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BOOK REVIEW

En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques. By HENRY CORBIN.
Vol. 1: *Le shî'isme duodécimain.* Vol. 2: *Sohrawardî et les platoniciens de Perse.* Vol. 3: *Les fidèles d'amour, Shî'isme et soufisme.* Vol. 4: *L'école d'Ispahan; L'école shaykhie; Le douzième Imâm.* Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1971-72. Pp. 332; 384; 358; 567.

En Islam iranien is an extraordinary religious document. In this culmination of Henry Corbin's lifetime work in Islamic philosophy, the most striking aspect recurring again and again is his religious involvement and interaction with the material. An example of the religious "insight" which constantly fructifies his vision is the following personal account of a journey with two close Iranian companions into the high mountains to the shrine of the great Shî'a thinker, Mullâ Şadrâ Shîrâzi:

During a late, splendid Iranian autumn (1962) after a day spent in the village of Kahak situated in a high valley of a nearby mountain, a region where Mullâ Şadrâ Shîrâzi found solitude for ten years, I had the opportunity to journey to Jam-Karân with two dear Iranian companions. I will report further on the recitation of the dream of one of them, a dream affirming (as if that was necessary!) the intense presence of the Imâm in the Shî'ite heart. I harbor an extraordinary memory of this pilgrimage no doubt because this place has a strange geological environment, with the Imâm's mosque inscribing in the soil a splendid defiance which faith in the Invisible Ones bears to our day; it seemed as if all things were possible. In this silent, immense country, relationships such as those we are proposing in the course of this chapter derive from totally different data than we acknowledge in our country, in the tumult of our cities, or in the proximity of our superhighways. Nothing resembles a trail more than another trail in the desert. Having lost our way, one of our companions loudly challenged a horseman who was passing providentially in the vicinity, "Where is the road to the sanctuary of the *Imâm al-zamân* (the Imâm of this time)?" These words *Imâm al-zamân*, vibrating in the silence of the great solitude, pure as the clarity of the immense sky, gave suddenly to the One so desig-

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nated with such hope and fervor across the centuries, the force of a reality thrust upon us during a lightning flash, real indeed . . . since the three of us were searching for the way toward Him, and someone had shown us the way. [4:345–46]

A purposeful sense of destiny guides Corbin in these volumes. He hopes to right a great religiophilosophic wrong by sketching in massive strokes the general outline of Eastern Islamic thought, thus ensuring a rich area of thought a permanent place in the philosophic world. His dedication to this goal is moving, and in some cases he has been successful. Unfortunately, his own biases and preoccupations cloud his final contribution.

There are seven distinct books comprising these four volumes. The first Book, *Le shî'isme duodécimain*, deals specifically with the main dimensions of the Twelver Shî'a, that is, the largest and most important group who define their allegiance to Islam through Alî. Despite the fact that this movement has ample historical data, Corbin eschews this material. Rather, he sees the real basis for Shî'a expression in a hierohistory, a metahistory operating in a realm transcending the historical and only obliquely related to it. The twelve Imâms function in a spiritual cosmos (a "pleroma") whose shape and meaning are "la tradition d'une gnose très ancienne" (1:60), while the concept *Imâm* itself derives from "une religion prophétique universelle" (1:63).

Those of us confirmed in understanding Shî'ism as a complex religious movement, deriving at least in part from the historical activities at Karbalâ, are chagrined that little of Ḥusain's great martyrdom is retained as meaningful; instead, the vitality of opposition derives from something deeper: "It derives from something more subtle, a combat against an interior menace and against a peril most difficult to recognize, because this menace and this peril, we have already indicated in previous pages, forms itself at the same moment where the external appearances are those of success" (1:88).

