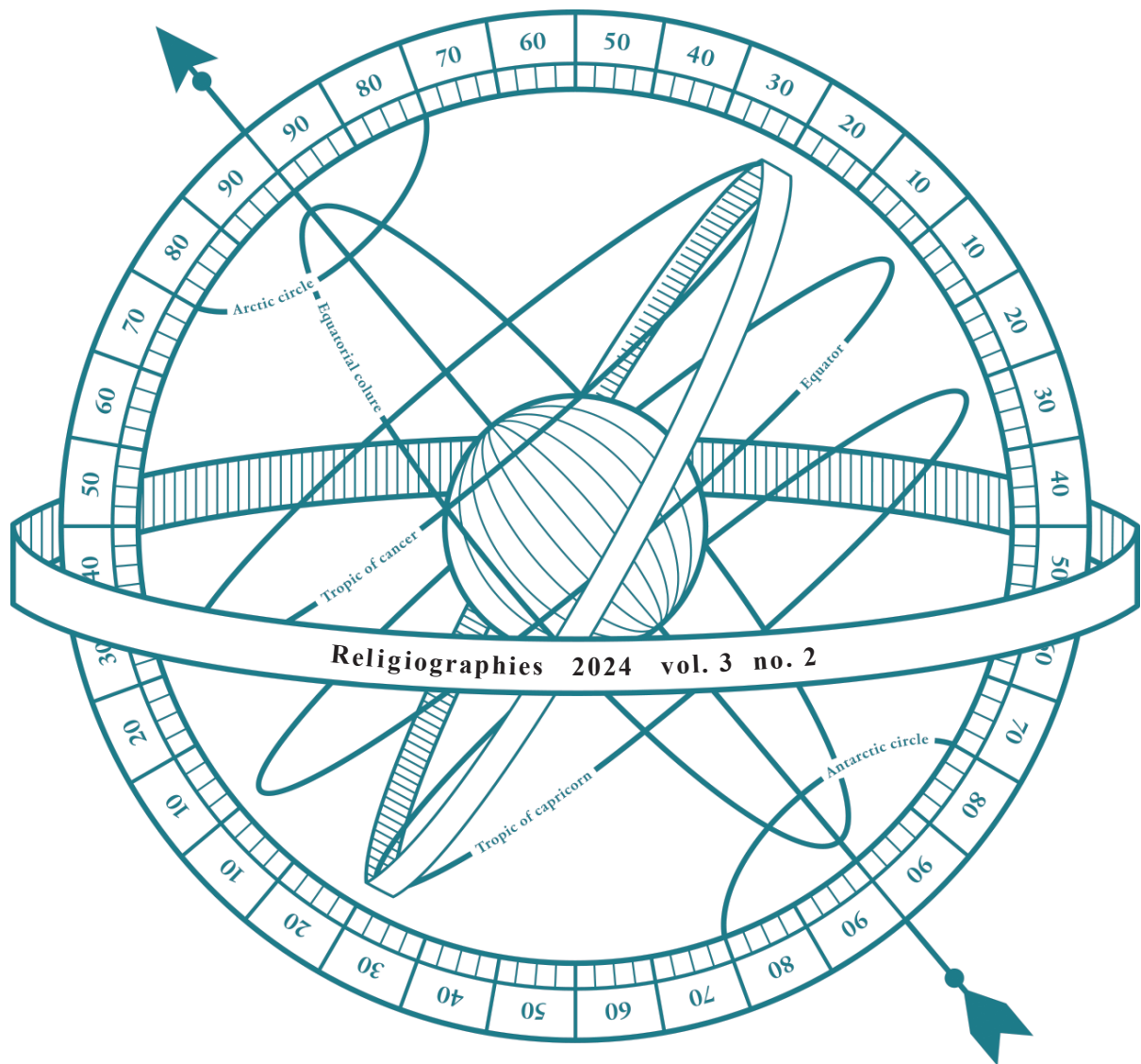


# *Religiographies*



Special Issue

“Reviving Muhyi al-Din: Contemporary Uses of  
Ibn ‘Arabi’s Thought and Reinventions of Islam”

edited by

Mark J. Sedgwick and Gregory Vandamme

# *Akbarian Anarchism: Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917) on Islam, Freedom and Shari‘a*

## Gregory Vandamme

### Author:

Gregory Vandamme  
FNRS/UCLouvain  
[gregory.vandamme@uclouvain.be](mailto:gregory.vandamme@uclouvain.be)

### Keywords:

Ivan Aguéli, Ibn ‘Arabi, Sufism, Traditionalism, Shari‘a, Freedom

### To cite this:

Vandamme, Gregory. “Akbarian Anarchism: Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917) on Islam, Freedom and Shari‘a.” *Religiographies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2024): 6–24. <https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2024.v3.n2.6-24>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2024.v3.n2.6-24>

### Abstract

This article explores the multifaceted legacy of Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917), a pivotal figure in the introduction of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought to the West. Aguéli’s paradoxical trajectory—encompassing art, anarchism, and Sufism—has elicited diverse interpretations. By situating him firmly within the Akbarian interpretative tradition, the article challenges views of his work as an eclectic appropriation, instead demonstrating its philosophical coherence and grounding in the doctrinal framework of Ibn ‘Arabi and his commentators. Aguéli’s philosophy highlights a dynamic equilibrium between strict adherence to the shari‘a and intellectual freedom, offering a profound reinterpretation of the shari‘a as a safeguard of individual liberty rather than a constraint. This balance reflects Ibn ‘Arabi’s harmonisation of intellectual creativity with unwavering commitment to tradition. By synthesizing spirituality, intellectual inquiry, and practical engagement, Aguéli emerges as a significant yet underappreciated modern interpreter of Akbarian thought.



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE  
fondazione ONLUS  
GIORGIO CINI

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International]  
To view a copy of this license, visit:  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

## Introduction

Few historical figures have managed to exert a significant influence on their era while remaining largely unknown to the general public. Such is the case with Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917). Beyond his pivotal role in introducing and disseminating Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought in the West, Aguéli appears to have been at the nexus of several dynamics that would prove crucial to the evolution of both Western and Muslim societies in the twentieth century. The various facets of Aguéli’s life and work—paradoxical and disconcerting in many respects, lending themselves to widely divergent interpretations—undoubtedly account for his longstanding marginalisation within contemporary Muslim thought. Recent editions and studies have fortunately reassessed Aguéli’s significance,<sup>1</sup> but these contributions have yet to fully resolve the challenges of engaging with his thought.

Born in 1869 in Sweden, the young John Gustav Agelii left his native country at the age of twenty-one for Paris, where he studied painting and adopted the name Ivan Aguéli.<sup>2</sup> He cultivated an early interest in the spirituality of Swedenborg—a legacy from his mother—and in Islam.<sup>3</sup> Also early on, Aguéli became involved in anarchist circles and was arrested in 1894 during a crackdown on radical groups in Paris. During his four months in prison, Aguéli deepened his reading and studies, particularly in the field of Islam.<sup>4</sup> Upon his release, he travelled for the first time to Egypt, before returning to Paris to undertake advanced studies in Arabic. His formal conversion to Islam is documented as early as 1898, and in 1899, he travelled to India and Sri Lanka, where he studied in Muslim madrasas and adopted the name ‘Abd al-Hadi.<sup>5</sup>

After a brief sojourn in Paris, he went back to Cairo in 1900, where he became a disciple of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh (1840–1921) and was initiated into the works of Ibn ‘Arabi. The nature and implications of this relationship will be central to the analysis offered here, as it ultimately situates Aguéli within the long tradition of interpreters of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought. During this period, he contributed mainly to the journal *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, where he wrote in Arabic and Italian under the name ‘Abd al-Hadi until 1907.<sup>6</sup> In those articles, Aguéli often acted as a spokesperson for ‘Illaysh, while more broadly presenting an Islamic vision rooted in Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, which we will examine in greater detail below.<sup>7</sup>

In the winter of 1909, Aguéli returned to Europe and began writing a new series of articles in French, still under the name Abdul-Hâdi, primarily in *La Gnose*, a journal edited by René Guénon (1886–1951). These writings address the doctrines of Sufism and the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi, while also formulating Aguéli’s approach to Islam by integrating these doctrines into his reflections on art and politics.<sup>8</sup> In 1911, Aguéli founded a society dedicated to studying and disseminating Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought: *Al-Akbariyya*, which can, in many respects, be regarded as the birth of Akbarian studies in the West. Nevertheless, he continued to paint and to write reflections on art, winning praise in the Parisian artistic milieu.<sup>9</sup>

Back in Cairo in 1913, Aguéli seems to have focused primarily on painting.<sup>10</sup> With the outbreak of World War I, the British colonial administration suspected him of harbouring pro-Ottoman sympathies

1

Among the most notable works, one must mention the extensive study conducted by his compatriot Axel Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli: Människan, mystikern, målaren*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Sveriges allmänna konstförening, 1940–41). A re-edition of his writings for the French journal *La Gnose*, accompanied by a biographical introduction, was published by G. Rocca: Abdul-Hâdi (John Gustav Agelii, dit Ivan Aguéli), *Écrits pour La Gnose, comprenant la traduction de l’arabe du Traité de l’Unité*, ed. G. Rocca (Milan: Archè, 1988). Jean Foucaud has published several detailed articles: “Le Musulman, Cheikh ‘Abdu-l-Hedi al-Maghribi Uqayli - I,” *Vers la Tradition* 72 (June–August 1998), “Notes complémentaires,” *Vers la Tradition* 73 (September–November 1998), “Le Musulman, Cheikh ‘Abdu-l-Hedi al-Maghribi Uqayli - II, le précurseur,” *Vers la Tradition* 77 (September–November 1999), and “Rectificanda,” *Vers la Tradition* 79 (March–May 2000). These articles were later republished by the author online, with additional annexes: <http://dinul-qayyim.over-blog.com>, accessed Sept. 1, 2024. Mark Sedgwick devoted an entire section to Aguéli in *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 59–63. Oliver Fotros published an anthology of Aguéli’s writings translated into English: *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity; Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Fotros (n.p.: Oliver Fotros, 2021), along with a study demonstrating René Guénon’s borrowings from Aguéli’s writings: *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown* (n.p.: Oliver Fotros, 2021). A significant milestone in Aguéli studies came the same year with the publication of the substantial collective volume edited by Mark Sedgwick to commemorate Aguéli’s 150th birth anniversary: *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. M. Sedgwick (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Many studies cited here derive from this volume.

2

For a general overview of Ivan Aguéli’s trajectory, see Viveca Wessel, “Ivan Aguéli’s Life and Work,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 17–32.

3

Wessel, “Ivan Aguéli’s Life and Work,” 20–21.

4

Wessel, 24.

