

## Article

# Spiritual but Not Religious? French Muslim Discourses on Spirituality

Abdessamad Belhaj

Institute of Religion and Society, University of Public Service, 1083 Budapest, Hungary;  
belhaj.abdessamad@uni-nke.hu

**Abstract:** This article explores the possibility of a spiritual Islam in the West as a viable alternative to traditionalist and political Islam. It looks at the capabilities and limitations of two French Muslim voices, Abdennour Bidar and Éric Geoffroy, who are the most vocal Muslim intellectuals in favor of spiritual Islam in France. A careful examination of their writings reveals that post-modernism, French secularism, and religious freedom all support the spread of spiritual Islam. However, because of its elitism, overemphasis on individualism, and lack of formal religious institutions for knowledge and practice, spiritual Islam struggles. Overall, spiritual Islam flourishes in a secular society, but it is too intellectual to truly oppose political and conservative Islam.

**Keywords:** spirituality; Sufism; French Muslims; spiritual Islam

## 1. Introduction

Tension between spiritual and legalistic Islam can be observed in various periods of the history of Islam. In particular, the Muslim jurists (the main holders of traditional religious authority) contested Islamic mysticism (known as Sufism) when the latter claimed to be an alternative to the scriptural authority of the religious scholars or challenged the social and religious order sanctioned by the jurists (de Jong and Radtke 1999; Carmona 2006). Most of the time, spiritual and legalistic Islam co-existed (willingly or unwillingly), acknowledging their different roles in regulating the religious lives of Muslims: the Sufis managed the realm of spiritual mediation and the jurists that of rituals as well as daily transactions. In post-classical Islam, the friction between the spiritual and legalistic schools of Islamic thought was greatly reduced via interaction, various adjustments, and arrangements (Curry and Ohlander 2012).

In modern times, it can be said that spiritual Islam has the overall meaning of following a Sufi practice, even if “intellectual” spiritualities can also be experienced by Muslim individuals.<sup>1</sup> In the Muslim world, Sufi Islam remains contested by Salafism, reformism, and modernism, having a hard time laying claim to the prospect of an Islam other than that promoted by traditionalist or activist Islam (Sirriyeh 1997). Nonetheless, Sufism became a global phenomenon in recent decades as Sufi Brotherhoods turned into transnational movements, gaining a firm presence in the West (van Bruinessen and Howell 2007; Philippon 2014; Sedgwick 2017; Sedgwick and Piraino 2019; Hermansen and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2023).

Among Muslims living in the West, spiritual Islam can manifest itself as Sufi brotherhoods, mystical philosophy, or “selective spirituality” (mixing practices and beliefs from various Muslim and non-Muslim spiritual registers). However, in France, spiritual Islam is a label that is most often used in two senses: 1. Confraternity Sufism, a form of Islam that emphasizes spiritual practice (invocations, sermons, and spiritual chants). 2. Mystical thought following the primordial tradition of René Guénon (1886–1951) or the esotericism of Henry Corbin (1903–1978) (Shayegan 2011). This Westernized, new age, and post-modern spiritual Islam, called “the inner Islam”<sup>2</sup> by Patrick Laude, is relevant to the history of Islamic thought but endorses mystic philosophy with strong Christian, Buddhist,



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and Hindu backgrounds, or a mixture of all these religions and philosophies, while its links to Islam are fluid. Thus, one can encounter in France disciples of Sufi brotherhoods such as the ‘Alāwiyya or the Būdshīshīyya, as well as mystical intellectuals who draw on the inexhaustible sources of Western or Eastern spiritualities. Some elements of Sufism and/or Westernized mystic philosophy can nourish a spontaneous spirituality, that of “*islam intérieur* (inner Islam), *islam positif* (positive Islam) and *islam individuel* (individual Islam)” among young Muslims in France (Babès 1993, 1997, 2000; Khosrokhavar 1997).<sup>3</sup>

Currently, “spiritual Islam” is promoted in France, in particular, by two French Muslim thinkers: Abdennour Bidar and Éric Geoffroy. Both adopted the expression of *islam spirituel* in their works and public appearances, gaining high visibility in French media and intellectual life in the last decade. In what follows, I discuss each of these thinkers’ ideas on spiritual Islam and their potential to challenge traditionalist and/or political Islam.

## 2. Spiritual Islam vs. Legalistic Islam?

It is appropriate to quickly explain the relationships between spiritual Islam and legalistic Islam from early Islam to the present before moving on to examine spiritual Islam in France. Despite rarely being at odds with one another, spiritual Islam and legalistic Islam have always been in tension. A dichotomous separation between the conservative and spiritualist (Sufi) schools of Islam is denied by the majority of Sufi orders and leaders. The authority of jurists and traditionalists was unaffected by the advent of proto-Sufism in the ninth century, which was centered on an ascetic tradition. Al-Ḥallāj was executed in 922 as a result of the struggle between Sufis and jurists-theologians that emerged in the 10th century when Sufism gained a more esoteric aspect. Sufis were not a tiny, oppressed minority between the 13th and the 19th centuries. Contrarily, Sufism gained popularity and had a significant impact on Islamic communities and cultures as a whole. Sufi interpretations of Islam were attractive both to elites who looked beyond the details of traditional Islamic practice and the popular classes of Muslims, becoming mainstream in the Mameluk and Ottoman eras in the Middle East (Winkel 1993; Sohbi 2022; Atanasova 2023).

