

Aspects of Islamic Esoterism*

by

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Esoterism is the correlative of exoterism. The latter is the outward and general religion of dogmas and observances, to which, in a traditional society, the whole community adheres, and which promises, and provides the means for achieving, salvation. The former is the “total truth” (spiritually and metaphysically speaking) behind—and only symbolically expressed by—the dogmas of the general religion and at the same time it is the key to, and the *raison d’être* of, the religious observances. What, in exoterism, are dogmas and observances, become, in esoterism, unconditioned truth and ways of realization. In both exoterism and esoterism the same two poles are present: theory and practice, or doctrine and method; they are simply envisaged at different levels. The first of these two poles, incidentally, clearly has a primary role or function: one must understand before one can do. Any practice without theory lacks both motivation and goal.

Exoterism is interested: it aims at transforming the collectivity, and saving as many souls as possible. Esoterism is disinterested and impersonal. As “total truth,” it “saves” *a fortiori*,¹ but whereas exoterism, to be itself, inevitably has a moralizing and to some extent a subjectivistic character, esoterism is dispassionate and totally objective.

What is meant by a universalist point of view can perhaps best be summed up in the following saying: “All religions come from God, and all religions lead back to God.” The first clause refers to doctrine, and the second to method (or “way,” or “path”). This saying presupposes that we are talking about “revealed” religions (or religious revelations), and also that the religions in question have retained their “orthodoxy” (i.e. fidelity to truth) and have remained “traditional” (i.e. have not undergone any essential innovation).

From the universalist point of view, the various revealed religions are sometimes represented as sectors of a circle, the sectors, by definition, coming together at the central point. The larger and wider area of the sector, bordering on the circumference, represents a given exoterism; the smaller and narrower area of the sector that is close to the center is the

* First published in German in *Initiative 42*, a special volume devoted to Esoterism Today, with contributions by several authors (Herder, Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1981).

¹ “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

corresponding esoterism; and the dimensionless center itself is esoterism in the pure state: the total truth.

The same symbolism can also be represented in three dimensions, in the form of a cone or a mountain. Here it will be said that “all paths lead to the same summit.” Once again, the dimensionless central point (this time the summit of the mountain) represents the total truth. The cone or the mountain is made up of sectors, each one representing a religion. The lower slopes of each sector represent a given exoterism, while the upper slopes of the same sector represent the corresponding esoterism. The summit represents esoterism in the pure state.

Perhaps the most direct of all the symbolisms referring to the genesis, mutual relationship, and saving role of the various revelations, is that which likens esoterism (in the pure state) to the uncolored light, and the various religions to red, green, yellow, and the other colors of the spectrum. Depending on their distance from the source of light, the colored rays will be more intense or more weak (i.e. more esoteric or more exoteric). Each color is a form or a vehicle of the truth. Each color “represents” the total truth. But the supra-formal total truth, the plenitude of uncolored light, is not exhausted by or limited to one single color. Incidentally, this symbolism has the merit of showing, amongst many other things, just how precious exoterism is. A weak, colored, light shining in unfavorable circumstances is in itself sufficient (if we genuinely try to see by it) to save us from outer darkness. Despite “refraction” (and let us remember that it is precisely its “color” which makes it accessible to the majority of men), and despite its weakness, it is the same light as the uncolored light of God, and its merciful role is precisely to lead us back to its own absolute and infinite source.

Terminologically one may regard esoterism and mysticism as synonymous. Mysticism is known to be the inward or spiritual dimension within every religion, and this is precisely what esoterism is. This may prompt the question: does the mystic who has reached the end of the path (who has achieved “salvation,” “liberation,” or “enlightenment”) leave religion behind? To this the answer must be yes and no. Returning to our symbolism of the uncolored light which is refracted into many colors, one may say that he has left “color” behind, but not light. And yet, when one recalls that each color is fully present in the uncolored light (in harmonious union with all the other colors in what amounts to a principial plenitude of light), one cannot truly say that he has left color behind either. What he has done is to trace his own color back to its essence or source, where, although infinitely clarified, it is essentially and abundantly present. The uncolored light, source of all the colors, has also been called the *philosophia perennis* or *religio perennis*. This is one with what was earlier called esoterism in the pure state.

