

# Henry Corbin and his Understanding of Ismailism

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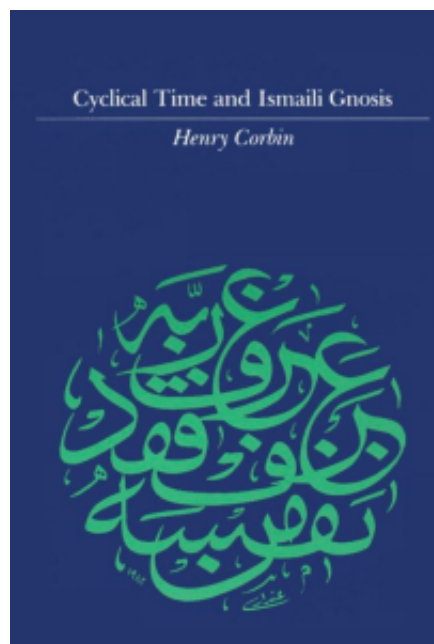
*Henry Corbin (1903 - 1978) was one of the 20th century's most prolific scholars of Islamic mysticism. Corbin was Professor of Islam and Islamic Philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris and at the University of Teheran. Photo: Eranos Archive*

## Introduction: Corbin's Universe

If scholarship is an entrance into a mental universe, then the gateway opened to us by Henry Corbin reveals a universe which is significantly different from those encountered in the works of many scholars of Ismailism. Along with V. Ivanow, S. Stern, W. Madelung, and a few others whose works are significant in impact if not in quantity, H. Corbin may be considered one of the pioneers in the twentieth century in the field of Ismaili studies, who attempted to study it from the viewpoint of texts internal to the tradition rather than from accounts of it by others not of the tradition itself. His impressive oeuvre of course consists of a much wider span than Ismaili studies alone; he edited, translated and wrote extensively on Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and Twelver Shi'ism, as well as on gnosticism as it is manifested in other religious traditions, notably Christianity and ancient Iranian religions.

Many studies have been conducted on Henry Corbin, evaluating his contribution to the

field of Islamic studies in general, analysing his method, and critiquing his interpretation and conclusions. My aim here is not to duplicate the observations made in some studies about what is “left out” by Corbin, about his rather individual and personal understanding of Islam, his anti-historicism and about the phenomenological method which he claimed to use although not in the manner in which it is commonly understood. Rather, I would like briefly to examine what he says about Ismailism in the context of: the methods he uses, the attitudes with which he approaches its texts, and the conclusions he draws. Thus, for the purposes of my study, I will focus primarily on the essays on Ismailism contained in *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* (London: Kegan Paul International, in association with Islamic Publications, 1983).



*Front cover of Henry Corbin's  
book "Cyclical Time and Ismaili  
Gnosis"*

From the outset, it may be salient to mention that the single most important factor cited by almost all scholars dealing with Ismailism is the paucity of historical material surrounding and found within Ismaili texts and concerning Ismaili figures (a lacunae that is being addressed by the publications of the Institute of Ismaili Studies). This obstacle is turned by Corbin into an advantage, for it frees him rather to concentrate on the ideas, often difficult to decipher and contextualize, expressed in these texts. While he admits the importance of historical data, he attempts to look beyond historicity in his analysis of the concepts he finds in the texts he reviews. Corbin's interest in gnosticism (that which relates to spiritual knowledge) provides him with a lens through which to look for and find structural similarities between ideas found in Ismaili texts and texts of other traditions. In this respect he deserves the recognition of being able to make connections across traditions in his attempt to substantiate his underlying supposition,

shared with other perennialist thinkers, that the diversity of gnostic religious expression and experience reveals insights into the human soul's journey into spiritual awareness.

### Corbin's Three Major Themes of Gnosticism

In his essay, "From the Gnosis of Antiquity to Ismaili Gnosis," Corbin reveals to us some of the major features, or themes, of gnosticism (as opposed to Gnosticism, which is commonly understood as an early Christian heresy) in its various forms.

These are:

1. "The unknowable, impredicable, ineffable Divinity, the Abyss of Silence which is the origin of all the becoming of the worlds." (161)
2. "The crisis occurring in this Pleroma, to which all forms of gnosis ascribe the great acts of Creation and salvation." (161)
3. "The figure of the *Anthropos*, the Saved-Savior." (161)

The culmination, or central fact of gnosis is that it is:

a teaching which does not aim at some pure theoretical knowledge, [but which is] *amode* of understanding which is not a simple act of knowing. It is not a teaching for the masses, but an initiatory teaching passed on to each specially chosen disciple. It is an esoteric knowledge, a knowledge of the Truth that, as such, gives rise to a new birth, a metamorphosis, the salvation of the soul. (153)

Each of these themes represents a wealth of significance which is deserving of amplification, and needs to be understood in much greater detail in order to draw out its significance for Ismailism. I will attempt, as best as I can, to state what Corbin is alluding to in each of these statements, and then proceed to show how he links these with Ismailism.