Following the rise of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s (1703–1792) movement in Arabia, followed by Salafi reformism in the 19th and 20th centuries, they turned Sufism (particularly Sufi Brotherhoods) into a fringe and unorthodox branch of Islam outside of their interpretation of legalistic orthodoxy (Wagemakers 2017). This binary perspective, adopted by reformism and eventually influencing a sizable number of Muslim theologians, ignores the historical and contemporary compatibility of Sufism and a conventional, largely legalistic Islam, as well as the fact that many millions of Muslims worldwide are both “traditional” Muslims and Sufi disciples. We should not overlook the fact that many post-classical traditional scholars have practiced some form of Sufism throughout the history of Islam, often in a Sufi brotherhood, as we study our cases of spiritual Islam in France. Above all, Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1057–1111) and Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), two of the most significant medieval Sunni theologians and jurists, embraced Sufism and Sufi brotherhoods.

Although most Sufis emphasize traditional Islamic practice, Sufism is not a monolithic movement and can include a variety of schools of thought, some of which, like “antinomian” Sufis, may be in conflict with orthodox Islam (Karamustafa 2015). Confraternity Sufism or Sunni Sufism does not place a higher value on spiritual practice than ritual practice (obeying Shari’a laws) or regard spiritual Islam as a substitute for Islam as a system of religious law. They claim that adhering to the traditional Sharia laws is a need before engaging in spiritual Sufi activity; therefore, the spiritual and theological-juristic aspects of Islam are combined into one system with spirituality as its most important component. The majority of Sufis throughout Islamic history spiritualize the law, yet they do not abolish it.

The debate between the spiritual and juridical strands of Islam is covered from two angles in this article. While opposing the two schools of Islam, Bidar seeks to alter the mainstream Sufi tradition in order to advance an independent and self-reliant spirituality. He does this by reusing particular elements of the intricate Sufi heritage for an autonomous endeavor that is motivated by the Enlightenment. Many pre-modern traditions are currently

being revived; thus, it is not difficult to apply classic elements in whole new circumstances. Éric Geoffroy, on the other hand, represents the Sufi majority view, which maintains that spiritual Islam is the essence of traditional Islam, embracing religious practice (such as fasting and prayer rituals) while criticizing some aspects of the legalistic interpretation of religious texts without completely rejecting it. Even though Geoffroy emphasizes the spiritual over the juridical, he does it in the context of what is most pressing right now rather than with the intention of undermining the scriptural/orthodox components of Islam.

### 3. Abdennour Bidar and Individual Spiritual Awareness

Abdennour Bidar was born in 1971 in Clermont-Ferrand (France). He was brought up by his mother (a French convert to Islam) in a dual French and Muslim culture, nourished as much by classical music as by the chanting of the Koran, by Western spiritual thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin and René Guénon, and by the mystics of Islam (Ibn ‘Arabī, Rūmī) and India (Ramana Maharshi). His academic career took him to the *École normale supérieure de Fontenay Saint-Cloud* and the Sorbonne, where he obtained an *agrégation* and a doctorate in philosophy. At the same time, he spent several years in a Sufi brotherhood (the Moroccan brotherhood Qādiriyya-Būdshīhiyya). In 2003, he published “*Lettre d’un musulman européen*” (*Letter from a European Muslim*) in *Esprit* review, which made him known as an Islamic intellectual. He then devoted his doctoral thesis in philosophy to the thought of the Indian Muslim reformer Mohammed Iqbal (1873–1938); Abdennour Bidar is one of the authors of the Charter of Secularism in Schools (2013) drafted at the request of Vincent Peillon, then Minister of National Education. He has published several books, including *Self islam, Histoire d’un islam personnel* (*Self Islam, A Story of a Personal Islam*) (2006), *L’islam sans soumission: Pour un existentialisme musulman* (*Islam without Submission: Towards a Muslim Existentialism*) (2008), and *L’Islam spirituel de Mohammed Iqbal* (*The Spiritual Islam of Mohammed Iqbal*) (2017). Following this book, he published two more works on spirituality: *Révolution spirituelle! (Spiritual Revolution!)* in 2021 and *Les cinq piliers de l’islam et leur sens initiatique* (*The Five Pillars of Islam and their Initiatory Meaning*) (2023).<sup>4</sup>

According to M. Hashas, Bidar’s project to “rethink Islam” evolved in three stages. The first stage revolves around his book *Self Islam* (2006), which presents his personal experience as a young European Muslim, as a model of a “reformed” Islam, embracing modernity and human rights (freedom, equality, respect for privacy). The second stage of Bidar’s thought adopts an “existentialist” reading of Islam, centered on the idea of the individual as “God’s heir” on earth, where he acquires an infinite presence and historical immortality, a vision he presents in *L’islam sans soumission: pour un existentialisme musulman*. The third stage is that of overcoming the religious and the sacred, an approach described in his book *Comment sortir de la religion?* (2012) (Hashas 2013, pp. 45–76; 2019, pp. 140–62).