5

A mark of this sojourn is the translation he published in 1910 for *La Gnose* of a classical text from the Indian curriculum: “Épître intitulée ‘Le Cadeau sur la manifestation du Prophète,’ par le sheikh initié et inspiré Mohammed Ibn Fazlallah El-Hindi,” *La Gnose* 1, no. 12 (December 1910): 270–75. On this text, see Michel Chodkiewicz, “L’offrande au Prophète de Muhammad al-Burhânpûri,” *Connaissance des Religions* 4, no. 1–2 (1988): 30–40.

6

See Paul-André Claudel, *Un journal “italo-isl-*

and inciting unrest among Arab populations. Ultimately, they expelled him from Egypt in 1916, deporting him to Spain. Living under difficult circumstances, Aguéli died mysteriously in 1917, struck by a train in the outskirts of Barcelona.

How can we evaluate the legacy left by Aguéli? It is challenging to encapsulate his artistic work, political engagements, spiritual journey, and intellectual trajectory within a single framework. Yet it is essential to consider all these elements together, resisting the temptation to isolate them by their respective domains, in order to honour the originality of Aguéli's thought and uncover the underlying coherence beneath the apparent contradictions of his eclectic and colourful outlook. For many, Aguéli represents a personal and eccentric appropriation of Ibn 'Arabi's thought, diverging from what is considered the authentic and legitimate interpretative tradition. Rocca and Sorgenfrei emphasise this eccentricity,<sup>11</sup> while Fiscella and Hatina identify in Aguéli's work a tension between anarchism and Islamic norms that remains unresolved.<sup>12</sup> Marchi, however, suggests that Aguéli's "Sufism" resolves this tension, though only by positing a form of spirituality that transcends common religious norms.<sup>13</sup>

This paper aims to show that, quite the contrary, Aguéli should likely be situated within the Akbarian tradition itself. His case reveals its possibilities of interpretation and compels us to reassess not only our conceptions and definitions of this tradition—and therefore of the broader Islamic tradition—but also how we approach the many contemporary interpretations and appropriations of Ibn 'Arabi's thought. We will see that Aguéli's grounding in Sufi Islam should not be viewed as merely one element within a radically modern bricolage. On the contrary, his Western and modern background is fully integrated into an Islamic perspective, where it is reinterpreted and transformed. Aguéli upholds a traditional approach to Islam and may have been the first to use the term "Islamophobia" to denounce how this traditional Islam was caricatured and disparaged by both Westerners and Muslim modernists of his time.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, he remains driven by a quest for radical freedom and the liberation from alienating norms.

These tensions in Aguéli echo a central characteristic of Ibn 'Arabi's thought: his continuous articulation of profound intellectual freedom, at times provocatively creative, with rigorous adherence to tradition, and meticulous observance of the shari'a.<sup>15</sup> The peculiarities and paradoxes of Aguéli's thought should therefore be seen as a faithful expression of Ibn 'Arabi's approach, which Chittick describes as "both intensely loyal to the tradition and exceedingly innovative."<sup>16</sup> Aguéli advanced this element of Ibn 'Arabi's thought arguably further than many others and one might draw an intriguing parallel between Aguéli's position and the way Ibn 'Arabi himself has often been regarded: as a sublime yet marginal figure in Islamic history, existing beyond the boundaries of the common tradition more than subtly reinforcing its contours.

It is therefore particularly fruitful to examine Aguéli's philosophy through the prism of Ibn 'Arabi's thought and its transmission. This approach introduces a significant interpretative shift: rather than viewing Aguéli's work as an eclectic orientalisating assemblage of Sufi elements, it is better understood as a modern articulation of the doctrinal frame-

*mique*" à la veille de la Première Guerre mondiale: *Il Convito / النادى - Le Caire, 1904–1912*, Études alexandrines 57 (Alexandria: Centre d'Études Alexandrines, 2023).

7

See, notably, "I grandi iniziati musulmani" and "Dio il bello—la maestà della bellezza," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 1 (May 1907): 19–25; "El Akbariya," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 2 (June 1907): 48–55; "El Akbariya—continua," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 3–4 (July 1907): 90–103; "El Akbariya—continua," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 5–6 (September 1907): 154–57; and "El Akbariya—continua," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 7–8 (November 1907): 194–95.

8

The articles in which he directly addresses Ibn 'Arabi's thought include "L'identité suprême dans l'ésotérisme musulman: Le Traité de l'Unité (*Risalatul-Ahadiyah*), par le plus grand des Maîtres spirituels, Mohyiddin ibn 'Arabi (traduction)," *La Gnose* 1, nos. 6, 7, 8 (June, July, August 1911): 168–74, 199–202, 217–23; and "Les catégories de l'initiation (*Tartibut-Taçawwuf*) par le plus grand des Maîtres spirituels Seydi Mohyiddin Ibn 'Arabi," *La Gnose* 2, no. 12 (December 1911): 323–28. Akbarian elements are also disseminated in other articles, such as "Pages dédiées à Mercure: *Sahaif Ataridiyah*," *La Gnose* 2, no. 1 (January 1911): 28–38; no. 2 (February 1911): 66–72; "Pages dédiées au Soleil: *Sahaif Shamsiyah*," *La Gnose* 2, no. 2 (February 1911): 59–66; "*El-Malâmatiyah*," *La Gnose* 2, no. 3 (March 1911): 100–107; "L'Universalité en l'Islam," *La Gnose* 2, no. 4 (April 1911): 121–31; and "L'Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques," *La Gnose* 2, no. 5 (May 1911): 152–53.

9

Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) even dedicated an article to him, "Le Suédois mahométan," in *Le Mercure de France* 365 (September 1, 1912): 220–21. However, Aguéli declined Apollinaire's offer of collaboration, as he seemed determined to avoid the Parisian art world at all costs, see Wessel, "Ivan Aguéli's Life and Work," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 29.

10

Wessel, "Ivan Aguéli's Life and Work," 31.

11

See Rocca, introduction in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, op. cit.; Simon Sorgenfrei, "The Great Aesthetic Inspiration: On Ivan Aguéli's Reading of Swedenborg," *Religion and the Arts* 23 (2019): 1–25.

12

See Anthony T. Fiscella, "Kill the Audience: Ivan Aguéli's Universal Utopia of Anarchism and Islam," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 81–93; and Meir Hatina, "Ivan Aguéli's Humanist Vision: Islam, Sufism, and Universalism," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 139–50.

13

Alessandra Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics: Ivan Aguéli and Il Convito," in *Anar-*

work established by Ibn ‘Arabi and his followers. The interpretation of Aguéli as a translator of the Akbarian heritage, serving the intellectual project of his Eastern masters, was already advanced by Guermazi.<sup>17</sup> He demonstrated how the teachings and actions of ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh, Aguéli’s master, should be understood as a direct continuation of the efforts of his own teacher, the renowned Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir (1808–1883), to disseminate Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas and employ them as a tool for reviving Islamic thought.<sup>18</sup> This article seeks to deepen this perspective by analysing key aspects of Aguéli’s philosophy. It opens with an examination of his engagement with the concept of tradition, followed by a focus on his distinctive affiliation with the Akbarian lineage. The analysis will then focus on how Aguéli, drawing on this tradition, conceives of Islam and shari‘a.

### A Higher Notion of Tradition

Aguéli occupies a position that straddles the two meanings of the term “traditionalist.” His conception of tradition combines adherence to the continuity of a specific spiritual and intellectual lineage with a meta-historical notion of a primordial and immutable tradition, which can be seen as a precursor to Traditionalist philosophy.<sup>19</sup> As he stated: “We have a higher notion of Tradition . . . According to us, it is the very ‘spacism’ that allows the rediscovery of the Ancient Tradition, that which is imprescriptible and forever young.”<sup>20</sup> Despite his metahistorical conception of tradition, Aguéli remains firmly rooted in the specific religious framework of Islam, consistently upholding its integrity and relevance throughout his writings. Recent references to Aguéli within Western traditional Muslim circles, by figures such as ‘Abd al-Hakim Murad (Timothy Winter) and Hamza Yusuf—both regarded by some as “neo-traditionalists” in a conservative sense—demonstrate that, despite his originality, Aguéli continues to inspire some contemporary traditional Muslims.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, Aguéli’s position could, in a certain sense, be understood as attributing a traditional origin to the emergence of the so-called Traditionalist movement. Aguéli’s ideas appear to have had a profound influence on Guénon. The most notable example is Aguéli’s use of the term “supreme identity” (*identité suprême*) to render—non-literally—the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd*. This expression would later become central to the technical vocabulary of Guénon and his followers.<sup>22</sup> However, Guénon does not seem to have been aware of Aguéli’s true identity, believing him to be a born Muslim and, therefore, a wholly traditional figure.<sup>23</sup> The central role played by the study and dissemination of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought and its interpreters among Guénon’s followers could thus be viewed as, in some sense, a return to the source. This approach was notably adopted by Michel Mustafa Vâlsan (1911–1974), who observed in 1953 that the true origin of the ideas disseminated through Guénon lay in the Akbarian heritage.<sup>24</sup>

Aguéli regarded himself as being at the service of that tradition, signing some of his writings as “servant of the saints” (*khādim al-awliyā*) and stating: “One day, my art will explain the eccentricities of my life. I am the servant of a tradition I cannot deny.”<sup>25</sup> Yet, this deference to tradition did not prevent him from cultivating an ideal of

*chist, Artist, Sufi*, 115–26.

14

See “I nemici dell’Islam,” *Il Convito* 7 (July 1904): 1, where Aguéli presents several typologies of Islamophobia. See the introduction and its English translation in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 205–10.

15

See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivages: Ibn Arabi, le Livre et la Loi* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) and James W. Morris, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority,” *Studia Islamica* 71 (1990): 37–64. The centrality of the Shari‘a is also at the heart of Lipton’s critique of universalist readings of Ibn ‘Arabi, which he perceives as “absolutist and exclusivist” in nature, see *Rethinking Ibn ‘Arabi*, op. cit.

16

William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 497–98.

17

See Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy of Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 127–37.

18

On the multifaceted activities of ‘Abd al-Qadir, consult the collective volume *Abd el-Kader, un spirituel dans la modernité*, ed. Ahmed Bouyerdene, Éric Geoffroy, and Setty G. Simon-Khedis (Beirut: Presses de l’Ifpo, 2012). A broader reflection on the links between Sufism and political engagement surrounding Aguéli was earlier explored by Meir Hatina, “Where East Meets West: Sufism, Cultural Rapprochement, and Politics,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (August 2007): 389–409.

19

See Mark Sedgwick’s analysis of the terms “Traditionalism” and “tradition” in *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3–20, 22–24.

20

“Les Indépendants, 29ème,” *L’Encyclopédie contemporaine illustrée* 664 (May 25, 1913), trans. Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 73.

21

See, for instance, the lecture dedicated to him by ‘Abd al-Hakim Murad as part of the “Paradigms of Leadership” series at the Cambridge Muslim College: <https://youtu.be/hRivu7eYEsA?si=4eQEL3XpKKwgAwfR>, accessed Aug. 28, 2024, or Hamza Yusuf’s mention of him during his debate with conservative psychologist Jordan Peterson: <https://youtu.be/x7ZIXD7COMU?si=EuL-KOKUuTk3Ed6XZ>, accessed Aug. 28, 2024.

