

Excerpts from T. Chouiref's
Titus Burckhardt: Le soufisme
entre orient et occident
(Editions Tasnim)

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Titus Burckhardt's Lineage

Titus Burckhardt belonged to a very old patrician family of Basel. Historical sources tell us that the oldest known representative of this family was Christoph Burckhardt (1490-1578). This wealthy silk merchant left Biznatch, an unidentified locality in Münstertal (Black Forest), to settle in Basel.

Here is the list of Burckhardt's ancestors as drawn from existing archives:

Christoph Burckhardt (1490-1578) – silk merchant

Theodor Burckhardt (1549-1623) – silk merchant

Christoph Burckhardt (1586-1639) – doctor

Christoph Burckhardt (1631-1705) – political and military advisor

Bonifacius Burckhardt (1656-1708) – glove maker

Johann Rudolf Burckhardt (1698-1756) – pastor in Riehen

Johann Rudolf Burckhardt (1738-1820) – pastor at Sankt Peter

Johann Rudolf Burckhardt (1774-1829) – professor of medicine, director at the University of Basel

Abel Burckhardt (1805-1882) – pastor in Basel (Gelterkinden)

Abel Burckhardt (1841-1883) – pastor in Lindau

Carl Burckhardt (1878-1923) – sculptor and painter

Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984)

Several renowned writers and artists were attached to this family. Amongst the latter, the case of Jean-Louis Burckhardt (1784-1817)¹ should be highlighted. During his exploration of Arabia, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1815 under the name of Shaykh Ibrāhīm ibn ‘Abdallāh and was thus the first European to provide an accurate and detailed description thereof.² His fame was due above all to the discovery of the ruins of the ancient Nabataean city of Petra in Jordan, in 1812, and he was the first European to visit the site of Abū Simbel in Egypt.

He began to study Arabic at the University of Cambridge in 1806 to prepare for his journeys to the Near East. A probable convert to Islam, it was at this time that he adopted Arab dress. Jean-Louis Burckhardt mastered Arabic and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and memorised a large part of the Quran. He left precious ethnographic and geographic descriptions of the populations and regions he visited.

Burckhardt's great-grandfather also deserves to be mentioned. Abel Burckhardt (1805-1882) was a pastor in Basel (*Gelterkinden*) and composed religious hymns and canticles. Some of

¹ Also called Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, but in his letters he used French and signed them "Louis".

² See *Voyages en Arabie*, 2 vol. Paris, 1835. This work is valuable because it describes several buildings that were destroyed by the Wahabis at the beginning of the 19th century.

these hymns still exist today in the collection *Den svenska psalmboken* (The Swedish Book of Canticles) the fourth official book of canticles of the Swedish church. We know that the canticles for children by Abel Burckhardt influenced the well-known Basel theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968).³ The latter affirmed having received his “first theological teaching” through these canticles. He affirmed it was thanks to their “comforting and intimate evidentness” that they made him perceive “authenticity itself”.⁴

Moreover, Abel Burckhardt was the author of a cultural history of Basel entitled *Bilder aus der Geschichte von Basel* (*Images and History of Basel*).⁵ Notably, he mentions the earthquake in 1356, its social impact and the reconstruction of the city. He also mentions the individuals who, through their spirituality, made their mark on the city at every epoch. In this voluminous work, the religious dimension is thus very present. It is worth noting that Abel Burckhardt emphasised a life of worshipping God, of total trust in Him, a life in which work played an important role, in conformity to the Protestant morality of which he was a pious defender.

Jacob Burckhardt was recognised as one of the main founders of what is conventionally called “cultural history”. His work shows how a period of history or an artistic movement should be treated in its entirety, not only through its painting, sculpture and architecture, but also through its social institutions and the daily life of the people concerned. His main work was *The Civilisation of the Period of the Renaissance in Italy*⁶ which was published in 1878. This is a pertinent analysis of the cultural and artistic impoverishment the modern West has undergone in the 17th century. It was probably this aspect that influenced Nietzsche, who attended Jacob Burckhardt’s classes on art history.⁷

In several works and articles, Titus Burckhardt went further than his great uncle in showing that the study of a work of art is a privileged means for understanding the era and civilisation in which its birth is witnessed:

Nothing touches us more intimately about a bygone culture than a work of art which is its focal point – a sacred image, a temple, a church, or a mosque. Something essential and immediate flows which neither history can capture, in its more or less manifest characteristics, nor the analysis of social and economic events. Only another door offers such a revealing vision of a culture, and even more profoundly: the texts, in particular those concerning eternal things. Inevitably complex, these writings are generally inaccessible to today’s reader without notes and commentaries, whereas a work of art makes us participate without an immediate intellectual experience in a certain way of being and projecting oneself. From here, one can explore other ways of penetrating the spirit of this culture.

Thus, it is easier to familiarise oneself with the intellectual and moral forms of a Buddhist culture when one is familiar with one of its manifestations, the image of the Buddha for example, and one can better imagine the spiritual and social life of the Christian Middle Ages when one has assimilated the architecture of a Roman abbey or a Gothic cathedral – depending how sensitive one is to an authentic form of art.⁸

Finally, mention should be made of Carl Burckhardt (1878-1923), the father of Titus, who was an art critic and became famous for his sculptures. Some of his works are still present today in several streets in Basel: one can admire the Amazon at the head of the Moya

³ Through his mother, Karl Barth was connected to Jacob Burckhardt’s family.

⁴ Cf. Pierre Gisel (ed.), *Karl Barth. Genèse et réception de sa théologie*, Labor et Fides, Geneva, 1987, p. 17.

⁵ Verlag von Felix Schneider, Basel, 1877.

⁶ A French translation appeared in 1906 entitled *La civilisation en Italie au temps de la Renaissance*.

⁷ Cf. John R. Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*, Montreal, 2000.

⁸ *La Culture mauresque en Espagne*, p. 9.

bridge, or Saint George at the top of the stairway overlooking the Old City, in front of Lycée Leonard. Titus Burckhardt edited letters and texts by his father under the title *Zeus and Eros: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen des Bildhauers Carl Burckhardt*.

Childhood and Education

Titus Burckhardt was born in Florence on 24 October 1908 but he spent little time there because his family settled in Basel in 1909. It was in this city that he met Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) for the first time in 1919. He was then eleven years old and Schuon was twelve. A few decades later, Schuon related his first encounter with Burckhardt, describing him as “unforgettable”:

...It was in the singing room in the high school (lycée) the teacher asked each one of us to sing a song we had learnt in primary school. And then the little Burckhardt stood up and sang the song of Winkelried⁹ with the piercing voice of a young boy. I caught a glimpse of his profile; he had long blond hair and he sang so loudly that the professor was completely surprised. This image is unforgettable to me. I was also a singer since I had to sing in the Passion of Saint Matthew in the cathedral of Basel.

The Brahmanic side of Sidi¹⁰ Ibrāhīm appeared later, as an adult. As a child he was half fighter, half dreamer; this dreaming was the prelude to his ultimate contemplativeness. That which was so characteristic of him was that, besides his Brahmanic side, he was a great friend of the (North American) Indians. It was not by chance that he published “I Call my People” by Black Elk, and that he was a friend of Yellowtail. The combination of the heroic and the sacerdotal nature of the Indians must have pleased him and was, in a way, close to his own nature.¹¹

In a letter written a few days after the death of Burckhardt, Schuon described the personality of his friend and the beginning of their spiritual friendship:

As you know, I have known Sidi Ibrāhīm since my twelfth year; at school, we rivalled one another with drawings illustrating Greek heroic legends. Our friendship properly speaking began in Riehen, in the home of Madame von Dechend; it was there that we had a long conversation about Guénon, Islam and the Maghreb.

That which was precious about Sidi Ibrāhīm’s personality was the combination of an extraordinary, penetrating, deep intelligence and great artistic talent. Since he could not be a creative artist, and it was fortunate that he was prevented from being such, his talent was entirely dedicated to the service of the spiritual life, all the more so since at the same time he was very gifted for mystical contemplation.

Raḥimahu Allah wa raḍiya Allahu ‘anhu (Arabic)¹² (at end of letter).

On his side, Burckhardt described his first meeting with Schuon, and then his friendship with him as an adult:

I had known Frithjof in our adolescence, when we were both at the Gymnasium in Basel. He was twelve, and I was eleven. Then I lost contact with him and I met him again after having read the books of Guénon, after which I really desired to be attached to an authentic spiritual tradition. My new encounter with him was decisive for me. At that time, he was coming back from his first stay in Mostaghanem, and I would have liked to have gone there as well, if I hadn’t known that the Shaykh Aḥmad (al-‘Alawī) was very ill and that Frithjof – Sīdī ‘Īsā – had had difficulties with the French administration in Algeria. Shortly afterwards, I received an invitation from a friend to go to Fez, and I considered that as a sign.¹³

⁹ “Winkelried” is a Swiss nationalistic song [translator’s note].

¹⁰ Literally, *Sidī* means “my master” in Arabic. Here it is an honorific title that is given to all disciples initiated into the Sufi path.

¹¹ Letter from F. Schuon to Hans Küry, 14 March 1984 (translated from German).

¹² A traditional Islamic formula handwritten by F. Schuon: “May God have mercy upon him and be content with him.” Letter from F. Schuon to Hans Küry, 21 January 1984 (translated from German).

¹³ Taken from F. Schuon, *Mémoires et méditations* (unpublished document, translated from German).

After their meeting in the high school (Gymnasium) of Basel when Schuon and Burckhardt were adolescents, they lost contact with one another and did not find each other until they were adults, in 1932, at the home of Lucy von Dechend, a friend of the Schuon family.¹⁴

In April 1920 the Burckhardt family left Basel to settle in Ligornetto, an old Swiss village in the canton of Ticino. The family lived in the Villa Casanova, a large home which allowed Carl Burckhardt to set up his art studio.

During this period, Titus made friends with Giuseppe Martinola (1908-1990) who became a well-known historian in Italy. Sadly, the fragile health of his father deteriorated rapidly; he died on 24 December 1923.

Titus Burckhardt then started art studies (painting, sculpture and also art history) in Munich and Paris. A few years later – probably in 1928 – Burckhardt decided to go to Morocco for the first time to look for artistic inspiration but also maybe to escape the West which was incapable of responding to his thirst for beauty. This would be the beginning of an indefectible attachment to Morocco, to its rich culture and above all, to its living spiritual heritage.

¹⁴ Lucy von Dechend (1899-1991) noticed the spiritual qualities of Schuon very early on and was one of his first disciples.

First Sojourns in Morocco

Titus Burckhardt travelled extensively throughout the Morocco of his youth – the Morocco that was then under the French protectorate – until his last visit to the Sherifian kingdom in April 1980. He made his first trip to Morocco towards the end of the 1920s, a few years after the death of his father, to devote himself to drawing and painting and take inspiration from the beauty of the country:

He left for Morocco in search of that which the West could no longer provide; because it had lost it: the presence of beauty in daily life, in the constructed environment, in masculine clothing, in daily objects made by men and not by a machine. He wanted to meet men who had preserved their lifestyle and their ancestral ideals; to live amongst them to be better familiar with the qualities of which they were the repositories.¹⁵

He was very deeply marked by this trip. According to Hans Küry, who was a close friend from the 1930s,¹⁶ this voyage released in him the beginnings of a profound spiritual quest:

The purity and beauty of Maghrebi art fascinated him and at the same time confronted him with a mystery that remained indescribable. He returned to Basel. Someone from our group gave him the books of Guénon: he found in them the key to the world that had dazzled him.¹⁷

Shortly after this journey to Morocco, Burckhardt discovered the works of the renowned French metaphysician René Guénon. They were to have a decisive impact on his spiritual direction. At the same time, he studied art in Munich and Paris, thus following the family tradition. The beginning of the 1930s were in this way a positive time for Burckhardt to meditate on the spiritual subjects dear to him. It was thus that, meeting Schuon again in 1932, he discovered a common point of view with his childhood friend. A very deep spiritual friendship began which was to last all his life.

Having understood the importance of an initiatic attachment to a living spiritual tradition, Burckhardt left for Morocco again at the beginning of 1933 with the hopes of being initiated into a Sufi order. He ended up receiving the hoped for initiation after long and patient searching. He then wrote a letter to his friends in Europe who made up a small group around Schuon:

I would first like to tell you to rejoice with me because, through an unexpected grace, I was received into the same order as that of our venerated ‘Īsā Nūr al-Dīn, but as a disciple of another Shaykh. This gift had escaped me at that moment, when I was thrown into the arms of my destiny, so to speak. It was completely clear that very subtle beams of spiritual influence were at play. As beautiful as the description of the event would be in all its logical depiction, I want to relate first of all what I consider to be of direct importance to you. You must excuse the doctrinal tone that this may take.

Above all: one cannot imagine how real and efficacious the nature of spiritual influences are. It is necessary to clearly distinguish between theoretical understanding and the cardiac intuition of a symbol. The spiritual influence, the *Baraka*, is the most truthful interpreter, it is that which is lucid and resolves all symbols: this *Baraka* is the grain of salt, the spark, the seed.

The transmission of spiritual influence is a very real gift. Its nature is intimately linked to the immanent locus of Love. In the heart, Love and Knowledge are but one.

¹⁵ Jean-Louis Michon, *Titus Burckhardt et le sens de la beauté. Sagesse et splendeur des arts islamiques. Hommage à Titus Burckhardt*, Marrakesh, 2000.

¹⁶ Hans Küry (1906-1987) was a writer, editor and professional translator, specialising in the works of Shakespeare. H. Küry is also the author of six books and several articles in German, his native language, on philosophical, religious and literary subjects.

¹⁷ Extract from an unpublished document, translated from German and entitled *Les Jeunes gens dans la caverne*, 1971, p. 8 (The Young People in the Cave).

In face of the efficaciousness of traditional rites, individual efforts are almost like trying to play the violin on a box lined with strings. Given that the rites consist of invocations, in evocations, in colligations which serve as a very fluid and subtle means that should penetrate the region of the heart and not the brain, the comprehension of a sacred language is of an importance that should not be underestimated. By the way, the entire Quran is built on such musical and spiritual laws, which even seem to bear a very clear pre-eminence over doctrinal architecture. These are laws of expression which are at the origin of sacred art and along with it, traditional craftsmanship.

From what I have said above, the result is that all doctrinal knowledge, to be effective, should be so assimilated by the heart that if it were transmuted into air, it would be parallel to non-knowledge. It should also be said that the transmission of spiritual influence leads, in very rare cases, to a simultaneous possession of the supra-conscience or the consciousness of the heart. Inversely, the receiving of *Baraka* should most of the time take place without the conscience directly realising it... even if it can be manifested in its effects.

Nevertheless, the general rites of Islam are already also carriers of a *Baraka* because they are included in the basic initiatic rites. A precondition of the effectiveness of all *Baraka* is the attitude of the opening of the heart, or in other terms: faith. In a very subtle way, this also touches on the essential nature of Love.¹⁸

Burckhardt received theological and spiritual teaching from his first master Shaykh ‘Alī al-Darqāwī for nearly two years. Besides his esoteric function as spiritual guide (*murshid*), ‘Alī al-Darqāwī was a professor of Arabic language and sacred history at the university mosque of al-Qarawiyyīn in Fez. T Burckhardt regularly attended the classes his master gave in this distinguished place of traditional Islamic knowledge.

At the same time, he took numerous photographs and made drawings of scenes and characters which he thought appropriate for expressing the depth of Muslim culture in Morocco. Many of these photos and drawings would illustrate his first work: *Land am Rande der Zeit* (A Country on the Margins of Time) which appeared in 1941 published by Urs Graf-Verlag.¹⁹ In this work, he recounts his lived experience of rural and city life in Morocco as well as the rich spiritual culture of this country.

Thinking that he would be able to live a long time in Morocco, Burckhardt looked for a way to make a living. He acquired a flock of sheep which he established in the countryside of the Middle Atlas. Nevertheless his financial situation remained precarious. This was why Schuon, back in Europe, worried about Burckhardt’s health and his personal situation:

My dear Titus,

First of all, I thank you for your message, I cannot answer it as I should today because I am swamped in work...

Are you going to carry out your projects alone? There are some things that nobody can give advice on because they depend upon the faith of the individual and his perspective on life, on a whole fabric of psychological conditions.²⁰

My dear Titus,

What has become of you? I received your letter addressed to Allar²¹ and I sent it to Preau²²... What are your plans? As you may have learnt, here in the West, that is, in Basel Lausanne and Paris, we are full of combative

¹⁸ Cited by F. Schuon in *Mémoires et méditations* (unpublished document, translated from German).

¹⁹ This work has never been translated.

²⁰ F. Schuon, letter of 14 January 1934 (translated from German).

²¹ This was René Allar (1902-1983), author and translator of works on traditional Eastern as well as Western esoterism.

²² As R. Allar, André Préau (1893-1976) was a traditionalist author. Both of them were contributors to the journal *Études Traditionnelles*.

fervour... Flourishing in the East cannot be the aim for all of us. What are you thinking of doing? Your situation seems to me very uncertain.²³

My dear Titus,

What is going on that you leave us without news? Have you fallen ill? If ever you are exposed to fever, I would strongly advise you to sell your sheep and come back to Basel; this would be a joy to all of us and would be wonderful also. Do not play with your life and come back, the rest will work itself out, there will certainly be a solution for you.²⁴

At the beginning of 1935, Burckhardt received a visit of Schuon who had just accomplished a long spiritual retreat (*khalwa*) during his second stay in Mostaghanem:

Two years after my initiation in Mostaghanem, I returned there and from there to Fez which at this time was still completely medieval. I lived in Fez for several days with an Arab carpenter near Bab Guissa. In this ambiance, my happiness was almost perfect, but then I had to return to Europe and look for work. The magnificent hours spent on the flat roof of the house, then in the narrow streets above the basket weavers and in the mosque, or at the edge of the countryside next to the city – all this was bathed in the golden light of the prime of my childhood and my most beautiful hours in Mostaghanem. Here, the sacred was perceivable everywhere, it was so to speak in the air, one could not escape it. I spent unforgettable days in Fez with my friend Sidi Ibrāhīm, who lived there at the time.²⁵

In Fez I was in contact with Shaykh Moulay ‘Ali and other venerable Moroccans; one evening I was the guest of the Saqalli dervishes and I attended a gathering in the Moulay Idris mosque. But soon thereafter I had to return to Europe.²⁶

Well integrated into the local life of the Fez populace, Titus Burckhardt attracted the attention of the Protectorate authorities who were concerned about his presence amongst the Moroccans:

Although the tall silhouette of a young blond man wearing a djellaba and a turban on his head became familiar to the shopkeepers and craftsmen of the souk, the presence of this unusual student was also quickly signalled to the Protectorate authorities, who began to be concerned. For representatives of the French administration, it was unthinkable that someone, and especially a foreigner, could so diligently attend classes in the traditional university and Muslim circles for motives other than political ones. It was thus that the decision was made to expel him from Moroccan territory, without any other form of trial.²⁷

²³ F. Schuon, letter of 25 April 1934 (translated from German).

²⁴ F. Schuon, letter of 30 August 1934 (translated from German).

²⁵ F. Schuon, *Mémoires et méditations*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jean-Louis Michon, « Postface: Titus Burckhardt a Fes » in *Fes, Ville d'Islam* p. 158.

