

The Spiritual Legacy and Heritage of Traditional Islam and Sufism in North Africa: Interview with Shaykh Ahmed Ḥabīb

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Shaykh Ahmed Ḥabīb, born on 18 December 1940 in Algeria, is a spiritual master of the ‘Alawīyya ṭarīqah, a Sufi brotherhood that originated in North Africa, or the Maḡreb, in the beginning of the 20th century via the spiritual paragon Shaykh Amhed Al-‘Alawī. Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, is known for its profound and tolerant practice of Islam. This interview, held on 18 February 2011, following the *Mawlid* or celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, took place in the village of Ouled ‘Ali outside the capital Algiers, Algeria at Shaykh Ahmed Ḥabīb’s home. On this occasion he explained what his mystical order stands for and in what manner its modality of religion is different from militant fundamentalism in Islam. What is most vital is his affirmation that orthodox or authentic Islam is part and parcel of orthodox Sufism and the latter cannot be separated from the former. The deeper understanding of the inner dimension of Islam or Sufism is crucial not only in going beyond the nonsensical and utterly false thesis of the “clash of civilizations”, but in combatting Islamophobia in the West, and extremist movements within the Muslim world, and it also provides an integral vision to engage in genuine interfaith dialogue which is indispensable to the pluralistic age of today.



The interviewer acknowledges his gratitude to Sidi Abdelkarim (b. 1964) for assisting him with this interview, and especially with the task of translation from Arabic to English.

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos: *Could you please provide audiences in the West with some information about yourself and how you came to Sufism or Islamic mysticism?*

Shaykh Ahmed Habīb: I was born on December 18, 1940 in the countryside of Ouled ‘Ali, Algeria. Before entering the path of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) I was a believer in God (*Allāh*), completely illiterate with no formal education. At a certain point I intuited on deep level that there was more to the faith (*īmān*) than its outward dimension or exoterism and I longed to know God directly. I longed to be taken by the hand and shown the path. God answered my prayer while I was in the midst of a professional training in the capital, Algiers. The instructor of the course, Sidi Ben Regubi, was none other than a representative (*muqaddam*) of Shaykh ‘Ali al-Boudilmi [1905-1988]—may God be pleased with him (*Radhi‘allāhu ‘anhu*)!

There was a prayer room at the training center where we would congregate for our daily prayers (*salāt*) and one day Sidi Ben Regubi informed the trainees that he had found a spiritual master (*murshid* or *shaykh*) and embraced Sufism (*tasawwuf*). I felt that this was a sure sign of the Divine Will and immediately asked to be initiated into the path (*ṭarīqah*), at this time I was twenty-four years old. Within a few days of taking initiation (*bay‘ah*) Shaykh ‘Ali al-Boudilmi visited the training center where a gathering was organized on his behalf. Shortly hereafter a group had formed which was interested in entering Sufism (*tasawwuf*), so Shaykh ‘Ali al-Boudilmi came to meet with the group and inaugurated a center (*ṣāwīyah*) placing Sidi Ben Regubi as the representative (*muqaddam*) in charge.

SBS: *How do you now view this pivotal decision to enter upon the Sufi path after almost five decades—keeping in mind that it is not the empirical ego (nafs) of the seeker (faqīr) that chooses but the Divine Will?*

Shaykh Ahmed Habīb: In essence, before meeting my spiritual master (*murshid* or *shaykh*), I was in darkness and traversing a *cul-de-sac* of egocentricity. Now there is submission (*islām*) to the Divine Unity (*tawhīd*), faith (*īmān*) in the Divine Will and awareness of God (*ihāsān*)¹—all of which are indispensable, and an invaluable blessing (*baraka*) on the whole of one’s life.

¹ We are reminded of the well-known saying (*hadīth*) of Prophet Muhammad: “Worship God as if thou sawest Him, for, if thou seest Him not, He nevertheless seeth thee.” (Gabriel *hadīth*); “Know (and may God illumine our hearts with the light of gnosis and lead us on the path of all holy gnostics) that gnosis is the degree of *ihāsān* and the last step of the gnostic.” (Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998], p. 49).

