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CHAPTER IV  
THE SPIRITUAL MASTER

Many legends grew up around those few months during which the Shaikh visited Tunis, Tripoli and Istanbul. Consequently an article published in *Revue Africaine*<sup>1</sup> two years after his death tells us: 'He spent ten years of his life in the East, travelling in Egypt, Syria, Persia and India.'<sup>2</sup> This remains the most mysterious and least known part of his life.' But although these ten years in the East were no more real than a dream, I think there can be little doubt that this dream corresponds to what the Shaikh would have chosen for himself if his destiny had allowed it. The urgency with which he sought to escape from his function shows at any rate that he would not have chosen to spend the rest of his life beneath the weight of the responsibility that was to be his, and one of his motives, possibly the chief, is no doubt to be understood in the light of what he says about the learning which he 'felt the need for'.

Berque writes: 'I knew Shaikh Bin-<sup>ʿ</sup>Alīwah from 1921 until 1934. I saw him slowly grow old. His intellectual enquiringness seemed to become sharper each day, and to the very end he remained a lover of metaphysical investigation. There are few problems which he had not broached, scarcely any philosophies whose essence he had not extracted'.<sup>3</sup>

From his writings, as also from the testimony of those who knew him, one has the impression of a vast and penetratingly active intelligence of which the higher or central part was utterly and eternally satisfied—he speaks of 'remaining inwardly

<sup>1</sup>1936, pp. 691–776, *Un Mystique Moderniste* by A. Berque. The title is a strange one, for Berque's quotations are in themselves enough, as we shall see, to show that the Shaikh was essentially very conservative. His so-called 'modernism' appears to have been nothing other than the great breadth of his spiritual interests.

<sup>2</sup>Sidi Muḥammad al-Hāshimī writes to me that the Shaikh certainly never went to India, and that apart from what he describes in his autobiography his only visit to the Near East was shortly before his death when he made the Pilgrimage and went on from Mecca and Medina to Jerusalem and Damascus and from there back again to Mostaganem.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 693.

forever steeped in drunkenness'<sup>1</sup>—and of which the circumference, that is, the earthly or mental part, in so far as it had any respite from the demands made on him by his thousands of disciples, found ample sustenance in meditating on the Qoran and the Traditions and in exploring some of the Sufic treatises,<sup>2</sup> in particular those of Ibn 'Arābī and Jīlī. Moreover he was a great lover of poetry, especially of the odes of 'Umar ibn al-Fārid, long passages of which he seems to have known by heart. But although it does not appear directly in his writings, and although it is relatively most unimportant, it is evident from what Berque says of the Shaikh's thirst for information about other religions that at the extreme edge of this circumference there was a certain 'nostalgia' for something which he would never have found unless he could have come into some kind of contact with representatives of other religions who were on a spiritual level with himself, such as, for example, his slightly younger Hindu contemporary, Sri Ramana Maharshi of Tiruvannamalai, whose teaching was essentially the same as his own. But he seems to have had no knowledge of Hinduism, and none of Taoism or Buddhism, nor had he any intellectual exchanges with the Qabbalists of Judaism, and as regards Christianity, with which he always maintained a certain contact, it is extremely doubtful whether he ever met any representative of it who was even remotely comparable to himself.

Here, however, he would in any case have needed an exception, for generally speaking Christianity scarcely admits of mutual understanding with other religions. Even the Christian mystic, though he may not reject other religions as false,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Al-Mīnah al-Quddūsiyyah*, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> He says: 'I do not think I am exaggerating if I say that there are amongst the Sufis men whose intelligences, each taken separately, would almost outweigh the combined intelligences of all the writers of this present age.' (*Risālah an-Nāsir Ma'rūf*), p. 20).

<sup>3</sup> Unless one is content to imply that God is a monstrosity of injustice, caprice and ineffectuality, the words 'None cometh to the Father but by Me' must be considered to have been spoken by Christ as the Logos, the Divine Word, of which not only Jesus but also, for example, the Hindu Avatars, including the Buddha, are manifestations; and just as these are 'the Word made flesh', so the Vedas, the Torah and the Qoran are 'the Word made book'. But since so many people, especially Europeans and Semites, are incapable of following seriously a religion unless they believe it to be the only one or to be exceptionally privileged, it is clearly providential that the above saying of Christ should be taken by most Christians in an exclusive sense as referring to one

is indifferent to them, legitimately so, for the method of 'the straight and narrow path' of love scarcely admits of looking either to the right or to the left.<sup>1</sup>

But although all mystic paths are 'straight and narrow' in a certain sense, this description is not immediately apt as regards Islamic mysticism, for *wheresoe'er ye turn, there is the Face of God*.<sup>2</sup> In Islam, as we have seen, it is the vista of knowledge which predominates over that of love, and the Sufi is essentially a Gnostic. Sufism is not so much a path hedged by temptations and distractions on both sides as a passage across a wilderness, each stone of which is liable to be transformed in an instant from barren poverty to Infinite Riches. In one of the Shaikh's poems, the Creator is represented as saying:

'The veil of creation I have made  
As a screen for the Truth, and in creation there lie  
Secrets which suddenly like springs gush forth'.<sup>3</sup>

He also continually quotes the saying of the Prophet: 'Lord, increase me in marvelling at Thee.' The alchemy of Gnosis does not leave things at their face-value, but reduces them to nothingness or reveals them as aspects of the Face of God.

