

# Jāmī's description of Abū 'Abdāllah Balyānī

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# jâmî's description of abû 'abdallâh balyânî

James  
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Theophany or "Pantheism" ? : the Importance of Balyânî's *Risâlat al-Ahadiya*.

The impact of books has little to do with their size. The first Western translation of a work attributed to Ibn 'Arabî, T.H. Weir's *"Whoso Knoweth Himself..."* (1901), was no more than a brief pamphlet,<sup>1</sup> and Michel Chodkiewicz' study of that same text, now correctly identified as Awhad al-dîn Balyânî's *"Epître sur l'Unicité Absolue"* (Paris, 1982), is still a short book. Yet it would be difficult to exaggerate the actual and potential significance of his study for bringing about a more adequate understanding of the true dimensions and contexts of Islamic spirituality, among both Western readers and younger, post-"traditional" generations in the new Islamic nation-states. Together with Professor Chodkiewicz' subsequent works on Ibn 'Arabî, this work has already contributed to bringing about a much-needed clarification and rectification of earlier widespread misunderstandings of "Sufism", of the teachings of Ibn 'Arabî, and of the purportedly "monistic" or "pantheistic" character of his doctrines and their ongoing reflection in the many movements of later Islamic thought and spirituality which remain inseparable from the wide-ranging influences of the "greatest Master", al-Shaykh al-Akbar.

In order to appreciate the surprisingly far-reaching importance of M. Chodkiewicz' remarks on this brief treatise, we must first explain the wider significance of the early translations of this *"Risâlat al-Ahadiya"* — and especially of their repeated mis-attribution to "Ibn 'Arabî" — in first mirroring, and then eventually helping to shape, both popular and more scholarly Western conceptions of Islamic spirituality from their first appearance at least on into the 1970's. The detailed history of the formation of these distinctive modern Western notions of "Sufism" and "Islamic mysticism" remains to be written, but there is no doubt that those nascent cultural stereotypes were already marked, even before the appearance of Weir's and 'Abd al-Hâdî's translations, by at least the following distinctive features.<sup>2</sup>

## 1

The assumption that these matters ("Sufism" or "Islamic mysticism", etc.) were essentially intellectual, theoretical, or doctrinal teachings that could be formulated and communicated, by

literary or other means, without further reference to the practical dimension of spiritual "realization" (Ibn 'Arabî's *tahqîq*) and the host of very concrete questions, both individual and cultural, that are inevitably raised when one enters that dimension.

## 2

The assumption of a vaguely "pantheistic" — or at the very least, "immanentist" — focus on the locus and forms of awareness of the ultimate reality, usually seen (at least in the prevalent Anglo-Saxon conceptions)<sup>3</sup> as reflecting a radically "individualistic", personalistic perspective explicitly divorced from any essential social and cultural ties with ritual, authority, tradition, practice and the like.

## 3

The assumption that the teaching or "wisdom" in question was essentially "universal" — or alternatively, vaguely "Eastern", "Oriental", "perennial", etc. — in such a way as to preclude any need for further reference to specific religious and cultural traditions, with their own concrete practical and intellectual demands.

While the *Risâlat al-Ahadiya* did not by itself create those basic pre-conceptions — and especially the wider cultural notions of "mysticism" within which the initial non-specialist images of Islamic spirituality in the West were almost inevitably embedded —, its long tenure as the only completely translated and widely-available<sup>4</sup> work attributed to Ibn 'Arabî in the West certainly helped to cement and support those stereotypes. Even a cursory reading of that text — or of Jâmî's stories about Balyânî himself, as translated at the end of this article — will quickly make clear how accurately these broad

conceptions are mirrored in this work and what we know of its (true) author's own life and teachings.

The second essential backdrop to the wider influence of M. Chodkiewicz' study has to do with an even broader and much more dramatic historical phenomenon : i.e., the ironic way that these recently created and historically quite anomalous Western stereotypes of "Sufism" and "Islamic mysticism" — and of the often mythical role attributed to Ibn 'Arabî in both — gradually came to be re-inserted into the ongoing polemical struggles of several generations of would-be "reformers" and "revolutionaries" seeking to shape and direct new nation-states and social realities throughout the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup> Whatever their ideological stance (traversing the whole spectrum from Marxist to Islamist!), those nationalist political and social reformers have almost everywhere tended to share a common distaste for the "corruption", "decadence", and other defects they typically associate with these same mythical stereotypes of "Islamic mysticism", "popular religion", and with the intellectual and cultural traditions and accomplishments of (at least) the preceding six centuries of Islamic civilization — not coincidentally, the period during which Ibn 'Arabî's actual influence became so widespread, at every level of religious teaching and expression, in Muslim cultures from Africa to China and Indonesia.<sup>6</sup>

Against this background, then, the essential contribution of Michel Chodkiewicz' work on Balyânî, as with each of his succeeding and increasingly detailed studies of Ibn 'Arabî himself, has been to undermine and radically "de-construct" these far-reaching mythologies that have come to be symbolically associated with the name of Ibn 'Arabî, in both East and West.

