

Esotericisation and De-esotericisation of Sufism: The Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya in Italy

Francesco Piraino

francesco.piraino@kuleuven.be

Abstract

In this article I will analyse the Sufi order Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya based in Milan, established by Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini in the 1980s. This is one of the most important Sufi orders in Italy, and it is engaged in interreligious dialogue activities and institutional relations with Italian political actors. I will argue that this Sufi order has experienced a process of esotericisation, “Western”-style, in the sense that: 1) it was shaped by the “forms of thought” of the French esotericist René Guénon; 2) following Hanegraaff’s and von Stuckrad’s definitions, it embodies both a rejected and an absolute knowledge; and 3) it is characterised by a sectarian organisational structure, which has distanced it from other Islamic communities. Starting from the 2010s, this Sufi order has been living through a process of “de-esotericisation,” following the same sense outlined before, in that the absolute knowledge is gradually opening up to other forms of esoteric knowledge and the sectarian dimensions are gradually fading, allowing a dialogue with other Islamic communities.

Keywords: Sufism; Islam; Esotericism; Metaphysics; Traditionalism

Introduction

In this article I will analyse the Sufi order Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya (from now on AIS) based in Milan, established by Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini in the 1980s. Forming part of a broader socio-anthropological research project in which I examined five Sufi orders in Paris and Milan, the data leading to the present article were collected between 2013 and 2014, when I participated in the AIS weekly religious meetings in Milan (six months in total). Furthermore, I attended a one-week spiritual retreat and interviewed fourteen disciples, focusing on life-story narratives.

I will argue that this Sufi order, like other Sufi orders in Europe and North America,¹ experienced a process of esotericisation, which entails a reconfiguration of doctrines, rituals, and organisational structures. Sufi and Islamic practices have been inscribed by these actors within the frame of Western esotericism, implying an estrangement between the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya and other Islamic and Sufi communities.

I will also argue that, starting from the 2010s, this Sufi order has been living through a process of de-esotericisation. Before addressing these processes, I will clarify my use of the term esotericism, and I will briefly present the work of René Guénon, a French esotericist and intellectual who deeply influenced this autonomous Italian branch of the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya.

Esotericism(s) and Sufism(s)

The heterogeneity of Sufism throughout its history discourages the use of a single descriptive category such as mysticism, esotericism, asceticism, spirituality, popular religion, or intellectual religion. All these categories could be either useful or misleading, depending on the specific context. Therefore, as has been argued by Simon Sorngenfrei, Sufism cannot be exclusively equated with esotericism.² Nonetheless, we cannot deny the existence and the peculiarity of Islamic exotericism, which is discussed in this special issue by Liana Saif, who shows its historical origins in *bāṭinism* and its intertwining with global esotericism.

But how does esotericism in the Western context map onto an Italian Sufi *ṭarīqa*? First, we must revisit some arguments concerning the meaning of esotericism in this context. As pointed out by Antoine Faivre,³ “esotericism” did not come into use until the eighteenth century. Faivre offers a very broad definition of Western esotericism: “a set of currents” that have strong similarities

1. Sorngenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected,” 154–57; Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World, passim*.

2. Sorngenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected,” 5.

3. Faivre, *L'ésotérisme*, 4.

and are historically connected.⁴ In other words, esotericism is a group of specific “forms of thought” (*forms de pensée*) that are identified by “four fundamental elements,” namely, correspondence, living nature, imagination and mediation, and experience of transmission.⁵ This approach has been considered as functionalist by Wouter Hanegraaff, who challenged Faivre’s analysis, proposing instead an historical and genealogical examination.⁶

According to Hanegraaff, esotericism is a “waste-basket category” which gathers together different fields of knowledge and practices perceived as “incompatible with normative concepts of religion, rationality and science”⁷ as they were defined firstly by early Protestant religious thinkers and later by Enlightenment thinkers. This process of othering, which created a sharp divide between rational, scientific, true, and irrational, archaic, superstitious, is at the heart of Western esotericism.⁸ Hanegraaff’s ground-breaking interpretation shed new light not only on Western esotericism, but more broadly on the history of Western societies.

On the other hand, Hanegraaff’s work created a heated debate that is still ongoing. For example, Marco Pasi stressed that esotericism as an “historiographical concept” has to sacrifice consistency and effectiveness in the analysis of esoteric contents. Furthermore, according to Pasi, the focus on rejection – on the process of othering – cannot represent the only perspective on esoteric themes, because “this tradition existed independently of the rejection and of the stigma.”⁹ Pasi and Olav Hammer prefer a substantive definition of esotericism, bringing back and elaborating Faivre’s approach to the field.¹⁰

Completely different is the critique of Kocku von Stuckrad, who took Hanegraaff’s deconstruction of esotericism to its extreme conclusion. Even if

4. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

5. *Ibid.*, 19–21.

6. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 337.

7. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 13.

8. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” 79.

9. Pasi, “The Problems of Rejected Knowledge,” 210.

10. Hammer, “Deconstructing ‘Western Esotericism’.”

these authors share the same genealogy of the category of esotericism, as a form of othering rooted in modern history, for von Stuckrad “esoteric” became an adjective qualifying a discourse claiming a higher or perfect knowledge: “a vision of truth as a master-key for answering all questions of humankind.”¹¹ Von Stuckrad’s esoteric discourse is inscribed in Western culture as a counter-discourse in opposition to mainstream religious narratives; this is possible thanks to the rhetoric of secrecy, capable of bestowing status, prestige, and symbolic capital on those who possess the perfect knowledge.¹² As has been argued by Michael Stausberg, the merit of this approach is to move away from the perspective of a normative Christianity that defines and rejects esoteric phenomena towards a broad religious field where different actors intermingle.¹³ This shift entailed another heated debate about the possible and necessary expansion of the category esotericism beyond the Christian European context.¹⁴

These debates inform my intellectual treatment of the construct as an heuristic tool and a historical phenomenon; however, as an anthropologist-sociologist of religion, I am, similar to Brannon Ingram’s analysis, more interested in what “‘esoteric’ does rather than what it is,”¹⁵ that is, how “esoteric” is understood and its implication in specific social and political spheres. I use esotericism in this context as a heuristic device that sheds light on socio-political activities.¹⁶ My purpose in this article is to analyse how the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya

11. Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 61.

12. *Ibid.*, x, 51–59.

13. Stausberg, “What Is *It* All About?”

14. Discussion of this expansion can be found in Stausberg “What Is *It* All About?,” *passim*; Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *passim*; Stuckrad, “Ancient Esotericism, Problematic Assumptions, and Conceptual Trouble,” *passim*; Faivre, “Kocku von Stuckrad et la Notion D’Esoterisme,” *passim*.

15. Ingram, “René Guénon And The Traditionalist Polemic,” 203.

16. A method employed by Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism,” 4; see Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 3–33 for an approach in comparative analysis that favours a typology “constructed along two axes: a homological-analogical axis distinguishes between comparison based on shared genealogy (homology) versus purely structural or functional comparisons (analogy), while a synchronic-diachronic axis picks out a temporal dimension.”

has been negotiating Islamic, Sufi, and Western esoteric references, and how these ideas have influenced practices, rituals, and organisational structures. I will also argue that both Hanegraaff's "rejected knowledge" and von Stuckrad's "absolute knowledge" are useful instruments in describing this Sufi order.