The full Islamic perspective, that is, the Qoranic perspective, is far too vast for the average Moslem. The words: *For each of you We have appointed a law and traced out a path, and if God had so willed, He would have made you one community*<sup>4</sup> remain for him little more than a dead letter, and the same may be said of many other verses such as: *For every community there is a Messenger*,<sup>5</sup> and the already quoted *Verily We have sent Messengers before thee. About some of*

manifestation of the Word only (see Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, ch. II, §6-8), and that the average Moslem, while not denying other religions, is inclined to relegate their validity to pre-Islamic times.

<sup>1</sup>Unless one is compelled to do so in virtue of some special function, or other exceptional circumstances. A great contemporary of the Shaikh, Pope Pius XI, said in confidence to Cardinal Facchinetti whom he had just appointed Apostolic Delegate to Libya: 'Do not think that you are going among infidels. Moslems attain to Salvation. The ways of Providence are infinite.' These words, spoken so many years ago, have only been made public recently, in *L'Ultima*, Anno VIII, 75-76, p. 261 (Florence, 1954).

<sup>2</sup>Qoran, II, 115.

<sup>3</sup>*Dīwān*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Qoran, V, 48.

<sup>5</sup>X, 47

them have We told thee, and about some have We not told thee, and Verily the Faithful<sup>1</sup> and the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians—whoso believeth in God and the Last Day and doeth deeds of piety—no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve.<sup>2</sup> But the Sufi, who methodically seeks to permeate his whole being with the Qoran, cannot fail to be interested, potentially, in all other Heaven-sent religions as manifestations of Divine Mercy, as God's *Signs on the Horizons*.<sup>3</sup> I say 'potentially' because he may never come into direct contact with other religions, and in any case he will be more or less bound to retain outwardly the prejudices of the great majority of his co-religionaries so as to avoid creating a scandal. But in so far as these prejudices are his own, they will be like fetters of gossamer upon his outlook, ready to be brushed away at a mere touch.

According to Berque, 'the Shaikh was always hungry for knowledge about other religions. He seemed to be quite well informed as regards the Scriptures and even as regards the patristic tradition. The Gospel of St. John and the Epistles of St. Paul appealed to him in particular. As an extremely subtle and penetrating metaphysician, he was able to reconcile plurality with unity in the Trinitarian conception of three persons in a consubstantial identity. . . He rejected it none the less, but his understanding of it made some people think that he adhered to it.'<sup>4</sup>

At the time when the Shaikh left the 'Īsāwī Ṭarīqah, and when he and his friend Al-Ḥājj Bin-ʿAwdah were searching for a spiritual path, there were several different branches of the Darqāwī Ṭarīqah<sup>5</sup> firmly established in the province of Oran to which Mostaganem belongs, not to mention many

<sup>1</sup>Moslems.

<sup>2</sup>V, 69.

<sup>3</sup>*We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in themselves until it be clear to them: He is the Truth, (XLI, 53).*

<sup>4</sup>Berque, p. 739.

He was in fact accused by some of his enemies of believing in the Trinity (*Ibid.*, p. 735).

<sup>5</sup>According to Depont and Coppolani, *Les Confréries religieuses musulmanes*, pp. 510-1, there were over 9500 members of this brotherhood in Algeria at that time. In Mostaganem itself there were three Darqāwī zāwiyahs, and it was no doubt from one or more of these that the Shaikh Al-Būzidī met with opposition on his return from Morocco. Berque wrongly says that he was a member of the Habrī branch of the Darqāwīs, whereas in actual fact he was not a descendant of Shaikh Muḥammad al-Habrī but as it were his younger brother, both being disciples of Muḥammad ibn Qaddūr of Morocco.

branches of other orders. Yet he says: 'Although we considered it an absolute necessity to take as a guide someone who was generally recognized as a Master by those who could judge, we had little hope of finding such a one'.<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years later, at the death of the Shaikh Al-Būzīdī, there was still the same quantity rather than quality among those who offered guidance.

In one of his poems he declares:

'I hid the truth<sup>2</sup> on a time and screened it well  
 And whoso keepeth God's Secret shall have his reward.  
 Then when the Giver vouchsafed that I might proclaim it,  
 He fitted me—and how I know not—to purify souls,  
 And girded upon me the sword of steadfastness,  
 And truth and piety, and a wine He gave me,  
 Which all who drink must needs be always drinking,  
 Even as a drunk man seeketh to be more drunk.  
 Thus came I to pour it, nay, it is I that press it.  
 Doth any other pour it in this age?'<sup>3</sup>

The sight of the relatively wasted efforts of so many fervent souls unconsciously following 'blind guides' made the Shaikh more and more outspoken as regards his own function and indirectly—sometimes even directly—as regards the false pretensions of others.<sup>4</sup>

There is little doubt that he felt himself to be the renewer (*mujaddid*) which the Prophet had promised for every century.<sup>5</sup> The last one had been unquestionably the great Shaikh Ad-Darqāwī himself. The Shaikh Al-ʿAlawī says: 'I am the pourer, the renewer',<sup>6</sup> and: 'Proclaim, O chronicler, the name of ʿAlawī after Darqāwī, for God hath made him his successor'.<sup>7</sup> His poems were not published until just after the first world war, though they had a wide circulation in manuscript.

<sup>1</sup> *Rauḍah*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> The truth of his own supreme spiritual realization.

<sup>3</sup> *Dīwān*, p. 35. The whole poem is translated on p. 207.

<sup>4</sup> For lines which he addressed to a spiritual imposter, see p. 198 f.

<sup>5</sup> 'God will send to this community at the head of every hundred years one who will renew for it its religion' (Abū Dā'ūd, *Malāḥim*, 1).'

<sup>6</sup> *Dīwān*, p. 30, 1.6.

<sup>7</sup> *Dīwān*, p. 45, 1.6.