He has done so, like an authentic 'ālim in any culture, not by articulating some new, alternative mythology, but rather by conscientiously exploring and re-presenting the actual religious, cultural and historical contexts within which Ibn 'Arabī — and, in this case, Balyānī and the earlier Islamic figures who were his own inspiration, like Shushtarī and Ibn Sab'īn — were actually writing and teaching. In the study of the *Risālat al-Aḥadīya*, in particular, Prof. Chodkiewicz began to develop three basic facets of that far-reaching effort of rectification and clarification which have been pursued in all his subsequent publications concerning the Shaykh.

The first of those facets, part of a much wider transformation in scholarship on Islamic subjects, has been to re-situate the "theoretical" writings and doctrines of figures such as Ibn 'Arabī (or Balyānī) within their original contexts, with all that implies for the relative weighting of religious, practical, literary, aesthetic and social dimensions that have typically been lost or forgotten when such texts came to be viewed only through a narrow philosophic, theological or political prism. The second key aspect of that scholarly effort, in some ways a subset of the first, has been to distinguish the actual teachings and writings of Ibn 'Arabī himself from the host of images and stereotypes with which his name has become associated — through the combined efforts of generations of "supporters" and detractors alike, in both Islamic and Western settings. One outstanding result of that effort, brilliantly illustrated in both of M. Chodkiewicz' subsequent books on Ibn 'Arabī, has been to restore appropriate emphasis to the absolutely central role of Islamic scriptures (Qur'an and ḥadīth) and of spiritual practice throughout all of his writing and teaching, and specifically in his monumental *"al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya"*.

The third facet of this new approach, most strikingly illustrated already in this study of Balyānī, is that it has freed serious scholars and historians — too often distracted by the mythic dualisms of ideological polemics, past and present — to turn their attention to the creativity and diversity of Islamic religious and mystical thought, practice and social expression throughout the crucial formative period of the late 12th/6th to 14th/8th centuries. As we indicated at the beginning, this is potentially much more than a merely scholarly or academic contribution. Simply recognizing the very fact of this diversity and creativity, and bringing it to the attention of those obsessed by the polemics and ideological orthodoxies of our own time, can help to open doors that unfortunately are too often closed throughout much of the Islamic world today.

Indeed it may have been in this same spirit and with something of the same far-sighted intentions that the celebrated Persian poet and philosopher of Herat, 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 1492) — commentator on the *"Fusus al-Hikam"* and devoted lifelong student of all of Ibn 'Arabī's work — mentioned Balyānī (d. 1287/686) in his famous hagiographic work, *"Nafahāt al-Uns"*. The practical opposition so visible in each of these anecdotes between Balyānī's radical spiritual individualism ("antinomianism" would be almost an understatement) and the far more sober, consistently Sharia-based injunctions underlying virtually all of Ibn 'Arabī's practical spiritual teachings is at least as dramatic as any of the multitude of doctrinal contrasts and disagreements between these two figures that are highlighted in M. Chodkiewicz' telling notes to Balyānī's treatise. But instead of "censoring" Balyānī, either by openly censuring him or by simply leaving him out of his work (as he surely did with other Sufi figures), Jāmī seems to have delighted in drawing attention to the

eccentricities of his character and method and, by implication, to their inner connections with his more theoretical teachings. Each reader is left to draw the appropriate conclusions...

## JÂMÎ'S DESCRIPTION OF ABU ABDALLÂH BALYÂNÎ<sup>7</sup>

His surname was Awhad al-Dîn, and he was one of the descendants of Abû 'Alî Daqqâq. Balyânî's lineage goes back to Abû 'Alî as follows : (he was) the son of 'Abdallâh, son of Mas'ûd, son of Muhammad, son of 'Alî, son of Ahmad, son of 'Umar, son of Ismail, son of Abû 'Alî Daqqâq—May God bless their innermost souls. Master Abû 'Alî [Daqqâq] had one son, Ismâ'îl, and a daughter, Fâtima Bânu, who was married to Abû al-Qâsim al-Qushayrî.<sup>8</sup>

As for his chain of initiation, he took the *khirqâ* from his own father, Diyâ' al-Dîn Mas'ûd, who is also known as "Imâm al-Dîn" Mas'ûd. He received it from Shaykh Asîl al-Dîn Shîrâzî, [p. 259] who took it from Shaykh Rukn al-Dîn Sanjâsî, from Shaykh Qutb al-Dîn Abû al-Rashîd Abharî, from Shaykh Jamâl al-Dîn 'Abd al-Samad Zanjânî, both of whom received it from Shaykh Abû al-Najîb Suhrawardî<sup>10</sup> - May God bless their innermost souls.

Balyânî said : "At the beginning (of my path) I sought to seclude myself from people, and I spent eleven years up on Mount Ligâm. When I came down from the mountain, I kept company with<sup>11</sup> the ascetic (*zâhid*) Abû Bakr Hamadânî. He was a man with spiritual powers and true spiritual insight<sup>12</sup>. His personal form of worship (*wird*) was always as follows : every night he got up and placed an iron rod under his chin, and remained standing (in prayer) until day. With his assent, I likewise stood behind him ; from time to time he

