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THE STUDY OF ISLAM: THE WORK OF HENRY CORBIN

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Orientalism—the purportedly scientific study of the religion, history, civilization, and actuality of the Muslim peoples—has recently come under increasing and often justified attack. A self-perpetuating tradition that has flourished incestuously, rarely open to participation by any but the most assimilated and “occidentalized” Muslims, it has signally failed to construct a credible and comprehensive vision of Islam as religion or as civilization, despite vast and meritorious labor accomplished in the discovery and accumulation of factual information. Nowhere have matters stood worse than in the Orientalist study of the Islamic religion. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that so radical is the disparity between the Islam of Orientalist description and the Islam known to Muslims from belief, experience, and practice that they appear to be two different phenomena, opposed to each other or even unrelated. The reasons for this are numerous. The persistence of traditional Judeo-Christian theological animus toward Islam should never be underestimated. Probably of greater significance, however, is the unwillingness of the quasi-totality of scholars to accept the autonomy of the religious “fact” and their insistence upon historicist or sociologist reductionism.

A major exception to this rule was the French Islamicist, Henry Corbin, who, by the time of his death on October 7, 1978, had elaborated a rich and varied corpus of writings on various aspects of Islamic spirituality unequaled by any other Orientalist. With Iran and Shi'ism always as his ultimate point of reference, Corbin wrote prolifically for more than three decades on Sufism, Islamic philosophy, Twelver and Isma'ili Shi'ism, the concept of spiritual chivalry in Islam, and a host of other related topics. In almost all that he touched, Corbin acted as a pioneer and innovator, questioning some of the most tenaciously held beliefs of Orientalism and uncovering vistas of thought and imagination that had previously been unknown or underestimated. In addition to his works of analysis and synthesis (culminating in the four-volume work, *En Islam iranien*, 1971-72, a summary of all his major themes and interests), Corbin founded and edited the *Bibliothèque Iranienne*, a series of Persian and Arabic texts concerned mostly with the currents of philosophy and mysticism that were close to his heart. Twenty-three volumes of

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this series have now appeared, many of them edited by Corbin himself, and others prefaced by him with analytical synopses, taken as a whole, they represent a major addition to the textual resources available for the study of Islamic philosophy and mysticism. Given the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of Corbin's work, an increasing portion of which is becoming available in English, it seems useful to attempt an analysis of his vision of Islam, and to indicate both the strengths and weaknesses of his profoundly individual, and even idiosyncratic, oeuvre.

1

It needs first to be remarked that Corbin brought to his labors as a scholar of Islam far more than the customary philological training and apparatus of the Orientalist. His was primarily a philosophical mind, nurtured by the training of the great medievalist, Etienne Gilson, and by an early interest in Heidegger (his French translation of *Was ist Metaphysik?* appeared in Paris in 1938). But, as he never tired of stressing in all his works on the Shi'i sages of Iran, his concept of philosophy extended beyond mere ratiocination to an insistence on the inner, visionary pursuit of the truth, his concern, indeed, was primarily with theosophy, a word that came to be a key element in his terminology. Accordingly, to the elements in his general intellectual formation that helped to shape his understanding of Islam should be added a sympathetic acquaintance with esoteric elements in Western philosophy, with the Rhenish mystics, and with such assorted topics as the Holy Graal, the Knights Templar, Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, and the writings of Swedenborg.

Corbin's theosophical predisposition led him to a radical reassessment of the whole nature and history of philosophical activity in Islam. Before Corbin, it had been the general thesis of most works on Islamic philosophy (e.g., E. J. de Boer's *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, first published in 1903 but widely used for many subsequent decades) that the prime interest of Muslim philosophical thought lay in the reception and transmission to Europe, in slightly enriched form, of Greek philosophy. This mediating function, and with it, philosophical activity as such, was held to have come to an end by the thirteenth century, so that apart from the anomalous figure of Ibn Khaldūn the intellectual horizons of Islam remained bare until the beginning of modern times. This view of Islamic philosophy rested partly on the assumption that only those aspects of Islamic thought that impinged on the intellectual history of Europe were of importance, partly on the unspoken equation of Islamic civilization with the Arab (or Arabic-writing) element that dominated its formative period, and partly on the sterile triadic scheme of "rise, maturity and decline" that Islam was thought to have completed by the thirteenth century. More than any other individual, Corbin discredited this simplistic view of things. He demonstrated, first of all, that even the most familiar of Muslim philosophers, Avicenna, had been partially misunderstood, and showed that in addition to the rational aspect of his thought—emphasized because of its influence on medieval scholasticism—there was another element to his thought—esoteric, inward, and illuminationist (see Corbin, 1960b, *passim*). More importantly, he brought to light in a whole series of writings the prolongation of Islamic philosophical activity that took place long after the thirteenth century under the aegis of Shi'ism and the designation of *hukmat*. It is fair to say

