Here’s a brief summary of my lecture for MIAS Latina scheduled for October, 4th.

The *Epistle on Unification* (*Risāla fī ’l-tawḥīd*) is the only extant work by the Shaykh Arslān of Damascus, a sufi of the beginning of the XII century. The work is not properly a “treatise”, but rather a collection of short enigmatic sayings, along the literary genre of the *Ḥikam* (like the more famous ones of Ibn Aṭā’ Allāh). These sayings are very criptic and not easily understandable without a commentary, and the editor of the Arabic text (‘Izza Ḥuṣriyya, 1969) has published five of them (out of the extant twelve). Among these commentaries, the most profound and enlightening is that of ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, on which I have based the greater part of my presentation.

The sentences of Arslān are centered around one major theme: the esoteric *tawḥīd*, a «monotheism» that is not a mere profession of God’s Unity, but rather an active process of *unification* (the arabic verb *waḥḥada* indicates an active and dynamic action). It is only by this process that the seeker can transcend himself as an individual and discover his real and essential nature.

This theme is clearly expressed at the very beginning of the text: «All of your being is an unaware polytheism (*shirk khafī*), and your unification (*tawḥīd*) will not be clear until you will not exit from yourself». This kind of «polytheism» or «association», according to al-Nābulusī, consists in believing that you are an autonomous entity different from God. This means that all the existent beings, if considered as separate from God, are essentially illusory and non-existent, because only in God they have all their reality and subsistence. The real *tawḥīd* can only be achieved extinguishing yourself (*fanā’*), because otherwise it will always remain the duality of the one who professes unity and the One whose unity is professed.

In another sentence Arslān says: «The more you dedicate yourself totally to this, the more it will be revealed to you that it is Him and not you, and you will ask forgiveness for yourself». I have translated with «you dedicate totally» the verb *akhlaṣta*, which express the notion of *ikhlāṣ*, the pure and complete devotion of man towards God, so intimate that it is known only by Him, for it is said that no other man, or jinn, or devil, or angel could perceive it. This total dedication is interpreted by al-Nābulusī as a radical «exit», not only form yourself (*khurūjuka ‘anka*), but even form this very exit (*kharajta ‘an hādhā al-khurūj ayḍan*), because in this case what appears to you as an exit *from you* is actually an exit *of you*.

Al-Nābulusī goes on explaining this point with an original example, similar to that of the vedantic rope mistaken for a snake. He says that this realization is not something new to be achieved or obtained, but that it consists simply in removing an error; like that of a person that sees a rock in the distance and mistakes it for a human being, attributing this and that quality to him and preparing to exchange words with him. But, once he approaches he realizes that it was just a piece of stone, and that the man didn’t exist even when he was sure he was. In this process, we did not go out of a man to enter a stone, but we have merely corrected an error of perspective. So, the words of Arslān «it will be revealed to you that it is Him and not you» (*yukshafu laka annahu Huwa lā anta*) mean that this *kashf* is not as a curtain removed from a door or a lid lifted from a tray, but that it consists in the awareness of a reality that has always existed and that you couldn’t see before because of a defect in your sight. Once the defect is eliminated, the Reality appears to you as it always has been. Al-Nābulusī remarks that this is the real meaning of the famous sufi saying (attributed by Ibn ‘Arabī to Ibn Barrajān): «It is estinguished what has never been, and remains what has never ceased to be» (*yafnā mā lam yakun wa yabqā mā lam yazal*». In other words, as the commentator Muṣṭafā Kamāl al-Sharīf argues, «it will be revealed to you that the Self by which you subsist is Him – the Living One, the Self-Subsistent, the Eternal – and not you; therefore, you are Him as to your Self (*huwiyya*) and other than Him as to your individuality (*shakhṣiyya*)».

Arslān concludes saying that «you will ask forgiveness of yourself» because the greatest sin is to pretend to have an existence by your own (*da‘wat al-wujūd*), not recognizing that He is the only one who is really existent.

The process of this realization, according to Arslān, is twofold. Another sentence says: «When you detach yourself from them, your faith grows; and when you detach from yourself, your certainty is strengthened». The commentators unanimously say that with the words «from them» (*‘anhum*) Arslān hints at the external objects, that is, at all those beings that are “other” than you (*aghyār*). So, the meaning of the sentence is that you must at first detach yourself from the external multiplicity, and then from your own being. The first step corresponds to the concept of faith (*īmān*), and the second to certainty (*yaqīn*) (The same idea is reaffirmed in a following sentence: «Faith is in your detachment from them, certainty is in your detachment from yourself»). Certainty is then superior to faith, because only certainty can provide a sure intuition of Reality (*al-kashf al-ṣaḥīḥ*) and the realization of the true *tawḥīd*.

This *tawḥīd*, according to al-Nābulusī, is to recognize that there is only one real Being, and that all things that are “other than Him” are actually non-existent (*ma‘dūma*), ephemeral (*hālika*) and false (*bāṭila*). However, this does not mean that the creatures are completely unreal, nor that the Being of God is somehow “inherent” to them (*ḥulūl*) or “identical” to them (*ittiḥād*), but only that God manifests Himself in them by the act of an eternal and primordial self-revelation (*al-tajallī al-qadīm al-azalī*).

In conclusion, Arslān affirms: «The creatures are a veil and you yourself are a veil. God (*al-Ḥaqq*) is not veiled, but He hides from you because of you, as you are veiled to yourself by them (= the creatures)». These, al-Nābulusī comments, are the two kinds of veil which prevent the contemplation of Reality, because the vision of the others prevents you from knowing yourself, and so you cannot know your Lord, for «he who knows himself knows his Lord» (*man ‘arafa nafsahu faqad ‘arafa rabbahu*).

The *Risāla* ends with a final invitation, that reiterates the main concept of the text: «Therefore separate from yourself to contemplate Him. Peace be upon you!». And al-Nābulusī adds: «Separate yourself from the “self” who veils your Lord to you, and from the “other” who veils yourself. Thus, you will be able to contemplate your Lord, who has never been, who is not and will never be hidden, but who on the contrary is Present, Seeing, Eternal and Perennial; it is you, rather, who hide from Him».