would look back and encourage me, saying (mockingly) : "Go and lie down somewhere!" I would sit down on the ground while he was occupied with his own (spiritual) task, and after a while I'd get up again. I emulated him until the time when his spiritual state also descended on me ; at that point I (again) chose solitude. Zâhid Abû Bakr was so very happy with me that he called me "Gypsy". I heard that one day he said: "Gypsy" came and took something from me and carried it off ; now I don't know where he went!" After some time I went back to see him. "Where were you", he asked, "and what did you bring ?" I modestly said nothing. After we'd sat together for an hour Zâhid asked me a question, in answer to which I responded that "I am not other than God". Zâhid said : "So you've brought the saying of Mansûr (al-Hallâj) ?"<sup>13</sup> "With a single sigh that I make", I answered, "I can find a hundred thousand (God-intoxicated souls) like Mansûr !" As soon as I said that, Zâhid picked up his rod and threw it at me. I jumped aside, and that rod just missed me. Zâhid cursed me roundly and said : "They crucified Mansûr and he didn't run away, but you fled from this little stick !" "That's because Mansûr wasn't yet spiritually perfect (*tamâm*)", I replied, "or else he would have run away. For with God — May He be exalted and sanctified — all things are one." Once I'd said that, Zâhid said: "Maybe you've eaten some (psychedelic) plant ?" "Yes indeed", I replied : "I have eaten a plant, but from the meadows of Reality !" "You've eaten bliss and you've eaten well", he declared, "so come sit on the prayer-carpet and preserve that (through prayer) !"

Later Zâhid asked me : "What you said concerning Mansûr (al-Hallâj), that it was because of his (spiritual) imperfection that he didn't run away and was crucified — what is your reason for saying that ?" "My reason," I replied, "is that if a rider who claims to know horsemanship [p.



260] doesn't let go of the reins when he gallops his horse ; or if, when he does drop the reins, he's still able to restrain the horse, then such a person is rightfully called a skillful rider. But if he's not able to stop his horse, then he's said to be imperfect in horsemanship". After I'd said that, Zâhid agreed with me. "You spoke correctly", he said : "I've never seen anyone more perspicacious than you."

Balyânî also said : "They told me that one of the companions of Shaykh Shihâb al-Dîn [Abû Hafs 'Umar] Suhrawardî<sup>14</sup> — May God sanctify his spirit — called Shaykh Najîb al-Dîn Buzghush<sup>15</sup> had come to Shiraz. I was very happy at that, because I had already attained all of the (spiritual) stations and states of the Sufis about which I'd learned, and I was seeking (to discover) something more. Indeed my own father used to say : "Whatever I requested from God I gave to (my son) 'Abdallâh ; what (God) opened up for me like a little peephole, He opened up for (my son) like a wide-open gate." So I got up and traveled to Shiraz in order to meet Shaykh Najîb al-Dîn.

I told him quite a few things about my own spiritual states and stations and extraordinary experiences. He listened to everything very politely and didn't say anything in response. I sat there for an hour and then went outside, but suddenly I felt absolutely compelled to return. "Let's go back and see Shaykh Najîb al-Dîn", I thought to myself, "to find out what he says."

When I reached the door of his house, they told me: "He's in the inner (private) rooms. Go on in and sit down in that outer room where the shaykh usually sits (in public audience) until he comes back." Now when I sat down there, I noticed that just in front of his prayer-carpet was (a paper with) everything that I'd just told him written down on it. "Aha"! I thought to myself,

"so the shaykh needed that so much he even wrote it down ! Now I know what sort of fellow he is and to what lengths he'll go !" I immediately got up and went outside. But when I reached Kâzarun<sup>16</sup> I reproached myself, and I found a certain (spiritual) ambition (had returned) within me. I began a spiritual retreat (khalvat), and during that retreat God gave me whatever I asked Him for in (only) five days.

One day when he was in Shiraz, he went into the khânegâh of Shaykh Sa'dî.<sup>17</sup> Shaykh Sa'dî took a handful of pennies and set them next to (Balyânî). "Say (a prayer over these)", he said, "so that we can give this blessed offering (to buy) a meal for the dervishes."<sup>18</sup> "O Sa'dî he replied", (instead of) bringing out those pennies, go take that jar with the 62 silver coins you put in it, and use that for the dervishes' supper!" Shaykh Sa'dî immediately went and brought back the jar, just as [p. 261] he had said (and found the money in it).<sup>19</sup> Then he sent it out and had a wonderful meal prepared for the dervishes.

The Shaykh had a disciple who was a cook ; he sold soup in the bazaar. Whenever the Shaykh passed by that disciple's shop he would take a bowl of his soup and eat it right there, standing up. One day he had a bowl of soup in his hands when a (would-be) dervish came up with great ceremony, dressed in a multi-colored Sufi robe,<sup>20</sup> and greeted him. "I would like for you", he said, "to point out for me the way to God. Please tell me what would be helpful for me to do so that I can act according to (your instructions)." The Shaykh handed him the bowl of soup he was holding in his hands and said : "Part of the foundation of your work is to take this and eat it." So the dervish took the soup and ate it, and when he was finished eating the Shaykh told him : "Now wipe off the soup that spilled on your hand on your Sufi robe, and do the same thing

whenever you eat something." "But master", he said, "I can't do that ! Can't you suggest something else for me to do !" "Since you aren't even able to do this much", the Shaykh said, "you wouldn't be able to do anything else I'd tell you to do either. Run along ; you aren't cut out for this work!"