22

See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 27–31.

radical freedom. Aguéli understood tradition as a framework guiding a path that remains deeply personal and individual. For him, both spiritual realisation and aesthetic pursuit emerge through a balance between fidelity to one's inner nature and adherence to tradition, which facilitates the full actualisation of that nature.<sup>26</sup> He thus emphasises the need to maintain a delicate equilibrium between “emotion (individual love, personality, nature) and style (collectivity, external order, tradition),” warning that any imbalance risks leaving the seeker either confined within sterile formalism or ensnared by the excesses of subjective emotion.<sup>27</sup> Tradition, therefore, only assumes its full significance when personally appropriated by the individual. Otherwise, it becomes merely a formal and harmful instrument of coercion: “Tradition without initiative produces only cunning and sleight of hand.”<sup>28</sup>

Aguéli's approach to tradition is most evident in his engagement with Islamic doctrines. His conception of Islamic faith is far from naïve or immature, as demonstrated as early as his 1902 article *Notes sur l'islam*, which contains the seeds of many principles later developed in his contributions to *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* and *La Gnose*. The vision of Islam presented by Aguéli reflects the teachings he received in Cairo, where Sufism was the most widely practised form of religion.<sup>29</sup> Late Ottoman Egyptian Sufism was strongly influenced by the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi and his commentators, particularly in emphasising the concordance between traditional religious law (shari'a) and the personal spiritual path (tariqa).<sup>30</sup> A notable example of how the Akbarian heritage was integrated into mainstream Islam is found in a figure who preceded Aguéli by more than a century yet is linked to him through Shaykh 'Illaysh's initiatory chain: the renowned Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–1790). As a leading authority in the traditional sciences and a transmitter of the *khirqā akbariyya*—the spiritual influence of the Shaykh al-akbar—al-Zabidi embodied what Reichmuth calls a “Sufi humanism,” perfectly aligned with the orthodoxy of his time.<sup>31</sup>

Although Aguéli stands firmly within the living tradition of Egyptian Sufism and the Akbarian heritage, his connection to Ibn 'Arabi's spiritual influence is profoundly personal.<sup>32</sup> This is particularly evident in the verses concluding his *Pages dédiées au Soleil*, published in *La Gnose* in 1911 “I read the books of the Master before I knew Arabic. I saw him before I knew his name.”<sup>33</sup> These lines refer to a dream Aguéli reportedly experienced in 1893, which he disclosed only in 1907, in a letter to Huot. In this letter, he explained that he recognised the Shaykh al-akbar after coming across specific details in a recently published biography.<sup>34</sup> This is particularly significant for understanding his connection to the spiritual lineage of Ibn 'Arabi, as it indicates that he viewed his relationship with the Shaykh al-akbar as deeply personal and intimate—a bond that preceded both his formal conversion to Islam and his initiation under Shaykh 'Illaysh.

The nature of Aguéli's connection to Ibn 'Arabi is thus twofold, reflecting his conception of tradition. On the one hand, it seems to have been established through a spiritual bond of the *uwaysī* type, which connects a disciple directly to a deceased master without a formal intermediary.<sup>35</sup> Aguéli himself hints at this form of transmission when he writes: “There is always a master, but he may be absent, unknown, or even deceased for several centuries.”<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Aguéli

23

See Mark Sedgwick, “The Significance of Ivan Aguéli for the Traditionalist Movement,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 167–168. Aguéli was, moreover, presented in *La Gnose* as “a Muslim student, Abdul-Hâdi, who knows only Islam, or rather a single Islamic school, that of Mohyiddin ibn Arabi, the Malâmātiyah, and Abdul-Karim al-Jīlī” (*La Gnose*, December 1910, 268–69). See Rocca, introduction in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, vii. Michel Vâlsan appears to have been the first among Guénon's followers to investigate Aguéli's background and to portray him positively, owing to his own affinity with the works of Ibn 'Arabi. See Rocca, introduction, 172–73, and Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 90–92.

24

“The traditional idea as it is known today in the West through the works of René Guénon has, historically, a definite Islamic and Akbarian origin,” Michel Vâlsan, “L'islam et la fonction de René Guénon,” *Études traditionnelles* 305 (January 1953): 44–46. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

25

Letter to Carl Wilhelmsson, in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:252, cited in Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 73. In another letter, he similarly wrote: “How ideal it would have been to be in an entirely wild and barren land where there was none other of the race of man! If only I had not had the tradition to defend!” letter to Richard Bergh, Feb. 8, 1916, in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:260, cited in Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 73.

26

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 41.

27

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 39.

28

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 39.

29

See Gilbert Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans dans l'Égypte du XIXe siècle (1798–1882)*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale [IFAO], 1982).

30

On the place of Ibn 'Arabi within late Ottoman Egyptian Sufism, see Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, introduction in *Le soufisme à l'époque ottomane, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle / Sufism in the Ottoman Era, 16th–18th century*, ed. Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, *Cahier des Annales Islamologiques* 29 (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2010), 11, 45–48.

31

See Stefan Reichmuth, *The World of Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–91): Life, Networks and Writings* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2009).

is formally linked to the Akbarian lineage through Shaykh ‘Illaysh. Notably, both aspects of this connection correspond to what Aguéli terms “the instruction of men” (*ta’līm al-rijāl*), as distinct from “lordly instruction” (*al-ta’līm al-rabbānī*).<sup>37</sup> In other words, Aguéli situates himself firmly within the tradition transmitted by men, albeit in an original manner, and does not claim direct access to a primordial or divine source of knowledge. At most, he sees himself as a “servant of the saints.”

### Al-Akbariyya

Faithful to the traditional notion of Sufi education, Aguéli considers initiation under a master indispensable. That master should not be seen as either a cleric or merely a schoolteacher but rather as “a spiritual father whom one chooses and can leave whenever one wishes.”<sup>38</sup> In Aguéli’s case, the spiritual fatherhood of Ibn ‘Arabi is mediated through Shaykh ‘Illaysh, who connected him to an initiatory chain that included Murtada al-Zabidi and Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir. Aguéli describes this lineage and its significance in a 1903 letter to Huot, while hinting that his connection to Ibn ‘Arabi ultimately predates his initiation by Shaykh ‘Illaysh.<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that a dual relationship to Ibn ‘Arabi’s spiritual influence—both personal, subtle, and direct, as well as collective, formal, and mediated through teaching—is commonly observed within this chain of transmission. This is particularly evident in the case of Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir, who recounts numerous visions of Ibn ‘Arabi in his writings and states that he acquired his knowledge both from Ibn ‘Arabi’s books and from his spiritual presence.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the subtle bond linking him to Ibn ‘Arabi, Aguéli has a connection to Shaykh ‘Illaysh that should not be regarded as merely formal or secondary. His correspondence is filled with expressions of deference and devotion towards his master, leaving no room for doubt about the sincerity of his attachment. In fact, Shaykh ‘Illaysh possessed such charisma that the son of Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir described him as “equal in sanctity” to his father.<sup>41</sup> It is known that Aguéli began meeting with Shaykh ‘Illaysh in Cairo from 1900 onwards, but it is not unlikely that he had already connected with him during his 1899 stay in Sri Lanka. This period coincides with the exile of the nationalist leader Ahmad ‘Urabi Pasha (1841–1911), who was close to the ‘Illaysh family and established several Islamic educational institutions in the country.<sup>42</sup> It is therefore possible that Aguéli first encountered Shaykh ‘Illaysh’s circle in one of these madrasas. Regardless, it was in Cairo that Aguéli formally placed himself under ‘Illaysh’s guidance and joined the tariqa Shadhiliyya ‘Arabiyya. The nature of this affiliation has been debated, given the decline of the ‘Arabiyya at the time and the lack of evidence of Aguéli’s formal participation in any of its activities.<sup>43</sup> However, these doubts rest on an idealised and ahistorical view of Sufi initiation, failing to account for the circumstances of the time.<sup>44</sup> Shaykh ‘Illaysh himself appears to have adopted a highly flexible approach to spiritual transmission: rather than confining his disciples solely to the ‘Arabiyya—which he led—he would initiate them into various schools to which he was connected through familial inheritance.<sup>45</sup> The nature of Aguéli’s initiation, therefore, depends far

32

It should be noted that the distinctiveness of this relationship far exceeds Aguéli’s engagement with Swedenborg’s thought, despite the familial and spiritual connection Aguéli’s mother maintained with Swedenborg. Sorgenfrei nevertheless regards Swedenborg as Aguéli’s primary influence, but this conclusion likely stems from the fact that his study focuses on letters from 1894, predating Aguéli’s travels to Egypt and his formal conversion to Islam—after which he repeatedly criticised Swedenborg’s ideas. See Sorgenfrei, “The Great Aesthetic Inspiration,” op. cit.

33

“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 64.

34

Letter to Huot, July 29, 1907, cited in Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 136. See also Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli, The Pearl upon the Crown* 18.

35

See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn ‘Arabi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 178–179, and Claude Addas, “Introduction,” in Ibn ‘Arabi. *Le Livre de la filiation spirituelle* (Kitāb nasab al-khirqā), ed. and trans. Claude Addas (Marrakesh: Al Quobba Zargua, 2000), 15–16.

36

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 30.

37

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 30.

38

“Notes sur l’Islam,” *L’Initiation* 11 (August 1902): 99–107, in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 168.

39

Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 135–36.

40

Michel Chodkiewicz, introduction in *Abd el-Kader. Écrits spirituels*, trans. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 15–40. See also Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 133.

41

Marie D’Aire, *‘Abd al-Qadir, Quelques documents nouveaux lus et approuvés par l’officier en mission auprès de l’émir* (Amiens: Imprimerie Yvert & Teller, 1900), 247, cited in Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 134.

42

See Costantino Paonessa, “La contestation de la ‘réforme’ en Égypte à la fin du XIXe siècle: anarchistes et soufis,” *Émulations - Revue de sciences sociales*, Varia, online (2022).

43

See Anthony T. Fiscella, “Kill the Audience: Ivan Aguéli’s Universal Utopia of Anarchism and Is-

more on Shaykh ‘Illaysh and his teaching methods than on Aguéli’s own involvement. The question becomes even more nuanced when we consider the transmission of the *khirqā akbariyya*, which Aguéli appeared to seek above all from Shaykh ‘Illaysh, whom he described as “the current representative of Ibn ‘Arabi, that is to say, his school.”<sup>46</sup>

The nature of Aguéli’s initiation and the teachings he may have received from Shaykh ‘Illaysh are inseparable from broader inquiries into his understanding of Sufi doctrines, particularly those of Ibn ‘Arabi and his commentators. Aguéli seems confident in this regard, writing to Huot: “The rare persons of our time who understand the master recognise that I perfectly understood him, but in an absolutely novel manner.”<sup>47</sup> A compelling element supporting this claim is the opinion of the Swedish scholar Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1889–1974), who produced the first critical edition and academic study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s early epistles in 1919.<sup>48</sup> Nyberg’s assessment, based on Aguéli’s notes and correspondence, along with testimonies he personally gathered in Cairo, appears in an appendix to Gauffin’s comprehensive biography.<sup>49</sup> Although critical of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas and somewhat dismissive of Aguéli’s eccentricity, Nyberg nonetheless acknowledges Aguéli’s profound mastery of Arabic, his serious commitment to Islamic practice, his involvement in Cairo’s Sufi circles, and the esteem in which Egyptian peers held him, as well as his meticulous work in collecting, copying, and synthesising Ibn ‘Arabi’s manuscript writings.

