

7 Islam and Freemasonry in the Twentieth Century

Summary 7.1 New Myths. – 7.2 A Universal Spirituality. – 7.3 Freemasonry and Islamic Esotericism Today.

7.1 New Myths

To conclude this study about the relations between Masonry and the Orient on a mythical, symbolic and esoteric level, a further aspect is the connection between Freemasonry and Islam developed especially, but not only, from the European side, starting in the nineteenth but especially in the twentieth century.

It has been seen how, during the expansion of Masonry in the Levant, starting in the eighteenth century, only a few European masons had paid attention to brotherhoods - especially John Brown -¹ despite the affiliation of some Sufis to the lodges and despite the fact that the convergence between masons and Bektashi had brought out some surprising affinities. The main preoccupation of the brethren who had come to the Middle East was not so much to track down esoteric symmetries with local orders, as to export and propagate Masonry, which in its way had set itself the mission of 'civilising' the colonised world, including Muslims (and only after discussions within the lodges concerning the suitability of admitting them).² While Freemasonry could be considered compatible with Islam on the basis of Anderson's *Constitutions*, in the Levant too, its cultural horizon was anchored to its European sources. The Egyptophile fashion, in-

¹ Brown, *The Darvishes*.

² *Compte-rendu de l'Assemblée Maçonnique; Compte-rendu de la deuxième Assemblée.*

stead of restoring the Hermetic roots of Freemasonry, had enriched its imagination with symbolic references to a fundamentally unreal Ancient Egypt, but no relationship had been thought possible with Islamic initiatory experiences.

However, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, undeniable symmetries between some mystic practices in the Middle East and in Freemasonry – like the case of the Bektashi – began to give rise to the idea of a convergence, if not of direct derivation, of Masonry, from Sufism, Ismailism or the Druze. On the basis of purely formal affinities – often of a very general nature, such as numerological symmetries – some publications suggested daring and unlikely overlapping or direct derivation between Islamic (or pre-Islamic) esoteric paths and European ones, through vague historic routes. These ‘studies’, without any hermeneutic base, were supposed by their authors to certify the ancient nature of Masonry and its Oriental origin. Actually, such conjectures failed to find much credit even in masonic milieux. Bernard Springett, who produced an example of this kind of literature in the introduction to his book *Secret Sects of Syria and the Lebanon: a Consideration of their Origin, Creeds and Religious Ceremonies, and their Connection with and Influence upon Modern Freemasonry*, published in 1922, admits that:

A surprising amount of scorn and ridicule has been the reception accorded by Freemasons, both in Great Britain and in America, to previous attempts to place on record some very plain proofs that we are justified in saying in our Masonic Ritual that ‘we came from the East and proceeded to the West’.³

Springett tells us how the hypothesis of a direct derivation between Masonry and the Druze, suggested by Haskett Smith,⁴ had also met with scepticism in the Masonic public. Blending myth, invention and history, in an article titled *The Druses of Syria and their Relation to Freemasonry*, published in 1891 in the “*Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*”, Smith claimed:

1. that the Druses are none other than the original subjects of Hiram, King of Tyre, and that their ancestors were the builders of Solomon’s Temple;
2. that, to this very day the Druses retain many evident tokens of their close and intimate connection with the Ancient Craft of Freemasonry.⁵

³ Springett, *Secret Sects*, 5.

⁴ Smith, “The Druses of Syria”, 7-19.

⁵ Smith, “The Druses of Syria”, 9.

Indicating the mountaineering Phoenicians as the craftsmen and Masons who build the Solomon's Temple, he claimed that Druses were their descendants on the basis of sings and passwords that they supposedly inherited, being absolutely convinced that:

I have thus been enabled to trace without, as it seems to me, any missing link, the unbroken continuity between the pastoral subjects of Hiram, King of Thyre and the Druses of the present day.⁶

In the introduction to his work, Springett also quotes A.L. Rawson, who in 1877 had written a long description of his initiation with the Druze for the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Madame Blavatsky, showing the analogies between the Druze and the Masonic systems, "but his views met with such ridicule among American masons that he considered it would be a thankless and hopeless task to publish anything further in the subject".⁷