Martin Lings

It was during this period that Martin Lings (1909-2005) looking for a spiritual master and, having heard about the group in Basel, decided to present himself to Schuon. It was Burckhardt who first received him and bestowed upon him his first spiritual teachings:

...after some weeks I made my way to Basle in Switzerland, and I knocked at the door of the house of which, in answer to tentative inquiries, I had been given the address. A man opened the door, and as I did not speak German fluently, I said to him in French something like this: "I am an Englishman, a reader of Guénon, and I understand that you have here a Sufi order. I want to join you." He invited me to come in, and then immediately went to the telephone and I heard him ask someone to come to his house as soon as possible. He kindly gave me lunch, and then the man he had sent for arrived. It was Titus Burckhardt, and he took me for a long walk which marked the beginning of a great friendship.

That day was Tuesday, January 11th, 1938, and I was within two weeks of my 29th birthday. Titus Burckhardt was already 29, three months older than me. I told him the gist of what I have written here, and he said: "Our Shaykh" – he meant Frithjof Schuon – "lives in France, just across the border at Mulhouse, but he will be coming here on Friday." Meantime, the next day in fact, another member of the group, Leo Schaya, then a young man of about 20, the grandson of a rabbi, went to see the Shaykh and told him about me. He said: "Tell him, if he wants to join us, to enter Islam." So Titus Burckhardt received me into Islam. From now on, he was to be known to me as Sīdī Ibrāhīm 'Izz al-Dīn, "Sīdī" being the North African dialectal form of Sayyidī (literally "My Lord"). He then taught me how to say the prayers, which meant that I had changed from learning Sanskrit to learning Arabic.²⁸

Sometime after having left Morocco and joining the *tariqa* of Schuon, Burckhardt received a sign indicating that his spiritual advancement would find its fulfilment in the West. Therefore, he enquired about the possibility of a *tariqa* in Europe; he was reassured by an unexpected sign. Here is the event as related by Schuon:

Sīdī Ibrāhīm later had an experience similar to mine at the time the *tariqa* was founded. In Basel, he was looking out of his window onto the street which displayed all the drab and desolation of its daily activity, and he felt nostalgia for Morocco, then still completely medieval, whence he had just returned. The following idea then came to him: that many Westerners are as ready to enter the *tariqa* as is probable as the apparition of a camel on this street. At that moment, a camel appeared; on its back it carried a sign inviting people to visit the zoo. *Allahu Karim*.²⁹

The inner certainty to follow the path corresponding to him, this sign was only amplified over the years. From time to time exterior elements appeared to reinforce this certitude. It was thus that in 1938 Burckhardt received a letter from Moulay 'Alī al-Darqāwī his first spiritual master indicating what the latter thought about the spiritual nature of the *tariqa* to which his former disciple now adhered to. This Sufi master of Fez had advised him a few years previously to join the group led by Schuon by explaining to him that the members of this group were "brothers of the Prophet" according to the expression present in a hadith. Lings witnessed the reading of this letter and reported its purport.

...shortly after I had become the disciple of Shaykh 'Īsā Nūr al-Dīn, I vividly remember Sīdī Ibrāhīm coming to the *zāwiya* where I was living and where others of the friends were often congregated, and in his hand was a letter which, as he told us, he had just received from Fez: "I must translate this remarkable letter to you. I am sure that Moulay 'Alī would wish me to do so, since it has a message for us all." Then he translated the letter from Arabic into German, which I was already beginning to understand fairly well, though once or twice I had to ask him to give me the French.

²⁸ M. Lings, *A Return to the Spirit*, pp. 4-5, Fons Vitae, Louisville, 2010.

²⁹ F. Schuon, *Mémoires and méditations*.

The letter was based on an incident in the life of the Prophet which is recorded by most of the traditionalists. The gist is as follows: one day when the Prophet was with some of his closest Companions they heard him say, in a moment of silence, as if speaking to himself: "O my brethren!" They expected him to continue but instead, after a pause, he repeated the same words, and then again, a third time. Finally, one of the Companions ventured to say: "O Messenger of God, are not we your brethren?" He answered: "No, ye are my Companions." Then, instead of quoting the exact words which follow, Moulay 'Alī paraphrased the rest of the Tradition to the effect that the Prophet's brethren would be men of the last days and that they would enter his religion because they had seen "black on white", interpreted as meaning through the influence of books which they had read. Then he added, clearly with reference to Shaykh 'Īsā and his disciples: "Ye are among the brethren referred to by the Prophet in this Tradition."³⁰

Thus was Burckhardt to have a crucial role in receiving and in imparting spiritual training to novices. His role, however, did not end at the preliminaries of the Way but also included spiritual guidance properly so-called, as witnessed by this extract of a letter addressed to a co-disciple:

As for inner stability, one should always remember that the truth of our present situation, whatever it may be, is precisely that which is spiritually the most useful for us because it is at once a result of our past and of what we always are. It therefore also expresses our limitations at the same time. That is why "he who desires to be in another state than that which Allah has placed him in for the moment", has not yet understood Islam.

Moulay 'Alī al-Darqāwi often told me that that we should not let the mirror of the heart be troubled by worry. One must act or else submit to circumstances, he repeated to me, but not to worry about things. Moreover, when one stops worrying, one notices that Mercy comes to us through many openings that we had not noticed before.³¹

Those very close to Burckhardt, namely his mother and his sister, ended up joining the *tariqa* and becoming disciples of Schuon. A short time after Burckhardt's death, the latter wrote that he highly appreciated the spiritual qualities of these two women:

I also had a high regard for Sidi Ibrāhīm's mother, a Rhinelander, who was also very gifted from the point of view of the soul and art, and who had known my father in her youth; and also his sister, who shared with him many character traits.³²

In his accounts about the beginnings of the *tariqa*, Hans Küry described the kindness that the mother of Burckhardt, Sophie Hipp (1876-1942)³³ showed to her son and his group of friends sharing the same spiritual path:

May God be praised and thanked that the mother of Sidi Ibrāhīm was such a kind and intelligent woman: the friends of Basel met in her apartment, under the direction of Sidi Ibrāhīm, for their first *majālis*. She embroidered beautiful prayer caps (*tarbouches*) for us and showed affinity for our ideas, even the most naïve ones, as if we were her sons. This remarkable woman had seen an inclination for dreaming in her own children, a son and a daughter, but she did not fall into the error of classifying their noble efforts into this category of spirituality: she often spoke with the Shaykh (Schuon) and ended her life as a pious Muslima and *faqīra*, *raḥimaha Llāh*.³⁴

As for Burckhardt's sister, Eleanor (1911-1980), very early on she followed her brother in entering Islam and attaching herself, like him, to the Sufi Path. This spiritual step was shared with her husband, Harald von Meyenburg (1911-2003):

³⁰ M. Lings, *A Return to the Spirit*, Fons Vitae, Louisville, 2010, p. 8.

³¹ An unknown correspondent, unknown date.

³² Letter from F. Schuon to Hans Küry, 24 January 1984 (translated from German).

³³ After art studies (painting) in Karlsruhe, Munich and Rome, Burckhardt's mother taught applied arts at the Site in Strasbourg, from October 1903 to October 1904. She married Carl Burckhardt in 1905.

³⁴ "May God have mercy upon her" Hans Küry, *Les jeunes gens dans la caverne*.

Rāḍiyya (Eleanor) had come to the same conclusion as her brother: her fiancé, the future Sīdī ‘Alī, had also been as desperate as we were in seeking truth. He had corresponded with Sīdī Ibrāhīm and had thus found his way to Islam. He was particularly receptive to the sound of the sacred word of the Quran, and to the *Ḥaqīqa*, the truth; which vibrated in him. And for nearly 40 years – until today – he enriched the friends of Basel with his Quran readings and his stories of the East, where he often travelled for professional reasons. Thanks to his precise and clear style, he won over valuable disciples to our cause, amongst them his younger brother.³⁵

In 1936 – a year after his return from Fez – Burckhardt decided to go back to academic studies to study art history and Oriental languages at the University of Basel. These studies far from satisfied his need for deep knowledge. It was thus that he confided in René Guénon – with whom he had been corresponding since his return from Fez – the annoying limitations that he noticed in the manner in which these disciplines were taught. Guénon encouraged him to continue, despite everything:

I wish you all the best for these academic studies which you are undertaking, and of which I understand very well that you have little taste for; art history itself is relatively inoffensive, and there are surely other studies that would be even more undesirable...³⁶

Enquiring of Guénon as to the usefulness of studying Persian to be able to read certain esoteric texts in this language, Burckhardt received this response:

Studying Persian can in fact be of certain interest because many esoteric works are written in this language, even though there are many Arabic translations for most of them. As for the heterodox schools of Persia, they appeared mainly as branches of Shi’ism. This does not mean that Shi’ism is heterodox itself, but it appeared to have furnished favourable grounds for certain deviations.³⁷

From 1938 Burckhardt wanted to finish his academic studies with a doctorate where he proposed to study Arab-Muslim influences on European sculpture and architecture in the Middle Ages. He presented his project to Guénon and asked him if he could help him to put together documentation on the subject. Finding the project interesting, Guénon then wrote to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy to ask for his help:

One of our collaborators, M. Burckhardt, is proposing to write a doctoral thesis on sculpture in the Middle Ages, and he asked me where he could find information on this subject: “We are beginning to suppose very vaguely moreover, geometric sciences of Arab origin at the foundation of Roman sculpture and construction, as discussed in many vestiges contained in the famous Album de Villard de Honnecourt of the 18th century”.³⁸

Coomaraswamy’s answer, transmitted through Guénon to Burckhardt, was the following:

Concerning Villard de Honnecourt, probably the most recent and most complete work is that of Hans R. Hahnloser: *Villard de Honnecourt*, Vienna, 1935. The references to Arabic geometry can be found here in the index.³⁹

In the same manner, Guénon addressed Luc Benoist (1893-1980)⁴⁰ to obtain his help. Here are the first parts of the answer he sent to Burckhardt:

I want to communicate without delay the information that Luc Benoist has sent to me for you. He still plans to go to Basel in September, but perhaps you would have some time to do some research in the meantime. First of all, he says this: “As for the Muslim influences on sculpture of the Middle Ages, I think they are focused on the Roman era as a result of the influence of Muslim architecture itself through the intermediary

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Letter from Guénon to Burckhardt, 25 June 1936.

³⁷ Letter from Guénon to Burckhardt, 18 August 1936.

³⁸ Letter from Guénon to Coomaraswamy, 4 July 1938.

³⁹ Letter from Guénon to Burckhardt, 21 August 1938.

⁴⁰ Art historian, author of several works on art history, symbolism and esoterism. He was a firm “Guénonian”.

of Spain.” This is perhaps the extract concerning sculpture, but for architecture, didn’t the influences last a long time, and is the Gothic pointed arch itself of Arab origin?

Following this letter, Guénon sent Burckhardt a long list of works suggested by L. Benoist.

Marriage and Professional Life

In 1939 Burckhardt married Edith Gonin, born into a family of publishers settled in Lausanne. From this marriage a daughter was born in 1941 who died several days after her birth. The couple never had any more children.

It was during this period that he accepted a position at the Swiss-German publishing house *Urs Graf-Verlag*, with their offices in Olten and Basel. This professional activity ended his doctoral research mentioned above. In fact, Burckhardt took over many tasks in the publishing house as author, translator, artistic director, and collection director.⁴¹

The first work that he published there in 1941 was dedicated to Morocco. It was *Land am rande des Zeit* as mentioned above. Until his retirement in 1968 Burckhardt was busy directing Urs Graf-Verlag Publications, which specialised in publishing art books, and which he did with inexhaustible energy.

It was thus that he personally participated in the reproduction of facsimiles of the most beautiful and oldest illuminated manuscripts of Europe. Thanks to Burckhardt's *savoir-faire* in typography in the publishing house and his meticulous care, it was possible to reproduce a quad chrome version of the Irish manuscript *Book of Kells* (1950) which was soon followed by a number of precious medieval manuscripts. In a short work entitled *Von wunderbaren Büchern*,⁴² Burckhardt explained the research required and all the different kinds of difficulties that he encountered in the reproduction of these manuscripts. Thus we discover the extraordinary effort that went into the publication of the *Book of Kells*, the *Book of Durrow*, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Rabbula Gospels*, as well as the *Ambrosian Iliad* and *L'Apocalypse de Gerome*, works published from 1950-1963. To shed light on the profound meaning of the importance of the *Book of Kells*, Burckhardt brought out an article in which he laid out the principles of illumination which could well be called "the state of soul of those who adorned the manuscripts":

Let us stop for a moment and consider the ideas on which the veneration for the "body" was based in sacred writings; they shed some light on the state of soul of those who adorned the manuscripts. According to the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church, the eternal Word is at once the efficient cause of the world, and in its human form, the revealer of saving truths, transmitted through words and fixed in writing. Now this fixation of true words in visible writing: is it not like an analogous process of the "fixation" of the Creator's Word in the visible forms in the world? However, this "fixation" implies the halting of the ever liberating and transcendent act of the Divine Word. The written letter is therefore the revealed words of what the world is to the Word. But there is more: the fixation of divine words in writing also reflects the incarnation of the eternal Word in the body of Jesus.⁴³

In the next part of this article, Burckhardt justifies certain particularities of medieval decorative art, such as the intertwined geometric and animal shapes or depictions of monsters, and points out their "spiritual basis":

The man of the Middle Age had a vivid awareness that "nature" represents a game contained of antithetic forces, merciless in their combat and in their passion, but regulated by rigorous laws. Only divine grace transcends this fatal domain. It was this awareness that found a logical satisfaction in the studied entwining of geometric and animal forms, or in normal depictions of monsters devouring one another. These compositions never ceased to fascinate painters and sculptors of the Middle Ages until the threshold of the Renaissance

⁴¹ For a list of works produced by Burckhardt, see the bibliography in *The Essential Titus Burckhardt*, pp. 313-321.

⁴² Published by Urs Graf-Verlag in 1963, 76 pages.

⁴³ "Thoughts on an Irish gospel: The Book of Kells" *Scriptorium* vol. 3 n. 1, 1949, pp. 155-158.

which absorbed everything into these anthropomorphic concepts and only allowed “grotesque” medieval motifs to survive on the margin in books.

Of course miniaturists acquired most of the adorned motifs already designed by metallurgical arts; these latter had specified the style and principle themes according to conscious rules of the rhythmic alteration of projected surfaces and backgrounds; even the distribution of the colours corresponded to an enamel technique.

In the *Book of Kells*, this art reached a culminating point: the search for decorative combinations was pushed to the extreme, the refinement of the interlacing approached virtuosity, and the tracing of certain initials reached the limit of boldness. Despite this, this work is too intense and too virile to only represent a decorative pastime; its greatness bears witness directly or indirectly to this spiritual background which we have tried to evoke.⁴⁴

A short time after the appearance of the *Book of Kells*, Burckhardt was received by Pope Pius XII, in a private audience, in order to place the book in the Pope’s hands. The Pope highly appreciated the work carried out by Burckhardt and the latter was sensitive to the sincere spirituality of Pius XII:

This morning we were in Castel Gandolfo, where I had permission to offer my book to His Holy Father Pius XII, in a private audience... He gave the impression of a martyr, almost of a corpse resuscitated from the tomb, very poor, delicate, completely noble and emitting a touchingly painful goodness... His state of sanctity is evident and has nothing to do with the diplomatic and clerical entourage he moves in, alone and prudently.⁴⁵

The challenging implications of the work he accomplished and his life in a world where values were far removed from the contemplative spirit rendered the fulfilment of Sīdī Ibrāhīm’s spiritual life very difficult. As he went through some inner difficulties, this was some advice offered to him by his spiritual guide at the end of 1952:

My dear friend,

On one hand we have to harvest certain fruits that we haven’t sowed ourselves: we are not directly responsible for our meaningless education, but we must feel deep down that it was meaningless and how meaningless it was indeed. I too suffered terribly from the fact that the world I was born into gave me few good things and many bad things, all along the way.

To this I would add that the world that you live in at present does not offer other means, all in all, to find another outlet for your vital abundance or your need for love...

Hold fast to what you have found in the Quran and to Ibn ‘Ata Allah, stop fasting, and do not forget that the Evil One does not miss an opportunity to reinforce an attitude which, in the final analysis, distances us from God, such as discouragement, doubt, disproportionate preoccupation with the ego and so forth. Cling all the more to the *Shahada* and to the Supreme Name. I cannot say anything more because I cannot change the world that we must live in.

The very mental nature of your being – apart from the opposite trait, incompatible with the first – makes it difficult for you to take the leap into spiritual immediacy starting from mental awareness. For example, instead of thinking, one must plunge into the sacred sound of the *Shahada*, particularly whilst walking, and repose there. This is what you should be working on; you should leave your thoughts as if they were something foreign to you, situated on the outside, and learn to taste the curative vibration of the liberating Word. And this, cannot be seized by thought *a priori*.

With you, the tendency towards disintegration is not only a predilection to sensitivity, but is also easily mistaken as the simplicity of a child, which, as a possibility, bears much goodness.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Thoughts on an Irish gospel: The Book of Kells*, pp. 157-178.

⁴⁵ Letter from Burckhardt to Schuon, 24 October 1950 (translated from German).

⁴⁶ Letter from F. Schuon, 15 September 1952 (translated from German).

Three months after receiving this letter, Burckhardt and his wife finally had the opportunity to leave Bern and be closer to the spiritual master and the disciples around him:

It was with great joy that today I learnt the great news – that you can move to Lausanne.

It had to have been so in the end, for your solitude in Bern was too absurd. Grace could not have failed to appear.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Letter from F. Schuon, 18 December 1952 (translated from German).

The Translator of great Sufi Classics

Very early on whilst working at Urs Graf-Verlag, Burckhardt took it upon himself to make some important works of Sufism known to the European public. He translated sections of al-Qushayrī, of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī and of the Shaykh al-’Alawī in the *Études Traditionnelles* Journal between 1937 and 1938. In 1955 his translation of the most important chapters of a major work on doctrinal Sufism, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* appeared. Entitled *La Sagesse des Prophètes*, Burckhardt made it possible for francophone readers to discover the wealth and depth of the metaphysical teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240). This translation was carefully presented and annotated and provided access to the quintessential work of “the master par excellence” (al-Shaykh al-Akbar.) The translation of the work of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1409), *Al-Insān al-Kāmil* had prepared access to al-Shaykh al-Akbar. Entitled *De L’Homme Universel*, this translation appeared in 1953; the most important chapters were translated and presented to the francophone public. Following the spiritual current started by Ibn ‘Arabi, Jīlī’s style is more didactic in a certain sense, and his thought embodies a more systematic appeal. As pointed out by Burckhardt in his introduction, this work “bears a more apparent structure, which is rather an advantage for the reader who is not familiar with this aspect of Sufism.”

Return to Fez

Having been expelled in 1935 by the French authorities of the Protectorate, Burckhardt would not touch the soil of the Sherifian kingdom until after its independence in 1956. Morocco’s new situation incited him to return to Fez, not without some apprehension of not finding the city and spiritual ambiance that he had loved so much in the 1930s:

In the 25 years since I hadn’t been back there, had the interior of the old town changed? Huddled in the walls, dilapidated, worn by time, it was exactly as I had remembered it. Only a few islands of white houses on open land, where in the past no one would have dared to settle, and a few poor huts, nested in abandoned lime quarries, indicated that the poor had had to leave the protection of the old walls.

Towards the east, to our left, the valley opened onto the riverbed of the Oued Sebou, not very deep, and barred at the horizon by a chain of the Middle Atlas, the Bou Iblane, still covered with snow. To the west, a little higher up, the plain opened out onto Fes al-Jadid, (New Fez) the medieval city of Marinid sultans, and farther still, the new town built by the French.

Fez came to meet me, as the shadow of memories of it arose in my soul, rich with six thousand faces bombarding me with questions; for Fez, which had been familiar to me, had nevertheless preserved its mystery. I had lived there in a world apart, a world of another era, undoubtedly now having disappeared: that harsh universe and full of the flavour of the Middle Ages, outwardly poor but inwardly rich.

