

## Analytic Comparison between ‘Allamah Tabataba’i’s View and That of Henry Corbin concerning Human Perfection

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### Abstract

In his existence and reality, according to Allamah Tabataba’i, man has been created potentially in the world; nothing is known for him at the birth time and it is he himself who has to try to acquire knowledge. In the first stage, he recognizes his own good and evil through his instincts; and if he insists to follow carnal desires and remains captive of material desires and demands, he will not attain the truth of religion. But, if he tries to purify his soul, he will be able to perceive evils and goods. Through this perception, many instances of good and evil, which have been already recognized through instincts, will change for him. Owing to this change, his path to ascend to the higher worlds (the world of intellect (*malakut*) and the world of sovereignty (*jabarut*)) will be paved. And to the extent he has ascended from the world of matter, he will acquire a new perception of the contents of Divine religion. Thus, in his perfectional path, man will ascend step by step and with no leap. Furthermore, according to this idea, God’s covenant with man concerning His own Lordship has been taken place in the world of imagination (*mundus imaginallis*), which is a mediate between world of matter (*nasut*) and the world of intellect (*malakut*).

Through exploring the world of imagination as a mediate between the two worlds of matter and intellect as well as understanding the role that may be played by the faculty of imagination to know the world of imagination, Corbin as well has considered human perfection as a function of his spiritual journey from the world of matter toward the world of imagination and therefrom toward the world of intellect. Furthermore, while making a distinction between false imaginary whose role is restricted to fantasy on the one hand and true imagination on the other, Corbin likens the false imaginary to a corrupt tree and true imagination to the good tree which has been spoken of in the Holy Quran. He has considered going after false

imaginary as a reason behind the idea according to which existence is restricted to the material world and negligence of the two worlds of *malakut* and *jabarut*. In contrary, he has deemed going after true imagination as a reason for purification of the soul and qualification with the higher attributes. Furthermore, Corbin is of the view that one's perception of religion is a function of his existential level.

In this way, Allamah Tabataba'i, taking into account human's gradual perfection in the world of matter which has been neglected by some Muslim thinkers in accounting for Quranic concepts, and Professor Corbin through understanding the world of imagination which had no ground in the philosophical thinking of the West, negated any leap in the hierarchy of the world and accounted for human perfection on this basis.

## **Introduction**

Muslim philosophers pictured the universe not in a horizontal order but in a vertical one. Worlds of matter, imagination, and intellect are the major columns of this system in both arcs of ascent and descent, so that the world of intellect precedes the world of imagination in order and the latter precedes the world of matter. Thus in the arc of descent neither a thing may descend from the world of intellect to the world of matter without going through the world of imagination, nor may it transcend to the world of intellect without going through the world of matter and the world of imagination. Thus, in this article, after exploring the vertical order of the universe according to Muslim philosophers, at first, we will go on to state ideas of 'Allamah Tabataba'i as a witness of the spiritual secrets of the Holy Quran concerning some apparent contradiction between Quranic verses, human gradual perfection in the world of matter and his ascension to the higher worlds, innateness of religion, man's competence to take divine trust, God's covenant with man to avoid worshipping Devil and to admit God's Lordship, and then we proceed to state Corbin's views concerning the above issues, and explore similarities and dissimilarities between his ideas and those of 'Allamah Tabataba'i.

### **The Governing Vertical System according to Muslim Philosophers**

Muslim philosophers have classified the universe in a vertical hierarchy under *Jabarut* (the world of intellect), *malakut* (the world of imagination) and *nasut* (the world of matter). The world of *jabarut* is the essence of the world of *malakut* and encompasses the latter (3, pp. 314-322). In this way, according to the verse "And there is not a thing but with Us are the stores thereof" (*Hijr*, 21), everything in this world has an existential record in the world of imagination which has, in turn, an existential record in the world of intellect. According to the meaning of the term "Be!" in the verse "when He intendeth a thing, is only that He saith unto it: Be! and it is." (*Ya-Sin*, 82), existential records of things in the world of imagination are emanated swiftly and all at once, so that all what a thing has in that station has in the first stage of its emergence and this is the same as the truth of which God has spoken of as *malakut*: "Thus did We show Abraham the *malakut* of the heavens and the earth" (*An'am*, 75), but the existence of things in the world of matter, in accordance to the meaning of the term "and it is" in the verse 82 of the Chapter *Ya-Sin*, turns from potency into actuality gradually and continues its gradual perfection until it separates from this world and returns to the world of Isthmus (*barzakh*) (imagination) and resurrection (intellect). (8, pp. 10-15).

