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A Counter-History of Islam

Ibn al-'Arabī within the Spiritual Topography of Henry Corbin

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INTRODUCTION

Henry Corbin was one of the most brilliant and sometimes unusual minds to rise to prominence in the western study of Islam during the twentieth century. At his death in 1978 he left behind a remarkable legacy of text editions and translations, studies and synopses, ranging over astonishingly wide areas of time and space within and beyond the Islamic world. While primarily dedicating his prodigious labors to the study of Iranian Islam, he also wrote about and translated texts from such varied fields as German existentialism, Rhenish mysticism, and Swedenborg's theology.¹ The critical response to Corbin's scholarship has been similarly diverse, and runs a spectrum from ardent devotion to equally ardent objection.² Among the reservations and notes of caution that are to be found in this critical reception, Corbin's idiosyncratic conception of Iran as the spiritual homeland of

1. For comments on the breadth and importance of Corbin's *oeuvre*, see the works of Adams, Algar, Bamford, Landolt, and Wasserstrom cited in the bibliography, and the many additional references adduced in the last two of these sources. Regarding Corbin's work on Heidegger, Hamann, Boehme, and Swedenborg, see Wasserstrom, 145ff. and *passim*, and Corbin, *Swedenborg*, Translator's Preface.

2. Robert Avens and Seyyed Hossein Nasr constitute two examples of "devotion" to Corbin's project and vision; the former in particular appears to have considered himself something of a mystical initiate of Corbin, while Wasserstrom refers to the latter as an "acolyte" and "disciple" of Corbin (309n 53; 150). The most serious objections raised – in English – against Corbin's overall methodology and its applications have come from Algar and Wasserstrom, in their works cited in the bibliography.

Islam's esoteric core is never far from the center of the argument. After examining this and related criticisms, it will be my purpose here to train their light onto one area of Corbin's interests and the object of constant reference in his work – the life and thought of the Andalusian mystical philosopher, Muhyi'd-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d.1240) – as embodied primarily in the independent study, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*. It will be argued that Corbin's situating of Ibn al-'Arabī within the "spiritual topography" of Iranian gnostic spirituality led to a distortion and misrepresentation of the Shaykh al-Akbar³ in Islamic history and thus within the history of religions.

CORBIN'S PROPHETIC PHILOSOPHY OF ISLAM

Henry Corbin began his career as a philosopher, receiving his doctorate in philosophy in 1927. He studied under the great medievalist, Etienne Gilson, while the leading French Islamicist of his day, Louis Massignon, fostered his interest in Islamic spirituality.⁴ He was the first French translator of Heidegger and Barth, publishing a translation of the former's *Was ist Metaphysik?* in Paris in 1938 and works of the latter theologian in 1932.⁵ Throughout his career, he maintained a self-definition as a philosopher-Orientalist, identified his method as being that of phenomenology, and disclaimed any intention to approach his objects of inquiry as a historian or to use the methods of history and the social sciences. His stance as a philosopher of Iranian Islam – applying his own unique brand of phenomenology, railing at all times against the "evils" of historicism and

3. "Greatest Master," an epithet commonly applied to Ibn al-'Arabī by those sympathetic to his work, both within the tradition and by Western specialists. From this title comes the adjectival term "Akbarian" which will also be used here.

4. Massignon gifted Corbin in 1928 with a lithograph of a work by Suhrawardi (d.1191), an act which Corbin saw as "a symbolic transmission of a lineage of thought" which "sealed my destiny as a scholar" (Corbin, *Voyage*, 90f.). Corbin succeeded Massignon as the holder of the Islamic studies Chair at the Ecole pratique des hautes études in Paris in 1954 (Ibid.).

5. Algar 86; Bamford, xxvii and xxx.

sociology and all “reductionist” methodologies⁶ – this stance is ultimately what all of Corbin’s critics tend to ground as the basis for their evaluation of his legacy. It was a stance from which Corbin felt justified in identifying Iran and Germany as the two cultural spheres nearest to his beloved “Imaginal World”,⁷ from which Islam as it *truly* is could only be represented shorn of the *Shari’ah*, of Islamic history, and of its meaning to the overwhelming majority of Muslims throughout the world; and from which the facts of history could be creatively reassembled into Corbin’s own esotericist narrative of a “secret tradition,” an initiatic chain of Aryan gnosis.