René Guénon's Legacy in Contemporary Sufism

René Guénon is a key figure of twentieth-century Western esotericism. It would even be possible to advance the idea that his work possesses a particular form of charismatic authority which would be neither related to the author in person, since he lived a very reserved life, nor to a specific associated religious group, which has never existed as such. His popularity is, rather, rooted in his writings. I refer here to what PierLuigi Zoccatelli describes as the "charisma of the book."¹⁷ His intellectual disciples, from different religious and intellectual backgrounds, gave life to the heterogeneous school of thought known as "traditionalism."¹⁸

René Guénon was born in Blois, France in 1886, and grew up in a bourgeois Catholic family. In 1904 he moved to Paris, where he attended university and began to frequent the local esoteric milieu. In the course of a few years, he came into contact with occultism, Freemasonry, and the Gnostic Church. The encounter with the "East," including Hinduism and Islamic esotericism, was an important turning point in his life. Hinduism was the subject of his doctoral thesis and his first book, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* and thanks to the mediation of the Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli he joined the Sufi order Shādiliyya and later moved to Cairo, where he lived until his death in 1951.¹⁹ Guénon took the Muslim name of Abd al-Wahid Yahya.

Guénon's area of study was notably vast: he studied and wrote commentaries on Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, Christianity, Celtic religion, Judaism and Kab-

17. Zoccatelli, "AAA. Sociologia Dell'esoterismo Cercasi," 84.

18. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, *passim*; Bisson, *René Guénon*; Laurant, *René Guénon*, *passim*.

19. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 59.

balah, Islamic esotericism, Freemasonry, Hinduism, Alchemy, and Taoism. This all-embracing approach, including religious, spiritual, metaphysical, and also social phenomena, allowed him to write a new history of the world, focused on the sacred, and challenging twentieth-century mainstream European narratives, tackling the supposed superiority of a Western civilisation destined to inexorable progress.²⁰

According to Guénon's interpretation, religions are composed of two dimensions, one exoteric, expressed by rituals, dogmas, and cosmologies, and one esoteric/metaphysical, which conveys hidden supranational and universal truths: "Metaphysics is the knowledge of universal principles, upon which all things necessarily depend, directly or indirectly."²¹ These truths or universal metaphysical principles are the reflection of a single "primordial tradition," the essence of all religions.²²

Following Guénon's approach, all religions share the same metaphysical truth and differ only in their outward forms. Among religions, some have better preserved the connection with the primordial source, while others have almost totally lost it, becoming "simulacra." Of course, Guénon was not the first to conceptualise a common religious source for all humanity. The *philosophia perennis* has been one of the hallmarks of Western esotericism since the Renaissance;²³ Guénon's peculiarity was to connect this conceptualisation of religions with the critique of modernity and Western societies.

Guénon elaborates Hindu eschatology, borrowing the idea of cyclical evolutions. The cycle in which modern and contemporary societies are inscribed is the *Kali Yuga*, the age of discord, or "the Iron Age" marked by spiritual corruption, violence, and destruction.²⁴ Western modernity is a "perpetual carnival" where all values are reversed.²⁵ Guénon addresses his criticism to materialist and scientific

20. Bisson, *René Guénon*, 29; Accart, *Guénon ou le renversement des clartés*, *passim*.

21. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 51 (my translation from French).

22. Guénon, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues*, 32; Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 97.

23. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 7.

24. Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne*, 11–14; similar ideas are found in Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, *passim*, and *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps*, *passim*.

25. Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée*, 113.

rationalism,²⁶ but also to new religious forms, such as spiritualism, occultism, the Theosophical Society, and Jungian interpretation of religions, which he considered to be not only innovations but the “invisible engine” of the corruption of Western societies.²⁷ According to Guénon’s critique of modernity, modern political phenomena such as human rights conventions and liberal democracies are the fruit of the “deification of the human being,”²⁸ which challenged traditional hierarchies: “it is the negation of all-natural hierarchies, and is the lowering of all knowledge to the level of the limited mind of the vulgar.”²⁹

In order to counter this spiritual and material decadence and corruption, Guénon looked at the East, where, he believed, religions preserved a deeper relation with the primordial tradition. For Guénon, the East possesses “the awareness of eternity,”³⁰ which protects it from the nefarious effects of modernity: “even if people from the East, to a certain extent, are forced to accept material progress, this will never entail a profound change for them.”³¹ Ingram aptly describes how Guénon creates “a polarity between East and West that resonates with the Orientalist tradition; the East is anti-modern, medieval, feudal, static, unified, and monolithic, while the West is modern, democratic, always changing, always divided.”³²

René Guénon and his intellectual work are inscribed in the frame of Western esotericism for several reasons: first of all, because of his intellectual background and relations with occultism and Freemasonry,³³ secondly, because of the content of his work, or “forms of thought” using Faivre’s category,³⁴ that are identified with *philosophia perennis*, the esoteric initiation transmitted from master to

26. Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps*, 65–69, 89–92.

27. Ibid. Ch. 36: “Pseudo Initiation.”

28. Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée*, 322.

29. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, 59.

30. Ibid., 95.

31. Ibid., 122.

32. Ingram, “René Guénon And The Traditionalist Polemic,” 205.

33. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*.

34. Faivre, *L’ésotérisme*, 22,31; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 15.

disciple, and the existence of subtle correspondences that resonate with several esoteric phenomena.³⁵ Furthermore, as has been argued by Ingram, following Stuckrad’s approach, Guénon is esoteric in his claim for a totalising absolute knowledge in opposition to a profane understanding of reality. Finally, Guénon could be labelled esoteric also following Hanegraaff’s conceptualisation; in fact, Guénon reclaims a metaphysical knowledge that has been rejected by Western societies, and like other esotericists he “refuse[s] to accept the disappearance of incalculable mystery from the world.”³⁶

Guénon is an essential figure in the development of Sufism in Europe, since many Europeans, especially in France, Belgium, Spain, and Italy, discovered Sufism through his books.³⁷ Nowadays, his legacy reaches beyond the Western esoteric milieu: in fact, his works are also influential in the New Age milieu,³⁸ and among many lifelong Muslims in Turkey and in North Africa.³⁹ Due to Guénon’s prolific career covering a variety of subjects, and due also to the heterogeneity of Sufism in Europe, it is difficult to grasp what the nucleus of Guénon’s legacy in contemporary Sufism may be. Some Sufi leaders and intellectuals stressed the concept of primordial tradition, as in the case of Khaled Bentounes and the ‘Alāwiyya and the Būdshīshīyya, engaged in interreligious dialogue and promoting an inclusive and Islamic universalism.⁴⁰ On the other hand, other Sufi masters stressed the anti-modernist narratives within Guénon’s legacy.⁴¹

35. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 7.

36. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254.

37. This is explored in detail in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, *passim*; Bisson, “Soufisme et Tradition. L’influence de René Guénon sur l’islam soufi européen,” *passim*; Piraino, “René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle,” *passim*.

38. Piraino, “René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle,” *passim*.

39. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 241–62.

40. Piraino, “René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle,” 40; Piraino, “Les Politiques Du Soufisme En France,” 142; Piraino, “Pilgrimages in Western European Sufism,” 168; Piraino, “Who Is the Infidel?” 77.

41. See for example Claudio Mutti in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 260.

Guénon's ideas merged with other cultural and religious influences, such as Sufism in North Africa, the academic interpretation of Sufism,⁴² and New Age culture. Notwithstanding, starting from the 1930s, a specific kind of Sufism based on Guénon's ideas, and reproducing doctrines, practices, and organisational structures of Western esotericism, started to develop, in a process of (Western) esotericisation of Sufism.⁴³ This is the case with the Mariamiyya (Frithjof Schuon), the Darqāwiyya (Roger Maridort), and the Aḥmadiyya Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya (Abd Al-Wahid Pallavicini), which is probably the last Guénonian-inspired Sufi order to be growing both in numbers and in political relevance.