However, Bidar’s thinking has continued to evolve, even if it is difficult to see a linear evolution here. After exploring the ideas of humanism in his two books *Histoire de l’humanisme en Occident* (*History of Humanism in the West*), published in 2014, and *Plaidoyer pour la fraternité* (*A Plea for Fraternity*), published in 2015, Bidar was alarmed by the terrorist attacks in France in 2015. He then embraced an extremely critical stance on Islam in his book *Lettre ouverte au monde musulman* (*Open Letter to the Muslim World*) published in 2015 before returning to his two favorite subjects: secularism and mystical Islam; he also published *Grandir en humanité, Libres propos sur l’école et l’éducation* (*Growing up in Humanity, Freethinking about School and Education*) in 2022 and *Les cinq piliers de l’islam et leur sens initiatique* (*The Five Pillars of Islam and their Initiatory Meaning*) in 2023. If it is possible to speak of a constant element in Bidar’s thought, it would be that of liberal Islam, understood here as a free Islamic spirituality; we can then understand Bidar’s desire to reconcile this free Islamic spirituality with liberal secularism as well as the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Bidar has been defending the idea of individual spiritual conscience for at least twenty years; in 2003, in his text “*Lettre d’un musulman européen. L’Europe et la renaissance de l’islam*” (*Letter from a European Muslim. Europe and the rebirth of Islam*), he called on

Islam to reform itself in line with the moral and political principles of the Enlightenment and in particular those of “critical thinking, the need and the right to think for oneself, individual freedom, the dissociation of politics and religion, equal rights and opportunities, the sharing of political sovereignty between all, and finally, the idea that the definition of what is just or objective is obtained through dialogue between consciences ethically disposed towards each other” (Bidar 2003, p. 12). This call to reform Islam was mainly motivated by the context of post-9/11, in which Islam, for global geopolitical reasons, was put on the dock.

The French Enlightenment, even if it is the major premise and conclusion of his thought, does not erase the spiritual dimension of his project but, in a way, encompasses it. Bidar gives spirituality a dominant role in self-realization. Nevertheless, his “spiritual Islam” is “philosophical”, a spirituality in the metaphysical sense of the term, not in the practical sense of spiritual discipline, and an internalized faith liberated from Islam as a religious–social system and from all legal and ethical norms. To put it simply, this is spirituality without religion, faith without theology, and Sufism without discipline.

Bidar elaborated further on this idea of individual spiritual awareness in his *Self islam: histoire d'un islam personnel*, published in 2006, which argues that the way out of the Islam of submission (understood as the pious practice of the Muslim tradition) is through “spiritual fulfillment, *ihsān*, an individual process of human perfection through the spiritual life that suits each person’s own nature, finding his own path deep within himself, being attuned to his own spiritual needs, and the freedom to let each Muslim seek his own Islam, an Islam of autonomy, an Islam of his own choice” (Bidar 2006, pp. 139–40). In *Self islam*, Bidar intends to reconcile Sufism with the French Enlightenment; spirituality with modernity; the spiritual values of meditation; self-examination; and the profound mystery of life with the values of freedom, equality, and tolerance (Bidar 2006, p. 141). In this self-spirituality, Bidar discards the boundaries established by the Muslim tradition, whether it is understood as the norms of Muslim law, mainstream Sunni Sufism, or anything that makes Islam a religion, a set of institutions, or a collective belonging, because this individual spiritual consciousness should be free and transcend religious heritages, traditions, and authorities, including that of the Sufi master.

Probably to avoid “getting bogged down in the traps of Islamic tradition”, Bidar interacts mainly with Muslim philosophy, especially with the work of the Muslim philosopher Muhammad Iqbal. His interest in Iqbal’s thought is certainly profound: Bidar has devoted three books and a doctoral thesis to Iqbal. His work on Iqbal can be reduced to his quest for a philosophy of the individual or philosophy of the self, and Iqbal, under the influence of H. Bergson and German philosophy, was a great exponent of these ideas in Muslim thought (Bidar 2010, 2013, 2017; Iqbal 2020). Nevertheless, Iqbal also deployed elements of political Islam and traditionalism that Bidar chose to ignore.

In 2023, Bidar published his first serious and critical engagement with the Muslim tradition (*Les cinq piliers de l’islam et leur sens initiatique*), attempting to give some anchoring to his self-spirituality. He chose a fundamental topic, that of the tenets of Muslim faith and ritual (1. Profession of faith that “there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”. 2. Prayer. 3. Almsgiving. 4. Fasting. 5. Pilgrimage). Therein, Bidar envisions spiritual Islam as follows:

I am therefore going to meditate on these five pillars with modesty and in complete freedom, because, for me, personal freedom is the keyword of the spiritual life. “No compulsion in religion (*Lâ ikrâha fiddîn*)”, says the Koran. No one should be forced to practice the five pillars of Islam, or any other religious prescription. In my previous books, I laid great stress on this principle of freedom in religion, because in spite of the Quranic verse I have just quoted, it is still not recognized in Islam. For this reason, it is important to proclaim and claim it again and again with all the force possible, until it is recognized by the community as a right: every believer, woman or man, must be left free in his or her Islam, and just as free to leave Islam if he or she wishes to do so. (Bidar 2023, p. 8)

To illustrate his vision of spirituality as an alternative to legalistic Islam, let us consider his interpretation of fasting. Following medieval Sufis, Bidar distinguishes between the fasting of the body (abstaining from drinking, eating, and having sexual relations from sunrise to sunset) and the fasting of the heart (which turns away from worldly concerns and seeks God), an apparent fast and a hidden fast, a literal fast and a subtle fast, giving primacy to the latter (Bidar 2023, p. 95). As he stated:

Fasting means closing the doors to the outside world and withdrawing for a while from the whirlwind of life. Turning one's gaze inward to listen to and follow the spiritual needs of one's own heart much better than usual. A Muslim will thus be able to experience that, for him and free of all constraints; it is the fasting of the body that puts him in the best conditions to feel fully predisposed to the spiritual exercises of *dhikr*, prayer, and study, and closer to God. . . the person who "breaks" the external fast or does not practice it, but who keeps his or her inner self empty of any aim other than that of God, paradoxically continues to fast even though he or she would stop fasting externally, or not physically fasting, because he lives in what can be called a perpetual fast, "a fasting of the heart". (Bidar 2023, pp. 97–101)

Thus, Bidar's spirituality dissociates the exterior from the interior while capitalizing on the tension in Sufi Islam between the body and spirit. Since he uses Ibn 'Arabī's legacy and other esoteric Sufi teachings to form individual spirituality, Bidar, to be precise, does not reject the Sufi tradition as a whole (this has to be distinguished from Bidar's emphasis on the individual as the only determiner of one's spiritual path). He opposes ceding one's own will and independence to a collective order, whether it be legalistic or Sufi, in which the person is required to submit to the authority of the Sufi master and God. From the perspective of Sufi brotherhoods, which currently dominate the Sufi landscape, an order is held by a tradition, a hierarchy, and an authority, which rests with the Sufi master, who is himself only one element in the hierarchy of beings that goes all the way up to God, the absolute Being. The Sufi master is "God's tool on earth" with strong ties to the social fabric of the community (Chih 2004, p. 83). Sufism is far from being monolithic, however, and there have been and continue to be many interpretations and arguments over how to understand its Neo-Platonic background, how to distinguish between the individual and the collective, and the role of the self within the Sufi tradition.

Sufism has indeed a Neoplatonic history in common with Jewish, Christian, and other religions. However, religious traditions have invented various ways to imagine these symbolic worlds that are anchored in the structures of being, speaking, and doing in the societies in question, from the family to the institutions of the army, religion, and education. The French Enlightenment gave the "individual" an opportunity to unmake these symbolic worlds despite resistance from religious traditions. As put by René Guénon: «It can be said, however, that the presence of a spiritual authority introduces into society a principle superior to individuals, since this authority, by its nature and origin, is itself "supra-individual"; but this presupposes that society is not envisaged solely in terms of its temporal aspect, and this consideration is the only one that can make it something more than a mere collective» (Guénon 1984, p. 30).

Striking a balance between freedom and authority, modernity and religion, seems to me to be the common aspiration of most Muslim theologians and intellectuals in France. However, Bidar is more interested in the French Enlightenment than in spirituality, in freedom than in authority, and in modernity than in Islam; he prefers "Islamic" and non-Islamic mystical philosophy over any "ordered spiritual Islam", i.e., mainstream Sunni Sufism, while "an individual spiritual Islam" without tradition is not enough to constitute "an order" or "a community" in the world of Islam, even if Bidar would say "my *umma* (community of Muslims) is humanity" (Bidar 2015, p. 15).

It is this premise of individual spiritual awareness, or let us say, freedom of conscience, that has led Bidar to delve deeper into "the universal", that is, individualism, humanism, and "spiritualism" without religions and traditions. Bidar urged the Muslim world in

his *Lettre ouverte au monde musulman* to make a spiritual revolution through freedom of belief and practice against the Muslim religious authorities and to choose its own Islam (Bidar 2015, p. 19). He also calls on the world of Islam, from which he is separated by an enormous distance, to seize “the extraordinary treasure of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the fundamental principle of human freedom with regard to religion” (Bidar 2015, pp. 20–21). In his view, the Muslim world should embrace humanism and a “departure from religion” that would be a spiritual rebirth for humanity (Bidar 2015, p. 31).

On the ground, Bidar has a limited audience in the world of French Islam. He sponsors the association “Voix d’un islam éclairé: Mouvement pour un islam spirituel et progressiste” (Voice of an Enlightened Islam: Movement for a Spiritual and Progressive Islam) led by Eva Janadin and Anne-Sophie Monsinay, two young converts who combine liberal, feminist, Sufi and neo-mu‘tazilite ideas.<sup>5</sup> Janadin and Monsinay founded the association *Simorgh* where they act as imams.<sup>6</sup> Bidar is also supported by the Foundation of Islam in France (*Fondation de l’islam de France*), a state institution led by Ghaleb Bencheikh, a reformist and Sufi thinker himself.<sup>7</sup> In general, secularized Muslims, who are nonetheless a minority, are sensitive to Bidar’s theses.

Mainstream Islam in France rejects Bidar’s project, accusing Bidar of Islamophobia, violence against Islam, and reductionism, and a number of religious leaders (councilors, theologians, imams, Islamic organizations) have publicly expressed their outrage in the media about his opinions.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, his interaction with the Sufi tradition overlooks the strong bond in Sunni Sufism between legalistic and spiritual Islam, and his dependence on Muhammad Iqbal misses the latter’s anti-secularist beliefs. Given this, his project is not necessarily irrelevant or inconsistent despite these conditions. Bidar is not a voice in the wilderness that only those who already partly support his position can hear; rather, he is a prominent figure in the intellectual Muslim scene and in French mainstream media, generating attention in the academic community and igniting discussions among Muslims. Most Muslims frequently view him as unworthy of regard, and occasionally French secularists and politicians do as well. For these reasons, understanding him is essential to comprehend how spiritual Islam has changed in France.