The Shî'a position grows out of several forms of dissent: the antagonism against the Sunni ulema who proposed a religion of Law (*sharî'at*) as the religion of Islam, the continuous critique of the *bâtin* (esoteric) as it is made *zâhir* (exoteric), such as occurred during the Safavid period, the struggle against the constant temptation of Shî'a followers to forget the esoteric meaning of their religion, even as the Şûfis had forgotten their true origins for a less noble religious perspective. This last issue needs some clarification, for it rests upon Corbin's view that Şûfism and Shî'ism derive from a common intuitive grasp, that is, *irfân* or *gnosis* (1:94), the latter being explicitly an element of the teaching of the Imâms. The evidence for this remarkable thesis rests upon the Şûfî use of *Qutb*, the "Pole" which he argues derives from Imâmîc sources (1:92), and upon *walayât*, a word connoting the total believing attitude one has toward the Imâm as the intermediary between himself and God. Corbin designates this as a "religion of love"

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(1:329) and sees it as the primordial form of mysticism in Islam (1:129, 154). In the final analysis, however, it is based upon the conviction that unitive thinking has deep gnostic roots and that, since mystical oneness is the message par excellence of Šūfism, true Šūfism and Shī'ism therefore have a common genesis (1:130). This issue arises again in the third volume.

Readers will become very restive with the continual spiritualizing of Shī'a consciousness: the Imâm is an eternal theophany (1:171); the Ahl al-Kitâb (the people of the Book) are those who proceed from a Holy Book, a Book which descended from Heaven (1:135 ff.); imâmology is really an eternal prophethood with each Imâm an event or moment (*événement*) revealing part of the meaning of prophecy (1:221). The valid expressions of Shī'a religion are grounded in a profound symbolism, such as the Reality of the primordial Muhammad (1:201 ff.). This trend in Corbin's thought is more complex than his dispute with historicism and social scientism, to which he returns repeatedly in this volume. It has to do with his convictions that Shī'a Islam is normative Islam, that the important aspects of Shī'a consciousness are rooted in a brilliant Iranian past, and that the most significant part of religion is its intuitive wisdom. None of these appears to me to be self-evident.

In contrast, the second volume, *Sohrawardî et les platoniciens de Perse*, is a much greater contribution to our knowledge. In it he traces the integration of Islamic thought with earlier Zoroastrian patterns through the work of Suhrawardî. Suhrawardî was born northeast of what is present-day Iran in the village of Suhraward (see 1:12). He studied in Azerbaidjan under Fakhraddîn Râzî, the great Muslim *kalâm* specialist, and then departed for Ispahan, where he came in contact with Avicennan thought, especially in its more theosophical interpretation. During one of his wanderings, the young Suhrawardî came to Aleppo, where he stirred up the antagonism of the Sunni ulema and, despite his friendship with Saladin's son al-Malik al-Zâhir, he was put to death in 1191, at the age of thirty-six. Those who knew him and honored his abilities as a thinker called him Shaykh al-Ishrâq, that is, mentor of the Ishrâq school.

The chief concern of Corbin's studies is to delineate the sources of Suhrawardî's thought (which, unfortunately, is only outlined on 2:18-19, being dealt with in a much earlier publication [*Sohrawardî d'Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishraqî)*, Publications de la Société des Etudes iraniennes, no. 16 (Paris, 1936)]. The basis for much of his analysis is Suhrawardî's *Kitâb Hikmat al-Ishrâq* taken in conjunction with its commentaries, especially that of Mullâ Šadrâ Shîrâzî (d. 1640). There are three principal figures in Suhrawardian theosophy: Hermes, Zoroaster, and Plato. Hermes was regarded as not only the ancestor of all wisdom but the archetypal hero of mystical ecstasy (2:24); the Zoroastrian-Plato connection is established by Suhrawardî himself: "There was a community of men in ancient Persia who were

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guided by God (*al-Haqq*) and who walked also in the way of law, eminent sages-theosophists with no resemblance to the Magians. It is their precious theosophy of Light, that which is witnessed in the mystical experience of Plato and his predecessors which we have resuscitated in our book which has as its title *The Oriental Theosophy*, and I have not had a precursor before of such a project" (2:29).