The esotericisation of the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya

Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, born in 1926, converted to Islam on January 7, 1951, the same year his spiritual master, Guénon, died. He took Guénon's first Muslim name "Abd Al-Wahid." Pallavicini stressed the continuity between his Christian and Islamic practices in the name of a perennial religion, root of every traditional religious form. Furthermore, he stressed his aristocratic lineage, because according to Guénon the aristocracy reflected spiritual and social hierarchies in pre-modern societies.⁴⁴ This aristocratic spirit was confirmed in his youth by his participation in the Second World War as a supporter of monarchism.

It's the question of "monism" which led me from Monarchy to Monotheism, always in the respect of the hierarchical order between the two principles of Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power, to recall an important work by René Guénon.⁴⁵

42. Cf. Laude, *Pathways to an Inner Islam*, *passim*; Griffith, "Sharing the Faith of Abraham," *passim*.

43. Zarcone and Vale, "Rereadings and Transformations of Sufism in the West," 115.

44. Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne*, 60.

45. Nesti, "Da Partigiano Monarchico Durante La Resistenza All'opzione Monoteista Islamica. Un Intervista Allo Shaykh Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini," 95. The cited work of René Guénon is Guénon, *Autorité Spirituelle et Pouvoir Temporel*.

Pallavicini, through the mediation of Julius Evola⁴⁶ and Titus Burckhardt,⁴⁷ joined the Swiss “Alāwiyya order led by Frithjof Schuon.⁴⁸ For doctrinal reasons — Pallavicini considered the Swiss *ṭarīqa* not orthodox enough — he left for Asia in search of a spiritual guide.⁴⁹ In 1971, he joined Abd al-Rashid ibn Muhammad Said’s *ṭarīqa* Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya.⁵⁰

In 1980, Pallavicini returned to Milan to write the book *In memoriam René Guénon*, thanks to which he became well-known and welcomed his first disciples. Shortly afterwards, he founded the “Centre of Metaphysical Studies,” which brought together many Italian traditionalists. At the beginning of the 1990s, the AIS experienced an important turning point: intellectual debates, focused on “metaphysics,” gave way to political action focused on interreligious relations. In 1993, Pallavicini founded the *Associazione Internazionale per l’Informazione sull’Islam* (International Association for Information on Islam), which in 1997 became the COREIS (*Comunità Religiosa Islamica* [Islamic Religious Community]). Over the past fifteen years, the COREIS has been recognised by several Italian institutions and become a key partner. Despite this high visibility, the COREIS does not have more than one hundred followers. In 2017, Shaykh Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini died in Milan at the age of ninety-two, and his son Yahya has been leading the Sufi order since then.

46. Julius Evola (1898–1974) was an Italian philosopher, painter, and esotericist. He is one of the key figures of European extreme right thought. For an introduction to his thought, see Furlong, *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*.

47. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) was a German Swiss Traditionalist, converted to Islam and Sufism, and an important author on Sufism.

48. Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) was a German Swiss, one of the first European disciples of the “Alāwiyya, founder of the Mariamiyya, and in the last years of his life he practiced Native American rituals; cf. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 147–60.

49. Pallavicini did not explain how and why Schuon’s Sufi order was not orthodox; as Sedgwick suggested, the disagreement could be also related to personal reasons (*ibid.*, 137).

50. *Ibid.*

Doctrines: Rejected and Absolute Knowledge

We can grasp the process of esotericisation of the AIS, showing how Guénonian “form of thought” shaped the AIS. Guénon’s pivotal role is evident when we read Abd Al-Wahid Pallavicini’s book *L’Islam interieur* (Inner Islam), where Guénon is quoted sixty-six times against twenty-eight for the prophet Muhammad. This Guénonisation of Islam is also evident when Yahya Pallavicini forces the Qur’anic translation, transforming “*dīn al-qaiyyama*” (Quran 98, 5), generally translated as “the correct [or upright] religion,” into the “Primordial Tradition.”⁵¹

Shaykh Abd Al-Wahid stressed that his mission was to bear witness to the metaphysical message: the “primordial tradition,” which is the metahistorical essence of religion. But what is metaphysics for Pallavicini? It is not the philosophy of Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger, or Catholic or Protestant theology; it is not Islamic theology, which is rarely mentioned in his works. It is mainly epitomised by Guénon, “whose work represents a true intellectual miracle, and fills six centuries of absence of metaphysical perspective in the West, since the dissolution of the order of the Temple in 1313.”⁵²

Drawing from Guénon’s works, Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini and his followers created a metaphysical language, fundamental in the construction of his own religious orthodoxy. In Pallavicini’s discourses, “Tradition,” “Metaphysics,” and “Esotericism” have overlapping meanings and are often interchangeable; all of them evoke a transcendental dimension that at the same time surpasses religious exoteric forms.

Metaphysics is beyond philosophy. Metaphysics is even beyond theology. In our inter-religious encounters we notice that the true possibility of encounter between religions is in metaphysics, because theologies must be different by definition.⁵³

51. Pallavicini, *L’Islam in Europa*, 97.

52. Pallavicini, *L’islam interieur*, 147–48.

53. Nesti, “Da Partigiano Monarchico Durante La Resistenza All’opzione Monoteista Islamica. Un Intervista Allo Shaykh Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini,” 98.

Metaphysics is therefore a much more fruitful stratum that reaches beyond the theological and dogmatic limits of each religion. Metaphysics can be embodying, grasping and witnessing the primordial tradition. This perennial interpretation of religions does not entail that all religious actors are equal in understanding and living the metaphysical essence. In fact, the conceptualisation of Pallavicini/Guénon of esoteric and exoteric orthodoxies, that define how the primordial tradition may be understood, are normative and strict. Finally, in this context the doctrine of primordial tradition is not at all universal, but is restricted to specific interpretations and practices that I will describe in the next paragraphs.

For Pallavicini, exoteric orthodoxy, following Guénon's anti-modernism,⁵⁴ implies that every religious innovation is an estrangement from tradition. This is the case with Protestantism, which represents an innovation, challenging the traditional authority of the Catholic Church, and promoting individualism,⁵⁵ but it is even more relevant for new religious movements, alternative spiritualities, and psychological and psychoanalytical interpretations of religious phenomena, which are not only regarded as an innovation but as "counter-initiatic," the action of the anti-Christ,⁵⁶ because they embody a parody of religion.

Furthermore, according to Pallavicini, traditional and orthodox behaviour also concerns everyday life: "Tradition" is the set of doctrines, values, rituals, religious rules, behaviours, and institutions that make up religious life. "Traditional" becomes the antithesis of modern: for example the peasants who lead a simple life become "the defenders of the tradition."⁵⁷ Any social innovation is anti-traditional: for example, feminism, and LGBTQ rights are anti-traditional and the expression of Western corruption.

According to Guénon and Pallavicini, not all religions which have conserved the exoteric orthodoxy have also preserved the esoteric dimension. The most

54. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 263–68.

55. Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne*, 47.

56. Pallavicini, *In memoriam René Guénon*, 17.

57. Leila, fieldwork notes 2013, Milan.

important example is the Catholic Church, which lost the transmission of esoteric knowledge due to the suppression of the Templar order at the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁵⁸ Hence, Catholics have access to salvation, but they cannot be initiated into the esoteric and metaphysical knowledge.