#### 4. Éric Geoffroy’s Spiritual Islam and the Confraternity Heritage

Éric Geoffroy is a French Islamologist and Sufi member of the Algerian al-‘Alāwiyya brotherhood. As a public intellectual, Geoffroy is an ambassador of the ‘Alāwiyya and of Sunni Sufism, more generally, to the French-speaking Muslim and non-Muslim public in France. Geoffroy was born in 1956 and converted to Islam through Sufism in 1984. In 1993, he defended his doctoral thesis on Sufism in Egypt and Syria at the Université de Provence Aix-Marseille I. He has been a Professor of Arabic and Islamology at the University of Strasbourg since 1995. Eric Geoffroy is both an author and a public intellectual. As an author, he has written academic works on the history of Sufism and its poetry, as well as introductions to Sufism. In his work, three axes can be distinguished: 1. The history of Sufism, especially of the Shādhiliyya brotherhood (the mother brotherhood of the ‘Alāwiyya). Thus, in 1995 he published his doctoral thesis *Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels* (*Sufism in Egypt and Syria under the Last Mamluks and the First Ottomans: Spiritual Orientations and Cultural Issues*), *Jihād et contemplation—Vie et enseignement d’un soufi au temps des croisades* (*Jihād and Contemplation—Life and Teachings of a Sufi at the Time of the Crusades*) in 1997; he also edited the book *Une voie soufie dans le monde: la Shādhiliyya* (*A Sufi Path in the World: the Shādhiliyya*) in 2005, and published *Abd el-kader: un spirituel dans la modernité* (*Abd el-Kader: A Spiritual Figure in Modern Times*) in 2010 and *Cheikh Ahmad al-‘Alāwî, vivificateur de la voie soufie* (*Ahmad al-‘Alāwî, Vivifier of the Sufi Way*) in 2021. 2. A second interest of his work consists in introducing Sufism to the wider public. Thus, in 2000, he published *L’instant soufi* (*The Sufi Moment*), *Initiation au soufisme* (*Introduction to Sufism*) in 2003, *L’islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus* (*Islam will be Spiritual or it will not be*) in 2009, *Le soufisme, voie intérieure de l’islam* (*Sufism, the Inner Path of Islam*) in 2009, *Le soufisme* (*Sufism*) in 2013,

and *Le soufisme: histoire, pratiques et spiritualité (Sufism: History, Practices and Spirituality)* in 2019. Nevertheless, some of the content of these works is repetitive. 3. Translation of Sufi texts and popularization of Arabic literature: he published *La sagesse des maîtres soufis: Présentation et traduction des Latâ'if al-minan d'Ibn 'Atâ' Allâh (The Wisdom of the Sufi Masters: Presentation and Translation of the Latâ'if al-minan by Ibn 'Atâ' Allâh)* in 1998, *Le grand livre des prénoms arabes (The Great book of Arabic First Names)* with Néfissa Roty-Geoffroy in 2009, and *Un éblouissement sans fin: La poésie dans le soufisme (A Never-Ending Dazzle: Poetry in Sufism)* in 2014.<sup>9</sup>

In 2016, Éric Geoffroy co-created the *Conscience Soufie* Foundation with Slimane Rezki (French Sufi from the René Guénon Foundation), Néfissa Roty-Geoffroy (French Sufi and Arabist and Geoffroy's wife), and Idrîs de Vos (French Sufi and Arabist). The foundation organizes seminars and conferences to popularize Sufism.<sup>10</sup>

In Éric Geoffroy's *L'islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus*, arguably his most important work, spirituality is a vague notion: it is "the divine project", transcendence, the state of perfect man-the Prophet, a vertical relationship with God, the *tawhîd* (unity of God), etc. Geoffroy envisions spirituality as a profound reform of the jurists' Islam, somewhat in the style of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111): deepening ritual practice through Sufism, orthodoxy through love of God. All the more so, this Sufi discipline takes place within traditional confraternity structures of allegiance to the Sufi master, submission to his will, and the practice of certain Sufi rituals ranging from the daily *wird* to the Sufi whirling session.

As much as Bidar's spiritual Islam remains largely based on the individual freedom of the French Enlightenment, Geoffroy's spiritual Islam distrusts the French Enlightenment, rationalism, and freedoms, instead drawing its discourse and structures from confraternist Islam. Geoffroy distances himself from the "Islam of the Enlightenment", based on the Enlightenment reason of 18th-century Europe (Geoffroy 2009, p. 77). For him, modern rationalism is insufficient, as it is content with discursive reason and excludes illuminist gnosis (Geoffroy 2009, p. 77). Geoffroy embraces the "post-modern critique" of rationalism and "rationalist modernity" in the West, arguing for more illuminist gnosis and spirituality, even a "spiritual revolution", against instrumental reason (Geoffroy 2009, p. 85). However, this spiritual revolution should not "abolish forms, dogmatic or ritual, but give meaning to forms and regenerate them" (Geoffroy 2009, p. 87). Geoffroy endorses, thus, a reformist rather than a modernist perspective and distances himself from the line of thought of Bidar, who defends rationalism and spiritual revolution against forms, dogma, and ritual.

*L'islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus* offers a single solution to the crisis of Islam, that of the Sufi brotherhoods and spiritual discipline. Ultimately, this seems in line with mainstream Sunni Sufism, which practiced spirituality in an institution in the form of Sufi brotherhoods that have survived the centuries in the spiritual guidance of millions of Muslims. This kind of institution has endurance and legitimacy. However, Sufi brotherhoods come with their own legacies of Sunni law and theology and of religious and political thought.

