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Henry Corbin and Abraham Heschel

In studies devoted to Abraham Heschel little or nothing has been said about his encounter and friendship with the French philosopher and orientalist Henry Corbin (1903–1978). Since I presume that the latter figure is less well known to the present reader, it will not be out of place to present an introduction to his personality and outline his approach to spirituality. Although the latter inevitably evolved over a number of decades, I believe that its seeds were nearly present when Corbin first met Heschel and this explains the immediate affinity they felt for each other.

1. *Henry Corbin*

Henry Corbin was born into a Protestant family in Paris in 1903. Like all true seekers, he was precociously interested in unexplored continents. The lectures of the Thomistic philosopher and historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson (1884–1978), which he followed from 1923 at the Sorbonne, aroused his interest in medieval philosophy, and convinced him to take up Arabic in 1926 at the Ecole des Langues Orientales, later adding Persian and Sanskrit.

His speculation on the relationship between philosophy and mysticism led Louis Massignon (1883–1962), whom he encountered in the Bibliothèque Nationale, to introduce him in 1929 to the theosophical thought of the Persian mystic Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi (1155–1191), “Master of Oriental Theosophy,” and founder of the *Ishrâqî* or “Illumination” School. During his studies under Massignon at the Ecole Pratique he befriended the Jewish scholar Georges Vajda (1908–1981), who no doubt introduced him to Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah.¹ However, Corbin was principally immersed at that time in the philosophical problematic of hermeneutics and temporality as meditated in the writings of the German-speaking Protestant theologians Martin Luther (1483–1546), Johann G. Hamann (1730–1788) and Karl Barth (1886–1968). In July 1930 he undertook the first of several cultural trips to Germany, in the course of which he met the eminent Lutheran theologian and scholar of comparative religion Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), the author of *Das Heilige*, Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Struck by the originality of Heidegger’s thought, Corbin began to translate *What is Metaphysics?* (1929). As his first French translator, Corbin revisited Heidegger on several occasions in order to discuss his translation with the German philosopher.

Although appointed to the Oriental section of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Corbin obtained a leave of absence from its administrator, Julien Cain (1887–1974),² to spend the academic year 1935–1936 at the Berlin *Französisches Akademikerhaus* at the invitation of its director, Henri

1 See our article “Henri Corbin et la mystique juive,” in *Henry Corbin: philosophies et sagesses des religions du Livre*, eds. M. Ali Amir-Moezzi et alia (Tournhout: Brepols, 2005), pp. 151–164.

2 Cain was the son of a Jewish printer in Paris and was deported to Buchenwald during World War II. Corbin remained his friend and participated in his Festschrift *Humanisme actif, Mélanges d’art et de littérature offerts à Julien Cain* (Paris, 1968).

Jourdan. As we shall see presently, it was on this occasion in Berlin that he met Heschel. At that time, far from Judaism or Jewish concerns, the name of Henry Corbin was already associated with two completely different areas of thought, apparently unrelated to each other – the philosophy of Heidegger³ and Islamic theosophy. In 1939, stranded in Istanbul for the duration of the War, he totally immersed himself in the study of Suhrawardi's works and published his first monograph on the Persian thinker. Indeed, on the one hand Corbin was to introduce the French reader to Heidegger's thought, being his first French translator, and on the other hand, Corbin was to initiate Western interest in the Iranian Shi'ite masters and the study of Islamic mystical thought, especially that of Ibn Arabi. However, as Corbin himself explained at length in an interview he gave to Philippe Nemo, these two apparently incongruent domains can be integrated in the same essential approach.⁴

The connecting link between Heidegger and Shi'ite esotericism is the issue of temporality, which Heidegger had analyzed in his *Sein und Zeit*, where he had distinguished between universal history, *Weltgeschichte*, and its ontological root in the historicity of the *Dasein*. Heidegger also believed that German philosophers had lost the connection between humanism and theology. This link could be restored through the recovery of hermeneutics as traditionally applied in the religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Corbin himself discovered the key to a transcendental interpretation of history in its vertical extension in the archetypal and "imaginal" world – or hierohistory as he calls it – in the hermeneutics of psycho-spiritual time discussed by the Irano-Islamic thinkers.