One of the Shaykh's disciples had sought out a secluded place on the mountain, when a poisonous snake came along. He tried to pick up the snake, but it bit him and his limbs became inflamed and swollen. The news of this reached the Shaykh and he sent a group of people to bring back the disciple. "Why did you pick up that snake", he asked the disciple, "so that he could bite you?" "But my master", the disciple replied, "you yourself always said that there's nothing other than God ! I didn't view that snake as being other than God, and that's why I bravely picked it up." The Shaykh declared : "Whenever you see God in a terrifying form (*libâs-i qahr*), run away and don't go near Him ! For if you don't act like that, He'll do exactly what happened to you just now !" After that he put his hand under the disciple's head and helped him to sit up and said : "From now on don't do anything so rash until you know that He<sup>21</sup> is good." Then he said a prayer and blew on the disciple, and the swelling went away and he was cured.

He once said : "Being a real dervish<sup>22</sup> isn't ritual prayer and fasting, and it isn't spending the night in prayerful vigil. All those things are (just) the accouterments of servanthood, while being a real dervish means suffering offense and affliction<sup>23</sup>. If you really attain that, you've arrived".

He also said : "Know God — but if you don't know God, then don't know yourself either ! Because when you don't know yourself, then you come to know God." Then he said : "I say that there's something even better than that [i.e., than knowing God] : Be God ! But if you aren't God,

then don't be yourself — because if you aren't yourself, then you are God."

One day he had gone on pilgrimage<sup>24</sup> to (the tomb-shrine of) Shaykh Ruzbihân Baqlî<sup>25</sup> — May God bless his innermost self — and Shaykh Sadr al-Dîn Ruzbihân [p. 262] was seated at the head of his father's tomb. When Shaykh 'Abdallâh (Balyânî) stood in front of Ruzbihân's tomb, Shaykh Sadr al-Dîn stood up out of respect for him, remained standing for a while, and then sat down. And again he stood up and remained standing for a while, but Shaykh 'Abdallâh didn't even notice him ! When (Balyânî) had finished his 'visit', Sadr al-Dîn said to him : "I've been standing up (in respect for you) all this time, and you didn't even notice me !" "Shaykh Ruzbihân had handed me a pomegranate", he replied, "and I was busy eating it with him."

Among his poems is the following :

We're totally God, most absolutely :

We're not from fire, wind, water and earth !

We've become forever naked with regard to being or not-being ; our clothing is torn.

The Truth: you can't see any other than God, for no doubt both worlds aren't other than Him'!

We don't say the world is Him ; nor (do we say) that it's wrong to make that connection :

He isn't the world, nor is the world Him :

to see all as Him in this way is not mistaken.

And this quatrain :

Until I saw *Haqq* with my own two eyes every instant

I never stopped seeking with each breath.

They say God can't be seen with our own two eyes : so

they're like that, and I'm like this at every instant.

passed away on the day of 'Ashurâ,<sup>26</sup> in the year 686

[March 4, 1287].

## Notes

1 - Originally published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1901, pp. 809-825 ; now available in a separate paperback reprint under the above-mentioned title (Beshara Publications, 1988). The subsequent Italian and French translations (1907 and 1910) by 'Abd al-Hādī (Ivan Agueli) are discussed in more detail at the beginning of M. Chodkiewicz' study.

2 - One has the initial impression that each of these stereotypes was more sharply developed in the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic evolution of these conceptions than in France — due both to the vagaries of radically differing colonial and missionary contacts, and to the equally differing receptivities of predominantly Protestant and Catholic intellectual settings — but the exploration of these significant differences, as well as the larger process of discovery-cum-creation of images of Islamic spirituality, must be reserved for another time.

3 - It is important to note that the great majority of the preceding English translations of Islamic spiritual texts, whether from Persian or Arabic (or Malay, Hindi, etc.), were guided by sources and traditions rooted in the Eastern Islamic world, especially South Asia, rather than the Ottoman/Arab realms and contacts long reflected in French Islamic scholarship.

4 - While Nyberg's subsequent editions and commentary (1919) had a noticeable influence on later scholars writing on Ibn 'Arabī, they did not reach a wider public ; and Asin-Palacios' pioneering works long remained either untranslated into other European languages or known mainly to specialists in non-Islamic fields (Dante studies, medieval history, etc.). The increasing availability in more recent decades of translations (T. Burckhardt, 1955) and then detailed studies (most notably, by H. Corbin and T. Izutsu) focusing on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fusus al-Hikam* and its later Muslim philosophic commentaries did not in itself seriously call into question these same underlying pre-conceptions about Ibn 'Arabī and "Islamic mysticism."

5 - By discussing the anti-"monistic" polemics of Ibn Taymiyya and his earlier emulators in their actual historical contexts, throughout all of his writings on Ibn 'Arabī, Professor Chodkiewicz has helped to highlight the radically different nature and context of these modern polemics involving the name of Ibn 'Arabī, even when their language and themes are clearly drawn from earlier medieval discussions. Another of the particularly striking phases in this continually ironic process of cross-cultural "transmission" that M. Chodkiewicz has often highlighted in his notes to these studies is the remarkably far-reaching direct and indirect influence, throughout so many parts of the Islamic world, of the highly charged polemic images of Ibn 'Arabī and his "followers" (faithfully mirroring all the above-mentioned stereotypes) to be found throughout the writings of Louis Massignon.