It is not always easy to understand what esoteric or metaphysical orthodoxy does entail, or the distinction between traditional and anti-traditional, orthodox and un-orthodox described by Pallavicini and his disciples. These categories are not clear-cut in the AIS and they could appear quite discretionary. In fact, these differences cannot be grasped by sociological analysis alone, rather an esoteric/metaphysical insight is needed. Furthermore, these categories are malleable instruments in the hands of the AIS, which legitimises its own existence and delegitimises those of other competing groups.

Following the Traditionalist heritage of harsh internal confrontations among small factions competing for Guénon's legacy,⁵⁹ AIS is particularly severe towards other Guénonians and other European Sufi orders, while being quite open towards religious groups in Asia and the Middle East. During my fieldwork with the AIS, I heard many solemn condemnations of the Sufi orders I was studying for my research in Europe, who were accused of being anti-traditional: Shaykh Bentounes ("Alāwiyya) for his liberal and progressive views and for his desire to change Western societies;⁶⁰ Shaykh Nazim (Naqshbandiyya) for the New Age influence on his order;⁶¹ Shaykh Mandel Khan (Jerrahiyya-Khalwatiyya) for being a psychoanalyst;⁶² and Shaykh Hamza Al-Būdshish (Budshishiyya) for

58. Guénon, *Autorité Spirituelle et Pouvoir Temporel*, 42.

59. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 123–31.

60. Piraino, "Pilgrimages in Western European Sufism," 158.

61. As regards the possible entanglements between New Age culture and the Naqshbandiyya Hāqqaniyya Sufi order, see Nielsen, Draper, and Yemelianova, "Transnational Sufism"; Damrel, "Aspects of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order in North America," 115–26; Piraino, "Between Real and Virtual Communities," 93–108.

62. Piraino, "The Sufi Shaykh and His Patients: Merging Islam, Psychoanalysis, and Western Esotericism," forthcoming.

problems regarding the solidity of the *silsila* (Sufi spiritual genealogy).⁶³ Other critiques concerned Guénonian intellectuals who were accused of abandoning Guénon’s work in favour of studying Ibn Arabī: “they are not only against the work of René Guénon, but it is an attack of the anti-Christ against the *taṣawwuf*, against the Primordial Tradition itself,” commented a young AIS disciple.⁶⁴

AIS represents itself as one of the few religious groups that still respects the metaphysical (Guénonian) orthodoxy. Similarly to Guénon’s work, Pallavicini describes a sense of encirclement and solitude in the quest for esoteric knowledge in contemporary society: the spiritual crisis of the modern human being has become the “most denied of all the conspiracies.”⁶⁵ This is comprehensible only if we address the eschatological issue, and the consequent role of the AIS as the spiritual élite that could restore to balance the corrupted West.

AIS’s eschatology is one of the most important themes in this Sufi order, although it is complex and blurred. The only certainty is “the acceleration of eschatological time,” that is to say, the awareness that the end of this world is getting nearer.⁶⁶ The blurriness is probably due to the overlapping of Islamic and Guénonian cosmologies. The Guénonian eschatology, drawing from Hindu doctrines, describes different cosmic cycles,⁶⁷ and we are at the end of the “cycle of iron,” which will soon give way to another cycle, to another world.⁶⁸

63. To my knowledge there are no ongoing discussions on the legitimacy of the Budshishi *silsila*. For further information about this order, see Chih, “Sufism, Education and Politics in Contemporary Morocco,” 24–46; Dominguez-Diaz, *Women in Sufism, passim*; Piraino, “Les Politiques Du Soufisme En France,” 134–46.

64. Fieldwork note, 2014, Milan.

65. Pallavicini, *In memoriam René Guénon*, 14. Similar ideas can be found in Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps, passim*.

66. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes, 2014.

67. I have to underline that in Isma’ili doctrine there is an elaborate cyclical cosmology, that could recall Guénon’s and Pallavicini’s interpretations; on the other hand, Guénon wrote his theories of eschatology before exploring Islamic doctrines, and to my knowledge Pallavicini referred only to mainstream Islamic theology and Guénon’s thought. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*. First part, ch. III, “*La superstition de la vie*”, 36–46.

68. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*. First part, ch. III, “*La superstition de la vie*”, 36–46.

According to Guénon, Europe could restore its metaphysical sources thanks to a spiritual élite, who will either guide people to salvation or postpone it.⁶⁹ In this perspective, the AIS proposes itself as the root of the European spiritual élite, whose aim is to guide not only the initiates but also other Europeans: “this work is the living demonstration that the intellectual élite⁷⁰ has taken root in the West and works to thwart the anti-spiritual hardened forces.”⁷¹ AIS is the last bastion against modernisation, the only religious movement capable of fulfilling the Guénonian prophecy of a spiritual élite saving the corrupt West.

We have to help our [Catholic] brothers in recognising the Christ, when he will come, but above all to recognise the Anti-Christ. . . . In other words, we should try to straighten this West, this Church, favouring the awareness that we are at the end, and if we do not get back on track we are going to die.⁷²

The critique of modernity and the rehabilitation of a rejected metaphysical knowledge lost in European societies resonates with Wouter Hanegraaff’s definition of esotericism as “rejected knowledge.” AIS claims the re-appropriation of a lost metaphysical knowledge, inverting the stigma: rejecting the rejection. Furthermore, AIS metaphysical knowledge is absolute à la von Stuckrad: “a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history . . . a vision of truth as a master key for answering all questions of humankind.”⁷³ Absolute knowledge that justifies, as I will show, the metapolitical engagement, a certain elitism, and the consequent sectarian organisational structures.

69. Ibid. Second part ch. III, “Constitution et rôle de l’élite”, 85–95.

70. It must be noted that Pallavicini/Guénon, in this context, used the term “intellectual” to express a metaphysical dimension, stemming from the perspective that mystically-oriented discursive process can reveal “metaphysical” truth..

71. Pallavicini, *A Sufi Master’s Message*, 17.

72. Fieldwork note, 2014, Milan.

73. Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism,” 88.

Activities: Metapolitics, Interfaith Dialogue, and Relations with Islamic communities

AIS politics, defined by David Bisson as “metapolitics,” are strictly connected to these doctrines.⁷⁴ AIS metapolitics is a political and spiritual project that aims to influence society through the testimony of the “primordial tradition.” Similar to the category of the spiritual élite, metapolitics oscillates between the idea of educating and that of inspiring but is never interested in directly changing society. For the only possible means of improving the world cannot be implemented at the level of society, of the population, of politics, not even of religion, but only by aiming at the correction of the metaphysical imbalance, through the re-establishment of the metaphysical truth. This approach has been defined as “ecumenism from above,” because it is not interested in influencing the general public but is reserved for a selected few.⁷⁵ This metapolitics corresponds perfectly with Hugh Urban’s analysis of esoteric movements as an elitist phenomenon, composed of highly educated disciples, “who wish, not to undermine existing social structures, but rather subtly to reinforce them, or else to bend and reshape them according to their own interests.”⁷⁶

Pallavicini’s metapolitics only makes sense if we look at history through a Guénonian lens, that is, if we understand history not as a succession of political events and social developments, but as sacred history. The sacred order cannot be restored with the old political and social forms because “sacred history does not repeat.”⁷⁷ This implies that, according to Pallavicini, all claims of a return to the monarchy or the sultanate, representative of a traditional world, are today only infantile pretensions. The second goal of Pallavicini’s metapolitics is the construction of alliances among cultural, religious, and political élites in opposition to anti-traditional forces — the influence of the anti-Christ.

