

Notes on the Shaikh al-'Alawī

(1869-1934)¹

By

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MARTIN LINGS'S work, recently published in a French translation, *Un Saint Musulman du Vingtième Siècle: Le Cheikh al-'Alawī*,² was reviewed in this journal³ when the first edition of the original English was published. We take advantage of its publication in French to draw attention, with regard to what it gives by way of biographical information, to a particular point which, when corroborated by other documentary elements and clarified by certain doctrinal notions of *Tasawwuf*, may bring out a hitherto unnoticed aspect of this spiritual master of our time and of his function.

To begin with, in the text of the souvenirs of Dr. Marcel Carret which Dr. Lings has included in Chapter I of his book as a means of broaching his subject,⁴ we find almost at the outset a record of the impression made by the Shaikh al-'Alawī on the French doctor during his first visit to the Shaikh at the Mostaganem *zāwiyah*: "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". We must bear in mind also, in this connection, the doctor's final impression of this first meeting: "I withdrew discreetly, carrying with me an impression which, after more than twenty years, remains as clearly engraved on my memory as if it was barely yesterday since all this took place". Some paragraphs later, still speaking of the Shaikh Al-'Alawī, Dr. Carret uses the phrase "that Christ-like face". Many readers will think, especially since these phrases come from the pen of a modern European who would have neither the inclination nor the means of making finer distinctions in recording his impressions, that this is a summary reference to a wide-spread notion of sainthood based on an aesthetic kind of analogy. There are however reasons for thinking otherwise, and several further considerations may serve to explain, at least to a certain extent, the "likeness" brought out in the doctor's account which, in the opinion of the present writer, serves to convey an element more subtle than mere physical appearance.

At the time of the events which followed the death of the Shaikh Al-Būzīdī who had not wished to name his successor himself, leaving it expressly to the decision of Providence, and when the group of those who were attached to the Mostaganem *Zawiyah*, together with their *muqaddams*, were wondering whom they should recognize as their new Shaikh, many members of the brotherhood had spiritual dreams from which it was to be concluded that the successor to the *maqām* of the Shaikh Al-Būzīdī was the Shaikh Al-'Alawī. The Shaikh Sidi `Addah bin Tūnis, in his book *Ar-Rawdat as-saniyyah* (Mostaganem, 1354 A. H. = 1936), says that these "visions" were very numerous: he gives as many as sixty; Dr. Lings has translated six of them (11. 64-66), one of which was seen by the Shaikh Al-'Alawī himself. Apart from these, the ones related in the

Arabic text comprise some others which are of such particular significance with regard to our present subject that it would be truly regrettable to make no mention of them here in this connection. The following is a translation of the passages in question:

"One of these visions was recounted by Shaikh Sidi 'Abd ar-Rahmān Bū'Azīz, the head of the *Zāwiyah* at Ja'āfirah:

"One of the *fuqarā'* told us that he had had a vision of the moon cloven in two. Then a plank (*lawhah*) was let down from it on chains, nearer and nearer the earth until it was only a little above us and we could see on it the Master al-'Alawī—may God be pleased with him!—and beside him Sayyidnā Īsā (our Lord Jesus)—on him be Peace! Then a herald stood up and cried out: "Whoever wishes to see Jesus—on him be Peace!—with the supreme Master, they are both here, descended from Heaven, so let him come with all speed." Then the earth trembled and shook and all upon it were shaken, and all the people gathered together and asked to mount up beside the Master on that plank, but he said: "Stay where you are, we will come back to you" (p. 138).

"Another vision recounted by Shaikh Hasan ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz at-Tilimsānī, is as follows:

'I had a vision in which I was in the valley of the town of Tlemcen, and it was filled with a large crowd of people who were waiting for the descent (*nuzūl*)⁵ from Heaven of Jesus—on him be Peace!—and then a man did descend, and the people said: "This is Jesus", and when I was able to see his face I found that he was the Shaikh Sidi Ahmad Bin 'Alīwah (=Al-'Alawī)—may God be pleased with him!"

The following vision was recounted by the revered Shaikh, God's Saint, Sidi Muhammad bin at-Tayyib bin Mawlāy al-'Arabī ad-Darqāwī—may God give us the favor of his blessings:

'I saw a group of people who told us of the descent of Jesus—on him be Peace!—and they said that he had already descended, and that he had in his hand a wooden sword with which he struck stones and they became men, and when he struck animals they also became human. Now I knew the man who had descended from Heaven, he had written letters to me and I to him. So I made ready to meet him, and when I reached him I found that he was Shaikh Sidi Ahmad al-'Alawī—but in the guise of a doctor, tending the sick, and with him were more than sixty men to help him—may God be well pleased with him!" (p. 137).