that before Corbin the names of Mīr Dāmād, Findiriskī, Qāzī Sa'īd Qummī, and Mullā Ṣadrā were barely known to Western scholarship.

In qualification of Corbin's unquestionable achievement in the reassessment of Islamic philosophy, it must be said that he frequently applied the traditional Arabic adage that "cure is effected by opposites." For in seeking to emphasize the undoubted visionary and theosophic element present in the thought of both Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā, he ran the risk of underestimating the rational core of their systems. In the introduction to his careful study of Mullā Ṣadrā, Fazlur Rahman addresses this problem, with obvious reference to Corbin. Rejecting Corbin's thesis of a substantial illuminationist or Sufi element in the work of Ṣadrā, he points out that inward experience had for Sadra and others of his school the function not of producing new thought-content, but rather of bestowing on thought-content intellectually attained the quality of personal experience (Fazlur Rahman, 1975, 3-4). We have here the first of many indications that the personal proclivities of Corbin colored as well as illumined the topics he discussed.

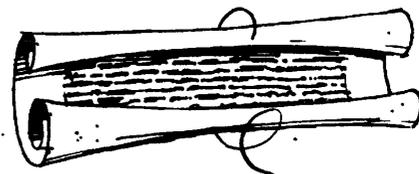
2

The second major theme addressed by Corbin was Shi'i Islam in its Twelver and Isma'ili forms. Here, too, he brought about a much-needed change in Orientalist concepts. Before Corbin, the Sunni-Shi'i differentiation within Islam was understood almost exclusively in political terms, and Shi'ism was dismissed as a "heterodoxy," without any precise definition being offered for the term or its counterpart, "orthodoxy," as if the position of the majority were *per se* orthodox and that of the minority, heterodox. Against this view of things, Corbin rose in eloquent revolt, protesting that "Shi'ism cannot be reduced to cursing the first three caliphs, nor to the practice of a fifth rite of law, side by side with the four rites of law officially recognized by Sunni Islam" (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol. 1, xiv). For the first time in a Western language, Corbin expounded the doctrine of the Imamate in all its esoteric and metaphysical dimensions, making it plain that the succession to the Prophet to which the Imams laid claim was far more than the political and juridical governance of the community, and that it was the cyclical prolongation of the core of prophethood itself.

But here again we find Corbin attempting "cure by opposites." Correctly refuting the reduction of Shi'ism to a contingent question of political succession, he insists upon an equally extreme view, that Shi'ism is essentially an esoterism, that indeed it is "the sanctuary of the esoterism of Islam" (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol. 1, 16). This view, which permeates the whole of Corbin's writing on Shi'ism, involves a serious distortion of both Sunni and Shi'i Islam. Once Shi'ism becomes the sole repository of Islamic esoterism (i.e., spirituality and profundity), Sunni Islam becomes reduced to what Corbin refers to, repeatedly and with obvious contempt, as "legalist Islam." A form of esoterism, Sufism, has manifestly flourished in the Sunni world, but as we shall see, Corbin views Sufism as a truncated form of Shi'ism that has mistakenly attempted to dispense with the Imams.

The distortion of Shi'ism involved in its identification as an esoterism is equally serious, and now, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, with its strong emphasis on the sociopolitical dimensions of religion, such an identification

even appears grotesque. None would dispute that *'irfān* represents a form of Islamic esoterism appropriate to the Shi'i context and that it draws in large part on the traditions attributed to the Imams. But to assert that *'irfān* is coterminous with Shi'ism, or even that it represents its most important expression, is quite a different matter. It necessitates overlooking the vast body of traditions of the Imams relating to exoteric ("legalist") matters and the persistent although thwarted claims of the Imams to exercise actual political authority. It also causes Corbin to be extremely selective in his view of Shi'ism.



