

# Une voie soufie dans le monde : la Shadhiliyya

Edited by Eric Geoffroy

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Reviewed by Renaud Fabbri

In *Vincit Omnia Veritas, I,2* was published Jean-Louis Michon's response to Mark Sedgwick's "The 'Traditionalist' Shadhiliyya in the West: Guénonians and Schuonians". This paper and the initial version of the response were delivered during an international conference on the Shadhiliyya, which took place at the Alexandria Library in Egypt. The different papers have now been edited by Eric Geoffroy and published by *Maisonneuve & Larose*. The highly questionable contribution of Mark Sedgwick should not prevent us from recognizing the quality of most of the other works presented there and currently available to the French and English public<sup>143</sup>.

The Shadhiliyya, a branch of Sufism –Islamic esoterism- was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Abu l-Hasan al-Shadhili, a disciple of Ibn Mashish, the hermit of the Moroccan Rif. To this Sufi brotherhood have belonged several spiritual masters of first magnitude among them were Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi, Ibn Ata Allah and more recently, in a time a decline of the *Tasawwuf* across the Islamic world, shaykh Al-Arabi al-Daraqawi and shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi. As most of our readers already know, both René Guénon (shaykh Abd al-Wahid Yahya) and Frithjof Schuon (shaykh Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad) were attached to the spiritual lineage (*silsilah*) of this order. While he was in Paris, Guénon has been initiated by Ivan Agueli, a European disciple of the Egyptian shaykh Abdur Rahman Elish El-Kebir. In 1932, Schuon became the direct disciple of the shaykh Ahmad Alawi himself, a holy man sometimes considered as the Pole (*qutb*) of his time. Both of them have contributed to make known the universal Sufi legacy, the core and mystical essence of the Islamic revelation in the West.

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<sup>143</sup> One third of the presentations are in English, the rest being written in French.

Originated in North Africa, the Shadhiliyya is credited for having maintained a very subtle equilibrium between esoterism (*haqiqa*) and exoterism (*sharia*), as many jurists and theologians have been dragged in its orbit. Essentially a path of sobriety, it is characterized by Eric Geoffroy and Zakia Zouanat as *Muhammadiyya* for it is centered less on the mystery of the divine Unity (*Ahadiyya*) than on the prophetic model (*Sunna*) and the doctrine of the Muhammadian Light (*Nur Muhammadi*). Identified both with the Holy Spirit (*Ruh al-Quds*) and the universal Intellect (*aql*), this prophetic reality finds in the Sufi perspective, its final and synthetic expression in Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophecy. Islamic Saints receive heavenly inspirations only through its mediation since sainthood (*walaya*) remains subordinated to the prophetic function (*nubuyyia*). According to Zakia Zouanat, *Muhammadiyya* paths tend by their sobriety, to remain closer to Islamic mainstream, and attached to the Prophetic model, even in their more contingent, if not legalistic dimension. Geographically speaking, they predominate in the Western part of the Islamic world.

These remarks about the *Muhammadiyya* nature of the Shadhiliyya may be a little bit disappointing at first glance, considering that both René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, the contemporary spokesmen of the *Sophia Perennis*, were connected to this order. Was it only for reasons of opportunity or geographical proximity rather than spiritual affinities that they were connected to this particular North African order? On the one hand, if such a distinction between *Muhammadiyya* and *Ahadiyya* perspectives is not too artificial, both René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, considering their insistence on pure metaphysics and quintessential esoterism, may be characterized at least schematically as *Ahadiyya* rather than *Muhammadiyya*. On the other hand, it would be misleading to reduce the Shadhiliyya to the level of “average Sufism”, to use Schuon’s category, of a sublimated prolongation of Islamic exoterism without universal opening. As Denis Gril argues, the Shadhiliyya has indeed “two faces”: “quintessential esoterism’ and “meso-esoterism” have coexisted in the Shadhiliyya, often on two different planes. In the writings of the founding figures of the order, a distinction of axial importance is also established between a lesser (*sughra*) sainthood, one largely opened to the pious believers, and a greater (*kubra*) sainthood, the initiatory path properly speaking, a path whose goal is the realization of the Supreme Identity. In this respect, the Shadhiliyya was influenced at its

inception by two of the most mysterious figures of *Tasawwuf*: Abu Madyan, to which Ibn Arabi himself was particularly devoted and al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, the author of “the Seal of the Saint” (*Khatm al-wilaya*) and disciple of Khidr. As Geneviève Gobillot establishes, although the Shadhilis do not share all the latter’s view, they have been largely influenced by his doctrine of sainthood (*walaya*) and hagiographical typology.

It is important to mention finally that several contributors evoke directly operative questions related to initiatory rites and esoteric practices in the Shadhiliyya and more particularly in its latter emanations such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Daraqawiyya and the 20<sup>th</sup> century Alawiyya. The spiritual discipline of the Shadhiliyya -at least for those *fuqara* belonging to the inner circles- is based on retreat (*kalwah*) and invocation (*dhikr*), sometimes accompanied by meditations (*fikra*). Frithjof Schuon has also recognized in ejaculatory prayers and the Divine Name the supreme means of spiritual realization, sharing this view with the late shaykh Alawi, from whom he received, at least partially, his spiritual method.

This book - in itself a remarkable achievement – offers much more than a scholarly approach of one of the more influential Sufi orders. Despite the technical nature of some of the material presented and the potential barrier of language, it deserves a definite attention from the serious spiritual seekers and potentially from those eager to learn more about the Sufi roots of the Perennialist movement. From the point of view of the *Tasawwuf*, the works of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon appear as the last offspring of a centuries old spiritual lineage, which renders even more painful the shortcomings of Mark Sedgwick’s own treatment of the subject.

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