The Sufis whom Burckhardt had known in the 1930s had retained a vivid memory of him and the seriousness of his spiritual quest. Thus, when in November 1950 Leo Schaya – a co-disciple of Burckhardt in the brotherhood directed by Schuon – met the Shaykh al-Tādilī in Mazagan (El-Jadida) the latter asked for news of Sīdī Ibrāhīm:

The Shaykh al-Tādilī also asked for news of Sīdī Ibrāhīm and said that he liked him very much because he had been a very zealous disciple with whom he had debated at the time about the three hundred and sixty *barazikh* of Creation.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Leo Schaya, “Journal d’un voyage spirituel au Maroc en 1950” translated from German and published by Paul Fenton in *Horizons Maghrébins*, no. 51, 2004, p. 79. Burckhardt pointed out the teachings of the Shaykh al-Tādilī regarding the notion of the *barzakh* (pl. *barāzikh*) a technical term in Sufism meaning “isthmus” in one of the very first articles he published: “Of the Barzakh”, *Études Traditionnelles*, December 1937.

The next day Leo Schaya met Muḥammad Būsha‘ra in Sale. They recalled Titus Burckhardt and the special situation of one who is attached to a Sufi Way in the West:

In the evening we were invited again to al-Hajj ‘Abd al-Rahman’s⁴⁹ and when we arrived two other guests already awaited us: the Darqāwi muqaddam, Sīdī ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ja‘aydi, and the old faqīr Sīdī Al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Būsha‘ra, both of them greeted us cordially. We prayed with them and then had a generous meal with them.

The two fuqarā who had visited them in Sale sixteen years previously remembered Sīdī Ibrāhīm well. I spoke to them about the difficulty of practising Islam and *taṣawwuf* in the West, of the worldly environment and exhausting daily work. Al-Ḥājj Būsha‘ra answered me: “You cannot separate your outward destiny from the inner and spiritual life, because it is given to you by God. Your outward life with all its exhausting work and difficulties is your *jihād* and your dhikr and if you invoke correctly during your free time, you will receive spiritual graces for your daily efforts, as you would have received them from the invocation which you prefer to your outward activity.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ This was Timothée Buret, called El Haj AbderRahmān. Of French origin, this Arabic specialist converted to Islam and taught Arabic in Morocco for a large part of his life where he died in 1960.

⁵⁰ “Journal d’un voyage spirituel au Maroc en 1950” pp. 80-81.

Return to Fez, continued

When he returned to the Sherifian kingdom, the first visit Burckhardt made was to Muhammad Būsha‘ra, a *muqaddam* of the Darqāwiyya who had introduced him to Alī al-Darqāwī, his first spiritual master. Accompanied by Muhammad Būsha‘ra, he went to Fez:

The two men went together to Fez and prayed at the tomb of Moulay ‘Alī al-Darqāwī who had died in the meantime. They also visited several sanctuaries of the city, including the *zawiya* where the Sufi ‘Alī Al-Jamal (d. 1780) is buried, the master of mysticism and founder of the Darqāwa. In this place, located near the *Bayn al-Mudun* bridge which unites the two banks of the Oued Fes, the two oldest quarters of the city, that of the Andalous and the Kairouanais, the two companions remained a long time in meditation, seated on matting in the small courtyard at the entrance of the sanctuary. The floor is covered with mosaics and faience in the form of prayer niches, and houses the remains of venerable members of the brotherhood.⁵¹

Thanks to a series of trips to Morocco, Burckhardt completed his photographic documentation with colour photos which allowed him, amongst other things, to illustrate his important work *Fes, Stadt des Islam*.⁵² This beautiful book is part of the *Statten des Geites* collection (*Hauts Lieux de l’Esprit*), a series launched on Burckhardt’s initiative. This rich collection already included a work by him: *Sienna, Stadt der Jungfrau*⁵³ which appeared in 1958. This book highlights the architectural richness of Sienna, in particular the Gothic architecture. The history and art of the city are enriched by the description of spiritual figures who marked the city, such as Catherine of Sienna and Bernard of Sienna, who was one of the great defenders of the practice of the invocation of the Holy Name. Two years after *Fes, Stadt des Islam*, Burckhardt published *Chartres und die Geburt des Kathedrale*.⁵⁴ Once again, he presented the city and its cathedral, not from a purely historical view point, but through their spiritual and cultural dimensions. This approach could be summarised in the image of Catherine of Sienna who held Burckhardt’s special affection:

The town is an image of the soul: the walls surrounding it signify the limit between the outer world and the inner one. The gates are the senses, or the faculties, that link the inward and the outward. The intellect controls everything that approaches the gate, distinguishing between friends and enemies, and free will is that which ensures the security of the city. In the inward, the fountains surge up; gardens stretch out under the shelter of the walls, and in the centre, where the heart is located, is the Sanctuary.⁵⁵

In the forward to his work on Chartres, Burckhardt describes the spiritual perspective of men of the medieval era and emphasizes the misunderstandings of modern people of that which they often consider to be a naïve and simplistic mindset. According to Burckhardt, it is necessary to understand what the medieval West was, and to “penetrate the heart of its symbolic universe, where the universal and eternal truth resides.” One can then understand what was behind Burckhardt’s objective in publishing this type of work which was far from being purely historical. He wanted to point out the universal character of the primacy of the spiritual in all traditional societies, both in East and West:

Observed from our agitated and frenzied era, people of the Middle Ages may in a certain sense appear to be naïve, childish, and devoid of psychological complexity. This leads one to mistakenly take them for people who were more instinctive, less conscientious than we are; whereas in fact, all their creative activities were related to the idea of a spiritual concept of life, which is certainly not the case of modern man. And it is exactly this eternal truth, at the centre of their lives, that their love and creative joys could draw upon for the

⁵¹ Jean-Louis Michon, “Afterword: Titus Burckhardt in Fez” in *Fez, City of Islam*.

⁵² Translated into French entitled *Fes, Ville de l’Islam*.

⁵³ Translated into French entitled *Sienna, Ville de la Vierge*.

⁵⁴ Translated into French entitled *Chartres et la naissance de la cathédrale*.

⁵⁵ *Sienna, ville de la Vierge*, p. 65.

unifying force which we admire in their works. “They were much closer than us to heaven, as well as to the earth” one could justifiably say about them.

With modern man, the situation is generally the reverse: he is moved by sentiments which he justifies with a complete conceptual framework, an ideology and, although personal passions are relegated to the background, rational thought occupies the foreground. Having recourse to psychology can be conceived of as a way of understanding modern man. To understand the man of the Middle Ages requires the discovery of his highest objectives without fear of penetrating the heart of his symbolic universe, where universal and eternal truth reside.⁵⁶

The 1960s witnessed Burckhardt’s regular return to Morocco.

Besides his visits to Fez, he also went to Chaouen where he visited Shaykh Moulay Hasan with whom he maintained a very profound spiritual relationship. The quality of this relationship stemmed from the sensitivity of this Sufi master, who did not know a European language, to the teachings of the tariqa to which Burckhardt belonged, and in particular to the Marian grace as shown in letters written by Schuon to Burckhardt:

You can imagine to what extent your two descriptions of Chaouen have made us happy. Everything that Shaykh Moulay Hasan said to you comes as if from the depths of my heart, especially his words of gratitude. We still haven’t translated your two descriptions yet except for our neighbours, because, as you know, we largely keep secret everything concerning Shaykh Moulay Hasan...⁵⁷

Starting in 1965 and for a decade, Schuon returned regularly to Morocco. In March 1967 he experienced the intimate descent of divine Mercy, in the form of Marian grace, when he was on a boat to Morocco.⁵⁸ From then on, Schuon often passed by Chaouen where the meetings with Moulay Hasan were precious moments of spiritual exchange:

It is joyful and consoling, but not really surprising, that I find confirmed here, in the home of *taṣawwuf*, that which in the West I had to constantly defend against violent opposition; and this results naturally from the most authentic *taṣawwuf*. This is obviously what we have always known, but as I have said, it is a consolation and encouraging to find our spiritual point of view present and living in old Morocco.⁵⁹

During a stay in Chaouen, a disciple of Schuon’s explained to Shaykh Hasan certain central aspects of the spiritual method taught by Schuon to those who were following the path under his direction. Schuon then reported to Burckhardt the appreciation shown by the old Moroccan master:

Sidī Moulay Rafīq described my alchemy to the old Shaykh Hasan, in my absence and without my knowledge. “This is very good,” said the Shaykh, “but it isn’t for everyone; it is only for those who are thirsty”.⁶⁰

On several occasions Shaykh Hasan bore witness to a profound and spontaneous understanding of the particular nature of the way directed by Schuon. The latter shared with Burckhardt spontaneous statements made by the venerable Shaykh Hasan:

Shaykh Hasan said this to Ben Ghabrit,⁶¹ entirely spontaneously: “Our time is that of Sayyidatnā Maryam.” He also said that the Virgin is the personification of *Rahma*.⁶²

⁵⁶ *Chartres et la naissance de la cathédrale*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Letter from Schuon to Burckhardt, 18 October 1965 (translated from German).

⁵⁸ In one of his poems, he expresses this unexpected grace. See Jean-Baptiste Aymard, “Frithjof Schuon: Connaissance et voie d’intériorité. Une approche biographique” in *Connaissance des Religions*, July-October 1999, pp. 1-68. For the Marian grace of Schuon see pp. 52-54.

⁵⁹ Letter from Schuon to Burckhardt, 11 June 1966 (translated from German).

⁶⁰ Letter from Schuon to Burckhardt, 13 May 1966 (translated from German).

⁶¹ A disciple of Schuon who was the Pasha of Chaouen.

⁶² That is “the Divine Mercy”. Letter from Schuon to Burckhardt, 14 May 1967 (translated from German).

Here is Schuon's narrative to Burckhardt where he describes his first meeting with Shaykh Moulay Hasan in 1967:

When I greeted the old shaykh for the first time, he sat close to me for a moment, tears rolling down his cheeks; he was as happy as a child. He commented briefly on the verse *Wa-Llāhu yarzuqu man yashā'u bi-ghayri ḥisāb* (God gives His bounty to whom He wills, without reckoning). This verse comes directly after the Verse of Light⁶³ and has a special significance for us. This same verse is pronounced in another surah by the Virgin Mary herself.⁶⁴

Before I had visited him, the old Shaykh said one day to our friends: "When Sayyidatnā Maryam gazes upon someone, this look suffices him".⁶⁵

In September 1971 Schuon travelled to Morocco where he met a few of his disciples as well as Shaykh Hasan. He described details of these encounters to Burckhardt. Schuon's words testify to the deep spiritual affinity which linked him to the old Moroccan shaykh:

It was thus that after a night in Tangier we returned to Chaouen passing through Tetouan, where in the evening Ben Ghabrit and Moulay Rafiq visited us. The next day before noon Shaykh Hasan and Al-Hajj 'Āqil came to see us and we gathered in my room. Speaking Arabic, I introduced the two guests to young Hussein and Maryam, then I told him that in Europe spiritual persons had a slight tendency to sadness, which is one reason one should continually focus on trust in God, gratitude and contentment. I also said that the Remembrance of God (*dhikru Allāh*) was not only the key to Paradise, but Paradise itself. Upon this, the Shaykh Hassan said that the elect was like white hairs on a black buffalo; that these were words of the Prophet; that the black hairs could become white but that a white hair could not become black; that this is the state of the elect. The number of saints, he added, remains always the same, according to a well-known Sufi teaching. Following up on this remark on the subject of gratitude and trust in God, he explained that these virtues come from *Ma'rifa*. There is in fact no true knowledge without these consequences for the soul. I conveyed your greetings to the two Moroccans. Al-Hājj 'Āqil asked about your news and sends greetings. I have difficulty understanding Shaykh Hasan's pronunciation. In connection with the discussions on gratitude and trust in God, al-Hājj 'Āqil recited the Quranic verse that begins: *Behold! Truly the friends of God, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve*.⁶⁶

When I expressed the idea that the *dhikr* is not only a means of reaching Paradise, but is Paradise itself, the old Shaykh strongly approved; this particular truth seemed to touch him.

⁶³ Quran 24:35.

⁶⁴ Quran 3:37.

⁶⁵ Letter from Schuon to Burckhardt, 21 May 1967 (translated from German).

⁶⁶ Quran 10:62.

The Preservation of the City of Fez (1972-1977)

In 1972, upon the recommendation of a long-time friend Jean-Louis Michon, Burckhardt accepted an assignment with UNESCO as an expert and consultant for the preservation of the spiritual and cultural patrimony of the Fez Medina by UNESCO.

Jean-Louis Michon (1924-2013) had been a disciple of Schuon's since 1946, the year when he received the Sufi initiation. It was therefore within the framework of the *tariqa* directed by Schuon that Michon had the opportunity to frequent Burckhardt. Here is how Michon recounted the birth of this collaboration in the service of preserving Fez:

Towards the end of 1971 when I went to find Titus Burckhardt in his retirement in Lutry to ask him if he would accept to go to Morocco on a mission for preserving the traditional artistic patrimony, he did not hesitate to give his consent. Although he was beyond sixty and settled with his wife in one of the privileged locations from which it seemed difficult to detach oneself – lodging in a rustic home and a flowering garden terrace with a view looking out onto Lake Geneva and the Alps mountains – he reacted like a doctor who is called to the bedside of a patient, or like a fiancé to whom is announced that the betrothed pines for him. Titus Burckhardt's relationship with Morocco was a beautiful and long love story, cemented in the 1930s, and later faithfully maintained and renewed over the course of several sojourns. Without impatience, but decided, he waited for the long bureaucratic formalities to be accomplished, which in international life, precede the nomination of experts; a few months later, we left together for Morocco. Once arrived, we were soon settled in, and in collaboration with the Moroccan authorities, a common work plan and division of labour was agreed upon, as well as the zones in which each one would carry out the preliminary research.⁶⁷

Michon was aware that he was working in association with an exceptionally gifted being, for this colossal task of preservation, as well as a fine connoisseur of the multiple aspects of the city of Fez:

Given the deep knowledge that Titus Burckhardt possessed of the city of Fez, to which he had already consecrated a magisterial work,⁶⁸ it was decided that he would go and settle in this city to study in depth the difficulties it suffered from and determine conditions for an action of preservation, not only of the monuments but also of its urban fabric and its handicrafts.

To retrace in a few pages, the activity of several years carried out by a man who was a prodigy in terms of rapidity and concentration in work would be an untenable joke. I took it upon myself, therefore, to relive two aspects of the mission in which Titus Burckhardt always consecrated a good part of his time, because he appreciated its utility and value: his didactic action as writer and lecturer and his action in the field, as a researcher and animator. In all these roles, Titus Burckhardt excelled.⁶⁹

The task of preservation which Burckhardt had accepted turned out to be difficult because all sorts of personal and administrative oppositions gradually appeared. He then opened up to his spiritual guide who, in return, gave him these recommendations:

As I see in your detailed letter, you must constantly undergo the most annoying obstacles, which is certainly not easy; one must not become ill over them, and not let spiritual discernment make one dull; we have always rejected the well-known recipe of instinct which consists of qualifying an evil as "good", but consequently we should have our link to the "inner good" all the stronger. I have often said that we should live with one foot in Paradise, or one should, in the middle of the world, possess one's own little celestial and indestructible garden.⁷⁰ *Wa ladhikru llahi akbar*.⁷¹

⁶⁷ "Hommage à Titus Burckhardt", *Études Traditionnelles*, 1984, p. 69.

⁶⁸ *Fes, Stadt des Islam*, ed. Urs Graf-Verlag, Olten, 1960. This work appeared in French translation entitled: *Fes, ville d'Islam*, ed., Arche, Milan, 2007. And in English: *Fez, City of Islam*, The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 1992.

⁶⁹ "Hommage à Titus Burckhardt", *Études Traditionnelles*, 1984, p. 70.

⁷⁰ Letter from Schuon, 29 September 1974.

⁷¹ "And certainly the invocation of God is greater", a verse taken from the Quran 29:45.

As emphasised by Michon, Burckhardt gave several important lectures in Fez with a view to sensitizing his listeners to the treasures of traditional Islam preserved in Fassi culture. His intellectual clarity, his artistic sensibility and his gifts as a teacher were thus put into the service of the preservation of Fez.

As a lecturer, he proved to have a rare pedagogical gift. Thanks to his natural humility, he knew how to reach the common man. Without ever slipping into simplification or vulgarisation, he was able to express key ideas with clarity, fundamental notions that he developed from several angles with care and measure, making them penetrate his listeners *nolens volens*. In an hour of speaking in a tranquil tone, interrupted by silences that were not hesitations but facilitated reflection and assimilation, he presented a limited number of important themes, each one illustrated with striking examples.⁷²

If Burckhardt's intellectual qualities clearly appeared in his exposés and analyses, we must also recognise his practical qualities which allowed him to carry out very important field research.

Although it was important to grasp the normative role of the Islamic city and justify the vast effort of preservation and improvement which had become necessary, these considerations should not, according to the intention of Titus Burckhardt remain simple theoretical notions. As a true "man of the field", he had prepared the application and implementation, with efficacy and high professional competence. Where did his capacity come from? To be at once an architect, town planner, sociologist, researcher and lecturer, he whose curriculum vitae did not include any of the diplomas and university titles that so much is made of today. Undoubtedly from an innate artistic sense, inherited from his father, the Basel sculptor Carl Burckhardt; but most of all from a clear vision, the perspicacity which M. Jean Borel, in his moving funeral eulogy, described so well by speaking of "a clear vision that he held of every being and of everything".

How to begin to preserve and rehabilitate the permanent values of the city, after having defined and characterised them: its water resources, architecture and urban fabric, its artistic and intellectual life?

Very quickly, Titus Burckhardt realised that no strategy could work without an inventory of the real-estate property patrimony, which had never been done. So, alone, he set to work. He went down to the Medina every morning armed with a drawing board and his photographic equipment. He set out to look for the heads of the neighbourhoods, and with their agreement, forged relationships with the landlords of the great bourgeois dwellings so as to get himself admitted to visit them and design a preliminary census, illustrated with sketches and photographs. An album describing some seventy beautiful homes in Fez was thus established, followed by a similar inventory of the large and small sanctuaries: mosques, mausoleums and *zawiyas*; for each edifice was indicated by a sign describing its artistic interest and its state of preservation.⁷³

Burckhardt was not just content with raising the awareness of the Moroccan authorities about the fate of the Fez Medina; he considered that this traditional model could be a source of inspiration for the entire Muslim world. Thus, he was led to emphasise the exemplary value of the Fez Medina during a lecture given at the UNESCO conference for Arab Arts (April 1974) at the international cultural centre of Hammamet (Tunisia). If the Fez Medina can inspire steps for preserving traditional Muslim urban sites, it is because it is an eloquent image of the influence of prophetic Tradition (*Sunna*):

The old city of Fez represents an especially complete and homogenous example of what we could call "Arabo-Muslim urbanism". In this capacity, it deserves to be preserved as it is, as an irreplaceable monument of a civilisation which may never take place again, on the plane of architecture and urban life, such an original expression – so near its origins... The fascination which the old city of Fez exerts on its innumerable visitors

⁷² Ibid., p. 70.

⁷³ Ibid. The results of these surveys are preserved in a public file in 1980 by the Moroccan minister of habitat and land development entitled *Schéma directeur d'urbanisme de la ville de Fès*.

can only be explained by this: it is not only the “foreignness” (*dépaysement*)⁷⁴ of the surroundings which are both exotic and ancient; as long as one is sensitive to forms, one feels that this world is “deeply human”, that is to say that it is the expression of a synthesis, in wise equilibrium, of the material, psychological and spiritual needs of man.