According to Muslim philosophers, existence of these three worlds may be proved if man returns to his own self and recognize the levels of the soul, for man is a wide-ranging being extending over the three mentioned worlds. Man has both material and imaginal levels as well as intellectual one (8, pp. 218-219) and finds sensual, imaginal, and intellectual forms in accordance to each one of these levels. In other words, man has various perceptions and through each one of them faces a different aspect of existence. In sense perception, he faces sensual aspect of existence. In imaginal perception he finds imaginal aspect of existence and in intellectual perception, he

confronts intellectual aspect of existence. So, each one of sensual, imaginal, and intellectual faculties, respectively, is able to cause man to know the three worlds of *nasut* (matter), *malakut*, and *jabarut*, and pave the path of man's perfection through a certain knowledge of the stages of existence and going through these in stages. According to this explication, man's perfection, in each one of the mentioned worlds is a subject of the genetic laws of that stage; and ascension to higher worlds, i.e. world of imagination and world of intellect, will be performed after necessary situations are provided and in a hierarchical order, and in this hierarchical order no leap is allowed.

### **Allamah Tabataba'i, Witness of and Intimate of the Spiritual Secret of the Holy Quran**

Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i who studied Islamic sciences in Shi'a seminaries, studied on the one hand- in addition to literal, and juridical sciences as well as principles of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and *hadith*- philosophical sciences and theoretical mysticism, and on the other and under a great master of wayfaring like Haj Mirza 'Ali Qazi he achieved practical mysticism, and went with the help of two wings of reason (philosophy) and heart (mysticism) to the feast of Revelation (the Holy Quran) and found his own ideal and appropriated it within his own heart. The late Tabataba'i, when in Shi'a seminaries only a part of the content of the Prophet and Imam's *sunna*, that is *fiqh* and principles of *fiqh*, were studied and there was no trace of philosophy, intellectual sciences, *tafsir*, and ethics, established a chair for teaching philosophy, *tafsir*, and ethics in the seminary of Qum, and brought Qum's seminary into a new stage. (11, pp. 196-197).

In philosophy, he separated issues entered from the philosophy of Greek into the Islamic philosophy (almost 200 issues) from the issues introduced by Muslim philosophers in general and Iranian Divine philosophers in particular (which amounts to 700 issues), and transferred cultural heritage of Muslim philosophers, in

which worlds are pictured in a vertical order and each one of these worlds is an image of another world, to the next generation. Furthermore, he introduced other issues such as distinction between real sciences and conventional (*i'tibari*) ones in philosophy, and posed new solutions for many previous problems.

In *tafsir* as well, he commented upon the Holy Quran through the Quran, and removed ambiguity from some verses through some other verses. Though he did not find any difference between prophets' ways to call people to the truth and the method in which searching for truth was made through demonstration, he commented upon the Holy Quran not with the help of demonstration, not through mysticism, and not through..., but through the Holy Quran, and with an extreme God-fearing he avoided imposing his own understandings on the Holy Quran and confusing commentary upon Divine words with human ideas. At the same time, after commenting upon a verse or some verses within a discussion, he introduced various issues under titles such as philosophical- ethical- mystical- narrative- social or historical discussions as confirming or confirmed and paved the way for various understandings of the Holy Quran.

While in this way he became more familiar with the meanings of the holy Quran, this method allowed him to make a distinction between revelation and exegesis (*ta'wil*), for revelation is related with divine legislation which has been revealed by God for the Holy Prophet, while exegesis is to return something to its essence, and by it returning to the true meaning is meant. Secondly he managed to understand the relation between outward and inward, which is the relation between image and imaged; for he who goes on to make an exegesis, keeps aloof of the outward of words to understand their inward and truth. Thirdly, he confirmed hierarchical system of the world, for these stages has been mentioned in the Holy Quran by various terms. Fourthly, he considered man's perfection as a subject of his gradual perfection in the world of matter and his spiritual

wayfaring in the hierarchical system of the worlds and ascension to the worlds of imagination and intellect.

In brief, this method allowed him to become an intimate and witness of spiritual secret of the Holy Quran, and keep immune of the dangerous error of confusing image and imaginary. Neither like scholastic ones he considers all stations of existence to be restricted to the world of matter and thinks of truth and inward as being imaginary, nor he neglects the Holy Quran's news about the genetic rules governing the world of matter i.e. its gradual development and speaks of inspiration of sins and God-fearing to man at the beginning of birth or basement of religion on human nature at the beginning of creation...and neglects man's anxiety, infidelity, and ignorance at the beginning of life. It was because of this same ability that he managed to remove some apparent contradictions between Quranic verses in an ideal fashion and avoid any explication, which required acceptance of some sort of leap in the order of the universe.