It remains striking, however, that Aguéli ultimately presented and commented on only a limited selection of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings. Among his publications in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, there is only a brief excerpt from chapter 558 of Ibn ‘Arabi’s magnum opus, *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Revelations)*.<sup>50</sup> Of particular interest are two texts attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi that Aguéli published in *La Gnose*. The first, which is the most famous, is the *Treatise on Unity (Risalat al-Ahadiyya)*, serialised by Aguéli in 1911.<sup>51</sup> This work continues to circulate under Ibn ‘Arabi’s name and has been reprinted numerous times. Yet, as Chodkiewicz demonstrated in his own study and translation, it is not actually a work of Ibn ‘Arabi but rather of Awhad al-Din Balyani (d. 1288).<sup>52</sup> Aguéli was not unaware of the doubts concerning the text’s attribution, acknowledging them in the introduction to his translation and noting the various manuscript versions at his disposal. Nevertheless, he remained convinced that it was indeed the work of the Shaykh al-akbar.<sup>53</sup> Despite this misjudgement, the doctrinal differences highlighted by Chodkiewicz—namely, that Balyani’s metaphysical perspective is closer to the concept of absolute unity (*al-wahdat al-muṭlaqa*) espoused by Ibn Sab‘in (1216–1270) than to Ibn ‘Arabi—do not appear in Aguéli’s writings. On the contrary, Aguéli repeatedly affirms the ultimate transcendence of the Divine being over its manifestations.<sup>54</sup> The second text attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi and published by Aguéli in *La Gnose* explores the categories of initiation.<sup>55</sup> This work remains poorly known, as its manuscripts have not yet been critically edited, and its attribution has not been definitively settled by contemporary specialists. However, it is not considered part of Ibn ‘Arabi’s authenticated works.<sup>56</sup>

Ultimately, although these heuristic uncertainties raise valid concerns, they should not obscure Aguéli’s evident mastery of the techni-

lam,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 237, note 3, and Simon Sorgenfrei, “Ivan Aguéli’s Monotheistic Landscapes: From Perspectival to Solar Logics,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 63, 232, note 35.

44

On the modalities of affiliation to Sufi orders in the context of modern Egypt, see Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, introduction, 38–42, and Gilbert Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:242–60. On the milieu of Shaykh ‘Illaysh specifically, see Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:129–67. The decline of the Shadhiliyya ‘Arabiyya may, in fact, be attributed to its subversive nature, as it was not officially recognised among the confraternities by the council established by the Egyptian state in 1882, likely due to its ties with ‘Urabi. See Paonessa, “La contestation de la ‘réforme’ en Égypte,” op. cit.

45

Frederick De Jong, *Turuq and Turuq-linked Institutions in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: A Historical Study in Organizational Dimensions of Islamic Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 173–74.

46

Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 135–36.

47

Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 135–36.

48

Henrik S. Nyberg, *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn ‘Arabi: Nach Handschriften in Upsala und Berlin zum ersten Mal herausgegeben und mit Einleitung und Kommentar versehen* (Leiden: Brill, 1919).

49

Henrik S. Nyberg, “Aguéli och islam,” in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:299–304.

50

See “I grandi iniziati musulmani” and “Dio il bello—la maestà della bellezza,” *Il Convito* 4, no. 1 (May 1907): 19–25.

51

“L’identité suprême,” in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, op. cit.

52

Awhad al-Dīn Balyānī, *Épître sur l’Unicité Absolue*, trans. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1982).

53

“L’identité suprême,” 109–10.

54

See, for instance, the distinction between “the Lord” and “the One” in “L’Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques,” in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 105; or the distinction between “neutral and absolute unity” and “primordial unity” in “Pages dédiées au soleil,” 56.



cal vocabulary and concepts derived directly from Akbarian literature, which permeate his writings.<sup>57</sup> Aguéli's works contain numerous phrases and allusions to the *Futuhat*, such as his exposition of the principle of the union of opposites (*ijtimā' al-diddayn*),<sup>58</sup> or his depiction of perplexity (*hayra*) as a form of knowledge in itself.<sup>59</sup> Aguéli also frequently refers to the doctrine of the Muhammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*),<sup>60</sup> particularly in his articulation with the figure of Adam: "The prophetic spirit is the doctrine of the 'Supreme Identity,' of the One-All in metaphysics, of the Universal Man in psychology, and of Integral Humanity in social organization. It began with Adam and was completed with Muhammad."<sup>61</sup> Another striking instance of the direct influence of Ibn 'Arabi's writings is found in the critique of the figure of Hallaj (858–922). While justifying Ibn 'Arabi's condemnation, Aguéli simultaneously expresses respect and compassion for Hallaj's martyrdom.<sup>62</sup> This stance contrasts with the widespread reverence Hallaj enjoyed in the West at the time. Aguéli's use of the concept of *malāmatī* is also worth noting, as he defines it in three ways: as a well-known historical movement; as a later tariqa in its own right; and as the highest rank in the spiritual hierarchy, a conception specific to Ibn 'Arabi.<sup>63</sup> All evidence indicates that Aguéli deeply understood Ibn 'Arabi's ideas and positions, and that his familiarity with the Shaykh al-akbar's works extended well beyond the limited selection of texts he chose to translate.

As Guermazi has demonstrated, Aguéli's efforts to disseminate Ibn 'Arabi's thought should be viewed as a continuation of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir's project to develop a Muslim intellectual framework rooted in the teachings of the Shaykh al-akbar and capable of addressing the challenges of his time.<sup>64</sup> The Emir's initiatives, such as financing the publication of Ibn 'Arabi's monumental *Futuhat*,<sup>65</sup> served a purpose that extended beyond mere philological or intellectual interest. The same holds true for Aguéli, whose engagement with Ibn 'Arabi was not that of a historian of ideas, but of an activist seeking to present him as a thinker with contemporary significance.<sup>66</sup> While Aguéli's reading of Ibn 'Arabi remains deeply rooted in traditional interpretations and relatively conservative,<sup>67</sup> it simultaneously accentuates the humanistic and universalist dimensions of his thought.

Aguéli's project to revive and disseminate Ibn 'Arabi's thought culminated in creating the *Al-Akbariyya* society. This initiative was closely aligned with his editorial efforts at *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, where the promotion of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas was repeatedly emphasised,<sup>68</sup> and where the society's foundation was first announced in 1907, preceding its formal establishment in 1911.<sup>69</sup> Although *Al-Akbariyya* appears to have held only a single meeting—Aguéli having left Paris for Sweden shortly after its foundation—it is no exaggeration to view it as the founding act of Akbarian studies in the West. Through the influence of one of its signatories, René Guénon, the study and translation of Ibn 'Arabi's works would later flourish among several disciples of Michel Vâlsan and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998).<sup>70</sup> These disciples became prominent figures, either within esoteric circles—such as Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), Martin Lings (1909–2005), and Charles-André Gilis (b. 1934)—or in academic contexts, including Michel Chodkiewicz (1929–2020),<sup>71</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), William Chittick

55

See "Les catégories de l'initiation," op. cit.

56

The text is known under two titles, *Risala fi Tartib al-Tasawwuf wa-Atwarihi* or *al-Salik wa-l-Murid*. See Osman Yahia, *Histoire et classification de l'œuvre d'Ibn 'Arabi: Étude critique* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1964), 2:506 (RG no. 769). Yahia lists two manuscripts, one of which is preserved in Cairo and was likely the source of Aguéli's translation.

57

Aguéli's works are replete with allusions to specific texts from the Sufi tradition. For instance, he references treatises on grammatical symbolism ("Pages dédiées à Mercure," 40). On this topic, see Chiabotti, "Nahw al-qulūb al-ṣaḡīr: La 'grammaire des cœurs' de 'Abd al-Karīm al-Quṣayrī, Présentation et traduction annotée," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 8 (September 2009): 385–402. Similarly, the pages Aguéli dedicates to the origins of languages (*Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, no. 25 [1905]: 2) seem inspired by conceptions of the primordial language (*ṣuryāniyya*) as formulated by the Moroccan Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz Dabbagh (d. 1718), who is also regarded as the progenitor of the 'Illaysh family. See Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:130, and Rocca, introduction, xviii, note 11.

58

"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 56.

59

"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 91. See also my doctoral dissertation: *Hayra: La perplexité chez Ibn 'Arabi; Épistémologie, métaphysique, herméneutique coranique* (PhD diss., UCLouvain, 2023).

60

See "Épître intitulée 'Le Cadeau,'" op. cit.

61

"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 88. See also "Épître intitulée 'Le Cadeau,'" in "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 11, note 3. On the articulation between the figures of Adam and Muhammad in Ibn 'Arabi's prophethology, see Gregory Vandamme, "Some Notes on Ibn 'Arabi's Correlative Prophethology," in *Thought and the Art of Translation: Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata*, ed. Mohamed Rustom, *Islamic History and Civilization* 202 (Boston: Brill, 2023), 97–116.

62

"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 27–28.

63

See "El-Malāmatiyah," op. cit. The tariqa to which Aguéli refers here is likely that of the Melami, which developed in the Ottoman world and was deeply influenced by Ibn 'Arabi's thought. On this subject, see Ballanfat, *Unité et spiritualité: Le courant Melāmi-Hamzevi dans l'Empire ottoman* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013).