74. Bisson, *René Guénon*, 10.

75. Bisson, “Soufisme et Tradition,” 40.

76. Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism,” 1.

77. Guiderdoni, fieldwork notes 2013.

As for AIS's activities to disseminate its metapolitics and metaphysics, they take place within the fields of 1) cultural activity, 2) dialogue with institutions, and 3) interreligious dialogue. These activities are only possible thanks to commercial enterprises which provide the necessary resources. These enterprises, staffed only by disciples, are: a real estate agency, a graphic company, and "Halal Italia" which guarantees the *halal label* for food products.⁷⁸

The activities pertaining to the interreligious dialogue, especially involving the Jewish and Catholic communities, are the most important. The Islamic public-engagement association affiliated with AIS known as the *Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana* (COREIS) initiates interreligious meetings, despite its small number of members, that are on a national and international scale. In contrast and unsurprisingly, AIS's interreligious dialogue is rather theoretical: no meeting takes place without debating the unity of religions, and without condemnation of relativism-atheism and religious syncretisms.

"The only true interreligious dialogue is the monologue, where the only voice is that of God," where the only voice resembles that of Guénon, who provides the framework and the fabric of the dialogue.⁷⁹ This explains the tension within the *ṭarīqa*, between a dialogue that seeks to inspire and one that seeks to teach. To use a disciple's words: "We are here on a razor's edge. We must not fall into the presumption of teaching to the Church the metaphysics, our task is to guide and inspire."⁸⁰

A good example of this "ecumenism from above,"⁸¹ interested in influencing a selected few rather than the general public, is an interreligious event I attended in Milan in January 2014: "The Temple of Abraham." In a beautiful public building in the centre of Milan, prominent figures such as the American Consul Kyle Scott, Rabbi Rav Marc Schneier from New York, and the President of

78. Complying with Islamic dietary laws.

79. W. Pallavicini, 2013 fieldwork notes.

80. Jebiril, 2013 fieldwork notes.

81. Bisson, "Soufisme et Tradition," 40.

Milan district Guido Podestà, engaged in interfaith dialogue. However, despite an extensive and expensive publicity campaign (they bought an entire page of the *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most important Italian newspapers), an audience was almost absent.

During the last thirty years, the AIS, despite limited economic resources and few disciples, has been creating important relations with national and international institutions (Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education), with the Catholic Church, and with the Jewish community. Just to give an idea, during my fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, the AIS organised interreligious dialogue events at the Italian and French parliaments. Considering the small number of disciples, fewer than one hundred, AIS's efficiency is impressive.

A certain distance from the general public is not problematic *per se*, in fact interreligious and intercultural dialogue can be promoted at many levels. On the other hand, it is counterproductive for the AIS to present itself – as the COREIS – to the Italian government as the main representative of the Italian Islamic community, proposing legal agreements in the name of all Italian Muslims.⁸² COREIS claims to represent more than five thousand Muslims living in Italy,⁸³ but when I discussed this number with Yahya Pallavicini, underlining that in six months of fieldwork with the AIS and the COREIS I kept on meeting the same eighty disciples, Yahya replied that the five thousand Muslims are not directly affiliated to the COREIS, but are those who collaborate in some activities with the COREIS without other affiliations.⁸⁴

AIS's elitism has produced strong tensions in the relationship with other Italian Islamic organisations, such as the UCOII,⁸⁵ aggravated by AIS's Guénonian language. Pallavicini was perceived not only as distant from the

82. Bombardieri, *Moschee d'Italia*, 16.

83. Pallavicini, *A Sufi Master's Message*, 17.

84. Interview with Yahya Pallavicini, Milan 2014.

85. Unione delle comunità e organizzazioni islamiche in Italia (Union of Islamic communities and organisations in Italy).

problems of Muslim migrants, but also as non-orthodox due to his (Western) esoteric language.⁸⁶ Finally, the separation between the AIS and other Islamic communities is evident in the management of the Al Wahid Mosque in Milan. This mosque, the property of the Pallavicini family, is formally open to Muslims of all nationalities,⁸⁷ but despite that, in six months of fieldwork I witnessed the participation of non-AIS Muslims in the Friday prayer only once, the week after I pointed out to an AIS disciple the absence of other, non-AIS, Muslims.

The tension between the AIS and other Italian Muslim communities clearly has a doctrinal dimension, since both Guénonian esotericism and Sufism are regarded by some Muslims as heterodox, but it has also a political dimension; in fact, discrediting political opponents could be a strategy to gain authority in the representation of Islam with Italian political institutions.⁸⁸ As mentioned before, Pallavicini's son and the current Shaykh, Yahya, is experiencing a turning point – Islamising the Sufi order, and patching up relations with other Italian Islamic communities.

Rituals: Intellectualisation and Verbalisation

Every week AIS disciples gather at the mosque-*ḥāmiyya* for the Friday prayer. Depending on the availability of the disciples, between twenty and forty people participate. The heart of the meeting is the *khutba*, the speech of the imam in Italian, including a short formula in Arabic. Imams take turns, and every week a new imam leads the prayer; even the youngest are called to perform the role of imam. Guiding the prayer and making the sacred speech is indeed envisaged as a kind of *rite de passage* for Pallavicini's disciples. Usually the imam reads a text rich with Qur'anic, Sufi, and Guénonian quotations. The speech is very solemn

86. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 139.

87. <http://www.coreis.it/wp/moschea-al-wahid/>, accessed March 22, 2019.

88. A similar case is the American Naqshbandiyya Hāqqaniyya, which in order to reinforce its political role accused other Muslim communities of radicalism. Dickson, “An American Sufism: The Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order as a Public Religion,” *passim*.

and precise, there is no room for improvisation or errors. Most imams also give bibliographic references. After the *keḥḥba* there is a debate or discussion and updates on the metaphysical doctrines and metapolitical activities, which usually lasts in total between two and four hours.

A monthly meeting brings together all Italian and French disciples; it starts on Saturday night with a dinner and a *dhiker* (repetition of the names of God), and ends on Sunday afternoon. Once a year, the AIS organises a nine-day spiritual retreat in the Alps between France and Italy. AIS leaders gave me the opportunity to attend weekly meetings and participate in the annual spiritual retreat; however, I was not permitted to participate in the monthly meetings, where the community *dhiker* is practiced. The community *dhiker*, which I attended only on the occasion of the spiritual retreat, is “protected” by disciples because it is considered a very intimate moment.

The intellectual dimension of AIS is preponderant, and all rituals are performed solemnly. Enthusiasm, joy, and spontaneity are frowned upon. Even at the end of the prayer or at the end of the *dhiker*, when the disciples greet each other, formulaic greetings are solemnly repeated while shaking hands. The most important feature of the European *ṭarīqa* Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya is undoubtedly the intellectual nature of its ritualistic conduct: talking, debating, discussing are the most important rituals. This is also emphasised by the choice of clothing, since the traditional clothing, such as *djellaba*,⁸⁹ is worn both for rituals (*dhiker*, prayer) and for metaphysical discussions. During the nine days of spiritual retreat there was only one community *dhiker*, the rest of the time being dedicated to debates. On some occasions, the speeches became almost academic: for example, during the spiritual retreat a disciple described all the various possible etymologies of the word Sufism, which can be easily found in any introductory book on Sufism; furthermore, other disciples studied, displayed, and discussed newly published books on Sufism and esoteric literature.