In the world of Iranian Shi'ism, Corbin confined his attention—apart from questions of "imamology"—to little more than the practitioners of *hikmat* and the Shaykhīs, a school of esoteric speculation that had some importance in the early nineteenth century but later became confined to a small and stagnant community in Kerman. Almost totally absent from all of Corbin's copious writing on Iranian Shi'ism are those who have been its chief custodians and exponents for more than three centuries: the *'ulamā' az-zāhir*, the "exoterist" authorities. Their absence is not of course attributable to a deliberate exclusion on the part of Corbin, and still less to ignorance. It is simply that once the identification of Shi'ism with esoterism has taken place, all schools and currents of thought that are not esoterist naturally fall by the way as inauthentic, even if they have been historically predominant. In a highly revealing passage, Corbin once suggested that the attainment of majority status by the Shi'a in Iran during the Safavid period, and the concomitant involvement of the religious leaders in socioeconomic and even political matters, led to a "betrayal" of the esoteric essence of Shi'ism (Corbin, 1960c, 69). The abstruse speculations of the Shaykhi school were, according to Corbin, a corrective response to this betrayal, intended to restore "integral Shi'ism," and he devoted several studies to them (notably Corbin, 1960-61). The triumph of the Uṣūlī school of *fiqh* at about the same time as the emergence of the Shaykhī school was, by contrast, a subject of no interest to Corbin, even though it was indubitably the most important single development in the religious history of post-Safavid Iran. It permitted the growth of a powerful class of *'ulamā* and may be regarded as the distant ancestor of the Iranian Revolution. Because of his identification of Shi'ism with esoterism, Corbin was, in his own way, as remote from the contemporary reality of Shi'i Islam in Iran as the most obtuse of political scientists.

3

The third major focus of Corbin's scholarly concern was Sufism, or, more precisely, a well-defined range of topics and personalities within Sufism: Ibn 'Arabī and his Iranian exegetes, Rūzbihān Baqlī of Shiraz, and various members of the Kubravī order, especially 'Alā ad-Daula Simnānī. It is immediately to be conceded that in this area, too, Corbin displayed his usual talents for the voracious and imaginative

reading of little-known texts. His understanding of all he touched was, however, colored, or even determined, by his particular vision of Shi'ism as the sole legitimate esoterism of Islam. He presented the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī as being in many ways akin to Shi'ism, in both its Twelver and Isma'ili forms, and went to some lengths to establish parallels between the two schools, while ignoring almost completely the immediate and demonstrable antecedents of Ibn 'Arabī in the Sufism of Andalusia and the Maghreb. Similarly, when speaking of Rūzbihān, Corbin again finds himself compelled to make some reference to Shi'ism, although on this occasion he can do little but offer his readers a barely disguised apology for concerning himself with a Sunni writer and mystic (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol 3, 11). As for the Kubravīs, he asserts that various leading figures of the order (such as Sa'd ad-Dīn Hamūya and 'Alā ad-Daula Simnānī) were either crypto- or proto-Shi'is. Here he followed the well-established practice of certain Shi'i writers, such as Nūrullāh Shushtarī, author of the celebrated *Majālis al-Mu'minīn*, who insisted on claiming retrospectively for Shi'ism almost anyone who made reverential mention of 'Alī and the other Imams. Corbin was, of course, aware that such references did not necessarily identify their authors as Shi'i. But he was remarkably categorical in his attributions of Shi'i tendencies to the Kubravīya, magisterially disdaining a whole mass of evidence pointing to the Sunni identity of the order (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol 3, 294-95). Consistently refusing to engage in more historical discussion than appeared necessary to validate his assertions, he left his readers unaware, for example, that the Kubravīya thrived for centuries in the strictly Sunni environment of Transoxiana and that in Kashmir it even engaged in fierce polemics against the Shi'a (see Rafiqi, n d, 96).