64

Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,"

(b. 1943), and Denis Gril (b. 1949). In many respects, the foundation of *Al-Akbariyya* can also be seen as a precursor to the establishment of the *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* (MIAS) in England nearly half a century later.<sup>72</sup>

The name *Al-Akbariyya* introduces a certain ambiguity, as it might suggest a Sufi tariqa. Although Ibn 'Arabi never founded a tariqa in the formal sense, several brotherhoods, particularly in India, have claimed affiliation with him.<sup>73</sup> While *Al-Akbariyya* was primarily an intellectual project—described by Aguéli as “a society for the scientific study of the life and works of Mohyeddin Ibn Arabi,” to promote his thought “in East and West . . . through editions of his works but also through translations and philosophical and rational commentaries on his writings”—the society also had an overtly religious and practical dimension, with plans to construct a mosque in Paris that would serve as a centre for its activities.<sup>74</sup> Membership conditions were primarily doctrinal but also required freedom from the influence of any religious authority. As stated in the statutes: “Each member should: (1) Formally recognise the unity of the Supreme Being; (2) Acknowledge the Prophetic mission of Mohammed; (3) Express affinity for the Shaykhul Akbar Mohyeddin Ibn Arabi and a desire to study his works in order to develop esoterically and commit to develop to the limits of his possibility; (4) Pledge not to be influenced by any clergy that is Christian, Jewish, Magian, Buddhist, or pagan.”<sup>75</sup>

It is worth noting that *Al-Akbariyya* embraced a diversity of esoteric influences while maintaining the exclusivity of Islam in matters of exoterism: “An Akbarite may belong to any school of esoterism . . . yet on the other hand he may not belong to any other exoterism than that of Islam (since Mohyeddin faithfully followed the Prophetic tradition, which is incomprehensible to non-Muslims).”<sup>76</sup> While members of *Al-Akbariyya* remain spiritually and socially free and independent, their common bond is the shari'a: “A member has no further rights over another member, except for what is due by the Shari'a, and no more. Apart from the formal obligations of the statutes, the Shari'a is also the ultimate rule in the social interactions between different members.”<sup>77</sup> This final paragraph of the statutes encapsulates Aguéli's conception of the relationship between individual freedom and the normative framework of Islam, a theme that will now be analysed in detail.

### Islam: “The High Transcendental Distraction”

As we have seen, the traditional context in which Aguéli operates offers valuable insight into the primary orientations of his philosophy. However, to fully appreciate the more original aspects of his thought, it is equally important to consider the influence of his anarchist inclinations and how these were reshaped through his engagement with Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines. While some have interpreted the long history of autonomous pirate communities along the North African coasts as embodying a form of Muslim anarchism,<sup>78</sup> one of the most original aspects of Aguéli's thought lies in his attempt to reconcile anarchist ideals with a deep commitment to the Islamic tradition and its normative framework.<sup>79</sup>

128, 131–34.

65

Ibn 'Arabi, *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*, 4 vols. (Bulaq, Dār al-Kutb al-'Arabiyya al-Kubrā, [1911]). This edition, collated from the autograph manuscript, remains the standard reference to this day, as no complete critical edition has yet been undertaken.

66

See the Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 136.

67

This becomes clearer when comparing Aguéli's interpretation with that of his contemporary Reza Tevfik (1869–1949), who read the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as a treatise on agnosticism, drawing parallels to Spencer's concept of the Unknowable. See Thierry Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes et francs-maçons en islam: Reza Tevfik, penseur ottoman (1868–1949), du soufisme à la confrérie*, Bibliothèque de l'institut français d'études anatoliennes d'Istanbul 37 (Istanbul: Institut français d'études anatoliennes-Maison neuve, 1993).

68

See, for instance, “I grandi iniziati musulmani,” *Il Convito* 4, no. 1 (May 1907): 19–25. An article authored by 'Illaysh first appeared in Arabic under the title “al-Imām al-qutb al-kabīr wa-l-kawkab al-ḍiyā' fī kullī zamān munīr (The Imam and great pole, the bright planet that forever illuminates),” *Il Convito* 4, no. 2 (June 1907): 59–60, before being published in Italian as “Il principe della religione, il gran polo spirituale, la stella brillante in tutti i secoli” (The Prince of the Religion, the Spiritual Grand Pole, the Shining Star in All Ages), *Il Convito* 4, no. 5–6 (September–December 1907): 154–57. See Paul-André Claudel, “Ivan Aguéli's Second Period in Egypt, 1902–9: The Intellectual Spheres around *Il Convito*/Al-Nadi,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 111.

69

“Miscellanea/Notizie,” *Il Convito* 4, no. 3–4 (July 1907): 130–31. See also Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33, and Sedgwick, “The Significance of Ivan Aguéli,” 165.

70

It should be noted that Schuon was at times surprisingly critical of Ibn 'Arabi, accusing him of an excessive “exotericism,” see *Le soufisme: Voile et quintessence* (Paris: Dervy, 1980).

71

Chodkiewicz appears to be the only one among these authors to mention Aguéli by name, in the foreword to his *Le Sceau des saints*, 13.

72

Remarkably, studies on the history of MIAS fail to mention this precedent. Taji-Farouki includes a lengthy note—albeit containing errors, such as the claim that Aguéli outlived 'Illaysh and changed tariqa after his death—that recognises Aguéli's pioneering role and its continuation by Guénon's collaborators. However, she makes no mention of the creation of *Al-Akbariyya*. See Suha Taji-Fa-

Aguéli's engagement with anarchist thought emerged almost simultaneously with his interest in Islam. It is recorded that he met Kropotkin in 1891 and borrowed a copy of the Qur'an from the Swedish National Library in 1892.<sup>80</sup> By 1893, he was already quoting the Qur'an in his correspondence and approaching the challenges he faced with an unshakable faith in the God of Islam.<sup>81</sup> However, despite the presence of anarchist thinkers and activists in Egypt during his first visit in 1894,<sup>82</sup> Aguéli showed no interest in them, gravitating instead toward the Sufi circles and scholarly milieu of Al-Azhar. These environments, however, were far from apolitical: Shaykh 'Illyash and his father were actively engaged in the politics of their time, particularly through their involvement in the 'Urabi revolt, in which several Italian anarchists also participated.<sup>83</sup>

Aguéli's engagement with the political context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt aligns with the efforts of Shaykh 'Illyash, who aimed to provide an alternative to the reformist projects of Afghani (1839–1897), 'Abduh (1849–1905), and Rida (1865–1935).<sup>84</sup> These prominent figures were the targets of several scathing critiques by Aguéli in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*. He described them as “the Calvinists of Islam,” whose project aimed to “reduce Islam to a mere police regulation” and could only result in draining the religion of its spiritual essence. They were, in his view, “the fiercest adversaries of Ibn Arabi.”<sup>85</sup> However, Aguéli's role extended beyond merely promoting Shaykh 'Illyash's political cause. His writings reveal an integration of his anarchist ideals with the Sufi vision of Islam espoused by his master.<sup>86</sup> This vision continues to resonate in Aguéli's later contributions to *La Gnose*, even though these writings addressed an entirely different context.<sup>87</sup>

Ultimately, Aguéli appears to have set aside political activism in favour of a project focused on spiritual and intellectual engagement. This shift is made explicit in the announcement of the creation of *Al-Akbariyya*: “The Society will not be concerned with political issues, whatever they are, and will never emerge outside the philosophical, religious, or theosophical circle on which it is based.”<sup>88</sup> Although his contributions to *La Gnose* do not address the political concerns central to some of his articles in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*—which directly engaged with the situation in the Middle East and the relations between Muslim countries and colonial powers—they nonetheless reflect a consistent outlook, rooted in a staunch defence of individual freedom and a vision of Islam as a metaphysical worldview with universal significance.

The vision of Islam advocated by Aguéli is rooted in the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi and in the interpretative tradition inherited from Emir 'Abd al-Qadir and Murtada al-Zabidi.<sup>89</sup> It rests on a deliberate tension between the universal scope of Islam and its specificities. Faithful to the Arabic etymology and its traditional interpretation, Aguéli explains that Islam consists of surrendering to God, “that is, to follow one's destiny submissively.” In light of the Sufi theological anthropology and its concept of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), the ultimate destiny of every human being is to attain the highest degree of universality.<sup>90</sup> The Islam depicted by Aguéli is therefore “neither a mixed religion nor a new religion,” but rather “the primitive and ancient faith” of humanity restored by the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>91</sup>

rouki, *Beshara and Ibn 'Arabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2007), 345–47, note 106. Isobel Jeffrey-Street, while discussing Guénon's role in spreading Ibn 'Arabi's thought in the introduction to her work, does not mention Aguéli at all. See Isobel Jeffrey-Street, *Ibn 'Arabi and the Contemporary West: Beshara and the Ibn 'Arabi Society* (Sheffield-Oakville: Equinox, 2012), 7–10.

73

For example, a branch of the Qadiriyya. See Octave Depont and Xavier Coppolani, *Les confréries religieuses musulmanes* (Paris: Maisonneuve-Geuthner, 1897): 319–20. In a letter dated November 8, 1950, Guénon claimed that Aguéli had informed him of the existence of an Akbarian tariqa in southern India; see Rocca, introduction, xxiii, note 23. On the close relationship between the dissemination of the Qadiriyya and the thought of Ibn 'Arabi, see my forthcoming article: “Devotion and Metaphysics in a Litany Ascribed to 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī,” in *The “I” of the Heart: Texts and Studies in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Mohamed Rustom and Muhammad U. Faruque (Boston-Leiden: Brill, 2025).

74

See the reproduction of these statutes in Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33.

75

See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33.

76

Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33. This esoteric inclusivity is illustrated by the suggested reading list included as an annex to the statutes. It begins with a translation of Bukhari's hadith compilation but continues with the *Zohar*, Taoist writings, and the *Gita*. Notably, in the initial *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* article announcing the society's project, Aguéli even asserts that, given the political-religious context where he accuses Arab Jesuits of working to undermine Islam, “one can therefore be atheist and Akbari together, but one cannot be a Jesuit.” See “Miscellanea/Notizie,” *Il Convito*, no. 2 (May 1907): 130–31, and Marchi, “Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics,” 121.

77

See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33.

78

See Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey), *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs & European Renegades* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995).

79

Fiscella, who provides a brief history of the intersections between Islam and anarchism, identifies Aguéli as the first figure to practically unite the two. See Anthony Fiscella, *Varieties of Islamic Anarchism: A Brief Introduction* (n.p.: Alpine Anarchist Production, 2014). Surprisingly, a recent essay exploring possible connections between Islam and anarchism makes no mention of Aguéli. See

Aguéli's twofold approach to tradition is again fully evident in how he articulates this vision of Islam with the historical Islamic tradition itself. On one hand, he clarifies: "It is well understood that Islam, in its true abstract and metaphysical sense, must not be confused with the political or ethnic communities of the East."<sup>92</sup> At the same time, he affirms: "Even in its exoteric form, Islam has always rejected the notion of being a new religion; it has consistently claimed the title of *Dīn al-Fiṭrah*, that is, the Primordial Religion, the one at the origin of Humanity."<sup>93</sup> Aguéli further adds that while Islam represents "the golden mean and balance between Judaism and Christianity," the religion closest to it in essence is Taoism. He supports this claim by referencing a hadith in which the Prophet is reported to have said: "Seek knowledge, even if it be in China." Such an inclusive vision of Islam did not originate with Aguéli himself and can notably be found in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi and Emir 'Abd al-Qadir.<sup>94</sup> What is particularly striking, however, is that in a letter from 1894, prior to his formal conversion to Islam, Aguéli already appears to regard the faith of Muslims as closer to his monotheistic ideal: "What my faith consists of. What is Christianity? . . . Belief in a supreme being which is above all else, Allah . . . Monotheism is the essence of Christ's teachings, so significant that the faithful Muslim is more Christian than most Christians."<sup>95</sup> Here again, Aguéli's fundamental intuitions appear to have found a natural home in the Akbarian vision of Islam. This suggests that what was initially personal and intimate to him eventually aligned with the framework of the tradition in which he would later situate himself.