... That which guarantees the unity (of urban works in the city) is that all of these initiatives, be they individual or collective, are inscribed in the tradition which, in an Islamic country, can only be the ever-renewed application of the *Sunna*, of prophetic custom.

One must understand that this tradition is not grafted *a posteriori*, onto the concrete details of life as an idealist sublimation; on the contrary, the *Sunna* provides above all the models of practical life. It is in regulating the simplest daily activities, such as communal eating, for example, or how to cleanse oneself or – indirectly – how to dress, that the *Sunna* determines the behaviours and thereby the soul of man. The *Sunna* is imprinted onto community life, at its very foundation, a certain “style” that has repercussions at all levels.

The *Sunna* is realistic in the sense that it always envisages the integral nature of man, a nature which is at once body, soul and spirit, the body having its material needs, the soul its affective needs and the mind its need of understanding, of intelligence. The city is an image of the total man who is not at peace unless all of his needs – physical, psychological and spiritual – are in principle satisfied. This is moreover what distinguishes traditional town-planning and modern town-planning which tends to disassociate the spiritual, psychological and material needs of man.⁷⁵

In the same way, at a conference given within the framework of the World Festival of Islam (United Kingdom) which he participated in organising in July 1976, he ended his talk with these words:

What were the vocations of the old city which allowed it to assume a complementary role to that of the new town? It could only have been the teaching, craftwork, science and art. It is very unlikely that the teaching transmitted in the past in the great mosque of *al-Qarawiyyin* can ever be reborn in its totality; on the other hand, it is conceivable that Fez could become a centre for Islamic studies, just as Granada, and with the advantage of having a “background”. In the same way, Fez could have the privilege of teaching traditional arts which are presently undergoing a crisis, but which could on the contrary be revived again, if they responded to the needs created by the more and more tiresome monotony of industrial products. And let us not forget the essential: Fez, as it subsists, is a model city, the destruction of which would deprive us forever of the tangible witnessing of a great civilisation.⁷⁶

Along with Michon, other town planning experts, other experts in traditional Islamic town planning would bring their expertise to the task of preservation that Burckhardt was involved in. This was the case with Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), a renowned Egyptian architect, and Stefano Bianca (born in 1941)⁷⁷ who at the time was a young historian of architecture living in Switzerland. The former was distinguished by his desire to preserve ancient architectural techniques. He thus made it possible for rural and impoverished populations of Egypt to construct homes adapted to their needs. He was the first laureate in 1980 of the alternative Nobel Prize (Right Livelihood Award).

Stefano Bianca rendered homage to Burckhardt in an article where he shared everything that he owed him intellectually:

⁷⁴ This descriptive French word has no real equivalent in English. It means feeling like a stranger in another land [translator's note].

⁷⁵ Unpublished.

⁷⁶ This talk was published under the title “Fez: Yesterday and Today”, in a volume directed by R.B. Serjeant, entitled *The Islamic City*, UNESCO, Paris, 1980, pp. 166-176.

⁷⁷ On his work of preserving the Fez Medina, see: “Toward the Rehabilitation of a Great City” in *Conservation as Cultural Survival*, edited by Renata Holod, Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Philadelphia, 1980, pp. 28-40.

My first encounter with T. Burckhardt took place around 1970, when I was a very young architect, impatient to meet the one whose books had so deeply touched me...

It was whilst going through the available literature on this topic that I discovered the works of T. Burckhardt, in particular his books on Fez, on the mystics of Islam and on sacred art in East and West. Expressed in the most subtle way and with great clarity, I found that which I had intuitively perceived through my much more limited experience of Islamic culture. Diving into his books was like drawing from the very sources themselves and relegated to second place many other works dealing with Islamic civilisation and thought...

But it was also the man and his spirituality which forever marked the young architect that S. Bianca still was:

Entering his office (in Pully, near Lausanne), I was struck by the austerity of the place and of the man. The room seemed more like a monk's cell than the middle of a flourishing publishing house. Of tall stature, his slender and slightly stiff silhouette gave the appearance of a Roman or Gothic sculpture and reflected all the spiritual concentration that had become his second nature. He was nevertheless not intimidating and his unpretentious attitude radiated with warmth and discrete kindness.⁷⁸

After a first meeting with Burckhardt in 1970, Stefano Bianca saw him several times. During these interviews, he received much advice and reading recommendations which helped him to deepen his knowledge. Some five years later, S. Bianca was finally ready to join the team of UNESCO consultants who were working on the project of the preservation of Fez.

For three years I was able to work side by side T. Burckhardt on the project for preserving the Old City of Fez... It was upon his recommendation that I was able to be part of the interdisciplinary team of consultants of UNESCO to whom this task was assigned from 1975-1978.

It was through gratitude that Burckhardt consecrated almost six years of his life to the cause of Fez, through feeling indebted to a country and a city that for thirty years had largely nourished his spiritual development. Moreover, it seemed to me that his great devotion also derived from the challenge and the vision which was his: Fez, still the best living example of the best preserved Islamic historical city, could become a reference point for the continuity of a traditional urban model, capable of development, all the while preserving its intrinsic qualities. A convinced conservative, he was also sufficiently realistic to admit that if one wanted to preserve and maintain the viability of the Old City, it was necessary to take into consideration modern needs. On the other hand, he was the first to oppose a certain type of modernisation which was satisfied with importing and imposing models and procedures without evaluating their impact and without adapting the physical structure to the social customs and local conditions.⁷⁹

Once his work as an expert in Fez was accomplished, at the end of 1977, Burckhardt returned to Switzerland. Nevertheless, he did not abandon the Fez Medina and returned the following year, in April 1978, to give a public lecture entitled "Fez and the Art of Islam".⁸⁰ In this talk which he gave on 25 April within the walls of the Lycée Moulay Idriss, Burckhardt began by recalling "all that is common to Islamic art before we can distinguish what is special about the city of Fez":

⁷⁸ « Quelques souvenirs personnels de ma collaboration avec Titus Burckhardt [Personal recollections from my collaboration with Titus Burckhardt] » *Sagesse et splendeur des arts islamiques (Actes du colloque international, held from 5-9 May in Marrakesh, 2000, pp. 13-14).*

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

⁸⁰ Published in *Actes du séminaire expérimental d'animation culturelle, 7 March - 28 April 1978, UNESCO, Conférences, 1980, vol. I, pp. 109-119.*

First of all, let me correct the current perspective a little, because one normally approaches Islamic art in general and Moroccan art in particular with criteria taken from European and Christian art, which are hardly viable for Islamic art. The summit and culminating point of European art is always the image of man. Whereas in the art of Islam, the anthropomorphic image only plays a peripheral role, as you know. In Western art everything, or almost everything, refers to the human form, even abstract art which refers to it indirectly...

That is to say that European art, in its essentiality is a sort of dialogue between man and his portrait, between man and his image, whereas this is excluded in the world of Islamic art. It preserves a purely objective character European art is subjective *par excellence*, notably art since the Renaissance...

During this seminar Burckhardt reaffirmed that the objective character of Islamic art is that which confers its fundamental role in transmission of the spiritual values of Islam:

Given the objective character of Islamic art, architecture has an important place. It is in a way the support of all the arts of Islam, even those that are not systematically linked to architecture. And this permits us to say that if European art consists of shaping the image of man, the art of Islam consists essentially of shaping the ambiance of man. Islamic art is an art of ambiance. Now ambiance acts on man. That which our ancestors put into the form of ambiance acts once again on the inheritors: there is nothing that exerts a greater influence on the human soul than the ambiance that surrounds him. Or rather: if there is something that comes next, it is clothing; for there is nothing that influences human attitude more than clothing. Then comes architecture: first the architecture of the interiors, then architecture in general, finally, the architecture of a city, urbanism. For this reason, the necessity of an art is not a purely aesthetic question. Art is a vital reality which man can never do without.

Burckhardt's intellectual competence and his authority on the subject of Muslim architecture resulted in a request on the part of Saudi Arabia in 1978, along with some of his collaborators in Fez, to design the concept of a university campus in Mecca. Bianca, who was part of the team, bore witness:

In the final year of his stay in Fez, Burckhardt and I were hired along with Hassan Fathy, Jean-Louis Michon and others, as advisors for the planning of a new university campus in Mecca (1978-1981). The Saudi authorities, fond of American efficiency, had chosen for their project the Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) office of Chicago, and they named a team of advisors charged with supervising the plan and infusing the fundamental principles of Islamic architecture. This was not an easy task for us, to make such a gathering function and the efforts thus of good will of the architects of SOM were put to a rude test since many of them abandoned the project during implementation. It took time for the American team to understand that we were not looking for beautiful graphic designs decorated with Islamic ornaments nor for copies of historical monuments and that we envisaged something of which the scale, rhythm, the urban fabric and the just relation between spaces, buildings and rooms, incarnated the spirit of Islamic architecture. Sometimes the meetings were stormy and Hassan Fathy suddenly stood up like a master of weapons in the midst of his musketeers. More meditative, T. Burckhardt remained reserved until others asked him to finally express himself. He then brought together, in an extraordinary manner, all the arguments, and seen in another light, the questions naturally found their answers.

The opposition by Burckhardt, and therefore of his team, to ignorant and dry modernism, a modernism that tends to make Islam lose its original and spiritual breath, could not really have surprised the Saudi authorities. In fact, a year before accepting the Saudi project, Burckhardt had presented a talk at the "First World Conference on Islamic Education" held in Mecca in April 1977. He had affirmed there, with vehemence, the indissoluble character of the arts of Islam with Muslim spirituality:

The beauty of the arts of Islam – we might also say the beauty that Islam normally conveys to its surroundings – is like a silent teaching which helps and deepens the doctrinal teaching transmitted by religious education. It penetrates into the soul without passing through rational thought. For many believers, it is a more direct argument than pure doctrine. It is like the life or the flesh of religion whilst theology, law and ethics are its skeleton.

For this reason, the existence of art is a vital necessity in the spiritual and social economy of Islam. Art, however, cannot exist without the artist nor without the craftsman, no distinction being made between the two in the traditional world of Islam, where an art without craftsmanship or a technical achievement without

beauty are both inconceivable. This means that the gradual withdrawal of the crafts, as a result of the inroads of the machine, entails the partial or total disappearance of the Islamic arts. At once religious education is robbed of at least two of its supports, namely the silent aid of an all-pervading beauty – there are still some traces left, but for how long? – and the more direct help of the professional activities (in the crafts) normally oriented towards a spiritual aim.⁸¹

Eventually the university campus in Mecca project was abandoned when the Saudi government discovered that it could not legally acquire the land on which the project had been envisaged...

In October 1979 Burckhardt participated in a seminar organised by the Aga Khan prize for Islamic architecture as a member of the grand jury of which the subject was “Architecture as Symbol and Self-Identity”. He had to vigorously defend the spiritual approach to symbolism – always his approach – against views which seemed to him to be very reductive.⁸² Some of our contemporaries seek to rehabilitate Muslim art by making light of its canonical rejection of images and by insisting on the influence of ethnic particularism. Some have gone so far as to declare that Islamic art does not exist in a global sense, that there exists only the art of individual Muslim peoples. These critics forget that for every culture there is an internal economy of artistic expression. Some forms have a central and essential role. Others (particularly in the case of semi-decorative, semi-narrative representations of human and animal forms) play a more or less peripheral role of compensatory elements. Except in very special cases, we know that anthropomorphic imagery has never been tolerated within the Islamic liturgical realm...

We have defined symbolism as a direct and non-discursive manifestation of a spiritual reality. This definition is not at all inspired by modern “in-depth psychology”.⁸³ Rather, the expression “spiritual reality” should be understood in a general sense. Thus, Islamic symbols always refer to the fundamental idea of Islam, the idea of divine unity. The unity of God is at the same time exclusive and inclusive. Nothing can be compared to God and nothing exists outside of God. Under the first relation, symbolism cannot exist. This may afford justification for those who deny the existence of symbols within the framework of Islam. Under the second relation, which refers to the inclusive unity of God, symbolism is indispensable. For the mentality of common Muslims, the incomparability of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) predominates as a point of view somewhat on the order of symbolical analogy (*tashbīh*). Thus symbolism remains implicit.⁸⁴

Then he took up and developed the views that he had already presented in some of his writings. More than ten times previously, he had in fact expressed the following remarks:

The art of Islam avoids any representation that could cause man to lose sight of his true nature: this art rejects anything that could play the role of an idol, even in a relative manner. Nothing should come between the human being and the Presence, invisible and informal, of God.

Thus Islamic art creates a void: it eliminates in fact all the turmoil and passionate suggestions of the world and in their stead creates an order that expresses equilibrium, serenity and peace. From this, it can clearly be seen how central the position of architecture is in Islam. Although the Prophet said that God favoured his community by giving it the whole surface of the earth as a place of prayer, it is architecture which, in populated regions, has to re-establish the conditions of purity and calm elsewhere granted by nature. As for the beauty of virgin nature, which is like the imprint of the Creator’s hand, it is realized by architecture on another level, one nearer to human intelligence and therefore in a way more limited, but none the less free from the arbitrary rule of individual passions.

In a mosque, the believer is never a mere visitor. He is so to speak at home, but not in the ordinary sense of the expression. When he has purified himself by ritual ablution thus freeing himself from accidental alterations – and recites the revealed words of the *Qur’an*, he symbolically returns to the “station” of Adam, which is in the centre of the world. In view of all this, all Muslim architects endeavoured to create a space entirely resting in itself and showing everywhere, in each of its “stations”, the plenitude of spatial qualities.

⁸¹ The text of this talk was published in *Philosophy, Literature and Fine Arts*, edited by S. H. Nasr, Islamica Education Series, London and Jeddah, pp. 41-48.

⁸² Notably those presented by Oleg Grabar (d. 2011) and Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010).

⁸³ Burckhardt here designates Jungian psychology and its theory of symbol as emanating from the collective unconsciousness.

⁸⁴ *Architecture as Symbol and Self-Identity*, pp. 36-37.

They achieved this end by means as different as the horizontal hall with pillars, (as in the old mosque at Medina) and in the concentric domes of Turkey. In none of these interiors do we feel drawn in any particular direction, either forwards or upwards; nor are we oppressed by their spatial limits.⁸⁵

Burckhardt concluded his intervention during the symposium *Architecture as Symbol and Self-Identity* with the necessity to exclude arbitrary meanings given to symbols:

Now I wish to offer an additional remark as to the definition of the symbol. We have to distinguish clearly between the sign which is a simple indication and the symbol which involves great complexities of meanings. Dr Grabar said that these meanings are attached to the symbol in an arbitrary way. This leads to the destruction of the symbol, because if the meanings can mean everything, then the symbol can either be everything too or it can be nothing. In fact, the multiple meanings of the symbols can occasionally be manifested in the complexity of exteriorly attached meanings. If we try to give too rationalistic a definition of the symbol, we simply make the symbol disappear.⁸⁶

Burckhardt finally returned to Fez again in April 1980 as a guest of honour to assist in the launching of a global campaign to save the city. This would be his last sojourn in this city that he loved so much.

* * *

Although it was very full of very demanding work caused by the project to save the Medina of Fez, the decade of the 1970s was also a period of trips to America for Burckhardt with the aim of visiting Thomas Yellowtail, an Indian “medicine man” of the Crow tribe. He had met him in Paris in 1953 when Yellowtail toured Europe and the Middle East with his troupe and gave performances so as to let the public discover Native American culture and spirituality. Burckhardt and Schuon were sensitive to the authenticity that he emanated. It was thus that a spiritual friendship was born that was to last for decades:

We met Yellowtail for the first time in the Champs-Elysees hotel in Paris; he was there with a group of Indian dancers who were travelling together, less to earn money than to get to know foreign countries...

Schuon had recognised the authentic character of the dances reproduced in a journal, and the fact of staying at the same hotel as the Indian group, gave us the opportunity to approach them. Amongst these Indians, Yellowtail, who was not yet a shaman at the time, emerged through his strong personality. I had never seen such a strong and soft man at the same time. He was slow in his movements, with an almost hieratic slowness, with an expression of serenity and strength. As soon as we spoke of spiritual realities, his face lit up... (A few days later), Yellowtail and several Indians from his family made an impromptu visit to us in our own country. (Switzerland). The links of friendship – and more than friendship – remained, and we met on the two continents, and more often than we had believed possible.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Originally published in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer 1967, entitled “Perennial Values in Islamic Art”.

This excerpt is from *Mirror of the Intellect*, edited and translated by William Stoddard, SUNY press, 1987, p. 219.

⁸⁶ *Architecture as Symbol and Self-Identity*, p. 37.

⁸⁷ *Quelques souvenirs* [A few memories], unpublished text.

End of life

The trip to Fez in April 1980 described above was to be Burckhardt's final journey. Weakened by debilitating neuropathy, he did not leave his home beside Lake Geneva until his death in Lausanne on 15 January 1984.

Despite his illness, Burckhardt remained active in the *ṭarīqa* and continued to read and appreciate the writings of his spiritual master. As such, he pointed out in a letter the spiritual benefit he experienced from reading the article entitled "The Mystery of the Prophetic Substance" which appeared in June 1982.⁸⁸ In the same letter he emphasized how much he appreciated the metaphysical quality of the writings of the emir 'Abd al-Kader:

Apart from this, can I ask if you have received the book *Spiritual Writings of Abd al-Kader*, translated by Chodkiewicz (Éditions du Seuil)? It contains an affirmation of the essential unity of all religions,⁸⁹ with no restriction, and extracts from the teachings of Ibn Arabi which are better than the original... One could almost say that Abd al-Kader is a better metaphysician, at least he is clearer.⁹⁰

A few months before leaving this world, Burckhardt took advantage of a passing improvement in his health to write what would be the last letter sent to his friend and spiritual guide, Frithjof Schuon. In it he related the numerous visits he had received while still in his role as *Nā'ib*, that is the "second" in the spiritual hierarchy of the *ṭarīqa*:

Over the course of the last weeks we have had several visits, mainly from young couples from Europe...I dreamt that I was on an island, intoning a spiritual song, and friends from all directions approached in small sail boats.⁹¹

The visits of numerous "young couples from Europe" bore witness to the spiritual radiance which remained fully intact within him, a radiance that was not diminished by his illness. As for the dream in which the spiritual song of Burckhardt attracted "small sailboats" thus leading them to a safe port, it was a good omen that his message would continue for a long time to guide those who, in a world dominated by forms of knowledge incapable of rendering to man his profound dignity, were in search of the solid ground of true knowledge. Like Abraham (Ibrāhīm) calling in the desert to summon pilgrims to the House of God (*Bayt Allāh*) that he had just built with his son Ismael,⁹² Sidi Ibrāhīm sings in his dream a spiritual song which is none other than the message of the *ṭarīqa* to which he belongs – thus attracting beings in search of the divine Proximity.

"One of the fundamental conditions of happiness, is to know that everything we do bears an eternal meaning..."

⁸⁸ The letter bears the date 15/20 June 1982. The article in question appeared in two parts in *Études Traditionnelles*, April-June 1982 and July-September 1982. The complete article was republished in *Approches du phénomène religieux*, Paris, 1984, pp. 159-185.