Apart from these dream visions we will quote another vision which seems to have started in a state of waking but which must have been transferred to a state between wake and dream (in which case it would be more precise to call it a *wāqi'ah*, ("event")):

"This was recounted by the faithful in love, the inwardly pure, Sidi Ahmad Hājji at-Tilimsānī

'Whilst I was absorbed in the supreme invocation (*adh-dhikr ala-'zam*)⁶ I saw the letters of the Name of the Divine Majesty fill the whole universe, and out of them shone the Prophet himself in a luminous form—may God grant him the graces of Union and the graces of Peace! Then the letters manifested themselves in another shape, and I saw in them the face of Shaikh Sidi Ahmad Bin-'Alīwah, and on his body was written Mustafa Ahmad Bin-'Alīwah. Then I heard a voice cry out: "Witnesses! Observers!" (*shuhadā', ruqabā'*). Then the letters were manifested a third time, in the image of the Shaikh with a crown on his head, and while we looked a bird alighted on his head and spoke to me, saying: "Behold, this is the spiritual station (*maqām*) of Jesus—Peace be on him!" (p. 145).

Ten others of the visions related in Shaikh 'Addah's book show an explicit and direct

relationship between the Shaikh Al-'Alawī and the Prophet Muhammad which in such a case may be considered as perfectly normal; one of these, related by the Shaikh Al-'Alawī himself, is quoted in Dr. Lings's book. But those which have just been given and which mention, each one of them, a particular relationship connecting the Shaikh Al-'Alawī with "Sayyidnā 'Isā" and, to be more precise, with his "spiritual station" (*maqām*) in Islam, constitutes an exceedingly rare phenomenon which has not yet been explained, at least not to our knowledge: in any case, Shaikh 'Addah gives no commentary on them in the volume from which we have been quoting, and Dr. Lings for his part makes no mention of them at all.⁷ For us, this particular group of "visions" is significant not only as regards the spirituality of the Shaikh Al-'Alawī, but also as regards his initiatic function. To be more exact, we have there, in the first place, an example which illustrates those initiatic types which exists in Muhammadian norms and of which Ibn 'Arabī speaks in his *Futūhat*, as we have already mentioned on other occasions.⁸ Suffice it to say here again that the prophetic form of Muhammad, as final synthesis of the prophetic cycle from Adam onwards, includes and sums up all the types of spirituality represented by the previous Prophets of whom the most important and most characteristic are mentioned in the Qoranic revelation and in the Hadith.⁹ The doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī gives the following explanation: the Prophet Muhammad, or his light, was God's first creation: from this light were drawn the lights of the other Prophets who came successively into the human world as his "representatives"; he himself came in body at the end of the cycle of prophetic manifestation, and it is thus moreover that the laws of his representatives come to be "abrogated" and replaced by his own law which potentially has contained them all ever since the beginning, and which, when it rejoins them in operation on the historical plane, either confirms them or not, according to the rule providentially allotted to the last part of the cycle wherever tradition continues to be followed. In any case, independently of the actual presence, in the world, of laws formulated by the previous bearers of Revelation, the spiritual entities of these messengers figure as inherent realities which go to make up the Muhammadian form itself and as ever present functions in the initiatic economy of Islam. It is in virtue of this that the spiritual men of *Tasawwuf* live and develop initiatically, without any deliberate choice on their part, according to this or that spiritual type which corresponds to them by natural affinity, either in general or during one phase of their career; they only realize needless to say the possibilities of the type in question insofar as these are to be found in themselves. Some may thus have to pass successively beneath the initiatic rule of several of these particular prophetic entities inscribed in the Muhammadian sphere which sums them up.¹⁰

As to the Shaikh al-'Alawī's case, it is true that the "visions" in question are merely indirect documents limited to one particular moment in his life, but this moment was particularly important for the Master's personal career and for the historical destinies of the *tarīqah* to which he belonged. This *tarīqah*, apart from the normal part it had to play within its Islamic framework, had also to constitute the presence of *Tasawwuf* as a viable initiatic path on the very borders of the Western world and even within the zone of European influence on the Moslem world which thus became also a zone of penetration in the opposite direction; it had therefore to express itself through means that were appropriate to a real and effective contact with the intellectual sensibility of the West. Despite the alterations and losses of memory inflicted on it by anti-traditional modernism, this sensibility—or what was left of it—could not but be mainly Christic in character. This being so, the presence in our times of a Moslem spiritual leader of 'Isawī¹¹ type at the head of a North African branch of the *Tarīqah Shādhiliyyah* is most understandable, and other concomitant or subsequent facts serve to confirm this way of looking at things.