89. A long, loose-fitting unisex outer robe.

The intellectualisation and verbalisation of Sufism is evident also when looking at the induction of new disciples into this order. The future disciple must read René Guénon's books, as well as texts by the founding master of the order, Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs. Subsequently, the teachers, through a discussion, will check whether the disciple has intellectually and spiritually assimilated the Sufi metaphysical principles. Intellectual and spiritual verification through discussion is the main instrument that Sufi masters use to understand the spiritual state of disciples. During community meetings, disciples are invited to speak, comment, and reflect. Amina, a 50-year-old disciple, explains:

I think we do not realise... it happened to me too... I realised that maybe I repeated the same concept forty times... Unfortunately, when you are invited to speak, you cannot be excused. Nobody is going to kill you obviously, but the principle is that in a certain way you should favour the circulation of a blessing, a *baraka*, and so when you are invited to speak, the Master wants to test you. It's to check your inner state. So, if you do not say anything... it's worse. Because we should always have this connection with the principle.⁹⁰

The intellectual/verbal approach is predominant not only because the majority of disciples graduated in philosophy or human sciences, or because they became Sufis thanks to Guénon's interpretation of reality, but because it constitutes the main ritual itself. As Amina explained, the circulation of the *baraka* (spiritual blessing) passes through the intellectual and metaphysical discussion.

Organisational Structures: Homogeneity, Solidity and Tension

We can describe AIS's organisational structure by noting their homogeneity, opacity, solidity, and strong internal and external tensions. At the socio-biographical level, AIS is particularly homogeneous: disciples have a middle-class background and most of them are well educated. All of them are white Europeans (either Italian or French), with the exception of Pallavicini's wife who is Japanese.

90. Amina, interview 2013.

The opacity of this Sufi order is evident in the relation between the “stage” (official narratives) and the “backstage” (informal narratives). AIS tries to manage its image and to hide its informal narratives — or, using Goffmanian categories,⁹¹ AIS aims at “maintaining expressive control,” that is, to strictly control the impressions it gives to others. A good example of this control is that over smoking. Generally, smoking cigarettes is frowned upon and disciples are discouraged from smoking. Yet there was always a small group of unrepentant smokers in every Sufi order I visited in Europe.⁹² Hence, a small group of disciples looked for a “hidden” place where they could smoke unobserved, and I joined them. In these backstage places, informal narratives took place, which in the case of other orders provided me with a different perspective on the formal and official narratives. Despite knowing for sure that there were a few smokers in the AIS, however, I never had access to this kind of backstage area in the way I did with other orders, because interacting with me, even backstage, was always an initiatic test. Using Pallavicini’s language, AIS disciples were afraid to “fall into psychologism,” that is the tendency to discuss personal emotions and interpretations, rather than embodying the “primordial tradition.” That is why AIS disciples have homogenous and opaque narratives, maintaining expressive control, in order to “witness the metaphysical message.”⁹³

Another organisational characteristic is solidity, which is due to strong tensions with the surrounding society. Good behaviour is exalted and bad behaviour severely condemned. Disciples control and criticise each other. Even the private lives of the disciples are examined by all other disciples during the community’s ritual discussions. The good disciple must live according to principles that organise his/her entire existence around the *ṭarīqa*. AIS’s activities are usually considered initiatic tests by its disciples.

91. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 111.

92. During my PhD fieldwork I worked with the Sufi orders ‘Alāwiyya, Būdshīshīyya and Naqshbandiyya Hāqqaniyya. Piraino, “Le Développement Du Soufisme En Europe. Au-Delà de l’antinomie Tradition et Modernité,” *passim*.

93. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes 2014.

A good example of this control and internal tension is the regulation of marriage. The disciple cannot marry whoever he/she wants. The husband/wife of the disciple must share the metaphysical vision (not the religious confession) of the *ṭarīqa* as well as the political and economic commitment to it. I knew two disciples who divorced because of the pressure from the *ṭarīqa*. One of them, Abdel, explained to me that there are rules to respect, a coherence to follow, for example “one cannot marry a psychoanalyst”; indeed, in the Guénonian interpretation, psychoanalysis is considered to be anti-traditional / counter-initiatic, and thus a diabolical parody of spirituality.⁹⁴ Hussein, meanwhile, did not want to leave his wife and consequently had to abandon the AIS. Anyone who threatens the strength of the *ṭarīqa*, including wives and husbands, is ostracised.

The intense atmosphere is actually a *modus operandi* of this *ṭarīqa*. Internal tensions unite disciples as a whole. In several months of ethnographic fieldwork, I witnessed many public reprimands from Pallavicini towards disciples. Some of them were relatively trivial, for example, Mansour was publicly criticised for scolding a teammate after losing the interfaith football game and Fatih for excessive use of his smartphone. Others’ reprimands were harsher, for example some of them were accused of being a failure in the spiritual sense. “You have already done the pilgrimage to Mecca, but you behave as if you have never been there. You’re not worthy of this spiritual level.”⁹⁵ External tension is due to the eschatological mission, previously described, which counteracts the forces of the Anti-Christ that are at play.

From a sociological point of view, the AIS conforms perfectly to the sect ideal-type. It is composed of a voluntary group which is coherent and strives to be homogeneous,⁹⁶ it possesses an aristocratic spirit,⁹⁷ and it is in tension with

94. Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes du temps*, 227–34.

95. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes 2014.

96. Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*. Ch. 9: “Das Absolute Gottens und naturrecht und die sekten,” 621–53.

97. Weber, *Sociologie des religions*, 410.

the surrounding environment;⁹⁸ finally, the AIS represents for its disciples the primary source of identification.⁹⁹ These characteristics of the sect ideal-type are closely connected to the “absolute” and “rejected” knowledge that explains the tension with the surrounding society, favours homogeneity and solidity, and justifies both the sense of encirclement and the aristocratic spirit in opposition to a decadent world.

The De-esotericisation of the Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya

As I have shown, Guénonian “form of thought” shaped the AIS, which could be described as an esoteric religious movement, using different definitions from Hanegraaff’s “rejected knowledge” to Stuckrad’s “absolute knowledge.” Furthermore, I argued that these categories could be perceived also in AIS’s rituals and organisational structures.

Starting from the 2010s, the AIS has been living through an important change: a gradual opening to the currents and sources of knowledge. “De-esotericisation” here is understood as the process of expanding the Guénonian contours that set the framework discussed in the previous sections, since Guénon’s notion of esotericism had strictly defined the AIS’s forms of thought and practice. The metaphysical “absolute knowledge” is gradually opening up to other forms of perspectives drawn from, for example, more traditional Sufi and Islamic knowledge, but is also shifting toward social and natural sciences. Finally, the sectarian dimensions described above, such as the tension with the surrounding societies, are slowly diminishing. This gradual opening up started with Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini, but it was boosted by Shaykh Yahya (Pallavicini’s son) and Bruno Guiderdoni, *kehalifa* (local spiritual leader) in France. Shaykh Yahya Pallavicini was born in 1965 and spent part of his youth between Switzerland, Japan (his mother’s country) and Italy, where he studied. Bruno Guiderdoni is

98. Stark and Bainbridge, “Of Churches, Sects, and Cults,” 123.

99. Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, 1–2.

one of the most important Muslim scientists working on the dialogue between Islam and science.¹⁰⁰

On several occasions AIS disciples stressed the extraordinary importance of my presence — as a researcher — among them, which would have been unimaginable a few years ago.¹⁰¹ In fact, according to Guénon’s interpretations, social and human sciences dealing with religious phenomena are an instrument of the war against the traditional spirit.¹⁰² Shaykh Yahya emphasised that the AIS is formed by “hawks and doves,” the first would prefer to stick to the Guénonian esoteric message and to continue the intellectual debates (the vertical dimension), while the latter would prefer an opening outward in order to perform / embody the esoteric message through activities in society, such as interreligious and intra-religious dialogues (the horizontal dimension).¹⁰³

I ask myself if it’s not necessary to insist on the horizontal dimension, after having insisted for years on the metaphysical dimension. I wonder also ... if a change of pace is not necessary. Hence, I am asking you to help us in translating our esoteric language into something lower — sociological — that allows us to improve our horizontal communication.¹⁰⁴

This opening does not concern only social sciences and communication with a wider public, but involves also the natural sciences. For Guiderdoni the dialogue between science and religion is now not only possible but also fruitful and serves the desire

to deepen the mystery of God, to make it even bigger through the dialogue between science and religion. The purpose of this dialogue for me is to increase our astonishment with God. It is here, the spiritual goal.¹⁰⁵

100. For his thought, see Bigliardi, “The Contemporary Debate on the Harmony between Islam and Science,” 167–86; Piraino, “Bruno Guiderdoni—Among Sufism, Traditionalism and Science,” 21–24.