SBS: *The ‘Alawīyya tariqah is a branch of the Shādhilī-Darqāwī Sufi order²—known for its quintessential exponents—such as Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) known as the “reviver of religion” (Mubiy al-Dīn) and “the greatest master” (Shaykh al-Akbar) and more recent Shaykh Ahmad Al-‘Alawī (1869-1934)³, who initiated your own Shaykh, Sidi ‘Alī al-Bouidilmi. Could you please speak about this tremendous spiritual heritage and legacy that you are a representative of?*

² Ibn ‘Ata’illah, *The Book of Wisdom (Kitab al-Hikam)*, trans. Victor Danner (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998); Jean-Louis Michon, *The Autobiography (Fabrasa) of a Moroccan Soufi: Ahmad Ibn ‘Ajiba (1747-1809)*, trans. David Streight (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999); Fatima Jane Casewit, “In Memoriam: Al-Ustad Abdslam Ad-Darqawi,” *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 10 (Winter 2002), pp. 196-199; See also Titus Burckhardt, *Fex: City of Islam*, trans. William Stoddart (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992).

³ The spiritual radiance of Shaykh Ahmed Al-‘Alawī travelled far and wide not only during his lifetime but continues to expand until this day. He was recognized not only by the adherents of Islamic spirituality but also by those of other spiritual traditions as well. The highly regarded Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), wrote the following about Shaykh Ahmed Al-‘Alawī: “Yesterday afternoon I finished a remarkable book—the biography of Shaikh Ahmad al-‘Alawī, who died in Algeria in 1934. One of the greatest religious figures of this century, a perfect example of the Sufi [and Islamic] tradition in all its fullness and energy. This is one book that I want to read again. The excerpts from his writings are most impressive and I know I have not begun to appreciate their content.” (Thomas Merton, “October 2, 1963,” in *The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. V: Dancing in the Waters of Life*, ed. Robert E. Daggy [San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997], p. 115); Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), who along with René Guénon (1886-1951), was the founder of what later became known as the “traditionalist” or “perennialist” school of intellectuality and spirituality, wrote of his personal encounter with Shaykh Ahmed al-‘Alawī in the following poem (translated from the German): “I was a fabric designer in Paris; / My comrades came from Alsace; / I was content, but I dreamt much, / Until I rent this miserable little corner of happiness / And fled to Algeria – to obtain / What my longing sought; and praise be to God – / The Shaykh al-‘Alawī said: it is good that thou hast come – / From him I received the light of the Path.” (Frithjof Schuon, *World Wheel: Volumes IV-VII*, trans. William Stoddart in collaboration with Catherine Schuon and Tamara Pollack [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006], p. 124); See Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-‘Alawī, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); *Two Who Attained: Twentieth-Century Sufi Saints, Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī & Fatima al-Yasbrutiyya*, trans. Leslie Cadavid (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005); Rob Baker and Gray Henry (eds.), *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005); Michel Vālsan, “Notes on the Shaikh al-‘Alawī (1869-1934),” *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 1971), pp. 145-150; Victor Danner, “The Shādhilīyyah and North African Sufism,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 26-48; Paul Chacornac, *The Simple Life of René Guénon*, trans. Cecil Bethell (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004); Martin Lings, *A Return to the Spirit: Questions and Answers* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005); Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, *A Sufi Master’s Message: In Memoriam René Guénon* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010); Julius Evola, *René Guénon: A Teacher for Modern Times*, trans. Guido Stucco (Edmonds, WA: Holmes Publishing Group, 1994); Robin Waterfield, *René Guénon and the Future of the West* (London: Crucible, 1987); Jean Borella, “René Guénon and the Traditionalist School,” in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, eds. Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 330-358; Michael Oren Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010); Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010); Harry Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000).

