Darqawiyyah tariqah* to which the Shaykh had belonged to and which is itself a derivation of the *Shadhiliyyah tariqah* to which René Guénon was connected to after his adherence to Islam with the name of ‘Abd al Wahid Yahya.

René Guénon dedicated “The Symbolism of the Cross,” one of his most important works, to the memory of his own teacher, Shaykh ‘Abd al Rahman Elysh al Kabir, adding that the initial idea of the book came from him. A passage from the introduction of this book will be cited in order to clarify the subject that will be looked at.



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We have said that the cross is one of the symbols that, in different forms, can be found almost everywhere since the most remote times; therefore, it is far from belonging exclusively to Christianity, as some may believe. Christianity itself seems to have, at least in its more well known exterior aspect, lost sight of the symbolic meaning of the cross, considering it to merely be a tangible symbol of a historic event: these two points of view are not mutually exclusive, in fact, the second is, in a way, a consequence of the first; but this is so foreign to the mentality of the greater part of our contemporaries that, in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is better to linger on the subject for a while. Too often one is led to think that the admission of a symbolic sense implies the exclusion of the literal or historic sense: such an opinion is nothing but the result of the ignorance of the law of correspondence that is actually the foundation of every symbolism, and in virtue of which anything, that as such proceeds from a metaphysical principle on which its reality solely depends on, translates or expresses, in its own way and according to its order of existence, this principle so that from one order to the other, all things are linked and correspond to one another to participate in a total and universal harmony which, in the multiplicity of manifestation, is like a reflection of the principal unity.¹

Here we have, in the unmistakable style of this “Unifier”- quality suggested by his Arab name “Abd al Wahid,” “servant of the One”- the clear affirmation of the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid*², the doctrine of Unity. It brings us to the conception of a Principle from which all derives and to which we can only refer to in the hope of

1 René Guénon Le Symbolisme de la Croix, (Paris,1932).

2 From the religious point of tawhid, a word that derives from al-Wahid, the One, one of the 99 divine names, that indicates Oneness, corresponds to the recognition of the testimony of the divine Unity; this expressed by the first part of the shahadah, that states: “there is no god but God”. Metaphysically, tawhid can be used as “Knowledge of the Oneness” or, as often it is used in the language of Sufism, “the realisation of the Oneness”, of that Unity that constitutes the interior and essential heritage of any tradition, non conditioned by the multiplicity of its exterior manifestations.



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finding within ourselves and relating to others the sense of that “universal harmony” which we, westerners and easterners of these times, seem to have distanced ourselves from.

On the other hand Shaykh Ahmad al ‘Alawi, himself connected to the *Isawiyyah tariqah*, or “Jesuitic”, is considered a saint of the ‘*Isawa* or “Christ” type, representing within the *Shadhili-Darqawi* derivation, the expression of the movement of revival of Islam that began in the XIX century with two other great Ahmads whose origins lie in the Maghrib: the Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Idris (*radiyAllâhu ‘anhimâ*, may God be pleased with them both). He was described by doctor Marcel Carret, who had visited and cured him during his last years of life, in the following manner:

The first thing that struck me was his likeness to the usual representations of Christ. His clothes, so nearly if not exactly the same as those which Jesus must have worn, the fine lawn head-cloth which framed his face, his whole attitude- everything conspired to reinforce the likeness. It occurred to me that such must have been the appearance of Christ when he received his disciples at the time when he was staying with Martha and Mary.³

Clearly such relations, if we have correctly understood the words of René Guénon, certainly do not seek to encourage a kinship that forgets the principles of every religious faith, nor a useless doctrinal syncretism, but are rather an invitation to see the unity in the multiplicity and to recognise the validity of each revealed expression as a manifested aspect of that Truth which is, as Allah, one and the same for all.

3 Martin Lings, *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century Shaikh Ahmad al-‘Alawi* (London: George Allen &Unwin Ltd).



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Therefore, the so-called conversion of René Guénon from Christianity to Islam should certainly not be misunderstood to be a rejection of his religion of origin, but as an acceptance of Islam, an insertion in what he called the primordial Tradition, *dînu al-qayyîma* in Arabic, in its final expression that, as such, incorporates all previous Revelations without opposing them.

It is not a matter of searching for a compromise or a common denominator between the various doctrinal positions of our religions, but rather to reconstruct the integrity of believers, an integrity like that which was present at the prophetic moment of the historic origin of each religion and that has slowly deteriorated throughout the process of decadence of recent times. Today, the various ethnic groups that constitute the normal support of every Revelation have developed the worst aspects of their temperaments to the detriment of the spiritual dimension: thus in the West intellectuality has become intellectualism, logic has become rationalism or, worse still, psychologism, while in the East intuition creates impulsiveness and fatalism produces fanaticism.