⁸⁹ This essential unity was always considered by Burckhardt as a fundamental fact. The following memory, which was transmitted by Ghislain Chetan is a beautiful illustration of it: "I was told that T. Burckhardt advised reading *Telle était Soeur Katrei* by Meister Eckhardt. I obtained the book and when I had the opportunity to meet him, I expressed to him all the happiness I had derived from the reading of this marvelous work, adding that this text offered in depth surprising similarities to the Vedanta. Sidi Ibrāhīm smiled in friendly complicity and said: "Doesn't it though, one would think one was on the banks of the Ganges!" This anecdote was around 1982. I had then met Sidi Ibrāhīm at his home in La Conversion (near Pully). He was already ill."

⁹⁰ Letter to F. Schuon from 15/20 June 1982 (translated from German).

⁹¹ Letter to F. Schuon of 30 November 1983 (translated from German).

⁹² This call by Abraham is made in response to a divine order, *Quran* 22:27. According to the Tradition, the Kaaba was built for Adam by the angels. Abraham rebuilt it as it had been damaged by the flood.

It was thus that T. Burckhardt expressed himself in the introduction to an exceptional work that appeared as *Principles and Methods of Sacred Art*.

No one can doubt that what he accomplished during his life was nourished and upheld by this consciousness of Eternity.

Sheikh Moulay Ali ben Tayyib Darqāwī

One fine day I returned to Fez in the hope of meeting Sheikh Moulay Ali. Although I had dressed for the train journey in European clothes, I had, however, kept my rosary round my neck as a sign of my attachment to the Way (*Tarīqah*). The train was full of Berbers from the mountains who had come down to the plains to work on the harvest; my neighbour regarded me intensely and pointing to my rosary asked me, "What are you wearing, there?"

I answered, "A rosary."

"Do you know how to recite it?"

"Yes", I replied and began reciting the first verses. The Berber rushed into the next carriage and told the people there was a European who could recite the Muslim rosary. In a moment there were two lines of excited men moving through the carriages, one coming to embrace me often with tears in their eyes and the other returning to their seats.

I arrived in Fez and waited for the letter of recommendation addressed to master Moulay Ali ben Tayyib, which Sidi Hajj Mohammed Bouchāra had promised to send me, to arrive. The letter was delayed, in fact it never arrived, for Sidi Mohammed had simply wanted to test my sincerity. In spite of that, I decided one evening to go and see the master face to face, and I knocked on the door of his house which was at the end of an alleyway, so totally dark that I couldn't even see the person who answered the door. The voice of an old man said, "My son, this isn't the time for visiting, come back tomorrow morning." The next day, he received me in his living room, a room almost totally empty and invited me to sit on a low cushion, then he picked up a book, opened it and read aloud a description which was partly historical and partly symbolical – about the coming of Christ in the last times. Without doubt he wished to show me the veneration with which Christ was held in Islam. "If Lord Jesus was to return tomorrow, I would be the first to follow him," the Sheikh told me.

Since I was sitting next to him and he had pulled off the hood of his djellaba, I could see his face which was that of an old man who was doubly noble; through his being a descendent of the Prophet as well as being marked by the spiritual discipline of his illustrious ancestors. I wanted to contemplate him, but in fact it was me who was being calmly observed.

The first thing that Moulay Ali taught me was the correct pronunciation of the Quran. With this goal in mind he made me learn by heart the last section of the Quran, containing the shorter Surahs regularly recited in the canonical prayers every day. I couldn't stop myself from showing my impatience at receiving such a mechanical exercise, and after a while, I began to imperceptibly neglect the practice of the Surahs I had learnt, which earned me a severe reprimand from Moulay Ali who said, "In God there is not only mercy there is also wrath."

When I had finally learnt a sufficient number of chapters of the Quran, Moulay Ali instructed me to learn by heart a well-known treatise by Ibn Āchir, not the patron saint of Salé, on various rites and dogmas. It was a text that droned on in very dry verse, and after a certain time I asked if it wasn't enough to know and understand the text in question without having to actually learn it by heart. But Moulay Ali was unmovable, he assured me that I would need it in the future, it was a text that was used elsewhere as a basis for teaching classical Arabic.

One day, he invited me to attend a lesson he was giving at the great University Mosque, the Qarawiyyin, in his role as teacher of Arabic and sacred history. I was sitting in the same circle as his students, and each time Moulay Ali thought that I wasn't following the text, he would ask me, "do you understand?" and when I replied "No", he would tell one of his older students to reread the text with me and explain it to me. This was another stratagem to make me learn Arabic.

Having arrived at this stage, he went on to teach me another lesson which was deeper and more direct using a short work by Ibn Nawiya, containing a selection of forty sayings by the Prophet. Instead of meeting at his house we would meet in the garden of a friend under an old fig tree, each saying of the Prophet first giving way to grammatical and syntactical explanations, then what I would call ritualistic explanations, and then finally spiritual commentaries.

When he realised that I understood these teachings, Moulay Ali bade me buy a copy of the Letters (*Rasā'il*) by his grandfather, as well as the treatise on Sufi terminology by Ibn Ajība, and finally a famous work by Al-Qushayrī on *Taşawwuf*. He didn't intend to comment on these works, or make me read them at the stage I was at now, rather they were to be kept and read along the way, and later I realised that they were very wisely selected with a lot of forethought.

The days when Moulay Ali would teach in the great mosque, a mule, saddled and caparisoned, waited for him in front of the door to the sanctuary to take him back home shortly before midday. As soon as he had mounted, he would tell me to grasp the tail of the animal which trotted up the steep streets of the medina with remarkable speed. Passing through the neighbourhood of Guerniz, where the houses join one another over the street, I suddenly saw that the height of the street was at the level of Moulay Ali's neck, who thus ran the risk of being decapitated. To my astonishment, he nimbly bowed down over the saddle in a horizontal position and then straightened up with the suppleness and speed of a reed in the wind.

His clothes were always impeccable and bore witness to his position as a scholar. However, sometimes I would find him wearing the garb of a Sufi, a robe patched with many pieces of cloth. At these times he was withdrawn and difficult of access. One day he told me that this garment went back to the tradition of the Prophet.

He cultivated the virtue of patience and often quoted a Sufi proverb, "The saints are like the earth, it doesn't return the stones that are flung at it, but offers us its flowers instead."

I arrived at his house one day at the height of summer; he said we would do well to seek the cool air in the country and suggested we leave at once, even though I was only wearing a shirt and a light djellaba, as well as carrying a bit of felt to sit on. We left the town to find a vehicle which would take us in the direction of the Middle Atlas Mountains. We travelled in a bus full, for the most part, of employees of the colonial administration. Moulay Ali asked me why all these people had the air of being so disagreeable; he meant by that the continual state of tension which one can see amongst many westerners in comparison with the average easterner.

Having arrived at the foot of the Middle Atlas, we continued the journey on foot walking through the cedar forests accompanied by a young law student who had joined us, and who was deeply fascinated by the tourist villas. As for me, I was enthralled by the marvellous forest and mountains. The student and I began a discussion about whether one could say the mountains were closer to God than the buildings, which seemed to me to be indisputable, while the student held that everything was created by God, and thus indifferent in this regard. Moulay Ali listened to us without saying a word, but later when we returned to his house he said, "I completely understand what my student meant."

After this discussion we found our way blocked by a mountain torrent and I wondered how an old man who was so frail would be able to cross it. Without interrupting our conversation, Moulay Ali hoisted his djellaba up above his knees and forded the raging torrent. When he saw my astonishment, he smilingly said, "didn't you know I was born in my father's hermitage where the lynx and the jackal rubbed up against its walls at night?"

One day I told Moulay Ali about a saying by the son-in-law of the Prophet, the caliph Ali, that someone had told me about, "Mohammed is a man, not like other men, but like a precious stone among pebbles." To my surprise, Moulay Ali told me that he didn't like this saying at all and that he doubted its authenticity because it evoked a superiority of the Prophet Mohammed not only over the people of his time but over all the prophets, whereas the Quran said, "We make no distinction between any of them." This criticism seemed excessive to me, the nature of each prophet being, all the same, unique.

According to his wishes I had bought Moulay Ali the Gospels translated into Arabic. Moulay Ali later told me he had been disappointed by his reading, having discovered the Gospels were not a direct revelation, that is, divine speech in the first person, as found in the Quran. I remembered that one cannot separate the Gospels from the Old Testament or the Ten Commandments of Mount Sinai. In the same way that one cannot separate the Quran from its two preceding revelations, the Gospels and the Torah. I felt somewhat perturbed or preoccupied by this, which created a certain distance between the Master and myself.

It was about this time that my friend, Sidi Aissa Nureddin, arrived in Fez, who I have mentioned in the first part of this memoir, as the man who transmitted to me the spiritual perfume of the great Sufi master Ahmed ben 'Alawī, who had sadly died a little before these events.

It was in the middle of winter. Together we visited Sheikh Moulay Ali, then towards evening of the same day, we climbed the hills to the north of Fez near Bab al-Guissa. A little way off the track stood a small sanctuary dedicated to an Andalusian saint. The sanctuary properly so called was a cube built of stone with a roof of green tiles and surrounded by an enclosure containing some graves. We sat amongst the graves to recite our rosary, then I told my friend all about the difficulties I had faced in my relationship with the Sufis of Fez. In a few words my friend put each thing in its proper place while taking into account the different theological structures of Christianity and Islam, which he described as two different but not contradictory dimensions of the Spirit. After that we talked about the mentality of our friends in Fez, defining the necessary distinction between the permanent principles of Islam and its transitory states which have their roots in history. What exactly was the difference – in practical terms – between the exoteric mentality and esoterism, the religious and metaphysical ways of thinking, keeping in mind that the two domains were diverse in nature without being rigorously separate in life? In the course of this conversation I suddenly realised that the real guidance, that which I had been destined to encounter, came from my friend.

After the Second World War – in fact thirty years later – I returned to Fez and crossed the medina, saddened not to find the same faces and the same cultural and spiritual ambience. But at the end of an alleyway I saw an old man clothed in white whose noble demeanour reminded me of Moulay Ali Darqāwī. I immediately stopped and greeted him and he returned my greeting. He then fixed me with his eye and asked me without further ado, “What do you think of this town?”

“I knew it before, I used to visit a master of *Tasawwuf* here, the Sheikh Moulay Ali ben Tayyib Darqāwī, who perhaps you knew?”

He nodded his head slightly and repeated, “And what do you think of this town now? Well, it doesn't matter really, we come into this world to accomplish a duty, and we are the instruments of that which surpasses us.”

“Life is like a dream,” I suggested.

“No,” he replied, “it is like the blink of an eye.”

With Muqaddam Mohammed Mejedli

A young friend having joined me, we set off together to visit the zawiyas dotted along the Atlantic coast. At the end of this journey we stayed in Marrakech in a little zawiya built like a simple Moroccan house; a main room taller rather than wide, sheltered the tomb of a spiritual master whose name I no longer remember. This room opened out onto an arcade and a garden surrounded by a high wall which contained choice plants such as a cypress, roses, jasmine and a number of flowering bushes. In the garden was a well whose water served for making ablutions. We were hastening to make our ablutions when the muqaddam of the zawiya, Mohammed Mejedli, suddenly appeared and whose presence touched us like a breath of fresh air. With his long white beard and the emaciated lines on his face he should have been an old man, yet his gestures and his speech were those of someone young. We knew that he was in the habit of climbing to the top of the tallest minaret in Marrakech to chant the testimony of faith and spiritual poems. His appearance made me think of a gothic statue of the 12th century, or the statue of a prophet or patriarch.

During a walk in the market in the old town, I had found a copy of the book, “Universal Man” by Abdel Karīm Jili and I was eager to show it to Muqaddam Mejedli. He opened the book and came across a passage where Jili expounds the following doctrine, “Whoever in his invocations addresses a particular saint, will receive a response from the part of God, and whoever in his invocations addresses a particular Name of God, will receive a response from the saint who in his invocations identifies with that Name.” He said to me smiling, “Do you understand this? And do you understand another saying of the Sufis that everything is united in God? So where is this obstacle to be found that prevents us from seeing this unity?”

I answered, “The obstacle is not in things but in ourselves.” To this he acquiesced while laughing heartily.

A few disciples, who were studying at the University of Marrakech and who already had an air of legalistic pedantry about them, arrived. In the course of the conversation they mentioned a man who lived in Marrakech and who, because of his unconventional behaviour, attracted their criticism; they went so far as to suggest the man was mad and that it was forbidden to pray behind him or take him as their Imam. Sidi Mohammed Mejedli leapt at this and vigorously asserted that the man was not only not mad but on the contrary that he was a saint and a sage and the spiritual father of Sidi Mohammed Mejedli himself. There was something in the tone of this defence that made me want to meet this controversial Sufi, but the Muqaddam told me that the man in question was almost always travelling and difficult to meet. However, he told me, he would appear if there was an intense desire to see him.

That very evening we were all sitting, the muqaddam, my companion and myself as well as a group of fuqara from Marrakech, under the arcade which gave out onto the garden already deep in twilight. We were listening attentively to a commentary that Sid Mohammed was giving on the "Universal Man", when suddenly a man entered the zawiya and greeted the company in a loud and confident voice, "Assalaamu alaikum!" He went straight up to the muqaddam took the book he was holding in his hands and said, "What are you reading here? I know you read the Quran but these texts are too elevated for you." He shut the book – "I will talk to you therefore about something else." And he began a speech which I only grasped a part of, given my knowledge of Arabic, but which answered questions I had been concerned about to the extent that it seemed to me it was expressly destined for me. "You consider yourselves superior to the Jews and Christians, simply because you adhere to the *shariah* (customs) of the Prophet, but you are mistaken as the same *shariah* is also found with the Jews and Christians, otherwise there would be no exchange possible between the different confessions, not even on the level of a business contract. What could make you superior to a Jew or a Christian is only the fact that both these religions believe exclusively in their own revelation be it Jewish or Christian whereas you recognise the same truth in the Torah, the Gospels and the Muslim *shariah*, as well as in all the other sacred books." The stranger I saw before me was moreover not very conventional looking; he wore an enormous black burnous, Arab riding boots and a turban wound tightly round his chin and forehead so his face, which was ascetic and royal, looked like a mummy's.

At this point the Sufi stranger turned his whole person in my direction – we were sitting at opposite extremities of the semi-circle – and asked where Sidi Ibrahim was. The muqaddam said to me, "That's the man that you were so keen to meet, approach him and ask for his blessing." While I was getting up the stranger was also standing up and said, "No, let he who has just entered Islam bless the others, for he is like a sword newly drawn from the sheath," and he saluted and left.

Testimonials

It is appropriate to begin this section of the volume, dedicated to testimonials, by quoting how the person who knew him the best, described him and who was none other than his spiritual guide, Frithjof Schuon.

Despite Burckhardt's illness and their geographical distance,⁹³ the two friends, united by an unwavering spiritual brotherhood, cultivated a close friendship. In a poem written ten years after the death of Burckhardt, Schuon recalled his friend who had disappeared:

On the day that my oldest friend passed away,

I received his last letter.

I have known this loyal friend since our schooldays;

It is difficult to believe that he no longer is.

At his grave, in order to do something meaningful,

Someone read four of my didactic poems.

An old proverb says: the beginning and the end –

By God's will – clasp hands.⁹⁴

In a second poem, consecrated to his deceased friend, Schuon returned to what represented the spiritual friendship granted to him to share with Burckhardt:

God often gives us in our earthly life

A brother-soul, who embellishes the Path,

And who, in this or that respect,

Reconciles us with the ups and downs of life.

The wise Titus Burckhardt was a friend

As there can be no better in life;

A brother, given me in far off days,

From earliest youth until the grave.⁹⁵

...

(Titus Burckhardt) was one of the most eminent of men through his science as well as by his spirituality; his works and essays are amongst the most profound that we know.⁹⁶

⁹³ Schuon had been living in the United States since 1981.

⁹⁴ F. Schuon, *Songs without Names*, Vols. VII-XII, 70.

⁹⁵ F. Schuon, *World Wheel*, Vols. IV-VII, 65.

⁹⁶ Extract of a letter from Schuon to a person who criticised Burckhardt.

The profound opinion that Schuon bore for his “brother and disciple” is perceptible in the way he rendered homage to him a few days after Burckhardt’s demise in a letter written to Sidi Omar (Hans Küry):

There was something eternally young and liberating about Titus Burckhardt; one never felt constricted in his presence. He was certainly not lacking in humour, and he also had a sense of adventure and was enterprising and adaptable; at the same time, he was kind-hearted and had a childlike innocence and purity about him. To this I would add that he was an excellent writer, as we all know.

Like myself, he lived for many years on the shores of Lake Geneva; and he was also familiar with our area near Bloomington. He led several gatherings here, and for the local friends he is unforgettable.

I mention all this because I feel the need to say it here in memory of my friend. I enclose for you a copy of the last letter I received from Titus Burckhardt. Now that he is in the next world, I feel that he is even closer to me than before. His mortal remains now repose right next to those of Sidi Arqam, in the little cemetery above Lutry, which has particular Baraka. I was happy to learn that the farewell words were given by our friend Pastor Borel...⁹⁷

Foreword (i)^{98,98}

Titus Burckhardt is without doubt one of the central figures of what has come to be known as the School of Tradition. He is at once a master of metaphysics and cosmology; an expert on the traditional arts of East and West; a pioneering expositor and translator of major Sufi texts; the keenest observer the West has produced of the traditional art, life, and thought of the Islamic Maghrib, particularly Morocco; and a master expositor of traditional patterns of social life. Burckhardt has left behind a precious legacy of works written in German and French, of which many have been translated into several European languages, especially English, as well as into Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu. Burckhardt was blessed with a remarkable power of intellectual penetration combined with visual intelligence. He was both metaphysician and artist and, above all, a saintly person in whom truth had become realized in all aspects of his being, in his thoughts and words as well as in his actions and deeds. He was not only a person who wrote of the wedding of the soul with the spirit and the turning of the lead of the soul into gold, but one in whose being that alchemical transmutation had taken place in an operative manner. His works complement in many ways those of his close friend Frithjof Schuon and, in the domain of art, those of A. K. Coomaraswamy.

Burckhardt wrote about metaphysics with the greatest clarity and produced books and articles of unparalleled depth concerning the traditional sciences, particularly alchemy, on

⁹⁷ F. Schuon, letter to Hans Küry, 21 January 1984 (translated from German into French and then into English).

⁹⁸ Part (i) written by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in the “Foreword” to *The Essential Titus Burckhardt*, Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2003.

which he wrote what is probably the most outstanding work of the 20th century. His criticisms of the modern world, following in the wake of René Guénon's pioneering works, penetrated into the most contentious questions and brought out with exceptional clarity the errors of such modern deviations as Darwinian evolution and modern psychoanalysis. It was, however, especially in the field of art that he produced a legacy of unrivalled value. Not only did he reveal the metaphysical truths of various traditional civilizations as expressed through the language of sacred art, but he also composed a number of illuminating works on Christian art, such as *Chartres and the Origin of the Cathedral*, both in relation to the total vision of Christianity and to the traditional sciences which made the production of Christian sacred art as revealed in the medieval cathedral possible.

It was particularly in the domain of Islamic art that Burckhardt was a veritable pioneer. What Coomaraswamy achieved for Hindu and Buddhist art in unveiling their symbols and expounding their inner meaning, Burckhardt accomplished for Islamic art in a number of seminal essays as well as in his masterpieces *The Art of Islam* and *Fez, City of Islam*. It was he who for the first time in the West brought out the inner meaning of Islamic art and its relation to the inner teachings of the Islamic region.

Burckhardt was also a pioneer in unlocking the meaning of the major doctrinal works of Sufism through the translation of the central work of Islamic gnosis, the *Fusus al-Hikam* of Ibn 'Arabi, as well as *Al-Insan al-Kamil* of 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili, while in his metaphysical masterpiece, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, he expounded the quintessence of Islamic gnosis (*al-ma'rifah*) in his own words. The extensive interest in Ibn 'Arabi manifested in the West during the past half century owes much to his works.