6 - For the almost unimaginable extent of that ongoing historical influence, see the superb and densely allusive summary of the available research (by dozens of contemporary scholars) in M. Chodkiewicz' Introduction to *Un océan sans rive : Ibn 'Arabī, le Livre et la Loi* (Paris, Seuil,

1992), now available in translation as *An Ocean Without Shore* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1993).

7 - The actual author of the "Treatise on the (Divine) Unicity" (*Risālāt al-Ahādīya*) often attributed to Ibn 'Arabī, translated by T.H. Weir as "*Whoso Knoweth Himself...*". This text is the translation of his biographical notice in 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī's (d. 1492) renowned Persian hagiographic dictionary, *Nafahāt al-Uns* (Tehran, ed. M. Tawhīdīpūr, 1336 h.s./1957), pp. 258-262. For additional historical background on Balyānī's probable historical connections with the "monist" Sufi school of Ibn Sab'īn and al-Shushtarī, drawn from discussions by Ibn Taymiyya and other later sources, see M. Chodkiewicz' Introduction to his translation of Balyānī's *Epître sur l'Unité Absolue* (Paris, les deux Océans, 1982), pp. 17-41.

8 - Daqqāq (d. 405/1014) and Qushayrī (d. 465/1074, author of the celebrated *Risāla*, perhaps the most widely read traditional Islamic work on the Sufi path) are two of the most important figures in the development of Sufism in Nishapur before the two Ghazālīs. Anne-Marie Schimmel (*Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 427) mentions that Qushayrī's wife, Fâtima-Bānū, also became famous for her learning and knowledge of *hadith* as well as her piety.

9 - The "patched garment" (in actual practice often simply a cap or other symbolic object) symbolizing the spiritual "poverty" of the Sufi, bestowed in the formal initiation ceremony connecting a novice with a particular chain of spiritual teaching (*silsila*) usually traced back to the Prophet.

10 - Died 563/1168, the influential founder of one of the oldest surviving Sufi orders, the Suhrawardīya, and author of an early Sufi "rule", the *Kitāb Adab al-Murīdīn* (trans. M. Milson, *A Sufi Rule for Novices*, Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1975). He was an uncle of the equally famous Abū Hafs Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234) mentioned by Balyānī later in this notice (n. 14). Most of the other shaykhs in this portion of Balyānī's *silsila* were influential enough to be mentioned elsewhere in Jāmī's work (e.g., al-Sanjāsī as master of the famous Persian poet and disciple of Ib 'Arabī, Awhad al-Dīn Kirmānī, p. 588).

11 - This phrase loosely translates a key technical Sufi term (*suhbat*) referring to a person's regular, constant contact with a particular spiritual guide, in which they "learn" from all the actions and influences of the guide in question, not simply from formal teachings or specifically assigned disciplines. As can be seen from the remainder of Balyānī's story, it can sometimes be misleading to describe this often relatively informal process as a "master-disciple" relationship.

12 - *Karāmāt*, or "spiritual powers" [literally "acts of (God's) grace"], refers to the supra-normal psychic and psychokinetic powers possessed by certain saints. *Firāsāt*, or "spiritual insight", refers to the specific type of *Karāma* involving the ability to "see" into the heart, mind and general spiritual state of another person ; it is mentioned in a famous *hadith* : "Beware the *firāsa* of the person of faith, for they see with the light of God!"

13 - I.e., *And al-Haqq*, "I am God (the Truly Real)", the notorious "ecstatic saying" (*shath*) which — along with many other related acts and public teachings — eventually led to the



celebrated voluntary martyrdom of al-Hallāj. (See the exhaustive four-volume study by L. Massignon [trans. H. Mason], *The Passion of al-Hallāj*, Princeton/Bollingen, 1982.)

14 - This celebrated and politically influential master (d. 632/1234; nephew of the Abū Najīb Suhrawardī mentioned at n. 10 above) was the author of the famous Sufi "handbook", *ʿAwārif al-Maʿārif*, and played a key role in spreading the chivalrous "futuwwa" movement initiated by one of the last Abbasid caliphs, al-Nāsir. (See A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 244ff.) His biography is on p. 472 of the *Nafahāt*.

15 - According to Jāmī's notice (pp. 473-474), this devoted disciple of Suhrawardī returned to his native Shiraz (in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions?), established a flourishing *khanegah* there, and died in 678/1279.

16 - An important trading city about 70 miles west of Shiraz, on the traditional route to the gulf port of Bushahr, home of the important Kazaruni ("Murshidī", "Ishāqī") Sufi order founded in the early 11th century. (See the related articles in EI2, vol. IV, 850-51, which mentions an Amīn al-Dīn Balyānī as "reviver" of that order in the 7th-8th/13th-14th century.)

17 - Presumably the celebrated Shirazi poet (d. 1292) and author of the *Gulistān* and *Bustān*. However, it should be added that modern historians have tended to question the authenticity of many of the later stories about Sa'dī's life and travels drawn from his works, including Jāmī's own brief notice later in the *Nafahāt*.

18 - It is not entirely clear from the context whether Sa'dī is simply asking Balyānī for his additional blessing on the money to be used for buying the meal, or whether instead it is understood — as in a similar anecdote told about a poor but respected saint by Ibn ʿArabī in his *Sufis of Andalusia* — that the pennies blessed by a famous saint will actually fetch a much higher price because of their protective, talismanic value.

