

A Sufi Master's Message: In Memoriam René Guénon

By Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini
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Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

The author of this short book of essays, 'Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini (b. 1926), is a Shaykh of the Ahmadiyyah Idrisiyyah Shadhiliyyah Sufi order based in Italy, and a disciple of the renowned and influential traditional metaphysician, Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya (René) Guénon, whose Muslim first name (translated as "The Servant of the One") he shares. An Italian nobleman who converted to Islam in 1951, at the age of 25, at the hands of Sidi Ibrahim Titus Burkhardt (the conversion occurred providentially on the same day as Guénon's death), and who married a Japanese wife, Shaykh Pallavicini certainly has an unusual background. He is also a leading European Muslim, one of the faces of Sufism in Europe, and a member of the college of elders of the Great Mosque of Paris. He is the founder of the Italian Islamic Community (COREIS).

This slight book (it is a mere 76 pages in length) offers insights both into the thought and relevance of Guénon's teachings for our times, and into Sufi doctrine and practice within a traditional ambience.

The first chapter, titled "In Memoriam René Guénon" is the English translation of a French pamphlet that was first published in Milan in 1981. It clarifies certain doctrinal misunderstandings of Guénon's works. It explains why traditional knowledge, being esoteric in nature, requires the protective role of initiation. It contrasts the profane and sacred notions of the "self", the latter being rooted in a theocentric dimension. It decries "the loss of Islamic esoterism" and cautions (30 years ago) of the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism and militant extremism,



describing the élite of these groups as “a twisted parody of the *tariqah* that René Guénon deigned a possible vehicle for salvation and spiritual fulfillment” (this is a reference to Guénon’s view of the urgent need to develop a cadre of traditional initiates, whose lives and thoughts were rooted in the sacred, as a bulwark against the onslaught of the anti-traditional influences associated with modernism). Pallavicini also cautions against the attempts to “Christianize” Islam, stressing that the unique forms of revelation highlight different aspects of the Truth. With regard to modernism, he clarifies, “we do not reject life or the world in itself, but instead denounce the parts of the modern world that are anti-traditional and thus inhibit our spiritual development”. Emphasizing that Sufism is not *contra mundum*, he states that “*tasawwuf* (Sufism) is the measure of our life and certainly not the measure of its evasion”.

In the chapter titled “A Meeting of Genius and Holiness”, Pallavicini writes of religious pluralism in the genius of Guénon’s writings and the saintliness of Algerian Darqawi Shaykh, Ahmad al-‘Alawi (1869-1934), who possessed the *barakah* of a Christ-like face and personality and who pursued a Jesuitic path within Sufism. The short essay focuses on their understanding of the symbolism of the Cross. For Guénon, the Cross possessed a symbolic significance, based on the law of correspondence, linking the inner and the outer in an affirmation of the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* or principial Unity. Pallavicini recounts an anecdote about Shaykh ‘Alawi’s explanation when confronted with the criticism from a Muslim theologian that his prayer beads resembled a Cross. The Shaykh stood up, lifted and spread his arms wide, and exclaimed: “And what do we resemble?”

The essay, “God is Here”, focuses on a spiritual message that is hidden, like the spirit of Reality that is like the sound of our breathing, its secret rhythm in our lives, its quiet presence within the “h” at the end of the divine name, “Allah”.

In several of the essays, including the article “Of the Beginning and of the End”, which is about the cycle of existence, the solidification of the world through time, the cycle of revelation, and the outer and inner dimensions of eschatology, Pallavicini stresses the importance of “sacrifice” in its traditional sense: “that of *sacrum facere*: to make every moment of our lives sacred, by means of the religious forms that God has given to each of us.”

The essay “Across the World’s Center” contains some important insights regarding the relationship between metaphysics and theology, the role of Grace and sincerity in worship, the dangers of pseudo-teachers and the consequent importance of initiation, and the vital need to avoid reducing the Presence of God to a “conceptualization” of God.

The Appendix contains the text of a Friday sermon or *kbutba* given by ‘Abd al-Haqq Ismail Guiderdoni, Director of the Islamic Institute of Advanced Studies, at Shaykh Pallavicini’s mosque in Milan, in 2008. Among its highlights is the following passage about the relationship between the essential and formal dimensions of religion, and between Traditional knowledge and the practice of faith through a given religious tradition:

It is very important to understand that the right metaphysical Path, and the primordial Tradition that constitutes its formally revealed expression, are not to be looked for in a hypothetical essence, nor in an even more hypothetical “quintessence” located somewhere above the revealed religions. There is not a “transcendent unity” of religions that can be extracted, or abstracted, from forms. There does not exist an “eternal wisdom”, or a *sophia perennis*, independent of the messages of the Prophets that would be sufficient to study in these so-called “post-Prophetic” times in order to inherit knowledge.

On the contrary, metaphysical truth is “framed” or even “incarnated” within the bosom of the revealed religions.... Truth is the very life of religious forms.

The book is, as its title indicates, “A Sufi Master’s Message”—the “Master” being at one level Guénon, at another Pallavicini, and at yet another, and by extension through their *silsilah* or initiatic chains, all the Masters of traditional wisdom, who continue to inspire us with their message of the Primordial Tradition that was handed down from God to Man.