And this has an important practical consequence for the beginner. One cannot take the view that, since mysticism or esoterism is the inner truth common to all the religions, one can dispense with religion (exoterism) and seek only mysticism (esoterism). Man’s situation is such that with God’s grace, he may be made worthy of turning towards the uncolored light only if he approaches it by way of “red” or “green” or some other color. (And his “red” or his “green” must

be as pure and intense as possible.) To believe that we can lay hold on the uncolored light without arduously proceeding along a “colored ray” is not only arrogance, it is illusion.

One should perhaps add at this point that any “syncretism” (or pseudo-theosophy) is likewise vain. To pick and choose bits and pieces from each religion (allegedly those relating to an imagined “highest common factor”) is to try to mix the immiscible. It leads not to clarity, but to a sterile and opaque “muddy brown.”

* * *

In the foregoing symbolisms, the relationships between Islamic exoterism, Islamic esoterism, and the *religio perennis* will be clearly apparent. Islamic exoterism, the *sharī‘a*, is incumbent upon the whole collectivity. It is the corpus of religious beliefs and practices which shapes the community and leads individuals to salvation. Islamic esoterism or Sufism (in Arabic *taṣawwuf*) is the inward or spiritual dimension of the religion, and is the concern only of those possessed of the appropriate vocation. From the “operative” point of view, the main difference between exoterism and esoterism (i.e. between the outward Islamic religion and Sufism) is as follows: whereas the goal of the *sharī‘a* is salvation, conceived as something attainable only after death—a rejoining of the saints in Paradise—Sufism envisages as its main end the attaining of salvation or liberation (or the embarking on the path that leads to salvation or liberation) even in this life, here and now. This is nothing other than the path of sanctification, the goal of which is union with God, whatever be the degree or mode of this union. The Koran declares: “Verily we are God’s and unto Him we shall return.” The function of Sufism (and indeed that of the general religion also, although in a less direct, less active, and more outward fashion) is to teach that, for salvation or liberation, this “return” must necessarily engage the will of the individual. Let it be added that all religions likewise teach that “perdition” or “damnation” is the result, precisely, of the individual’s refusing his co-operation with the divine will as expressed, for example, in the relevant religious revelation. Revelation, incidentally, represents the “objective” pole of religion, in that it comes to the individual from outside. The “subjective” pole is that which comes to the individual from within. It includes both the voice of conscience and also that intuitive assent to the truths of religion which constitutes faith. For religion and spirituality, revelation and faith are the twin sources, objective and subjective respectively, of knowledge.

One of the most easily graspable keys to the origin, and so to the meaning, of the concepts “objective” and “subjective” is furnished by the Hindu doctrine of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*. In Hinduism, this term is one of the names of God. Its constituent elements are usually translated as (infinite) Being, (infinite) Consciousness, and (infinite) Bliss. This enables us to see that Being is the Divine Object, Consciousness the Divine Subject, while Bliss—the joyous coming together of the two—is Divine Union. The most “essential” translation, therefore, of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* is

“Object-Subject-Union.” This is the model and origin of all possible objects and subjects, and of the longing of the latter for the former.²

This trinitarian aspect of the Divinity is universal and is to be found in all religions. In Christianity it is the central dogma: God viewed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The analogy between the Christian Trinity and “Being-Consciousness-Bliss” is best seen in the doctrinal expositions of the Greek Fathers and also in St. Augustine’s designation of the Christian Trinity as “Being-Wisdom-Life,” which carries the same connotation of “Object-Subject-Union.” In Islam, although it is the religion of strict monotheism, certain Sufi formulations evoke the selfsame trinitarian aspect of the Divinity. Reference will be made later to the question of “spiritual realization” in Sufism, the essential means of which is the invocation (*dhikr*) of the Name of God. In this connection it is said that God is not only That which is invoked (*Madhkūr*), but also, in the last analysis, That within us which invokes (*Dhākir*), and furthermore that *Dhikr* itself, being one with the internal Activity of God,³ is also Divine. We thus have the ternary *Madhkūr-Dhākir-Dhikr*, meaning “Invoked-Invoker-Invocation,” the relationship of these elements to one another being precisely that of “Object-Subject-Union.” This is the very essence of the theory and practice of esoterism—Islamic or other—for this “Union” *in divinis* is the prefiguration of and pattern for the union of man with God. Hindu, Christian, and Sufi doctrines coincide in elucidating just why this is so.