The rub enters when one tries to establish solid connections in the meanings of these terms. What was the "mystical experience of Plato" (actually Plotinus) which Suhrawardī saw as the key to ancient Persian thought? Were hermetic concepts directly adopted by Suhrawardī? Corbin relies upon a string of analogical arguments in his explication: *Xvarnah* in the Avestan texts is actually a coalescence of several traits that can best be translated as "Lumière de Gloire," involving the notion of a sacred aura, a flaming celestial light, a source of "connaissance orientale" (2:82), a principle of being and life and divine inspiration (2:84). This term is found in Suhrawardī as *khorrhah* (2:82); its use, argues Corbin, is consonant with the earlier meaning traits. In a very dense and complicated argument, he draws parallels between the Oriental theosophy of Suhrawardī and the ancient cosmic, angelic, and ontological dimensions of the Light of Glory until he concludes that this term denotes a Presence (2:159) which cannot be understood as an object, concept, or representative of a concept; it is "ce qui fait voir" (2:83).

Perhaps the most interesting argument is the hermetic aspect; cautiously accepting Coyajee's thesis that there was a community of ideals between the Mithraic groups and the confreres of the Holy Grail (2:157), Corbin points out the similar intentionality expressed in the ecstatic ascensions of Hermes, Kai Khusraw, and Zoroaster. Suhrawardī is part of this spiritual world because he uses *Xvarnah* in symbolically the same way, that is, to search for the most significant existence, for true personal being, and for an "Orient" in the cosmos (2:208).

Obviously, the validity of these arguments rests upon issues larger than themselves. It is best to leave the question of Corbin's interpretation of *Xvarnah* to the Zoroastrian specialists, but we can sympathize with what he is attempting to do. In the absence of direct historical connections, and without opting for patterns of influence, or geographical spheres, etc., how much can be said about Suhrawardī's sources? Nevertheless, the old problems of the *formgeschichtliche Schule* flood us once again, and, though Corbin is undaunted by them, I still think that establishing the base terms of an analogical argument by projecting current meanings onto the past can lead to gross errors. We really need additional definitive evidence.

Several other points should be noted. Balanced against the fascinating bits and pieces of translation from Suhrawardī scattered throughout the book is Corbin's habit of translating material with his own theories

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in mind; for example, *Hikmat al-Ishrâq* should not always be translated as "Theosophie d'Orient." It is better to leave it untranslated than to imply the whole range of meanings which may or may not be there, depending upon one's acceptance or rejection of Corbin's theories. Moreover, it seems unnecessary to me for the author to go out of his way to establish the "Iranian" content of Suhrawardî (2:181). It is true that he sets this off from any current nationalistic interpretation ("Il faut d'abord comprendre que cet iranisme n'est nullement racial, mais hiératique au sens néoplatonicien de ce mot" [2:181]), but few lay readers would catch such nuances, especially when they note that the volumes were published with the help of several Iranian governmental agencies. On the other hand, the volume abounds with material of permanent value: the depiction of the liturgical recital of the Qur'ân (2:278 ff.), the symbolism of the mountains (2:282-83), the alchemic meanings (2:285-86, 311), and the symbolism of colors (2:222-23), to mention only a few.

The third volume, *Les fidèles d'amour, Shi'isme et soufisme*, comprises two different kinds of studies: the theories of love of Rûzbehân Baqlî of Shirâzî (d. 1209) and the examination of several writers who demonstrate the Şûfî-Shî'î interaction. Of all the sections in these volumes, I found Corbin's treatment of Rûzbehân to be the most satisfying: his interpretation arises naturally out of textual material, there are many fine translations, and the reader does not have to wade through pages of theoretical disquisition to suddenly be introduced to a quote that makes sense of it all. Rûzbehân has remained in the shadows of great Persian writers such as Hâfiz, 'Aṭṭâr, and Jalâladdîn Rûmî, who followed him, but Corbin shows he deserves a more elevated position in Şûfî annals. He is "l'un des spirituels les plus représentatifs du soufisme iranien, mais d'un soufisme non shî'ite" (3:9). This conviction leads Corbin to establish Rûzbehân as the model of a profound love roughly comparable to that found in Dante and the *Fedeli d'amore*.