Shaykh Ahmed Habīb: The essence of the initiatic chain (*silsilah*) of the Shādhilī-Darqāwī Sufi order which includes the ‘Alawīyya tariqah traces itself back to the Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) is none other than the message of Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) and his companions—which is nothing more and nothing less than Sufism (*tasawwuf*).⁴

SBS: *Many in the West, especially the Far West such as North America have come to view Sufism as a separate doctrine and method to spiritual realization, outside of the Islamic revelation.⁵ Could you please speak to this curious phenomenon and the dangers⁶ of practicing Sufism or any mystical path divorced from its outward dimension for that matter?⁷*

Shaykh Ahmed Habīb: That Westerners are interested in the Heart of Islam, Sufism (*tasawwuf*), is a blessing from Heaven, however the fact that they wish to separate them is a grave mistake and error. Traditional Islam cannot be separated from Sufism (*tasawwuf*) any more than traditional Sufism (*tasawwuf*) can be separated from Islam. Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is the core of Islam. In addition Islam cannot be a complete religion without Sufism

⁴ “We see that the spiritual way (*tariqah*) is necessarily maintained by Divine Force and Power, since it comes down through our Masters from God’s Messenger [Prophet Muhammad] (*may God bless him and give him peace*).” (Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998], p. 25).

⁵ “To be an orthodox Moslem it is enough to observe five points: to believe in God and to recognize Muhammad as His last Prophet, to pray the five daily prayers, to give the prescribed alms to the poor, to keep the fast, and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.” (Shaykh Ahmed Al-‘Alawī, quoted in Martin Lings, “Seen from Outside,” in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-‘Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* [Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], p. 23).

⁶ “The doctrine of Self-Knowledge [the mystical or esoteric dimension of religion] is dangerous, the great danger being, as one of the Shaikh’s disciples has said, that the seeker, for want of the necessary sense of the Absolute, should unconsciously ‘deify a secret fold of the ego’, imagining it to be the Self.” (Quoted in Martin Lings, “Selections from his Aphorisms,” in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-‘Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* [Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], p. 206).

⁷ The notion that mysticism or the esoteric dimension can be practiced outside of a commitment to a complete religious form is what leads many astray in the eleventh hour of this temporal cycle. The following Sufi parable speaks to the implicit limitations and pitfalls of this approach: “They are like a man who tries to find water by digging a little here and a little there and will die of thirst; whereas a man who digs deep in one spot, trusting in the Lord and relying on Him, will find water” (Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998], p. 61); See the following works which illuminate the inseparability of orthodox Sufism from orthodox Islam: William C. Chittick, “Spiritual Mastery,” in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 270-274; René Guénon, *Insights into Islamic Esotericism and Taoism*, ed. Samuel D. Fohr, trans. Henry D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001); Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence, A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006); Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. D.M. Matheson (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1972); Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977); William Stoddart, *Outline of Sufism: The Essentials of Islamic Spirituality* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2012); William C. Chittick (ed.), *The Inner Journey: Views from the Islamic Tradition* (Sandpoint, ID: Morning Light Press, 2007).

(*tasawwuf*); the fruit of Islam is direct witnessing of Divine Reality—and this is Islamic esoterism.⁸

⁸ The following dialogue between Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī and Dr. Marcel Carret speaks to the distinction between the inward (*bāṭin*) and outward (*ẓāhir*) dimensions of religion:

"[Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī]: Some people are set at rest by very little; others find their satisfaction in religion; some require more; it is not only peace of mind that they must have, but the Great Peace, which brings with it the plenitude of the Spirit."

"[Dr. Carret]: What about religion?"

"[Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī]: For these last religion is only a starting point."

"[Dr. Carret]: Then is there anything above religion?"

"[Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī]: Above the religion there is the doctrine.... The means of attaining to God Himself."

"[Dr. Carret]: And what are these means?"

"[Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī]: Why should I tell you, since you are not disposed to make use of them. If you came to me as my disciple I could give you an answer. But what would be the good of satisfying an idle curiosity?"

(Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī, quoted in Martin Lings, "Seen from Outside," in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-'Alawī, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* [Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], pp. 26-27);

The following *hadīth* addresses both the inner and outer dimensions of the Islamic tradition: "The Qurān has an exoteric and an esoteric meaning [an outer appearance, a literal sense, and an inner depth, a hidden or spiritual sense]. In its turn, this esoteric meaning itself has an esoteric meaning [this depth has a depth, in the image of the heavenly Spheres enfolded the one within the other], and so forth, up to the seven esoteric meanings [seven depths of depth]." (Quoted in Henry Corbin, "The Seven Prophets of Your Being," in *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson [New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1994], p. 122); Shaykh ad-Darqāwī affirms the following on this matter: "Religious law (*sharī'ah*) does not hide spiritual truth (*ḥaqīqah*) nor spiritual truth religious law" (Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998], p. 20); Al-Hujwiri (d. 1071) articulates the complementary facets of the inner (*bāṭin*) and outer (*ẓāhir*) dimensions of Islam: "The exoteric aspect of Truth without the esoteric is hypocrisy, and the esoteric without the exoteric is heresy. So, with regard to the Law, mere formality is defective, while mere spirituality is vain." (Alī b. 'Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, "On the Affirmation of Knowledge," in *The Kashf al-Mahjub: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. R.A. Nicholson [London: Luzac and Company, 1911], p. 14); Ibn 'Arabī, the Spanish-born mystic addresses the distinct levels of understanding that correspond to the diversity of seekers: "As for the Divine discourse (revealed in the Koran and in other sacred books, where God manifests Himself as a Person), it has been revealed in conformity with the understanding of those to whom it is addressed and in conformity with reason, and not according to the ways of intuition. It is for that, moreover, that there are many believers and few who know intuitively." (Muḥyi-d-Din Ibn 'Arabī, "Of the Wisdom of Being Lost in Love (*al-bikmat al-mubhaymiyah*) in the Word of Abraham," in *The Wisdom of the Prophets (Fusus al-Hikam)*, trans. Titus Burckhardt and Angela Culme-Seymour [Gloucestershire, UK: Beshara Publications, 1975], p. 43); The following quote also speaks volumes to this distinction within the context of Islamic spirituality: "[I]n Islam, two 'religions' meet, combine, and sometimes confront one another: the outward religion—that of Revelation and the Law—and the religion of the Heart, of Intellection, of immanent Liberty; they combine inasmuch as the outward religion proceeds from the inward religion, but they are in opposition inasmuch as the inward and essential religion is independent of the outward and formal religion." (Frithjof Schuon, "The Religion of the Heart," in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. William Stoddart [London: Perennial Books, 1990], p. 230); See also René Guénon, "The necessity of Traditional Exoterism," in *Imitation and Spiritual Realization*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 41-44; Frithjof Schuon, "The Limitations of Exoterism," in *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1993), pp. 7-32.

SBS: *Not only is Islam under attack from what has been perceptively termed “secular fundamentalism”⁹, now a global phenomenon, but it is also under attack from within (i.e. Wahhābism or Salafism).*¹⁰ Could you please address how authentic or traditional Islam is different from fundamentalism or extremism as it is misperceived by the mainstream media in the West?¹¹

⁹ Mateus Soares de Azevedo, “Secular Fundamentalism,” in *Men of a Single Book: Fundamentalism in Islam, Christianity, and Modern Thought* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), pp. 64-107; See also William Stoddart, *What Does Islam Mean in Today’s World? Religion, Politics, Spirituality* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2012); Joseph E.B. Lumbard (ed.), *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars, Revised and Expanded* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009).