* * *

The mystery of union, from whichever doctrinal point of view it may be approached, carries an inescapable “operative” implication and is the basis of the mystical path and the motivation for all spiritual striving. One of the most esoteric of all doctrines expressing the mystery of union is that concerning the Logos. This doctrine has its origin in the distinction, within God Himself, between God and the Godhead, or between “Being” and “Essence.” This distinction is to be found in the esoterisms of several religions, and is made explicit in the treatises of such great “gnostics” as Śaṅkara, Eckhart, and Ibn ‘Arabī.⁴ Ordinary theology distinguishes simply between God and man, between the Uncreated and the created. But in each of these categories, esoterism makes a distinction. For example, within God Himself, there is already a prefiguration of creation, and this is God as “Being.” God as “Being” is the immediate Creator of the world. This is the source of the metaphysical distinction between “Beyond-Being” (“Essence”) and “Being,” or between the Godhead and the Personal God. Likewise, within the created, there is a distinction to be made. There is something within the created itself that reflects the Uncreated (something,

² *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* may also be interpreted as “Known-Knower-Knowledge” or “Beloved-Lover-Love.”

³ That this Divine Act should pass through man is the mystery of salvation.

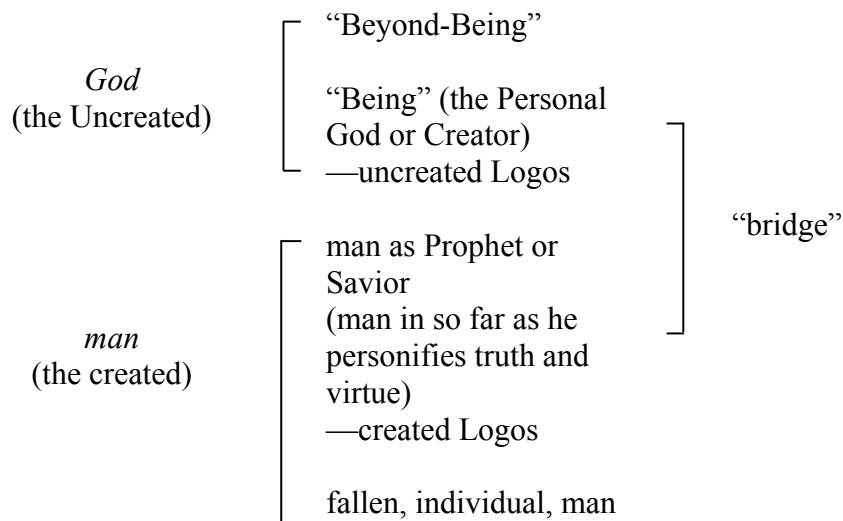
⁴ The same distinction is also made by St. Gregory Palamas in his doctrine of the Divine Essence and the Divine Energies.

within the relative, that reflects the Absolute). For Christianity, this is the Savior; for Islam, the Prophet. In more general terms, it is truth and virtue, or symbol and sacrament.

These different strands are brought together by the concept of the Logos: the prefiguration of the created in the Uncreated (the Personal God) is the *uncreated* Logos. The reflection of the Uncreated in the created or the Absolute in the relative—(Savior; Prophet; truth and virtue; symbol and sacrament) is the *created* Logos. Hence the indispensability of the Logos (with its *two* faces) as “bridge” between created and Uncreated, or between man and God.

Without the Logos, no contact between man and God would be possible. This seems to be the position of the Deists. Without the Logos, there would be a fundamental dualism, not “Non-Dualism” (*Advaita*), as the Vedantists call it. This indeed is the blind alley that Descartes (with his unbridgeable dichotomy of “spirit and matter”) has led us into.

This doctrine can be summarized in diagrammatic form as follows:



Esoterism thus renders explicit the reality of mystical union, for it is by uniting himself with the “created” Logos (for example, in the Eucharist, or in the Invocation of the Divine Name, or in the practice of the virtues), that the spiritual aspirant (the *faqīr*, as he is called in Sufism) realizes his union with, or reintegration into, the uncreated Divinity.

