

A Note on Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Affinities and Differences

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Tout n'est que révélation; il ne peut y avoir que révélation. Or la révélation vient de l'esprit, et il n'y a point de connaissance de l'Esprit.

C'est le crépuscule bientôt, mais maintenant les nuages sont encore clairs, les sapins ne sont pas encore sombres, car le lac les éclaire de transparence. Et tout est vert, d'un vert qui serait plus riche que tout un jeu d'orgue, au récit. Il faut l'entendre assis, très proche de la Terre, les bras bien clos, les yeux aussi, faire semblant de dormir.

Car il ne faut pas se promener comme un vainqueur, et vouloir donner un nom aux choses, à toutes les choses; c'est elles qui te diront qui elles sont, si tu écoutes soumis comme un amant; car soudain pour toi, dans la paix sans trouble de cette forêt du Nord, la Terre est venue à Toi, visible comme un Ange qui serait femme, peut-être, et dans cette apparition, cette solitude très verte et très peuplée, oui, l'Ange aussi est vêtu de vert, c'est-à-dire de crépuscule, de silence, de vérité. Alors il y a en toi toute la douceur qui est présente en l'abandon à une étreinte qui triomphe de toi.

Terre, Ange, Femme, tout cela en une seule chose, que j'adore et qui est dans cette forêt. Le crépuscule sur le lac, mon Annonciation. La montagne: une ligne. Écoute! Il va se passer quelque chose, oui. L'attente est immense, l'air frissonne sous une bruine à peine visible; les maisons qui allongent au ras du sol leur bois rouge et rustique, leur toit de chaume, sont là, de l'autre côté du lac.

Everything is but revelation; there can only be revelation. Now, revelation comes from the mind, and there can be no knowledge of the mind.

It will soon be dusk, but now the clouds are still clear, the pine trees are not yet shadowy, for the lake is illuminating them with transparent light. And everything is green, a green that is richer than the sound swelling from an organ stop, narrating. One should listen to it sitting, very near to the Earth, the arms crossed, the eyes closed, pretending to sleep.

For one should never walk about like a conqueror, wanting to give a name to things, to all things; they will tell you what they are, if you listen submissive as a lover, suddenly for you, in the untroubled peace of this forest of the north, the Earth has come to you, visible like an Angel that would be woman, perhaps, and in this vision, this very green and populous solitude, yes, the angel is also dressed in green, of the dusk, of silence, of truth. And then there is in you all the sweetness that is present in the surrender to an embrace which triumphs over you.

Earth, Angel, Woman, all this is one and the same thing, which I adore and which is in this forest, twilight on the lake, my annunciation. The mountain: a line. Listen! Something is going to happen, yes, the anticipation is immense. The Air is quivering under a fine barely visible drizzle. The houses, with their red rustic wood and thatched roofs are there, on the other side of the lake.²

Henry Corbin
Leksand en Dalecarlie
au bord du lac de Siljan
24 aout 1932, 18 heures.
Henry Corbin, L'Herne, Paris, 1981, § p. 62.

It is nothing new to argue that there is a close affinity and many similarities in the discourse of Orientalists and the "Orientals." The French Orientalist Henry Corbin, for example, was an innovative contributor to Iranian spirituality and spurred the revival of interest in Iranian philosophy, in both the East and West. This paper will first discuss the affinities and differences between the Iranian Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the French Orientalist Henry Corbin concerning spirituality, and then con-

sider the peculiarity of the intricate East/West intercultural exchange. Indeed, Nasr's intellectualism owes a great deal to Henry Corbin. In *Traditional Islam*,³ Nasr dedicates a chapter as 'hommage' to Corbin. Nasr's book is worth reading for many reasons, not the least of which is the insight it provides with regard to East-West interaction.

Corbin was also Nasr's spiritual mentor. If we consider Nasr as representing one trend among the Islamizers,⁴ he would be alone in acknowledging his debt towards Orientalism and, in particular, towards Corbin. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, like the Palestinian American Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, and the Malaysian philologist S. H. al-Attas,⁵ took part in the Mecca Conference wherein the term "Islamization of knowledge" was first devised. The First World Conference on Muslim Education was held at Mecca from March 31 to April 8, 1977. Nasr, al-Attas and al-Faruqi later developed different understandings of the concept of "Islamization of Knowledge." At the conference, al-Attas presented a paper entitled "Preliminary Thoughts on the Nature of Knowledge and the Definition and Aims of Education."⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote "On The Teaching of Philosophy in the Muslim World," which he subsequently published in *Hamdard Islamicus*.⁷ In this paper, Nasr stressed the significance of teaching Islamic philosophy, a theme he was to expound upon throughout his career.⁸