The philosophical nature of Corbin’s position as an Orientalist was a point upon which he himself was explicit: “Our own approach to Islamic studies was that of a philosopher.”⁸ For Charles Adams, it was the nature of this philosophical approach that led to the oddities of Corbin’s scholarly production, in which the picture that emerged of Islam and of Shi’ism was “manifestly ... a distortion of the historical reality.”⁹ His philosophy was not that of a rationalist, and certainly not critical or historical. Corbin saw the history of Western philosophy from the time of the ascendancy of Latin Averroism up to Hegel’s philosophy of history as a progressive desacralization of philosophical insight – in his own gnostic perspective, an exile of the human mind ever further into the tomb of this world. Corbin’s philosophical Orientalism was a “prophetic philosophy,” an esoterism of history that he called “counter-history.”¹⁰ He advocated a kind of “spiritual realism” that would relocate meaning away from the outward and the apparent to the objectively “more real” spiritual world – Corbin used the Arabic term *‘ālam al-mithāl*, which he famously rendered as *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal world. The individual must be “initiated” into this

6. “Sociologists and philosophers of history ... are the docile followers of Pharaoh” (Corbin, *Temple*, 280).

7. See Wasserstrom, 135.

8. *Voyage*, 91f.

9. Adams, 139.

10. See Corbin’s statement on counter-history quoted as the epigraph in Wasserstrom, 159.

mode of perception, however, and thus Corbin holds up the phenomena of the invisible guide, the Master incognito, whose initiatic bestowal of the keys to such a trans-terrestrial understanding is the pre-eminent function of (true) religion. A bewildering host of religious and cultural traditions are brought into "spiritual affinity" on this point, with "homologies" being set up between the *fravartis* of Zoroastrianism, the "perfect nature" of the Hermetic tractates, the imaginal Christ of the Gnostic gospels, the Angels of Avicenna and Jacob Boehme, the *Khiḍr* alluded to in the Qur'an, the Elijah of Jewish mysticism, Parzifal of the Grail Quest, the *doppelgänger*, the spiritual double, the celestial Anthropos – and, ultimately, the Shi'i Imāms. These various threads of Corbin's esoterism are brought together in one relatively lucid passage, regarding the dynamics of the method that he championed:

[T]his calls for a prophetic philosophy going hand in hand with an esoterism to which the philosophical oppositions by which we tend to "explain" everything (nominalism and realism, for example) may well seem absurd. Such a prophetic philosophy moves in the dimension of a pure theophanic historicity, in the inner time of the soul; external events, cosmologies, the histories of the prophets, are perceived as the history of spiritual man. Thus it obliterates the "historical trend" with which our epoch is obsessed. Prophetic philosophy looks for the meaning of history not in "horizons", that is, not by orienting itself to the latitudinal sense of a linear development, but vertically, by a longitudinal orientation extending from the celestial pole to the Earth, in the transparency of the heights or depths in which the spiritual individuality experiences the reality of its celestial counterpart, its "lordly" dimension, its "second person", its "Thou".¹¹

Corbin's self-understanding as just such a prophetic philosopher did in fact entail an obliteration of historicism, and an implosion of the then ruptured facts and events of religious history into his own "inner time of the soul". As Adams noted,¹² Corbin's personal selection of certain forms of religious phenom-

11. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 81.

12. Adams, 136.

ena were not simply the results of specialization; rather, his emphasis on the esoteric sprang from his own philosophical judgment concerning the “hierohistory” of religions, a judgment that states with no apology that “abstract monotheism and literalist religion do not suffice to permit an effective divine encounter.”¹³ What *does* suffice for this encounter, according to Corbin, is the gnosis mediated by the invisible guide.

The question remains then, why Shi’ism? A variety of answers are suggested both by Corbin and his critics, the most obvious being the pliability of the notion of the Imāmate, as conceived by Shi’i mystics, to Corbin’s own purposes in elaborating a “prophetic philosophy”. According to Adams, “Corbin asserts that there is no complete Islam, no full realization of the Islamic truth, without the Imāms, for without them the gnosis, the quintessential truth, the *haqīqa* of the Book, could never be known.”¹⁴ But Adams went further, in commenting on the “primacy of things Iranian” in Corbin’s perspective, to note that “it is the ‘Iranian connection’ which confers such significance on Ithna ‘Ashari [Twelver] Shi’ism and not the other way around.”¹⁵

Behind this Perso-centrism are disturbing possibilities that Adams did not pursue in his critique, but which other authors have made quite explicit, raising serious questions about the political and ethical motivations of Corbin’s scholarship. Hamid Algar has noted that Corbin’s “particular vision of ‘Iranian Islam’ corresponded nicely to the cultural policies of the Pahlavi regime.”¹⁶ Steven Wasserstrom has taken this line of inquiry further, explicating the support and patronage extended to Corbin by the Shah’s government and shedding light on the ethical quandaries of that relationship by pointing to the equally explicit support for Corbin’s work given by the Bollingen Foundation, funded by American billionaire Paul Mellon, whose Gulf Oil benefited enormously from its relationship with Pahlavi Iran and its project of creating a first-world nation in the Middle

13. Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 87.