Springett's mention of Helena Blavatsky (of whom he also inserts an article in his volume)⁸ takes us back to the climate in which this new parascientific literature arose, a confused and imaginative blend of Egyptosophy and Oriental disciplines, often associating both with Masonry to claim the rediscovery of a universal ancestral spirituality. A mountebank for some, an enlightened spiritual being for others, the co-founder⁹ of what critic René Guénon called the 'Theosophist pseudo-religion'¹⁰ she had an enormous impact on twentieth century esoteric imagination.¹¹ Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), who spent her life amidst magicians, magnetisers and spiritualists, and who worked herself as a medium in Cairo and the USA (being found guilty in both places of fraud), established the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York, under the guidance, she claimed, of certain spirits. The message of the spirit guides, and the core of the complex metaphysical system of Theosophy, was based on the principle that different religions bear a universal message, necessary for understanding the absolute Truth; the Theosophical doctrine thus appears as an entirely arbitrary recombination and synthesis of principles present in different faiths or mystic currents, interpreted in various ways. One can find elements of Brahmanism, Buddhism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Jewish Kabbalah, occultism, Egyptomania/Egyptosophy - and, last but not least, evolutionism. Especially the

⁶ Smith, "The Druses of Syria", 9.

⁷ Springett, *Secret sects*, 6, 203-7; De Smet, "Les prétendues origines druzes".

⁸ Blavatsky, "Lamas and Druses".

⁹ The other founder of Theosophy was the reporter Henry Steel Olcott.

¹⁰ Guénon, *Theosophy*, 1-24.

¹¹ Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky*; Lachman, *Madame Blavatsky*.

Egyptosophic strain came to her from the journalist and Egyptologist George Felt,¹² and from the American Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, where she spent some time in the early 1870s. It comes as no surprise that one of the alleged spirit guides, ‘masters of ancient wisdom’ of Blavatsky bore the name of Serapis and that she titled her first book *Isis Unveiled* (1877). Later the Russian medium, who had become a US national, joined the Arya Samāj, a reformist Hindu movement founded in Bombay in 1870 by Swāmī Dayānanda Saraswatī, an organisation which she called the most ancient masonic lodge of India – established before the advent of Jesus –, of which the Theosophical Society deemed itself to be a branch. Actually, there was nothing masonic about Arya Samāj, of absolutely recent origin, and in 1882, Dayānanda Saraswatī broke off relations with the Theosophical Society, calling Blavatsky “a trickster”.¹³

However, Theosophism and its mystic fascination based on a mingle of heterogeneous elements aimed at depicting a synthesis as ‘absolute truth’ had an immense impact on Western Neospiritualism¹⁴.

It was with this mentality that Springett, in his book on the *Secret sects of Syria and the Lebanon*, recreated a thread connecting various initiatory or pseudo-initiatory organisms and ancient and modern sects, using of a hand-picked selection of superficial analogies. Turning traditional masonic mythopoieses into ‘history’ in order to prove the ancient origins of Masonry, he put together the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the Stellar Cult and, in succession:

The Druids, the Manicheans and Gnostics with all their developments traceable through to the Pythagorean system: the Templars; the Essenes, Therapeutae, Nazarenes, and their modern representatives, the Mandaites, or Christians of St. John; the Sabians, Nabatheans and the Samaritans; the Sufeites, and the various Dervish Orders; the secret sects of Islam, the Ismaeli, Bate-nians, Karmatians, and Metawileh; the Lodge of Wisdom at Cairo, the Assassins, the Nusairis, and the Druses.¹⁵

To the Druses he dedicated the longest chapter, associating them with both Tibetan Lamaism and Masonry, which is where he again picked up Haskett Smith’s thesis.¹⁶

¹² Felt took part in the foundation of the Theosophical Society, which he wanted to have called the Egyptological Society.

¹³ Guénon, *Theosophy*, 23.

¹⁴ This again is a term of Guénon.

¹⁵ Springett, *Secret sects*, 8.

¹⁶ Springett, *Secret sects*, 180-296.

A similar approach characterised Rudolf Von Sebottendorf, born Rudolf Glauer¹⁷ (1875-1945), who, influenced by Theosophy, in 1917 founded the Thule Society in Munich, the 'ideological' forerunner of Nazism.¹⁸ As Von Sebottendorf himself recounted,¹⁹ after an adventurous youth which led him to Australia, in 1900 he landed in Alexandria in Egypt, and stayed in Cairo before reaching Istanbul where he learned Turkish and worked at the service of an influential landowner, Hussein Pasha. It is not clear whether he converted to Islam, but in Turkey he approached Islamic esotericism through the Mevlevi, and thanks to Hussein Pasha who practised Sufism and allegedly introduced him to the secrets of Muslim alchemists, still practised by the Bektashi. In Bursa, a Greek Jewish family from Salonica, the Termudi, also introduced him to the Kabbalah and initiated him in a masonic lodge, perhaps affiliated with the Memphis rite. Von Sebottendorf, who believed that Islamic mysticism shared an Aryan origin with Germanic runes, in 1914 wrote a manuscript which he rewrote and published in Leipzig in 1924 under the title *Die Praxis der alten türkischen Freimaurerei*. There he revealed the spiritual exercises of 'Turkish Masonry', explaining that, contrarily to what is believed in the West, "Islam is far more alive than the Christian religion",²⁰ and that:

The exercises of the Oriental mason are merely actions taken to make improve oneself and acquire greater knowledge. The following text will show that they represent the secret of the Rosicrucians, the discoveries of the alchemists, the achievement of the seekers' passion, the philosopher's stone. [...] I shall show how Oriental Masonry, even today, is faithful to the ancient philosophers whom modern Masonry has forgotten; one may start by saying right away that the Constitutions of Freemasonry of 1717 are no deviation from the straight path.²¹

The idea of an original spirituality of the Truth, flowing from East to West through direct contaminations among initiatory groups, emancipated from specific cultures, historical and social contexts, became

¹⁷ After becoming an Ottoman citizen in 1911, he appears to have been adopted by an expatriate baron by the name of Heinrich von Sebottendorf, taking his name.

¹⁸ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*; Alleau, *Hitler et les sociétés secrètes*; Galli, *Hitler e il nazismo magico*.

¹⁹ Goodrick-Clarke (*The Occult Roots*, 199-223) used von Sebottendorf's autobiographical writings, with their elements of fantasy, but supported by other documentary sources. One may however be quite sceptical about his esoteric education.

²⁰ Von Sebottendorf, *La pratica operativa*, 14.

²¹ Von Sebottendorf, *La pratica operativa*, 15.

a paradigm which gained strength in the twentieth century, through increasingly heterogeneous manifestations, leading up to the New Age movement. This vision would give rise to a series of unlikely hypotheses, but also to specific experiences which would indicate spiritual ways with a universalist vocation. This trans-religious approach would continue to be valid until our days and would gain adepts in the Islamic world as well.

7.2 A Universal Spirituality

Sometimes influenced by Theosophism, sometimes firmly opposed to it, sometimes simply following a vocation of their own, various personalities of the twentieth century opened up a new outlook for contemporary spirituality, with a wide variety of contents and outcomes. Some of these figures, in their writings or lives, would provide testimony of their direct experience of Sufism or Freemasonry or both, the connection between Eastern and Western esotericism, giving rise to schools which often had considerable influence. They could follow different individual paths and come from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, but they all shared experiences of transnational life, with itineraries from the East to the West or vice versa. Instead of attempting to classify the components of this very composite universe, it is better to give some examples which show their variety of expression.

The father of the universalist view of religions was certainly René Guénon (1886-1951). Like Helena Blavatsky, Guénon too would have a major impact on contemporary spiritualism or neospiritualism, and, as with the Russian medium, he would have at least as many admirers as detractors. He had a wide range of esoteric interests: when he was very young, Guénon attended Papus' Hermetic occultist school, Masonry, the Martinists (the antechamber of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, long 'in dormancy'), the Gnostic Church of France, but what really changed his life was his encounter with Hinduism, through a master of the Advaita Vedānta when he was twenty. This encounter, he said, founded his metaphysical certainties.²² He seems to have become a Sufi in 1910, through the Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli, who had been initiated in Cairo in the Shādiliyya *tarīqā* under the name of 'Abd al-Hādī; Guénon's Islamic name became 'Abd al-Wāhid Yahyā.²³ In the two following decades, Guénon set himself the mission of restoring the spiritual destiny of the West, reaching a wide public with his writings, but he was forced to acknowledge

²² Laurant, *Le Regard ésotérique*, 104.

²³ Urizzi, *Présence du soufisme*, 330-1; Rezki, *René Guénon*, 59.

his failure, and in 1930 departed for Cairo. The trip was supposed to last three months, but once he had established himself in the old quarter of the Egyptian capital, he quickly learned Arabic, became the disciple of a shaykh of the Shādiliyya (among other he has been influenced by ‘Abd al-Rahmân Illaysh, close friend of ‘Abd al-Qādir in Damascus)²⁴ and publicly converted to Islam, using his Muslim name exclusively from then on. Guénon never returned to Europe and was buried in Cairo on his death in 1951.

