THE WESTERN SUFI IS A SOCIAL PORTRAIT

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Abstract: This study examines the intercultural reception of Sufism in the West through two key figures: George of Hungary (15th c.) and Ivan Aguéli (19th–20th c.). George, a Dominican enslaved in the Ottoman Empire, briefly engaged in Sufi practices before returning to Christianity, leaving one of the earliest European accounts of dervishes and Sufi poetry. His writings combine admiration with critique, revealing the cultural impact of Ottoman Sufism on early modern Europe. Centuries later, the Swedish artist and theosophist Ivan Aguéli embraced Islam and Sufism, translating classical texts and linking Sufi thought with Western philosophy, theosophy, and avant-garde aesthetics. A comparison of these cases shows how Sufism was variously perceived as a spiritual challenge, an intellectual resource, and a universalist framework. The article highlights the shift in Western attitudes from Renaissance suspicion to modernist appropriation, laying foundations for the emergence of Western Sufism.

Keywords: Western Sufism, dervishes, intercultural transfer, Theosophy, Sufi poetry, mysticism, religious conversion, early modern Europe, Orientalism, universalism.

George of Hungary, a young Dominican who was captured during the Ottoman conquest of Transylvania and sold into slavery in western Anatolia (now in Turkey). He became a Sufi around 1443. However, he later repented of this and returned to Europe, where he wrote his treatise to warn others against the seductive power of Sufism and Islamic society. He is the first Western Sufi known by name. Undoubtedly, there were many others like him, that is, Christians who found themselves under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and assimilated with Ottoman culture and religion. What was unusual about George of Hungary was not that he became a Sufi, but that he later returned to Christianity and Europe. That's why we know his name. George's treatise on the Turks contains the earliest known discussion in Western printed work of Sufis and dervishes, a term used to refer to mendicant Sufis.

It also includes the first translations of Sufi poetry, which George particularly liked. The Western taste for Sufi poetry persisted through Goethe, until in 1899, the author of a New York literary magazine complained about the

Sufi poems "Rubai" by Omar Khayyam that "everyone reads them – even boys whistle them in the street." Between 1480 and 1899, during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and while enjoying Sufi poetry, Western scholars defined Sufism first as mysticism and then as eternal esoteric, Deistic universalism[1].

These Renaissance and Enlightenment beliefs further shaped the structure of Sufism, which eventually established itself in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century. The period between 1480 and 1899, much of which coincided with the period of Western history known as early modernity, was the period during which the fourth intercultural transference took place.

It was a transition from the Muslim world to the West, and it had consequences only in intellectual life; it had no significant consequences for religious practice. The means of transmission include personal contacts, as in the case of George, and texts based on such contacts. There were also translations of texts from the Muslim world.

The earliest printed exposition of Sufism, which became widespread in Europe, was in George of Hungary's treatise "On the Customs, Conditions and Depravity of the Turks" in 1480. George was born in Romos, Transylvania (now in Romania, but then in Hungary), and may have been of German descent. He joined the Dominican Order and studied in Mulbach (now Sebesh) when it was taken by the Ottoman army. He was captured, enslaved and sold first to a Turkish farmer, and then to a second master, who treated him more kindly than the first[2]. After twenty years in Turkey, he left this second teacher, joined the Dominicans and died in Rome in 1502.

In his treatise, he explained that he had observed how Christians in the Ottoman territories often converted to Islam, and that he himself was very close to this. Therefore, he wanted to investigate this phenomenon in order to prepare other Christians who might find themselves in a similar temptation. He identified two types of reasons for conversion: religious (which he calls "supernatural") and non-religious (which he calls "natural"). The main religious reasons he highlighted were Islamic theology, dervishes and saints. The main non-religious reasons he cited included admiration for Ottoman culture, the Ottoman military and political. achievements and qualities of Ottoman women. One would expect a Christian apologist to demonstrate the illusory nature of the Ottoman Empire's superiority in these respects by exposing the shortcomings of the Ottoman Empire, but this was not George's approach. Rather, he accepted

[1] Inayat Khan, Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty (London: Theosophical Publishing Society,1914), – P19– 20.
[2] Charles Eliot Norton, "Review of Khayyam's Quatrains and Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyats", North American Review, 109, No. 225 (October 1869): – P 565-84,

the basic premise of the superiority of the Ottoman Empire, but claimed that it had a diabolical origin[3].