When he was fifty-five, Rûzbehân wrote *Kashf al-aşrâr* [Spiritual journey], an autobiographical account of his religious experiences beginning when he was fifteen. Corbin delineates the various steps in his spiritual evolution from this statement (still in manuscript, unfortunately) and with enviable grace relates this to his doctrines that are camouflaged in an enigmatic, flowery language in his commentaries and expositions. Rûzbehân's contribution to the theory of the love of God in Şûfism is highlighted by his conviction that seeing beauty in the world, expressing human love, having the ordinary joys of life, are potentially initiatory modes through which divine life can be experienced (3:112 ff.). Moreover, for the initiated, the beauty of the world is a cipher that gives expression to the face of heavenly beauty and the love which man knows is rooted in the eternal dimensions of the other world (3:28). The key statement in Rûzbehân is "I have seen my God through the most beautiful of forms," and this form may indeed be a

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beautiful woman (3:69–70). For Rûzbehân, the Şûfî goal is to adhere to an attitude of fidelity to the eternal Fiancée (3:123). Corbin follows Rûzbehân through the various steps of initiation into the understanding of God, and during the course of these explorations tells the fascinating account of Rûzbehân in Mecca. Rûzbehân was called to task by the Şûfî brotherhood for his continual gaze upon a beautiful woman; the young lady thought that Rûzbehân's intentions were less than honorable. We can understand the spiritualized meaning of Rûzbehân's gaze by the following gloss: "When these things of beauty are favored with the mystical contemplation of the Şûfis, and they purify [i.e., the Şûfis'] inner being, the light of their outer beauty is communicated to their inner beauty, and their beauty becomes eternal" (3:20, n. 61). It was this double meaning, this duality of intent, in every experience of the world which characterized Rûzbehân's interpretation of Şûfî doctrine. Corbin's interpretation of Rûzbehân is a fine contribution to our knowledge of Şûfism and well worth the purchase of the volume for it alone.

As we might expect, the second section, *Shî'isme et soufisme*, is dominated by the thesis that true Şûfism and Shî'ism derive from common sources (3:149). Corbin finds this view exemplified in several authors, notably Ḥaydar Âmulî (d. 1385–86?), Sâ'inuddîn Ispâhanî (d. 1427), and ʿAlâuddawla Semnânî (d. 1336). The strongest case for his views is that found in Ḥaydar Âmulî:

And these, despite their origination in one or other (i.e., Şûfism or Shî'ism) are of the same origin; the source from which they drink deeply is the same, the term to which they refer is only one and the same. In effect, the term to which all Shî'a refer, in particular the group of the Twelvers, is none other than the person of the Emir of believers (the first Imâm) and after him, his children and the children of his children (the eleven other Imâms). He is the source therefore from which they draw their origin and from which they drink deeply; he is the foundation for their understanding, the term to which they can refer their principles. The same holds for the true Şûfis (*al-sûfiyat al-haqqa*), because this is the one in which they found their understanding and to which they do the ascent of their consecration (their *khirqâ*, their mantle of the Şûfis); it is none other than the first Imâm, and after him, the one succeeding the other, his children and the children of his children. [3:179]

There is no doubt that Şûfism and Shî'ism grew out of a common religious environment, and when they did become recognized as distinctive trends, interaction between them was constant. But it does not follow that a "true" Şûfism should be defined by loyalty to the Imâm's teachings—in fact, that was only one of the many religious tendencies contributing to pious development in the early *ummah*. Any other view ignores the diversity which characterized Islam from the beginning. Ostensibly, Corbin bases his theory on three key doctrines in Şûfism: (1) adherence to the *walayât*, a complex term incorporating the loving relationship between the Şûfî initiate and God, which