101. For example, until the 2010s prominent scholars working on contemporary Islam complained about the difficulty of giving a lecture without AIS’s metaphysical interruptions — personal communication with Professor Massimo Campanini and Professor Stefano Allievi.

102. Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée*, 5.

103. Yahya Pallavicini, fieldwork notes July 2013.

104. Abd Al Wahid Pallavicini, fieldwork notes July 2013.

105. Guiderdoni 2013, interview.

Guiderdoni is not interested in building a new theoretical system in order to describe the relationship between science and religion.¹⁰⁶ On the contrary, Guiderdoni is trying to develop a discussion within the scientific Islamic community in order to allow the exposure of different perspectives, which can transcend scientific or religious simplifications. This is an approach that differs from the absolute knowledge previously described. The book *Science et Islam* which he edited in 2012 is a perfect example of different Islamic voices on the subject of natural sciences.¹⁰⁷

Unlike his father, Shaykh Yahya is very familiar with Arabic and Islamic doctrines. Guénon's thought remains in the background, but is no longer the first reference, since the Quran and scholars of classical Sufism, such as Aḥmad Ibn Idrīs, al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī, are cited more often.¹⁰⁸ During the interview, Shaykh Yahya told me that “we have to free ourselves from the presumption of going on with a Guénonian checklist.”¹⁰⁹

Following this gradual opening up, AIS's approach to modernity is changing, the accent is on the project of rebuilding, restoration and resistance, rather than opposition to modernity. Both Yahya Pallavicini and Guiderdoni prefer to define themselves as “ante-modern” or “post-post modern” rather than “anti-modern.”

Guénon had to face the modernity, modernity [that was] really proud, colonialist, positivist. It had colonised the whole reality. . . . We are in a different situation where the ideological modernity has even declined and we are interacting with postmodernism, which is more open to dialogue. . . . We are rather “ante,” that is to say, we try to find the great metaphysical synthesis, which is the Primordial Tradition, which existed in the Christian and Muslim worlds of the Middle Ages. . . . We have a rebuilding project. There is the postmodern deconstruction and we are in a “post-post-modern” or “ante-modern” reconstruction.¹¹⁰

106. Bigliardi, “The Contemporary Debate on the Harmony between Islam and Science,” 167–86; Piraino, “Bruno Guiderdoni—Among Sufism, Traditionalism and Science,” 21–24.

107. Guiderdoni, *Science et religion en islam, passim*.

108. Pallavicini, *Dentro la moschea*; Pallavicini, *L'Islām in Europa*, 133, 136, 144.

109. Yahya Pallavicini, interview 2014.

110. Guiderdoni, interview 2013.

This process of openness and de-Westernizing the esotericism of the AIS concerns also the social dimension. Yahya Pallavicini is a member of the Mosque of Rome and has established the conditions for dialogue with other Italian Islamic communities that were alienated during the 1990s and 2000s.¹¹¹ Guiderdoni is not only a renewed scientist, he is engaged both in disseminating Islam for a non-Muslim public and natural sciences for a Muslim public, activities which have been honoured with the title of *Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite*.¹¹² This entails that AIS disciples and spokespersons are gradually engaging in social and cultural activities, not only in the name of the Italian Aḥmadiyya-Idrīsiyya Shādhiliyya, but generally in the name of the Islamic community.

This process of the de-Westernisation of the AIS's esotericism — a de-esotericisation understood in terms of a Western heuristic and historical conceptualisation of esotericism — and gradual opening up is not homogenous and some AIS disciples confessed to me that they would prefer to focus on the metaphysical debate, rather than this new openness to Islamic doctrines and communities. The tension between hawks' elitism and doves' reaching out is far from being resolved. In the following words of an AIS disciple, we can read both the aristocratic and elitist spirit, and the diffidence towards the Italian Islamic community that still characterises the AIS.

We try to do this intra-religious dialogue [with other Muslims] in order to let our [Muslim] brothers understand, that Islam, it's not only to eat couscous in the mosque or the kebab, but it concerns also the effort to read about sacred books, to interpret them, to write, to take part in the cultural, religious and public debate. . . . They exist [Muslim migrants] only as a problem for the state. At this moment the [Italian] citizens are right to be afraid, to be afraid of immigration, and of Islam.¹¹³

111. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 140.

112. <https://www.ihei-asso.org/cérémonie-de-remise-des-insignes/>, accessed March 22, 2019.

113. Fieldwork notes, 2014.

Final Remarks

In this article I showed how Guénonian forms of esoteric thought shaped the AIS, in particular the concepts of “primordial tradition” and “spiritual élite.” Furthermore, I argued that these doctrines form an “absolute knowledge” — “a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history”¹¹⁴ — that justifies the metapolitical engagement, the sense of superiority, and the sectarian organisational structures. Finally, the AIS claims the re-appropriation of the metaphysical rejected knowledge, inverting the stigma, rejecting the rejection, “refu[sing] to accept the disappearance of incalculable mystery from the world.”¹¹⁵

Starting from the 2010s, the AIS has been living through a process that we can define as “de-esotericisation”: the Guénonian “form of esoteric thought” is still of fundamental importance, but other Sufi and Islamic references are more present. The “absolute knowledge” is softening and opening up to other forms of knowledge, such as social, human, and natural sciences. The anti-modernist spirit implicit in the conception of a “rejected knowledge” is less central, with a growing focus on the concept of reconciliation and rebuilding. This process affects also the social dimensions; hence the sectarian aspects are gradually diminishing and AIS disciples and spokespersons are engaged in activities for the wider Islamic community, and not only focused on the AIS. It has to be stressed that these tensions are still at play.

To conclude, I would like to frame the AIS in the context of contemporary Sufism in European and North American countries. Several categorisations have been tried to describe these Sufi orders. The most important are Marcia Hermansen’s categories “hybrid, transplanted, and perennial,”¹¹⁶ Olav Hammer’s

114. Stuckrad, “Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion,” 230.

115. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254.

116. Hermansen, “Literary Productions of Western Sufi Movements,” 29; Hermansen, “What’s American about American Sufi Movements?,” 39.

“neo-Sufism and Islamic Sufism,”¹¹⁷ and Gisela Webb’s “three waves.”¹¹⁸ I adopt a similar approach to that employed for esotericism, preferring its efficacy in specific cases, rather than using broad concepts for different and heterogeneous phenomena and contexts.