Guénon’s thinking was built around a clear basic principle: all religions share a universal truth, which is still preserved in the East. A fierce critic of Theosophy – which however influenced him –²⁵ Guénon considered it impossible to establish a new religion or spiritual access starting from an arbitrary synthesis of heterogeneous elements, and deemed valid only ancient traditions expressed in their authenticity, which – he believed – all converged towards the spiritual fulfilment of Man. He is considered the founder of the ‘Traditionalist school’ or *perennialisme*, following the term *sophia perennis* suggested by Frithjof Schuon, referring to the nucleus of Truth which can be achieved through gnosis arising from spiritual initiation into one of the major religious Traditions. Already in his *Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues*, published in 1921, he had this to say about metaphysical questions:

Tout ce que nous venons de dire est applicable, sans aucune restriction, à n’importe laquelle des doctrines traditionnelles de l’Orient, malgré de grandes différences de forme qui peuvent dissimuler l’identité du fond à un observateur superficiel: cette conception de la métaphysique est vraie à la fois du taoïsme, de la doctrine hindoue, et aussi de l’aspect profond et extra-religieux de l’Islamisme.²⁶

Guénon, believing the West to be spiritually ‘lost’, therefore chose the Sufi way for his interior self-fulfilment, but he preserved a certain respect for Freemasonry. Guénon’s masonic experience was brief (approximately from 1909 to 1914) and he certainly considered Freemasonry a corrupted institution. However, he did believe it to be the

24 Zarccone, *Le mystère Abd el-Kader*, pos. Kindle 206-2013.

25 Actually, Guénon got to know Theosophy at an advanced stage of his initiatory path. However, many believe he was influenced by the Theosophical or spiritualist and occultist thinking of the nineteenth century, sharing with Theosophy the principle of a universal spirituality based on a core esoteric teaching that underlies all religions (Smoley, *Against Blavatsky*). However, in academic milieux, many have criticised his totally unscientific approach, where false premises lead to imaginary conclusions (Eco, “La supposta”; Jesi, *Cultura di destra*).

26 Guénon, *Introduction générale à l’étude*, 56.

only authentic initiatory organisation in the West together with the *compagnonnage*, and he dedicated several articles collected and published posthumously in two volumes.²⁷

Even though his treatises are epistemologically weak and have been criticised by academic scholars,²⁸ Guénon did launch an original hermeneutic approach, 'internal' to the initiatory path, and influenced many contemporary spiritualists and scholars, some of whom were also transitional between Masonry and Sufism. During the twentieth century, the study of Islamic mysticism derived much of its energy from his work and from that of other Europeans converted to Islam and to initiates of Sufi orders, who would refer, directly or indirectly, to dialogue or spiritual convergence between religions.

Thus, the Romanian diplomat Michel Vâlsan (1911-1974), follower of Guénon,²⁹ converted to Islam and became a master of the Shādiliyya *tariqā* in Paris under the name Shaykh Mustafa 'Abd al-'Azīz. Especially through his writings for the review *Etudes Traditionnelles* which he also directed, Vâlsan practically founded western contemporary studies on Ibn 'Arabī, translating many of his works.³⁰ Commenting on some essays by Guénon, Vâlsan went back to the topic of the relationship between Masonry and Oriental traditions, including Islam, in a series of articles published in *Etudes Traditionnelles* under the title *Les derniers hauts grades de l'Écossisme et la Réalisation descendante*.³¹

The Swiss mystic of German origin, Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) as a youth came in touch with the Qur'an and Hindu texts such as the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, and at the age of 17, he read and appreciated Guénon, with whom he shared the rejection of the European civilisation of his day and the idea of a mystic Truth at the core of different religions.³² At the age of 22, he went to Paris to study Arabic. In 1932 he decided to travel to India to seek a spiritual teacher, but then he went to Mostaganem in Algeria, where for four months he attended the school of the Sufi teacher Ahmad al-Alawī and converted to Islam under the name of 'Isâ Nûr ad-Dîn. Invested with the title

²⁷ Guénon, *Etudes sur la franc-maçonnerie*. For a critique of Guénon studies on Freemasonry see Di Bernardo, "René Guénon e la Massoneria".

²⁸ According to Umberto Eco, Guénon, in his reflections on the Rosicrucians, showed "sovereign disdain for any historical and philological criterion" ("Arnold e i Rosa-Croce", 6).

²⁹ Vâlsan, "La fonction de René Guénon" and *L'Islam et la Fonction de Rene Guénon*.

³⁰ *Les écrits de Michel Vâlsan*. URL <http://www.sciencesacree.com/pages/les-ecrits-de-michel-valsan.html>.