14. Adams, 139.

15. *Ibid.*, 134f.

16. Algar, 90.

17. Wasserstrom, 150ff. Cf. McGuire, *passim*, on Mellon’s Bollingen

East.¹⁷ In his words, "Corbin's self-described 'spiritual Iran' served the Shah's 'imperial' Iran, a Cold War ally who stabilized extraction of petroleum for a billionaire American, who in turn, from his profits, subsidized that 'spiritual' self-image."¹⁸

Wasserstrom has also initiated a line of inquiry into what he calls Corbin's "Aryan triumphalism,"¹⁹ opening a door into our understanding of the Prusso-Persian emphases in Corbin's thought that calls out for further exploration. Examining a number of Corbin's essays and monographs and detailing his relationships not only with Germany's past mystics but also its contemporary fascists, he concludes that Corbin "did nothing less than assimilate the themes of a visionary Germany with those of a spiritual Persia into a singular Aryan *Weltanschauung*", and characterizes him as "a repeated visitor to Germany in the 1930s [during which visits he often met with Heidegger], as a close colleague of leading fascist sympathizers throughout Europe, as a lifelong Teutonophile, and as a sworn enemy of liberal democracy and secular humanism...".²⁰ Wasserstrom prudently stops short of making any sensationalist leaps, finally stating the matter in the following terms: "While I would not claim that Corbin was a fascist, I am saying that he cannot be understood historically unless he is seen in the light of ... contemporaneous themes in fascist thought."²¹

Leaving aside such questions regarding the political affiliations of Corbin's scholarship, the fact remains that he posited at the basis of his work as an Islamicist certain racist assumptions about Iranians, assumptions with a markedly determinative influence on his conclusions as a scholar. Algar compared Corbin's work to the infamous theories of such Orientalists as the Comte de Gobineau, author of the *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*,

foundation, and p. 152, where it is stated that: "Corbin earned a Bollingen fellowship in 1959, for studies in the phenomenology of Iranian religious consciousness."

18. *Ibid.*, 152.

19. Wasserstrom, 135.

20. *Ibid.*, 134 and 146.

21. *Ibid.*, 155.

stating that "Corbin transferred the dichotomy [Aryan–Iranian/Semite–Arab] from the biological to the spiritual plane".²² Corbin wrote of Iran as an enduring essence, the capital of his "visionary geography", in which latent spiritual characteristics determined and unified the course of its religious developments from ancient Zoroastrian times to the Shaykhi movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²³ He wrote of an "Iranian soul", having "an imprescriptable vocation";²⁴ of a "liturgical" quality of the Persian language being "something inherent in the language itself".²⁵ Examples of Corbin's essentialist characterizations of Iran, Iranian spirituality, or events and personalities somehow related historically to Persian culture could be multiplied for pages, as they appear constantly throughout his many works. It will be seen to have been a constant theme in Corbin's visionary rearrangement of the facts of the life-history of Ibn al-'Arabī in his efforts to fit the latter into his own esoteric "counter-history".

CORBIN, IBN AL-'ARABĪ, AND RETROACTIVE SHI'ISM

When Henry Corbin wrote his major study of Ibn al-'Arabī – *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn 'Arabī* – the Western scholarship on the Andalusian mystic was just beginning.²⁶ In addition to the several commentaries on Ibn al-'Arabī by Shi'i mystics of past centuries that Corbin cites in the text, he refers to only five studies in European languages that dealt specifically

22. Algar, 89.

23. See the essay "Iranian Studies and Philosophy," in Corbin, *Voyage*, 33–88.

24. Translated and quoted from Corbin's *En Islam Iranien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–72), vol. 1, x, in Algar, 88.

25. Corbin, *Voyage*, 39.

26. The last two-thirds of the book were first delivered as lectures to the Eranos gatherings in 1955 and '56 and published in those years in the 24th and 25th volumes of the *Eranos-Jahrbücher* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag). The original French text was first published as *L'Imagination créatrice dans le Soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabī* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958), and the English translation by Ralph Manheim came out in 1969.

with the Shaykh.²⁷ All of these works were tentative, pioneering efforts in the field and have been superseded by subsequent research. By stark contrast, the study of Ibn al-'Arabī at the beginning of the twenty-first century has become a major academic enterprise, with its own scholarly society,²⁸ a number of individuals devoting brilliant careers to the study of the Shaykh,²⁹ and a vast proliferation of literature on the subject in the form of translations, biographical studies, synoptic introductions, and comparative analyses.³⁰ While none of those engaged in the study of Ibn al-'Arabī today would suggest that all the major questions have been answered or that we are even close to having a comprehensive picture of his stunningly prolific output, advances in our knowledge of Ibn al-'Arabī have been sufficient to reveal some very glaring errors in the picture of him painted by Henry Corbin.³¹