19 - Again it is not clear whether the "miracle" (*Karāma*) intended by the story is simply that Balyānī was supernaturally aware of the exact amount and location of money Sa'dī had once put away (and then forgotten?), or whether he was actually able to materialize that particular sum in that location. (Both sorts of supernatural phenomena are frequently mentioned in hagiographic works.)

20 - By the 13th century, with the international spread of both organized Sufi orders (*ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭuruq*) and wandering, mendicant dervishes throughout the Islamic world, their adherents in many regions had developed special robes, headgear and other distinctive apparatus (e.g., the *Kashkūl* or beggar's bowl; different forms of prayer beads; the *ṭabarzīn* or two-headed hatchet; etc.) to distinguish their particular status and affiliation.

The *khirqā hizār-mīkhī* ("thousand-nailed" *khirqā*) mentioned here was no longer the poor beggar's cast-off rags, but a splendid, artistically sewn patchwork of hundreds of tiny strips of multi-colored material — an ostentatious sign of wealth and social pretense rather than of inner or outward poverty.

21 - Or "it": it is unclear whether the reference is to the manifestations of God — and especially the well-known distinction between the divine theophanies of Beauty (*jamāl*) and Majesty (*jalāl*) — or to the more mundane distinction between poisonous and harmless snakes.

22 - Or simply "(spiritual) poverty": *darvīshī*, the Persian equivalent of the Arabic term *al-faqr*, glorified as the epitome of Muhammad's own spiritual path in the celebrated ḥadīth "Poverty is my pride", *al-faqr fakhrī*.

23 - The Persian term here (*ranjīdān*) is probably used as an equivalent of the Arabic Sufi technical term *malāma*, or intentionally "drawing blame" upon oneself in order to avoid the forms of hypocrisy often accompanying the reputation of piety and the spiritual "insincerity" (and insecurity) often underlying an unusual reliance on acts of piety and devotion. From a very early period, the true *mālamattīya* — accomplished mystics who carefully concealed their powers and accomplishments — were often considered the highest rank among the Sufis: see the references and discussion in A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 86-88, and R. Deladrière's recent translation of Sulamī's influential *R. al-Mālamattīya, La Lucidité Implacable: épreuve des Hommes du Blâme*, Paris, arléa, 1991.

24 - *Ziyārat*, literally "visit": the technical term in many Islamic languages for the pilgrimages to the tombs or shrines of saints, Imams, prophets and the family and Companions of Muhammad which are a central feature of religious life in every part of the Islamic world.

25 - One of the most celebrated of the many saints of Shiraz (d. 606/1209), whose works have been edited and translated by a number of modern Western scholars: see Jāmī, *Nafahāt*, pp. 255-258, and A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, index s.v.

26 - The tenth day of the lunar month of *Muharram*; for Shiites the final day of mourning commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn (grandson of Muhammad and son of Alī and Fātima) at Kerbala.

la  
description  
de abû  
'abdallâh  
balyânî  
par  
jâmî

James W.  
Morris

Sans envisager l'importance de l'"*Épître sur l'Unicité Absolue*" (en tant que contribution à la compréhension de la spiritualité islamique), nous devons à Michel Chodkiewicz (M.C.) d'avoir clarifié puis rectifié les conclusions erronées qui valurent à ce bref opuscule d'être faussement attribué à Ibn 'Arabî, qualifiant l'œuvre de celui-ci de "*monisme*" ou de "*panthéisme*", ce qui n'aura pas été sans répercussion dans la genèse des mouvements de pensée islamique jusqu'à nos jours.

Pour apprécier les remarques de M.C. sur ce traité, nous devons d'abord expliquer les significations des premières traductions de cette "*Risâlat al-Ahadîya*" désormais identifiée comme étant celle de Balyânî Awhad ad-Dîn (ob. 686/1287). En fait l'histoire entière des notions occidentales modernes de soufisme, depuis sa formation jusqu'aux années soixante dix, est à réécrire. On s'accorda trop longtemps à reconnaître au "*soufisme*", à la "*mystique islamique*" ou "*spiritualité islamique*" une dimension essentiellement intellectuelle, théorique ou doctrinale, sans aucune référence à celle de "*réalisation spirituelle*".

L'hypothèse du "*panthéisme*", prévalant dans les conceptions anglo-saxonnes, reflète une perspective radicalement "*individualiste*", "*personnelle*", détachée de toute dimension sociale, culturelle. Enfin, la supposition que l'enseignement de la sainteté était essentiellement universel ou alternativement "*oriental*", "*éternel*" a, dans un sens, empêché le recours aux références des religions et traditions culturelles spécifiques.

Si l'Épître n'est pas elle-même à l'origine de ces préjugés, son attribution à Ibn 'Arabî a certainement contribué à asseoir et cautionner ces stéréotypes.

Le second impact des travaux de M.C. est lié à un plus large et (d'ailleurs) dramatique phénomène historique. L'ironie du sort a fait que ces a priori à l'égard de la spiritualité islamique et le rôle mythique dévolu à Ibn 'Arabî refirent surface dans le champ des polémiques de plusieurs générations de "réformateurs" et "révolutionnaires" ambitionnant de façonner et diriger les nouveaux Etats-nations et les réalités sociales, à travers le monde islamique. Quelles que soient leurs positions idéologiques initiales ces politiciens nationalistes ou réformateurs (du marxisme à l'islamisme) affichèrent un commun dégoût pour la "corruption" et la "décadence" qu'ils associent à la mystique islamique, à la religion populaire et aux traditions intellectuelles et culturelles ayant eu cours durant les six derniers siècles dans la civilisation islamique : or, précisément, la période incriminée recouvre celle du

rayonnement de l'influence akbarienne, attestée dans les cultures islamiques allant de l'Afrique à la Chine, jusqu'à l'Indonésie.