### **Apparent Contradictions between some Verses and Allamah Tabataba'i's Innovation**

In the Holy Quran, in some verses, blankness of the tablet of man's soul of all knowledge at birth time as well as gradual emergence of knowledge after birth through senses and thinking have been mentioned (*Nahl*, 78). Furthermore in the verse 34 of the Chapter *Ibrahim*, verse 72 of the Chapter *Ahzab*, verse 19 of the Chapter *Ma'arij*, verse 7 of the Chapter *'Alaq*, man has been described respectively as wrong-doer, fool, anxious, and rebellious. According to 'Allamah Tabataba'i's commentary, the verse 213 of the Chapter *Baqarah*, man's inclination toward social life and observance of justice have been introduced as statements that man has been led inevitably toward them. But in some verses man's knowledge of right and wrong through inspiration (*Shams*, 7 and 8), that religion is set upon human beings' nature (*Rum*, 30), God's covenant with man to not worship devil (*Ya-Sin*, 60 and 61) and

man's confession to Divine Lordship (*A'raf*, 172) have been stipulated. Thus, relying on the second type of verses, some Muslim thinkers have mentioned man's enjoying some sort of nature (*fitra*) because of which he is aware from the very time of birth of goodness of right and badness of wrong, and due to this awareness, he has necessary readiness to accept divine religion. They have interpreted God's covenant with man as a covenant God concluded after creation of Adam with human beings who have the capacity of being generated of his sperms. 'Allamah Tabataba'i who enjoys a particular ability to comment upon the Holy Quran through Quran, however, accepts none of the above justifications, and introduces a commentary in accordance to the first kind of verses as well as the vertical order of the world of being and genetic rules governing it.

According to Allamah Tabataba'i, man, in terms of his existence and reality, has been created potentially. In other words, seeds of humanity exist in him potentially and grow gradually in his existential background. According to this commentary, nothing is known for man at birth time (5, p. 312) and it is he who has to acquire knowledge. Furthermore, in the first stage of his growth, he recognizes his good and evil through his instincts and as long as he has not attained the station of purification of the soul of which has spoken of in the verse 7 of Chapter *Shams* "And a soul and Him Who perfected it", in other words as long as he is a host of instincts, recognition of his good and evil is up to instincts (7, p. 297). But when he manages to purify his soul and make a balance between the faculties within his self and establish justice between them, in other words if he uses each of faculties of sense, imagination and intellect to approach the world specific to that faculty, he attains the perception of good and evil. And most likely, many instances of good and evil, he has recognized before attaining the present station through instincts, will change for him. Evidently, this change is in proportion to man's spiritual growth and his attainment of higher worlds.

Also, he is of the view that man, as long as he insists on carnal desires and following of them and is a captive of material desires, will not accept the religion in accordance of his nature (6, p. 177). Thus, innateness of religion never means that every man, from the time of birth and at any station and with any insight and action, inclines toward religion, but it means that religion as a set of principles, traditions, and practical rules which guarantees man's happiness and brings him to true perfection, is one of the genetic requirements for man's growth and transcendence in various stations of existence, which man demands for it and confirms it in each station in proportion to that station. Thus, a man who lives in the level of *nasut* and has not yet admitted to the world of *malakut*, demands for and confirms a smaller set of principles and traditions and he who has left worlds of *nasut* and *malakut*, demands for and confirms a larger set.

And finally, concerning God's covenant with man for not worshipping devil and confession to His Lordship, he believes that God has concluded a covenant with man in a world which is not temporally separate from the world of matter and it is with the latter but encompasses it, i.e. precedes this world however not through a temporal precedence but through a orderly precedence (4, pp. 312-323). So, man has an existential record with God and in His treasures so that, that existential record which relates to the world of imagination and *malakut* and his worldly existence are two aspects of the same thing. One of them is the aspect which is toward God and emanated with the term "Be!" swiftly and all at once; and the other is the aspect which turns toward the world and comes from potency to actuality gradually and is mentioned as "and it is". In the world of imagination all human beings are present for God in a collective existence. No one is absent from others. Human beings are not absent for God and God is not absent for human beings and in general absence of action for agent and making from maker in that station is not reasonable. Hence, in that world, everybody confirms God's Oneness in Lordship through observance of his own soul and not by