¹⁰ “‘If Islam could speak,’ he [Shaykh Ahmed Al-‘Alawī] writes, ‘it would complain to God, enumerating all the evils which assail it.’ But he asserts continually that of all the dangers which beset Islam, by far the greatest come from certain Moslems, and he makes it no secret that he is referring to those exotic authorities of the group known as As-Salafīyah who claimed to be ‘reformers’...prompting him [Shaykh Ahmed Al-‘Alawī] to quote from the Quran: *And when it is said to them: ‘Cause not corruption in the land’, they say: ‘We are nothing if not reformers.’ Nay, unknown to themselves they are workers of corruption.*” (Quoted in Martin Lings, “The Spiritual Master,” in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-‘Alawī, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* [Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], pp. 108-109).

¹¹ We might also add that while the Islamic tradition is currently the subject of much controversy, all authentic spiritual traditions are under one and the same attack of secularism. The following contains one of the sayings (*hadith*) of Prophet Muhammad by way of articulating the eschatological considerations within Islam, however they are found within all sapiential traditions: “No time cometh upon you but is followed by a worse.” (Quoted in Martin Lings, “The Future,” in *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* [Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1983], p. 329) or the following saying (*hadith*): “God will not withdraw all knowledge with an act that will take it away from all men [and women], but will withdraw it by reducing the number of the wise until no more are left.” (Quoted in Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, *A Sufi Master’s Message: In Memoriam René Guénon* [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010], p. 12); Islam being the last revelation of this temporal cycle reflects a unique universalism respecting diversity and difference without compromising the primacy of the Divine Unity (*tawhid*) that is found throughout the Koran: “*For each of you We have established a Law and a Path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as you are]. So we with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed.*” (5:48). “*Say: We believe in God, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted.*” (2:136). “*And do not hold discourse with the People of the Book except in that which is finest, save with those who do wrong. And say: We believe in that which hath been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and unto Him we surrender.*” (29:46) and also “*There is no compulsion in the religion.*” (2:256) (Quoted in Patrick Laude (ed.), *Universal Dimensions of Islam: Studies in Comparative Religion* [Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011], pp. 67, 78); See also Tayeb Chouhri, “The Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī and the Universalism of the Qur’an: A Presentation and Translation of His Commentary on Verse 2:62,” in *Universal Dimensions of Islam: Studies in Comparative Religion*, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011), pp. 42-48; Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. D.M. Matheson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963); William Stoddart, *What Do the Religions Say about Each Other? Christian Attitudes towards Islam, Islamic Attitudes towards Christianity* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008); Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006); Reza Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur’an and Interfaith Dialogue* (London: Islamic Texts Society, 2006); Abdul Wahid Radhu, *Islam in Tibet and Tibetan Caravans*, trans. Jane Casewit, ed. Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1997); Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010); Amadou Hampaté Bâ, *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar*, trans. Fatima Jane Casewit, ed. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008); James S. Cutsinger (ed.), *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002); Toshiniko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

Shaykh Ahmed Ḥabīb: Islam is a Divine Blessing (*baraka*) upon humanity, and wisdom informs us that for every blessing there will be a counter response. The enemies of Islam are a natural phenomenon of existence in the temporal world (*dunya*)—contraries arise and are themselves an aspect of this reality.¹² The only means of understanding the world of multiplicity is through the Divine Unity (*tawhid*).

As for the *Wahhābīs*, they are enemies of Islam without any awareness of this fact. They are under the misguided notion that they are of service to the faith (*īmān*) when this could not be farther from the truth. Because they rely solely on their individual interpretation of Islam, discarding the interpretation and agreed-upon aspects of the faith (*īmān*) as the community (*ummah*) understands it, they have deviated from the Straight Path of Islam (*Sirat al-Mustaqim*). It is no less than a tragedy that many of the younger generations are being recruited into this deviant mindset which has sadly propagated much confusion and violence in the name of Islam.

