Pérennès Jean-Jacques,
Georges Anawati (1905-1994). Un chrétien égyptien devant le mystère de l'Islam.

Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2008.
ISBN : 978-2204073202

Jean-Jacques Pérennès**,** a Dominican friar specialized in economics and development issues, has taught for around fifteen years in Algeria, then in the Catholic Institute in Lyon. From 1992 to 1998 he was assistant counselor of the Master (Superior General) of the Dominican Order. Then he has been appointed as the secretary general of the IDEO (Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales) in Cairo. He has written a biographical account of Mgr. Pierre Claverie, killed in Oran (Algeria) in 1996, allegedly by Islamic extremists: *Pierre Claverie. Un Algérien par alliance* (Paris, Cerf, 2000). In the present book, he gives an account of the life and work of another illustrious Dominican, a well-known pioneer of Christian-Islamic dialogue, Fr. Georges Shehata Anawati (d. 1994).

Abuna Anawati, as people used to call him, has been one of the most representative figures of the Catholic Church in the field of dialogue with the Islamic world. The present account of his life and work can be considered a token paid to his person and work, and also a permanent remembrance for his numerous friends who will now be able to put together all the aspects of his life. Besides, this book will be a valid resource and stimulus for those who intend to enter into the field of interreligious dialogue. They should first consider how much work has been done before them by pioneers such as Fr. Georges Shehata Anawati and others, so as to build upon their work, without destroying what has been done by them.

The preface of the book is offered by Zeinab al-Khodeiry, professor of the Department of Philosophy at Cairo University. She is a disciple of Abuna Anawati and proud to be so. In her preface she underlines the effort Abuna Anawati put trying to make the different cultures meet in an atmosphere of dialogue. She highlights also the educative role Abuna Anawati had in the formation of many Muslim scholars who consider him their guide in the field of scientific research and openness to other cultures.

The book

The book is organized in ten chapters in which the life and work of Georges Anawati are exposed in strict chronological order. I will summarize here some basic traits of it, following the order of the chapters.

Ch. 1. A young man in Alexandria in the thirties.

Georges Shehata Anawati was born the 6th of June, 1905, in a Christian family of Alexandria, an educated family of Syrian origin belonging to the Alexandrine bourgeoisie of the 30ths, known as the 'Belle époque' of Alexandria. He was the sixth of eight children. From his father, who belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church, he got a quite strict Christian upbringing, completed by the French education he received in the school of the Frères des Écoles chrétiennes in Alexandria. He showed from the start a clear, brilliant intelligence and an iron will. At 16 he made the choice of becoming a Catholic, not without problems with his family. Then, he went to the Saint Joseph University of the Jesuits in Beyrouth to specialize in pharmacology. In this time he made his first great decision: "I want to be a great Christian scientist" (Diary, 1st March, 1925). To this purpose he went to Lyon (France) for further specialization in industrial chemistry. Beside pharmacology, Georges lived in his youth an intense life of intellectual and spiritual search that will mature in his decision to enter the Dominican order. Important was at that time his meeting with of Youssef Karam (d. 1959), a Christian philosopher, who encouraged Georges in his orientation, and will remain a lifelong friend of his.

Ch. 2: 1934-1941:
Between Chenu and Massignon.
Birth and maturation of a vocation.

In 1934, Georges went to France to start a long period of formation (noviciate) and theological studies (at Le Saulchoir, Belgium). It was a time of deep spiritual experience ("I want to become a saint", he wrote then) and intellectual activity. There, he came in touch with the great Dominican theologians (such as Madonnet, Sertillanges, Yves Congar), and the great French Christian thinkers (such as Etienne Gilson, J. Maritain and his circle). But his vocation for Islam will be determined especially by two persons: the Dominican, Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895-1990) and the French Orientalist, Louis Massignon (1883-1962). France was at that time a boiling pot of renewal in theological and pastoral experiences. Louis Massignon was opening new ways of approaching Islam that he considered part of Abraham's heritage. From there a basic question will arise for Georges Anawati, "Why Islam in the plan of Divine Providence?" (Diary, 17th November, 1941). Fr. M.-D. Chenu indicated in the philosophical approach of St. Thomas of Aquinas a model to be re-proposed in our time. Georges Anawati entered with full determination in these new ways, far from the pure negative polemics of the past. This has to become now his new vocation.