Corbin was also passionately interested in the 13th century Muslim mystic Ibn Arabi, who had also inspired the thought of the grand critic of modernism, René Guénon (1886–1951). From his study of "crisis theology" that arose in the wake of World War I, and more specifically towards the end of his life, Corbin was preoccupied with the "ills of the modern world" in terms reminiscent of those expressed by Guénon. It has recently been shown by Xavier Accart⁵ that Corbin, in his youth, was familiar with Guénon's writings which had begun to have a noticeable influence in the intellectual circles he frequented. Guénon's view of the real nature of Eastern esotericism – disencumbered of occultism and exoticism – also coincided with those of Corbin. However, he turned away from Guénon's conception of Islamic esotericism using a different phenomenological approach.

For Corbin, the solution to the question East/West resided in their reciprocity, whereas Guénon considered the East the centre of gravity from which the modern West had deviated. Corbin did not share his bitter criticism of all Western philosophy and European scientific methods, and instead followed their development closely. As we have seen, he turned to the spiritual world of "the Faustic man" in order to elicit a reply to the intellectual demands of the times, and his interest in Protestant theology, especially the young Luther, urged him to first become "a pilgrim of the West." Inversely, Guénon, "a pilgrim of the East," considered Protestantism one of the symptoms and causes of modern spiritual decay. Interestingly, in 1947

3 See for this period D. Shayegan, *Henry Corbin, la topographie spirituelle de l'islam iranien* (Paris: La Différence, 1990), "Corbin et Heidegger," pp. 41–47.

4 "Henri Corbin, de Heidegger à Sohrawardi," in *Henri Corbin, Cahier de l'Herne*, ed. Ch. Jambet (Paris: De l'Herne, 1981), pp. 23–37. See also Corbin's postscript, *ibid.*, pp. 38–56 and the article in the same volume by Jean Brun, "Un philosophe en quête de l'Orient," pp. 70–79.

5 X. Accart, "Identité et théophanies. René Guénon (1886–1951) et Henry Corbin (1903–1978)," *Politica hermetica* 16 (2008), pp. 181–200.

Guénon wrote a significant review of Corbin's monograph *Suhrawardī d'Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishraqī)*, Paris, 1939. Although he appreciated its historical dimension, he reproached Corbin for not having distinguished between *ishraqī* philosophical doctrines, which, according to Guénon, had no real spiritual affiliation (*silsila*) with regular Sufism. While recognizing that Sufism had influenced Suhrawardi, Guénon thought that he had been primarily inspired by Neoplatonic ideas which he had clothed in Islamic form and thus his doctrine was only truly relevant to philosophy.⁶

In connection with the basic issue of "initiatory affiliation," Guénon's touchstone, Corbin considered Shi'ism to be the original Islamic gnosis from which Sufism had deviated by assigning to the Prophet those attributes which belonged to the Imam. Shi'ism permanently preserves the vertical relationship between Creator and creature and God's guidance to humanity through its devotion to the Imam, thus foregoing the necessity of initiation.

Corbin questioned the idea "of an impersonal metaphysical knowledge through pure intellect which was neither 'mental' nor 'human.'" In the light of his phenomenological approach to religious texts, Corbin insisted on the necessity of personal experience, "there where the phenomena take place and there where they have their place," i.e. in the soul. Thus the *Meccan Revelations* by Ibn Arabi were founded above all on the most personal visionary experience and were not transmitted through initiation.

In the last decade of his life Corbin diagnosed the state of the modern world. He was notably concerned about science, which he felt had gone out of control metaphysically and thereby put humanity on the road to destruction. He saw one of the essential causes of this crisis in our civilization in the loss of the "spiritual sciences" or "esotericism." The antidote to the crisis of civilization should come not from the East, but from the spiritual resources of the West itself. He deemed it "important to establish a centre which would strive towards the restoration of these elevated sciences" and spoke about the creation of an elite based on a Western form of metaphysics. This elite was to be founded on a spiritual world distinct from "Asiatic non-dualism," and it was with this perspective in mind that he founded the University of Saint Jean of Jerusalem in the 1970s, a sort of international centre of comparative spiritual research. In contrast to the Eranos conferences at Ascona, the former was to be limited to the heritage of the revealed religions.