In *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, Corbin signals the direction of his interpretation in the very title of the first section of the introduction: "Between Andalusia and Iran: A Brief Spiritual Topography". Here he begins with some remarks on his notion of phenomenology and makes an invitation to the reader to join him and "become for a moment his [Ibn al-'Arabī's]

27. These were works by A. E. Affifi, Miguel Asín Palacios, Fritz Meier, Reynold A. Nicholson, and Henrik S. Nyberg. In addition, he lists in the bibliography the still-essential manuscript classification of the works of Ibn al-'Arabī done by Osman Yahia in 1964, though this wouldn't have been available to him at the time he wrote *Creative Imagination* (see n.26).

28. The Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society was founded in 1977 and publishes its journal bi-annually.

29. An incomplete list of such scholars would include Claude Addas, Ralph Austin, William Chittick, Michel Chodkiewicz, Gerald Elmore, Stephen Hirtenstein, and Masataka Takeshita.

30. I have prepared a bibliography of Ibn al-'Arabī studies in English which, in the first 22 pages of citations, covers over 350 books, dissertations, and articles with a specific focus on Ibn al-'Arabī, with an additional 8 pages on works devoted to important figures in the Akbarian tradition.

31. A similar revision of Corbin's conclusions has been done with regard to his work on Mulla Sadra Shirazi (d.1640), particularly by Fazlur Rahman. See the latter's *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), pp.1-4.

disciple," which is "the only way to understand him."³² Further, we learn that, regarding the spiritual life of any individual, "to dissociate this personal life from its social frame" is the *sine qua non* of such a phenomenological discipleship, and that for "those unable to effect this dissociation, the spirituality of an Ibn 'Arabī will have little to say."³³ Given this beginning, it is not surprising that Corbin refuses to set Ibn al-'Arabī within a "social frame", or to provide any historical context for his life.³⁴ But as the title of this introductory section indicates, Corbin does intend to place Ibn al-'Arabī *somewhere*. We get another hint on the following page:

If we are to avoid an over-hasty use of the categories by which we characterize our own philosophical systems, if we are to grasp the unique conjunction between prophetic religion and mystical religion presented by Sufism, we must briefly consider the thinkers and the ideas which provide Ibn 'Arabi and his school with their context.³⁵

The subsequent "contextualization" proves not to contradict Corbin's strictures against giving any consideration to a "social frame". Not a single individual from the western Islamic lands is mentioned in the following pages. Neither "thinkers" nor "ideas" which we know to have been in Ibn al-'Arabī's milieu are discussed. Rather, we are told that his intellectual heritage, just like all "the genealogies of Sufism", "lead[s] back to one or the other of the Holy Imāms of Shi'ism, principally to the Sixth Imām ... or the Eighth Imām...".³⁶ The important piece of contextual information that Corbin wishes to stress here is "the

32. *Creative Imagination*, 5.

33. *Ibid.*, 6.

34. *Ibid.*, 4–6. Regarding Ibn al-'Arabī and kindred spiritual individuals, Corbin states that "What by a historical convention is termed 'their' time is not really *their* time." As to what such an assertion could possibly mean Corbin does not, unfortunately, enlighten us.

35. *Ibid.*, 7.

36. *Ibid.*, 9. Corbin's assertions regarding the Sufi initiatic *isnads* going through the Imāms is true, but only from the eleventh century on. Prior to that, no known *silsila* includes even 'Ali, the first Imām. See Trimmingham, Appendix A.

return of Shī'ism to the spiritual horizon",³⁷ and thus the only individuals that are suggested as giving "Ibn al-'Arabī and his school their context" are Iranians. The associations that Corbin constantly makes are between Ibn al-'Arabī on the one hand and, on the other, either Suhrawardi and *Ishraqi* thought,³⁸ Iranian Sufism, Twelver Shi'ism, or Ismailism, and often several of these at once. The references to Akbarian/Shi'i parallelism become something of a *leitmotiv* throughout the text. The repetitiveness and ubiquity of these suggestive groupings are such that I cannot identify and discuss each, or even most of them.