#### 1. The Cause of All Existence: The Unknowable God

*...theophany itself serves as a veil that, while hiding the Unknowable, nonetheless manifests it in so far as it may be manifested, thus rendering the Unknowable divine accessible to worship.*

The first statement is an allusion to the tension and relationship, as far as one can be spoken of, within the Unknowable, Ineffable God, which transcends all predication, but which nonetheless is the cause of the existence of all worlds without itself being predicable of existence or non-existence.

The issues raised with regard to this entity, to which no name or attribute or



In Ismailism, the form of the crisis depends on the sources used: for Nasir-i Khusraw (d. ca. 1074 CE: Corbin suggests d. ca. 481 AH/1088 CE), for example, the crisis occurs at the procession of the second hypostasis, the Universal Soul, or *Nafs-i Kull*. As the *Nafs-i Kull* turns to face and acknowledge its origin through a response of gratitude or what Corbin calls “adoration”, it realizes that it is imperfect because something stands between it and the Originator, the *mubdi’* – what we might term God. That something is the Universal Intellect, the *Aql-i Kull*, which stands between the *Nafs-i Kull* and the Originator. As a result, the *Nafs-i Kull* is perfect potentially but not in actuality, causing it to move to do something about its imperfection. This movement results in the creation of the rest of the cosmos, including everything that lies in our realm, the realm beneath the moon or sublunary realm, that of earth in which everything is subject to generation and corruption or birth and death. Corbin elaborates:

Just as this [universal] Soul is the adoration of the primordial Archangel [the universal intellect], so the Cosmos *is* in turn the adoration of the Soul – with this difference, that the Soul cannot complete its work, cannot make good the margin of imperfection and incompleteness that comes to it solely from Time. That is why it starts the movement of the Cosmos; it tends toward its perfection through the great souls which appear from epoch to epoch in this world, not only the Prophets but in general all the members of the esoteric Church, up to the coming of the Qa’im, the Resurrector. Here then the cycle of Time is measured by the Soul’s effort to make good its own ontological imperfection. (37)

In a different account, that of Hamid al-Din Kirmani (d. after 411/1021, according to F. Hunzai), the procession of ten archangelic hypostases is developed, and the crisis occurs with the third of these. Corbin does not state clearly whether Kirmani himself mentions such a “crisis”; he prefers to draw upon the works of the Yamani *da’i* Imad al-Din Idris (d. 1462 CE) and Imam Husayn ibn ‘Ali (d. 667 CE). In this account, the third Archangel, the spiritual Adam, *adam ruhani*, doubts “the eternal ontological anteriority of the two Archangels [that is, the universal intellect and universal soul] who mediate between the Principle [that is, the Originator or God] and the third Archangel [that is, spiritual Adam]” (39).

Several concepts need to be introduced here. The first is that the first Archangel [universal intellect] issues a call, has a mission (*da’wah*) to all who proceed subsequent to it to acknowledge the Oneness of the primordial principle, that is, to acknowledge the *tawhid* [uniqueness or oneness] of God in the manner already described above (subject neither *totashbih* nor to *ta’til*). In ignoring this call the spiritual Adam’s “transgression becomes a transgression” (40), causing him to fall into a stupor, and when he awakens from this stupor, he realizes that a rupture has taken place, which has created Time, and moreover, that he has been “retarded” [or has “fallen”] to the position of the tenth Archangel. In addition, the retardation, as a temporal dimension, introduces “an opacity in the dimension of pure Light” (40).

Another consequence of this doubt is the generation of the cosmos, for this third Archangel, in whose image an entire universe of [potential] angels has been formed, is thereby responsible for their placement in “an existence in the dense and opaque world of material nature” (41), which however, is also the context within which they will find their salvation [that is, become actual angels]. The Archangel awakens from his stupor and resolves his doubt in a movement of conversion, when he heeds the call of the *da'wah*, simultaneously transmitting an appeal to his angels to do likewise and thereby overcome their own retardation. In thus being the medium through which darkness is born (in the form of Iblis), the third Archangel becomes simultaneously the medium through which it is vanquished, by virtue of his conversion. Correspondingly, the cosmos created by the doubt of the Archangel is also that “which is the instrument of their [that is, of the angels formed in his image] purification and the scene of the combat which is at once theirs and his” (41). This now leads us to the third theme of gnosticism, the relationship between the Saved-Saviour [the third, now tenth archangel] and its earthly counterpart.