A few words about Corbin's attitude towards Judaism will not be out of place, if only for our understanding of his relationship with Heschel. Corbin's main propensity was of course towards Islam. However, an attentive reading of his writings reveals numerous references to Judaism. Certain themes frequently reappear. Every time his favorite Muslim Gnostics deal with numerology, *'ilm al-jafri*, or the science of letters, or the angelical realm of *malakūt*, of the metaphysical world of light, or the symbolism of colors, Corbin exclaims "our theosophers connect with the preoccupations of the Kabbalists."⁷ In his monumental *En Islam Iranien*, he declares:

6 R. Guénon, *Etudes Traditionnelles* (1947), p. 92. Guénon further criticizes Corbin for having imitated Massignon's obscure style!

7 H. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 270.

Judaism and Christianity also have their esotericists, and there exists between them and the Gnostics of Islam, many common traits. It would be a fascinating task but of enormous proportions, but of unforeseeable consequences to study comparatively, from a point of view which we indicate here, the meaning and fate of the so-called esoteric schools in Islam and their counterparts in Christianity.⁸

This text reveals one of the fundamental characteristics of Corbin's approach – his conviction that certain spiritual families were related by a principle of metaphysical synchronism. In particular, the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition occupy a special place. According to Corbin, the study of the hermeneutic modalities employed by all spiritual traditions based on revealed religion could yield their common spiritual denominators.

It seems that this permanent preoccupation which runs through his work originates in his conviction that the “fedele d'amore” of all spiritual horizons constitute a single family. It was important for our Iranologist to “bring its members to mutually recognize in their brothers the same need for an imaginal world – beyond institutions.”⁹ Thus, he wrote in his *Philosophie iranienne islamique*:

It is certainly a great misfortune that the esotericists of Shi'ite Islam knew neither the Jewish mysticism of the *Merkaba*, nor the kabbalistic tradition of the *Zohar*, nor that of an Isaac Luria, nor a Hayyim Vital, etc. ... The misfortune is that these esotericists of the three Abrahamic branches never met in order to meditate on their affinity. They never had a common seat of learning however small their number.¹⁰

It seems that he saw these relations through the prism of his meta-denominational conception of the revealed religions, which culminated towards the end of his life in what he was wont to enthusiastically call the *harmonia abrahamica*. He practiced a “comparative philosophy” which postulated a visionary perception, transcending the conventional limitations of confessionalism. This visionary thereby achieved the transcendental unity of the Abrahamic religions, albeit with a Shi'ite eschatological coloring.

We may therefore proceed to point out some signposts which led our researcher to the idea of a synthesis between Jewish and Muslim theosophy. Let us recall that in his student days Corbin made the acquaintance of a few important scholars of Judaic mysticism, with whom he no doubt had fruitful exchanges.

Among his co-disciples at the feet of Louis Massignon were the young Georges Vajda (1908–1981),¹¹ Paul Kraus (1904–1944)¹² and Salomon Pines (1908–90).¹³ These future

8 Ibid., vol. I, p. 25.

9 A. Faivre, *Henry Corbin et le comparatisme en religion* (Milan, 2000), p. 98ff.

10 H. Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne islamique aux XVIIe and XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1981), p. 330. We have tried to demonstrate in some of our own writings that, contrary to the prevalent opinion, there had been some privileged contacts between Jewish and Muslim mystics on the literary, if not the physical plane.

11 For Vajda, see the biographical essay in our *Bibliographie de l'œuvre de G. Vajda* (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 1991).

12 On Kraus, see J. Kraemer, “The Death of an Orientalist: Paul Kraus,” in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. M. Kraemer (Tel-Aviv: Moshe Dayan Centre, Tel Aviv University, 1999), pp. 181–223. P. Kraus collaborated with Corbin in the edition of Suharwardi's *Whirling of Gabriel's Wing*, *Journal Asiatique* 227 (1935), pp. 1–82.