Throughout the course of the first one-third of the book, to which I will limit the bulk of my analysis, Corbin goes much further than simply suggesting an "Iranian connection" for Ibn al-'Arabī by setting him alongside Iranian or Shi'i personalities. He is quite explicit in asserting that Shi'ism is the ultimate source of Ibn al-'Arabī's doctrines. At one point he writes of "a long line of masters who integrated the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī into the Shī'ism of the twelve Imāms (or perhaps we should speak of a re-integration, for a study of the origins of these doctrines suggests a return to their source)."³⁹ This is in regard to a mystic who was a self-defined, unambiguous, even vehement Sunni.⁴⁰ The indebtedness of later Shi'i mysticism to the writings of Ibn al-

37. *Creative Imagination*, 9.

38. There is no evidence for an *Ishraqi* influence; Addas notes that "a search through the corpus of Ibn 'Arabī's writings for even the slightest reference to the *Hikmat al-ishraq* or any other of Suhrawardi's writings reveals nothing at all" (*Quest*, 110). Elmore would concur, opining that any influence is "not likely", and that at most a case could be made for "parallel development" (*Islamic Sainthood*, 99n 140). However, Corbin comes out later in the book to state that "Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics of the Imagination borrows a good many features of Suhrawardi's 'Oriental theosophy'" (*Creative Imagination*, 190).

39. *Ibid.*, 23.

40. To cite but one among many examples in Ibn al-'Arabī's works, I quote at length from the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*: "Satans have given them [the people of innovation] a true premise which they cannot doubt, and, due to their lack of understanding, deceptions came upon them and led them astray.... This is mostly dominant among the Shi'ites, especially the *imāmis*. At first Satans of *jinn* lured them into exhaustive love of the Prophet's

'Arabī puts Corbin into a quandary, given his stand on Shi'i spirituality as "incomparably richer than the contributions of Sunnite Islam",⁴¹ and thus a retroactive adoption of the Shaykh into the "Iranian spiritual universe" is effected out of thin air. This retroactive logic is employed on a number of occasions: "Shi'ite esoterism implies an invisible mystical hierarchy"; therefore, the presence of a mystical hierarchy in Ibn al-'Arabī "perhaps ... bears the original imprint of Shi'ism".⁴² Corbin tells us that Ibn al-'Arabī interprets in his writings a certain Quranic verse (33:33, in which mention is made of the *ahl al-bayt*), and without telling us the actual nature of his interpretation, we are led on to observe the fact that this verse is "one of the scriptural foundations of Shi'ism [!]", and hence the conclusion, given at the beginning, that this interpretation "might have been written by a pure Shi'ite".⁴³ Further on we are asked to consider Ibn al-'Arabī's esoteric exegesis (*taw'īl*) of the Qur'an as a kind of "Shi'ite hermeneutics", since "it is impossible to speak of *taw'īl* without speaking of Shi'ism, for *taw'īl* is basic to its attitude toward scripture".⁴⁴ This sort of logic is not so much misleading as it is, quite plainly, bizarre.

family, which they considered the most sublime oblation to God. In fact it is, if they only stopped at the limits of loving the Prophet's family; instead they violated all limits of such love in two different ways. One group imagined that the Prophet's family are more entitled to these worldly positions [leadership], therefore took to hate, and insulted the Companions because they gave the Prophet's family no precedence; and carried on all the details of slander that are known about them in this regard. The second group, in addition to insulting the Companions, blamed the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace), and Gabriel (peace be upon him), and God (supreme is His greatness), because they did not state clearly the rank of the Prophet's family, nor their entitlement to the leadership (*khiḷāfa*) of the community ... All of these emanated from a true premise, i.e. the love of the Prophet's family, which was corrupted through their reflection, so they went astray and led others astray too". (Quoted and trans. in al-Ghorab, 204f.)

41. *Creative Imagination*, 27.

42. *Ibid.*, 16.

43. *Ibid.*, 26.

44. *Ibid.*, 29. This formula is repeated on p.50.

To his credit, Corbin does attempt to marshal some evidence. Making a brief foray into history, he raises the question of how much of Ismailian thought Ibn al-'Arabī may have "assimilated before leaving the Maghrib".⁴⁵ He answers this question by pointing out that Ibn al-'Arabī read and composed a commentary on a work by the Andalusian Sufi-rebel and instigator of the Murīdīn uprising, Ibn Qasī (d.1151), and states that this man's work shows "many characteristic traits of Ismailian-Shī'ite inspiration".⁴⁶ Corbin returns in excitement to this commentary later in the book:

[I]n Tunis Ibn 'Arabi began to study an exceptionally important work of mystical theosophy ... the sole surviving work of Ibn Qasī, ... founder ... of the Murīdīn The movement, or at least the foundations of its esoteric doctrines, was of Ismailian Shī'ite inspiration. Ibn 'Arabi himself wrote a commentary on the book; a study of it will assuredly help to throw light on the affinities that have been noted between the doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi and Shī'ite theosophy, affinities which account for his rapid assimilation by the Shī'ite Sūfism of Iran.⁴⁷