Geoffroy teaches a spiritual Islam that completes and guides legalistic Islam. First, his promoted spirituality deeply engages with the sources of authority in Islam: the Quran and Muhammad's model, (even if he tends to privilege esoteric readings of these sources (Geoffroy 2019, pp. 66–73). What makes Sufi spirituality unique for Geoffroy is that it believes in the primacy of spirituality over the material and the interior over the exterior (Geoffroy 2019, pp. 74–75); it does not imply a quest for egoistic individual salvation (Geoffroy 2019, p. 17). One enters the Sufi path by adhering to a Sufi brotherhood and following a Sufi master who would protect and guide them on the way (Geoffroy 2019, p. 95). Concretely, this means that the disciple goes through a process of spiritual learning and rituals, including the investiture with the cloak, secret learning of invocations, and the allegiance pact (Geoffroy 2019, pp. 95–98). Sufi spirituality is practiced daily with individual and collective invocations accompanying other practices recommended by legalistic Islam (prayers), Sufi chants, Sufi whirling, and retreats (Geoffroy 2019, pp. 107–11). Sufi whirling is intended here as community *dhikr* sessions, which turn into exuberant swaying (sitting and standing) as they enter trance-like states.<sup>11</sup> Geoffroy admits that Sufism leaves little space for the

initiative and conscience of the individual within the group controlled by the authority of the master (Geoffroy 2019, p. 126). For this reason, the Sufi brotherhoods failed in their initial mission to interiorly liberate the individual (Geoffroy 2019, p. 127).

Geoffroy recommends adaptation to modernity as a solution for the sclerosis of Sufism (Geoffroy 2019, p. 128). For such adaptation to succeed in the Western context, Sufi spirituality needs to solve at least two major problems: 1. Some Sufi brotherhoods impose on their disciples numerous formal rules that are inherited from a tradition of pre-modern Islam. For example, the strict daily practice of invocations or the allegiance pact might contrast with the freedom to which most modern individuals are attached. 2. Strict Sufi Brotherhoods preach submission to the authority of the master and the collective practice within the Sufi community, which contradict the individualization of the religious experience in secular societies; most young Muslims (similarly to non-Muslim youth) living in the West are not disposed to submit their will to any formal authority (or the authority of the Sufi master in particular). That said, Sufi activities of immigrant populations in France and other European countries have transformed the Sufi landscape, especially in recent decades (Malik and Hinnells 2006; Dressler et al. 2009; Hermansen and Zarrabi-Zadeh 2023).

In his *Allah au féminin: le féminin et la femme dans la tradition soufie* (*Allah in the Feminine: The Feminine and Women in Sufi Tradition*) published in 2020, Geoffroy associates spirituality and femininity in Sufism whereby the latter “must constantly nourish, through ‘feminine’ receptivity and inspiration, “a Muslim experience that all too often sinks into religious materialism.” (Geoffroy 2020, p. 157). He argues for the spiritual prevalence of women over men, which makes them “closer to the Divine” (Geoffroy 2020, p. 144). He adds that spirituality “offers women a space and expression that they did not find, or found only to a very limited extent, in the more normative and legalistic Islamic field” (Geoffroy 2020, p. 9). On the other hand, spirituality “belongs to what is known as feminine intuition, in contrast to the rational religious sciences, which are more suited to men” (Geoffroy 2020, p. 9). In this regard, he makes a strong statement:

It’s obvious that spirituality, whatever the religion or tradition, is now more often practiced by women. In the West, at all events (conferences, seminars, retreats, etc.) relating to this field, there are generally many more women than men. Why? The first answer is that women’s more intuitive nature, which the ancients perceived as “deficient in reason”, particularly in Islam, has a very positive aspect. It’s no coincidence that the Arabic word for “reason” is ‘*aql*, which means to bind, to hinder, and the Sufis have not hesitated to play on the double meaning of the term to stigmatise the theologian-legalists of Islam, bound by their rationalism and religious positivism. In this respect, women are freer when they are aware of the “intelligence of the heart” that drives them. (Geoffroy 2020, p. 124)

The Conscience Soufie Foundation, established by Geoffroy and others, shows the limits of feminine Sufism. This foundation gathers the main figures of Sufism in France around a “circle” of 27 members, counting only 11 women. Contrary to men of this circle, such as Geoffroy himself, Tayeb Chouiref, Omero Marongiu-Perria, Mohamed Bajrafil, Idris De Vos, or Ghaleb Bencheikh, who are highly visible in French Islam, either as imams, Sufi guides or intellectuals, women of the Conscience Soufie Foundation cannot claim any influence on the Sufi field in France, let alone have any significant impact on French Islam as a whole. Most of the feminine members of the Conscience Soufie Foundation, such as Néfissa Roty-Geoffroy, Carole Latifa Ameer, or Bariza Khiari, pursue careers in research, art, or politics and have not shaped the discourse on Islam.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Geoffroy’s experience led him to observe the active role women play as disciples of Sufism (or the main audience of Sufi spirituality), but this spirituality is still produced and promoted by men most of the time.

## 5. Discussion: Resources and Limits of Spiritual Islam in France

Thus far, I summarized and contextualized the views of Bidar and Geoffroy on spiritual Islam, focusing on how spirituality relates to Islam as an institutionalized set of beliefs and



norms. Let us now discuss the resources and limits of spiritual Islam in the (secular) French society, particularly for Muslims living in France.

