

# A SUFI SAINT OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: SHAIKH AHMAD AL-'ALAWI: HIS SPIRITUAL HERITAGE AND LEGACY

**Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj ud-Din) Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, England, 1993. (Reprint). pp. 242.**

In the midst of the spiritual and aesthetic sterility of Muslim-majority lands since colonial and post-colonial days, the spiritual attainments of Shaikh Ahmad al Alawi (1869-1934) must be valued as all the more unique and precious in our time.

Of pious and God fearing parents, he was born in 1869 in Mostaganem, Algeria, during the high-noon of European imperialism. Very early in his youth, he was attracted to the Darqawi spiritual order and served its master, Buzidi with utter devotion until his death in 1909 when he became his successor.

Shaikh Ahrnad al Alawi devotedly served the cause of Islam all his life till his last breath. Towards this end, he repudiated all "organizations" and "propaganda" in the western sense. He was the opposite of today's Islamic "activist." Simply his saintly presence was sufficient, shedding the light of faith all round him. Once while in Algiers, he was followed on his way to the Great Mosque by more than a hundred men, all Muslims in little more than name. When they reached the door of the mosque, he told them to go in with him which they did. Then sitting down in their midst, he preached to them. When he finished, they repented to Almighty Allah and vowed to the Shaikh that they would never again return to their former ways. (p.102)

When the Shaikh traveled through the countryside, sometimes the entire population would spontaneously come to take Bait at his hands. A disciple records that hundreds, sometimes thousands would sit before him on the ground in silence with heads bowed, full of awe and eyes wet with tears because of what they heard him say. (p. 102)

Shaikh Ahmad also wrote extensively on the inner life of Islam from the point of view of Tasawwuf (Sufism). Soon he was the target of severe attack

form the Salafi (reformists) and defended his order with vigour and eloquence. Finally his strict adherence to adab or the standards of Islamic behaviour and courtesy won over his most vociferous opponents.

Among the remarkable features of this book are beautifully translated selections from the Shaikh's poetry which, contrasting with his secular, West-sorshipping literary contemporaries, attain the summit of modern Arabic poetry. In one of these poems, the Qur'an is described:

It hath taken up its dwelling in our hearts and on our tongues  
and is mingled with our blood and our flesh and our bones  
and all that is in us. (p. 35)

The narrative of this book begins with a vivid description of the Shaikh, then already fifty years old, by his doctor, Marcel Caret who despite his own agnosticism, retains complete objectivity. He writes: "The first thing that struck me was his likeness to the usual representations of Christ...." (p. 14)

Why did al-'Alawi's successor, Shaikh Muhammad al-Hashimi (d, 1961) fail to have the same impact? According to Abdal Jabbar Danner's book, *The Islamic Tradition* (1988), the fault was not his. He writes:

The reformative efforts of such a saintly figure could affect so many because the Algerian and the Islamic world of his day were still largely in the traditional mold. The influence of the modernist governing elite had not yet seeped down into the mass of believers ... The case of his successors is not the same. Their followers have been much more restricted in numbers (because) since World War II, the world around them has been in great part de-Islamized by the modernists. The teaching of 'Alawi's successor, Shaikh al-Hashimi, Was carried out in a Syria under the socialists whose culture was rapidly succumbing to the inroads of the modern world." (p. 211).

The inheritors of Shaikh al-'Alawi's legacy in the West, particularly in the U.K. and the U.S.A. including the author of this book, are again under

severe attacks. Unlike their predecessors, this time, the attackers have no conception nor appreciation of adab. The contrast between the mental stature of the attackers and the attacked and their respective contributions to the cause of Islam are most striking. The attackers can offer no viable alternative except the most crass materialism and nihilism.

Even for those Westerners lacking basic knowledge of Islam, this book can be of much benefit.

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