The contemplative and metaphysical approach to Islam formulated by Aguéli is rooted in the theophanic perspective of Ibn 'Arabi, which perceives the world as a veil that simultaneously conceals and reveals Divine reality. Viewed as independent entities, things are mere illusions or idols: "The tangible Universe is nothing more than an immense collective, hereditary, and deep-seated hallucination."<sup>96</sup> However, when seen from the correct perspective, these same things become manifestations and revelations of the One God: "I consider the world to be a book of God, like any other. Its signs are everywhere, and we are among them."<sup>97</sup> The Islam presented by Aguéli is therefore not a rejection of the world but rather a way of reintegrating things into their proper perspective: "When contemplated in isolation, they may appear real, but this is an illusion. However, this illusion is not diabolical, as certain schools claim. On the contrary, it is so sacred that religion obliges us to believe in it under pain of heresy and posthumous punishment."<sup>98</sup>

The relationship with God is what allows breaking free from the illusory aspect of the world. According to Aguéli, it is "the high transcendental distraction" through which human beings can liberate themselves from their conditioning: "What I place above all else, what is everything to me, that is my God. God is what distracts me from all that is not Him. They who do not know how to gather themselves together on any given point of existence, they alone are the atheists. For faith, in short, is nothing but the high transcendental distraction."<sup>99</sup> All the ritual practices and norms of Islam ultimately converge on this quest for unification: "Islam, as a religion, is the path of unity and totality."<sup>100</sup>

Mohamed Abdou, *Islam and Anarchism: Relationships and Resonances* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

80

See Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 83.

81

"Praise is due to Allah forever! 'After difficulty comes relief' (Qur'an 94:5–6). Constraint and liberation actually lead to the same result for the one who is blessed, just as they lead to the same result for the one who is cursed." Letter to Richard Bergh, October 10, 1893, cited in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:188, and in Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 84.

82

Fiscella highlights figures such as Shibli Shumayyil (1850–1917), author of what is likely the first anarchist text in Arabic, as well as the Free and Popular University group in Alexandria, see Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 86–87.

83

See Paonessa, "La contestation de la 'réforme' en Égypte," op. cit.

84

Shaykh 'Illaysh's opposition to 'Abduh was particularly forceful, as he prevented him from teaching at Al-Azhar and had his turban removed, to the extent that 'Abduh was compelled to teach with a cudgel by his side for self-defence. See Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:135. The 'Illaysh family also maintained close ties with the renowned Palestinian scholar and polymath Yusuf Nabahani (1850–1932), a staunch opponent of 'Abduh's modernist reformism. See Francesco Chiabotti, "Yūsuf b. Ismā'īl al-Nabāhānī (m. 1932), *adīb soufi au temps de la Réforme*," in *Adab and Modernity: A "Civilising Process"?* (Sixteenth–Twenty-First Century), ed. Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020), 506–07.

85

"La moschea 'Umberto,'" *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, 4, no. 3–4 (July–August 1907): 103–11. See also Claudel, "Ivan Aguéli's Second Period in Egypt," 111–13, and Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 123. On the political-religious context of Egypt during this period, the dynamics involving Al-Azhar scholars, Sufi circles, and the 'Illaysh family in particular, see Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London-New York: Tauris, 2009).

86

See Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 115–26.

87

The political orientation of the esoteric circles associated with *La Gnose* stands in clear contrast to anarchism, as it often advocates for societal organisation based on spiritual hierarchies. See, for instance, the article by F.-Ch. Barlet, "Principes de sociologie synthétique," in *L'Initiation* 22 (1894): 97–134, which outlines an ideal form of government structured around various institutional organs,

In his *Notes sur l'islam*, published in 1902, Aguéli outlines a definition of Islam grounded in this unifying experience, integrating the ritual and doctrinal dimensions of the religion to sustain it: “*Islam is above all a mental state*,<sup>101</sup> which results from worship that is at once sincere, hieratic, and ritualistic. Doctrinal details are meaningless for one who does not practice.”<sup>102</sup> For Aguéli, ritual practice serves as an “insulator,” protecting and supporting the effort to distract oneself from the world: “Religion strengthens the Muslim by separating him from everything that is not God, leaving him alone with the force of forces. *Islam is a great insulator*, and the more perfect the isolation, the more strength is gained . . . The one who prays has God before them and the world behind them.”<sup>103</sup> For Aguéli, religious norms are thus tools for inner emancipation rather than externally imposed rules: “*Islam is a discipline that emancipates*. Both regional and universal, it places one’s homeland in the heart of man, preparing him to feel at home everywhere.”<sup>104</sup>

This principle of personal freedom, which Aguéli sees as fundamental to the Islamic religion, allows it to dispense with any formal organisation of the sacred: “Islam is the only religion in the world that can do without clergy or priestly institutions in any form while remaining firmly rooted in the foundations of Tradition.”<sup>105</sup> The essence of Islam, according to Aguéli, lies in the personal, inner experience of the practitioner, rather than in any external normative framework to which they must conform. Even the theological doctrines of Islam, he argues, aim to preserve the mystery of divine presence: “One cannot explain to the ordinary man how God does everything, how He is everywhere, and how each person carries Him within themselves.”<sup>106</sup> The ritual and normative framework of Islam must not, therefore, replace the divine presence or act as an intermediary between the believer and God. Instead, it should serve to prepare the Muslim to realise this presence and to act accordingly: “One must avoid anything resembling a clergy, even remotely . . . Heaven is like nature, which always answers truthfully when questioned properly, but only then.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, for Aguéli, the essence of Islam is not located in its formal manifestations but in the experience of the informal reality that these forms are meant to facilitate. Even the Qur’an itself is not a necessary condition for the existence of Islam; rather, it is the reality of Islam that constitutes the necessary condition for the Qur’an: “Let us suppose for a moment that all copies of the Sublime Recitation could be destroyed, and all believers killed to the last: Islam would still live, for its homeland is not of this world. God does not need us, but we need Him.”<sup>108</sup>

Aguéli’s radically metaphysical approach to Islam, however, is not divorced from its formal substratum. Instead, it seeks to integrate the religion’s doctrinal and normative elements as instruments for communicating this perspective: “Formalism is obligatory; it is not superstition but a universal language.” While “universal intelligence” is the heart of the Islamic experience, its formal aspects are nonetheless akin to a circulatory system, allowing this intelligence to flow through human society: “Since universality is the principle and *raison d’être* of Islam, and since, on the other hand, language is the means of communication among rational beings, it follows that the exoteric formulas are as important to the religious organism as arteries are to

explicitly aiming to “save our societies from death and anarchy” (Barlet, “Principes de sociologie synthétique,” 107). On the political implications of Aguéli’s writings and the continuity between his publications in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* and *La Gnose*, see Hatina, “Where East Meets West,” op. cit.

88

“Miscellanea/Notizie,” *Il Convito*, no. 2 (May 1907): 130–31. See Marchi, “Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics,” 121.

89

Traces of a metaphysical and universalist conception of the notion of religion (*dīn*) in Islam are already evident in Murtaḍa al-Zabīdī’s thought. See Stefan Reichmuth, “The Arabic Concept of *Dīn* and Islamic Religious Sciences in the 18th Century: The Case of Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791),” *Oriens* 44, no. 1–2 (2016): 94–115.

90

“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 88–89.

91

“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 101.

92

“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 63, note 32. Notably, this assertion—that “Islam must not be confused with Muslims”—can already be found in the early issues of *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*: “Perché sono disprezzati i mussulmani. Non bisogna confondere l’Islam con i Mussulmani,” *Il Convito*, no. 7 (July 17, 1904). See Marchi, “Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics,” 118.

93

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 23.

94

See the recent study by Faris Abdelhadi, *Ibn ‘Arabī’s Religious Pluralism: Levels of Inclusivity* (London: Routledge, 2024). ‘Abd al-Qadir expresses this view in the following terms: “Religion is one, and it is so by the agreement of the prophets. For they differ in their opinions only regarding certain details and rules. Indeed, they resemble men who have the same father, each of them having a different mother.” *Rappel à l’intelligent, avis à l’indifférent*, cited in Guerhazi, “Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,” 130.

95

Letter to von Hausen, April 24, 1894, cited in Sorgenfrei, “The Great Aesthetic Inspiration,” 11.

96

“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 56.

97

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 31.

98

“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 56.

99

“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 57.

the animal body.”<sup>109</sup> The metaphysical reality of Islam is therefore never entirely separate from its formal manifestations but remains latent within each of them: “As a universal religion, [Islam] has degrees, but each of these degrees is truly Islam, meaning that any aspect of Islam reveals the same principles.”<sup>110</sup> As Aguéli succinctly puts it, Islam is thus “esotero-exoteric.”<sup>111</sup>

For Aguéli, the fullest expression of this metaphysical and integrative perspective of Islam is found in the Sufi teachings of the Akbarian tradition: “The ‘Supreme Identity’ (*Wahdatul-wujūd* = the identity of Existence) is based on the perfect accord between the external and the internal.”<sup>112</sup> Aguéli critiques the conventional understanding of mysticism, which he considers inadequate for describing Akbarian Sufism. The latter, he argues, is genuinely metaphysical—or, in his own terminology, “mathematical”: “The lucid mysticism of the ‘Supreme Identity’ should not be confused with those schools of past and present times that are commonly referred to as mysticism or neo-mysticism, etc. We replace Theology with Mathematics.”<sup>113</sup> However, the Sufi spiritual path necessarily unfolds within the formal framework of Islam, which guarantees its metaphysical orientation and universal scope: “The formula of *Et-Tawhîd*, or monotheism, is a common *sharā’ite* principle. The meaning you ascribe to this formula is your personal affair, as it pertains to your Sufism. Any deductions you may draw from this formula are more or less valid, provided they do not abolish its literal meaning; for doing so would destroy the Islamic unity, that is, its universality.”<sup>114</sup> The Sufi spiritual teachings presented by Aguéli thus align both with the principles of Islamic religious norms and with the inalienable personal freedom that underpins spiritual life: “The true Sheikh is not the one who moulds the aspirant in his own image, but rather the one who, on the contrary, develops the *morîd* (the aspirant) according to the will of God . . . You believe you are walking in the footsteps of the Sheikh, whereas, in reality, you are following your own path, the path that is personal to you according to divine destiny.”<sup>115</sup> This conception of Sufi spiritual education corresponds to that of Ibn ‘Arabi, as expressed in his famous maxim: “It is through God that one comes to know the masters, not through the masters that one comes to know God.”<sup>116</sup>