The influence of Burckhardt has been extensive not only in the West but also in the Islamic world. In Morocco, where he played a major role in the preservation of the city of Fez and in the revival of the traditional arts and crafts, he is widely known and respected to this day, and he is still referred to by the older generation as "wonderful Sidi Ibrahim" who first came to Morocco in the 1930s, embraced Islam, learned Arabic and made Morocco his second home.

We had the great blessing of having been closely associated with Burckhardt from 1957 until his death and of having been in his company in Europe as well as in the Islamic world, in the Alps as well as by the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. In all different circumstances he displayed a keenness of vision, both intellectual and artistic, and a remarkable state of collectedness and humanity. How wonderful it was to circumambulate the Ka'bah in Mecca with him or to sit in silent meditation by his side at the tomb of Ibn 'Arabi in Damascus! All who knew Burckhardt well were deeply impressed by the combination of extraordinary intelligence and exceptional virtue that were moulded together in inseparable unity in this truly exceptional being...

With Titus Burckhardt at the Tomb of Ibn 'Arabī (ii)

In the autumn of 1966, T. Burckhardt was invited to give a talk in Lebanon, on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the American University in Beirut. He took advantage of this trip to go to Damascus in the company of Seyyed Hossein Nasr in

order to sit in contemplation at the tomb of Ibn ‘Arabi. Here is the description of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s visit.⁹⁹

...[Burckhardt] was not a Western specialist of Islam in the normal sense of the word, rather a being who was blessed with exceptional intellectual and spiritual gifts, and who in his youth travelled to the Muslim world so as to master the interior of Islamic disciplines by following the teachings of masters of exoteric and esoteric sciences. He was providentially chosen to expose the modern world in a language comprehensible to contemporary man, the truths of the Islamic Tradition and, in fact of the Tradition in its most universal sense. His writings represent in fact for the modern world, one of the best exposés and one of the major formulations of traditional Islam. [...]

Hearing the *adhan*, despite the din and noise of the modern and Westernised city of Beirut, caused him to remark that the presence of Islam was to be felt even in the corner of the Islamic world which had been earmarked as the beach head for the spread of modernisation and Westernisation. It was possible to visit the few old mosques nearby together and to read and contemplate before the azure expanses of the Mediterranean and the clear light of the Middle Eastern sky certain Maryamian litanies and to meditate over the role of the Virgin in the religious life of the whole Mediterranean world. Moreover, we were able to visit together the saintly Yashruti Sufi woman Sayyidah Fātimah who recounted to us how it was impossible for her to choose a title for her famous Arabic work on Sufism, *al-Rihlah ila’l-Haqq*, until she had seen Ibn ‘Arabī in a dream and received the title from him. The daughter of the founder of the *Yashrutiyyah* Order was in fact so impressed by Titus Burckhardt’s spiritual presence and radiating character that she devoted a most beautiful page to this encounter and to him in her autobiography, *Masirati ila’l-Haqq*.

Titus Burckhardt was, however, anxious to visit the more traditional Islamic sites of the Arab Near East which provided more of traditional Islamic life and art than it was possible to encounter in Beirut. Therefore, after some consultation, we decided to visit Damascus together. During the two-hour drive across the beautiful mountains and valleys, which at that time conveyed a wonderful sense of peace and tranquillity, he commented upon many aspects of Islamic culture and tradition in general, upon such subjects as the ecological and geographical resemblance of the region to Andalusia and the Maghreb which he knew so well and the complementarity between the mountains and the deserts which surround so many Islamic cities such as Damascus and Marrakesh. His comments brought a joy and freshness to the experience of a scenery which I had seen so often, and brought about an interiorisation of the experience of the countryside which could result only from the spiritual effect of the companionship of a sage.

Upon arriving in Damascus we decided to spend the day visiting the tomb or “place of residence” (*maqām*)¹⁰⁰ of the granddaughter of the Blessed Prophet, Sayyidah Zaynab, the

⁹⁹ Extracts from the article “With Titus Burckhardt at the tomb of Ibn ‘Arabi” written by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*.

¹⁰⁰ There is some debate between scholars as to whether Sayyidah Zaynab is buried outside of Damascus or in Cairo. There are in fact two tombs, both of which are sites of pilgrimage by vast multitudes from near and far, one in Damascus and the other in Cairo, and both are identified with her. Whatever the historical reality, they are both her *maqams* where she resided and are loci of the emanation of great barakah associated with the saint.

tomb of Ibn ‘Arabī and of course the Umayyad Mosque in that order, for Titus Burckhardt said that traditional courtesy or *adab* required that we pay our respects first to the daughter of ‘Ali and the granddaughter of the founder of Islam. Usually “Sit Zaynab”, as Damascenes call it, is full of pilgrims, but on that morning strangely enough we were the only pilgrims present. The only other people there were a number of Persian craftsmen from Isfahan who were reconstructing the dome and placing tiles upon the walls of the edifice. After prayers and a long period of quiet meditation, we turned to the craftsmen whose activity obviously attracted the author of the most outstanding works on Islamic art to appear in the contemporary world. Burckhardt commented upon the deep piety of the craftsmen and their humility before their work. We reminisced about Fez and discussed further plans we had made together for him to write a book on Isfahan in the collection of “Cities of the Spirit” which he was then editing for Urs Graf Verlag. It was my intense wish to have a book like *Fes-Stadt des Islam* written on the beautiful city of Isfahan which he also wanted to visit. What a tragedy that this work was never realized and the world could not benefit from seeing the delicate and almost ethereal edifices of the Safavid capital through the eyes of the master interpreter of Islamic art that Burckhardt was.

It was after this pilgrimage and brief encounter with Persian art in the persons and art of the Persian craftsmen working at Sayyidah Zaynab, that Titus Burckhardt and I set out from the southern fields where her *maqām* is located for the slopes of the mountains north of Damascus where Ibn ‘Arabī lies buried. We entered the sanctuary reverentially and after offering prayers, sat down by the tomb of the great metaphysician and saint which was surrounded by an atmosphere of contemplative tranquillity and calm. The peace and serenity of this atmosphere were accentuated by the fact that at the moment Titus Burckhardt and I again happened to be alone in that sacred space which, like every veritable sacred space, is the echo of the Centre and a reflection of Eternity upon the moving image of peripheral existence.

While meditating upon the verities of that *Haqiqah* at the heart of Sufism, I occasionally glanced at the contemplative face of my companion whose closed eyes seemed to gaze inwardly upon the heart and whose face reflected the light of the Intellect before which his mind and soul were so transparent. I thought at that time about Burckhardt’s significance in making Ibn ‘Arabī known to the Western world. I recalled his *La Sagesse des prophètes, Vom Sufism* written also in French as *Introduction aux doctrines ésotériques de l’Islam, Clé spirituelle de l’astrologie musulmane* and *De l’homme universel* with its incomparable introduction, all of which I had read as a graduate student at Harvard. How essential were these writings in the sense of expounding the essence of the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī and his school in a metaphysical language of great power and clarity formulated first by Guénon, perfected in an amazing way by Schuon and applied in an ingenious manner to the teachings of Shaykh al-Akbar by Burckhardt.

During the years as I plunged into reading the texts of Ibn ‘Arabī with numerous Arabic and Persian commentaries while studying these texts with traditional masters in Persia as well as discussing them extensively with H. Corbin and T. Izutsu, whose study of Ibn ‘Arabī was deeply appreciated by Burckhardt, I realized fully the significance of Burckhardt’s achievement. He had succeeded in reaching the heart of and making known in a contemporary language Akbarian metaphysics without divorcing it from the *barakah* of Sufism or the rest of the Sufi tradition. His translations and commentaries, which are at

once traditional and full of living wisdom and light, differ so markedly from those pedantic and dry translations of certain claimants to the traditionalist school who would reduce the whole of Sufism to Ibn 'Arabī alone, and Ibn 'Arabī himself to a cerebral presentation of theoretical metaphysics which is far removed from the living presence emanating from his teachings as seen both in the writings of Burckhardt and the traditional masters of his school whom I had the privilege to meet in Persia.

Later experiences with the school of Ibn 'Arabī have brought back often the memory of those moments when I sat with Titus Burckhardt at the tomb of the great master in Damascus. To have beheld Burckhardt there lost in the contemplation of that Truth which lies at the heart of all traditional metaphysics and of course of Sufism, to have witnessed his humility before the Divine Presence and transparency before the Truth which manifests Itself in a mysterious fashion in certain loci determined by sacred geography and usually identified with tombs or *maqāms* of great saints, was to realise the incredible chasm which separates the theoretical understanding of wisdom or *al-hikmah* from its realisation. In contrast to many who write of Ibn 'Arabī and claim strict traditional orthodoxy without however having realized the truth of Sufism, Burckhardt lived the truth of which he wrote. The exceptional light of intelligence which emanated from him pierced to the heart of the texts he studied and illuminated their meaning in a manner which is possible only by a person in whom the truth has descended from the plane of the mind to the centre of the heart and become fully realized. At the tomb of Ibn 'Arabī, Burckhardt manifested his qualities of a saintly man possessing a penetrating intelligence of extraordinary lucidity combined with virtue and a luminous soul transmuted by the presence of the Truth whose doctrinal aspects he studied with such depth and understanding.

We left the tomb of the saint feeling a special proximity to the quintessential metaphysics of Sufism which Ibn 'Arabī had been destined to formulate, intertwined with many less central teachings in a vast tapestry which remains unique in the history of Sufism. Titus Burckhardt departed for Jerusalem with the aim of visiting not only the site of the Nocturnal Ascent (*al-mi'raj*) of the Blessed Prophet of which Ibn 'Arabī had written so eloquently, but also in Hebron the tomb of the patriarch of monotheism, Abraham, after whom Burckhardt himself was named. He asked me to accompany him on this leg of the journey but unfortunately other demands forced me to return to Tehran. Little did we know that in a few months the status of both Jerusalem and al-Khalil or Hebron would be changed so drastically. Later, he wrote to me of the exceptional blessings of this pilgrimage and how this blessing was a continuation of what we had received from Heaven during that incredible day in Damascus at the tombs of Sayyidah Zaynab and Ibn 'Arabī. And years later, as we circumambulated the Ka'bah, again the reality of the nexus between the *barakah* of the Centre and the secondary centres which reflect and echo the Centre was discussed and the blessedness of the visit to the tomb of the author of the *Mekkan Revelations* evoked. Titus Burckhardt has now left this plane of ephemerality for the empyrean of the Spirit, but his works which are the fruit of realized knowledge continue to illuminate in a unique fashion the path of those seriously interested in Sufism in general and the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī in particular. May God shower His choicest blessing upon him. *Rahimahu Allah.*

Some Memories of Sidi Ibrahim¹⁰¹

My first meeting with T. Burckhardt took place in 1969. I had written a letter to Sheikh 'Isa (F. Schuon) indicating my wish to enter the *Tariqa* after my Muslim marriage in Tehran, a circumstantial obligation at the time. I had expressed to him my hesitation to fully embrace this religion which, despite everything, seemed foreign to me. After my divorce and a close reading of Guénon, I was persuaded that, in the end, I had no other choice if I wanted to follow a spiritual way. In a long and beautiful response, the Sheikh confirmed this choice:

“...the question of knowing whether your adhesion to such and such a religion is the effect of a choice or the only remaining solution is absolutely irrelevant. That which decides is the value of the motives, that is, their concrete character. If such a decision is really “the last option” it is because it is imposing itself, and if it imposes itself, that is because it is good.”

He also granted me an interview in Pully and entrusted me to Sidi Ibrahim for my spiritual preparation.

At the time, I was a teacher in Alexandria and I spent my summer holidays in France, very close to the Swiss border. Sidi Ibrahim, with whom I was put into contact, had scheduled a meeting at his office in Pully (next to the Sheikh's house.) But at the scheduled time, he did not come to his office and it was impossible for me to contact him. It took much effort to find Sidi Ibrahim, thanks to Harold von Meyenburg, his brother-in-law, with whom I had been in contact. I (along with my spouse who participated in everything) finally found Sidi Ibrahim who did not offer a word – he, who was so courteous – of explanation for this “misstep”. I later understood that these difficulties could have been involuntary on his part but were there to test my sincerity. Thus, we had several interviews during which he explained to me in a general manner the broad rules of esoteric Islam and gave me in writing the precise rules of the prayer and other rites.

What to say about Sidi Ibrahim? All the while possessing extreme rigour in accomplishing the rites, he was tolerant of the demands of practical life. He had a surprising sense of humour and relativity. Also, although he had denounced with great lucidity the spiritual and intellectual impoverishment brought about by modern science in his numerous writings, he said to me one day: “I prefer modern medicine to that of the era of Louis XIV, who died of a tooth infection!”

Although he was an Arabist, he did not encourage me to learn Arabic extensively (apart from the ritual formulae of course). Since I had asked him this question – even whilst residing in Egypt – he answered me: “Do not waste your time with that.” Nevertheless, he deemed a minimum frequency of reading the Quran essential, and for this he sent us for a time to an Arabic teacher in Geneva.

When I was in Alexandria, Sidi Ibrahim had advised me to visit a Muslim saint living in old Cairo, Sheikh Ali al-Yamani. I went to him, accompanied by my wife and a young Trappist monk, a French foreign-aid worker who at the time was teaching French at Saint Mark's College in Alexandria. We were accompanied by a translator, Sidi 'Abd al'Latif, a Jewish Egyptian friend who had converted to Islam. Sheikh 'Ali al-Yamani lived in a small poor apartment and he himself was a small, elderly man, very thin, in whom one only saw his

¹⁰¹ By Jacques Perret, previously unpublished.

eyes sparkling with spirituality. He “teased us” and said with satisfaction that “our hearts are good” and also that “Islam is only a colour.”¹⁰²

Later I learnt that at his death, the pallbearers, crossing the neighbouring mosque where he used to pray, had to put his body down because it had become so heavy. They had understood that Sheikh Ali wanted to be buried there. When I related our visit to Sidi Ibrahim, regarding the material impoverishment of Sheikh ‘Ali, he said: “Oh, that’s too bad.” Then, with a little smile, he added: “At least , if one can say so...”.

What else to say; many memories escape me... the frequenting of such a man and the care he took for our training solicits my gratitude. An illuminated intelligence together with great simplicity and a surprisingly frank manner of speaking. I shared with him my perplexity regarding the writings of Shri Aurobindo: “Oh! What bird droppings!” he said, without any verbal warning.

I am forever grateful to him for having made the effort and taken the time, despite his high spiritual status and his busy schedule, to write down for me all the rites to be accomplished in Islam – it is rather long – with a transcription and the Arabic text, whereas he could have sent me any printed document. It was he who gave me the authorisation, when the time came, to practice the invocation (*dhikr*) with the metaphysical themes, then the spiritual alchemy of our spiritual Way.

A Spokesman for The Universal Tradition¹⁰³

Titus Burckhardt was descended from an old patrician family of Basel which had already been prominent for several generations with its remarkable succession of writers, learned people and artists of great renown. In the area in which he was himself to acquire great authority, Islamic studies and knowledge of the arts, he counted amongst his relatives two famous predecessors. The first was Jean-Louis Burckhardt, an explorer of Arabia who in 1815, using the name Sheikh Ibrahim, performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, and who was the first European to provide an authentic description of Arabia. The second was” Jacob Burckhardt, an art historian and specialist of the Italian Renaissance, who has been claimed by some to be one of the best minds of his century.

Born in Florence in 1908, Titus Burckhardt was the son of the sculptor Carl Burckhardt in whose footsteps he initially followed. Working as a designer and sculptor, very early on he felt the need to expand his knowledge of traditional and folkloric arts; he had a presentiment that their significance and scope went beyond many of the ideas that were

¹⁰² That is, a religious form amongst other revealed religious forms.

¹⁰³ By Roger du Pasquier. This article appeared in *Études Traditionnelles*, no. 484, April-May-June 1984, pp. 59-62.

prevalent at the time. A first sojourn in Morocco provided the opportunity to study the function of art more thoroughly in a still largely traditional society, whilst learning Arabic at the same time, and generally familiarising himself with Muslim civilisation. Later on, he was to write several works on this topic which have truly contributed to renewing our understanding of it. His first contacts with representatives of the Sufi tradition date from this time when he began to study the tradition in depth. He was to become one of the most authoritative interpreters of Sufism in the West. The foundational treatise by Al-Jili, *al-Insan al-kamil* (The Universal Man) drew particular attention. He translated important extracts from this text which were published from 1937 onwards in *Les Études Traditionnelles* and later compiled into a volume dating from 1953 and re-edited in 1974.

Returning to Switzerland, Titus Burckhardt took over the management of the Urs Graf publishing house in Olten, which specialised in art books and facsimiles of ancient manuscripts. An excellent *connoisseur* of folk art – as demonstrated in 1939 by his contribution to the special edition of *Études Traditionnelles* on folklore – he published several works in 1943 relating to it, particularly a beautiful volume on Ticino of which he was both the author and publisher. He also published a remarkable collection entitled “*Hauts lieux de l’esprit*” (Lofty heights of the spirit) which included books about Mount Athos, the Sinai, Ireland, and Kyoto, as well as three others written by him and illustrated with his designs and photographs on Chartres, Sienna and Fes. He wrote the text of two other illustrated works, one on Morocco, *A Country on the Margin of Time* in German and the other on Muslim Spain initially in German, but which later also appeared in English.

At the same time he continued his work and research, not only into Islamic civilisation and Sufism, but also into the esoteric doctrines and traditional sciences of East and West. In the field of Islamic studies, with French publishers he brought out *An Introduction to Esoteric Doctrines of Islam* (re-edited and expanded with a study first published under the title *On Sufism*), of which his above mentioned translation of the treatise on Al-Jili made up a sort of illustration, as did also the volume entitled *The Wisdom of the Prophets* which brought together the most important passages of the *Fusus al-hikam* of Muhyi l-Din ibn ‘Arabi, which he had translated along with substantial commentaries. To these translations, so useful for the knowledge and understanding of Sufism, should be added *Letters of a Sufi Master* by the Sheikh al-‘Arabi al-Darqawi, a precious example of a great spiritual teaching. In addition, in this area of Sufi tradition, his *Spiritual Key to Muslim Astrology According to Muhyi l-Din ibn ‘Arabi* should be mentioned. This is a short work of rare density confirming that Titus Burckhardt was one of the most qualified interpreters of the thinking of the Sheikh Al Akbar, the “greatest master,” of our times.

One of his most notable works, his treatise on alchemy, was first written and published in German. Sometime later there was a trying period that we cannot pass over in silence. Without any authorisation on his part and without him knowing, the publishers of the magazine *Planète* in Paris put out a supposed French version of the above work, which was falsely adapted to their own ideas, and which were certainly very far from those of the author. Rather than having recourse to justice, Titus Burckhardt preferred to publish a true, honest and authentic translation. This soon appeared entitled *Alchemy, its Significance and its Image of the World* with the note “the only French edition authorised by the author”. The book also appeared in duly authorised versions – in Italian, Spanish and English. It

certainly remains the most perspicacious and the most profound treatise on this traditional science, which is the object of so many false interpretations, that has appeared in our time.

Principles and Methods of Sacred Art is another book of great importance appearing opportunely to correct the erroneous ideas which very often circulate in this area. In also clarifying the function of symbolism and showing that, in artistic expression, beauty is inseparable from the Truth, this work represents a major contribution to the trends of traditional thinking in our time.