Sayyed Hossein Nasr was born in Tehran in 1933. It is this author's opinion that the finest biography of him to this date was written by a Turkish scholar who chose Nasr as the subject of his doctoral thesis in philosophy at the University of Lancaster.⁹ Adnan Aslan's unpublished thesis faithfully follows the trajectory of Nasr's career, which peregrinated between Tehran and the States. Originating from a family of religious scholars and physicians in Iran, Nasr was sent to study to the United States in 1945, at the age of twelve.¹⁰ After receiving an undergraduate degree in physics at MIT, he obtained a Ph.D. in history at Harvard.¹¹ According to Aslan, Nasr's thinking during this time was primarily influenced by F. Schuon and Henry Corbin.¹² Nasr became familiar with the writings of F. Schuon when he undertook the job of editing them.¹³ Nasr stayed in Tehran from 1958 until 1979, the year when the Iranian revolution occurred. He immersed himself in and wrote about the school of Suhrawardī and the rise of the Illuminationist school, both topics which deal with Corbin's legacy.¹⁴ In 1975, Corbin and Nasr founded the Imperial Academy of Philosophy under the auspices of Empress Farah of Iran.¹⁵ The pair were later criticized for their association with the regime of the Shah. After he left Tehran, Nasr's first appointment was Professor of Islamic Studies at Temple University, Philadelphia. He remained there until 1984.¹⁶

It was Nasr who introduced Corbin to Iranian religious scholars like Allamah Tabataba'i, who traveled from Qom to Tehran just to meet with Corbin.¹⁷ Corbin conducted several intense dialogues with the Iranian religious scholars who sought him out. Nasr, in contrast to Corbin, developed a more "esoteric" type of religious thought, probably due to the fact that he was so deeply influenced by René Guenon (1886-1951), whom he cites extensively in his work.¹⁸ What particularly attracted Nasr to Guenon was the latter's critique of modern science as a product of its reductionism. Nasr's attraction to esoteric Western thought extends to what he called the "anti-history and anti-philosophy" and non-rationalistic philosophies, such as hermeticism and the Kabbalah. He often refers in his writings to romantics such as Goethe and Shelling as critical philosophers in an effort to convey his disappointment with the philosophy of Western science.¹⁹

There are several reasons why I chose to analyze Nasr's writings. Firstly, he was connected with the Mecca conference and the enormous project of creating Islamic universities. Secondly, his writings are very popular today throughout the Muslim world, particularly Malaysia, primarily because of his focus on the spirituality of the East and the melding of science with revelation. Some of Nasr's Malay students currently teach in Malaysia.²⁰ As with other protagonists of the 'Islamization of knowledge,' Nasr was critical of the 'ulama and, as a result, was called anti-clerical by some scholars.

Nasr was critical too of the Western propensity for analyzing sacred tradition in light of secularized reason. Like al-Faruqi and al-Attas, his project was to revive the "lost sense of wonder."²¹ In writing of resurrecting and rediscovering the sense of the sacred,²² Nasr stressed an activation of intuition, a viewpoint he shared with al-Attas and, of course, Corbin. He aspired to a cosmology that had withered away in the Western world.

Nasr's agenda was to highlight forms of traditional Islam (about which he expresses many doubts) and "fundamentalist" Islam. Although Nasr's writings are good examples of hybrid knowledge in the sense that he extensively quotes Western Orientalists and philosophers like T. Burckhardt, Henry Corbin etc., he seemed to be cognizant and wary of the fusion of different trends, such as Marxism with Islam. In his view, Marxism and Islam were irreconcilable.²³ In fact, Nasr professed strong anti-Marxist sentiments. In several passages of *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, Nasr defines traditional Islam as an immutable cultural entity which had been damaged by the intrusion of modern and secularizing trends:

Time is in fact a most important factor because the withering influences of secularizing ideologies and false philosophies continue to

erode the foundations of Islamic tradition before our very eyes.²⁴

For Nasr, there existed a corpus of “traditional Islam” which had been maintained for centuries, an authentic tradition. He also saw a pseudo-tradition within Islam, one which was counter-traditional. What Nasr calls as pseudo-traditional is in fact “fundamentalism.”²⁵ Again, there are similarities in thought between Nasr and those called “authenticators” who find tradition and modernity to be opposites. The implication is that traditional Islam has been static for centuries, which is again what the Orientalists have always maintained.

