

Rereadings and Transformations of Sufism in the West

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Sufism between oral tradition and writing

In his study of the conversion of Westerners to Islam, a Turkish sociologist revealed in 1996 that it happened that a significant proportion of the converts had adopted that religion under the influence of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism.¹ Now Sufism, located at the meeting-point of the written and oral traditions of Islam, offers an original commentary on the Quran and a spiritual practice based on psychosomatic exercises close to yoga. Interest in Sufism among Westerners was revealed at the end of the nineteenth century and became considerable from the 1930s onwards, resulting in the foundation in Europe of Sufi groups directed by converts who very quickly became shaykhs (*shaikh*). These first groups, to which new ones were added, are still active today, although somewhat bruised by numerous divisions. The reasons for conversion to Sufism among Europeans, for the most part from intellectual milieux, rest on concerns of a spiritual dimension linked to the climate of religious crisis which the modern West has experienced since the end of the nineteenth century. To which should be added in recent decades the fashionable exoticism fostered by the development of means of transport and communication which have brought East and West closer.

Before investigating the precise motives which have led Westerners to espouse Islam and Sufism and to studying their reading of it, we must clarify some points of a terminological nature and locate Sufism in relation to the written tradition of Islam. It is generally by means of initiation into an order (*tariqâ*, 'path' in Arabic) that access is gained to Sufism. The written tradition that Sufism refers to is in the first place the Quran, and additionally the doctrinal texts composed by the great figures of Sufism. As for the oral tradition in which the strength of Sufism lies, it draws on the knowledge transmitted from one to the other by generations of shaykhs who hold one of the keys to the reading of the Quran and the art of repeating the divine names (*dhikr*), as – according to tradition – taught by the Prophet or by his son-in-law, Ali, or his Companion, Abu Bakr, and, by the latter two, to the shaykhs of today across an uninterrupted chain of spiritual masters. The orders, of which there are a large number, are hierarchical structures at the head of which are one or more shaykhs with responsibility for communicating this inherited knowledge which varies according to the order.² The doctrine of Sufism habitually follows from the teaching of the eponymous or effective founder of the order and that of his masters, just as the contemplative practices do. Admittedly, the shaykhs composed works and gave their doctrine a written form, but the reading of these books was always inseparable from the oral teaching which the shaykh alone, or his disciples, could disseminate.

As for contemplative practices, they were reduced to exercises of repetition (*dhikr*), visualization and meditation of a yogic character and, in some orders, to solitary retreat in a meditation room or in ecstatic dance.³ I should explain that some orders are intransigent in relation to Islamic law; their oral tradition, in this case, rejoins the written tradition of Islam. Others, by contrast, give themselves a freedom in relation to the Scriptures which has provoked the wrath of the doctors of Islam; in this second case, their oral tradition operates against the written and acknowledged tradition of that religion.

For believers from the East, the question of an order's legitimacy is fundamental. This legitimacy is the assurance that oral transmission has been effected well, without any break. It thus rests on the chain (*silsila*) of the spiritual masters (shaykhs) who have led that order. The appearance of a *silsila* is generally sanctioned by the handing-over by the shaykh of an 'authorization' or certificate of investiture (*ijaza*) to his disciple or to his representative, the latter being authorized in his turn to transmit the oral teaching. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of a group of Sufis cannot be measured only by the fact that the shaykh who leads them can produce a genuine *ijaza*, but also by the fidelity with which he keeps the group of his disciples to the true path outlined by the master and which he himself received from the order.

Groups of European converts to Sufism are fairly diverse and their attachment, legitimate or otherwise,⁴ is to orders mainly originating in north Africa. As a general rule, the converts come from intellectual milieux and a great number of them have committed themselves to continuing of the work of the French thinker René Guénon (who died in 1951) who converted to Islam at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the converts are divided as to the interpretation which should be placed on the work of the latter and the way in which his conversion to Islam should be understood. An analysis of this thinker's views on Sufism therefore seems imperative if we are to grasp simultaneously the exact reasons why a large number of Western intellectuals have, following Guénon, converted to Islam and to Sufism and how they subsequently lived out these religious traditions in a Western society. This figure and the school of thought which has survived him are also at the heart of the process of reading traditional Sufism by means of the oral tradition of Christian esotericism to which I shall return below. Thus in what has been written by converts, regardless of whether they have been influenced by Guénon, we discover several common observations which are primary indicators for any understanding of the reasons for their conversion: the rejection of Christianity described as a religion divested of spirituality and from which the oral tradition has been lost or gone astray; revulsion from material civilization and modern technology; and the need for attachment to a spiritual institution that is still living, with an oral tradition.