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Ch. 3. "Why Islam?". The question in the Algerian years (1941-1944).

In 1941 Georges Anawati went to Algiers to study Islamics at the University of Algiers. Here, he entered in contact with the 'Islam of Orientalists' (most of them coming from the French school of Orientalism), with its positive and negative sides. This will become a field in which he will travel for the rest of his life. Beside this intellectual Islam, he meets also another Islam that of people's daily life, estranged from its past intellectual splendour. In Algiers he had another meeting that, with that of Massignon and a converted Franciscan Mohamed Abd-al Jalil, will be decisive in his life: his meeting with Louis Gardet (1904-1986), a little brother of Jesus and a fervent disciple of J. Maritain. With him Georges Anawati started a lifelong collaboration that will lead to a number of publications in Islamic mysticism and theology.

Ch. 4. The beginning of IDEO (1944-1953).

In 1944 Georges Anawati arrived in Cairo to start his activity. He settled in the Dominican convent of Abbassiyya, founded in the '30s as a branch of the famous Dominican École Biblique de Jerusalem. Since 1938, Fr. M-D. Chenu wanted it to become a centre of Islamic studies: to study Islam, its doctrine and civilization without any attempt of proselytizing. Georges Anawati took up in full the challenge of such project with a group of collaborators, among them Fr. Jacques Jomier (d. 2008) and Fr. Serge de Laugier de Beaurecueil (d. 2005). They formed for some years a trio of intense study and research. The centre, named IDEO (Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales), and the magazine issued by it *MIDEO* (*Mélanges de l'IDEO*) became important tools for their work in Islamics, acquiring world wide recognition. The pre-revolutionary Egypt of the 40-50s knew the flourishing of some of its most brilliant intellectuals, among them the famous writer Taha Hussein (d. 1973), a close friend of IDEO. A strict collaboration with Egyptian intellectual milieu was developed, and in 1949 Georges Anawati was chosen by the Arab League as part of a team sent to draw up a catalogue of Arab manuscripts in Istanbul. He carried out his work on the writings of the great Muslim philosopher, Ibn Sinâ (d. 428/1037), and presented his work in the Congress for the millennium of Ibn Sinâ, held in Baghdad in 1952. With such work he has entered as an appreciated partner in Islamic scholarship.

Ch. 5. Inventing Space for Dialogue (1945-1955).

While the circle of his friends among Orientalists and Muslim scholars was growing wider and wider, Georges Anawati did not forget the work of dialogue inside the Church. Two associations were the centre of his activity. The first was the Thomist Circle in Cairo, an educational activity offering Christian youth a way of deepening their faith to face the issues of time. Here, Georges Anawati introduced topics concerning the dialogue with Islam. The other was the Association of the Brethren of Purity (Ikwhân al-Safâ') with the intent of grouping together people from the three Abrahamic religions: Christians, Jews and Muslims, creating among them links of mutual knowledge and friendship. Another important person entered at that time the life of Georges Anawati: Mary Khalîl. She was a supporter of Massignon's *badaliyya*, a spiritual movement of consecration to God in favour of Muslims who, according to Massignon's view, are part of Abrahamic heritage and carry in their faith an inner call towards Christ. Mary Khalil founded also a center of studies in Cairo, Dâr al-Salâm, to promote Christian Arab heritage. Georges Anawati became an active member of it. However, the coming to power of Abd al-Nasser in 1953 seemed to put an end to such activities. Arab nationalism became the dominant ideology; all ideas coming from the West were banned; a lot of people went abroad; intellectuals were put under strict censorship. Georges Anawati's activity too was put under constant control to the point that he himself was tempted to leave the country.

Ch. 6. A World Authority in Islamic Philosophy.