### 5.1. Resources of Spiritual Islam

Spiritual Islam enjoys relative freedom in France, which allows it to thrive in terms of discourse and activities, both in private and public spaces. For instance, the mystic expressions of Islam in France do not need to deal with the pressure traditionalist and political Islam puts on Sufism in the Middle East and Africa (although spiritual Islam still must struggle in order to compete with traditionalist and political Islam in the West for Muslim audiences); spiritual Islam, as interpreted by Bidar and Geoffroy, does not need to constantly express its loyalty to the orthodox Sunni beliefs and laws.

Moreover, the French secular context allows Muslims to experience spirituality in various forms, including Sufi spirituality, in the absence of dominant religious institutions or authorities. Thus, we can certainly speak of secular spirituality in the case of Abdennour Bidar (the latter endorsed the concept of secular spirituality as opposition to all forms of sainthood and religious law in his *Génie de la France: le véritable sens de la laïcité* (*Genius of France: The True Meaning of Secularism*) (2021) Bidar 2021, p. 61) through which spirituality can exist without the burden of institutionalized religion. Furthermore, spiritual Islam adapts better to the individualization of religiosity in the West, including care for spiritual well-being, the hybrid forms of belief in post-modernity, and environmentalism. This explains why the French mainstream media and state tend to promote spiritual Islam.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, spiritual Islam benefits from the relative success of the Traditionalist School (perennialism) in France, which helped channel Sufism into French culture, establishing a Western Sufism in France. The latter has produced or translated vibrant mystic literature, which, at least from an intellectual point of view, provides some opportunities for spiritual Islam to develop in France and influence Muslim youth. We should emphasize how René Guénon's legacy continues to influence spiritual Islam in particular, as he sits at the nexus of Sunni Sufism (a Shadhili order member in Egypt), traditionalism (Guénon founded the Traditionalist School), and a sort of post-modern spirituality open to other world religions and philosophies (Sedgwick 2000).

### 5.2. Limits of Spiritual Islam

One evident limit to the discourse and popularity of spiritual Islam, especially as seen by Bidar among Muslims in France, is elitism; it speaks mostly to intellectuals, independent women, and highly educated young men. For this reason, spiritual Islam poses little threat to political and traditionalist Islam. While the former relies on resentment because of social inequalities and the unfair policies of French governments to mobilize Muslims, the latter offers a basic version of pious beliefs and practices commonly known and anchored in the history of Islam to claim authority over Muslims. Conversely, spiritual Islam relies on the metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabi, Sufi poetry, and other artistic and philosophical elements that are difficult to access for Muslims of working-class groups, which form the bulk of the Muslim communities in France. Indeed, secular Sufism can be vulnerable to the criticism that it treats the majority of Muslims "who maintain Islamic normative beliefs and ritual practice as spiritually immature" (i.e., "primitive") and are therefore labeled "fundamentalist" and "fanatical." (Lipton 2011, p. 440). Although it is true that Geoffroy's spirituality likewise primarily appeals to elites, it differs in that it is linked to established leadership and community structures, a well-known Sufi order, and a generally traditional interpretation of orthodox Islamic practice. We should, however, mitigate this remark by the fact that many Sufi practitioners in France whose ancestors come from areas where Sufism is common continue to practice popular Sufism, and numerous non-elite Sufis from West Africa live in Paris and regularly gather for communal *dhikr* sessions, set up Qur'anic schools for their kids, and have large gatherings where they invite influential figures from West Africa to speak (this is particularly the case of the descendants of immigrants from West Africa, who keep alive the Tijaniyya and Muridiyya orders).

Additionally, spiritual Islam, especially as endorsed by Bidar, is individualistic. Religion, which applies to Islam in particular, is communitarian, offering meaning to individuals within their social setting in relation to the group and its norms. The importance of the community to the Muslim individual cannot be stressed enough: the family usually offers necessary social, psychological, and material support throughout life. Most Muslim religious obligations are meant to be collective and designed to cement social ties. This resistance to individualism is, thus, structural, weakening the chances of this type of spiritual Islam (and not spiritual Islam in the absolute) to prevail over traditionalist and political Islam.

A third limit of spiritual Islam is the lack of religious structures. Both traditionalist and political Islam operate in visible structures of religious learning and practice (mosques and associations, respectively) that lie at the heart of Muslim neighborhoods, offering services and guidance. Spiritual Islam relies on changing conference rooms or places with little visibility or accessibility. Sometimes, it is just a matter of practicality: it is less expensive to rent space for a one-time event than to do so on a recurring basis, and so many spiritual circles do not have permanent headquarters, but they still have regular meetings, organizational structures, charismatic leaders, and a sizable number of Muslims who follow traditional Islamic and spiritual practices. The digital space can offer ample opportunities for spiritual Islam to promote its views, but it cannot substitute for physical structures deeply connected to Muslim everyday lives.