CONVERSION TO SUFISM

Crisis of civilization and spiritual quest

For some converts, the choice of Islam and of Sufism as a solution to the spiritual crisis affecting the West has sometimes been the product of chance, but for the readers of Guénon it was the result of a minute enquiry into different mystical religions and initiatory societies of their own day. The proximity of the Muslim world and the presence, in Europe, of important communities of Arabs, Pakistanis or Turks has also facilitated contacts

between Westerners in search of spirituality and the Sufi shaykhs. Moreover, since the beginning of the twentieth century and up to the present day, many Eastern shaykhs have adopted a discourse which actively seeks future converts. Thus at the beginning of the twentieth century at Mostaganem (Algeria), Shaykh al-Alawi (1869–1934) denounced material civilization and launched an attack on the westernization of outlook and customs in Algeria.⁵ Today, the Turkish Cypriot, Nazim Qibrisi,⁶ maintains that the twentieth century is the century of faithlessness and atheism, all the while rebelling against the secularization and modernization of the East.⁷ Finally, it cannot be denied that since the end of the nineteenth century Sufism has never ceased to exercise a fascination in the West nor that, in recent decades, numerous publications have succeeded in initiating a non-specialist public in Islamic mysticism. Nevertheless, it is indisputably Guénon's work that has carried numerous intellectuals towards Islam by proposing an explanation of the 'crisis of the modern world' and several solutions to remedy it or, more precisely, to enable people in search of spirituality to find the true path.⁸ His was through Islam and had to serve as a model for a large number of 'Guenonians'. Before discovering Guénon and then Islam, a number of converts had followed, like Guénon himself, a road strewn with various spiritual experiences in esoteric movements, Freemasonry and other Eastern religions. As for 'non-Guenonian' converts, such as members of the groups of the Scot Abd al-Qadiri⁹ or of Nazim Qibrisi, they have also often been associated with the spiritualist movements linked, in the United Kingdom, with the New Age movement. The passing appeal to converts of occult trends or of the New Age demonstrates that the objective in view is, and is none other than, mysticism (more precisely, it is the search for techniques of meditation); the convert in fact 'goes' via Islam, sometimes without even stopping, to reach Sufism . . .

According to Muhammed Hamidullah, a Pakistani theologian who has lived in Paris, the main reason for the success of Islam in the West lies in the attraction exerted by Sufism. But he explains that he has never attempted in his work as a theologian to explain, as the converts do, the duties of Islam (prayer, fasting and so on) by Sufism but rather by Islamic law (*fiqh*), that is, with reference to the Quran and the Sunna (the tradition of Islam). It is not therefore, he explains, the Muslim theologians (Abû Hanîfa or Imam Maturidi, for instance) who attract the Westerners but the Sufis and in particular the Andalusian, Ibn Arabi.¹⁰ Now, Ibn Arabi was the favourite Sufi author of Guénon and his followers . . . It should finally be observed that reading Sufi authors has not always led, as a result, to the great majority of Western converts reading and meditating upon the Quran and the other traditional Islamic texts. This is a disturbing situation: it is as if the reading of a Christian mystic such as Meister Eckhart resulted in a non-Christian adopting Christianity without ever bringing him to a reading of the Gospels . . .

The influence of René Guénon and the mysteries of conversion

Guénon's plan, the implementation of which revolutionized the European spiritualist movement of the twentieth century, was to seek to attain the 'Primordial tradition', the historical and principal origin of all the religious traditions, by means of a religious form (described as exoteric) the mystical path (the esoteric) of which was to be adopted. Guénon

also maintained that this primordial tradition could be reconquered in the West by means of the initiation conferred by Freemasonry – unfortunately, he remarked, very much in decline – and by guilds. This initiation, Guénon was convinced, was always transmitted by the Sufi orders of the Muslim world. The French thinker thus discovered Sufism rather than Islam, and, more precisely, an ‘esotericism’ which corresponded exactly to what he was looking for and to which he made ceaseless reference in his articles. Guénon nonetheless stated in a letter dated 1938 that he had never adopted the Muslim religion, but that he had been ‘attached to the initiatory Islamic organizations for thirty-odd years, which is clearly very different’.¹¹ In this way he interpreted his bond with Islam before 1930. Subsequently, once he had settled in Cairo where he married an Egyptian woman and frequented Sufi circles, Guénon adopted an attitude that was apparently very respectful towards the ritual prescriptions of Islam, as those who visited him testified. This change in attitude may well have been the consequence of his settling in a social and family context infused with the law of the Prophet.