³¹ Vâlsan, "La fonction de René Guénon". The articles are collected in Vâlsan, *La realizzazione discendente*.

³² Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon*; Nasr, *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*; *Frithjof Schuon Archive*. URL <http://www.frithjofschuon.info/english/home.aspx>.

of shaykh in 1936, he founded the first Sufi order in Europe in Basel.³³ Schuon was also a friend of the Swiss Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), another major figure in the *perennialist* school, who also converted to Islam in Morocco in the 1930s and was initiated into Sufism. He was also author of important works on Islamic esotericism and alchemy.

In France, one can also mention Bruno Étienne (1937-2009): initiated into the lodge *Le Phare de la renaissance* in Marseilles in 1960, he remained a member of the French Grand Orient until his death. A researcher with the CNRS, he spent several years in North Africa before becoming Professor at the Institut d'études politiques di Aix-en-Provence. As an academic, but also a direct *connaisseur* of the esoteric dimension, he dealt with Islamic spirituality, also in the relationship with Masonry, sometimes putting aside scientific rigour: "On comprend donc que pour traiter ce sujet (soufisme/maçonnerie), je vais être amené à quitter quelque peu la voie scientifique que j'ai proposé de suivre jusqu'ici".³⁴ Especially, he dedicated two works to the figure of 'Abd al-Qādir.³⁵ As a young man, Henry Corbin (1903-1978) too was influenced by Guénon's thinking, and his passion for Oriental spirituality led him first to Istanbul and then to Iran, where he began studying Shiite spirituality, producing key works in that context in the Department of Iranistics he had set up at the Institut Français. Corbin, who became a mason in 1962 (he was initiated into the lodge *Les Compagnons du Sept No. 3*, which obeyed the French Grand National Lodge - Opéra 6), was very close to the Shiite esoteric milieu which he studied and dedicated a large part of his academic and social engagement to supporting spiritual and esoteric dialogue between the three Abrahamic religions, for example through the University of Saint John of Jerusalem, the International Centre for comparative spiritual research which he founded with other academics. Freemason is also Thierry Zarcone (Worshipful Master of the Research Lodge Villard de Honnecourt), the most prominent scholar on Ottoman freemasonry, and source repeatedly mentioned even in this book of ours.

There is no intention to express any judgement on the value of the personalities spoken of here, or on their writings: the different examples of mystic and esoteric erudition illustrated so far are important for us because they show how during the twentieth century, interest in Oriental spirituality led to reflections concerning the possible convergence between European and Islamic esoteric paths, with special reference to Masonry and Sufism. Also seen from Europe, Western and Eastern esotericism are no longer watertight universes, but

33 Fascinated by native American culture, after several years of travel in the USA, in 1980 Schuon moved to Bloomington, Indiana, where he died at the age of ninety.

34 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie*, 104.

35 Étienne, *Abd el-Kader et la franc-maçonnerie; Abdelkader*.

reflections of a universal spirituality, which present many commonalities. Ever since its foundation and throughout the nineteenth century, Masonry implanted in the Orient presented itself as a tool for exporting Western culture, including esoteric culture; but from the twentieth century, it would be Islam which fascinated many European intellectuals and spiritualists. Paradoxically, Europeans would start to insist on the affinity between 'Western' and 'Eastern' initiatory systems with an empirical attitude, approaching and converting to Sufism, at the time when the masonic experience in the Middle East was beginning to decline or had ended, from the 1930s on and especially in the second half of the twentieth century. The effect therefore was mainly on the West and contributed in no way to reinforcing the masonic experience in the Islamic context, overwhelmed as it was by regional geopolitical developments and conspiracy thinking.

7.3 Freemasonry and Islamic Esotericism Today

The founders of Traditionalist thinking and the personalities who helped the universalist spiritual vocation take root belong to at least one of the esoteric traditions of the East or the West, being initiated into recognised masonic orders or Sufi orders in the Islamic world, some also having done research in an academic context. However, recent or still active movements exist which pick up universalist thinking, giving rise to partly syncretistic experiences, through initiatives or studies which are marginal both in academic circles and among the official orders they supposedly adhere to.