The Logos is everywhere and always the same, but its personification is “unique” within each different religion, in the shape of the Founder. Jesus and Muhammad are personifications of the Logos, and this is what enables them to speak in such absolute terms. Muhammad said: “He that has seen me has seen God.” That is, whoever has seen the created (and visible) Logos has, sacramentally, also “seen” the uncreated (and invisible) Logos, namely God as “Being” or Creator. Similarly, Jesus said: “No man cometh to the Father but by me.” This has the same meaning. It is for this precise reason that Muhammad for Muslims (like Jesus for Christians) is

“absolutely” indispensable. In Islam, this is the ultimate, or esoteric, reason for conformity to the *Sunna*, the “Wont” or “Practice” of the Prophet. Outwardly the *Sunna* constitutes a norm for the whole Islamic community, but for the *faqīr*, conformity to the “inward” or essential *Sunna* is as it were a “sacrament,” and a central mode of realizing union.

Mutatis mutandis the Virgin Mary plays the same role. She is the feminine personification of the Logos—or the personification of the feminine aspects of the Logos, namely Purity, Beauty, and Goodness. This is why, in Christianity, she is called “Co-Redemptrix.”

The above doctrinal considerations let it be seen that mystical union, whatever be its degree or mode, is realizable only through the Logos.⁵

* * *

It has been mentioned more than once that Sufism is the spiritual and metaphysical interpretation and application of the religion of Islam. The central doctrine of Islam is the “testimony of faith” (*Shahāda*): “There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God” (*lā ilāha illā ’Llāh; Muḥammadur Rasūlu ’Llāh*). The esoteric interpretation of the *Shahāda* generally takes the form of the doctrine known as *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or the “oneness of being.” According to this, the *Shahāda* means not merely “there is no god but God,” but also, and even more, “there is no reality except Reality.” One of the names of God, indeed, is *al-Ḥaqq*, which means “Reality” or “Truth.”

This doctrine also means that the relative has no reality other than in the Absolute, and the finite has no reality other than in the Infinite. The Muslim or the Sufi has access to the Absolute and the Infinite in the Koran (God’s revealed words), in the *Shahāda*, and, most intensely of all, in the Divine Name, *Allāh*. He also has access through the Prophet who, within the world itself, is God’s very reflection. The Prophet’s name is communicated in the second clause of the *Shahāda*. Thus through these two revealed and sacred clauses, man has access, on the one hand, to the Divine Immutability and, on the other, to the Muhammadian or Prophetic Norm. In and through the two *Shahādas*, the imperfect is overwhelmed by the Perfect (the Muhammadian Norm) and the impermanent is extinguished by the Permanent (God Himself). As the Koran says: “Truth hath come, and falsehood hath vanished away. Verily falsehood is ever bound to vanish.”⁶

* * *

⁵ This exposition is taken from the writings of Frithjof Schuon. See especially *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (London: Perennial Books, 1981).

⁶ For a detailed esoteric interpretation of the *Shahāda*, see *Mirror of the Intellect* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), chapter entitled “Concerning the *Barzakh*,” by Titus Burckhardt, edited by William Stoddart.

The above considerations enable us to see how the spiritual method, or means of realization, in Sufism is above all the “remembrance of God” (*dhikru`llāh*). The verbal root concerned also means “to mention” or “to invoke,” and the practice is sometimes called “invocation” (i.e. the invocation of the Divine Name). Reference was made to this above. This spiritual practice is derived from numerous Koranic injunctions, amongst which are: “Remember God with much remembrance” (*idhkurū`llāha dhikran kathīran*); “Verily in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest” (*a lā bidhikri`llāhi tatma`innu`l-qulūb*); and “Remember Me and I shall remember you” (*idhkurū-nī adhkur-kum*). *Dhikr* may be performed only with the permission and guidance of a spiritual master or Shaykh. It can be performed either in solitude or in a gathering (*majlis*) of *fuqarā`* (plural of *faqīr*) convened for that purpose, and led by a Shaykh or his representative (*muqaddam*). From another point of view, *dhikr* should, in principle, be constant. This is analogous to the “prayer without ceasing” of St. Paul (the Jesus-Prayer of the Eastern Church) and to the *japa-yoga* of the Hindus.

The immediate, practical motivation for *dhikr* is that man finds himself entrapped in manifestation. Manifestation is doomed to impermanence, and this impermanence inevitably entails separation, suffering, and death. Islamic esoterism teaches that the Principle alone is permanent—and blissful. Once again we are brought back to the message of the *Shahāda*: “There is no permanent except in the Permanent,” “there is no reality other than the Real.” The doctrine of the *dhikr* is that the Divine Name (*Allāh*) directly vehicles the Principle, and when the believer unites himself with the Divine Name in fervent invocation, he inwardly frees himself from manifestation and its concomitant suffering. The essential condition for *dhikr* is *faqr*, i.e. “spiritual poverty” or self-effacement. Without *faqr*, *dhikr* is self-delusion and pride, and a dangerous poison for the soul. Only the *faqīr* (the one who is “poor in spirit”) may be a *dhākir* (one who invokes God).