We know that Guénon advised some of his correspondents to rejoin Islam and to become Sufis in a group of converts established at Amiens.¹² However, Guénon’s attitude with respect to the ritual prescriptions of that religion was ambivalent. While, on the one hand, he encouraged a certain laxity in his correspondents *vis-à-vis* these prescriptions, and he went so far as to raise the ‘possibility of simultaneous attachments’ to other religions or initiatory societies,¹³ on the other hand, in 1950 he judged harshly the flexibility of ‘ritualistic observances’ implemented by a Sufi group established in Switzerland directed by one of his companions, Frithjof Schuon.¹⁴ However, in his article entitled ‘The necessity of traditional exotericism’,¹⁵ Guénon maintained that every journey along an esoteric path (this was his term for the mystic forms) imposed an attachment to its ‘exoteric’ structure (the religions) and that this exotericism should never be rejected but ‘transformed, to an extent corresponding to the degree attained by the initiate, as the latter becomes ever more capable of understanding the profound reasons . . .’. In another article devoted to conversion,¹⁶ the thinker expatiated on the motives which might lead someone to abandon one religion for another, considering:

those who, for reasons of an esoteric or initiatory nature, are led to adopt a traditional form other than that to which they have been affiliated by their origin, whether because the latter gives them no possibility of this kind, or whether only because the other, even in its exotericism, supplies a basis that is more appropriate to their nature and, as a result, more favourable for their spiritual labour.

The object of this atypical ‘conversion’ is, therefore, to use Guénon’s language, attachment to what is esoteric in the religion adopted. The term ‘conversion’ seems in fact little suited to the description of this involvement. Moreover, Guénon was aware of this, since he stipulated in the same article, ‘we can say that whoever is aware of the unity of the traditions, whether by means of purely theoretical understanding or the much more powerful reason of an effective realization, is necessarily, by this very fact, “inconvertible” to anything at all’. Guénon defended these same ideas in his letters between 1934 and 1947, in relation to his own case and to contradict the rumours which were circulating on the subject of his own ‘claimed’ conversion to Islam. He intended to establish in an exact manner on what bases his own attachment to that religion was founded; ‘I cannot

allow it to be said that I “converted to Islam”, for this way of presenting things is radically false; whoever is aware of the fundamental unity of the traditions is by that very fact rendered inconvertible to anything whatsoever; and it is the same whoever he is . . . But one can “settle”, if one may be permitted so to express it, in such and such a tradition according to circumstance, and above all for reasons of an initiatory nature’.¹⁷ Conversion to Islam is an acknowledged phenomenon but ‘settling’ – to use the term chosen by Guénon – refers to a new shift which could never receive the approbation either of the doctors of Islam or the great majority of Sufis. Guénon’s conversion was in fact a ‘non-conversion’, as Jean-Pierre Laurant put it.¹⁸ The only significant problem is that it served as a model for Guénon’s followers. Finally, we should note that Guénon invoked ‘reasons of an initiatory character’ for settling in another religion. This leads us to the current of Christian esotericism¹⁹ which had a legacy from Alexandrian hermetism and Renaissance neoplatonism through occult philosophy, Kabbalah and alchemy. At the beginning of the twentieth century this trend was represented in the West by organizations and societies that were secret to varying extents, such as Freemasonry, which was attained after an ‘initiation’. However, Guénon and his followers considered the Muslim orders as initiatory orders, the spiritual practices of which were still alive, by contrast with Western initiatory societies in full decline. Initiation was a fundamental concept for Guénonien converts. It referred to a ceremony which put into play the notions of the secret, of selection, of spiritual death and rebirth which the nineteenth-century esotericism drew from Alexandrian philosophy and Christianity and the transmission of which has always been made orally. The application of the term ‘initiatory’ to Sufism is not wrong but it is not entirely accurate. Except for the fact that initiation – exactly like Sufi *bay’a*, ‘allegiance’ – is an invitation to death and rebirth, which brings them closer and authorizes the identification at this level, the Sufi orders do not appear at the sociological level to be closed, and sometimes secret societies on the pattern of the initiatory Western orders of Antiquity (Mysteries) and those of recent centuries (Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Golden Dawn and so on). The Guénonien convert thus unconsciously reconstructs the Sufi order on the model of the Western initiatory society. There is the covert knowledge, transmitted orally, which he knew had disappeared in the Western initiatory societies. There is a conjunction between the oral tradition of Sufism and that of Christian esotericism.