Most important, however, for understanding Corbin's view of Sufism is his constantly repeated assertion that the key concept of *wilāyat*—"sainthood," for want of a better English equivalent¹—is, in Sufism, an uprooted borrowing from Shi'ism and that the esoteric, initiatic, and cosmic functions of the Imams of Shi'ism have been usurped by the Sufis and reassigned by them to their masters. In a discussion of Simnānī, for example, Corbin asserts that the idea of *wilāyat* originated in various *hadīths* of the Imams recorded by al-Kulaynī and proceeds to claim that "to speak of *wilāyat* in isolation, passing over the charisma of the Imam in silence, is more than a paradox, it destroys a unity," i.e., the unity of prophethood and *wilāyat*, the former being exoteric in purpose, the latter esoteric (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol 3, 296). Now this assertion is demonstrably untrue, the Sufi understanding of *wilāyat* also relates it to prophethood, although in a fashion different from that propounded by Shi'ism (see al-Hakīm at-Tirmidhī, 1965, 336ff). Moreover, as Paul Nwyia has pointed out, there is no need to suppose a transmission of influence to have taken place in either direction, since the concept of *wilāyat* is rooted in the Qur'an and developed in Sufism without any paradox or problem resulting (Nwyia, 1970, 240-42).

4

Philosophy, Shi'ism, and Sufism were, then, the three major areas of Corbin's concern alternating throughout his scholarly career as the dominating themes of his work. In addition to them, a particular place is occupied in his oeuvre by

an individual, Shihāb ad-Dīn Suhrawardī, the illuminationist philosopher executed for heresy in Aleppo in 1191. Corbin devoted to him his earliest essay in *Orientalism* (Corbin, 1939), published his collected works in Arabic and Persian (in collaboration with Seyyed Hossein Nasr), and made ubiquitous mention of Suhrawardī throughout his work as well as devoting to him a number of separate studies. In brief, we may say that Suhrawardī was for Corbin what Hallāj was for Massignon—not only the pivotal figure of a scholarly career, but also a personal spiritual hero. Suhrawardī was of compelling interest to Corbin for a number of easily identifiable reasons. More clearly than Avicenna or Mullā Sadrā, the *shaykh al-ishrāq* exemplified the union of discursive reasoning and mystic intuition that was so dear to Corbin. He was moreover an ancestor of the school of *hukmat* that occupied so large a place in Corbin's vision of Shi'ism, although it appears he may have distorted the nature and extent of illuminationist influence on, for example, Mullā Sadrā (see again Rahman, 1975, 1). Finally, Suhrawardī claimed to have resurrected the wisdom of pre-Islamic Iran, and he made use of Persian terminology in his angelological theories. For Corbin, who always insisted on an unbroken spiritual continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran, this was a precious and rare fragment of evidence. I cannot attempt to pass judgment here on the accuracy of Corbin's analyses of Suhrawardī. What may be pointed out, however, is that the position of Suhrawardī and his school in the intellectual and spiritual history of Islam is marginal, whatever may be the intrinsic interest of *ishrāq*. Apart from his influence on *hukmat* in Safavid Iran, and the stray commentary written upon his work in Turkey and India, there is little sign of his having exerted a substantial posthumous influence. The fact that Corbin deliberately elevated him to a position of eminence in his scheme of "Iranian Islam" is perhaps the strongest single indication of how Corbin's spiritual predilections came to determine his scholarly concerns. Just as Massignon had elevated Hallāj to a position of centrality in Sufi tradition that was not legitimately his, so did Corbin glorify Suhrawardī as a sage of unparalleled stature. It is hardly a coincidence that both Hallāj and Suhrawardī, the respective heroes of the two French Orientalists, suffered execution, a fate indicative, among other things, of their marginality with respect to Islamic tradition.²