Corbin may have been disappointed – and yet perhaps undeterred – to find out that a study of this commentary did in fact throw light on the question, but not a light that revealed any such esoteric affinities. Ibn al-'Arabī did not actually study the work in question in Tunis, where he met Ibn Qasī's son; rather, it was at least forty years after that visit that he studied the work and penned his commentary. In the latter, Ibn al-'Arabī concludes that Ibn Qasī was "an imitator (*muqallid*), an ignoramus (*jāhil*) and even an imposter", and states that "this man [Ibn Qasī] in his book has not adhered to what the faith demands."⁴⁸

Aside from this piece of evidence, Corbin sets out in the section entitled "The Curve and Symbols of Ibn 'Arabi's Life" to identify "three exemplary elements or traits that assume the

45. *Ibid.*, 25.

46. *Ibid.* No support is provided for this characterization, however, nor are any of these "traits" specifically identified.

47. *Ibid.*, 48.

48. Addas, *Quest*, 56.

character of symbols for the characterology of Ibn 'Arabi."⁴⁹ Calling these symbols co-ordinates of a spiritual topography, Corbin hopes that they will "suffice to provide the reader with a preliminary orientation"⁵⁰ to the life and thought of Ibn al-'Arabī. It is not surprising that these three symbols are all presented in such a way as to situate the Shaykh as an incognito Shī'ite, nor is it any less predictable that we find them to be founded upon inaccuracies and misrepresentation of the facts.

The first of these co-ordinates that Corbin places before his reader is Ibn al-'Arabī's relationship to his older contemporary, the famous Andalusian Muslim philosopher Averroes (Ibn Rushd, d.1198). However, after sketching very briefly the early life of Ibn al-'Arabī leading up to his meeting with the philosopher while he was in his late teens, Corbin digresses to comment on a peculiar "synchronism" in relation to Ibn al-'Arabī's birth. Corbin gives Ibn al-'Arabī's birth date as 17 Ramadān, 560 AH, and points out that this was exactly one lunar year after "the Imām Hasan ('alā dhikrihi's-salām, peace be upon his memory),"⁵¹ proclaimed at Alamūt the realization of the *qiyāmat*, the Resurrection, thus "instituting the pure spiritual Islām of reformed Iranian Ismailism".⁵² Corbin mentioned this coincidence earlier in the book as well, having this to say on the matter:

This unusual synchronism may be imputed to chance. But is this a truly satisfactory answer? To mention the synchronism, in any event, is to introduce, if only in passing, the questions it will be possible to study as we pursue our parallel studies of Ibn 'Arabi and of Shī'ite theology.⁵³

Leaving aside entirely the serious questions that could be raised here about Corbin's notion of "synchronicity", it must be said

49. *Creative Imagination*, 38.

50. *Ibid.*, 31.

51. Corbin's invocation of blessings here – upon the Nizārī Ismaili leader – is the only one found in the entire book, a book in which Corbin mentions many times the names of Muhammad and other Muslim personalities for which this invocation is traditional.

52. *Creative Imagination*, 38f.

53. *Ibid.*, 25.

that there is no universal agreement among scholars on the dating of Ibn al-'Arabī's birth. While some early sources give the 17th of Ramadan, a note in the hand of Ibn al-'Arabī's closest disciple and protégé, Sadr al-Din Qunawi, gives his master's date of birth as the 27th of that month, and thus not amenable to a thesis of harmonic Ismaili convergence.⁵⁴ No amount of historical data, of course, can argue with a perspective that insists that "counter-history is ultimately more true than history."⁵⁵

Returning to the symbolic importance given by Corbin to Ibn al-'Arabī's relationship with Averroes, it would be well to recognize the significance that Averroes himself has in Corbin's thought. In relation to the numerous dichotomies that Corbin applies to Islam and religious history, Averroes can usually be identified with the initial terms of the following pairs: West/East; Arab/Iranian; Sunni/Shi'ite; outer/inner; exoteric/esoteric; rational/mystical; legalism/spirituality; dualist cosmology/tripartite cosmology. Averroes as a symbol for these terms is an important device in Corbin's rhetoric, and it is thus he appears in a great many places in the latter's work. Here, we find Ibn al-'Arabī being set in opposition to Averroes, and thus identified with the second terms in the same pairs just mentioned.

Corbin frequently bemoaned the inadequacy of traditional European views of Islamic philosophy in which it was often held that the whole enterprise of "Arab philosophy" came to a close with the death of Averroes. Despite his protestations, it is clear that he did consider this to be a valid proposition, so long as it was understood that it was "Arab" and "Sunni" philosophy that died with Averroes, and that pure, spiritual philosophy lived on in Iran.