For example, Sayyid Idris al-Hāshimī, known as Idries Shah (1924-1996),³⁶ considered one of the most influential exponents of Western Neosufism and its most successful populariser, never belonged to any Islamic Sufi order. Born in India, to an Afghan father and Scottish mother, Shah grew up in England, having been exposed since childhood to the most diverse influences thanks to his father's work as a diplomat and to the open-mindedness of his family. In the late 1950s, Shah began to work with Gerald Gardner, founder of the Wicca, the British neopagan movements - influenced in its turn by Theosophy -³⁷ and already back then he began popularising Sufism, after having come into contact with a group inspired by the teachings of another influential philosopher and mystic of the time, Georges Ivanovič Gurdjieff. In 1964 he published his most significant work, *The Sufis*, with help from and a long introduction by his friend Rob-

³⁶ Moore, "Neo-Sufism"; Dervish, "Idris Shah"; Lewin, *The Diffusion of Sufi Ideas*; Sedgwick, *Neo-Sufism in the 1960s*.

³⁷ Heselton, *Wiccan Roots*.

ert Graves. In this work, Shah, who believed in “the essential unity of all religious faith”³⁸ claimed that Sufism preceded Islam and that “Sufis show how and why the message of self-perfection may be carried into every conceivable kind of society, irrespective of its nominal religious or social commitment”,³⁹ suggesting, among other things, an outlook with an evolutionary touch to it.⁴⁰ While he admits that very similar esoteric elements can be found in different civilizations, quoting the saying “pears are not found only in Samarkand”⁴¹ and speaks of ‘confluence’ among the various esoteric traditions, he also claims direct seeding by Sufism for Western esoteric experiences. The Knights Templar,⁴² Saint Francis of Assisi,⁴³ the Carboneria,⁴⁴ the Order of the Garter,⁴⁵ Masonry,⁴⁶ the Rosicrucians⁴⁷ all supposedly derived directly from Sufi orders. To support this hypothesis, Shah used quite original arguments, associating for example the hut, *baracca*, of the *carbonari* with the *baraka* (!), the Islam blessing also used in Sufism,⁴⁸ or freely using numerological keys. Shah also alludes to the initiation to ancient esoteric mysteries of a general of Napoleon’s army during the Campaign of Egypt (an episode that recall general Kléber and Napoleon initiation mentioned by Zola), who presumably “founded the Order of the Seekers of Wisdom, otherwise known as the Sufiyin-the Sufis”⁴⁹ - but fails to give us the general’s name or provide precise details about the source (“a book perhaps correctly entitled the *Mélange*”).⁵⁰ As has already been said, Shah was neither initiated nor founded Sufi orders, but in 1965, he established in London the Institute for Cultural Research (an educational charity aimed at stimulating “study, debate, education and research into all aspects of human thought, behaviour and culture”)⁵¹ - which in 2013 became The Idries Shah Foundation.⁵²

38 Shah, *The Sufis*, 39.

39 Shah, *The Sufis*, 27.

40 Shah, *The Sufis*, 61-3.

41 Shah, *The Sufis*, 42.

42 Shah, *The Sufis*, 254-6.

43 Shah, *The Sufis*, 257-64.

44 Shah, *The Sufis*, 194-204.

45 Shah, *The Sufis*, 245-53.

46 Shah, *The Sufis*, 205-15.

47 Shah, *The Sufis*, 274.

48 Shah, *The Sufis*, 202.

49 Shah, *The Sufis*, 270.

50 Shah, *The Sufis*, 270.

51 *The Institute for Cultural Research, Welcome*. URL <http://www.i-c-r.org.uk>.

52 URL <https://idriesshahfoundation.org/>.

While Shah spread a school of thought emancipated from the Islamic roots of Sufism, the Ecumenical Arab Grand Orient (GOAO) founded by Jean-Marc Aractingi appears quite marginal, if not irregular, in the context of the masonic family.⁵³ According to its own website, the GOAO (Obéissance française d'Etude et de Recherche travaillant au Rite Œcuménique - Judéo-Chrétien-Musulman) includes an Ecumenical Arab Grand Orient of Lebanon, of France, of the Indian Ocean and of the Ivory Coast. The site refers to a Centre de Recherche et d'Initiation au Rite Œcuménique, based in Normandy, which:

a pour mission principale d'initier les postulants au différents grandes de ce rite. De Plus, il se veut être un 'Think tank' du Rite Œcuménique qui plonge ses racines dans le Rite Ecossais Ancien et Accepté (REEA) tel qu'il a apparu au XVIIIème siècle, et étend sa ramure vers les différents mythes et voies initiatiques arabo-islamiques. Le Rite Œcuménique a été élaboré par le Grand Maitre Mondial du Gran Orient Arabe Œcuménique, le TSF Jean-Marc ARACTINGI.⁵⁴

As Aractingi himself puts it:

Si J'ai élaboré un nouveau rite en franc-maçonnerie, le rite œcuménique ou abrahamique (judéo-chrétien et musulman), alors qu'il existe une multitude de rites [...] c'est parce que tous ces rites fondent leurs références uniquement sur la culture biblique [...] et que seul le Rite Œcuménique (RO), tout en préservant l'essentiel de ces différentes cultures, les complète en faisant référence à la culture arabo-musulmane. Un rite qui se veut universel et compréhensible pour toutes les cultures du monde, que l'on soit d'origine asiatique, africaine, européenne ou autre.⁵⁵

Jean-Marc Aractingi, by profession an engineer and diplomat, former Master of the Grand Lodge of France at the Orient of Paris and high dignitary of the Sovereign International Sanctuary of the Egyptian rites of Memphis-Misraïm, published an *Histoire Mondiale de la Franc-Maçonnerie en Terre d'Islam*, in two volumes, and together with

⁵³ Pragman, "Que Représente".

⁵⁴ *Centre de Recherche et d'Initiation*. URL http://grandorientarabe.org/index.php?p=1_12_Rite-cum-nique.

⁵⁵ *Centre de Recherche et d'Initiation*. URL http://grandorientarabe.org/index.php?p=1_12_Rite-cum-nique; Aractingi, Introduction a *Le Rite Œcuménique*; Aractingi, *Le Pape, Rituels et Catechismes*.

Christian Lochon⁵⁶ wrote *Secrets initiatiques en Islam et rituels maçonniques. Druzes, Ismaéliens, Alaouites, confréries soufies*. In this work, the authors highlight the closeness of the Sufi esoteric way to the masonic one, comparing for example the initiatory rituals of the Islamic world (Bektashi and Shiite sects: Alawi, Ismaili and Druze, where they partly replicate Haskett Smith's study without quoting the source). Aractinigi and Lochon in 2014 also published *Islam et franc-maçonnerie. Traditions ésotériques*, dedicated to some heterogeneous aspects of Mediterranean spirituality and esotericism. Generally speaking, the volume brings out symbolic, mythical and initiatory elements taken from various traditions which present analogies, to uphold the thesis of a substantial identity of spiritual paths, ignoring or underestimating any element which, by distinguishing among traditions, makes each unique. For example, they write:

Le fait que les religions juive, chrétienne, musulmane tout aussi bien que la franc-maçonnerie se déclarent 'universelles' montre qu'avec patience et ténacité, nous nous devons de souligner que l'humanisme méditerranéen est bien notre substrat culturel commun malgré la diversité des appellations de nos croyances. [...] Mythes et tradition constituent la mémoire des hommes éclairés a la recherche de l'initiation authentique.⁵⁷

The authors insist on the universal message of religions as an element of convergence, and not as the aspiration by each to become the one faith at the expense of the others, as even a glance at history shows us is the case.

In the United States too, movements exist which combine Masonry and Islam. For example, Mustafa El-Amin, author of *Al-Islam, Christianity and Freemasonry and of Freemasonry, Ancient Egypt and Islamic Destiny*, claims a connection between Freemasonry, America and Ancient Egypt. El-Amin explores the great contributions that the ancients Africans of Egypt made to the West and the entire world, convincing himself of the confluence of the Western esoteric front into the spiritual world of Islam: especially *Freemasonry, Ancient Egypt and Islamic Destiny* "points out that the ancient wise of Egypt and the hidden teachings of Freemasonry alludes to an 'Islamic destiny', the ultimate idea for advancing society on the basis of justice".⁵⁸ In

⁵⁶ With a literary and Orientalist education, Lochon has lived and taught in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt, Iran. He was cultural attaché of the French Embassy in Baghdad, Khartoum and Damascus, director of studies and research at the Centre des Hautes Etudes sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Modernes (CHEAM), and taught in the Educational Institute for Imams at the Grand Mosque of Paris.

⁵⁷ Aractinigi, Lochon, *Islam et franc-maçonnerie*, 4.