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Corbin argues derives from Shī'ism; (2) the stress of *gnosis* in Ṣūfism, which he finds equivalent to the Shī'a theosophical knowledge; and (3) the tendency for Ṣūfis to depict reality in terms of *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, between *sharī'at* (law) and *ḥaqīqat* (mystical truths), which he argues is consonant with Shī'a developments (3:154–55). Corbin supports Āmulī's view that both Ṣūfī and Shī'a consciousness derives from the first Imām, understanding by that that their derivation is a common ideational ethos (3:11). Since he further contends that Ṣūfism is *the* spiritual tradition of Islam (3:11), one then wonders why the esoteric branch of Shī'ism should be the only area explored to determine Ṣūfī religiosity, there being several trends growing from that ethos. In the final analysis, Corbin's Shī'a bias is based upon his phenomenology of the spiritual life, one corollary of which is the continuity and similarity of the mystical-theosophical mode whenever it expresses itself. Any Ṣūfism that moves in another direction is judged in reference to this initial standard resulting in a depreciation of that form. With only one legitimate model, no other kind of Ṣūfism is logically acceptable. The result, in my opinion, would be equivalent to defining Notre Dame in terms of its stained-glass windows, satisfactory to a point but hardly comprehensive.

The fourth volume actually comprises three studies : *L'école d'Ispahan*; *L'école shaykhie*; and *Le douzième Imām*. Philosophers, especially those interested in the history of ideas, should be delighted with *L'école d'Ispahan*. It is a fine glimpse into a movement of thought that begins with Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631), achieves rare brilliance in Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1640), and continues through Qāzī Sa'īd Qummī (d. 1691). The coalition of Avicennan and Shī'ite thought which begins in Mīr Dāmād comes to its greatest fruition in the work of Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī.

Briefly, Mullā Ṣadrā argues that being does not have an essence that antedates its existence. It is in its act of being that an essence comes to be. This essence has no quiddity, in the manner of the essentialists, since it arises out of the act of existing and therefore changes with the degree of intensification or weakness of the act. This act of existing takes place at all levels of being: *sensate*, *imaginal*, and *intelligible*. Essence arises as a function of this existence, and thus essence has the aptitude of passing through a series of metamorphoses from a lower level to a higher level of being. The world is not evolving but ascending through various levels of beings, finally culminating in a Presence, which is the act of existence of a spiritual being. For Mullā Ṣadrā, the more intense the degree of Presence, the more intense is the act of being; hence, man is freed from the defining characteristics of death, so pronounced in contemporary existential ontology (4:79–81).

One might wonder how we can know such a Presence, which, after all, must be perceived by someone rooted in a space-time continuum incompatible with its reality. Mullā Ṣadrā's answer is that there is a

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spiritual faculty which the soul carries "with it," an active Imagination (4:93). In fact, says Mullâ Şadrâ, "All external sensible faculties are the shadows and vestiges of these internal faculties which return to the essential center of the soul, the soul herself" (4:94).

By the soul herself, Mullâ Şadrâ means a Form (*sûrat*), the principal of individuation; moreover, there are imaginative forms which subsist in the imagination itself as "a thing subsists in its author, not in the manner of a thing subsisting in a passive receptacle" (4:103). This allows for the reality of the perceptions of the mystic in his ecstasies and guarantees the objectivity of that intermediary world, *‘alâm al-khayâl*, which stands between the world of sense experience and the world of pure intelligibles—the world of the Presence (4:103). Thus, "reality" reaches across all three levels of being: "The truth here is that all the essences have a reality of substance (*haqâ'iq jawhârîya*) existing in each of the three worlds: sensible, *imaginal*, and intelligible. They are immaterial (*mujarrada*) in the two worlds, while material (*mâddîya*) in the sensible world" (4:112).