## 6. Conclusions

This article addresses the question of whether spiritual Islam can become an alternative to traditionalist and political Islam in the West. It examines the resources and limits of two voices from France, Abdennour Bidar and Éric Geoffroy, who are the most outspoken Muslim intellectuals in favor of spiritual Islam. A thorough study of their discourses in the French context shows that religious freedom, French secular society, and post-modernity contribute to the diffusion of spiritual Islam. However, the latter suffers from its elitism and overemphasis on individualism, as well as a lack of religious structures of learning and practice. Overall, although spiritual Islam fits well within liberal and secular Western societies, it is too intellectualist to seriously challenge political and traditionalist Islam. The conclusion that these two figures' spirituality is too elitist to serve as a counterweight to traditionalist Islam does not necessarily apply to Sufi groups more generally. The mosques and Islamic umbrella organizations, which are the most powerful institutions in Muslim communities, are where traditionalist and political Muslim leadership is well established. In addition to being religious (although that alone implies a significant influence on the lives of Muslim communities in France), these structures are also economic and social, affecting the individual and collective decisions made by regular Muslims in everyday life (clothes, finance, employment, marriage, consumption, etc.). Themes of piety and Muslim authenticity are mixed with appeals to identity by these dominant religious authorities, which may reinforce traditional values even more strongly than those in the home countries. Some young Muslims advocate more extreme political positions and employ conservative and political discourses to voice their feelings of injustice in French society. The majority of Sunni Muslims consider Sunni Sufism as an integral part of Islam, but they see France's spiritual brand of Islam as a byproduct of Westernization.

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## Notes

- 1 Thus, it is more common to find promoters of “*islam spirituel*” or “*islam individuel*” in France than “*islām rūhī*” or “*islām shakhṣī*” in the Arab-Muslim world. This does not mean that Muslims who live in the Muslim world are not experiencing private spiritualities. Usually, in Muslim societies, it is rather perceived as a transgression of norms to claim a private spirituality amidst pressure from collective Islam, whether in the form of official Islam, popular Islam, political Islam, or traditionalist Islam. All these forms of Islam leave little space for individual spirituality. Part of the problem was that the movement of re-islamisation that took place in Muslim societies between the 1970s and 1990s was led by forces that belonged to political and traditionalist Islam and held communitarian visions of Islam.
- 2 Patrick Laude, one of the rare researchers who have studied spiritual Islam (focusing on the works of Louis Massignon, Henry Corbin, René Guénon, and Frithjof Schuon), defines it as follows: «with regard to the religious predispositions of our four “mystical ambassadors” to enter the world of spiritual Islam, it must even be suggested that an a priori familiarity with the Christian emphasis on an inner, extra-legal, definition of religion may have been for them a fertile ground to become attuned to the manifestations of an inner Islam» (Laude 2010, p. 7).
- 3 Leïla Babès, a French Muslim sociologist and intellectual has argued in her *L’islam intérieur—passion et désenchantement (Inner Islam—passion and disenchantment) for spirituality as a religious emotion which is expressed by other means than the doctrinal teaching (trance or female devotions, worship of saints, food as a gift and sacrifice), that is to say a plural and multifaceted Islam, anthropological and not theological. She wants to rehabilitate the spiritual dimension in order to reinterpret Islam as a religion of belief that postulates the primacy of the heart. By the same token, she perceives Islam as a religion of balance, of the measure, but also of, purity of intention (Babès 2000, p. 32).*
- 4 Biographie <https://abdennourbidar.fr/oeuvres/biographie/> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 5 Voix d’un islam éclairé: Mouvement pour un islam spirituel et progressiste [http://www.voix-islam-eclaire.fr/equipe\\_de\\_la\\_vie/](http://www.voix-islam-eclaire.fr/equipe_de_la_vie/) (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 6 Principes de la mosquée Sîmorgh. <https://www.voix-islam-eclaire.fr/mosquee-simorgh-principes/> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 7 Nos actions. <https://fondationdelislamdefrance.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Bilan-Actions-FIF.pdf> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 8 Kamel Meziti, Éloge de l’indignation: Lettre ouverte à Abdennour Bidar. [https://www.saphirnews.com/Eloge-de-l-indignation-lettre-ouverte-a-Abdennour-Bidar\\_a11865.html](https://www.saphirnews.com/Eloge-de-l-indignation-lettre-ouverte-a-Abdennour-Bidar_a11865.html) (last accessed 10 August 2023). Dr Al ‘Ajamî, Lettre ouverte à Pierre—Abdennur—Bidar. Pourquoi tant de Violence? <https://oumma.com/lettre-ouverte-a-pierre-abdennur-bidar-pourquoi-tant-de-violence/> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 9 Ouvrages. <https://www.eric-geoffroy.net/travaux-et-publications/> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 10 Conscience Soufie. <https://consciencsoufie.com/> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 11 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjQnSvff0XQ> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 12 Le Cercle. <https://consciencsoufie.com/le-cercle/> (last accessed 10 August 2023).
- 13 “Un islam spirituel pour réduire les inégalités sociales”. [https://www.facebook.com/RTL/videos/un-islam-spirituel-pour-r%C3%A9duire-les-in%C3%A9galit%C3%A9s-sociales/1121200291409558/?locale=fr\\_FR](https://www.facebook.com/RTL/videos/un-islam-spirituel-pour-r%C3%A9duire-les-in%C3%A9galit%C3%A9s-sociales/1121200291409558/?locale=fr_FR) (last accessed 10 August 2023). Kahina Bahloul “Je veux faire connaître un islam spirituel et paisible”. <https://www.lepelerin.com/religions-et-spiritualites/culture-interligieuse/kahina-bahloul-je-veux-faire-connaître-un-islam-spirituel-et-paisible-6072> (last accessed 10 August 2023).

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