For Nasr, traditional Islam in the political domain meant that the various forms of authority were colored with a sacral tone:

In the political domain, the traditional perspective always insists upon realism based upon Islamic norms. In the Sunni world, it accepts the classical Caliphate and, in its absence, the other political institutions, such as the Sultanate, which developed over the centuries in the light of the teachings of the Shari’ah and the needs of the community.²⁶

Nasr considered the divine aspect in the institution of the sultanate as a *fait accompli*. He differentiated what he called ‘traditional Islam’ from modernist ideas, which were popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By Nasr’s time, these ideas were an integral part of the traditional body.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s vast knowledge of Islamic sciences and institutions was well known, and his publications on all branches of science impressive. Certainly, he has proven to be one of the most prolific and interesting of Islamic academics. Aslan states that Nasr published over twenty books and two hundred articles, which Aslan divides into two branches: Islamic sciences and perennial philosophy.²⁷ His esoteric and Sufi vision of Islam found a particularly receptive audience in Malaysia.²⁸ Again, like al-Faruqi and al-Attas, Nasr emphasized the idea of science with revelation. He wrote:

In a traditional civilization like that of Islam, the cosmological sciences are closely related to the Revelation because in such civilizations, the immutable revealed principle, or the “presiding idea” manifests itself everywhere in social life as well as in the cosmos in which that civilization lives and breathes.²⁹

Nasr's conception of spirituality and mysticism were seen through the screen of his unique focus on astrology, alchemy and the occult sciences. Because of this, some Islamizers went so far as to allege that Nasr had proposed an alternative form of science:

Nevertheless, Nasr manages to convey the feel of an alternative science in action: a science that is just as "objective" and "rational" as Western science, but draws its legitimacy and its philosophical and sociological framework from the all-encompassing epistemology of Islam.³⁰

Nasr's idea of searching for an "alternative science" can be traced back to the circles he frequented in the fifties, when he was active in the "counter culture" group of Theodore Roszak. It was during his participation with this group that Nasr discovered Oriental wisdom.³¹ Moreover, his interest in Islamic esoterism and spirituality followed from his interaction with T. Burckhardt, a well-known participant in counter culture discussions.³² If it is spirituality that connects Corbin to Nasr, we must clarify a nuance in Corbin's posture in order to better understand Nasr. Corbin was not inspired by esoterics. He tended to follow the world of dream, the world of active imagination, the world of imaginary forms, (*le monde des formes imaginales*) or *mundus imaginalis*, which he translated from Arabic as *'alam al-mithāl*.³³ He was sensitive to the call of the angel and in fact wrote extensively about angelology in Oriental theosophy. Rather, Corbin was interested in the metaphysics of active imagination (*la métaphysique de l'imagination active*).³⁴ Corbin wrote an article on his concept of *Mundus imaginalis*,³⁵ in which he compared such a concept among Muslim theosophes that roughly translated to the eighth climate "*le huitième climat*." Corbin analyzed the visionary tales of spiritual initiation composed by Suhrawardī and elaborated on the idea of "*corps subtils*," subtle bodies that create a link between the pure spirit and the material body.³⁶ According to Corbin, active imagination is a pure, spiritual faculty, independent of the physical organism. It replaces the physical organism after the latter's disappearance. Two articles of great interest on this subject are included in a volume by Roger Caillois and Gustav E. Von Grunebaum entitled *Le rêve et les sociétés humaines*.³⁸ The first is by Henry Corbin *Le songe visionnaire en spiritualité islamique* and the second is by Fazlur Rahman with the title of *Le rêve, l'imagination et 'alam al-mithāl*.³⁹ In his article, Corbin develops the significance of the visionary dream in Islamic spirituality. Corbin looks at Ibn 'Arabi's concept of "active imagination" and the gift of visualizing or visionary imagination. He associates spiritual ethos and

the visionary dream with the structure of prophethood. He also closely examines the concept of the Prophet and the idea of the Imam in Shiism and analyzes the idea of *mundus imaginalis*, which was propagated by several Sufi mystics and which Corbin translates as 'ālam al-mithāl:

*Or, nos spirituels en ont pris admirablement eux-mêmes conscience. A plusieurs reprises, notamment en parlant du monde mystérieux où réside l'Imam caché, nous avons prononcé les mots de 'ālam al-mithāl. Pour établir la portée ou la valeur noétique de leurs songes visionnaires, de leurs perceptions suprasensibles en général, nos spirituels ont été amenés à développer l'ontologie d'un tiers monde, intermédiaires entre le monde de la perception sensible et le monde intelligible pur.*⁴⁰

Nevertheless, our spiritual thinkers have themselves become admirably aware. In several instances, notably when speaking of the mysterious world where the hidden *Imam* resides, we have pronounced the words of 'ālam al-mithāl. To establish the significance of the noetic value of their visionary dreams, in general of their oversensitive perceptions, our spiritual thinkers came to develop an ontology of a *third world*, intermediary between the world of the perception of senses and the pure intelligible world.