demonstration. For, in that world no body is separate from the Essence of Oneness and does not find Him absent even for a moment, and is continuously confessing His Being. This collective existence is not independent from this world of matter and separate from it, but it is its other aspect. In other words, in the world of matter, perfections exist in man potentially and it is he himself who has to actualize them. Man, if he acquires perfections and actualizes them, will attain higher worlds; otherwise, he will be predicated of attributes opposite to those perfections. Thus that man is predicated of the opposite attributes in the Holy Quran is not because man is a creature with two natures of which one is lofty and admirable and the other is low and reproachable. But it is due to the fact that perfections in the world are actualized only by man himself and this leads to his attaining higher worlds, while if perfections are not actualized this will prevent him from attaining higher worlds and causes man to be predicated of attributes opposite to that perfections. That is why man's being predicated of tyranny and foolishness in the verse "Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Lo! he hath proved a tyrant and a fool." is described as a reason for offering Divine trust (the station of God's viceroy) unto man, for a subject which may be predicated of tyranny and foolishness may be predicated of justice and knowledge as well and it may be put in the path of growth and transcendence and attain a station at which he will put his own affairs under God's guardianship. But the heavens, the earth, and the hills, which may not be predicated of tyranny and foolishness, are not worthy to be predicated of knowledge and justice as well (7, pp. 348-350). Thus, that man is predicated of tyranny, foolishness, infidelity, and anxiety is among the essential requirements of man in the material station of existence. This station is placed in a vertical order in respect to other ones, and going through it is necessary to be predicated of opposite attributes.

In brief, 'Allamah Tabataba'i has not accepted that man, from the very beginning, is predicated of knowledge and justice, accepts

divine religion, and is free from the system of the world of matter and gradual actualizing of perfections, enjoys modes of the world of matter, but 'Allamah insists that in each of the two arcs of ascent and descent man is in it, he follows the genetic rules governing that arc, and there is no leap in the path of his descent or ascent.

### **Islamic Philosophy and True *Hikma* for Corbin**

Born in the land of Descartes and Voltaire and learned Western philosophy in the best scientific centers of that land, Henry Corbin studied, on the one hand, under Etienne Jilson who was one of the greatest scholars in the field of European philosophy in the Middle Age, and on the other he was under the influences of Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existentialism. After finding command on Arabic, Persian, and a relative knowledge of Islamic issues, under guidance of L. Masignon he became familiar with Sufism, *Tashayyo*' and Islamic Philosophy. Having discovered Suhrawardi, he got acquainted with the intellectual and spiritual sphere of Iranian divine philosophers; and to enter this sphere and sitting at the table of *Tashayyo*' spirituality, he became a guest of the spiritual land of the Iranian spiritual thinkers.

Corbin's entrance to the Islamic intellectual and spiritual world in general and *Tashayyo*' in particular attracted him toward Islamic philosophy and in particular philosophies of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra and the vertical order depicted by them for the universe. This attraction was so great that he considered Western philosophy, which after Descartes has gone after empirical sciences and believed only in two sources, i.e. sense perception and concepts acquired through faculty of understanding, for knowledge, as a kid game with mental concepts in which there is no hope to discover the reality of the immaterial and supra-sensible world. According to him, this philosophy was neither able to consider a faculty other than faculty of imaginary of which untrue, myth-like, and false and strange things stems which are always suspected and will annihilate with body and

its organs, between senses and faculty of understanding, and nor it was able to consider a place for the world of imagination in its horizontal picture of the world, and enter the immaterial and supra-sensible world which is neither the world of experiences which may be perceived through senses nor a an abstract world which is perceivable through reason by the help of formal logic or dialectic which goes from a concept toward the other.

Hence, he confessed weakness and limitation of this philosophy as compared with true philosophy which he had discovered within Islamic and in particular Iranian civilization. He made his heart ready to accept spirituality of *Tashayyo*' and attain true philosophy.

Like 'Allamah Tabataba'i who not only has found true philosophy in critical studies but also has embodied it within his self, Corbin's attainment of true philosophy which can be seen in his works, allowed him to make a distinction between revelation and exegesis, discover the relation between inward and outward, confirm hierarchical system of the universe, and considers man's perfection as a subject of man's gradual perfection in the world of matter and his spiritual wayfaring through hierarchical system of the universe and ascension to the worlds of imagination and intellect, and in brief allowed him to become an intimate and witness of the Holy Quran's spiritual secret and keep himself immune from confusing between image and imaginary.

