







of this reminding function of tradition that the Shaykh al-‘Alawi protests against religious indifference and rampant materialism when declaring “Islam complains to God, it is betrayed by its own. (...) Our coreligionists cannot even conserve what remains, in fact, of religious practices, to save them in this world and the next.(...) Indifference is everywhere! Only the degrees of this indifference are different.”<sup>7</sup> He is particularly concerned by the spiritual destiny of the youth: “Our youth has plunged in this modern civilization that it thought to be licit, whereas it is perishable.” For him the challenge of modernity is not to be couched in the legal terms of the licit and the illicit, but in metaphysical terms: the unreal that claims to be real, the perishable that postures as eternal, forgetfulness that supplants remembrance.

Traditional authenticity is first and foremost a sense of metaphysical proportion, rather than a legal frame of mind, and true revivification cannot happen without a spiritual revolution rather than through formal reform. This is the reason why the Shaykh did not believe in most reformists, whom he considered deprived of any profound consciousness of the metaphysical roots of tradition. By contrast he puts his hope in the simple folks whom he sees –we are in the thirties, consciously or subconsciously penetrated by Islamic existential reflexes.

### **Esoterism (*al-Bātin*)**

Louis Brenner has noted that “by the early twentieth century the leaders of the Tijaniyya were generally conservative, speaking to protect their social and political positions.” By contrast “Cerno Bokar’s attitude was relatively radical in that he clung tenaciously to the gnostic goals which he understood to be at the heart of the Tijaniyya.”<sup>8</sup> The esoteric dimension of his teachings appears, formally, in numerology, but more profoundly perhaps in his teachings on degrees of inwardness and spiritual subtlety which are epitomized in his distinction between the three levels of faith, that is solid (*sulb*), liquid (*sā’il*) and gazeified (*ghāzī*), the two latter epitomizing two degrees of esoteric consciousness. Through these three degrees faith

---

<sup>7</sup> 35.

<sup>8</sup> Brenner, 107.

becomes as it were less and less human and more and more divine in its source, and therefore less individualized and impure in its manifestations. For Cerno, solid faith (*sulb*) adheres to the most formal aspects of the creed; as such, it is the necessary basis for reaching higher levels of faith, but it is also on its level that the ego may still largely affirm itself at the expense of *faqr*, as evidenced by the danger of self-righteousness. Cerno declares: “it is intransigent and hard like the stone from which I draw its name.”<sup>9</sup> It is only on the liquid level (*sā’il*) that faith begins to lose its egotic rigidity and becomes “poor” and spiritual receptive. The water takes on the shape and colour of the recipient: “This faith, due to its subtle, liquid nature, is strong and undermines the faults of the soul, erodes the rocks of intolerance and spreads out, taking on a shape which is not fixed as in the case of *sulb* faith but borrows the form of its recipient.” On the gazeified level (*ghāzī*), there is “light without color.” This is the level of the highest *haqīqah*: the limits of the individual *qua* individual have been extinguished in the Spirit and the quintessence of religion has been reached. As for the Shaykh al-‘Alawī, he created the newspaper *Al-Balāgh al-Jazāiri* as an organ of religious revival in the spirit of his defence of tradition. According to Martin Lings “it was his means of preaching a renovation of Islam in all its aspects, not puritanically, as one who seeks to strip his religion of everything that goes beyond his understanding, but on the contrary seeking to safeguard its dimension of breadth and above all to restore what it had lost of its dimension of depth.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Shaykh makes it clear that the inner message of Islam goes well beyond what is understood of this religion by most of its contemporary practitioners. For him, “religions are only a starting point” and, above them, lies the domain of what he calls the “doctrine” or the “means to reach God.” These means are essentially connected to the practice of *dhikrullāh*, together with supports such as meditation, spiritual retreats and keeping spiritual company. For the Shaykh, the *dhikr* is the means of access *par*

---

<sup>9</sup> Brenner, 171.

<sup>10</sup> 108.

*excellence* not only to the *bātin* of scriptures but also to *al-Bātin*, God as the Hidden. *Dhikr* is a *barzakh*, or an isthmus, between the world of manifestation and that of non-manifestation.

### **Universality (*al-‘Ālamiyyah*)**

It could be said that the universality of Cerno stems from *faqr*, a sense of the limitations of the individual as such, and mankind as such. The epistemological modesty of Cerno originates in his sense of the incapacity of any given individual or group to embrace the whole truth. He states that “Faith and Truth, in that they are connected with God, are not the prerogatives of one individual, nor one race, nor even one country.”<sup>11</sup> To claim otherwise would be like stating that the sun shines only for my family. “God knows best” does not only mean human submission to God’s All-Knowledge but also, and above all, an attention not to impose one’s own limitations upon the divine un-limitedness. For Cerno, the recognition of the Divine Unity and Infiniteness in religions stems, by contrast, from an awareness of human limitations. These limitations are either natural, and as it were innocent, or --more dangerously-- a result of individualism and egoism. In his spiritual discourses he declares: “The mutual opposition of various believers emerge from certain [lower] human causes the origin of which is to be found in extreme racism, in the diversity of languages, and especially in the egoism which pushes each to seek and maintain an exclusiveness.”<sup>12</sup> By contrast, it appears that, for the Shaykh al-‘Alawi, universality flows less from a sense of the limitations of mankind than from the universality of *dhikr* as both divine reminder and human remembrance. In the wake of the Emir ‘Abdel-Kader al-Jazairi ad the Akbari school the Shaykh asserts that both the flower “imagining God as perfume”<sup>13</sup> and Aristotle conceiving “God as thinking itself eternally” are right. Each of them crystallizes a point of view on Reality, what Chittick renders as a “God of imagination.” And it is in the same spirit of

---

<sup>11</sup> Brenner, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Brenner, 158,

<sup>13</sup> Recherches, 33.

perspectivism --but not relativism, that he defends what one of his biographers call the “anagogic plurality” of the meanings of the *Qur’ān*. The divine richness, through its manifold theophanies, discloses itself in the various prophets and the various communities. Father Giacobetti, a *Père Blanc*, relates that when he met him in 1926 on a boat bringing him back to Algeria upon his return from the inauguration of the mosque of Paris, the Shaykh was preparing a book on convergences between Catholics and Muslims. This book was to gather verses that insist on the validity of Christianity and Judaism, and the positive description of Islam by past Christian authors. He entitled his commentary—unfortunately unfinished—*al-Bahr al-masjūr*,<sup>14</sup> “the boiling ocean.” Commenting upon Quran 2:62

Lo! Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans—  
whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right—surely their reward is  
with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (2:62)

the Shaykh draws the deduction (*istinbāt*) that “a man having faith in what is taught by Islam could be considered as belonging to the people of the Book, even if he does not accomplish the pious actions that must, in principle, accompany his faith.” He then draws the *ishāra* or spiritual allusion that one should “consider no one, be he a Muslim or an infidel (*kāfir*), pious or sinful, as being inferior to us, and this throughout our entire life.” Finally, he concludes that “all aforementioned traditional communities possess a genuine validity in Religion (*makāna fī l-Dīn*).” In conclusion, it is clear that, for both African sages, tradition is a necessary principle of renewal, being like a river flowing from the source. Inwardness, esoterism, *al-bātin*, is a spiritual imperative for there is no rejuvenation but from the heart, in the spirit of the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn*. Finally, universality revitalizes religion by unveiling unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, *tawhīd* in *ikhtilāf* and *ikhtilāf* in *tawhīd*. These three dimensions of renewal are both founded and perfected in *faqr* and *dhikr*.