Dhikr, in the wider sense, includes any devotion that serves as a support for the remembrance of God, in particular the *wird*, or rosary, which most *fuqarā`* recite morning and evening. The *wird* comprises three Koranic formulas, each of which is recited one hundred times. The first formula pertains to individual man and its aim is to establish contrition and resolution. The second formula contains the name of the Prophet, and seeks to confer on the *faqīr* the perfection pertaining to the human state as it was created. The third formula contains the Name of God, and enshrines and vehicles the mystery of Union. The three formulas thus correspond to the three “stages” known in the mysticisms of various religions, namely: purification, perfection, union. And in their essence, they correspond to the three fundamental aspects of all spirituality: humility, charity, truth.

* * *

The last-mentioned words lead us directly to a well-known Islamic ternary, namely, *makhāfa*, *maḥabba*, and *ma`rifa*. These may be translated as “Fear of God,” “Love of God,” “Knowledge

of God.” “Fear,” “Love,” and “Knowledge” (or “Gnosis”⁷) may be regarded either as simultaneous aspects or successive stages. They correspond to the perhaps better known Hindu ternary: *karma-mārga* (the Way of Action), *bhakti-mārga* (the Way of Love), and *jñāna-mārga* (the Way of Knowledge). Strictly speaking, it is only *bhakti* and *jñāna* (i.e. *maḥabba* and *ma’rifā*) that constitute esoterism: esoterism is either a Way of Love, or a Way of Knowledge, or a combination of both.

Since comparisons with Christianity may be useful, let us recall the incident in the life of Christ when he was received in the house of the sisters Martha and Mary. What has come to be known in Christianity as the “Way of Martha” corresponds to *karma-mārga*, the way of religious observance and good works. The esoteric or mystical way, on the other hand, is the “Way of Mary,” which comprises two modes, namely *bhakti-mārga* (the Way of Love) and *jñāna-mārga* (the Way of Knowledge). *Karma* as such is purely exoteric, but it is important to stress that there is always a karmic component within both *bhakti* and *jñāna*. Sufism teaches quite explicitly that the Way of Love (*maḥabba*) and the Way of Knowledge (*ma’rifā*) both necessarily contain an element of Fear or conformity (*makhāfa*). Likewise the Way of Knowledge invariably contains within it the reality of Love. As for the Way of Love, which is composed of faith and devotion, it contains an indirect element of *jñāna* or *ma’rifā* in the form of dogmatic and speculative theology. This element is in the intellectual speculation as such, and not in its object which, for the Way of Love, is restricted to God as “Being,” “Creator,” or “Lord.” When the object is God as “Beyond-Being” or “Essence,” it is no longer a case of *bhakti* (or *maḥabba*), but of *jñāna* (or *ma’rifā*).

In spite of the presence in each “Way” of elements of the two others, the three Ways, *karma*, *bhakti*, and *jñāna* (or *makhāfa*, *maḥabba*, and *ma’rifā*), represent three specific and easily distinguishable modes of religious aspiration.

As for the question as to which of these paths a given aspirant adheres to, it is overwhelmingly a matter of temperament and vocation. It is a case where the Way chooses the individual and not the individual the Way.

Historically speaking, Christian mysticism has been characterized in the main by the “Way of Love,” whereas Islamic mysticism (like Hindu mysticism) comprises both the “Way of Love” and the “Way of Knowledge.” The language of the “Way of Love” has a remarkably similar ring in whichever mysticism it crops up, but the more “gnostic” formulations of Islamic esoterism (as

⁷ This word is used purely etymologically, and does not hark back to the current, in the early history of Christianity, known as “gnosticism.” “Gnosis,” from the Greek, is the only adequate English rendering for the Sanskrit *jñāna* (with which in fact it is cognate) and the Arabic *ma’rifā*.

of Vedanta) tend to strike a foreign note in the ears of those who are familiar only with Christian, or at any rate bhaktic, forms of spirituality.⁸