5

All of the topics outlined above should be viewed against the background of Corbin's belief in an entity he called "Iranian Islam." It is obvious that Islam, in its historical elaboration, assumed multiple forms of expression, some of which may be identified with a particular region or people. From the beginning of the sixteenth century down to the present, Iran has certainly followed a path of religious development largely distinct from that of its neighbors. But it is plain that when Corbin spoke of "Iranian Islam," he had in mind something far more fundamental and pervasive. There existed for Corbin something called "the Iranian soul," endowed with "an imprescriptible vocation" and exercising a quasi-monopoly on the philosophical and mystical aspects of Islamic tradition (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol 1, x). The counterpart of this profound "Iranian Islam" is presumably "Arab Islam"—a dry and superficial legalism, with a mistaken insistence on the social applicability of religion. The racial

contrast between Iranian and Arab is never explicitly made, but when reading the works of Corbin, one cannot fail to be reminded of the theories of bygone Orientalists such as Comte Arthur de Gobineau and Max Horten who attempted to analyze the intellectual history of Islam in terms of a putative clash between Aryan (= Iranian) and Semite (= Arab). Corbin transferred the dichotomy from the biological to the spiritual plane.

According to Corbin, "Iranian Islam" is characterized not only by spirituality and esoterism, but also by a virtually unbroken continuity with the pre-Islamic past. In the credo prefacing his *En Islam iranien*, he states: "Within the Islamic community, the Iranian world has formed since the very beginnings an entity the characteristic traits and vocation of which can be understood only if one considers the Iranian spiritual universe as forming a whole, before and after Islam" (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol. 1, xxvii). Clearly the religious consciousness of Iran was not a *tabula rasa* at the time of the Muslim conquest, and elements of Mazdean provenance persisted into the Islamic period, particularly on the level of folklore and popular belief. But it is a question of emphasis and proportion. There is no substantial pre-Islamic substratum in the mainstream religious history of Islamic Iran. It is, on the contrary, remarkable to see how fully the intellectual and spiritual energies of Iran were devoted to the assimilation and elaboration of the Islamic religious sciences in the era of their formative development. For his thesis of fundamental continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran, Corbin is able to muster little more evidence than the nomenclature of the angels in the works of Suhrawardī;

certain parallels between the cosmological doctrines of the Yashts and the Bundahishn, on the one hand, and those of Suhrawardī, Mullā Ṣadrā and the Shaykhīs, on the other hand; and a partial similarity between the Saoshyant of Mazdean belief and the Twelfth Imam of Shi'i Islam (see in particular Corbin, 1977, *passim*). But he exhibited these fragments of evidence untiringly, and even regarded them as justifying the concept of "Irano-Islamic philosophy."³

Having defined "Iranian Islam" as a distinct entity narrowly concerned with mysticism and spirituality, and deeply marked by the legacy of its pre-Islamic past, Corbin came inevitably to present a highly selective view of Islam in Iran. It is true that he foreswore all attempts at presenting a general history of Islam in Iran, and that he deliberately entitled the four-volume summation of his researches *En Islam iranien*, warning the reader to anticipate a series of themes, not an exhaustive catalogue. Having made so much of the distinctiveness of Iranian Islam, Corbin might have been expected, however, to select themes more fully representative of the well-defined tradition he claimed to perceive. In fact, for all the mastery and eloquence with which it was elaborated, Corbin's vision of Iranian Islam embraced little more than the dim echoes of Mazdaism, the Sufism of Rūzbihān and the Kubraviya, the illuminationism of Suhrawardī, and the speculative and mystical aspects of Shi'ism. From a reading of Corbin's works, one would never suspect that Sunni Islam dominated the religious horizons of Iran for nine centuries, nor are his writings of much help in understanding the verifiable process whereby Twelver Shi'ism did indeed become something of an "Iranian Islam."

