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Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon, and Schuon by Patrick Laude, 2010. Albany, SUNY Press, vi + 211 pp., \$ 80.00. ISBN: 978-1438-42955-7 (hbk).

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Usually, and may the oversimplification be forgiven here, those who 'like' René Guénon also happen to 'like' Frithjof Schuon, Henry Corbin, and probably also Louis Massignon. While in the case of Corbin and Massignon this connection is rather obvious, the latter being one of the academic mentors of the former, the connection is not completely intuitive in the case of all of the named intellectuals altogether. The transitive property, in this case, applies 'phenomenologically' – that is, in a way that transcends the personalities themselves and takes into consideration the nature of the texts only, as if their works subsisted and interacted in the *mundus imaginalis*.

I open my review with this remark because *Pathways to an Inner Islam* effects this connection openly, analysing the works of the four authors through acknowledging the elective choice of the readers *a posteriori*: that this elective choice does in fact exist is no mystery whatsoever, whatever Corbin may have thought about the label 'traditionalist' that is often attached – with some good reasons – to Guénon and Schuon. To be sure, Laude is careful at the very outset to stress that one has to deal with 'two intellectual lineages': Massignon and Corbin on one hand, Guénon and Schuon on the other (2). But, quite pertinently, he attributes to both lineages the basic common feature of having experienced on a personal level the spiritual influence of mystical Islam, which is even more meaningful, according to the author, if one considers the fiercely rationalist stance of the 20th century French intellectual climate.

The book is, by explicit statement of its author (whose previous two monographs were devoted to Massignon and Schuon respectively), an introduction to the four personalities and their oeuvre, offered to the English speaking world. The aim is thus to fill a gap, as the extant

translated works are not enough to make for a whole understanding of the depth and subtleties of their thought and their mutual intellectual connections. In this sense, *Pathways to an Inner Islam* is a contribution to the academic understanding of the often underestimated 'traditionalist' approach to mystical Islam, which, like it or not, has served as an inspiration and motivating force behind the activity of a congruous number of scholars of Islam – avowedly or not.

The four, Laude points out (11), are to be considered by now and to some extent 'primary sources' in the study of Islam in the modern world: the personalities and thoughts that have been influenced by them (15-20) testify to how far their influence has reached. The author tackles the possible lines of thought, Eastern and Western, that take to task the very notion of an 'inner Islam' (20-21), mentioning the range of options available to the scholar: it ('inner' or 'spiritual' Islam) does not exist, for Islam is law; it does exist, but its origin is not Islamic or Qur'anic; it does exist, but it is marginal and not at all representative of Islam; there could be something 'inner' in Islam, but its Western proponents exaggerate its import. Also, Laude advocates the legitimacy, even the necessity, of a traditionalist approach to Islam that privileges its inner dimension, making a case for this. By doing so, he provides a definition of Sufism that serves as a brief introduction to Islamic mysticism, preliminary to the study of the four intellectuals.

The book proceeds thematically. Rather than addressing the four authors one by one, as would have been expected – and probably would have been too simplistic – Laude fashions his chapters in the form of a 'path', consistent with the title he gave to the study. In Chapter 2, significantly entitled 'Sufism, Shi'ism, and the Definition of Inner Islam', the approaches of the four and their definition of and take on 'inner Islam' are meticulously presented in their distinctive characters. The same paradigm is applied to Chapter 3, on the Qur'an; and to Chapter 4, on the Prophet. While the thematic arrangement may at times obscure the matter addressed – it is no easy task to condense the complexity and articulation of monumental thought systems like Massignon's and Corbins's in the space of a few pages – the elaboration shows a tendency toward an analytic and comprehensive treatment of the subject that is truly commendable. In addressing Massignon's conception of Prophet Muhammad, for example, Laude embarks in a meticulous discussion of the key passages of Massignon's prophetology that includes timely references to the exegetical and mystical tradition, and is as rich as it is illuminating. These incursions in the tradition are

often useful to put the thought of the four intellectuals into perspective. The following excerpt may give a gist of Laude's mode of proceeding:

It is significant to note that Massignon is less interested in the symbolic suggestion of proximity implied by the Quranic expression "two bows' length or even nearer" than in the remaining distance that it explicitly denotes. Early Sufi meditations, by contrast, have tended not only to highlight the inaccessible Mystery of the Divinity but also the ways in which the Prophet was, as it were, "clothed" with divine Attributes, thereby providing an exemplar for actual states of mystical union. (80)

Chapter 5 is an attempt to connect the theme of 'inner Islam' as envisaged by the four intellectuals to the theme of the 'feminine' in Islam, without avoiding giving an indirect response to the modern liberal concerns about the condition and role of women in Muslim societies. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 address the universality of Islam and the theme of war respectively. Both subjects are treated impeccably, with an abundance of references to the primary texts and an in-depth journey through the thought of the scholars that, while not making for a smooth reading, provides opportune windows for the reader to expand further his or her knowledge by way of a thematic approach.

Many things could be said on how the author could have made the book more readable, comprehensive, and consistent. Truth being, nevertheless, that writing a better book on such an enormous and complex subject would have hardly been possible, for Laude shows detailed and meticulous knowledge not only of the thinkers themselves, but also of the intellectual milieu that nourished their endeavour. The work does have apologetic accents, but this is not necessarily a flaw, as long as the apologetic stance is unambiguously declared. The sympathetic treatment comes across clearly and, for one like the author of this review, who has never hidden his personal penchant for Guénon, Schuon, Massignon, and Corbin, this can by no means represent a decisive argument against the book. If a critique can be levied against Laude in this respect, it is that sometimes he is *naively* apologetic: 'in a traditional setting such as was prevalent at the time of classical Islam the entire society and the educational structures were set in such a way as to preserve and promote an organic hierarchy of knowledge and action that integrated the whole array of human

endeavours and culminated in the spiritual sphere of inner realization' (3). Such a romanticised picture, even though it is the author himself who is watering it down and problematising it, reflects, I believe, an oversimplified traditionalist imagination, that, besides avoiding a definition of such key terms as 'classical Islam', does not account for the complexity of history and fails to acknowledge centuries of criticism – at times very harsh and dark – of their own social setting by the mystics themselves.

However, for all the minor shortcomings that a fastidious reviewer might catch through a hair-splitting search – such as some forgivable mistakes, like 'daughter of her father' for *umm abiha* (106) – my contention is that *Pathways to an Inner Islam* may serve as an excellent companion to a comparative study of Corbin, Massignon, Guénon and Schuon, particularly if one is interested in the distinctive elements of their work. I can hardly conceive of it, though, as an introduction to the four thinkers' oeuvre, as I cannot imagine anyone who has not already gone through some of their key essays, grappling with Laude's dense study with much benefit – as opposed, for example, to Mark Sedgwick's *Against the Modern World*, which can be, with some major caveats, an introductory work to the 'perennialist' influence even in the absence of a preliminary knowledge of the primary sources. Would I recommend this book? Yes, I would, warmly and without hesitation, to those interested in Muslim spirituality and mysticism. However, I would definitely not recommend it to anyone who does not have first-hand thorough knowledge of the works and thought of the four intellectuals treated in it.