⁵⁸ Back cover of the volume *Freemasonry, Ancient Egypt and Islamic Destiny*.

the USA, again, it's quite spread the Shrine (Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine), a paramasonic brotherhood⁵⁹ (all Shriners are masons), "a fraternal organization of men who are dedicated to brotherhood, compassion and service to others",⁶⁰ founded in 1872 by the physician Walter Millard Fleming (1838-1913) and the actor William Jeremy 'Billy' Florence (1831-1891). The Shrine adopted 'Arab' and Oriental symbolism, and its members wear a fez, with an emblem reminiscent of various Oriental symbols,⁶¹ while the temples are often associated with mosques.⁶² Though all this seems to have a purely casual and largely playful origin, its symbolic impact is not to be neglected.⁶³ Of special interest is the fact that a member of the Shrine, Albert Rawson (d. 1902), considered a fine connoisseur of the Christian and Islamic East, used the image of 'Abd al-Qādir to attract proselytes, claiming in 1877, to be in correspondence with the Emir. In fact, in American masonic circles, the Algerian Emir enjoyed particular fame and prestige, evoked for his humanity and tolerance and above all for his Sufi mysticism - but mistakenly believed by the Shrine a Bektashi. On his death, in June 1883, the Imperial Council of Shriners brought up a communiqué in the New York Times entitled "Abd el-Kader's Masonic Friends", recalling that the emir was considered "head of the [Shrine] order in the Eastern hemisphere".⁶⁴

More examples could be given, but the substance does not change. While clear elements of affinity between European and Oriental esoteric dimensions do exist, formal syncretisms (based on ideas of direct derivation, a universalist vision of religions as an ecumene, or an idea of Masonry represented by Islamic symbols) betray a simplification, if not a distortion, of the history of relations between differ-

⁵⁹ Specialists generally reserve the term "paramasonic" for orders and societies not technically belonging to Masonry, but which admit only masonic as members, or else for "auxiliary" youth or women's organisations.

⁶⁰ *Shriners International*. URL <https://www.shrinersinternational.org/Shriners/History/Beginnings>.

⁶¹ "The scimitar stands for the backbone of the fraternity, its members. The two claws are for the Shriners fraternity and its philanthropy. The sphinx stands for the governing body of the Shriners. The five-pointed star represents the thousands of children helped by the philanthropy each year". Shriners International. *History. Beginnings*.

⁶² El-Amin, *Al-Islam, Christianity, & Freemason* (video).

⁶³ "Billy Florence had been on tour in France and had been invited to a party given by an Arabian diplomat. The exotic style, flavours and music of the Arabian-themed party inspired him to suggest this as a theme for the new fraternity. Walter Fleming, a devoted fraternity brother, built on Fleming's ideas and used his knowledge of fraternal ritual to transform the Arabian theme into the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (A.A.O.N.M.S.). With the help of the Knickerbocker Cottage regulars, Fleming drafted the ritual, designed the emblem and costumes, formulated a salutation and declared that members would wear the red fez". Shriners International. *History. Beginnings*.

⁶⁴ Zarcone, *Le mystère Abd el-Kader*, pos. Kindle 1284-1318.

ent civilisations. Especially, they detach history and esoteric forms from the underlying metaphysical, political and social paths where certain phenomena have arisen, and which make each experience unique and specific in its kind. These approaches also mask the profound differences which marked both the civilisations in the region and conflicts (just as violent in the political and military field as in the theological one) between Christianity and Islam over the centuries, not to mention the conflicts within the Christian and Islamic worlds themselves.

However, a syncretistic vision does show the will to build a link between Islamic and European esotericism, with special reference to Masonry, in order to develop a spiritual ecumene which can overcome the social and political barriers which prevent meeting and cause clashes of civilisations.⁶⁵ Taking gnosis and the Hermetic approach to be a universal value which confirms the unity of being, each of these readings – even when their origins and goals are not always clear – contributes to creating a collective culture open to encounter and favourable to dialogue; in today’s globalised world, they can help spread antibodies against ever spreading radicalisation.

65 Theosophical and Traditionalist currents certainly influenced right wing movements – not last Nazism – in Europe, but they also influenced left wing ones. This study limits itself to observing the spiritual aspects of these approaches, without going into political manipulations, some of which had devastating results.

Glossary of Arabic And Turkish Terms

- çırak*: apprentice
dhimma: lit. subordinate legal status of protection for non-Muslims living in an Islamic state
dustūr: code, constitution
fata/fityān: young member of the *futuwwa*
futuwwa: chivalry
'ilm al-bātin: occult science
Islāh: reform
Kalfa: companion
mu'allim: master
muta'allim: apprentice
nahda: awakening or 'renaissance', cultural movement developed in Egypt at the end of the 19th century
peştemal: canvas and aprons
qalandarī: heretic
rafiq: master
sani: worker
sharī'a: the Islamic law.
sinf/asnāf: urban guilds
tariqa: lit. 'way', Islamic brotherhood
tasawwuf: sufisms
usta: master
ustādh: master
wahdat al-wujūd: unity of Being
zàirgeh: Egyptian tables for the arts of divination