### 3. Metamorphosis of the Human Being and the Temple of Light

*The mode through which this metamorphosis in the human being from the state of angelicity in potentia to angelicity in actu is accomplished is through a movement from the exoteric (zahir) to the esoteric (batin) through an exegesis (ta'wil)*

The crux of this third feature of gnosticism lies in its conception of the human (*anthropos*), and in its underlying presupposition that the purpose of the human soul is to undergo a metamorphosis which will restore it to its original state of angelicity. Thus, the status of the human being cannot be understood except in relation to angelology.

When we turn to Ismailism, we find that Corbin has isolated a significant number of transformational concepts attached to this central theme of the metamorphosis of the human being, all the separate strands of which form an interconnected whole merging in the concept of the Imam as the “temple of light”. These strands may be enumerated as follows:

a. The cycles of time, alternating between periods of **epiphany**, when direct vision of the truth is accessible to all the angels made in the image of the spiritual Adam, and **occultation**, when the form of Iblis is freed from its imprisonment in the “world of the mothers” (43). The energy generated by the spiritual Adam’s victory over his own Iblis causes the Grand Cycle (that is, the earthly cycle) to be ushered in by a period of epiphany rather than occultation.

b. The “drama on earth”, which is a reflection, a re-enactment, of the drama that occurred in the angelic pleroma. The drama on earth is characterized by the seduction of the human Adam by the human Iblis. Briefly, this Adam, who was “one of the last



in which it originated” (47-48). Thus “each of the Imam’s manifestations, the Imam of each period, is only the manifestation of a unique and eternal Imam who, in the person of the last among them, will consummate the totality of the Aeon or Grand Cycle” (48).

Secondly, the adepts who comprise the esoteric hierarchy, that is, the members of the *theda’wah*, who as mentioned earlier, are angels *in potentia*, “compose the mystical Body, the Temple of Light of this Imam-Resurrector” (47). The task of each adept is to undergo a metamorphosis from the potential state into an angel in actuality, by engaging in a battle which has a two-fold implication: first, each adept battles for the “person of the Angel of mankind (the third Angel who has become the tenth)” (49), and for the Angel who is in the adept *in potentia*, that is, waiting to be actualized. The “fallen” third angel, as the tenth Angel, finds his manifestation “through the person of the primordial Adam, through that of each partial Adam, and finally through the person of the Imam Resurrector; and similarly the Imam Resurrector is already manifested and announced in the person of every Imam of every period” (49-50). All adepts, meanwhile, “have their celestial archetype in the Angels who followed the tenth Angel in his repentance” (50), that is, those angels who were formed in the image of the tenth angel.

The mode through which this metamorphosis in the human being from the state of angelicity in *potentia* to angelicity *in actu* is accomplished is through a movement from the exoteric (*zahir*) to the esoteric (*batin*) through an exegesis (*ta’wil*) of revelation (51). Only then will the Grand Resurrection at the end of the Grand Cycle take place. This brings to the fore the idea of the tutelary angel, manifested (the idea of *mazhar*, the locus of manifestation) both in the Imam and in each member of the esoteric hierarchy, each of whom acts as a limit, or *hadd*, for the one below it, the *mahdud* or that which is bounded or limited. The relation between the two is as follows:

Each *hadd* is bound to its *mahdud* by a companionship of initiatory brotherhood; it must draw it along, lift it to its own rank, in order to raise itself to a higher *hadd*, or rank.... At each degree, the horizon, or limit, defines for the adept the measure of his being and of his perception; his knowledge of himself, like his knowledge of his Lord, rises from horizon to horizon, from Angel to Angel, that is to say, from metamorphosis to metamorphosis. (85)