In fact, Corbin differentiates between the imagined world and hallucination. He argues as follows,

*Nos auteurs Ibn 'Arabi, Mollâ Sadrâ de Shiraz en particulier, ont donné des développements considérables à la théorie de la puissance imaginante, l'imaginatrice," énonçant avec soin les critères qui permettent de discriminer entre l'Imagination vraie et ce que nous appellerions hallucination. Plus encore: Mollâ Sadrâ revient fréquemment dans ses livres sur la thèse qui lui est chère, à savoir que l'Imagination active est, comme l'intellect, une faculté purement spirituelle, dont l'existence n'est pas conditionnée par celle de l'organisme physique.*⁴¹

Our authors Ibn 'Arabi and in particular Mulla Sadra of Shiraz have contributed considerably to the theory of "imaginante," "l'imaginatrice" the imaginative strength, proclaiming with care the criteria that would allow differentiation between real imagination and what we would call hallucination. Even more: Mulla Sadra frequently

refers in his works to the thesis dear to him, which is that active imagination is similar to the intellect, a pure spiritual faculty whose existence is not conditioned by the physical organism.

In his study of Mulla Sadra, Corbin notes that for this mystic, active imagination was not an organic faculty related to the world of matter and the perishing of the body, but rather a spiritual faculty, which the soul takes away with it.⁴² While Nasr's emphasis is upon esoterism, one can still argue that Nasr's spirituality has great affinity with Corbin's phenomenology and the world of *mundus imaginis*.

Corbin never considered submerging himself in esoteric thinking. Although he expressed a strong interest in gnosis, alchemy and visionary literature, he was clearly against obscurantism:

*Mais nulle complaisance à "l'esoterisme" trivialement entendu, à l'occultisme obscurantiste. Bien au contraire, s'il refusait de suivre Descartes à considérer les "sciences curieuses" comme pures superstitions, simples vésanie, s'il nous invitait à penser ces pensées, c'était afin que la Raison s'enrichit assez pour qu'elle se rendit capable de compter avec leur expérience.*⁴³

But no submissiveness to "esoterism," trivially understood as obscurantist occultism. On the contrary, if he refused to follow Descartes, who considered the "curious sciences" pure superstitions, and when he was inviting us to think such thoughts, it is so that reason is enriched and becomes capable of relating to their experience.

The subtle differences between "le maître" Corbin and Nasr the disciple can also be seen as a metaphor for the larger issue of East-West interaction. Corbin saw the East as a mirror of the West and a continuation of ideas, which, although born in various places, played analogous roles within different mystical traditions. This is an intellectual position most Islamizers dispute. Corbin's genius was in fusing and rediscovering the "elective affinity" between the East and West in terms of philosophies and cultures. His achievement was to read and associate Suhrawardī with Jacob Boehm by arguing that since the (image) is magic in the texts of the great theosophes, so also should it be for our contemporary world.⁴⁴ Corbin's work on Iranian Sufism was original because he explored and interpreted *Sbi'i* gnosis in relationship to Christian and Jewish gnosis.⁴⁵

Corbin's life and what he represented as an intellectual who crossed borders and moved between different spiritual and geographical spaces

holds great meaning for many. The countries of Iran and Germany were crucial geographic and spiritual points for him. From 1954, Corbin traveled every year to Iran. He had previously spent six years in Istanbul, during World War II.

C'est ainsi que l'Iran et l'Allemagne furent les points de repère géographiques d'une Quête qui se poursuivait en fait dans les régions spirituelles qui ne sont points sur nos cartes.⁴⁶

This is how Iran and Germany became geographic points of reference of a quest that was in fact pursued in spiritual regions which are in no way to be found on our maps.

There was also *Eranos*. "De l'Iran à Eranos" is an article written by Henry Corbin⁴⁷ about the scholarly meeting-place in Ascona. Great historical figures such as Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, T. Isuzu, G. Durand, C.G. Jung gathered there to discuss issues of the day.⁴⁸ It is this constant travel between the East and West, this constantly shifting life style, that characterized Corbin's life.

More importantly, Corbin used Heideggerian terminology and philosophy as a key with which to open a lock, to understand Iranian Sufism:

Il ne s'agissait même pas de prendre Heidegger comme une clef mais de se servir de la clef dont il s'était lui-même servi, et qui était à la disposition de tout le monde.⁴⁹

It was not a question of using Heidegger like a key, but of using the same key which he himself had used, and that was at the disposition of everybody.