13 On Pines, see S. Stroumsa, “Shlomo Pines le savant,” *Journal Asiatique* 278 (1990), pp. 205–211.

scholars were all Jews of East-European extraction who combined a double competence both in Jewish and Islamic studies and with whom he maintained a life-long friendship. They no doubt contributed to Corbin's awareness which prepared him for his encounter with Heschel.

2. Henry Corbin and Abraham Heschel

As we have previously noted, Corbin spent the year 1935–36 in Berlin as a guest of the *Französisches Akademikerhaus*. It was at the library of this institute, one of the outstanding points of Franco-German exchange, that his attention was drawn to a thesis on prophetic consciousness by a young doctoral student of Polish origin – Abraham Heschel. Deeply impressed by the author's philosophical depth and originality, he immediately sought to make his acquaintance. Thanks to the mediation of the *Akademikerhaus*' director, his friend Henri Jourdan,¹⁴ he was able to meet Heschel in May 1936. Discovering their common passion for visionary phenomena, they struck up a spontaneous friendship, which was to last through their subsequent correspondence, at least until the '50s.

Abraham Heschel was no ordinary student, as Corbin was to discover.¹⁵ What probably appealed to Corbin was that, as the authentic scion of a Jewish mystical dynasty, Heschel embodied a living tradition, something like a Sufi sheikh. Indeed, Heschel was the direct descendant of the rebbes of Apta – and counted among his ancestors Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch, direct disciple of the Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760), the founder of Hasidism. His mother was also of Hasidic stock descended from one of the Master's other disciples, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. Groomed to take up the leadership of his community, Heschel mastered the vast corpus of traditional studies, which embraced not only the hermeneutics of the Bible and Talmud, but also the esoteric disciplines of the Kabbalah and Hasidism. As with the other descendants of some aristocratic Hasidic families, Heschel also received a secular education, and was pursuing the study of modern philosophy at the University of Berlin, where he had registered in 1927. As an initiate of the academic world, he probably incarnated in Corbin's eyes the symbiosis of philosophy and mysticism which he himself pursued, a "living Jewish Suhrawardi," the likes of whom he could never have hoped to encounter in France.

Heschel had completed his doctoral thesis in 1933, the year in which events in Germany were to change the face of human history, but it was only three years later, due to the Jews having already been excluded from the German educational system, that the University of Berlin finally granted Heschel the title of doctor. In order to obtain the latter, he had had to find an editor for his thesis, not in Germany, where Jewish works had already been outlawed, but through the Polish Academy of Sciences in Kraków, where it appeared in 1936. It was distributed in Germany by the Berlin Erich Reiss Verlag and in Poland by the Jagellonian University of Kraków.

14 On Henri Jourdan (1901–1993) see D. Bosquelle, "La Maison académique française à Berlin," in *Échanges culturels et relations diplomatiques: présences françaises à Berlin au temps de la république de Weimar*, eds. H.M. Bock and G. Krebs (Paris: Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2005), pp. 153–155.

15 For a biography and introduction to the thought of Abraham J. Heschel, see E. Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (Albany: SUNY, 1996). In the course of his research Professor Kaplan discovered the Corbin-Heschel connection about which he informed me when we first met in Paris in 1999. He had the kindness to subsequently place at my disposal the documentation he had gathered and I am indebted to him for having graciously shared that information with me.

Having read the thesis, Corbin was at once taken in by the author's phenomenological method in which he encountered themes which were close to his own reflections on the polarity of mysticism and prophetism, on the one hand, and transcendence, on the other. As a reader of Karl Barth's dialectic theology of a return to prophecy, of whom Corbin was also the first French translator, how could he remain insensitive to Heschel's exegesis of existence from the Divine perspective? Dismissing historicism, which Corbin also abhorred, Heschel defined prophetic consciousness in terms of *unio sympathica*, a co-revelation ("Mitoffenbarung"), where expression is given as much to the prophet's rapture as it is to the ecstasy of God, who emerges from His inaccessibility in order to realize His desire for communication. Heschel defined this mode of relation as a *transitive pathos*.¹⁶ The latter is not an exclusive attribute of God but a simultaneous experience shared both by God and man. "It's not absolute transcendence, nor the essential difference, but similarity which forms the presupposition of prophesy. It is not dialectics – the contrast and the tension of opposites – but dialogue which constitutes the relationship between God and man." Heschel considered the *pathos* as a theological category independent of anthropomorphic representations. The *pathos* does not signify a mode in itself but a mode of being-in-relation. The foundation of this relation is ethical and its ultimate end is man.