### “Besides, Who Is Free?": An Anarchist View of Shari‘a

The way Aguéli managed to transform his anarchist aspirations through his engagement with the doctrines of Ibn ‘Arabi is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the conception of shari‘a. Fiscella has noted that Aguéli “never described anarchism in Islamic terms nor Islam in anarchist terms,” and suggested that his approach “conformed to a pattern of people from Europe who adopted individualistic interpretations of foreign traditions.”<sup>117</sup> Hatina asserted that he never successfully reconciled his anarchist ideal of freedom with the constraining framework of tradition, and that his thought was thus riddled with contradictions.<sup>118</sup> As we have seen, Aguéli actually operated within the framework of a well-established tradition, and his conception of Sufism fully integrated the Islamic religious norm. Furthermore, while Aguéli presented Islam as a religion without clergy, he held the notion

- 100  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 89.
- 101  
Aguéli himself emphasises these definitions.
- 102  
“Notes sur l’Islam,” in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 164.
- 103  
“Notes sur l’Islam,” 165.
- 104  
“Notes sur l’Islam,” 164.
- 105  
“L’Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques,” in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 106.
- 106  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 89.
- 107  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 88.
- 108  
“Notes sur l’Islam,” 161.
- 109  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 90.
- 110  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 89.
- 111  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 101.
- 112  
“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 26.
- 113  
“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 60–61, note 26. It should be noted that this conception of mysticism precedes his engagement with the Akbarian tradition, as is already evident in a letter from 1893, where he discusses his interest in “so-called Mysticism, which under closer inspection is found to be non-mysticism, but instead the chemistry and mathematics of the thought and will, or rather chemistry and physiology.” Letter to Bianchini, February 3, 1893, cited in Sorgenfrei, “The Great Aesthetic Inspiration,” 5.
- 114  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 90.
- 115  
“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 33.
- 116  
Ibn ‘Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, 2:366. See also my forthcoming article: “L’éducation spirituelle et le “maître imaginaire” selon Ibn ‘Arabī dans son *K. al-Ajwiba al-‘arabiyya fī sharḥ al-naṣā’ih al-yūsufiyya*,” in *Sainteté et héritage prophétique en islam: Études sur Ibn al-‘Arabī et l’histoire de la sainteté à la mémoire de Michel Chodkiewicz*, ed. Denis Gril (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2025).

of tradition itself in the highest regard and considered the instruction of a spiritual master to be an indispensable element of that tradition.<sup>119</sup> One might therefore ask what remains of the anarchist ideal in Aguéli's writings after his integration into the Akbarian tradition.

The ideal of freedom, as we have seen, lies at the heart of Aguéli's approach. However, all indications suggest that his conception of freedom underwent a profound transformation as he deepened his understanding of the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi. As illustrated by the title of a 2021 exhibition at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, Aguéli's quest for freedom was grounded in questioning the very notion of freedom itself: "Besides, who is free?"<sup>120</sup> Rather than seeking liberation from sociopolitical structures, the emancipation advocated by Aguéli aimed to liberate the individual from their own conditioning and emotions: "Sentimentality is a kind of inner idolatry, in the same way as the idol is collective sentimentality in tangible form."<sup>121</sup> Aguéli thus denounces, from the vantage point of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical perspective, the illusory freedom that imprisons the individual within this sentimentality. Chief among these, he argues, is the freedom claimed by so-called free thinkers, whom he accuses of being more religious than they realise: "Free thinkers should have been our brothers; but, lacking breadth, they stopped halfway and, succumbing to the obscure instinct of the 'religious animal,' they established themselves as pontiffs like the others, only without the art."<sup>122</sup>

Aguéli's ideal of freedom is therefore a quest for self-liberation—a struggle against the limitations and conditionings of the individual perspective—rather than a struggle to free oneself from others. True to his principle of distraction, any focus on an object from this individual perspective is, for Aguéli, an attachment to a form of "fetish" or idol: "This is how I understand a modern monotheism: fanatical towards oneself, tolerant towards others . . . It is a balance within the self and not outside of it. Whoever has his centre of gravity exclusively in exterior things is a fetishist."<sup>123</sup> This radical interiorisation of the process of emancipation aligns with Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of practical virtues. In the second section of his *Futuhāt*, dealing with ethics (*faṣl al-mu'āmalāt*), each chapter dedicated to a particular virtue is followed by another discussing its renunciation (*tark*), which entails the internal reintegration of the objectivities of ethical consciousness.<sup>124</sup> Aguéli appears to draw inspiration from this logic when discussing the notion of humility: "It means nothing to be humble or not, as we are all nothingness. They have turned humility into a virtue, a goal, whereas it is merely a means, an exercise, and a form of training. It is just a small station on the journey, where one stops as needed. Vanity is foolishness. Misplaced humility can be equally so."<sup>125</sup>

Another fundamental aspect of the path to emancipation advocated by Aguéli seems to diverge from anarchist ideals: the recognition of a natural hierarchy to which one must conform. Faithful to Qur'anic cosmology and the doctrinal developments of Ibn 'Arabi and his commentators, Aguéli emphasises the polarisation of reality, described as a "world of opposites" (*ālam al-aḍḍād*). The hierarchical order of this world, fragmented by rational thought, must be reconstituted by the spiritual intelligence of the heart, which alone is capable of unifying and ordering what has been divided.<sup>126</sup> Aguéli draws on an expres-

117

Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 93.

118

Hatina, "Ivan Aguéli's Humanist Vision," 148.

119

The context of Egypt in which Aguéli was situated also holds significance in this regard. While Shaykh 'Ilaysh was renowned for his zeal in observing the Sunna and the Maliki tradition (see Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:131–32), the dynamics of Egypt's modern scholars often ran counter to Ottoman efforts to systematise and hierarchise religious norms. See Chih and Mayeur-Jaouen, introduction, 35–36, 52–53.

120

This title is drawn from the conclusion of a letter Aguéli wrote to the Finnish painter Werner von Hausen on July 14, 1894: "*Du reste, qui est libre?*" See <https://www.nationalmuseum.se/en/du-reste-qui-est-libre-vem-ar-forresten-fri>, accessed Oct. 30, 2024.

121

"L'Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques," 106.

122

"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 26–27.

123

Letter to von Hausen, 1894, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 128.

124

Ibn 'Arabi, *Al-Futuhāt al-makkiyya*, 2:139–213.

125

"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 92.

126

"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 32.

sion dear to Ibn ‘Arabi, defining wisdom (*hikma*) as “the art of placing each thing in its rightful place.”<sup>127</sup> This ontological hierarchy finds its counterpart in Aguéli’s vision of a social hierarchy, one not based on privileges but rather on the responsibilities that wisdom demands in proportion to its realisation: “The Arab social principle is both fraternal and aristocratic. The wealthy, the learned, and the strong bear duties toward the poor, the ignorant, and the weak.”<sup>128</sup> The ideal society described by Aguéli is thus far from being anarchist. On the contrary, he characterises it as an “Islamic aristo-democracy.”<sup>129</sup>

The notion of shari‘a takes on a unique meaning in Aguéli’s thought. It integrates the preservation of radical individual freedom with the maintenance of the ontological hierarchy that serves as its necessary condition. In this sense, Aguéli’s conception of shari‘a encapsulates the entirety of his spiritual and intellectual approach. He refers to what he sees as both the foundation and the ultimate aim of the shari‘a as “lordly freedom” (*liberté dominicale*), in the sense of sovereign or divine freedom. This freedom is “original, innate, extra-temporal” and always exists in the individual: “It cannot be destroyed, it is inevitable, as it constitutes the reason for each person’s existence.”<sup>130</sup> According to Aguéli, the shari‘a seeks to preserve and cultivate this freedom, not to restrict it: “The Law that acknowledges this secret, as well as its inaccessible, inviolable, and incommunicable nature, guarantees the most precious of humanity’s four cardinal freedoms, for it is the expression of the highest form of life.”<sup>131</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Aguéli draws direct inspiration from Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of the shari‘a: “Mohyiddin ibn Arabi refers to exclusivists—that is, fanatics and those astray—as those who exhort you to be like them and do as they do in all things, failing to respect the legitimate freedom of the individual. Everything comes from God: the disbelief of the faithful as well as the faith of the believer. Any zeal outside of public matters is an inconsiderate act, committed by those with a crude understanding of God’s power.”<sup>132</sup> For Aguéli, the shari‘a functions as a bridge between the most intimate and irreducibly personal aspects of each individual—“I say that the light of the same Sun is not the same for everyone”<sup>133</sup>—and that which is necessarily universal and communal. This ability to make the shared law a pathway for personal realisation is, for him, “a distinctive feature of Islam” and “the central point of the idea of Muhammad the Prophet.”<sup>134</sup>

The junction between the individual and collective dimensions of the shari‘a is achieved through another concept employed by Aguéli: that of the “average man” (*l’homme moyen*). While this term appears to be borrowed from the social sciences of his time, particularly the statistical sociology of the Belgian scientist Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874),<sup>135</sup> Aguéli assigns it a completely different meaning. Hatina errs in suggesting that Aguéli viewed the formalism and observance of the shari‘a as pertaining to the average man in a pejorative sense of mediocrity, in contrast to a select few elevated individuals with access to esoteric knowledge.<sup>136</sup> In Aguéli’s thought, the average man represents an abstract reality that does not pertain to specific individuals but rather encompasses humanity as a whole, uniting all classes within the spiritual and social hierarchy: “The fusion of the elite and the common, the Islamic aristo-democracy, can be achieved without violence

127  
“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 45.

128  
“Notes sur l’Islam,” 164.

129  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 86.

130  
“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 121–31.

131  
“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 63. These four cardinal freedoms find their fullest expression in different contexts according to Aguéli: divine freedom (*liberté dominicale*) in Islam, political freedom in Celtic England, intellectual freedom in France, and sentimental freedom in Italy, “Pages dédiées au Soleil,” note 32.

132  
“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 31. For more on Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of the Shari‘a, see Samer Dajani, *Sufis and Sharī‘a: The Forgotten School of Mercy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

133  
“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 46.

134  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 86.

135  
See Maurice Halbwachs, *La théorie de l’homme moyen: Essai sur Quetelet et la statistique morale* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1913).