Titus Burckhardt's expertise in these subjects was so well established that the organisers of the World Festival of Islam in 1976 in London entrusted him with the writing of a general work on Muslim art. He produced an authentic *chef-d'oeuvre*, hereafter indispensable for a true appreciation of the spiritual meaning of this artistic tradition. Unfortunately, this admirable book has only appeared in English up to now.¹⁰⁴

From 1972 when UNESCO decided to undertake international action for the preservation of the cultural treasures of Fes, the friends he had made in Morocco insisted that Titus Burckhardt be appointed as an expert. For six years there he admirably worked in the service of the most authentic values of Tradition; and certainly this city, a testament to Muslim civilisation, will cherish a grateful memory of him for a long time to come.

His authority and prestige had become such, in the area of Islamic art and architecture, that due to his expertise, the authorities of Saudi Arabia entrusted him with the elaborate plans created by a large office of architects in Chicago for the improvement of some buildings for the King Abd al-Aziz University in Makka and Jeddah. It was not of course his technical expertise that was needed but rather his task consisted of surveillance with respect to the traditional forms and norms of Islam in the construction of these buildings; undoubtedly no one would have been able to fulfil this role with more confidence than him. In order to be complete it would be necessary to list Titus Burckhardt's other publications and articles in French, German and in other languages, notably on folk art and traditional sciences. However, the above notes only mention the most important of these works and are intended to point out that, following Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, without forgetting Ananda K. Coomaraswamy – that he was one of the most qualified and eminent spokesmen of Tradition and the Truth.

About the author and his work¹⁰⁵ 105

Despite our great sorrow, and the massive number of unforgettable memories that have been pouring in since the departure of Titus Burckhardt, we shall try to write this contribution without conceding, as far as possible, to emotion and subjectivity. We feel this is a method he would have appreciated more. Therefore, let us now cite with dithyrambic homage, his simplicity and humility in the face of every trial and his intellectual rigour (undoubtedly and unexpectedly terse for some). He loathed emptiness and ostentatiousness,

¹⁰⁴ The French translation appeared in 1985, entitled *L'Art de l'islam, Langage et signification*, Sindbad publishers.

¹⁰⁵ By Jean Canteins. This article appeared in *Études Traditionnelles*, no. 484, April-May-June 1984, pp. 63-68.

especially in words. Being in his presence, one appreciated the difficult enumerating of the illusions of the world and the ego, not without one's self-esteem sometimes taking hard knocks: Burckhardt made us destroy a batch of our paintings... conforming to the rule: "Burn what you have adored". He possessed the art of detecting sentimental and mental delusions, turning them into a blank slate. His naturally impressive approach could be formidable for a stupid and pretentious man. But behind this approach hid a goodness and unexpected solicitude for those who came to him with complete sincerity and resolve, for the one who was only concerned with exercising the intelligence in order to discriminate and understand. The interlocutor then discovered a refined man, full of humour, joyous to share his knowledge and to elevate people as high as possible to their potential. A significant anecdote, the arrival of a cat begging for a caress, or the approach of an emboldened bird, were excuses and the usual means of relaxing or resting from prolonged efforts of attention. At the end of such intense interviews, one left fully recharged. It then took days to assimilate what had been transmitted. Such was Burckhardt's intellectual charity, a certainly demanding charity and not prodigal to all who came – "why throw pearls before swine?" (Matthew VII, 6) but he knew how to address diverse needs with patience and extreme tact.

Guessing from his notes, Burckhardt was not a monolithic person. One must point out at least two dimensions that characterized the man and his work.

1. He was born under the sign of art. Amongst his close relatives was a reputable historian of Italian art. His father was a sculptor and Burckhardt himself (born in Florence!) undertook artistic studies (sculpture, design, art history). This training strongly marked his later activities and yet never made of him an artist in the contemporary meaning of the word. To our knowledge, he never produced any "*oeuvre d'art*" to be displayed in a gallery or in a museum.
2. At the same time, very early on, it was the call to the East that came to counterbalance taste and artistic talent. This call, with which exoticism and disorientation seemed to be unknown, concretely propelled him into a serious study of the Arabic language. Strengthened by the exemplary friendship of Frithjof Schuon, Burckhardt thus acquired knowledge of Islamic philosophical (Avicenna, Ghazali) and esoteric (Ibn 'Arabi, Al-Jili, etc.) doctrines which he was able to master all the better especially since he providentially met spiritual masters in traditional Morocco where he had lived on several occasions.

All of his life was conditioned by this dual purpose:

I. The Role of Art

He produced, wrote and edited books on art.

For several decades he was the kingpin in a German Swiss publishing house dedicated to reproducing ancient illuminated manuscripts in facsimile. For this sophisticated production, a photographic click was not enough and, with the active participation of his spouse, he committed himself to long sessions of chromatic notation so as to be as faithful as possible to the original manuscript. Such a work required both the artist and the craftsman, and it

goes without saying the quality of the limited copies of such work coming off the presses gave Urs Graf-Verlag a worldwide reputation.¹⁰⁶

During the '50s, the *Hauts lieux de l'Esprit* collection was created (*Statten des Geistes*). Burckhardt wrote three books for this collection, illustrated with his own photographs and drawings:

Sienna, City of the Virgin

Fez, City of Islam

Chartres, Genesis of the Cathedral

Although none of these books have been translated into our language (French),¹⁰⁷ the French public, on the contrary, enjoyed the premiere of a masterly book, the final versions of various articles on art which had appeared in *Études Traditionnelles* from 1938-1939. The chapter on Muslim art had recently been part of a new book which deals, in an exhaustive and magisterial manner, with the subject in all its aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual dimensions. This was *Art of Islam, Language and Meaning*, published in 1976 on the occasion of *The World Festival of Islam* in London where Burckhardt, in the foreground, played a major role. This publication, undoubtedly his crowning work, is revealing of Burckhardt's interests, i.e., the application of geometry to art in all its forms:

Architecture

Abstraction (arabesques, interlacing, etc.)

Calligraphy

He was a visual person, but it was not so much tangible, figurative, even sensual art as studied by his ancestor that attracted his attention, but rather abstract representation, the "ideal" in the Platonic sense.

Be it calligraphy, interlacing, or Arab *muqarnas*, he recognised the inherent Unity in multiplicity (or vice versa) that has profound Sufi and metaphysical implications. This "architectonic" tendency explains Burckhardt's interest for prestigious monuments of the past and the attraction to certain cities like Sienna and Fez, where the living environment is a masterpiece of harmony, the urban planning producing a marvellous artistic, sociological and political equilibrium. In addition, we are not surprised that from 1972 he was appointed by UNESCO on a mission to preserve a city which he loved most amongst all of them: Fez.

II. The Role of the East

Burckhardt was barely 30 years old when he began to collaborate with *Études Traditionnelles* (from 1934 the special issue on Islam contains photographs taken by him in Morocco). In 1937 his first writings were published and this collaboration implied a principal agreement with the positions of René Guénon. The collaboration was inaugurated with the translation of passages from *The Universal Man* by Al-Jili, an article

¹⁰⁶ In this respect parallels can be drawn with Burckhardt and Coomaraswamy (Cf. Essex House Press). Their common views are not limited to the editorial field, but a comparative study could come out of the proposed framework, we can only suggest it.

¹⁰⁷ Currently the three works exist in French translation.

on the Sufi notion of *barzakh* and the partial translation of *The Unique Prototype*, a short treatise by Sheikh al 'Alawi. This brings us straight to the heart of Burckhardt's preoccupation to expose selections of the Islamic esotericism proclaimed by Ibn 'Arabi. These works were not published into books until the beginning of the 1950s with the Derain collection of "Sufism". One would think that the "Sufism" series was only created by J. Herbert for Burckhardt's two works to be published. These projects that were announced would take decades to complete and translate outside of France: *Lettres du Sheikh Darqawi*, translated by Burckhardt, London (1969), *Poems of the Sheikh al 'Alawi*: translated by Lings, London, (1969), *Hikam d 'Ibn 'Ata' Allah*: Paul Nwyia, Beirut, 1972; or even those that never came to fruition (works of the Sheikh al-Tadili). However, J. Herbert preserved in his "Living Spirituality" collection, the *chef-d'oeuvre* of Burckhardt's translation concerning essential paragraphs of Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusus al-hikam* entitled *The Wisdom of the Prophets* (1955).

The fifties were very important for publishing the writings of Burckhardt. He was at the height of his era and his works from then on gained more authority and enrichment. The following decade would see him delve into subjects that came out of the traditional sciences, more precisely, cosmology. Alchemy would hold a privileged place; Burckhardt practiced the "arts of the fire": enamel, and the articles published on this subject from 1948 would find their definitive shape in German in 1960 only under the title *Alchemy*. This book – later translated into French – made up the synthesis of Hermetic doctrines of the East and West and placed the bases of "spiritual alchemy" at the antipodes of prejudices which reduced alchemy to a simple *spagyria*.

This interest in cosmology took shape through the treatise "Spiritual Key to *Muslim Astrology*" (1950), and then through the series which appeared under the title "Cosmology and Modern Science" (second semester of 1964) Burckhardt's last notable contribution to this journal.

One might find it paradoxical that Burckhardt, whose mother tongue was German, would first of all publish his books in French (which he mastered perfectly having lived a large part of his life in the canton of Vaud, the native land of Mme Burckhardt.) The explanation is that in the religious and political context of Switzerland at that time, Islam aroused no sympathy, not even a favourable echo. In France, there was a relatively more open public allowing the publication of a work such as *Introduction to Esoteric Doctrines of Islam*. Since then, conditions have changed: more and more of his books have been translated into English or even directly published in this language to the detriment of French (deplorable absence of the translation of *Fez*, *Chartres* and *Art of Islam*).

We would like to end this succinct and rapid outline with Burckhardt's position regarding "Sufi studies".

As we mentioned above, Burckhardt was above all interested in "Akbarian" trends, that is, the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi. Such an interest was in conformity with his "gnostic" temperament and with the teachings received from the Maghrebin masters he had met or with works which he had read and translated. Now with regard to "Akbarian studies" he held an extremely restrained position; he tended to dissuade any undertaking of the study of the *Futuhât*, the *magnum opus* of the Master.

One can grasp the motives behind this reserve in the introduction to *L'Homme Universel*. Burckhardt notes that Al-Jili, a disciple of Ibn 'Arabi, had the advantage over the latter, of

being more systematic, of having a more dialectic structure, of being less informal, in short, closer to the Western mind set. Burckhardt considered that there was too great of an inequality, too great of a difference in the way of thinking between Ibn ‘Arabi and a modern European and that the latter risked going astray – in all meanings of the term – in the enormous magnitude of the *Futuhāt*. In summary, the forest risked hiding the tree.

Burckhardt’s position, who spoke with great knowledge (his four volumes of the *Futuhāt* bore evident marks of practice) would certainly nuance this... but with the foreknowledge thus of an economy of means. His main goal was to stick to the essential; this was one of the fundamental keys of his commentaries.

Meetings with a Metaphysician¹⁰⁸

We had the privilege of meeting Titus Burckhardt many times. His presence offered us a rare glimpse of the effacement of an individual substance in the light of intelligence. Few men give such an impression of meditative peace and impersonal serenity, without the least posturing or stiffness; on the contrary, there was a sort of obviousness about it that was irresistible and sweet... To meet him was to be suddenly aware that “truth itself bears its own stamp”, that the right to knowledge is imprescriptible and that God loves intelligence.

The simplicity of his attitude, his discretion, and his very reserve did not exclude humour or the goodness which characterised his ready availability, the total attention he gave when listening to his interlocutor, and the care with which he answered him. But this goodness itself was without heaviness or insistence: rather than being a crutch or an artificial support, this goodness tended to re-open, in each person, the pathway to their own inner strength, which is that of the spirit.

These exceptional qualities, together with being widely cultured – T. Burckhardt had mastered several areas of the traditional sciences (metaphysics, cosmology, sacred art and spirituality) in multiple linguistic sectors (German, Latin, Arabic, French, English, Italian, etc.) – these qualities, we say, are found in his important opus of which unfortunately only a part is known in France. Of this opus we shall only focus on one characteristic, but which in truth is essential: that of his “objective logic.”

We do not mean by this a particular emphasis on the flow of ideas, the rigour of its proofs or the observance of Aristotelian rules of reasoning, which would make his writings lean towards scholastic philosophy. No, true metaphysics has no need of fitting into the mould of formal coherence to ensure its approach. It is regulated by another consistency, that of being and the real, that is, of the very *logos* of the known object. True metaphysics lies in the capacity to perceive and to manifest the *immanent intelligibility of things*. Be it pure metaphysical doctrine, cosmology, traditional texts or sacred forms, there are many ways of looking at things: Burckhardt’s attitude always remained restrained; and this moderation was only the outer aspect of a much more precious “charisma” which was that of

¹⁰⁸ By Jean Borella. This article appeared in *Études Traditionnelles*, no. 484, April-May-June 1984, pp. 76-78.

evidentness. Everything happened as if the extreme effacement of his subjective nature, in a way compelled the very order of things to be revealed through the impersonal light of his gaze, whence the surprising naturalness of his commentaries. For example, this is true of his great study of alchemy and of the meaning of its symbols. What is convincing is not so much his profound but unobtrusive erudition, but also the clarity and simplicity of the keys he offered which put into order, as if in play, the most perplexing symbols and formulae. This is all the more true of his books on art and particularly of the one which, for us, is his *chef-d'oeuvre*, *Principles and Methods of Sacred Art*¹⁰⁹ where he studies Buddhist, Hindu, Far Eastern, Christian and Muslim art from a more spiritual and doctrinal view rather than simply an iconographic one. Here the pictorial, sculptural and architectural shapes, according to the language of each Revelation, suggest the very logic of their structures, dimensions and colours, as a guarantee and verification of the discourse that they arouse, nothing less vague and nothing less gratuitous. However, the beauty, this ungraspable and mysterious radiance of the immanent divine presence in creatures, is not reduced to canon or numbers. The role of the ineffable and of grace, as well as the ultimate silence whence all speech arises and from which it is appeased, was always reserved with him. For no-one was less talkative than Titus Burckhardt, always ready to be silent, unless truth demanded otherwise.

“He who contemplates the rising or setting sun above the surface of water sees the golden path of the rays reflected on the water aim directly at him.” A pure and noble spirit has left us. But the golden path that he left behind him on the surface of the waters of our existence will still sparkle for a long time as the very sign of a luminous truth.

Memory of a Friendship¹¹⁰

After having had the privilege, at the age of 19, of meeting Frithjof Schuon almost a half-century ago, I made the acquaintance of Titus Burckhardt, a childhood friend of Schuon's, who, like him, was inclined towards the sacred and the traditional, very early on in life. The common background of our childhood was the city of Basel, with its majestic Rhine and reddish grey half-gothic, half-roman cathedral.

What I received from Schuon – beyond my reading of Guénon – was from then on, as it were, conveyed through the friendship that Burckhardt showed me for the rest of his life. He was eight years my senior, and for me he was like a brother sent by destiny. He testified to this all his life; he was, so to say, my brother by destiny and his personality was for me in many ways a model.

As a young man who was rather inclined towards a somewhat flamboyant mysticism, I found in him the serene metaphysician, the implacable logician, the man of universal culture who pulled me out of my subjectivism and who showed me how to face concrete realities. In the zeal of the aspirations bursting forth from my youthful enthusiasm, when I

¹⁰⁹ Note by J. Borella: “If one were to read only one book on sacred art, this would be the book to read.”

¹¹⁰ By Léo Schaya. This article appeared in *Études Traditionnelles*, no. 484, April-May-June 1984, pp. 79-80.

was with him I felt as if I were a sea at high tide whose waves broke ceaselessly against an immovable rock, an imperturbable crystalline rock penetrated by a light that led me to discern between the real and the illusory, more and more clearly. At the same time, he was for me like a pure and empty mirror, always ready to receive my image, to welcome it with care and even with kindness – a mirror in which I could recognise and find myself once again, and thus, so to speak, find stability on the right path.

Over the decades our friendship only became deeper, through a certain osmosis at once human and spiritual. Be that as it may, I always found my mirror again which forced me, without any constraint to show him my true side, my inward self – to confide in him my secrets and to receive, as through the clearest reverberations, his appeasing response. It was thus so until his death. Then on my last visit to his bedside three years ago – because he was already suffering from the illness that was to take him away – I was once more able to relive with deep emotion the truth of the proverb that says, “an old friend is the most faithful of mirrors.”

A few days after his death, as his illness had prevented him from writing to me since our last meeting, I received a few lines, written in his hand just before his death which spoke amongst other things of his wish to see me again – and of a “meeting on a new plane”...

Titus Burckhardt: A Great Friend of the American Indians¹¹¹

Titus Burckhardt's personal relationship with Islam and his extensive contributions to the traditional sciences and sacred art of all world's cultures are well known.¹¹² His relationship to the American Indians, however, is not widely recognized. In a letter written shortly after Burckhardt's death, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) observed that “he was a great friend of the American Indians.”¹¹³ Schuon remarked, “The combination of heroism and of a priestly mentality in the Indians must have appealed to him and somehow corresponded to a personal affinity.”

Burckhardt was responsible for two important contributions to the understanding of American Indian spirituality in the German speaking world. The first is his book, *The Wild West*, published in German as *Der Wilde Westen*,¹¹⁴ which includes quotations from some of the most well-known American Indian leaders and is heavily illustrated, including paintings of American Indians by Charles Russell, Frederick Remington, and Frithjof Schuon. It also includes a 45 RPM recording of a Plains Indian Sun Dance song.

The second, as Schuon noted, is that Burckhardt said “had *Black Elk Speaks* been published [in German].”¹¹⁵ *Black Elk Speaks* is the life story of a Lakota holy man and the best-selling

¹¹¹ This unpublished testimonial was written for him upon our request. He is heartily thanked. This article was translated from the English by Ghislain Chetan. Unless noted, the footnotes for this article are those of Michael Fitzgerald.

¹¹² For biographical information on Burckhardt see *The Essential Titus Burckhardt: Reflections on Sacred Art, Faiths, and Civilizations*, edited by William Stoddart (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003). See also the Titus Burckhardt Memorial Issue of *Studies in Comparative Religion* 16, nos. 1-2 (1984).

¹¹³ Schuon's letter from Bloomington dated January 21, 1984 to Hans Küry.

¹¹⁴ *Der wilde Westen* (Olten and Freiburg: Urs Graf Verlag, 1966).

¹¹⁵ Schuon's letter from Bloomington dated January 21, 1984 to Hans Küry.

book of all time about American Indians. Frithjof Schuon first drew Burckhardt's attention to *Black Elk Speaks* in 1947, at a time when the book was long out of print¹¹⁶ and virtually no Westerners were interested in Plains Indian spirituality. Undaunted, both men recognized that *Black Elk* (1863–1950) was a source of authentic Plains Indian spirituality and each set out to preserve the wisdom of the Lakota visionary for future generations.¹¹⁷ Burckhardt was instrumental in convincing the Swiss publisher Walter Verlag, where he was a consultant and an author,¹¹⁸ to produce their first book about American Indians. He also reviewed the translation into German by Siegfried Lang. The German edition was published in 1955 with the title *I Call My People: Black Elk Tells the Story of the Life of the Oglala Sioux*.¹¹⁹ Interest in American Indian spirituality subsequently emerged into the public mainstream in the 1960s, propelling *Black Elk* to the attention of millions of readers worldwide.

Titus Burckhardt also had a close personal relationship with Thomas Yellowtail (1903–1993), a Crow Sun Dance chief and one of the most beloved native leaders of the twentieth century.¹²⁰

I was able to gain insights into the relationship between these two paragons and Burckhardt's affinity with Plains Indian spirituality during a three-week trip with Burckhardt in the American West in June, 1979. Our journey took us through wilderness areas of Colorado and Wyoming before attending a Crow Sun Dance in Montana. Following the Sun Dance, we camped with Thomas Yellowtail in the Bighorn Mountains for four days before driving back to Colorado.