Heschel called the cognitive faculty and affective disposition to listen to divine emotionality *prophetic sympathy*.¹⁷ The latter, in antipodal contrast to the transient and momentary experience of mystical ecstasy, derives from a permanent conformity between human and divine pathos. God's apprehension does not imply the abandonment of the personal I, but rather the encounter with the Other in an immanent reciprocity.

In antithesis to rationalist philosophical conceptions of an apophatic God or the theological ideas of a legalistic and moral God, against which Corbin inveighed, Heschel's thesis unraveled for him an unsuspected facet of Jewish spirituality. Corbin's enthusiasm for Heschel's prophethology was such that, at the same time he was translating Heidegger and Barth, he personally assumed the task of translating the young Pole's doctoral thesis into French.¹⁸ There was perhaps another aspect of this work which had appealed to Corbin. As much as it was highly technical and objective, Heschel's study exhaled a modern relevance which led to the belief that all men could have their share of the Holy Spirit through personal experience, irrespective of any authoritative power (*pace* Guénon). Emboldened by the spiritual heritage of his own aristocratic origins, Heschel scarcely conceals his personal conviction, which, moreover, he shares with certain medieval philosophers, that normal consciousness possesses a cognitive faculty analogous to prophetic inspiration.¹⁹

Moreover, the theoretical discussion between the two young philosophers led to the conception of a grandiose project which is of astonishing relevance even today – an anthology of essays on mystical thought in Islam and Judaism, assembled around Heschel's text.

My cherished colleague, Professor Edward Kaplan, amiably drew my attention to an exchange of letters between Corbin and Heschel which, in the course of his biographical

16 A. Heschel, *Die Prophetie* (Kraków: PAU 1936), p. 132.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

18 This translation, which was published in the review *Hermes* (see below) is in fact limited to a choice of quite lengthy extracts, selected according to Heschel's own indications. They in fact only cover 34 pages of the original 194 pages.

19 See Heschel's study, "Prophetic Inspiration in the Middle Ages," in *Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets*, transl. M. Faierstein (New York: Ktav, 1998).

research on Heschel, he had obtained through the kindness of the late Mme Stella Corbin. Dating back to 1938, this correspondence related to Corbin's translation of Heschel's doctoral thesis. Furthermore, it also includes a discussion of the table of contents of the proposed anthology which Corbin intended to publish in *Hermes*, a Brussels based review devoted to mysticism, poetry and philosophy. The journal was directed by Henri Michaux (1899–1984), a highly idiosyncratic Belgian painter, poet, and writer who composed in French, best known for his esoteric books written in a highly accessible style.²⁰ Heschel rejoiced at the prospect of this publication in France, "your reaction to my book gives me great satisfaction," he wrote in German. "You will not be surprised at my ardent desire to see this work introduced into your country. You will easily understand the reason at this point in time."²¹ Heschel indicated to him the chapters he felt were the most relevant, informing Corbin on the same occasion about his study of prophetic visions.²² Upon receiving Corbin's translation, Henri Michaux, was overwhelmingly enthusiastic:

A prodigiously interesting essay. I have the impression for the first time, that I understand who the Israelite prophets were, the current they belonged to, or to which they claimed to belong, and also why they always bewildered me when I wanted to assimilate them with modern Christian mystics. As for theomorphism as a substitute for anthropomorphism, the point of departure is promising.²³

The anthology of Jewish and Muslim mysticism carried a forward by Louis Massignon. The Islamic section was to include a text by Henry Corbin on Suhrawardi, an article by Salomon Pines on Ismaili gnosis, a study on Hafiz by the Iranologist Henri Massé (1886–1969), and extracts from Ibn Arabi and Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī. This was to be followed by an analysis of Abraham's prayer by Massignon, "as a transition," adds a note in Corbin's hand-writing. The Jewish section was to contain extensive extracts from Heschel's study of prophecy translated by Corbin, followed by an article on the mystical philosophers Judah Halevi and Ibn Gabirol by Jacob Gordin (1896–1947), a contribution on the Kabbalah by Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), and an essay on Hasidism by Martin Buber (1878–1965), whom, moreover, Heschel had replaced in Frankfurt. The volume was to conclude with an undefined essay by Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929).