La contribution essentielle de M.C. tient à ce qu'il a radicalement déconstruit les mythologies attachées au nom d'Ibn 'Arabî, tant en Orient qu'en Occident. Il a donc opéré comme un authentique *'âlim*, sans aucunement substituer une nouvelle mythologie à l'ancienne mais plutôt en explorant et représentant les différents contextes de la réception de l'œuvre akbarienne. La première de ces mutations que subirent les thèmes islamiques dans le cadre universitaire est de replacer les écrits akbariens dans leur contexte d'origine ; la seconde est la restauration du rôle absolument central des références scripturaires de l'Islam (Coran et Hadîth) et la fonction initiatique de cette œuvre. Troisièmement, M.C. a attiré l'attention vers la créativité, la diversité de l'Islam légal et spirituel et particulièrement sur la période cruciale de formation (pour celui-ci), comprise entre les XIIe et XIVe siècles. Ceci constitue davantage qu'une contribution académique. Ainsi fut-il possible de sortir de l'impasse des polémiques, de l'orthodoxie idéologique de notre temps.

C'est assurément dans le même esprit et animé des mêmes intentions, que le célèbre poète persan 'Abd al Rahmân Jâmî (ob. 1492) commentateur des *"Fusus al Hikam"* ayant consacré sa vie à l'étude des œuvres d'Ibn 'Arabî, mentionna Balyânî (ob. 1287) dans sa fameuse hagiographie *"Nafahât al Uns"*. L'opposition très manifeste, dans chacune de ces anecdotes, entre l'individualisme radical de la spiritualité de Balyânî (antinomianisme serait plus exact) et la sobriété reposant sur les préceptes de la *Chari'a* (et comme telle, ramenant allusivement à l'enseignement initiatique d'Ibn 'Arabî), s'avère finalement aussi dramatique que ces divergences doctrinales dont rendent compte les notes jointes par M.C. à ce traité.

Jâmî semble avoir attiré l'attention sur les excentricités du caractère de Balyânî et de sa méthode. Chaque lecteur tirera les conclusions appropriées.

## LA DESCRIPTION DE JÂMÎ

Balyânî déclarait qu'à ses débuts dans la Voie, il s'était résolu à se retrancher du monde et passa ainsi onze années de solitude au Mont Ligâm. Quand il en redescendit il tint compagnie à Abû Bakr Hamadânî, lequel était doté de hautes qualités spirituelles. Chaque nuit celui-ci se levait et plaçait une tige de fer, sous sa poitrine et demeurait debout en prière jusqu'au matin. *"Avec son consentement, expliqua Balyânî, je souhaitais me tenir derrière lui ; de temps en temps il regardait vers moi et m'encourageait en se moquant : "va et allonge-toi quelque part !" Je m'asseyais un temps et pendant qu'il continuait, me relevais, (...) jusqu'au moment où son état spirituel descendit sur moi. Je décidais encore de choisir la solitude. Hamadânî était si content de moi qu'il m'appela "Gypsy", le gitan."*

*"Un jour, poursuit Balyânî, j'entendis quelqu'un rapporter ces paroles : "Gypsy vint et prit quelque chose de moi et l'emporta avec lui. A présent j'ignore où il se trouve".*

Quelque temps plus tard Balyânî revint auprès d'Hamadânî. *"Où étais-tu et qu'apportes-tu ?"* lui demanda-t-il. Balyânî lui répondit : *"Je ne suis pas autre que Dieu". "Tu as répondu comme Hallâj", à quoi Balyânî répliqua : "Il existe des centaines de milliers d'âmes telle que celle de Hallâj". Hamadânî le visa de sa baguette de fer et Balyânî, in extremis, l'évita. "Ils ont crucifié Mansûr (al Hallâj), sans qu'il ait jamais cherché à s'enfuir, et toi tu te dérobes devant une baguette !" "C'est parce que Mansûr n'avait pas atteint la perfection spirituelle, enchaîna Balyânî, car alors il aurait fui".*

*- "Par devers Dieu, toutes les choses sont un" ; Hamadânî continua : "Peut-être as-tu mangé une*

plante (psychédélique) ?". "Certes, répondit-il, mais elle provient des prairies de la réalité". "Tu as goûté la béatitude et tu as bien fait, assieds-toi donc sur le tapis de prière et préserve cela".

- "Pourquoi, interrogea plus tard Hamadânî, avoir ainsi qualifié Hallâj ?" Balyânî répondit : "Si un cavalier prétend savoir mener son cheval (...) et qu'il n'est pas capable de l'arrêter, il est considéré comme imparfait dans son art".