The case of the AIS challenges many conceptualisations of Sufi orders in Europe and North America. First of all, even if, as I argued, it reproduces some Orientalist stereotypes (such as the presupposed better resistance of non-Europeans to the processes of modernisation and secularisation), Pallavicini and the AIS, in contrast to many Orientalists,¹¹⁹ do not conceptualise Sufism as being in opposition to Islam, nor in opposition to the *shari‘a*. On the contrary, following Pallavicini’s teachings, the primordial tradition can be grasped only by living and respecting a specific religious orthodoxy, and in this case following (his interpretation of) the Islamic orthodoxy.

AIS should not be categorised as “perennial” or “universal,”¹²⁰ along with the Sufi Order International and Idries Shah’s movements,¹²¹ because these Sufi orders have completely different doctrines, rituals, organisational structures and relations with Islam. The most important differences concern the process of de-Islamisation that the aforementioned Sufi orders experienced, while as I showed in this article, the Islamic orthodoxy and practices are fundamental narratives in the AIS.

Secondly, it has to be stressed that there are several interpretations of the universal and religious pluralism, and they have been debated issues throughout the whole history of Islam and Sufism.¹²² These themes, even if they are

117. Hammer, “Sufism for Westerners,” 138.

118. Webb, “Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” 190.

119. Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies in the West,” 126–27.

120. Hermansen, “Literary Productions of Western Sufi Movements,” 28; Webb, “Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” 95.

121. Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, 203.

122. Geoffroy, *Un éblouissement sans fin: la poésie dans le soufisme*, 285; Geoffroy, *L’islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus*, 119–31.

particularly relevant in contemporary global Sufism,¹²³ do not belong only to modernity or to Western societies. The category “universal” could be misleading, simplifying complex relations between Islam and religious otherness. In the specific case of the AIS, even if there is a conceptualisation of a primordial tradition that transcends religious forms, it would be difficult to describe them as “universal” because, as I showed in this article, their interpretations of esoteric and exoteric orthodoxies are quite normative and strict: only a few – a small élite – could grasp the primordial tradition. The majority of European believers do not know the metaphysical/esoteric knowledge and many of them are considered to be living anti-traditional lives. Finally, there are other Sufi orders both in Europe and in North America, such as the Būdshīshiyya and the ‘Alāwiyya, that claim an “inclusive universalism” without undergoing a process of de-Islamisation and claiming the Islamic-ness of universalism.¹²⁴ These Sufi orders differ both from the AIS and de-Islamised Sufism; further research is needed to compare these different forms of universalism.

AIS also challenges Hammer’s categorisation of Neo-Sufism,¹²⁵ and the similar definition of the “second wave of Sufism” characterised by the counter-culture,¹²⁶ which, in contrast to Islamic Sufism, fosters an individual quest rather than a collective action, implies a combination of different religious beliefs, adopts a more liberal gender roles, and stresses the importance of experience rather than the importance of orthodox practices.

If these categories are not effective in describing the AIS, what words should we use? I consider that the most effective category is “hybrid,” a concept that should be considered as a starting point for the analysis and not as the final re-

123. Piraino and Sedgwick, *Global Sufism*, *passim*.

124. Piraino, “René Guénon et Son Héritage Dans Le Soufisme Du XXIème Siècle,” 40; Piraino, “Les Politiques Du Soufisme En France,” 142; Piraino, “Pilgrimages in Western European Sufism,” 168; Piraino, “Who Is the Infidel? Religious Boundaries and Social Change in the Shadhiliyya Darqawiyya Alawiyya,” 77.

125. Hammer, “Sufism for Westerners,” 138.

126. Webb, “Third-Wave Sufism in America and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship,” 90.

sult,¹²⁷ because there are several forms of hybridisation and the majority of Sufi orders in Europe are influenced by local cultural and religious trends. The specificity of AIS hybridity in Italy is the negotiation between Western esotericism and Sufism (understood as a current of Islamic esotericism, though not exclusively).

I would like to draw attention to the resemblances and resonances between AIS's process of esotericisation and de-esotericisation in the sense described here, and the process of de-Islamisation and re-Islamisation of Sufism in North America and Europe described by Mark Sedgwick and Alix Philippon.¹²⁸ Exogenous doctrines from Sufism and Islam, coming from the Theosophical Society and the Guénonian heritage, shaped some Sufi orders in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, producing peculiar Sufi phenomena in Europe and North America, with specific doctrines, rituals, and organisational structures. With the passage of time these exogenous doctrines are gradually fading, and the new generation of these Sufi orders are increasingly focusing on Sufi and Islamic references and engaging with other Islamic communities.

To conclude, I consider that the case of AIS could give us some concrete insights in the debate about the conceptual and geographical borders of esotericism, which have been subjects of discussion in recent years. If several authors have called for abandoning the application of the label “Western” to esotericism, stressing the intrinsic risks of Orientalism¹²⁹ and of ignoring subjects outside the Western frame,¹³⁰ other scholars have stressed how the use of esotericism in other linguistic, cultural and religious frames could be a form of semantic violence: a “terminological imperialism.”¹³¹

127. Werbner, “The Limits of Cultural Hybridity,” *passim*.

128. Sedgwick, “The Islamization of Western Sufism after the Early New Age,” 35–53; Philippon, “De l’occidentalisation Du Soufisme à La Réislamisation Du New Age? Sufi Order International et La Globalisation Du Religieux,” 209–26.

129. Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, “Editorial: Time to Drop the ‘Western’,” 112.

130. Aspren, “Beyond the West,” 11.

131. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” 86.

AIS is liminal — a hybrid phenomenon between Western esotericism and Sufism. Using Egil Asprem’s categories,¹³² we could infer that genealogically the AIS belongs to Western esotericism, due to the Guénonian and Orientalist influences. On the other hand, this process of hybridisation has been possible only because there are some analogies between Western esotericism and Islamic esotericism generally and Sufism specifically.

Resemblances and resonances that we could grasp in the forms of thought informing AIS: the metaphysical knowledge could be compared with *maʿrifā* — intuitive and spiritual knowledge; the primordial tradition could be compared to the *fiṭra*, the innate nature or original disposition that is present before birth, or the *dīn qaīyyama* — the correct religion; the intellectual élite could be compared with *kehamās*, the spiritual élite; the esoteric initiation with the initiatory pact *bayʿa*; the esoteric transmission with the *silsila*, the chain of transmission of sacred knowledge from master to master (which goes back to the Prophet Muhammad); the inner transmutation with the *fanāʾ* — the annihilation of the ego in God. Finally, the difference between esoteric and exoteric can be compared to the difference between *zābir* and *bāṭin*, respectively visible and hidden teachings. Furthermore, resonances could also be perceived using von Stuckrad’s and Urban’s approaches,¹³³ in fact there have been several Sufi leaders claiming an absolute knowledge that implies elitism and sectarian organisational structures.¹³⁴

As I stated in the introduction of this article, I do not consider the category of esotericism sufficient to describe Sufism exclusively; which is true also for all the other categories, such as mysticism and spirituality, because the complexity and heterogeneity of Sufism (as with many cultural and religious phenomena) implies a certain elusiveness. Having said that, I consider that the paradigms of

132. Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 12.

133. Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 3; Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry,” 1.

134. Sedgwick, “Sects in the Islamic World,” 195–240.

Western and Islamic esotericisms are particularly helpful in analysing the specific phenomena of AIS, its Guénonian foundations, and doctrinal shifts, via a pragmatic approach focused on the adopted heuristic values of the historically conceptualised categories, rather than on their ahistorical absolute values, could help us in overcoming the impasse of the supposed borders of esotericism(s).

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