Corbin thus drew on Western spirituality in order to understand Eastern Iranian Sufism. It is perhaps this element that Islamizers ignore in denying the connection between East and West. Indeed, it is this author's contention that many Islamizers unconsciously suppress the sources of their ideas. For example, ISTAC (The Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization in Kuala Lumpur) published a thesis by Alparslan Acikgenc⁵⁰ on a comparison between the metaphysics of Mulla Sadra (born in Shiraz in 1571) and Heidegger. Both philosophers greatly influenced Henry Corbin's life and work. There is no mention, however, in the entire book of Corbin's major contribution to the work of Mulla Sadra.⁵¹ Acikgenc attempts to draw

a parallel between the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, which is translated as “unity of Being” in Sadra and Heidegger’s terminology. The author considers both as philosophers of Being. Hence, the Heideggerian term “Sein,” which Acikgenc translates as “Being,” means “*wujūd*” in the terminology of Sadra.⁵² Acikgenc constructs a common ground between these two philosophers, Sadra and Heidegger, who are separated in time by nearly three centuries, by arguing that both are existentialists. “Both take Being as the starting point in their philosophy, not only as a beginning for their system but as a necessary foundation and an inevitable element of their thought.”⁵³

What is interesting here is the renewed interest in Heidegger within Islamic circles: Heidegger, the philosopher who ambiguously collaborated with the Nazi regime, the philosopher of existence and transcendentalism and the jargon of authenticity so well criticized by Adorno. It is this interactive aspect which reveals that it has become practically impossible to divorce the discourse of Islamization from mainstream Western philosophy.

Apart from Nasr, who acknowledges the teachings of Corbin and Fazlur Rahman, who did not predict the “Islamization of Knowledge” debate, most of the Islamizers seem to be unaware of Corbin’s significance in religious studies. Nasr himself has stated that before discovering Iranian transcendentalism, Henry Corbin expressed a growing interest in the philosophy of Heidegger, Husserl and Scheler. Corbin was an impressive man; a humanist, highly cultured and well versed in German philosophy as well as in Islamic culture:

Si l'on demande autour de soi qui est Henry Corbin, on recevra des réponses apparemment incompatibles: comment le même homme peut-il s'être voué à la résurrection des philosophes de l'ancien Iran, à la traduction de Heidegger, à l'herméneutique luthérienne? En fait son projet fut de bouleverser notre paysage mental en multipliant les rapports, en tendant des ponts entre les différentes gnosés des religions du Livre.⁵⁴

If one asks who Henry Corbin is, he will apparently get incompatible answers. How is it that the one and the same man was dedicated to the resurrection of ancient Iranian philosophers, to the translation of Heidegger, and also to Lutheran hermeneutics? In fact, his project aimed at revolutionizing our mental landscape by multiplying the relations and bridging the different gnosés with the religions of the Book.

Corbin was the first to translate Heidegger's major work, *Qu'est ce que la métaphysique?* into French.⁵⁵ He corresponded with Heidegger (about Sein und Zeit) and Karl Jaspers, exchanging ideas about the various philosophical interpretations and translations. Corbin visited Heidegger in Freiburg in April 1934 and July 1936 to discuss the translations of *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?*⁵⁶ Corbin also translated Heidegger's text on Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry.⁵⁷

There are two different explanations for Corbin's relationship to Heidegger's *Existenz-philosophie* and Iranian philosophy. These two versions reveal how the Muslim vision locates a contradistinction of Western philosophy vis-à-vis the mystical East. One is Nasr's interpretation, which emphasizes Corbin's disappointment in Heidegger's philosophy. Nasr stated:

I once asked Corbin, "How did you become interested in Suhrawardī?" having in mind the fact that no one has rendered greater service to the knowledge of Suhrawardī and later Islamic philosophy in the West than Corbin. He said, "For several years, I was studying Martin Heidegger and the German *Existenz-philosophie* and had gone several times to Freiburg to meet Heidegger but his philosophy did not satisfy me."⁵⁸

Until Massignon gave him a lithograph edition of *Ḥikmat al-isbrāq* of Suhrawardī...

Henceforth I put Heidegger aside on the shelf and became interested in serious philosophy, as Corbin told Nasr.⁵⁹

Corbin, on the other hand, refuted the above statements and insisted upon Heidegger's significance for him. He wrote the following:

J'eus le privilège et le plaisir de passer quelques moments inoubliables avec Heidegger, à Freiburg, en avril 1934 et en juillet 1936, donc pendant la période où j'élaborais la traduction du recueil des textes publiés sous le titre Qu'est ce que la métaphysique? Il m'est arrivé d'apprendre avec étonnement que, si je m'étais tourné vers le soufisme, c'est parce que j'aurais été déçu par la philosophie de Heidegger. Cette version est complètement fautive. Mes premières publications sur Suhrawardī datent de 1933 et 1935 (mon diplôme de l'école des langues Orientales est de 1929); ma traduction de Heidegger paraît en 1938.⁶⁰

I had the privilege and pleasure to spend an unforgettable time with Heidegger in Freiburg in April 1934 and in July 1936. Thus, at the time when I was working on translating the collection of texts published under the title “*What is Metaphysics?*” To my astonishment, I happened to learn that I had drifted towards Sufism because I was disappointed in the philosophy of Heidegger.. This version of the story is completely false. My first publications on Suhrawardī date from 1933 and 1935 (I obtained a diploma from The School of Oriental Languages in 1929) and my translation of Heidegger appeared in 1938.