It has long been a commonplace to suppose ... that with Averroes [Arab philosophy] attained at once its apogee and its end. This may have been the case if we consider only the destinies of philosophy in Western, if not all Sunni Islam ... Seen from Iran, the situation takes on an entirely different aspect.⁵⁶

54. See Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*, 18f.; Ates, 707.

55. Corbin, quoted in Wasserstrom, 159.

56. *Creative Imagination*, 8. This same formulation is repeated count-

Corbin refers in a number of places to Ibn al-'Arabī's attendance at Averroes' funeral as a "scene ... transfigured into a symbol", a symbol which suggests the simultaneous flowering of pure, Iranian spirituality through Ibn al-'Arabī and the decay of sterile, dogmatic rationalism with the death of the Arab Averroes.⁵⁷ Against this attempt at mapping a "spiritual topography", it must be borne in mind that Ibn al-'Arabī himself had nothing but admiration for Averroes, and considered him perhaps more highly than any other of the speculative philosophers with whom he was acquainted.⁵⁸

The second of Corbin's symbolic co-ordinates for the portrayal of Ibn al-'Arabī's character involves his departure from Andalusia toward eastern Islamic lands in 1201 AD. Here Corbin repeatedly states that Ibn al-'Arabī left the Maghrib because it was not a suitable environment for his esoteric spirituality, which was for Corbin, as we have seen, *necessarily* of an Iranian, if not Shi'i quality. Thus, it was because of the Shaykh's awareness of the gnostic barrenness of the Sunni Maghrib – that "his spiritual situation was without issue in the West" – that he took his leave of his homeland and set out on his peregrinations throughout the "Orient."⁵⁹ This picture of the situation neglects the prevailing turmoil in Almohad Andalusia at the time, ignores the strong trends of mysticism and antinomianism that were in fact prevalent there, and does not seek to present Ibn al-'Arabī's own understanding of his reasons for making the journey. Gerald Elmore, whose research has considered all these elements,

less times in Corbin's *oeuvre*; see for example *History*, 242; *Avicenna*, 13; *Voyage*, 93; *Temple*, 276.

57. See *Creative Imagination*, 21, 24 and 41.

58. See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 384n 13, where we read: "Ibn al-'Arabī has little respect for most of the learned masters of such rational sciences as Kalām and philosophy, but great respect for Ibn Rushd. He saw him primarily as a master of the *Shari'a* ...". Chittick then translates a passage from the *Futūhāt* which is highly laudatory of the great philosopher. See also Rosenthal, 16–18. He reads Ibn al-'Arabī not so much as having "little respect" for the philosophers as much as being "condescendingly compassionate" towards them (*ibid.*, 16).

59. *Creative Imagination*, 24.

doesn't suggest even remotely that Ibn al-'Arabī set out to find more "Iranian" climes. Rather, among several other factors, he opines that Ibn al-'Arabī "was constrained to [depart] by political or prevailing social circumstances in the ominously unstable situation following the death of the Almohad ruler, Ya'qūb al-Mansūr."⁶⁰

The final element of Corbin's "spiritual topography" that will be considered here, the third of his symbolic co-ordinates, is his portrayal of Ibn al-'Arabī as a "disciple of Khidr".⁶¹ This turns out to be Corbin's primary narrative tool for insinuating an incognito Aryanism for Ibn al-'Arabī's character; indeed, he calls this discipleship "the center which dominates the co-ordinates of our spiritual topography".⁶² When Corbin first introduces this discipleship, he comes very close to revealing his intentions, and so I quote that passage at length:

Ibn 'Arabi [had] contact with almost all the Sūfi masters of his day. Yet essentially he never had more than one, and that one was none of the usual visible masters Ibn 'Arabi was, and never ceased to be, the disciple of an invisible master, a mysterious prophet figure to whom a number of traditions, both significant and obscure, lend features which relate him, or tend to identify him, with Elijah, with St. George, and still others. Ibn 'Arabi was above all the disciple of Khidr (Khādir). We shall attempt further on to indicate what it signifies to be "the disciple of Khidr". In any event such a relationship with a hidden spiritual master lends the disciple an essentially "transhistorical" dimension⁶³

This passage provides a very compact example of Corbin's esoteric methods. None of the hinted "significant and obscure"

60. *Islamic Sainthood*, 166.

61. *Creative Imagination*, 32, but a phrase that Corbin evokes repeatedly throughout the book. Khidr is an important figure in Sufism, regarded as a kind of angelic master capable of initiating the Sufi from the invisible world. Many exegetes considered Khidr to have been the mysterious individual whom God had given knowledge from His presence and who meets with Moses in the Quranic story recounted at 18:61–83.