Bitter polemic divided the Guénonians on the meaning which should be ascribed to René Guénon’s conversion.²⁰ Those who followed him into Islam and those who today still continue to espouse this religion comprise two groups; the first gathers together the Guénonians who have chosen to adhere to Sufism while only ‘passing’ by Islam, by in fact ‘settling’ in this religion; the second by contrast unites the people who were fully converted to Islam and have embraced Sufism. In this latter group, some converts have only preserved a distant attachment to the Guénonien system. They have tried to have direct access to the essential texts of Sufism, thanks to knowledge of the Arabic language, among other things, and they have links with shaykhs in the East. However, other converts still continue to invoke Guénon and his works, attributing canonical status to the latter and almost completely ignoring Islamic dogmatics and the classics of Sufism. Towards the end of his life, Guénon rediscovered a certain hope in the Western ‘initiatory traditions’, especially in hesychasm and Freemasonry, somewhat disillusioned by the difficulties encountered at the time of the establishment of Islam and Sufism in the West.²¹

SUFISM AND ITS TRANSFORMATIONS

For several reasons, the Sufi organizations established in the West have experienced deviations in relation to orthodox Islamic teaching and practice which led them to the fringes of, and sometimes even beyond, Islam. These reasons can be explained, on the one hand, by the pressure of the Western way of life which the convert carries within him and which incites him to demand, scorning the laws of Islam, a relaxation of the Muslim social codes least acceptable to a modern European mind. The convert seeks, in this case, to harmonize a way of being in society with commitment to the order but has no idea that this transforms the original structure of the group. Islam and Sufism are, therefore, compelled to compromise with Western modernity. On the other hand, in other groups, under the influence of Guénonien-inspired spiritualism the 'exoteric' dimension of Islam has been devalued, indeed rejected, in the name of a superior vision with supra-confessional emphases. For the latter, the choice between Islam and Sufism does not imply the rejection of other religious traditions but their overwhelming, Islam included, by a superior spirit of reconciliation. This is why the attachment of these latter groups to Islam is only formal, even if in some cases a religious (exoteric) gloss has been maintained.

East versus West

One of the transformations which Sufism has experienced under the influence of Western modernity is perfectly illustrated among the converts of the *tariqâ* of Nazim Qibrisi in London who meet well away from the Turkish and Asian members of the same order, whom they judge common and ignorant. Moreover, the British converts do not practise the repetitive Sufi prayer (*dhikr*) in a mosque but in the environs of an organization, the East–West Centre, which welcomes other spiritualist associations and schools of yoga, meditation, shiatsu and so on.²² With the tacit agreement of Shaykh Nazim Qibrisi, the converts have obtained a relaxation of the ritual prescriptions of Islam and above all the possibility of men and women gathering together at the time of *dhikr*. Yielding to Western pressure, to the detriment of respect for the law of Islam, Qibrisi has responded favourably to the fact that women could thus play a more active role in the activities of the *tariqâ*. The intermarriage between Sufism and modernity has been consummated. What is more, the changes also concern the course of Sufi ceremonies, since the preliminary prayers which are habitually read before the *dhikr* have been reduced ('they bore the converts'). Even the Naqshbandiya *dhikr*, which is generally a silent *dhikr*, is practised orally there ('it is easier and nicer for the converts'). The converts submit, moreover, that the 'silent *dhikr* cannot be practised, in current conditions, that is in a Western social milieu, but only in a purely Sufi atmosphere'. A tendency of Guénonien aspect, in appearance only, is not totally absent from the converts in this group, even if this is not the norm (Guénon is almost unknown in the United Kingdom), since one of the converts has maintained that Islam and Christianity are similar and Sufism alone distinguishes them. Moreover, the current representative of Kibrisi's *tariqâ* in France, Philippe de Vos, a disciple of the Guénonien Muslim Michel Valsan, interprets the Naqshbandiya of Qibrisi through Guenonianism.²³ The group of British converts in this *tariqâ* is unambiguously denounced by other Muslims and Sufis in London, and the principal 'quality' attributed

to Qibrisi by his Western pupils, tolerance, is interpreted as softness and laxity by the London imams. The most surprising thing is that Qibrisi insists on the fact that the doctors of Islam (*oulama*) alone are competent in matters relating to the *zahir* (the exoteric dimension of Islam). It is the response made to the attacks which come in particular from the Turk, Mahmud Hodja, an *oulama*, certainly fundamentalist, but also one of the principal Sufi (Naqshbandiya) shaykhs in Turkey. The deviations of Qibrisi's order in relation to Islamic law are known to the Turkish Sufi shaykhs of Istanbul and other Sufi communities in London (such as the Menzilköyü) who guard against contact with the shaykh and his flock.

Forms of Sufism in the Guenonian tradition and their hybridization with Christian esotericism

The deviations of Guenonian Sufi groups are not imposed by social pressure and Western modernity but are the consequence of the devaluation, stronger or less strong, by the Guenonians of the Islamic 'exoteric dimension', which is neglected for Sufism adopted as a sole doctrine: choice thus focuses on the oral tradition of Islam. However, big differences can be observed between the Guenonian founders of *tariqâ*: for example, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), a supreme paradox, virtually separated himself from Islam while remaining a Sufi; by contrast, Michel Valsan (1907–1974) consolidated his bond with Islam and sought the most perfect orthodoxy while remaining faithful to Guénon's thought.