Since his coming to Cairo, Georges Anawati had started an intense scholarly activity. In collaboration with Louis Gardet he published a fundamental study, *Introduction à la théologie musulmane* (Paris, 1948). This was part of a project that included: *Dieu et la destinée de l'homme*, published by Louis Gardet (Paris, 1967), and should have included also: *Dieu, son existence et ses attributs*, on which Georges Anawati worked till the end of his life without coming to its publication. All this work should have appeared under the title *Grands problèmes de la théologie musulmane*, a kind of Summa of Islamic theology. The other field of his activity was Islamic philosophy. He edited and translated the works of Ibn Sinâ, becoming a worldwide recognized authority in it. In 1950, he obtained the PhD in Islamic Philosophy from Montréal University, and was invited all over the world to give lectures in the most important universities, East and West. A constant topic he liked to highlight was the link between Islamic classical philosophy and Christian medieval philosophy, as an example of cultural exchange, relevant for our times too. The IDEO became a worldwide recognized centre for studies of Arabic-Islamic cultural heritage,

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and a visiting and meeting point for researchers from all over the world, as the register of the house witnesses. In all his activity, Georges Anawati proved to be not only a knowledgeable scholar, but also a man of wide, deep and warm human contacts and relationships. The circle of his friends extended evermore in all directions.

Ch. 7. The Second Vatican Council: Harvesting Time.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1966) represented a major event for the Catholic Church and outside it. One of the most innovative topics of the Council was the introduction of interreligious dialogue as a basic trait of the Church's mission. This topic found its official endorsement in the famous document *Nostra Aetate* (1965). Special relevance had its pronouncement on Islam starting with the words: "The Church regards with respect to Muslims who worship the one living God, self-subsistent, creator of heavens and earth…". With such statement the Church intended to put an end to past acrimonious controversies and bitter clashes, starting a new era of relationships with Muslims. This was the harvesting time of the efforts made by the pioneers of dialogue with Islam, such as Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, Jean-Mohammed Abd el-Jalil, and many others. But, the one who worked behind the curtains in order to produce such a document and make it accepted by the Council was surely Georges Anawati: "It is clear that Georges Anawati played a fundamental role in all this process" (p. 219). His activity in Rome to make the 'question of Islam' enter the ecclesial institutions at all levels has been a most important contribution in this field. In this way, he was harvesting what he had been sowing since long, and this document represented an official recognition of his efforts at the highest level of the Catholic Church. This document has become, in fact, the starting point for a lot of new attempts of finding new approaches to Islam. One of these initiatives animated by Georges Anawati was the 'Journées Romaines', where Christians from all over the world used to meet every two years to study and reflect on what Georges Anawati calls "The mystery of Islam".

Ch. 8. A Scientific Work at the Service of Dialogue among Cultures and Religions.

After the Vatican Council, Georges Anawati was fully committed to make dialogue with Islam a central topic of interest among Orientalists and Christian scholars. In October, 1966, he wrote his *Lettre aux Orientalistes* (Letter to Orientalists), addressed to the most prominent scholars of Islamics all over the world, asking in it their opinion and advice on dialogue with Islam. Answers were quite numerous representing all kinds of opinions; the majority of them still skeptical, only a few were positive, among these there is that of Fr. Louis Pouzet (d. 2002), a prominent Jesuit scholar of St. Joseph University (Beirut). Georges Anawati's activity and contacts with people and academic centres extended more and more. His travel schedules were tight busy. For many years he was visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), invited by Gustav von Grunebaum (d. 1972), a prominent scholar of Islamic civilization. He received a lot of public recognitions from many academic institutions. However, in such activity his scientific work suffered some dispersion, and his 'Great Work', as he used to call it, was never finished. Why? 'Human factor' played here surely a great role. Georges Anawati felt to be, and actually was, a man of 'human contacts', and because of this he was invited all over the world. His partner, Louis Gardet, often complained of such a dispersion and lack of progress in their common work.

Ch. 9. Abuna Anawati: A Religious Man Full of Human Warmth.

In fact, Georges Anawati, or Abuna Anawati, as it was usually called by all, was not just a great scholar. He was a religious man, faithful to the daily duties of his religious life: "Religious life is community life", he used to say. He was always full of energy and humour till the last days of his life. Famous were the after lunch conversations on the veranda of the convent where he was always the soul of them. His diary reveals also the depths of his spiritual life: "Go forwards. To the hour God wills. Think about it every day. Trust in God. Die standing", wrote in 1982. Above all, friendship was the best and main trait of his life. As mentioned above, he had lifelong friendships with the most different people from all over the world: religious and not, Christians and not, educated and not. Everyone one was feeling to be the center of his attention. "His door was always open", commented Fr. Serge de Beaurecueil, one of his first companions, summarizing Abuna Anawati's character. In the last years of his life, however, he knew also times of solitude. Most of his companions had left, the future of IDEO was not clear and the community was reduced to a minimum. The deep vocation crisis that hit the religious congregations in the '70s was felt also by his order. It was during this time that I had the chance of knowing him quite closely, accompanying him in many meetings in Cairo, discussing with him many questions, and being encouraged by him in my own research on Sufism. In spite of all, he continued in his determination to be faithful to his mission till the end.