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An Orientalist career may legitimately be viewed not only in the context of the intellectual and spiritual predilections of the scholar in question, but also in that of the institutional and even political framework within which it was pursued. Throughout his career, Corbin alternated between France and Iran, having as his base in Tehran the Department of Iranology at the Franco-Iranian Institute. He enjoyed numerous contacts in both official and academic circles, and frequently mentioned unnamed "Iranian friends" as a source of authoritative reference in his works. He collaborated on certain projects with the late Muhammad Mu'in, with Jalāl ad-Dīn Ashtiyānī, as well as other scholars. A series of discussions he conducted with one of the scholars of Qum, 'Allāma Sayyid Husayn Tabātabā'ī, was published in Persian and enjoyed considerable fame (Corbin, 1960a). But the most important among his Iranian collaborators was, without doubt, Sayyid Hossein Nasr. A prolific if often derivative author on themes akin to those pursued by Corbin, Nasr occupied a wide variety of academic and administrative posts before prudently leaving Iran in the course of the revolution. Director of the Imperial Academy of Philosophy, he was known to have close personal ties to the court. Corbin's association with Nasr had, therefore, certain inevitable political implications. I do not wish to imply for a minute that Corbin, consciously or unconsciously, aligned himself with the now defunct Iranian monarchy in the sense of placing his scholarship at its service. The directions he chose to pursue were fully explicable in terms of his own intellectual preferences and spiritual tastes. It remains, however, a fact of some significance that his particular vision of "Iranian Islam" corresponded nicely to the cultural policies of the Pahlavī regime. Corbin's identification of Shi'ī Islam as an esoterism that disdained the sociopolitical plane had much in common with the regime's insistence that religious leaders refrain from all political concern. In particular, the teaching of the Shaykhī leader, Zayn al-'Ābidīn, that "the action of men cannot remedy their situation," quoted approvingly by Corbin, may fairly be termed an ideal prescription for the passive endurance of tyranny (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol. 4, 247). Certainly a reading of Corbin's works leaves the reader with the impression that Imam Khomeini has either failed to grasp the true essence of Shi'ism, or has willfully transgressed against it. Likewise, Corbin's positing of an Iranian-Arab dichotomy in Islam had a direct affinity to the ex-Shah's insistence on removing Iran, as far as possible, from the Arab context of its culture and history; it was the scholarly and elegant version of the official slogan, "Muslim but not Arab." Finally, his notion of a profound spiritual continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran was frequently absorbed into the bombastic propaganda that spoke of two and a half millennia of unbroken monarchical rule.

Corbin died in Paris a week after the arrival there of Imam Khomeini, who was about to enter the last and triumphant stage of his long exile from Iran. Writing an obituary notice in *Le Monde* (October 11, 1978) Henri Thomas speculated on what would have transpired if the two men, who apparently had so much in common, had met. Given the political context and implications of Corbin's work (which is known to Khomeini in general terms), it is highly unlikely that the meeting would have been congenial.

As remarkable and idiosyncratic as the content of Corbin's work was the methodology he espoused. Disdaining not only historicism but history, he claimed to be a strict phenomenologist, concerned only with the religious phenomenon as an autonomous, almost unattached, reality. He defined phenomenology as

the recovery of phenomena, i.e., encountering them, where they take place and where they have their places. In the religious sciences, this means encountering them in the souls of believers, rather than in the monuments of critical erudition or circumstantial enquiries, it is to display what has shown itself to them [the souls], namely the religious fact (Corbin, 1971-72, Vol. 1, xix).

This is no doubt a laudable and even necessary aim, one that the overwhelming majority of Orientalists have never even conceived, let alone striven to attain. Its sufficiency and feasibility are, however, questionable. The religious fact exists not only in the soul of the believer, but also on the historical plane, conditioning and being conditioned by it, to ignore the interaction between the religious and historical fact is surely an avoidable impoverishment of our understanding of religion. There is the danger, too, that the scholar will encounter the religious fact not so much in the "souls of the believers" as in his own soul, where it will be intermingled with whatever beliefs and associative reminiscences may happen to exist there. Thus in the case of Corbin, the Sufism and Shi'ism of Iran are obliged to coexist with numerous elements that are most definitely absent from the soul of the Muslim believer: the Holy Graal, the Knights Templar, Swedenborg, Meister Eckhart, to name but a few. Deliberately, even ostentatiously, refusing to place the religious phenomenon in the historical context that gives it specificity, Corbin all too frequently ended up by embedding it in the contours of his own soul.

He was, moreover, not entirely consistent in his adherence to phenomenology. As we have seen, he regarded the Sufi concept of *wilāyat* as an unacknowledged borrowing from Shi'ism; this is obviously a historical argument, since the alleged borrowing must have taken place at a given time. True, Corbin remains faithful to his contempt for history by failing to adduce any convincing proof, but the phenomenological principle is violated by the refusal to encounter the religious fact of Sufi *wilāyat* "where it takes place and has its place"—i.e., in the soul of the Sufi who is unconcerned with, or even totally unaware of, the Shi'ī teachings on the *wilāyat* of the Imams.