In 1950, when he was living in Cairo, René Guénon, who lay at the origin of Schuon's interest in Sufism and who had sent him numerous candidates, no longer recognized as legitimate any group founded by the latter. He wrote then, concerning the group, that 'ritualistic observances' had been reduced to the bare minimum and that the majority of members no longer even fasted during Ramadan. Guénon subsequently made a prophetic remark and declared that 'soon this group will not be a *tariqâ* but a "vague 'universalist' organization" . . .'.²⁴ Several people close to Guénon had already denounced the deviations of Schuon's *tariqâ* which, several years before, recruited in the Amiens *zawiyya* candidates for Sufism who had no knowledge whatsoever of the Arabic language and the foundations of Islam.²⁵ The 'syncretic' and supra-confessional tendency of Sufism under Schuon was clearly marked by the doctrine, much debated in Islam, of Ibn Arabi, but it also drew inspiration from Christian esotericism. This trend accelerated during the decades that followed until Schuon's death in 1998. In 1965 Schuon had had a vision of the Virgin and he gave his *tariqâ* the name of Mayramiyya (in Arabic, Mary becomes Maryam). The group, centred at Bloomington in the USA since 1980, welcomed non-Muslims and no longer observed the Islamic law. Schuon considered the Christian sacraments as 'initiatory' and he even authorized Christians becoming pupils of a Sufi master whilst remaining Christians. Finally, Schuon was enthusiastic about the religion of the American Indians and had himself 'initiated' into their religious system.²⁶ Schuon's journey is surprising and illustrates perfectly the hybridization between Sufism, the esoteric Christian tradition and esotericism in general. Thus Sufism is reduced in its system to a mere varnish whose cracks reveal the ultra-Guenonianism of its founder. This tendency was already present in latent form in his most famous work, *De l'unité transcendante des religions* ('Of the Transcendent Unity of Religions'),²⁷ where Schuon rebelled against the

'invading autocracy' of all exotericisms.²⁸ Once they had returned to Islam his disciples 'broke out again', in some way, immediately afterwards, although convinced that they still dwelt in the heart of that religion . . . The group transformed itself into a veritable Guenonianist religion.

Idealized Sufism

Numerous converts display an enthusiasm for and an attraction towards Sufism which is also found in Westerners converted to other oriental religions (Buddhism, Taoism and so on). Sufism is imagined, idealized, just as an order is, and both are perceived without reference to the Islamic society which gave birth to them. Under the Guénonien influence, Sufism becomes the True Islam and *tariqâ* is spoken of with a capital 'T', as if there was only one, or then with reference to an ahistorical *tariqâ* which transcended all the rest. An identical magnetism emanates from the term '*silsila*' (the chain of Sufi legitimacy) in such phrases as, 'The master belongs to the *silsila*' and so on. Misunderstanding of and contempt for history, together with ignorance of the functioning of Islamic society and oriental languages, join together and make Sufism and the order an inconsistent unit with no counterpart in an Islamic country.

The idea of the transcendent unity of religions which the Guenonian converts believe they discover, or wish to discover, in Sufism, especially in the system of the twelfth-century Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi, is foreign to Islamic mysticism, which has always laid greatest stress on the revelation of the Prophet of Islam. On the other hand, there is a supra-confessional mysticism in Islam which has similarities in many respects with the doctrine of the transcendent unity of all religions and which lay at the origin of links between Christianity and Islam. But this propensity is clearly defined as heretical by the doctors of Islam. The attraction towards the thought of Ibn Arabi of certain heterodox Sufi orders and several mystico-political movements on the margins of Islam suggests that the writings of the Andalusian Sufi authorize several interpretations that are not in conformity with the spirit of the Islamic tradition, and that they promote deviations. It is for this reason that, while they have not condemned it, numerous doctors of Islam and Sufis have issued the most serious reservations in regard to the doctrine of Ibn Arabi. Others have called for great prudence in the reading and commentating upon his thought. Ahmad Sirhindi, for instance, the standard sixteenth-century authority for the Naqshbandiya order, did not dispute the richness of Ibn Arabi's contribution on a spiritual level but denounced the intolerable liberties taken by the mystic with regard to the doctrine of Islam, liberties the consequence of which threatened orthodox practice.²⁹ What then are we to think of the reading of Ibn Arabi by Western converts, ignorant of the Arabic language and the Islamic way of life, and, moreover, untrained in the scholarly disciplines of the *madrasa* (theology and Islamic law, commentary on the Quran, study of ritual prescriptions and so on)? Now, it is by the intermediation of the Guenonian converts (Schuon, Valsan) that the Sufism of Ibn Arabi has been presented to Westerners . . . for almost a century, as the Sufism par excellence, the only, the true . . . The doctrine of Ibn Arabi clearly influenced the first founders of the Western *tariqâ* by means of Balyani's *Épître sur l'unicité absolue* ('Epistle on absolute unity'), translated by I. Aguéli, a friend of Guénon.³⁰ Now, this text exposes the extreme consequences of the mysticism of the