Balyânî dit aussi : "On m'a raconté que l'un des compagnons du Shaykh Shihâb al-Dîn Suhrawardî, appelé Shaykh Najib al-Dîn Buzghush, était sur le point de venir à Shiraz. J'en étais très heureux car j'avais déjà atteint toutes les stations et états spirituels des soufis, qui furent portés à ma connaissance, si bien que je cherchais à en savoir davantage. Je décidai donc de me rendre à Shiraz pour y rencontrer Shaykh Najib al-Dîn. Je l'entretins de mes expériences spirituelles les plus exceptionnelles. Il écouta mon récit avec beaucoup de politesse et pour toute réponse garda le silence. Je demeurai à ses côtés (dans l'attente d'une parole), une heure entière, puis me décidai à prendre congé, mais je fus pris soudain du besoin impérieux de retourner voir le Shaykh. Lorsque j'eus atteint la porte de sa maison on m'informa qu'il se trouvait dans ses appartements privés. Il me fallait donc m'asseoir et l'attendre là où il avait coutume de prendre place pour ses audiences en public. Alors que je m'étais installé je remarquai juste en face de son tapis de prière, un papier, où, à ma grande surprise, était consigné tout ce que je venais de dire. Ah ! pensais-je en moi-même, le Shaykh a donc tellement besoin de ce que je lui ai confié, qu'il l'a noté ! Je vois à présent de quel genre d'individu il s'agit ... ! Je repartis aussitôt. Mais quand je m'en fus retourné je me fis grief de mon comportement et trouvai qu'une certaine ambition spirituelle m'avait quitté. J'entrepris alors une retraite pendant laquelle Dieu me donna tout ce que je lui demandais pour une durée de cinq jours seulement."

Un jour qu'il était à Shiraz il visita le Shaykh Sa'di. Celui-ci soupesa une poignée de pièces de monnaie qu'il désigna à Balyânî : "Dis une prière

sur ceci, pour que nous puissions offrir un repas pour les derviches". "Oh ! Sa'di, répliqua Balyânî, au lieu de cette poignée de monnaie, va plutôt prendre ce vase dans lequel tu as déposé soixante-deux pièces d'argent, et utilise le pour le repas des derviches". Le Shaykh Sa'di se leva immédiatement et revint avec le vase, comme on le lui avait demandé et trouva ledit argent à l'intérieur.

Le Shaykh avait un disciple qui était cuisinier. Il vendait de la soupe dans le bazar. Lorsque le Shaykh passait devant l'échoppe de son disciple il prenait habituellement un bol de soupe et l'avalait sur place, debout. Un jour, il avait un bol de soupe entre les mains quand un (aspirant) derviche arriva, en grande pompe, vêtu de sa robe multicolore de soufi, et le salua : "J'aimerais que vous me donniez quelques conseils pour avancer sur la Voie de Dieu. Je vous en prie, dites-moi ce qui pourrait m'être utile...". Le Shaykh lui tendit le bol de soupe et lui dit : "Une part de ton travail consistera à prendre ceci et à le boire". Le jeune derviche s'exécuta et lorsqu'il eut avalé la soupe, le Shaykh ordonna : "Maintenant essuie ta robe et enlève les taches de soupe que tu viens de faire, et agis de même chaque fois que tu manges quelque chose". "Mais maître, répliqua le disciple, je ne peux pas (il ne s'agit pas de cela)". "Donne-moi autre chose à faire". "Si tu n'es pas capable de faire ceci tu ne parviendras à rien faire de ce que je te commanderais. Sors d'ici, tu n'es pas qualifié pour cette tâche".

Un des disciples du Shaykh s'était retiré dans la montagne quand un serpent venimeux s'approcha. Le disciple tenta de l'attraper mais se fit piquer, ce que vint à savoir le Shaykh : "Pourquoi as-tu fait cela ?". "Maître, tu m'as toujours dit qu'il n'y a rien d'autre que Dieu. Je n'ai pas songé que le serpent était autre chose que Dieu, c'est pourquoi je l'ai bravement soulevé". "Toutes les fois que tu vois Dieu sous une forme terrifiante, rétorqua le Shaykh, cours et ne reste pas près de lui. Dorénavant abstiens-toi de tout acte irréfléchi jusqu'à ce que tu saches qu'il est bon".

Balyânî dit un jour : *"Être un derviche authentique ne consiste pas en la prière rituelle et le jeûne pas plus qu'à prier toute la nuit. Tout ceci n'est que l'apparence de la servitude, alors que l'état de derviche trouve l'accomplissement dans la capacité de souffrir les offenses et l'affliction (référence à la malâma : hommes du blâme). Si vous y parvenez vous êtes arrivés".*

Il dit aussi : *"Connaître Dieu — mais si tu ne connais pas Dieu tu ne te connais pas toi-même — (...). Je dis qu'il y a quelque chose d'encore meilleur que cela : être Dieu !"*

Un jour que Balyânî était en pèlerinage sur la tombe de Rûzbihân Baqlî, le fils de celui-ci se tenait là assis au bord de la tombe ; il se leva immédiatement par respect pour le Shaykh Balyânî qui ne le remarqua point. Lorsqu'il eut terminé sa visite, le fils de Rûzbihân lui en fit poliment le reproche. Il lui fut répondu : *"Shaykh Rûzbihân m'avait tendu une grenade et j'étais tout simplement occupé à la déguster avec lui".*

Suit un poème que nous ne traduirons pas, dont le thème central est *"La vérité : Tu ne peux voir autre chose que Dieu..."*.

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Traduction de Véronique Barre