Corbin was certainly not alone among modern Orientalists in experiencing a confluence of spiritual and scholarly interests. E. G. Browne, R. A. Nicholson, and A. J. Arberry all seem to have been restored to a belief in Anglican Christianity by the study of Sufi texts,⁴ and Louis Massignon spoke of being a "spiritual guest" in the Islamic world long before Corbin identified himself in similar terms. Insofar as the attitude of the Orientalist guest is more respectful and sensitive than that of the Orientalist judge, critic or conqueror, all of whom bring to the study of Islam latent or overt feelings of hostility and superiority, he may achieve a greater insight than his colleagues. Sometimes, however, the guest turns out to have been self-invited, and there is no guarantee that he will fully understand his hosts or transmit accurately their perception of themselves. What then results

is a personal vision, which may possess profundity and beauty, but is convincing neither on the plane of formal, discursive scholarship, nor on that of the religious fact (or facts) experienced by Muslims

It would be an impertinence to overlook the grandeur and sweep of Corbin's work or to belittle the magnitude of his achievement. He transformed utterly the study of both Islamic philosophy and of Shi'ism, and no Western student of these topics, or indeed of Islam in general, can afford to shirk a careful reading of his works. The reader should not be intimidated, however, by the magisterial eloquence of Corbin's tone, or by the wide and imaginative erudition his writings display. Like Massignon before him, Corbin can be said to have attempted a selective appropriation of Islam by rearranging its component elements in a pattern that he felt to be congenial, personally satisfying, and, therefore, true. His enterprise was a rarefied and idiosyncratic form of spiritual colonialism.

NOTES

¹ It is concisely defined by Sharif Jurjānī (1969, 269) as "the subsistence of God's servant through God after his obliteration with respect to himself"

² The perceptive analysis of Massignon's work by Edward Said (1978), 264-75, suggests many points of comparison with Corbin.

³ See Corbin, 1972, a paper given, significantly, at the International Congress of Iranology held at Shiraz in 1971 on the occasion of "the 2500th anniversary of the foundation of the Persian Empire"

⁴ See A. J. Arberry's autobiographical sketch prefaced to the posthumously published second volume of his translation of *Mystical Poems of Rumi* (1979), ix-xiv.

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**"MASTER OF THE STRAY DETAIL":
PETER BROWN AND HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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The invitation to write a survey review of Peter Brown's work is a challenge to justify to myself and others the hold this man's portrayal of the world I study has come to have over me. I came away from reading *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* with something of the exhilaration Keats felt on first looking into Chapman's Homer. I know other patristic scholars who, lacking my native-Texan penchant for enthusiasm and hyperbole, nevertheless abandon academic caution and professional prickliness when admitting how Brown has helped them see things fresh and new. To review Brown's work is to attempt a measurement of a powerful electric charge (to adapt one of Brown's favorite metaphors) administered over the past two decades to a broad field of study.

I propose to measure the charge by passing it through four questions:

1. What does Brown think he is doing?
2. What are his suspicions?
3. What are his questions?
4. What is his method?

This will be less an account of achieved results than an assessment of the way Brown has reached his conclusions, for his work is not an icon to be venerated, but an undertaking to be joined.

WHAT DOES BROWN THINK HE IS DOING?

This question is particularly important in Brown's case because he is doing something uncommon in a field which usually falls into a classicist's appendix or a medievalist's prolegomenon. The territory is of course not unexplored; Rostovtzeff, Nock, Jones, Dodds, Marrou, Frend, and others have staked their claims, and the somber hues of Gibbon can still be glimpsed at the lowest stratum of the palimpsest map of the age built up by recent generations of scholarship. The tradition of patristic scholarship since the seventeenth century has minutely examined the theological and ecclesiastical remains of the period. Brown readily admits his debts to previous explorers, but insists he is doing something different. To disregard this insistence is to risk criticizing Brown for not doing something he has no intention of doing.



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