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Ch. 10. The Harvest of a Life.

Surely, from many points of view Georges Anawati's has been a successful life. He could achieve a lot of what he dreamt about himself in his youth, i.e., to become a great Christian scholar; but, one could say, he reached beyond his dreams. He achieved worldwide recognition as a scholar and as an active promoter of interreligious dialogue. However, one must avow that he too had some shortcomings and experienced some delusion. First of all, in spite of his active life, he could not complete one of his first enterprises: his great work on Islamic theology, with which he was busy till the last day of his life. Such a work, done in collaboration with Louis Gardet, could have been a much useful Summa of Islamic theology and of his vision of Islam, offering a basis for further research and comparison. Also in the field of dialogue obstacles proved to be greater than he probably expected. After the first enthusiastic approaches, dialogue with Islam knew some drawbacks on both sides, Christian and Islamic. In Christianity many people continued to be hostile to it, gaining evermore influence in Christian communities, in what is known as the post-Council reflux. On the Islamic side, for a number of reasons the fundamentalist trends came up with great power, gaining almost complete dominion over the Islamic societies. A clear sign of such new trend was a lecture Georges Anawati had been called to give on the occasion of an important meeting between Vatican representatives and al-Azhar in 1978. He proposed the topic: 'The common faith in the one God' as the ground on which Christians and Muslims could build together a common humanism based on the common monotheist faith. His lecture was cancelled and a bitter answer followed in al-Azhar magazine in which it was stated quite clear that Islamic monotheism is different from the Christian, and so one cannot speak of a common faith, and therefore there is no common humanism between Christianity and Islam. Such a refusal came like a shock for him. In fact, after some years, in an article published in the French newspaper Le Monde (5 January, 1982) Anawati pointed to the necessity for Islam to carry out an 'up-dating' of its culture, if it wanted to be at the level of other religions, Judaism and Christianity. Without such a premise dialogue would not be viable. He was seeing that fundamentalist propaganda and polemics were evermore dominating the Islamic cultural world. The old generation of 'liberal' Muslims he knew at the beginning of his work in the '50s and '60s had passed away; now one has to search for 'new thinkers' in Islam, quite few in fact, with whom to rebuild dialogical relationships. "Dialogue with Islam requires a geological patience"; was one of his famous expressions, fruit of some difficult experiences. One has to remark too that Anawati, while well acquainted with classical medieval philosophy in Christianity and Islam, was out of touch with modern philosophy and its innovative trends that were influencing Islamic thought too. However, another of his famous sentences is still commonly repeated in the Arab intellectual milieus, giving people a lot to think about: "There is no religion without culture and no culture without religion". This sentence may well summarize the whole effort of his life, dedicated to dialogue among cultures and religions.

Georges Shehata Anawati passed quietly away in his convent at Abbassiyya (Cairo), on the 28th of January, 1994, the day of the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, his master and model of thinking. The news spread around quickly and a lot of people of all denominations and groupings came to pay homage to a man that represented for them all a model of life, both at the intellectual and human levels. His name remains inscribed among the great thinkers of the Arabic world, and among the pioneers of interreligious dialogue.

Conclusion.

With the present biography, of which I have offered just some traits, Jean-Jacques Pérennès has surely given a great gift to all those who knew and loved Georges Shehata Anawati, but also to those who did not know him personally. This biographical work is well documented, full of useful remarks and reflections. The character of Anawati is well outlined in its different aspects. Those who knew him will surely appreciate this book. In fact, Anawati's work and experience should be taken into account by everyone who intends to enter the field of dialogue with Islam. One point, however, could have been added to complete the picture, i.e., a substantial summary of Anawati's vision of Islam and interreligious dialogue, drawn from his numerous writings. Such summary could help a lot with a better acquaintance of his thought and a better knowledge of his mind in topics to which he has dedicated most of his efforts. In this way, one would be able to compare them with other visions, continuing Anawati's work of research and dialogue.

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