It is this fine distinction that requires our attention. Perhaps where Nasr joins Corbin is on the issue of secularization as a negative phenomenon and a destruction of the transcendental. Nasr and Corbin are united in their aversion towards secularization. In Robert Avens’ examination of Corbin, one sees that Corbin considered secularization a negative modern phenomenon, a banalization, a reduction of the *Mundu imaginalis*:

Secularization is “disorientation,” the loss of orient, the *‘Ālam al-mithāl*. In the case of the West, this loss is marked by a transition from eschatological Christianity to historical faith, *fides historica* - a gradual adaptation to the external historical condition and the replacement of the freedom of prophetic inspiration with the dogmatic magisterium of the Church.⁶¹

Corbin wished the process of secularization be confined “only by rediscovering the *polar dimension of man* (italics added), and by developing a gnoseology which culminates in the figure of the angel as the *dator formarum*.”⁶² This is best exemplified in Corbin’s understanding of spiritual form and the individual being. According to Avens,

Corbin’s point, stressed throughout his work, is that we must not limit the notion of the concrete to the sensible world, because there are also *spiritual concrete* entities (“spiritual realism”) possessing their own kind of unity and their own ‘concrete’ determination.⁶³

Perhaps Corbin was more a dreamer and visionary. He shared with Nasr the problem of refusing to see how “modern man is religious” and

how the secularization thesis no longer applies. Since the seventies, the world has witnessed a strong religious revivalism in all religions -- paradoxically, under strongly secular and modern conditions.

Corbin has been blamed for over-exaggerating spirituality at the expense of neglecting existing processes of secularization. It is possible that he overlooked the dimension of political Islam and the impact of the wide-ranging effects of the Iranian revolution. It is no coincidence that in a conference on Averröes in 1976, commemorating the 850th anniversary of his birth, Corbin refused to separate philosophy from theology. He argued that there were philosophers who were not metaphysicians, but he did not believe that one could do metaphysics without being a philosopher. One consequence of Corbin's position was that the Egyptian philosopher Abderrahaman Badawī was advocating the technical Occidental philosophy while the "Western" Corbin was drawing parallels between Western mysticism, philosophy, on the one hand and on the other, Suhrawardī, Ibn 'Arabi and the mystical philosophers of Isfahan, Khorassan and Tehran.⁶⁴ The paradox that secularism has to be defended by an Egyptian or 'Oriental' versus the great mystical Orientalist is extremely interesting for us. It is no coincidence that Corbin saw that the disappearance of the intermediary angelic hierarchy in Averröes and Averroism was related to the loss of *le monde imaginal* in his thought. What he defines as the "*imaginal*" is no longer the usual idea of imaginary (*l'imaginaire*). From that moment, we can perceive the divergence from the Occident and, in the words of Corbin, the triumph of Latin Averroism, in contrast to the Orient, where the Iranian Avicenna was popular.⁶⁵

*Peut-être faut-il, en Occident, faire commencer cette décadence avec le moment où l'averroïsme rejeta la cosmologie avicennienne avec sa hiérarchie angélique intermédiaire des Animæ ou Angeli célestes. Ces Angeli célestes (hiérarchie au-dessous de celle des Angeli intellectuales) avaient en effet le privilège de la puissance imaginative à l'état pur.*⁶⁶

In the Occident, perhaps, one should trace this decadence from the moment when Averroism rejected the Avicennian cosmology with its hierarchical, intermediary angelology, *Animæ* or *Angeli caelestes*. These *Angeli caelestes* (a hierarchy beneath that of the *Angeli intellectuales*) had the privilege of the imaginative intensity of the pure state.

Avicenna's philosophy is still subject to heated debate among Arab intellectuals, who regard it as a point of departure for criticizing rationality and transcendentalism in Arab thought. A discussion of the extensive Orientalist and Muslim writings dedicated to Islamic philosophy and in particular to Avicenna and Averröes/Ibn Rushd (born in 1126 in Cordova), the two most celebrated philosophers in the West, is beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant here is the contemporary reading of these early philosophers for modern purposes. On the question of science and rationalism in early Islam, we can contrast Nasr's writings with the critical contribution of the contemporary Moroccan philosopher Muḥammed 'Ābid al-Jābirī, who throws into question the official writing of history and philosophy. Nasr adopts a "scientific approach," dividing Islamic thought into the stream of reason, the rational (*ma'qūl*) and the a-rational or the fantastic tendency (*alla ma'aqūl*). Al-Jābirī advocates a 'scientific,' counter ahistorical reading of the *turāth* (Islamic heritage) and in particular the established understanding of the Islamic history of science. The works of Avicenna, according to al-Jābirī, are thus reinterpreted in a new light and classified between the skilled scientific medical doctor on the one hand and the a-rational, or fantastic, philosopher on the other.⁶⁷ Avicenna is thus dissected and analyzed by his political opponents, professional adversaries and the various cultural, ideological influences of his time. Avicenna is often compared to al-Farabi and understood as the philosopher of the soul (*nafs*) versus al-Farabi, who was the philosopher of reason (*al-'aql*).⁶⁸