Scholem, about to depart to New York, where he was to deliver a series of lectures on Jewish Mysticism,²⁴ declined the invitation.²⁵ As for Gordin, whom Corbin seems to have

20 His works include poetry, travelogues, and art criticism. Michaux travelled widely, tried his hand at several careers, and experimented with drugs, the latter resulting in two of his most intriguing works, *Miserable Miracle* and *The Major Ordeals of the Mind and the Countless Minor Ones*.

21 Heschel's letter to Corbin, dated Berlin, 10th January, 1938.

22 Most probably the Hebrew article on the phenomenon of prophetic inspiration in the Middle Ages, recently translated into English by M. Faienstein, above, note 19.

23 *Henri Corbin, Cahier de l'Herme*, p. 322.

24 The Hilda Stroock lectures, delivered in 1938 at the Jewish institute of Religion which became his classic *Majors Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941).

25 A copy of the letter in which he declines Corbin's invitation is to be found in Scholem's correspondence, preserved in the Jewish National Library, Jerusalem, Scholem Archive Acc. 4^o1599 COR.

known personally, one of the key-figures in the renewal of Jewish thought in France,²⁶ his activities were interrupted by the outbreak of war.

Indeed, the war seriously impaired the project. In the end, the only Jewish text to see the light of day in the special issue of *Hermes* was Corbin's translation of Heschel's thesis. Published forebodingly at the beginning of the war in the month of November 1939, it was probably the last glimmer of Jewish intellectual creativity to appear in Belgium before the catastrophe.²⁷

The rest of the texts were devoted mainly to Muslim mysticism: two esoteric epistles by Suhrawardi presented by Corbin, a translation of Rūmī by Henri Massé, a translation of Ibn Fārīdh by the Guénonian Emile Dermenghem (1892–1971), and an article on the heretical Qarmathian movement by Salomon Pines, later professor of Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University. No other Jewish text appears besides Heschel's article, which rather incongruously concludes the issue.

In his preface, dated October 1939, just a few days after Germany's invasion of Poland, Corbin proclaims the urgent task of revealing the transcendental source of Truth in order to defy nihilism. In a sort of premonition of the impending catastrophe, Corbin hoped that the intellectual encounter of the three Abrahamic religions would somehow help to restore human unity:

In the tempest which now rocks our Europe, may this (anthology) lead us to ensure, as they themselves had ensured in bygone times, the survival of spiritual motifs, for which, in every crisis, man finds his way towards the Light, towards the One.

Relations with Heschel did not end there, for the Jewish theologian had an abiding impact on Corbin. His concepts fecundated Corbin's own thought and clearly underpin the seminal lecture Corbin gave in the 1955 Eranos meeting entitled "Sympathie et théopathie chez 'les Fidèles d'amour' en Islam."²⁸ Moreover, this study forms the first three chapters of his masterful *Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi*, published three years later. This work, acclaimed as one of the great philosophical texts of the 20th century, marks, so to speak, the real point of departure for Ibn Arabi studies in the West. Indeed, in the introductory paragraph devoted to the "prayer of the sunflower," Corbin cites Heschel explicitly, while expressing his reservation in relation to the latter's conclusion concerning the antithesis between prophetic and mystical religion, Corbin himself developing a more nuanced conception. Furthermore, he borrows heavily from Heschel's conceptual terminology in order to interpret Ibn Arabi's personal vision of God.

At the very outset, Corbin recognizes his source of inspiration and refers to "a very original recent research carried out in a completely different context."²⁹ A footnote informs

26 Born in Dvinsk in Russia, he had come to Berlin in 1923. Like Heschel he fled Nazi Germany, settling in 1933 in Paris where he taught at the Rabbinical seminary, and worked as librarian at the Alliance Israélite Universelle. His teaching tried to establish a bridge between the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg school and Jewish thought. He never recovered from the trials of the war and died prematurely. His papers are preserved in the Alliance Israélite library in Paris. On him, see J. Gordin, *Écrits: le renouveau de la pensée juive en France* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

27 *Hermes*, 3^e serie, Nov. 1939, pp. 78–110.