St. Augustine warned against such illusions, he noted, and it was known that Satan could appear as an angel of light. Since George did not try to expose the shortcomings of the Ottoman Empire, his account is generally factual, and where he deviates from neutrality, he praises the Ottomans rather than condemns them. George was particularly impressed by the restraint inherent in Ottoman social customs, especially those practiced by the rich and powerful. He was also impressed by the Ottoman dervishes and their poetry.

In fact, if you read between the lines, he actually converted to Islam. He admits that the dervishes he met made a deep impression on him and then spent fifteen years living as a dervish, assimilating into Ottoman society to the point that he forgot how to speak his native language[4]. It is not known exactly how he then found himself among Western Christians again. It was in connection with the dervishes that George mentioned Satan's ability to appear in the form of an angel of light, because the dervishes he met were "so exemplary in all their words and deeds and showed so much piety in their manners and movements that they seemed not human, but angels."

The poetry of the dervishes made such a strong impression on him that he included two samples of poems in his treatise on the Turks, in Turkish and in Latin translation. Their author has not been identified[5].

We will see that another Ottoman slave of Western origin, who may have also become a dervish, also loved dervish poetry. George draws a basic distinction between ulama, whom he calls "priests" (sacerdos), dervishes (dervischlar), whom he identifies as a type of monk (religiosus), and Sufis (czofilar), whom he identifies simply as "devoted to meditation and spiritual exercises."

Its transcription corresponds to the Turkish in using the plural suffix –lar and the Hungarian spelling in using cz instead of s. He describes the dervishes as wandering ascetics living in voluntary poverty, sometimes walking naked except for covering their genitals, suffering from extreme heat and cold, perhaps abstaining from speech and possibly burdening themselves with chains or cutting themselves. Thus, their bodies may be covered with scars. Some have

[3] Franklin D. Lewis, Rumi Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalal al- Din Rumi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), – P 499.
[4] Albrecht Classen, "The World of the Turks Described by an Eye- Witness: Georgius De Hungaria's Dialectical Discourse on the Foreign World of the Ottoman Empire," (Journal of Early Modern History 2003): – P264.
[5] Franklin D. Lewis, Rumi's Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), – P 499.

visions, some have revelations, and some experience "supernatural ecstasy." Sufis, on the contrary, are highly respected as the successors of the prophets, "do not stop constant prayer" and perform vigils. Dervishes perform sema, rotation, thanks to which the Mevlevi are now most famous, and Sufis perform dhikr[6].

His own experience, which began with being captured and turned into a Sufi, and then returning to Christianity, reveals the complex dynamics of cultural and religious contact. While living in the Ottoman Empire, he absorbed Ottoman culture and religion so much that he could forget his native language, but eventually returned to his Christian roots, leaving us invaluable evidence of his experiences and observations.

In his treatise, we see not only an analysis of the Islamic faith and culture, but also respect for them. George was fascinated by Sufi poetry and the Dervish lifestyle, which makes his work much more than just a critical look at Islam. His writings left a deep mark on the Western understanding of Sufism and probably inspired many followers of this tradition in the following centuries.

Ivan Agueli was the most important European theosophist writer on Sufism. In addition, just as Johnson founded a Sufi circle in the United States, so Agueli introduced Sufism to some other members of his circle in Europe. Agueli, as we will see, first converted to Islam, and a few years later became a Sufi. This is the opposite of the model that later became the norm, following which Westerners convert to Islam because they become Sufis, which was also followed by George of Hungary in the XV century.

Agueli was not the only Westerner to become a Sufi in the Muslim world at the turn of the nineteenth century. There was also the journalist and adventurer Isabelle Eberhardt, who joined the Rachmaniyah tariqa in Algeria in 1899 or 1900, and the French orientalist painter Etienne Dinet, who also joined the Rachmaniyah tariqa in 1913. There were probably others. Eberhardt was known for her journalism and Dinet for her painting, and therefore their lives are documented.