Burckhardt subsequently wrote his impressions of our trip, which was published in English as "The Sun Dance."¹²¹ The article begins by detailing his first meeting with Yellowtail in Paris in 1953, when Yellowtail invited both Burckhardt and Schuon "to celebrate the rite of the full moon" in a sacred prayer ceremony in Yellowtail's hotel room. As Burckhardt explains, "Each of us later had a dream which symbolically revealed one or another aspect of the tradition of the Plains Indians." Burckhardt then wrote about his relationship to Yellowtail, "The bond of friendship—and more than friendship—remains, and we have subsequently met one another on both continents more often than we would have believed possible."¹²²

Burckhardt's article goes on to present a lengthy description of the Crow Sun Dance before summarizing the wisdom that Yellowtail imparted around our campfire. What Burckhardt

¹¹⁶ The original 1932 English language edition of *Black Elk Speaks* was a financial failure and the unsold inventory was quickly remaindered to used booksellers. The book would not be reprinted in English until 1961.

¹¹⁷ The story of Schuon's role in preserving and perpetuating Lakota spiritual traditions and bringing both of *Black Elk*'s books to the attention of the francophone world is told in Michael Fitzgerald, "New Light on *Black Elk* and *The Sacred Pipe*", *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41, no. 4 (2017) pp. 71-91.

¹¹⁸ Burckhardt began his thirty-three-year relationship with Walter Verlag in 1939 when he designed a cover and provided six illustrations to *Scipio und Hannibal: Kampf um das Mittelmeer* by Friedrich Donauer. Burckhardt published his third and last book with Walter Verlag in 1972, *Marokko, Westlicher Orient: Ein Reiseführer*.

¹¹⁹ The book's original title is *Ich rufe mein Volk: Schwarzer Hirsch erzählt die Geschichte und Gesichte vom Leben und Untergang der Ogalalla-Sioux* (Olten and Lausanne: Walter Verlag, 1955).

¹²⁰ Yellowtail's life story, including his efforts to perpetuate his tribal spiritual traditions, is told in *Yellowtail: Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*, edited by Michael Fitzgerald (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

¹²¹ "The Sun Dance" in *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, edited by William Stoddart (Albany: SUNY, 1987).

does not mention in his article, however, is that he spoke as often around the campfire as did Yellowtail.¹²³ Yellowtail's discourses centred on the history of the Crow Sun Dance and his tribal traditions, while Burckhardt's discussions invariably focused on one or another aspect of Frithjof Schuon's life and philosophy, including a lengthy description of Schuon's search for a spiritual master.¹²⁴ What is most revealing about Burckhardt's character is that he did not speak about himself, he spoke of Schuon. This incident also demonstrates Burckhardt's great admiration for Schuon, a mutual admiration that is reflected in Schuon's reference to Burckhardt as a "brother-soul."¹²⁵

One evening around the campfire, Yellowtail held a sacred prayer ceremony in which he prayed for Burckhardt, this being the same rite that took place in Yellowtail's hotel room Paris in 1953.¹²⁶ Frithjof Schuon described the 1953 ceremony in this way, "Yellow Tail stood for a long time there and prayed in the Absaroka tongue to the Great Spirit; then I had to take eagle feathers in my hand, while he prayed for me; he also asked me to pray for him and for his people."¹²⁷ Following the ceremony in the Bighorns, the Crow holy man presented Burckhardt with the sacred eagle feathers and herbs he had used during the rite.

The physical stamina of the then seventy-one-year old Burckhardt was remarkable. He appeared to be energized by hiking for hours, even in the mountains, while I was exhausted by the same trek. Whereas I shrieked loudly when I submerged myself in ice cold river water that had recently melted from a nearby glacier, I was humbled as I realized that Burckhardt and Yellowtail calmly appeared to be bathing in hot bath water.

Burckhardt's love of the surrounding virgin nature was a recurring topic as we crossed the continental divide of the United States four times and stayed in wilderness areas in Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. I asked him on our way back to Denver if any of the landscapes surprised him and he responded, "no, I have seen many photographs over the years, so no one landscape was a surprise." He quickly added, "however, nothing in all of my travels throughout the world prepared me to experience the vast, almost limitless scale of the wilderness we visited, virtually untouched and uninhabited by man. It was beyond my imagination."¹²⁸ He then recalled a statement made years earlier by his dear friend, Frithjof Schuon: "should I someday disappear, one should look for me in the Bighorn Mountains."¹²⁹ He added that this statement now applied to him, as well.

¹²² Ibid., p. 165. Their next meeting was a weeklong visit in March 1954 in Lausanne, when the Yellowtails stayed in the Schuon home and Agnes and Donald Deernose, Yellowtail's sister and her husband, stayed in the Burckhardt home.

¹²³ Burckhardt's audience included a fourth member of our camping party, Rodney Frey, now a Professor Emeritus of Ethnography at The University of Idaho.

¹²⁴ Frithjof Schuon's life is the subject of two biographies: Jean-Baptiste Aymard & Patrick Laude, *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings* (Albany: SUNY, 2004); and Michael Fitzgerald, *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010). A list of scores of articles about Schuon's life may be found on www.frithjofschuon.info.

¹²⁵ Schuon wrote of Burckhardt, "God often gives us in our earthly life / A brother-soul, who embellishes the Path, / And who, in this or that respect, / Reconciles us with the ups and downs of life. / The wise Titus Burckhardt was a friend / As there can be no better in life; A brother, given me in far off days, / From earliest youth until the grave. . . (*World Wheel*, Fifth Collection, LXIV [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006], p. 65).

¹²⁶ Yellowtail's detailed account of this ceremony is told in chap. 14, "Monthly Prayer Meetings," in *Yellowtail: Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*.

¹²⁷ Schuon's letter from Pully, January 1, 1954 to Hans Küry.

¹²⁸ All personal recollections.

¹²⁹ Quoted from Schuon's unpublished *Memoirs* and *Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 72.

One month later Burckhardt wrote:

“There is not a single morning that I awake without recalling to my mind either the sweet-smelling prairie where the Sun Dance lodge has been built, or the wild valley of the Bighorn Mountains where we camped or some other beautiful site of our wonderful journey. I still can hear the drum and the singing of the Sun Dance and all the sounds of nature like the rushing of the mountain river near our camp. I will never forget Yellowtail officiating like a Shinto priest”.¹³⁰

Now, forty years have passed, but the memories are still vivid—Burckhardt’s spiritual charisma was tangible and unforgettable. The term “God-centred” comes to mind, by which I mean he was only comfortable when discussing the sacred in one or another of its many manifestations, and that he was a man who was always inwardly praying, invoking the Name of God. This judgement was confirmed when we embraced at the Denver airport, before he started his journey back to Switzerland: his parting words were, “We are always together in the dhikru ’Llāh [remembrance of God].”¹³¹

Meetings with Sidi Ibrahim¹³²

In 1972 I was in Rabat on an assignment for a festival about the Arab lute and it happened that for the exhibit I did not have an authentic *oud* from the Near East. Connecting the dots, I ended up being led to the person who could lend it to me; it was thus that I had the joy of meeting Sidi ‘Ali Michon. The meeting was jovial because we were both passionate about this traditional instrument. Discovering this universal Arabo-Andalusian music explorer in Fez, he recommended that I urgently contact there his colleague in UNESCO who right then needed a musicologist in this field; it was through this musical journey that I had the honour of meeting Titus Burckhardt, Sidi Ibrahim.

The first meeting took place in his apartment located on the third floor of a new building in the new town of Fez overlooking a fairly quiet triangular square. I was first welcomed by his wife, Saida Zaynab, a woman of remarkable simplicity and distinction who led me to his spacious and light-filled office. He greeted me with sobriety, imprinted with warmth, and bade me sit in front of him. I immediately noticed a very beautiful blue and white mural fragment representing the *shahadah* in Kufic characters and also a magnificent bronze from the Indies; the dance of Shiva. Arriving in this city after being four years with a Berber tribe, I was not at all surprised at the first one, but rather intrigued by the second object and it was there, with a simple glance, my first implicit contact with the perspective of universality of the Sophia perennis.

¹³⁰ Personal letter from Burckhardt dated July 22, 1979.

¹³¹ Personal recollection.

¹³² This unpublished testimonial was written by Marc Loopuyt upon our request. We thank him sincerely.

The flow of our relationship proved quickly very fluid and natural, and I soon found myself in the happy position of someone who had finally found a serene, modest erudite referent, to whom I could pose all the questions concerning the traditional worlds, questions that had remained suspended during all my years in the field in Andalusia and in Morocco. The answers were offered without haste, almost always after a time of profound silence which generated much serenity and were often accompanied by a surprisingly intense and penetrating blue gaze which naturally commanded a position of great respect and extreme inner mobilisation. We first dealt with subjects which had apparently brought us together, of course with the necessary seriousness. However, it was soon clear that they were secondary in relation to the concern of the sapience inferred by the exemplary manner, once detached and concentrated, of which this man managed every topic, either from the practical, theoretical or spiritual domain.

I was going to try to respond as best I could to the various demands that had above all the advantage of establishing for me with this inspired erudite an almost systematic cycle of one to three meetings per week, which took on a natural and imperturbable patience, and soon turned into the *ziyara*; a visit to a sage.

Besides his training as a sculptor with his father, his assiduous frequenting of master craftsmen had certainly influenced his practice of vigilance on all planes. As he often explained to me, the art of transforming raw material is most often accompanied by a form of symbolic speculation based on Quran, Hadith and Sufi commentaries where spiritual depth is combined with a sharp sense of observation but does not eliminate the practice of light irony. This endearing, sapiential and enduring universe is marvellously developed in *Malhoun*, the traditional singing of Moroccan urban centres which Sidi Ibrahim Burckhardt appreciated to the fullest thanks to his knowledge of classical Arabic combined with that of the popular language maintained by the craftsmen of Fez, which included a whole specific vocabulary for the trade.

When in the introduction of his book *Principles and Methods of Sacred Art*, he relates his dialogue with a street musician who “chants legends”, he also makes an allusion to the repertoire of *Malhoun*. It recalls the small lute with only two strings which this artist plays. This instrument, the *suissan*, at that time still retained its essential and minimal shape, such that it almost forbids the instrumentalist to develop any narcissist tendency with simple and therefore vulgar effects.¹³³133

Apart from the various combinations, the notion of a male and female string evoked by the bard of Sidi Ibrahim is found in each of the backing vocals (double string) of the ‘*oud* (large Arab ‘*oud*) and serves to differentiate the articulation by taping the plectrum; one can then have the same feminine (round and englobing), masculine (aggressive and penetrating) or angelic (imperceptible and without shock) note, in view of imitating the consonants of the Arabic language. This almost disappearing *savoir-faire* was necessary on the famous *ramal* lute, the archaic Moroccan lute reconstructed by Mohamed Ben Harbit al-‘Alami in 1971 and that Sidi Ibrahim had heard for the last time in the Harraqiyya Zaouia in Tetouan in the 1960s, as he had explained to me.

¹³³ In the 1960s, this same instrument already had three cords and then four in the 1970s with the musician Rouicha who had entrusted me with the project to install six... (Cf. Marc Loopuyt, “String Instruments of Marc Loopuyt”, *Horizons Maghrébins*, no. 75, 2016, pp. 128-176).

To come back to the first meeting with Sidi Ibrahim; in fact, my wife had met him before I did. She was a secretary with a deliberately modernist Western architect but who had been able to slide into the UNESCO team for preserving the city of Fez in which Sidi 'Ali Michon and Sidi Ibrahim were assigned. Therefore, Sidi Ibrahim presented himself eight days in a row to make contact with this man who, despite the warmth, age and respectability of his visitor, imposed interminable waiting in an antechamber every time, although he was completely available. My spouse, concerned by the malice of the proceedings, increased tea, coffee and biscuit servings to which Sidi Ibrahim responded with perfect serenity by acquiescing and smiling; soon it was he in person who reassured her and consoled her with a profound detachment and a sense of humour, revealing his perspicacious reading of the situation.

At each visit he politely took his leave and said he would return the next day. When my spouse related the details of this pitiful situation, she noted: "You know, this distinguished Monsieur, he came back and the other vulgar character made him wait again in a shameful manner – but you know, this Monsieur is really not like the others...there is something about him..."

This was indeed a constant trait of Titus Burckhardt, never lowering himself to respond to pettiness with pettiness, but, on the contrary, maintaining himself in an honest posture of discreet nobility, which always lingered in the mind of witnesses, either at the time, or in different circumstances. This degree of elevation, sometimes barely perceptible, sooner or later met its objective through intrinsic radiance, revealing a powerful maieutic for hearts that were open.

Little by little this eminent, discreet man proved to have a particular aura amongst the population of the city, a reputation that had its origins in his youthful frequenting of master craftsmen and Sufi masters. Here are a few examples:

Several times when I was with him in town, I saw people hurriedly leave the crowd and bow through respect, approaching him, greeting him traditionally, and kissing his hand before disappearing again into the crowd, whilst he observed deep silence and made no commentary.

One day an anecdote was related to me about a master craftsman of faience and decorative geometry with whom he had been an apprentice. Whilst he was studying classical Arabic, this man had, in a way, obliged him to learn by heart the *Alfiyya*, a very long traditional didactic poem of a thousand verses which goes through all the rules of Arabic grammar. He confided to me that since then, he has blessed the memory of this master who had been able to persuade him to do so, in particular every time he had to translate or comment on some of the great and subtle treatises of classical Sufism, such as those of Ibn 'Arabi or of 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili. That is, not only was he able to use the classical Arabic tongue in all its subtleties, but he also mastered it through the traditional method by which the memory is stimulated by the poetic metric of the ancients; this is the mnemotechnical potential of rhyme, combined with the science of letters, as this was also practised in oral learning of traditional classical music.

Another less common case was that of another Westerner who had recently converted and whose certificate of Islamisation was blocked in the Ministry of Habbous.¹³⁴ Sadly, his young daughter of several months had just died and the almost unsolvable and urgent administrative problem was posed for the burial in the Muslim cemetery. Solicited by the intermediary of a friend, Sidi Ibrahim immediately had the new Muslim accompanied through several administrations through one of his contacts, a professor at the university, and he himself followed all the bureaucratic steps in the following manner: dressed all in white with a *djellaba*,¹³⁵ turban and *babouches*,¹³⁶ he positioned himself in the middle of an office every time, in an impressive and concentrated silence, by merely evoking an intense act of presence with his tall, distinguished stature. Each time, in the unaccustomed silence observed by the bureaucrats and the public who observed him with amazement, the stamp hit the form in a surprisingly short time! I understood later that he was then invoking the divine Name *al-Latif* (the Kind, the Subtle) which one recites in case of difficulty: *Ya Latif*. The funeral proceeded and he directed it like a true notable of the city, without sparing any time nor trouble despite his advanced age.

Preparing for the World of Islam Festival in London in 1974, I had to manage the group of traditional Moroccan instrumentalists; a visit to the master lute player of Fez, Mohamed Ben Harbit, was planned. I took Sidi Ibrahim to his workshop, in the rain, above the Bab Sinsla *souk*. The welcome was warm and very respectful on both sides and was soon followed by an invitation to the home of the master craftsman who had recalled having heard of him in Fez in his youth. A few days later, the meeting between them was intense and the meal ostentatious. The two men of the same generation exchanged anecdotes on Sufi masters of their youth and wise evocations on the beauties and virtues of Shadhilite brotherhoods as well as the methodical invocation of divine Names. The elevated and subtle level of their exchanges on *fikr* (meditation) and *dhikr* (invocation) as well as their language was only half-comprehensible to me, but the *Barakah* that came out of it was powerful and continuous. They left each other with accolades and ritual greetings of collegial brothers and on the return a great, profound silence and marvellous proximity reigned between us in the car.

The quality of extreme modesty of Sidi Ibrahim is evoked from the preceding lines but it seems to me useful to emphasise this even more through a few extra lines to point out his truly unusual stature.

After two months of our multi-weekly meetings, one day as I was taking my leave at the doorway of an already open door, he handed me a copy of his work *Introduction to the Esoteric Doctrines of Islam* with the following comment: “This may be useful for you; I wrote it a long time ago, today I would write it differently...” Certainly the book’s very precise and concise style at first seemed dense and obscure because it was simply the first book of this kind that I had ever opened and I was only 23 years old, but today I know clearly that one should never modify any facet of this reference work, along with its precise and inexhaustible and therefore eminently useful and efficacious glossary.

¹³⁴ Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

¹³⁵ Moroccan traditional men’s wear.

¹³⁶ Moroccan footwear.

For two years I had the happiness and honour of the rich proximity to his teachings, his finesse, including a sense of an almost undefinable sense of humour. Then, alas, destiny turned the page and I had to leave Fez for a year, to Chefchaouen before returning to France. Fortunately, there was a sort of premonition that we would see one another; from Nancy where I then resided, I was able to visit him often in Lausanne where he ended his life. To live in a place called “La Conversion”, to which one accessed through “Les Brulées”, in a house located on “Chemin d’Arabie” – this obviously was not surprising for such a figure!

One day I sent a close friend to him, a seeker of knowledge. Sidi Ibrahim was very tired, in bed. My friend was introduced, exchanged greetings with him and kept quiet for almost an hour having entered into a state of *Baraka*. He said later, all the atoms dancing around him placed him into the incapacity to offer a word... As if from afar, he heard his host declare: “*Ya Sidi*, you have come a long way, perhaps you have a question?” In this *hal*, he no longer had any questions, but through respect, he forced himself to find one and finally offered: “*Ya Sidi*, in this world of mourning, how would you recommend that we act?” The answer: “If this world is in mourning, it is covered with ashes, maybe you could look for some embers to revive it?” Years later this friend always applied this marvellous advice in transmitting his knowledge of traditional medicine. Later, other friends of Marrakesh organised a Sufi symposium called “*Joummara*”, the embers, in reference to this image and homage to Sidi Ibrahim.

At my last visit a month before his death, as I was leaving him, he declared to me: “And above all, do not forget the spiritual potential of music which is your path... it can always be deepened...” This was his final teaching which I preciousely preserve as a viaticum and that I try to pass on, as with other embers...

The day of his funeral in the cemetery of Lutry, my friend Luc Breton wanted to be introduced to Sayyida Zaynab, widow of Sidi Ibrahim. A master lute player himself in the Western tradition, in a few moving phrases, he tried to convey to her the gratitude that he owed to her husband’s work, especially for *Principles and Methods of Sacred Art*, because, he declared, this book had very efficaciously guided his search towards properly traditional arcana of his profession within the Christian perspective. She responded with a sort of modesty, appropriately surprised, testifying to the exceptional *faqr*¹³⁷ of her husband.

In the following years I worked from time to time in Switzerland and took the advantage to visit his very simple, but remarkably styled tomb. There was a white stone in an Islamic shape and a sort of enclosure for a small Japanese garden. One day, I noticed that a wild tree had grown there and I picked a leaf that I put into what is called a wallet... the wallet also met another leaf of a wild tree that had grown in the heart of the tomb of his friend Léo Schaya of the years in Nancy; it was exactly the same variety of willow, a water tree, a water tree of their *Baraka*.

On another visit in June, I noticed the presence of wild strawberries on his tomb: this time it was the sign of the living heart and spiritual blood, just like the *ramal* lute of which the rosacea design sometimes represents an inverted heart, that is, a converted heart.

¹³⁷ *Faqr* means spiritual poverty.