136  
Hatina, “Ivan Aguéli’s Humanist Vision,” 147.



and without promiscuity thanks to the specifically Islamic institution of a conventional type of humanity, which I will call, for lack of a better term, the average man or human normality . . . This type is always fictitious and never real. It serves as a neutral and impersonal insulator that facilitates certain pre-arranged and regulated relationships.”<sup>137</sup> The average man thus functions as an insulator between individuals, much as religion itself acts as an insulator between the presence of God and the world, as previously discussed. It encompasses every individual without exception and provides the shari‘a with its universal dimension: “Being no one and everyone, without any concrete reality, always the rule, never the exception, it is nothing more than a universal standard of measure for all conceivable social, moral, and religious rights and duties . . . Through it, the social state of the Arab-Semitic tribe, which is an ideal of justice, integration, cooperation, and solidarity, can expand over the entire Universe.”<sup>138</sup>

In this way, the shari‘a formally preserves that which remains resolutely informal within human consciousness: “The formalism, the institution of the average man, allows the primitive man to achieve universality without losing any of those precious characteristics attached to the primordial, quasi-paradisiacal Adamism. It is precisely the ‘average man’ who is the object of the *Shariyah* or sacred law of Islam.”<sup>139</sup> The breadth of shari‘a norms is justified by the diversity of individuals. Because the shari‘a applies to the average man, who synthesises all individuals, it is thus a practical implementation of the notion of the Integral or Perfect Man: “Certain prescriptions of the Shari‘a may appear absurd in the eyes of Europeans. However, they have their raison d’être. A universal religion must take into account all intellectual and moral levels . . . The average man establishes around each person a kind of neutrality that guarantees all individualities while obliging them to work for all of humanity. History knows no other practical form of integral humanity.”<sup>140</sup> Due to this universal scope, the shari‘a is not a closed and immutable corpus of norms. On the contrary, it necessarily evolves alongside the development of the average man throughout history, requiring the ongoing effort of adaptation and commentary that constitutes the broader Islamic tradition.<sup>141</sup>

The concept of the average man thus enables Aguéli to reconcile the normative prescriptions of the shari‘a with the radical freedom of each individual. On one hand, the shari‘a concerns only the common and formal aspects of human existence.<sup>142</sup> On the other, it allows each individual to recognise as illusory their attachment to the formal particularities that constitute them: “There is no difference between you and others. You are the others, all the others, all things. All things and all the others are you. We only reflect one another . . . If, regarding a theft, you cannot understand that you are both the thief and the victim; that, in a murder, you are both the murderer and the slain . . . you would be better off not studying esotericism, for you are wasting your time . . . I am not saying that all humans are the same, but I am saying that they are all ‘the same.’ ”<sup>143</sup>

The shared framework of the shari‘a enables the individual to transcend the illusion of collective relations and to transform them into a means of spiritual conversion: “The doctrine of identity and unity is more developed in Islam than elsewhere. Its precious esotero-exoteric

137  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 86–87.

138  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 86–87.

139  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 87–88.

140  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 87–88.

141  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 87–88.S

142  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 98.

143  
“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 98.

quality stems above all from its conception of collective reality as an indispensable agent in transforming personal reality into human Universality or prophetic reality.”<sup>144</sup> True to Ibn ‘Arabi’s vision, Aguéli holds that the reality of the shari‘a is esoteric, insofar as it aims to distract the Muslim’s inner self from an illusory relationship with the world: “It may seem strange that obedience to laws can yield such a brilliant result, but one must not forget that the law being obeyed is not man’s law but God’s law, the ‘Sharia.’ Yet it is primarily a matter of conforming to its esoteric meaning, which is a magnificent doctrine of universality and hieratism . . . Respect for the rights of others—persons, beasts, or things—not out of fear of men or devils but out of love for God, universal harmony, and cosmic responsibility, constitutes the very spirit of the ‘Supreme Identity’ or Arab-Muslim esotericism.”<sup>145</sup> In other words, the shari‘a enables humanity to integrate into the ontological hierarchy and to conform to it by using the world as a means rather than an end in itself: “The sacred Law of Islam, the ‘Sharia’ (= the great Path, the exterior Path) encompasses material life with rites, ceremonies and various considerations and obligations, solely to teach us that things exist, how they exist and the proper measure of respect due to their existence. The canonical laws of Islam are, without doubt, a social order, but above all they are a magnificent treatise on symbolism which assigns each thing to its proper place in the universal hierarchy.”<sup>146</sup>

Aguéli does not refer to an abstract or idealised vision of the shari‘a, as he integrates the practical application of Islamic jurisprudence into his conception. Islamic law as exercised by the jurists represents for him the enactment of God’s rights: “The doctors of the Shariyah are always infallible when they speak ‘ex cathedra,’ in the name of the Law and the Tradition, because they then participate in the infallibility of the Doctrine itself.”<sup>147</sup> Aguéli repeatedly defends the democratic and liberal nature of Islamic legal practice, describing it as a flexible system that rests on individual consent and offers a wide array of accommodations.<sup>148</sup> This flexibility inherent in Islamic norms means that they are never formulated in an ideal or synthetic manner, as they must necessarily adapt to those unaware of their true nature: “The heaviest tax in Islam is not the tithe, but democracy and respect for certain rights of ignorance.”<sup>149</sup>

For Aguéli, the shari‘a constitutes the most universal path to emancipation. Far from imposing limits on human freedom, it offers a framework for transcending individual conditioning, allowing one to rediscover the informal and radically free dimension of existence. In other words, it is within and through the shari‘a that Aguéli locates the realisation of perfect freedom: “We struggle through a religious duty imposed upon us, which we fulfil with humble joy.”<sup>150</sup>

## Conclusion

This brief overview of Ivan Aguéli’s philosophy has shown how the various elements of Islamic tradition he engages with are deeply intertwined with his ideal of freedom. Furthermore, by situating Aguéli’s thought within the continuity of the Akbarian tradition, we can interpret his work—despite its originality and eclecticism—as an expres-

144

“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 99–100.

145

“Épître intitulée ‘Le Cadeau,’ ” in *Écrits pour la Gnose*, 16, note 7.

146

“Pages dédiées au Soleil,” 56.

147

“El-Malâmatiyah,” in *Écrits pour la Gnose*, 67–70.

148

See “La moschea ‘Umberto,’ ” op. cit., and “L’Universalité en l’Islam,” in *Écrits pour la Gnose*, 89. See also Hatina, “Ivan Aguéli’s Humanist Vision,” 141–42.

149

“Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 27–28.

150

“Notes sur l’Islam,” 161.

sion of that lineage, contributing to the ongoing efforts of his predecessors to revive and disseminate Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings.

The case of Aguéli reveals the hermeneutical potential and adaptability of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas. His philosophy illustrates—sometimes disconcertingly, yet always provocatively—how Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought continued to invigorate Islamic philosophy well into the twentieth century. The defining characteristic of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought that Aguéli cultivates and develops lies in its capacity to structure itself around paradoxes that balance the informal with the formal, the universal with the particular, and the collective with the individual. In this way, Aguéli’s philosophy reflects what Thomas Bauer has identified as the “culture of ambiguity” inherent in the Islamic tradition.<sup>151</sup> The interplay between the framework of tradition and personal creativity, or between religious law and the quest for freedom, runs throughout his work, revealing its deeper significance and broader reach.

While Aguéli’s philosophy ultimately operates within a metaphysical perspective, it also incorporates practical considerations and social and political reflections. As we have seen, the formal and normative framework of the Islamic religion is neither relativised nor undermined by Aguéli. Instead, it is elucidated and justified within this metaphysical perspective. Although Aguéli’s thought significantly pushes the boundaries of Islamic norms, he never openly criticises traditional structures or institutions.<sup>152</sup> However, one should not conclude that Aguéli merely reinforces established religious authorities, much less than he endorses the various attempts at politicising the Islamic religion that were prevalent in his time. For him, the spiritual authority of Islam is irreducible to any form of institution or clergy and must, in this regard, remain independent of historical contingencies. He vehemently opposes efforts to appropriate Islamic doctrines for political purposes, particularly when such appropriations lead to conflict.<sup>153</sup> Aguéli’s activism is fundamentally spiritual and metaphysical. For him, if there is a Jihad to be waged, it is the struggle for spiritual emancipation and the realisation of Islam’s metaphysical perspective. He contends that the colonisation of the Muslim world by Western powers became possible precisely because this supreme Jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*) had been neglected, and Muslims had failed to convey this intellectual and spiritual vision to the West.<sup>154</sup>

Aguéli’s philosophy also reveals the paradoxical dimension of the question of universality. Islam is for him “the best spiritual communication agent that exists,” for it is capable of preserving cultural diversity and particularities by integrating them into its metaphysical perspective.<sup>155</sup> While the expansion of modern Western civilisation has established only a “material international” order, Aguéli argues that Islam has consistently revitalised the spiritual life of nations.<sup>156</sup> True to this perspective, Aguéli does not oppose Islam and the West. On the contrary, he sees the political and ideological polarisations of his time as a “war of evil against evil,” arguing that only the union of East and West can bring about the advent of an authentic “kingdom of God.”<sup>157</sup> While Aguéli can, in many respects, be considered one of the progenitors of the Traditionalist movement, his conception of Islam’s universal dimension stands apart from the views of figures with a far more pronounced influence. Lipton’s analysis of the Traditionalist interpreta-

151

Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel, 2011). See the English translation, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

152

Hatina, “Ivan Aguéli’s Humanist Vision,” 147.

153

See “Pages dédiées à Mercure,” 26–27.

154

“Notes sur l’Islam,” 163.

155

“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 88.

156

“L’Universalité en l’Islam,” 88; “Notes sur l’Islam,” 164.

157

“Notes sur l’Islam,” 162. In an unpublished text titled *Les Européens et les Musulmans*, Aguéli emphasises the importance of distinguishing “between Europe and Europe.” See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 121.

tions of Ibn 'Arabi fails to account for the paradoxes and structural tensions inherent in Aguéli's interpretations. He sees Aguéli's adherence to the framework of the shari'a as evidence of Islamic absolutism,<sup>158</sup> a reading that clearly overlooks the subtleties of Aguéli's own definition of Islam and the shari'a, as we have seen.<sup>159</sup>

Ultimately, it is perhaps in Aguéli's resistance to any form of classification or simplification that his philosophy most closely mirrors the approach of Ibn 'Arabi. His ability to transcend antinomies reflects what he understood as the distinctly Muhammadian nature of the Shaykh al-akbar's teaching: "The personal and collective realities, the will and the need, the outward and the inward, the unity and the plurality, the One and the All, merge into a third reality, which Islam alone knows, acknowledges, and professes. This reality is the Muḥammadian or prophetic reality."<sup>160</sup> While Aguéli regarded himself primarily as a servant of the saints, his devotion was unmistakably oriented toward embodying and upholding what Ibn 'Arabi articulated as Muhammadian sainthood.

### Acknowledgments

The research presented here stems from a project undertaken during a residency fellowship at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini (May–June 2022), for which I extend my sincere gratitude to Pr. Francesco Piraino and the *Centro Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparate*. I am equally grateful to Pr. Mark Sedgwick for his critical reading and insightful comments, which have greatly contributed to refining this article.

158

See Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*, 129–30.

159

It is worth noting that, whereas Lipton emphasises the connection between the "Aryanist" approach and the universalist reading of Ibn 'Arabi by Guénon and, in particular, Schuon, Aguéli repeatedly asserts that the true universality of Islam lies in its "Semitic" character. Ibn 'Arabi's Sufism is described by Aguéli as the "Arab school of Muslim esotericism," in contrast to the Persian school, which he critiques for a preciousness and intellectualism that Ibn 'Arabi consistently avoided (see "Pagées dédiées au Soleil," 53; and Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 256, note 41). Conversely, Luther's theology is deemed inferior to the Semitic perspective for being overly Aryan, while the highest thought of the Renaissance is said to have "developed to the Arab rhythms of the troubadours" (see "Notes sur l'Islam," 162).

160

"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 83.