If Westerners who were not famous joined Sufi tariqas in the Muslim world, this would not usually be recorded. Agueli, however, is the most important of the Westerners who became Sufis during this period, thanks to his writings on Sufism and because of his connection with Rene Guenon, whom he initiated into

[6] B. H. Steele-yard. The Secret Ritual of the Secret Work of the Ancient Arab Order of the Nobility of the Mystical Temple (Washington, D.C., 1914).

Sufism, and thus provided one of the foundations on which Sufism later established itself in the West[7].

Agueli's eventful career also illustrates how avant-garde artistic, political, social, and religious views and environments blended in late nineteenth-century Paris. Just as religious and political radicalism converged in Spinoza, they converged in Agueli.

In addition, it also illustrates how European states sometimes promote Sufism for their own purposes — a phenomenon that has a longer history than is often thought. He was introduced to the Theosophical Society in Paris by his art teacher Emile Bernard. By 1891, he had developed an interest in Islam, judging by the books he borrowed from the Royal Swedish Library during a visit to Stockholm that year, among which were the Koran, as well as Baudelaire and a book about travels to Indochina (now Vietnam) and Cambodia. In 1893, returning to Paris, he read about ancient non-European art, Indian and East Asian, as well as Islamic, and about mysticism, especially Swedenborg, Buddhism and Ancient Egypt[8].

He also studied Hebrew and planned a trip to the East, to Algeria, Egypt or India. Agueli studied Arabic and continued to study mysticism; he asked a friend to try to find him the works of Dionysius. After that, he went to Egypt. He first lived in a small village near Alexandria, and then in Al-Marga, a predominantly Christian village near Cairo, studied painting and perfected his Arabic. He was enthusiastic about Egypt. "I have never seen more peaceful people in my life," he wrote to his mother. "There is a seal of peace and inner light on their faces, which is nice to see"

After his return to France, Agueli converted to Islam, about which he still knew relatively little at that time. In 1899, when he visited Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the first mention of Islam appeared in his letters, when he tells how he addressed members of the Muslim community of Ceylon, hoping to be accepted and possibly get permission to study at a madrasah (traditional school). Agueli was warmly welcomed by the Muslim community of Ceylon. He also discovered that many of his new Muslim friends were Sufis, "among [whom] there are really outstanding intellectuals." However, he did not write anything more about Sufism until a year had passed. The only person who did not know about his

[7] "The Howling Dervish"and "The Whirling Dervish", Constantinople, ed. Warwick Goble and Alexander Van Millingen (London: A&C Black, 1906),– P 228-30.

[8] Invariably copied as dermschlar, but the m is clearly a miscopying of vi. The identification was made by Klaus Kreiser, "Die Derwische im Spiegel abendländischer Reiseberichte," in Istanbul und das osmanische Reich: Stadte, Bauten, nschriften, Derwische undlihre Konvente, ed. Kreiser (Isis: Istanbul, 1995), –P 2.

conversion at the time was his mother, to whom he carefully wrote only that he was "living with Muslims" who were "the best people in India[9]."

He explained that they had the same God as Christians and Jews, and they "worshipped him in a more dignified way." Swedenborg had great respect for Muslims, he added. There are different ways to be a Muslim. A devout Muslim in the Muslim world is a Muslim in terms of theology, practice and identity. Agueli has clearly adopted an Islamic identity in Ceylon, using the name Abd al-Hadi and dressing as a Muslim, mostly in a Moroccan style. However, it is unclear to what extent he practiced Islam on a daily basis. There is no mention of ritual prayer (namaz) or fasting during Ramadan in his correspondence, while there are mentions of visiting mosques to meet people, which may mean that he did not follow daily Islamic practice[10].

On the other hand, this may mean that he did not mention issues that, in his opinion, his European correspondents would not understand. His biographer reports that he once got very drunk in Cairo, and notes that he found no other evidence of "alcohol abuse." This may indicate that Agueli did occasionally drink alcohol, although not in excess. On the other hand, Agueli could have disregarded the Sharia prohibition on alcohol consumption in only one or two cases. For many years after his conversion, Agueli painted only landscapes that did not cause problems in accordance with most interpretations of Sharia, and for several years he gave up painting altogether. However, since 1911, he began to paint human figures, which is prohibited by many interpretations of Sharia, as well as naked female nature, which is prohibited by all known interpretations of Sharia, since a man can see a mature woman naked only if he is married to her. At least in this respect, Agueli chose art over Islam. Agueli returned from Ceylon to France via Madras[11].