Some readers will find intriguing the rich exploration of Qâzî Sa'îd; while obviously not a thinker in the genre of Mullâ Şadrâ, he has a creativeness in depicting the spiritual life worth considering. One is awed at times by Corbin's ability to tread this way through a wide range of images, symbols, theosophical ideograms, and mythological wanderings. On the other hand, statements like "Le 'Récit du Nuage blanc' nous introduit en un monde qui est simplement une autre région du monde dans lequel nous font pénétrer les *Memorabilia* de Swedenborg" (4:150) quickly deflates this admiration. Nevertheless, after scanning the ideas and metaphysical principles of impressive thinkers such as Mullâ Şadrâ, one anticipates with Corbin that our philosophical provincialism might be somewhat challenged. His work certainly has opened the door to important new data; hopefully, he can justly claim that "cette autre *jâhiliya* [Islamic pejorative term designating the pre-Islamic period of ignorance] approche de sa fin" (4:29).

L'école shaykhie is a small section, less than 100 pages, sketching what Corbin sees as a legitimate branch of Shî'a theosophy reaching from Shaikh Aḥmad 'Ahsâ'i (d. 1826) to the present day. He admits that Shaikh Aḥmad would not have seen himself as a founder of a distinctive school (4:206); nevertheless, several points indicate that this was "a restoration and a reformation of the whole tradition of Shî'ite theosophy" (4:211). This revival encompasses *ijâzat* (spiritual requisites) of each of the twelve Imâms, the ontological validity of the intermediary world, and the *Shaikh al-ghayb*, the guide to the supersensible world and master of his inner personhood. From the textual material available in Corbin's exposition, little of originality appears in the Shaikh's doctrine, except perhaps his designation of the *Ḥaqîqat muḥammadiya* (the eternal Reality of Muhammad) as an absolute being, a category encompassing all being (4:267–68), and his modification

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of matter-form so that the former is that which exists while the form is its quiddity (4:268). It is doubtful if a whole new school should be defined by such meager developments. At any rate, Corbin views the "visions, revelations and dreams" of Shaikh Aḥmad as expressive of archetypes evident in Shi'a consciousness, and it is this awareness which characterizes the school to today. We must await the work of contemporary exponents of this school to make a final judgment about this contention.

The last book, entitled *Le douzième Imâm*, ought to be a reward for the patient reader who has plodded thus far. Style is not one of Corbin's strong points; he often repeats himself ("pédagogiquement, les récapitulations ne sont jamais superflues" [4:65]), concerning both theme and methodological principle, and at times he is excessively turgid. Having labored to this point, we might hope to find a few pious texts on the twelfth Imâm and a brief résumé of the influence of various Twelver themes. Indeed, we do find some remarkable texts, translated with great feeling: concerning the Imâm, pages 312-17, 318-21, and 324, and concerning other hagiographical episodes, pages 342-43, 347-67, 368-72, and 375-76. But there is no résumé. Instead, a long section entitled "La chevalerie spirituelle" advocates that there is a noble religious élan encompassing all the themes explored in these volumes. In short, religiotheosophical data arise out of a more fundamental phenomenon, that of a "chivalry of the spirit." The sweep of this "spirit" is incredible: it reaches from India to Iran, Iraq, Russia, and Italy, from Zoroaster, Abraham, and Suhrawardî to the Knights of the Round Table, Joachim de Fiore, and Swedenborg, from the misty past of Saoshyant to Goethean heroes, the Mahdî, the Church of John (a mysterious and eternal church succeeding the Church of Peter), and the current search for "self." It is a masterful vision, heady, elitist, and steeped in a career of Islamic and theosophical lore.

It is, I suppose, futile to point out that there were many kinds of chivalry differing in time and space and quality: distinctly religious and obviously feudal, motley bands and noble armies. No one now supports Leon Gautier's theory that feudalism was a social and economic system while chivalry was singularly an ideal, claiming allegiance from widely scattered and independent groups. It is likely irrelevant to note therefore that the "spiritual chivalry" concept has no acceptable support. It is a romantic view characterized by aristocratic *hauteur* and loyal to an ideal Persian image. It is an existential comprehension arising from an archetypal experience of Corbin himself in the company of a few close companions on the way to a shrine of Mullâ Şadrâ Shirâzî, fortified by a community of sympathetic Shi'a colleagues in Téhéran and a lifetime of Middle Eastern beneficence.