Andalusian Sufi and attributes a total unreality to the 'created world' (this is the principal error of the system of Ibn Arabi denounced by the Muslim theologians and the Sufis). The influence of this *Epistle* on the thought of Schuon is clear and it is his reading of this text, among other things, which authorized him to proclaim the bypassing and even the negation of exoteric forms by esotericism.³¹

From 'settlement' to conversion and from Sufism to fundamentalism

As we have indicated above, some groups of Guenonian Sufis (Valsan) have clearly chosen the camp of Islamic orthodoxy and tried to match the doctrine of Guénon with the imperatives of Islam and those of the Sufism of Ibn Arabi. In this sense Valsan and his disciples went beyond Guénon who had, however, insisted on the fact that his point of view in fact resulted in an 'inconvertible' who could nevertheless 'install' himself in such or such religious tradition . . . Valsan and his pupils opted for a total and sincere conversion, but this conversion remained no less suspect in the eyes of a number of Muslims by reason of the interest they displayed in the doctrines of Ibn Arabi. On the one hand, insisting on Valsan's fidelity to Guénon's thought, one convert author has written that Valsan embodied the perfect equivalence between the Sufi Islam of akbarian obedience (Ibn Arabi) and Guénonien metaphysics, uniting 'the Western tradition to the Muslim East'.³² Is this the best acknowledged example of cross-fertilization between the oral tradition of mystical Islam and that of Western esotericism? But it should be noted that, for this author, the 'oriental tradition' boils down only to the Sufism of Ibn Arabi. After the explosion and the disappearance of the first Western *tariqâ*, converts today are to be found in small closed circles when they have not chosen to take a separate path. Some Guenonian converts also play a social and political role within the French Muslim community, like Jacques Roty (connected with Valsan) who for a year (1985–1986) held office as president of the National Federation of Muslims of France. The latter has evoked Guénon in publications designed to reveal the values of Islam to new generations of French Muslims.³³ The best minds, the best informed among the converts as to the realities of Sufism and the history of the orders, do not generally teach, aware of the risks of deviation when a *tariqâ* composed of a majority of converts remodels itself unconsciously on the foundation of the social and cultural values of origin of its members. They prefer to gather together a group of Eastern Sufis when they choose not to be isolated. Finally, at the doctrinal level, it is asserted that the direction adopted by Valsan and his disciples is to be found in a deepening of the reading of Ibn Arabi with the firm intention of avoiding the excesses of the system (Balyani). Are they sufficiently securely anchored in Islamic orthodoxy and sheltered from possible deviations for this?

In a completely different register, the Scots Abd al-Qadiri, non-Guenonian and an opponent of Guenonianism, has been led by Sufism to a form of Islamic rigorism which borders on fundamentalism. After the setback experienced by the Sufi community which he had established in Norfolk in 1976, Abd al-Qadiri hardened his movement by insisting on the sharia and affirming that Islamic law and Sufism were intimately linked. Distancing himself from mystical quietism, he flung himself into the political arena and religious propaganda. The new name of his organization (The Murabitun: European Muslim Movement) alludes to a missionary movement which Islamicized Spain in the ninth century. To

the personal spiritual quest was added the need for a society which conformed to the law of the Quran; his Sufism became political. But the principal originality of Abd al-Qadiri comes from his Spanish experience and the community which he established in the 1970s in Granada.³⁴ This experience led him to establish that Islam was not, and is not, a purely oriental phenomenon but that, in Spain, it had been a European phenomenon. So, for him, Islam is at the heart of Western civilization, and his scheme for the Islamicization of Europe thus went by way of a rediscovery of this Islam in his own culture and not through the reading of an exogenous Islam essentially Arabic or Asian.³⁵ The work of Abd al-Qadiri has intensified in relation to the conversion of Westerners with the plan to establish an Islamic society in Europe as the sole alternative to the spiritual crisis which is gripping the West. In his way Abd al-Qadiri responds, like the Guenonian converts, to the question of the meaning of existence, confident that Islam and Sufism were the solution to the 'crisis of the modern world'.