Starting in December 1910, Agueli published a series of articles on Sufism and a number of translations of classical Sufi works, mainly in the tradition of Ibn Arabi, in the journal of the World Gnostic Church "La Gnosis" (Gnosis). Agueli's articles and translations shaped the understanding of Sufism, which later had an impact in Europe, just as Bjerregaard's articles had an impact in America and England. They rejected some details of the theosophical

[9] Patrick D. Bowen, "Magicians, Muslims, and Metaphysicians: The American Esoteric Avant- Garde in Missouri, 1880– 1889," Theosophical History 17, no. 2 (2014): – P 61– 62.
[10] Ivan Aguéli, "L'universalité en l'islam," La Gnose 1911, reprinted in Ivan Aguéli, Ecrits pour La Gnose, ed. G. Rocca (Milan: Arche, 1988), – P 96, 100.
[11] William Jones, "On the Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus", (London, 1807), – P 211, 216.

understanding of religions, most notably the emphasis on Vedanta Hinduism, while maintaining the general concept of eternity[12].

Agueli used Ibn Arabi as his standard authority in Sufism, establishing him in the position he retains in the West to this day. Agueli also quotes other great Sufis and several famous hadiths, but — surprisingly for a Muslim — not a single passage from the Koran. His interpretation of Sufism is also important because it does not take into account the Koran and Sufi practice. Agueli's understanding of Sufism corresponded to the basic emanationist scheme. The multiplicity of existence is an illusion, and the "identity of "I" and "Not-I" is a "Great truth" that leads to unity, to the "transformation of personal reality into human universalism or prophetic reality".

Emphasizing this point, he even goes so far as to claim that "altruism" is an empty term, since there is no one to whom altruism can be shown. When a murder occurs, each of us is a murderer and a victim at the same time. Agueli approaches the rhetoric of Meister Eckhart here. Agueli's articles in La gnose also retain some of Al-Nadi's accents. He is consistently positive about Islam, which he defends as a better religion than any other.

In some ways it resembles brahmanism, but, unlike Brahmanism, it is universal. It is not Islamic fatalism that is to blame for the deplorable state of the Muslim world, as some critics of Islam have claimed, but rather an oppressive government and "ethnic heterogeneity." The goal of Sufism, fana (unification), is perceived in this world as "tolerance, impartiality, disinterest, detachment, self-sacrifice, self-discipline and active fatalism," and "active fatalism" means accepting the will of God, and not passive fatalism, which Islam has been accused of encouraging.

An article published in Al-Nadi in 1907 suggests that Agueli still understood Sufism at that time, which he repeated the "Secret Doctrine of Blavatsky", describing as the "secret doctrine of Islam", as compatible with theosophy, which he favourably presented. However, by 1911 he had changed his mind, rejecting many theosophical principles[13].

Thus, he describes the mahatmas as "imaginary" and rejects the possibility of any "historical kinship" between Islamic and Chinese mysticism. Although he is sometimes inconsistent, Agueli rejects theosophical perennialism, replacing it with universalism. Islamic and Chinese mysticism may not have a "historical kinship," but they are remarkably similar, and most of Agueli's articles are devoted to exploring these similarities and explaining Sufi theology in a

[12] G. Rocca, "Introduction" to Ecrits pour La Gnose, ed. G. Rocca (Milan: Arche, 1988).
[13] Guillaume-Joseph Grelo, "New relations from a trip to Constantinople" (Paris, 1680), – P 290-91.

comparative framework. Here he acknowledges Pouvourville's work on Taoism. From time to time, he makes comparative references to other religions, especially Swedenborg, Kabbalah and yoga, simultaneously comparing dhikr with Hatha-He emphasizes the essential agreement between Ibn Arabi, Swedenborg and Lao Tzu, which he attributes not to a common eternal origin, but to the fact that all three "achieved the same the depths of human knowledge."