### **World of Imagination and its Place for Corbin**

For Corbin, faculty of imagination is a mediate faculty that on the one hand brings out sensible and sensual forms of the world of matter and gives them an abstract form and separates them from materiality and on the other grants intellectual forms an imaginal form, and gives them shape, dimension, and direction. In other words, imaginal perception creates some sort of transformation in sense

perceptions and transcends them. This transcendence makes man's ascension to the higher worlds possible, so that if there is not such transcendence going through one stage toward other will be impossible. The world to which this faculty brings us is a mediate between sensible world of matter and world of intellect, and if there is no such a mediate world, design of worlds will collapse. Forms and beings of this world, which is called world of *malakut*, are imaginal manifestations of pure intellectual forms and beings of the world of *jabarut*. Thus, faculty of imagination is a faculty whose work is to make us know one of the certain worlds of the field of existence i.e. world of imagination (10, pp. 14-24).

Thus, having explored hierarchy of the world of being and place of the world of imagination as a mediate between the world of matter (*nasut*) and the world of intellect (*malakut*) as well as the role which the faculty of imagination can play in finding knowledge of the world of imagination, Corbin considers man's perfection as a subject of his spiritual wayfaring from the world of matter to the world of imagination and therefrom to the world of intellect, and in this regard he is unanimous with Muslim philosophers. Furthermore, he makes a distinction between the faculty of imagination and imaginary whose role is restricted to the realm of fantasy, and relying on Paracelse's words, while making distinction between true imagination and false imaginary, he likens true imagination to the good tree and false imaginary to corrupt tree of which in the Holy Quran has been spoken (10, p. 20). In other words, according to him, this faculty, if it performs its main duty which is to make the world of imagination known and to lead man toward it, will justify a perception which considers the worlds of existence as divine manifestations. But if it descends to the station of carnal desires and of which false and untrue things stems, it will lead to corruption and deviation, it will consider the world of matter as reality and neglects supra worlds which are the inward and essence of the world of matter, and it will be predicated of attributes which are suitable for this negligence.

Thus, it is man who makes himself committed to either imaginary and false imagination or true imagination. In the first case, he will consider the world of matter as reality and existence as being restricted within it, and neglects the worlds of *malakut* and *jabarut*. In the second case, however, he regards the world of matter as a ladder to transcend to the world of *malakut*, and will try to purify his soul to attain to the higher worlds with the help of the faculties of imagination and intellect.

In man's understanding of religion as well, Corbin is of a view similar to that of 'Allamah Tabataba'i. According to him, "The main and important thing is to understand the true meaning of the contents of the Scripture (religion), and understanding of the meanings of the Holy Quran is a subject of the mode of understanding of he who tries to discover that meanings. All believer's acts as well stem from his mode of perception. Believer, if he has become familiar with the meanings of the Holy Quran, deals with interpretation and exegesis, and in this case the true meaning of the Holy Quran, which is at the same time the meaning of his life and his mode of being, will become manifest for him." (9, p. 17).

As regard to man's being before the world of *nasut* and believers' cheerful answer which has been mentioned in the verse 171 of the Chapter *A'raf* and the pre-eternal covenant between believers and God as well, Corbin is of a view similar to that of 'Allamah Tabataba'i. (9, p. 20)

### **Conclusion**

1- 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i and Professor Henry Corbin were bright stars and each one of them, after serious studies in the field of Islamic philosophy, *hikma* and mysticism and familiarity with the Holy Quran, depicted man's gradual perfection in the world of matter and his ascension to the higher worlds in an ideal fashion. In this depiction, 'Allamah Sayyid

Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i who was born in the Orient and grew with the oriental culture and philosophy which is full of spirituality and supra-natural realities, found a presupposition according to which some Muslim philosophers, neglecting gradual perfection in the world of matter, believed to some sort of leap in man's perfectional path, and considered the man born in the world of matter as having some attributes which man would find later. And Professor Henry Corbin who was born in the Occident noticed the lack of the world of imagination in the explications of the thinkers of that land about man's perfectional path.

2- Corbin's familiarity with 'Allamah Tabataba'i and some other Iranian thinkers on the one hand and his own intellectual and spiritual capacity on the other, allowed him to penetrate to the depth of various issues mentioned above in an admirable way and attain the true meanings of the Holy Quran.

"No "raw" is able to understand conditions of a "cooked"  
"Then it is time to stop speaking, *wassalam*."

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