It is, therefore, a matter of favouring an osmosis, in which believers from the West and East learn how to recreate the beneficial waves of their complementary qualifications from the common sea their shores face. In this way the westerner will return to being the intelligent man he was, in the sense of being able to again participate in that which makes us similar to God in the reflection of His Intellect, and the easterner will find again in the innate sense of divine imminence that belongs to him, the strength to not be dragged into events that revealed themselves to be too



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similar to those that have already occurred in the West, so that the East can return to bring in the light. This is the teaching of Shaykh Ahmad Ibn Idris.

Shaykh al ‘Alawi used to answer his French doctor- who believed that all beliefs are equal:

They are all equal if you only consider the question of being set at rest. But there are different degrees. Some people are set at rest by very little; others find their satisfaction in religion; some require more; it is not only peace of mind that they must have, but the Great peace, which brings with it the plenitude of the Spirit. *What about religion?*- persisted the doctor. For these last - answered the Shaykh- religion is only a starting point, above the religion there is the doctrine, the means of attaining to God Himself, but why should I tell you, since you are not disposed to make use of them? If you came to me as my disciple I could give you an answer. But what would be the good of satisfying an idle curiosity? Do you know what is lacking in you? To be one of us and to see the Truth, you lack the desire to raise your Spirit above yourself. And that is irremediable.⁴

It was René Guénon who attempted to resolve the problem of what was lacking in modern westerners, speaking in the only way that suited their ability to understand⁵, in the hope of thus being able to reawaken in some of them the conception of a transcendent reality, the yearning for spiritual realisation, towards a gnosis, a Knowledge that is possible only through the reinsertion of a determined Tradition and the rediscovery of the spiritual values and the fundamental human virtues. Using his very own words, taken from the introduction to “The Crisis of the Modern World” his function is here expressed:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Let the example I set for the future generations be a good one” Quran XXVI:84.



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'All we can undertake at the moment is to contribute, to a certain extent and as far as the means at our disposal allow, toward making those capable of it aware of some of the consequences that seem already fully established. By so doing we shall be preparing the ground, albeit in a partial and rather indirect manner, for those who must play their part in the future 'judgment', following which a new era will open in the history of mankind.⁶

In fact, René Guénon recognised in our times the signs of that cyclical end predicted by all the sacred texts and hoped for the establishment, in the West, of a *tariqah*, of a brotherhood with an autonomous quality, the same quality that allowed the Christian initiatic organisations to exist during the period of the Inquisition- the same period which Islam is passing through today in the unavailability of its decadence, a destiny that is common to all religions- so that some seeds remain at the end of times, that which will be, according to the words of Shaykh 'Abd al Wahid Yahya, nothing but the end of a world.

After having freed the ground from all the weeds of occultisms and spiritualisms that were still spreading at the start of the century, René Guénon began to battle the prejudices and false idols established by modernist, evolutionist and progressist theories that until today impede the majority from finding that faith and that acceptance of the spiritual reality that have been in the sacred texts from the beginning of man.

His work was aimed at helping many find the path towards the Tradition of origin and some, as was the case with him, the adherence to the Tradition that concluded the

6 René Guénon [The Crisis of the Modern World](#) (London: Luzac&Company).



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cycle of Revelations, Islam, that in these times can continue to offer the possibility of an initiatic reconnection. Such conceptions and connections caused him to be accused of being a syncretist, apostate, esoterist (in the magic-occultist terms of the word), until, after attempts of denigration and a type of conspiracy, we now see the attempts to plagiarise his works by his detractors who, not having been able to beat him, decided to try and have him on their side. These forces, that René Guénon called “counter-tradition”, are stronger now that people no longer believe in neither God nor in the devil so that the last one is free to spread not only outside the structures of the various religious forms, but also within them where, amongst other things, they seek to falsify the conception of the metaphysical equality of religions in order to propose syncretistic mixes, not only of an ideological nature but also of rituals, helped along by false teachers.

The Shaykh al’Alawi was not immune to attacks and criticisms due to his universalism and for the particular ability that he had to verify sacredness of other religious forms without ever detaching himself from the Islamic orthodoxy despite having been criticised regarding this by the vacuity of the usual “doctors of law.”

So, one day, when he was reprimanded for the fact that his *tasbih*, the rosary, resembled a cross, the Shaykh stood up, lifted and spread out his arms at shoulder height and exclaimed: “And what do we resemble?”

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini

Chairman