28 H. Corbin, "Sympathie et théopathie chez 'les Fidèles d'amour' en Islam," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 24 (1955), pp. 199–301.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

us that the reference is to Abraham Heschel's *Die Prophetie*.³⁰ The pages which followed provided a summary by Corbin of the quintessence of Heschel's thesis, emphasizing the essential difference between *unio sympathica* and *unio mystica*.³¹ In the development that follows, Corbin adopts Heschel's lexical categories, applying them to the Islamic mystical thought and Sufism. Thus he speaks of the "pathetical God," of "anthropopathy" and "theopathy."³² Interestingly, Corbin did not translate the section of Heschel's thesis where these notions appear. Heschel states therein: "Ein Gegenstück zu der anthropotropischen Wendung Gottes bildet die theotropische Bekehrung des Menschen zu Gott ... wie der Prophet als Erlebensträger des Anthropotropismus, so ist der Preister als Erlebnisträger des Theotropismus."³³

An enlarged and revised edition of Heschel's thesis eventually appeared in English in the United States with the title *The Prophets*.³⁴ For his part, Heschel was conscious of Corbin's debt towards him as he wrote in a note:

Henry Corbin applied the categories of the 'theology of pathos' and the 'religion of sympathy' to the religious experience of the Sufis in Islam in his illuminating essay: 'Sympathie et théopathie chez 'les Fidèles d'amour' en Islam,' 1956, [and in] *L'imagination créatrice d'Ibn Arabi*, 1958."³⁵

Interestingly, we should add that at exactly the same time, another French author, our own former teacher, André Néher (1914–1984) – whom we used to refer to as Heschel's French counterpart – was also striving to formulate a contemporary conception of prophecy.³⁶ In his treatment of the subject he also made use of Heschel's notions of pathos and religious sympathy.³⁷

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 263, n. 4.

³¹ *Die Prophetie*, p. 176: "Diese unio sympathetica ist im geissen Sinne der Gegentypus der union mystica." It is interesting to observe that Corbin had Heschel's original text before him since he translates (p. 203): "Finalement l'unio mystica, éprouvé par la conscience du prophète, serait l'antitype de l'union mystica des extatiques." In this article Corbin adopts this wording, whereas in his translation of this sentence in his rendering of Heschel's thesis published 16 years previously, he translates: "Cette unio sympathetica est, en un certain sens, l'antithèse de l'unio mystica." A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: JPSA, 1962), p. 319.

³² *Die Prophetie*, p. 114: "die Prophetie als Anthropotropismus," pp. 115–119: "Anthropotropismus und Theotropismus." These notions were amplified in the English edition: *The Prophets*, pp. 439–443.

³³ *Die Prophetie*, p. 117. See *The Prophets*, p. 441. See Corbin, *art. cit.*, p. 203.

³⁴ A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: JPSA, 1962). The section translated by Corbin corresponds to chapters 12, pp. 221–231, and 18, pp. 307–323.

³⁵ *The Prophets*, p. 308, n. 1.

³⁶ The late Madame Renée Néher confided to me that she did not recall her husband ever mentioning Corbin.

³⁷ A. Néher, *L'Essence du prophétisme* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1955), pp. 97–102, 250 (ed. 1983, pp. 95–100). See E. Jacob, "Le prophétisme israélite d'après les recherches récentes," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* (1952), p. 169.

Conclusion

As far as we are aware the two philosophers remained in epistolary contact until 1954. In the meantime, Heschel had been included in the infamous October 1938 expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany which was the prelude to Kristallnacht. After many escapades, he succeeded in emigrating from Poland to England and thence to America, where he arrived in 1940. There he was to become one of the great propounders of the modern Jewish theology in the 20th century, teaching philosophy and Jewish mysticism at the celebrated Jewish Theological Seminary of New York. Echoing Henry Corbin's qualms towards modern society in the name of the Koranic covenant with Adam, Heschel, referring constantly to the Sinaitic covenant, became a foremost militant in the cause of social justice and civil rights.