As regards the Shādhilīs, let us recall here what we wrote about the Islamic sources of the work of René Guénon.¹² When mentioning the more direct interest of Islam, amongst all Eastern

traditional forms, in everything that concerns the fate of the West and the possibilities of its spiritual redress, we drew attention to the part played by the Egyptian Shādhilī Shaikh 'Ullāish al-Kabir. This Shaikh is the author of the famous statement quoted by René Guénon in Chapter III of his *Symbolism of the Cross* (written 1931): "If Christians have the sign of the Cross, Moslems have its doctrine". It was moreover above all on the basis of certain points of doctrine proceeding from this master that Guénon wrote his book which holds a central place in his work as a whole and which concerns in the highest degree those Westerners who participate in traditional intellectuality. We have no intention of insisting any further on this point in the present context, except to add by way of precision, that this book of Guénon and all those subsequent writings of his which deal with symbolism proceed from principles which are characteristic of "‘Īsawīs" and from which the Science of Letters (*‘ilm al-hurūf*) proceeds especially in its aspect of knowledge and art of the Divine Breath or in its aspect of Life¹³ (the "letters" being above all the articulated elements of the Word). It may be added also that this was the spiritual science of Al-Hallāj, celebrated "‘Īsawī" of the third and fourth centuries of Islam (858-922), who by a coincidence which has nothing fortuitous in it has also a connection with our times in that he constitutes the theme *par excellence* of the orientalist interpretation of *Tasawwuf*. The case of Al-Hallāj is fraught with particularities and accidents which are difficult to place, especially for anyone who does not have a traditional' point of view; it has therefore been turned all the more easily, though not without distortions, into a subtle machine of war against Islam as a whole; and even some modern Orientals, the product of milieu dominated by European universities, have succumbed to this machine. We have here, as it were, the reverse side of the already mentioned intellectual relationships between Islam and the West.

To go back to the book which prompted these notes, let it be added that they do not account for all the reflections we might have made on this subject. There is one point in particular about which Dr. Lings has been very discreet, and so have we, without any connivance and moreover for reasons which are probably somewhat different from his though not ultimately opposed to them; in the hope that some day we shall be free to speak with less reserve.

¹ Originally published in the *Etudes Traditionnelles*, janvier-fevrier 1968, pp. 29-34.

² Villain et Belhomme—Editions Traditionnelles, Paris, 1967.

³ *Etudes Traditionnelles*, janvier-fevrier 1962, p. 46.

⁴ Dr. Carret composed his text, dated "Tanger, mai 1942", at the request of an 'Alawi faqir of Western origin who had not known the Shaikh Al-'Alawi and who had been initiated into the path of *Tasawwuf* after the death of the Shaikh by one of his Moroccan muqaddams who was himself then living at Tangiers. The first French edition of this text was in the form of a booklet of thirty pages published at Mostaganem in 1947 under the title: *Le Cheikh El-Alaoui (Souvenirs)*.

⁵ The Descent of Sayyidna 'Isa is the second coming of Christ which is expected in Islam, as well as in Christianity, as the climax to the events of the last days, though the two religions differ in certain respects as regards his function.

⁶ That is the invocation (*dhikr*) of the name Allah, generally termed "the Name of the Divine Majesty", as in what immediately follows.

⁷ In the second edition (revised and enlarged) of his book, published this year by Allen and Unwin under the title *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, Martin Lings refers to this article and gives a translation of the four visions in question. (Ed.)

⁸ See especially the mention made in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, nos. 372-373, juillet-octobre 1962, p. 166, note 2, and more especially, as far as the Islamic spiritual type of `Isa is concerned, p. 169, note 12.

⁹ Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. It may be born in mind also that the spiritual form of Muhammad, apart from its universal and totalizing function, has a particular, differential aspect by reason of which the Prophet of Islam is also one of a historical line together with the other Prophets of the whole traditional cycle.

¹⁰ There are cases of Masters or Saints of Islam who have thus realized the possibilities corresponding to each of the particular Prophets. The question is closely related to the Islamic doctrine of the traditional Seals, and more especially to the doctrine of the Seal of Muhammadian Mastery (*khatam al-walāyat al-muhammadiyah*) which has not been fully understood by those Orientalists who have dealt with it, some of whom have gone so far as to distort it almost beyond recognition. This question will have to be considered another occasion.

¹¹ This epithet derived from the Islamic name of Jesus, and used in *Tasawwuf* (by Ibn `Arabī for example) to denote those *Awliyā'* (sing. walī="friend of God", saint) whose spiritual type is the spirit of Jesus as possibility contained within the general Muhammadian form, is not to be confused with the same word as used to denote a member of the *Tarīqah 'Isawiyyah* whose designation is derived from the name of the Shaikh Bin `Īsā, founder of a North African branch of the *Tarīqah Shādhiliyyah*.

¹² *L'Islam et la fonction de René Guénon*, in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, janvier-fevrier 1953, pp. 14-47.

¹³ "The science belonging especially to Jesus is the Science of Letters. Thus it is that Jesus had received the power of inbreathing life which consists of that air which proceeds from the depth of the heart and which is the Spirit of Life" (Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūhāt*, ch.20), quoted by M. Vālsan in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, no. 424, 1971. See also the same number for the author's *Références islamiques du "Symbolisme de la Croix"* (Translator's note).