One of the hopes of the Guenonian converts has been to revive Islam and Sufism in the East itself, where Western modernity is in the process of undermining the 'traditional institutions'. However, the 'École guénonienne' has been established in Turkey for the last ten years, thanks to Turkish graduates who have studied in France and discovered Guénon. They have translated many of his works into Turkish and one of them has even devoted a doctoral seminar to the study of *La crise du monde moderne* under the auspices of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Istanbul in 1984. It is still too soon, observed a Muslim Turk in 1998, to assess the influence this 'other Islam', described as 'traditional School', could have on Turkish Islam in the future. Nevertheless, he added, Guénon's work, which sets out a high-level critique of modern Western civilization, from philosophy to the arts, could provide Turkish Muslims with the ingredients for thought on the modernization of the Islamic world in general and Turkey in particular. Moreover, he added, the writings of the French spiritualist stimulate a rereading of the function performed by Sufism in Turkey, where it is described as an obstacle to the progress of liberal reforms, taking account in this instance the role of the supposed doctrine of Ibn Arabi in enabling a relaxation of the rules of Islamic society and promoting reforms.³⁶

The situation becomes increasingly complex today with the implantation, in the Western world as a whole, of new orders now not only originating in the Maghreb, Egypt or Turkey, but also from the Indian sub-continent, from Indonesia and so on. With the cross-fertilization of thought, modern Western culture, Christian esotericism and these diverse forms of Sufism are in constant development and promote, in the absence of any control brought by an Eastern or Western master concerned for orthodox teaching and practice, transformations which carry the group onto the periphery and often outside Islam towards new forms of religion. The Sufi order of Guenonian persuasion remains the best-structured form, thanks to René Guénon's strongly cohesive thought, but there is a 'Guénonien Islamic religion' . . . Societies distinguished by akbarian doctrine develop on shifting ground and their shaykhs are forced into constant dialectical pirouettes in order to securely establish a harmony between the way followed by mystics confident of the unreality of the world, and their duties as believers in their role as members of a community. Finally, it is clear that what the Western converts sought above all in Sufism was an oral and supra-confessional spiritual tradition which they believed had been lost in the West but which their familiarity with Jewish or Christian esotericism enabled them to recognize in Muslim mysticism. This explains why the adoption and the reading of Sufism

have been carried out according to mental and philosophical categories originating in Western esotericism. It could be said that Sufism has found its *raison d'être* in the West as a structure replacing the initiatory Western societies and religions and that it is on this basis that cross-fertilization between the oral traditions of Islam and those of Western esotericism has taken place.

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(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

Notes

I am grateful to X. Accart, J.-P. Brach, J.-P. Laurant and N. Luca for their corrections and suggestions.

1. Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of British Converts* (London and New York, 1996), p. 142.
2. Sufism did, moreover, precede the appearance of the structure of orders by several centuries. In a study of the mystical Ottoman milieu of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, I have attempted to demonstrate the relationship of Sufism – the mystical ideology – to the order, that is, Sufi sociability. See Thierry Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes et franc-maçons en Islam: Rizâ Tevfik, penseur ottoman (1868–1949) du soufisme à la confrérie* (Paris, 1993).
3. Information on the main Sufi orders is to be found in A. Popovic and G. Veinstein, *Les ordres soufis dans le monde musulman* (Paris, 1996).
4. On this question, see Mark Sedgwick, 'Traditional Sufism', *Aries* 22 (Paris, 1999), pp. 3–24.
5. Augustin Berque, 'Un mystique moderniste: le Cheikh Benalioua', in *Ile Congrès des Sociétés savantes de l'Afrique du Nord* (1936), pp. 719–720.
6. The group founded by this shaykh has been settled above all in London since the 1970s. It also has offshoots in the United States and in Europe (France and Germany). The order gathers many of Muslim descent, from Cyprus and the Indian sub-continent, and a significant number of British and German converts.
7. Tayfun Atay, *Batî'da bir nakshi cemaati. Sheyh Nâzîm Kibrîsî örneği* ('A Naqshbandiya community in the East. The example of Shaykh Nazim Kibrîsî') (Istanbul, 1996) pp. 181–194. This book is a Turkish translation of T. Atay, 'Naqshbandis Sufis in a Western Setting', D. Phil. thesis, University of London (SOAS), 1995.
8. See Guénon's two works, *La crise du monde moderne* (Paris, 1927), translated by Arthur Osborne as *The Crisis of the Modern World* (London, 1942), and *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (Paris, 1945), translated by Lord Northbourne as *The Reign of Quantity and the Sign of the Times* (London, 1953).
9. Ian Dallas, alias Abd al-Qadiri, established his group first in England in 1970, where he led a community of 200 families at Wood Daling Hall, outside Norwich, Norfolk (Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam*, p. 178) then in the United States and at Granada, Spain.
10. Personal communication from this theologian on Sufism sent in 1967 to the Turkish author I. Hakkî Akin and published in a book cited by Mustafa Tahrali in his article, 'Batî'da ihtida hadiselerinde tasavvufun rolü' ('The role of Sufism in questions of conversion to Islam in the West'), in *Uluslararası birinci İslam sempozyumu* (Izmir, Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi, 1985), pp. 141–162.
11. Letter sent to Pierre Collard, an extract from which is published in his article, 'René Guénon et la religion musulmane', *Renaissance traditionnelle*, 29 (Paris, 1977), p. 4.
12. J.-P. Laurant, *Le sens caché dans l'oeuvre de René Guénon* (Paris, 1975), pp. 234–235.
13. J.-P. Laurant, 'Le Soufisme', in *René Guénon et l'actualité de la pensée traditionnelle: Actes du colloque de Cerisy-La-Salle, 13–20 juillet 1973, Braine-le-Combe (de Beaucens, 1977)*, p. 96.
14. Letter published by Mario Manara, 'De la confusion en plus: Planète-Plus et les prétendus disciples de René Guénon', *Rivista di studi tradizionali*, July–Dec. 1970 (Turin), p. 207.
15. See *Initiation et réalisation spirituelle* (Paris, 1967).
16. *Ibid.*