Despite the fact that Agueli called the mahatmas imaginary, he retained the theosophical idea of a hidden master. Following an 11th-century text that emphasized the superiority of the Malamati (an early Sufi group from Khorasan), parts of which he translated for La Gnose, Agueli defined the Malamati as something like mahatmas and as "great initiates of Islam", a phrase taken from the title of "Great Initiates" (Les grands initiés), the bestseller of the theosophist Edward The Shure, which traces the "esoteric doctrine" from Rama through Krishna, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato to Jesus, and also shows the influence of Antoine Fabre d'Oliva as about Blavatsky and theosophy[14]. Agueli attributed the decline of the Muslim world to the fall of Malamati.

However, he believed that some Malamati were still hiding, and implied that one should hope for their reappearance. This is a completely theosophical position. In addition to presenting his understanding of Sufism and Ibn Arabi's ideas as standard references in French circles, Agueli also introduced Sufism to Rene Guenon, then one of the two editors of La gnose, and later, as we will see, a key figure in the development of Western Sufism.

Guenon was primarily interested in Vedanta Hinduism, he was among those whom Agueli "initiated" into shadhiliya Arabiya in 1910 or 1911. Since then, many have taken this as a sign of Guenon's conversion to Islam, but in fact there is no evidence that Guenon practiced Islam or adopted a Muslim identity before the 1930s. He continued to belong to the Worldwide Gnostic Church until it was dissolved in 1917 to attend Catholic Mass with his wife, and write about Hinduism rather than Islam. At the same time that Agueli initiated Guenon into Shadhiliya Arabiya, he and Guenon were also initiated by Pouvourville into an unknown Taoist order. Guenon, in turn, gave Agueli and Pouvourville Masonic initiations. The Gnostics obviously understood all this as compatible with each other, as well as with Gnostic universalism[15].

[14] Ivan Aguéli, "Pages dédiées a Mercure," La Gnose 1911, reprinted in Ivan Aguéli, Ecrits pour La Gnose, ed. G.Rocca (Milan: Arche, 1988),– P 61.
[15] David Brafman, "Facing East: A Western View of Islam," Research Journal (Getty Research, 1 2009): – P 153-54.

There is no evidence of "practical dervishism." Sufis in the Muslim world usually distinguish between accepting the tariqa for guidance (irshad) and accepting the Tariqa for its blessings (baraka). Guenon could only accept Shadhiliya Arabiya for her blessings, as there were no instructions available. Sufis in the Muslim world usually take one tariqa for guidance and then may take others for blessings, but the tariqa for guidance takes precedence over the tariqa for blessings, rather like the first university degree takes precedence over subsequent honorary degrees.

Agueli returned to Sweden and took up painting at the end of 1911, and then to Egypt in 1913, where he was at the beginning of the First World War. Sweden remained neutral, but the British military authorities, who took control of Egypt during the war, suspected Agueli of having contacts with pro-Ottoman circles and expelled him in 1916. He boarded a ship to Barcelona in neutral Spain, where in 1917, becoming increasingly deaf, he was hit by a train. His paintings were rescued by Prince Eugene, the artist and younger brother of the King of Sweden, and are now on display in various Swedish galleries. As will be seen, his understanding of Sufism, developed by Guenon, gained wide influence[16].

The life and work of Ivan Agueli are an example of exceptional courage and openness of thought, which in their greatness combine avant-garde studies in the field of art, politics, social and religious ideas. His journey across cultural and religious boundaries reflects not only his own quest for understanding, but also the diversity of views and beliefs that may have been present in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century.

For Agueli, the study of Sufism became not just an academic exercise, but a way of self-discovery and understanding the meaning of life. His writings and translations of Sufi texts in the magazine "La Gnose" not only shed light on the mystical aspects of Islam for a Western audience, but also became the foundation for the further development of Sufism in the West.

Being an adherent of universalism and gnostic thinking, Agueli was able to unite various religious and philosophical traditions, showing their unity in the pursuit of eternal truths. His work opens the door to understanding and interaction between cultures and religions, promoting harmony and mutual understanding in the world..

[16] Ivan Ageli, “The Universe of Islam”, "Knowledge", 1911, reprinted in Ivan Ageli's book "Essays on Knowledge", edited by G. Rocchi (Milan: Arche, 1988), – P 96, 100.

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