The fact that the spiritual method *par excellence* consists in “sacramental” concentration on the revealed Name of God (*dhikru`llāh*) indicates clearly that the practical side of Islamic esoterism is the very opposite of giving free play to man’s unregenerate subjectivity. Indeed, it amounts to the exposing of his unregenerate subjectivity to the normative and transforming influence of the Divine “Object,” God transcendent. At the same time, and even more esoterically, it is the exposing of man’s paltry egoism, seen in turn as an “object” (illusorily other than God), to the withering and yet quickening influence of the Divine “Subject,” God immanent; the Name of God (*Allāh*) being both transcendent Object and immanent Subject (*Madhkūr* and *Dhākir*). These two contrasting attitudes or “stations” (*maqām*)—spiritual extinction before the Divine Object and spiritual rebirth in the Divine Subject—are the two aspects, objective and subjective, of unitive Knowledge (*ma`rifā*).⁹ In Sufi treatises, they have been called, respectively, *fanā`* (extinction) and *baqā`* (permanence).¹⁰

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The organization or framework within which Sufism historically exists is that of the *ṭurūq* (plural of *ṭarīqa*, which on the one hand, means “path” or “way” and, on the other, “spiritual order or brotherhood”). The first great Sufi order to appear in the form in which *ṭurūq* are now known was the Qādirī *ṭarīqa* which took its name from its illustrious founder ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (1078-1166). This was an offshoot of the older Junaydī *ṭarīqa* which stemmed from the great Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910). Amongst the next to appear were the Suhrawardī *ṭarīqa*, whose founder was Shihāb ad-Dīn as-Suhrawardī (1144-1234), and the Shādhilī *ṭarīqa*, founded by one of the greatest luminaries of Western Islam, Abū ‘l-Ḥasan ash-Shādhilī (1196-1258). Another order to be created about the same period was the Maulawī *ṭarīqa* (more famous under its Turkish name Mevlevi), so called after the title *Maulā-nā* (“our Lord”), given by his disciples to the founder of the order, Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273), author of the *Mathnawī*, and perhaps the greatest mystical poet of Islam. The most renowned Sufi order to originate in India is the Chishtī *ṭarīqa*, founded by Mu‘in ad-Dīn Chishtī (1142-1236), whose tomb at Ajmer is one of the greatest shrines of the sub-continent, and is much visited and revered by Hindus and

⁸ Those who, by way of exception, have manifested the “Way of Knowledge” in Christianity include such great figures as Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Angelus Silesius. It is significant that it is the works of “gnostics” such as these that have tended to cause ripples in the generally “bhaktic” climate of Christianity.

⁹ This synthesis of the dual aspects of spiritual realization or method is taken from the writings of Frithjof Schuon. See especially *The Eye of the Heart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1997), chapter “Microcosm and Symbol.”

¹⁰ The Sufi expression *fanā` al-fanā`i* (“the extinction of extinction”) is a synonym for *baqā`*.

Moslems alike. Another order important throughout the East is the Naqshbandī order, founded in the fourteenth century by Pīr Muḥammad Naqshbandī. A widely disseminated order in Western Islam is the Darqāwī, a relatively recent sub-group of the Shādhilī *ṭarīqa*, having been founded by the Moroccan Shaykh Mulay al-‘Arabī ad-Darqāwī (c.1743-1823). An illustrious spiritual descendant of Mulay al-Arabī ad-Darqāwī was the Algerian Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Alawī (1869-1934), “whose erudition and saintliness” as A. J. Arberry has written, “recall the golden age of the medieval mystics.”¹¹

It should be stressed that these orders are not sects, but mystical brotherhoods whose purpose is to vehicle and enshrine the traditions and inheritance of Islamic spirituality, and above all to guarantee the transmission of the initiatic rite (passed on from shaykh to shaykh, and originating in Muhammad himself who, through God’s grace, received it from the Archangel Gabriel) that is the *sine qua non* of entering and following the Sufī path. Without this initiation, followed by a long and arduous discipleship under a spiritual master, there is no Sufism, and no possible spiritual rebirth or sanctification.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my under-standing
and my whole will. Thou hast given me all that I am and all that I possess. I
surrender it all to Thee that Thou mayest dispose of it according to Thy will.
Give me but Thy love and Thy grace; these are sufficient for me, and I will
have no more to desire.*

St. Ignatius Loyola.

¹¹ *Luzac’s Oriental List* (London), October-December 1961.