62. *Ibid.*, 35.

63. *Ibid.*, 32.

traditions that provide the basis for the wild associations he mentions are made known to the reader, here or anywhere else in the book. The distinctive qualities of Corbin's "prophetic philosophy" are all here, especially in the emphasis on the hidden master and his portrayal of counter-history as transcending history. Later, the "still other" associations that obscure traditions reveal for the *true* identity of Khidr turn out to be with the Shi'i Imāms.⁶⁴ Likewise, Corbin suggests more and more explicitly throughout the subsequent twenty-five pages the answer to his question about what being a disciple of Khidr signifies – none other than being an initiated disciple of the hidden Imām.

Corbin provides only the most bizarre reasoning for his association of Khidr with the hidden Imām, and it is not this element of his rhetoric that I would like to address.⁶⁵ Rather, the sort of discipleship of Khidr that is suggested for Ibn al-'Arabī itself turns out to be untenable, bringing down the entire narrative edifice that Corbin has constructed. Quite against Corbin's picture, Ibn al-'Arabī himself rarely mentions Khidr, ascribes no pride of place to him as his mystical master, and only claims to have received an initiation from Khidr relatively late in his Sūfi career. If any "invisible master" is to be placed at the core of Ibn al-'Arabī's initiation into the mystical way, it is unquestionably Jesus ('Īsā), as Ibn al-'Arabī himself states many times throughout his writings.⁶⁶ In the opinion of the foremost western biographer of Ibn al-'Arabī, Claude Addas, it is

surprising – in view of the frequency and extreme explicitness of these references to 'Īsā and to his role as "first teacher" – that Henry

64. *Ibid.*, 55f.

65. Essentially, we are told at p.57 that "Khidr and Elijah are sometimes associated"; no evidence is adduced for this. On the next page Corbin quotes a *khābar* from the corpus of Imāmī traditions which has the Imām identifying himself with a series of prophets, including Elijah. Khidr is Elijah; the Imām is Elijah; therefore Khidr is the Imām. Corbin never goes so far as to state this in such bald terms, but rather sets out one by one the various connections, and finishes by noting that all of this "is to suggest an answer to the question of *who is Khidr* ..." (*Ibid.*, 58, Corbin's emphasis).

66. On Ibn al-'Arabī's self-conception as a "Christic" Sūfi, see Chodkiewicz, especially ch.5. On the place of Khidr in Ibn al-'Arabī's doctrine of

Corbin missed the significance of the relationship, insisting instead on making Khadir the "initiator" of the Shaikh al-Akbar. The intervention of Khadir was certainly very real. However, it occurred much later and was considerably less decisive.⁶⁷

It could be suggested that, in the light of what we know about Corbin's "prophetic philosophy" and its consequences for his presentation of Islam, this should come as no surprise at all.

ALTERNATIVES TO COUNTER-HISTORY

I would agree with Wasserstrom that "Ibn 'Arabi is too important to be left to a scholasticism, however esoterically inspired."⁶⁸ The uniqueness of any great thinker, the singular qualities of their contributions, are utterly opaque to us if the light of history is put out. Corbin's frustrations with modernity do not of themselves pose a problem – indeed, many scholars would easily sympathize with his call for greater attention to the understanding of tradition. But when a flight from reason is proposed as the remedy, little hope is left for any sort of understanding at all.

As noted previously, the study of Ibn al-'Arabī has come a long way since the time of Corbin's efforts. Some scholars have noted, though, that there continues to be a trend of esoterist methodologies and anti-historicist leanings among some students of the Shaykh al-Akbar.⁶⁹ That the field is being furthered by such scholars as Addas, Chittick, Elmore – all of whom apply exacting philological and historical methods – inspires hope that our

the mystical hierarchy, see *ibid.*, ch. 6. Incidentally, Chodkiewicz directs critical remarks at several points in this book to what he saw as Corbin's "attempts to uncover a clandestine Shī'ite in the writings of this self-confessed Sunnī" (5). See the index, s.v. "Corbin (H.)."

67. Addas, *Quest*, 39.

68. 240.

69. See Morris, part I, and Elmore, 101. Both authors identify this esoterist trend as primarily existing among current French students of Ibn al-'Arabī, and Elmore suggests an influence from the "Traditionalists" – i.e., those that draw their inspiration from René Guénon.

knowledge of Ibn al-'Arabī and his influence in Islamic history will no longer be dominated by the whims of counter-history. It is my hope that the above inquiry may contribute something to the development of this alternative.

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