SBS: *How should someone living in the West who wants to obtain authentic information on Islamic spirituality proceed as the erroneous phenomenon of Islamophobia appears to be on the rise?*

Shaykh Ahmed Ḥabīb: It is the responsibility of the Muslim community (*ummah*) at large to gather and respond to the false media's presentation of the world of Islam (*dar al-Islam*). The Westerner likewise needs to research the truth for him or herself and not rely solely on one source of information—let God guide them in their search—for what is True and Everlasting will not be found through these worldly channels, yet God-willing (*inshā'Allāh*) it can be a starting point, but God knows best. The Holy Koran is a theophany, a Divine Blessing (*baraka*) of God—it is not the product of human innovation—it contains the message of Islam which is the religion of peace.¹³

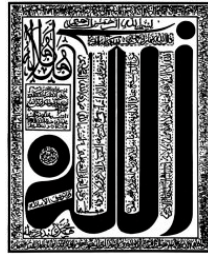
SBS: *What should seekers (faqīrs) keep in mind as they live in an ever complex world burdened by endless responsibilities and commitments, having less and less time*

¹² "Certainly all things are hidden in their opposites—gain in loss and gift in refusal, honor in humiliation, wealth in poverty, strength in weakness, abundance in restriction, rising up in falling down, life in death, victory in defeat, power in powerlessness and so on." (Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998], p. 34).

¹³ In one of his poems Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī illuminates the providential role of the Koran not only in Islam but traditional Sufism: "It [The Koran] hath taken up its dwelling in our hearts and on our tongues and is mingled with our blood and our flesh and our bones and all that is in us." (Shaykh Ahmed Al-'Alawī, quoted in Martin Lings, "The Origins of Sufism," in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-'Alawī, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* [Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], p. 35).

to engage in spiritual matters let alone the Greater Jibad (*al-jihād al-akbar*)¹⁴, which is in direct contrast to previous eras where the Sacred was infused in all aspects of life?

Shaykh Ahmed Ḥabīb: I advise seekers (*faqīrs*) to be steadfast, to perform their daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) and invocation (*dhikr*)¹⁵, and be aware of their obligation to their Lord (*Allāh*), to their faith (*īmān*) and to the society to which they belong, and may God guide and protect them! What cannot be forgotten is the living remembrance of the Divine Reality within the sanctum of their own heart.¹⁶



The Divine Name (*Allah*)
surrounded by verses from the Koran

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet stated in an “Interfaith Summit on Happiness: Understanding and Promoting Happiness in Today’s Society” held on October 17th – 18th, 2010 at Emory University that: “[T]he whole Buddhist practice is but the practice of *Jihād*.” See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Spiritual Significance of *Jihād*,” in *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: KPI, 1987), pp. 27-33; Reza Shah-Kazemi, “Recollecting the Spirit of Jihad,” *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 8 (Winter 2001), pp. 137-155; Charles Upton, “On the Greater *Jihād*,” in *Reflections of Tasawwuf: Essays, Poems and Narrative on Sufi Themes* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008), pp. 28-31; Lorenzo Scupoli, *Unseen Warfare: The Spiritual Combat and Path to Paradise of Lorenzo Scupoli*, ed. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and revised by Theophan the Recluse, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Shaykh Ahmed Al-‘Alawī speaks to the importance of the Invocation (*dhikr*) of the Divine Names: “Remembrance is the mightiest rule of the religion.... The law was not enjoined upon us, neither were the rites of worship ordained but for the sake of establishing the remembrance of God.” (Shaykh Ahmed Al-‘Alawī, quoted in Martin Lings, “The Spiritual Master,” in *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-‘Alawi, His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy* [Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993], p. 96); “Lastly, my brother, I strongly advise you—“religion is sincere counsel”—not to give up the remembrance (*dhikr*) of your Lord, as He himself told you to do it, *standing, sitting and reclining* (Qur’an IV, 104) and in all conditions, for we need nothing but that; we, you and every man [and woman], whoever he [or she] may be.” (Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998], p. 76).

¹⁶ “Our attention should be devoted to religious activities at all times and today more than ever, for in these days one might well imagine that no such thing as religious activity without worldly attachment had ever existed; nevertheless it certainly has existed even if it exists no longer” (Shaykh ad-Darqāwī, *Letters of a Sufi Master*, trans. Titus Burckhardt [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998], p. 31).