Certainly Shi'ism does have its continuities, its ideals, its theosophical moods, and its genius, but even the most ardent follower would pause before the multidimensional construction which Professor Corbin sees

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exemplified in Shi'a religion and eventually turn back to perception that is both historical and metahistorical, social and theophanic.

The phenomenological method of Corbin raises several problems, some of which I have indicated above. Corbin sees phenomena as having direction and change within themselves, so that, for example, the data of study are not regarded as a funeral cortege but as having a life and intentionality of their own (1:173). Hence, it is not enough to "let the phenomenon be" as if it were an object; one must perceive the phenomenon as a living entity with an intentionality which it is working out. This means that a phenomenon has a history, but *that* history can only be properly understood when judged from its own terms of reference, not from another (i.e., not from the norm of bland "historical" facts which appear in a continuum without respect to import or value). "The phenomenologist allows the religious object to tell itself its history, its own history, so that time is the time proper to the consciousness of this object" (1:173). "He knows that the living, actual reality of the Imâm must be searched for in the witness of those living there or who have lived there, those to whom the person of the Imâm *is* the actual history, while they are the hermeneutic of it." Thus, he attaches a special significance to an eminent shaikh who, noting that a book concerning the first Imâm had been written, said, "At that precise moment, it is the Imâm who spoke." We might say, therefore, that each individual has a perception of the Imâm, and in writing about him or responding to him in any concrete manner, he is telling us what the Imâm *is*. The phenomenologist must uncover what the Imâm is by studying not only what he appeared to be in the data as expressed but the consciousness which made possible the data to begin with.

Corbin recognizes very well that there are many kinds of "appearances," some of which will be significant for study, some not. Hence, those which become normative he holds have a "phenomenological truth" evident in every true event; the shaikh recognized the "truth" which was being written through the inspiration of the Imâm. Whatever may be said about this theory, it has several advantages: (1) It puts stress on the existential experience as determinative in studying religion. This bypasses the problems of trying to interpret religious data by historical means which may be antagonistic toward it. (2) It acknowledges that a symbol system has a certain genius (style, form?) which may vary experientially but which nevertheless has *power*. (3) It recognizes that part of what may be true about a religion is not what is said about it, or perhaps even experienced in it, but the "mood" which led to the concrete expression.

Nevertheless, there are serious shortcomings in his method. There are no distinctive norms by which an experience can be regarded as archetypal, other than, perhaps, the agreement of authorities. Moreover, characteristics may be claimed as true phenomena which in

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reality are only the stringing together of similar data (the Frazer syndrome); finally, his symbol systems rely on models with no existing guidelines to indicate which models best fit the data.

Let us consider the issue of an archetypal phenomenon. It must be, according to Corbin, *sui generis* in the events of a spiritual world (1:174); hence, "experiencing the Imâm" would constitute such an archetype. But such a designation already defines the limits of what will be acceptable as a candidate for this class, since only those designated as "events in a spiritual world" are eligible. Who decides which events are relevant? This problem shows up in very specific ways in Corbin's work; for example, he rejects the study of both myth and history as being incapable of handling a religious "event" (1:149). He rejects the use of allegory because it is only a paraphrase of what can be handled in another, more effective manner (1:153). He adopts the hermeneutical principles of Swedenborg as being able to disengage the spiritual sense from data and thus allow a symbol to retain its mystery without reducing it to something that can never be (1:153). But such a dichotomy between what is historical and what is religious is not present in the data themselves. Corbin can only admit to imposing that from without himself.

Thus, his argument throughout that the authentic spiritual dimension of Shi'ism is the only true religion while all other forms are just social is based on grounds other than the given: "The fatality leading to 'killing God' results precisely from confusion and an identification between the religious aspect and a given social system," and, "[This is why the] universal sense, supernatural, of the concept *Islam* as religious concept is alive and appears much more clearly in our day in a country like Iran" (1:34). This clear definition of true religion is contrasted with the agonizing of an Arab Sunni from Jordan who faced Western technological society and responded: "Is it possible not to kill God, by trying to isolate religion from a social system condemned by technical and scientific progress? In our Islam, religion and society are intermingled, one and the other only existing by the inseparable union of the two. Is it possible to modernize without damning ourselves?" (1:33).