The fundamental premise upon which this transformation rests is that the metamorphosis from potential angelicity (*in potentia*) to actual angelicity (*in actu*) can only be effectuated by one who is already actualized as an angel, that is, an angel *in actu*, and such a figure—or figures—are the “Pure Imams” (104). Through their teachings, or spiritual exegesis (*ta’wil*), they awaken the souls of their adepts, who comprise their “Temple of Light” to their true nature. This true nature is that of angels formed in the image of the tenth angel, that is, not to a nature which is alien to them but which is their original status. In other words, the Saviour “saves his followers by awakening them to their primitive [that is, primordial or original] nature that is also his” (116). Thus, the gnostic dictum, “Know Thyself” is in Ismailian gnosis to be understood as awakening



the soul to its true self through consociation (*paywastagi*) with the Imam, who is the *mazhar* [locus of manifestation] of the tenth angel, and who awakens the soul of the adept through his spiritual exegesis (*ta'wil*). This *ta'wil* is communicated by the degrees (*hudud*) of the esoteric hierarchy (*da'wah*) to each subsequent level, enabling the soul to be awakened to the level of gnosis it is capable of attaining, and drawing it further and further upward until it reaches the threshold of the Imam himself, whereupon it will be drawn upwards by the Imam as part of the Temple of Light to the final, or Grand Resurrection of Unveiling, which is the true affirmation of *tawhid*.

### Corbin's Method and its Impact on his Ismaili Studies

*Corbin approached Ismaili texts with a view to elucidating the gnosticism which he identified as the true religious aim of human beings. It was this aspect which interested him most...the wealth of his erudition is able to identify the key structural elements of Ismailism, such as the notions of ta'wil (and hence zahir and batin), cyclical time, the Imam, the soul as the locus of transformation..*

his has been an all-too-brief delineation of some of the central aspects of Corbin's analysis of some key Isma'ili concepts. Many other important aspects have been left out, such as his discussions on the homologies found between Ismailism, Mazdaism and Ebonite Christian doceticism. At this juncture, however, it may be salient to ask: What impact does Corbin's method have on his Ismaili studies?

The first remark we may advance is that he perceives a unity in Ismaili thought which may not always seem apparent from a study of the various individual thinkers who contributed to the shaping of Ismaili thought up to the time of the Fatimid and Alamut thinkers. This is not to say that he was unaware of the differences among the various major thinkers in Ismailism, for he had certainly worked closely enough with works of individual thinkers such as Kirmani, Sijistani, Nasir-i Khusraw, 'Imad al-Din Idris and Nasir al-Din Tusi not to be cognizant of significant intellectual differences between their systems, and between their conceptions of the *da'wah*, the position of the Imam, and their celestial universes. (155) Nonetheless, and perhaps because of his profound erudition, he was able to isolate and highlight those elements in their writings that allowed him to focus on and reveal structural homologies with gnosticism, in which he was interested as a perennial philosophy that made its appearance in different human cultures at different times. It is possible that in advancing what we may term a "megatheory", that is, his view that gnosticism finds expression in every religious tradition in some form or another, that he "selected" the information he required to fit his theory. Thus, he read the diverse texts of Ismailism with a view to identifying those elements within them which substantiated his theory. Builders of megatheories run the risk of an exposed Achilles tendon which brings to the fore all the details which do not fit into the theory. In this case, however, the wealth of his erudition is able to identify the key structural elements of Ismailism, such as the notions of *ta'wil* (and

hence *zahir* and *batin*), cyclical time, the Imam, the soul as the locus of transformation, and the angelic pleroma (the hypostases), and the concept of *oftawhid* with respect to an Unknowable primordial principle, and then to supply sufficient detail from the works of individual Ismaili thinkers in support of his theory. While the more cautious student today may want to examine each major Ismaili thinker on his own terms, there is no denying that s/he would have to acknowledge the “gnostic” context clarified by Corbin within which that Ismaili thinker operates. Moreover, the illuminating notes made by Corbin on each of the Ismaili manuscripts edited by him are invaluable, and in fact one often wishes that his notes had not been so brief.

In sum, then, it may be fair to say that Corbin approached Ismaili texts with a view to elucidating the gnosticism which he identified as the true religious aim of human beings. It was this aspect which interested him most, and he points out his interest often enough for him not to have to apologize for not having focused on the many other concomitant aspects of organized religion (such as its legal systems and its pragmatic, this-worldly concerns). As the state of scholarship advances, and as more Ismaili texts come to light, his work may stand to be challenged or to be further vindicated. Currently, it is daunting for the student to challenge many of his assertions in the narrow spheres within Islamic studies that he defined as his subject of interest. This is because his masterly command of the texts lead him to revealing insights to be gained from the texts precisely because he brings them into conversation with ideas found in other religious traditions. The legacy his work has left lies in the plethora of individual studies which may now be carried out on the basis of his preliminary, yet nonetheless insightful and penetrating investigations.

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