17. Extracted from a letter from Guénon to Alain Daniélou of 27 August 1947, cited by Robert Baudry, 'De la Loire au Nil, ou l'itinéraire spirituel de René Guénon', in *Loire littérature: Acte du colloque d'Angers du 26 au 29 mai 1968* (Angers, 1989), p. 346 note 5. In a letter written in 1934 Guénon asserted that there was nothing of the convert about him, and that his personal status could not in any way serve as an example and had not had a beginning in the proper sense of the word (*Études traditionnelles*, 87, Paris, 1986, n. 491, pp. 4–9).
18. 'La "Non-conversion" de René Guénon (1886–1951)', in Jean-Christophe Attias (ed.), *De la conversion* (Paris), pp. 133–139.
19. For the position of Guénon and his followers *vis-à-vis* this trend, see Antoine Faivre, 'Histoire de la notion moderne de tradition dans ses rapports avec les courants ésotériques (XV^e–XX^e siècles)', *Aries. Symboles et mythes dans les mouvements initiatiques et ésotériques (XVII^e–XX^e siècles): filiations et emprunts* (Paris, 1999), pp. 7–48.
20. See for example Robert Amadou, 'René Guénon et le soufisme', in *René Guénon et l'actualité de la pensée traditionnelle*, pp. 103–109; Pierre Collard, 'René Guénon et la religion musulmane', *Renaissance traditionnelle*, 29 (Paris, 1977), pp. 1–14; Giovanni Ponte, 'Se convertir à quoi', *Renaissance traditionnelle*, 37 (Paris, 1979), pp. 17–31.
21. J.-P. Laurant, 'La "Non-Conversion" de René Guénon', p. 239.
22. See Tayfun Atay, *Batî'da bir nakshi cemaatî*.
23. Shaykh Nazim, *La preuve de la générosité* (Avignon, 1997).
24. Mario Manara, 'De la confusion en plus', p. 207.
25. J.-P. Laurant, *Le sens caché dans l'oeuvre de René Guénon*, p. 235.
26. Mark Sedgwick, 'Traditional Sufism'.
27. This work was published at Paris in 1948.
28. *Ibid.* p. 25.
29. J.G.J. ter Haar, *Follower and Heir of the Prophet: Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindî (1564–1624) as a Mystic* (Leiden, 1992), pp. 122–131.
30. This was published for the first time in France in the periodical, *La Gnose* in 1911. A new translation of the text was made by Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris, 1982).
31. See Frithjof Schuon, *De l'Unité transcendante des religions* (Paris, 1948), pp. 45–46.
32. Charles-André Gils, 'Le maître d'or. Apperçus complémentaires sur la tradition hermétique', *Vers la tradition*, 74 (1998–1999), p. 3.
33. *L'attestation de foi. Première base de l'Islam* (Casablanca, 1994), pp. 64–66.
34. The Spanish community has been described by Francisco López Barrios and Miguel José Haguerty, *Murieron para vivir* (Barcelona, 1983). See also L. Rocher and F. Cherqaoui, *D'une foi à l'autre: Les conversions à l'islam en occident* (Paris, 1986), pp. 175–186.
35. Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam*, pp. 175–188.
37. Ismail Kara, 'Tarih ve Hurafe: Çağdash İslam düşüncesinde tarih telâkisi' ('History and Traditions: Consideration of the History in the Modern Islamic Thought'), *Dergâh* (Istanbul), 105 (1998), p. 24 (in Turkish). On the commentary of Ibn Arabi in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Thierry Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes et francs-maçons en Islam*, pp. 154–164.