Al-Jābirī's long-term project is thus to contrast Ibn Rushd, the philosopher of the Western Muslim world, with Avicenna, the philosopher of the Eastern Muslim World and to promote Averroism in an Arabic culture which is rationalist, realist and critical.⁶⁹ According to al-Jābirī, this approach is more "Descartian" and in tune with our times. The adoption of Averroism thus entails an epistemological break with Avicenna's late *ishraqi* "illuminative" stream of thought, which is accredited to Iranian philosophy and Sufism and is, according to al-Jābirī, obscurantist.⁷⁰ Al-Jābirī's goal of actualizing a Descartian vision proposes one program (among others) of salvation for the Arab World against the growing confusion and political rivalry in interpreting Islamic heritage. Here again, according to al-Jābirī, the Avicennian vision which seems to have triumphed in history is interpreted as "magically" oriented,⁷¹ obscurantist,⁷² and metaphysical in shaping the overall understanding of Arabic culture which led to its decadence. Al-Jābirī also criticizes Avicenna's followers and students for adopting the magical and metaphysical vision versus reason.

Conclusion

It is a mistake to say that Corbin overestimated the spiritual dimensions of Iranian thought at the expense of the political aspect of Islam. Corbin died in 1978, one year before the Iranian revolution. He probably overlooked the Shah's politics and the growing political force behind the *Mullas*. Corbin insisted on depoliticizing *Shi'i* Islam. For instance, he failed to see the dynasty of the twelve Imams as a political dynasty competing in worldly matters against other dynasties.⁷⁴ It is precisely this emphasis on the concept of spirituality which was been picked up by the Islamists; however, it is used today for instrumental, political purposes.

Endnotes

- 1 This paper is part of a chapter of a German Habilitationsschrift submitted at the Free University of Berlin, 1988, with the title of *Re-Thinking the Social Knowledge of Islam; Critical Explorations in the "Islamization of Knowledge" Debate: Malaysia and Egypt*.
- 2 I would like to stress that this is merely rough translation, aimed at giving the gist of the original nuances and subtleties, which might be lost in English language.
- 3 S. H. Nasr, "Henry Corbin: The Life and Works of the Occidental Exile in Quest of the Orient of Light," in *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (Kuala Lumpur: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1987), 273-91.
- 4 Nasr's son, Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, published a paper in the series *Islamization of Knowledge*. Vali Nasr, while being mildly critical of the project of Islamization of social sciences which was launched three decades ago, reproduced the jargon of Islamization to plead for Islamic economics. Islamic economics differs from Western capitalism because it is spiritual and fulfills man's function as *Khalifat Allah*. This is because, according to Vali Nasr, religion and spirituality do not exist in the Western definition of rationality. Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, "Islamization of Knowledge: A Critical Overview," Occasional Papers No. 17 (Islamabad: *International Institute of Islamic Thought*, 1992).
- 5 There are nevertheless basic differences in orientation between al-Attas and al-Faruqi's views of Islamization of knowledge. Al-Attas stresses strong Sufi inclinations with intuition as a form of knowledge, while al-Faruqi expressed strong sympathy towards *fiqh*. In addition, there were very strong personal antipathies between al-Attas and al-Faruqi.
- 6 Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam, A framework for an Islamic philosophy of Education*, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (Kuala Lumpur: 1991).
- 7 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "On The Teaching of Philosophy in the Muslim World," *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. IV, No. 2, 53-72.
- 8 See my "Some Reflections on the Question of Islam and Social Sciences in the Contemporary Muslim World," *Social Compass*, Vol 40, No. 2 (1993), 301-21.
- 9 See Adnan Aslan's unpublished thesis *Ultimate Reality and its Manifestations in the Writings of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, thesis submitted in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Religious Studies (UK: University of Lancaster, September, 1995), in particular, 20-42.
- 10 Aslan, *Ultimate Reality*, 20.
- 11 Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*