It follows then that the "real" religious life of Islam is an "inner" life, a life of spirit neither dependent upon nor concerned with the social, political, and cultural forms around it. "Let us say the thing in all its gravity: it is in spiritual Islam that one is confronted by the being of Islam" (1:16). Corbin quite rightly points out that the division between honoring the law and loving God is part of the spiritual heritage of Islam, but we should note that in the ongoing development the perception of the spiritual life presented itself through social, historical, psychological, and cultural facets. No conception, not even the Imâmate, impressed itself upon the life of the people as an "Other" (to use Otto's phrase) unmediated by those factors. Consequently, for all its

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attractiveness, the view does not cover the realities of the material as it presents itself.

Second, what constitutes the Tradition's character? No phenomenologist can speak about a given as if it were pure; he brings models, or, if you will, preconceived ways of asking questions of the data. One such model drawn from Corbin's study is that of "the great tree of wisdom" (*Sophos*) (2:35). With its roots in Hermes, the father of Sages (2:36), and moving in two branches of Magian migrations southwest and northwest, the tree sprouted two great branches. One lived under the form of Chaldaic wisdom, Platonic and Neoplatonic "Orientalists," the other in the form of Zoroastrian theosophy, until they were re-woven in the thinking of Suhrawardî (2:34-35). Naturally, in the course of those developments various ideas and conceptions were picked up from other sources. This accounts for the different stresses one finds in the Shi'a doctrines. Certainly Corbin's model is workable and effective, but why begin with Hermes? Why conceive the development to be precisely that way and not another way? Why acknowledge some material as viable and reject other? Why impose only one approach on the data?

Consider also his use of words as models, a pertinent example being *walayât*. The dimensions he finds in this word take up a whole page in the index. Basically the word means affection or friendliness. The ascetic seeker was the *wâli* of God, and the *Ŝûfis* were known as *Awliyâ Allâh*, Friends of God. Corbin finds this word to be the key to a new cycle in Islamic existence, and, in a manner reminiscent of Heidegger, he uncovers many different kinds of meanings. For example, the Sunnis held that Muhammad had brought the *shari'at* and ended the "cycle of prophecy"; the Shi'is held that Muhammad was "the Seal of the prophets" but that the revelatory mission continued in the Imâmate, in a new "cycle of the *walayât*" (1:41). If we accept this characterization of early Islamic development, the question of which is correct cannot be answered on neutral ground. Most scholars would not opt for either position but would try to comprehend the total religious picture. Corbin's expansion of the *walayât* indicates that he has adopted one point of view as normative and has then found a concept which appears to encompass all the data relevant to that development. It may be a legitimate phenomenological technique, but it biases a whole range of data.

We are now caught on the horns of a dilemma, a dilemma which every phenomenologist of religion must eventually face: is the phenomenologist's pose discriminatory to the phenomenon? Corbin acknowledges that it is, it seems to me, and suggests that we accept the definition of the phenomenon offered by the religious practitioner. He rejects the notion that a phenomenologist can scan the whole horizon in a neutral stance, for that distorts the texture of the data. Only from "within" a religious milieu can the religion be interpreted.

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The position might be more palatable if we had not seen the kinds of biases that this view can encourage in the work of Corbin himself. Surely some critical appraisal must be brought to bear on a religious phenomenon, whether it be mystical, theosophical, or cultural. Very little of this is evidenced here. His study lacks that distance which has always marked the difference between scholar and adherent, and it may well be that his method has a great deal to do with that failure. We may sympathize with his position, but in the end I think most would rather risk the distortions of neutrality than lose the blessing of criticism. Thus, while much of the material in Corbin's *magnum opus* will find its way into a generation of footnotes—and in several ways he has added important dimensions to our knowledge—it is unlikely that the shape of Islamic studies will be significantly altered by the author's purposive but limited methodology.

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