- (London: Zed Publications, 1991), 69. Hoodbhoy is extremely critical of the advocates of "Islamization of Knowledge." Nasr in particular is lumped in one chapter with Maurice Bucaille and Ziauddin Sardar.
- 12 See Yann Richard, *L'islam chi'ite* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 91.
- 13 *The Essential Writings of Fritjof Schuon*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Amith House, Amity, 1986).
- 14 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spread of The Illuminationist School of Suhrawardi," *The Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. XIV, No. 3, July-September (1970).
- 15 Yann Richard, *L'islam*, 92.
- 16 Aslan, 25.
- 17 Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent, The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York University Press, New York and London, 1993), 316.
- 18 Nasr discusses in detail Guenon's life and ideas. See, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 100-105.
- 19 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (Kuala Lumpur: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1987), 209.
- 20 Adnan Aslan's thesis reveals that Nasr has an audience in Turkey.
- 21 Leif Stenberg, *The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity* (Lund: Lund Studies in History of Religions, 1996), 302.
- 22 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 2.
- 23 *Traditional Islam*, 219.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 224.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 27 Aslan, 24.
- 28 Besides, he was attacked by the Malaysian sociologist S. Hussein Alatas for his ambiguous position in backing the former Shah of Iran and for some of usage of Islamic history, in particular the nation of prophecy for political ends.
- 29 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods used for its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn-Sina* (Thames and Hudson, revised edition, 1978), 1.
- 30 Ziauddin Sardar, *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1988), 174.
- 31 Aslan, 21.
- 32 Aslan, 22.
- 33 Nancy Pearson translates it as *mundus archetypus*. Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth From Mazdean Iran to Shiite Iran*, translated by Nancy Pearson (London: I.B. Tauris, 1976).
- 34 Henry Corbin, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 49.
- 35 Henry Corbin, "Mundus imaginalis ou L'imaginaire et l'imaginal," *Cahiers Internationaux du Symbolisme*, Bruxelles, Vol. 6 (1964), 3-26.
- 36 *Ibid*, 10.
- 37 *Ibid*, 13.
- 38 Roger Caillois and G. E. Von Grunebaum, *Le rêve et les sociétés humains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).
- 39 Fazlur Rahman, on the other hand, looks at the term of 'ālam al-mithāl," the World of images. He analyzes the notion of imagination among Muslim philosophers like Avicenna and al-Suhrawardī. For this latter philosopher, pure individual souls have the power to create new objects in the 'ālam al-mithāl and to equally project images in the physical reality. Fazlur Rahman ...*Le reve et les sociétés humaines*, 410.
- 40 *Ibid*, 402.
- 41 *Ibid*, 403.
- 42 Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Tome IV (Paris:

Gallimard, 1972), 93.

43 Guy Lardreau, "L'histoire comme nuit de Walpurgis," *Henry Corbin* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), footnote 1, 118.

44 Jean-Louis Veillard-Baron, "Imago Magia," in: *Henry Corbin*, 88.

45 *Henry Corbin*, 25.

46 *Henry Corbin*, 42.

47 See *Henry Corbin*, "le temps d'Eranos," 256-60.

48 See pictures of the volume on Henry Corbin (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1981).

49 *Henry Corbin*, 25.

50 Alparslan Acikgenc, *Being and Existence in Sadra and Heidegger: A Comparative Ontology* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1993).

51 See chapter II, "Molla Sadra Shirazi (1050/1640), "En islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques, Tome IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

52 *Ibid*, 9.

53 *Ibid*, 12.

54 Christian Jambet, "Avant-Propos," *Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1981), 12.

55 S. H. Nasr, "Henry Corbin: The Life and Works of the Occidental Exile in Quest of the Orient of Light," *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 266, 276.

56 *Henry Corbin*, 24.

57 It appeared in *Mesures*, as "Hoelderlin et l'essence de la poesie," 3, 15 July (1937), 120-43.

58 S.H. Nasr, "Henry Corbin: The Life and Times of", 266.

59 *Ibid*.

60 *Henry Corbin*, 24.

61 Roberts Avens, "Henry Corbin's Interpretation of Imamology and Sufism," *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. XI, no. 2, Summer 1988, 67.

62 *Ibid*, 68.

63 Roberts Avens, "Henry Corbin and Suhrawardi's Angelology," *Hamdard Islamicus*, Vol. XI no. 1, (3-20), 14.

64 Jean Paul Charney, "Le sufi et le faqih," in: *Henry Corbin*, 275.

65 Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Tome IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 98.

66 Henry Corbin "Mundus imaginalis ou l'imaginaire et l'imaginal," *Cahiers Internationaux du Symbolisme*, Bruxelles, Vol. 6, (1964), (3-26),14.

67 Muḥammed Ābid al-Jābirī, *Takwin al-'aql al-'arabī*, (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 1987), 197.

68 Muḥammad Ābid al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa'l turāth*, (We and The Heritage) (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi [The Arabic Institute of Culture], the fifth Edition, 1986), 111.

69 Ḥassan Hanafi also highlighted the significance of a modern reading of Averroes (1982).

70 *Ibid*, *Naḥnu wa'l turāth*, 52.

71 *Ibid*, 165.

72 *Ibid*, 52.

73 *Ibid*, 165.

74 *Henry Corbin*, 17.



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