

‘Alam al-mithal or Mundus Imaginalis

By Samir Mahmoud

MPhil, Faculty of Divinity

University of Cambridge

England, UK, 2005.

We saw in the previous article that the dimension the “act of being” must have in order for it to be or become “the *place* of those worlds that are *outside the place* of our natural space” is the dimension of *presence*; a presence in the hierarchical world of the soul. However, what exactly are those worlds? To what is the human *presence* present? In what follows, we shall attempt to answer these questions. First, we shall turn to an analysis of the primordial space of the soul in order to clarify the ontological nature of this space and to reveal Corbin’s precursors in this understanding of space.

The Time and Space of Soul

We arrived at the conclusion that a metaphysics of presence is at the very root of our being in the world. Therefore, it is a metaphysics of presence that pre-determines, in an ontological manner, our very experience of time and space. The place where the Event of “becoming conscious” and meeting the angel take place is qualitatively different from the “quantitative, discontinuous space” of the sensible world. For as Heidegger has taught us, since it is our very mode of being in the world, our mode of presence, of *Dasein*, that determines our understanding of time and space, then it is to this mode of being that we turn in order to see how time and space are revealed to us.

Our common sense understanding, that of *das Man*, is that we are *in* space like objects are; however, a Heideggerian analysis would lead us to realize that it is we who spatialize a world around us. In Heidegger’s formulation, *Dasein* has a tendency to remove distance (*Ent-fernung*); in other words, *Dasein* tends to bring close, to “situate.”¹ *Dasein* spatializes the world by giving things a place according to their importance for *Dasein*’s *Being-in-the-world*. We recall that for Heidegger, *Dasein* is *already* in a world; *Dasein* already occupies an existential space. But this space is neither subjective nor objective. “Space, therefore, is neither subjective nor objective,” because with Heidegger, we are still at

¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 22-24.

the ontological level prior to any ontic subject-object dichotomy. “Rather [space is] the result of man’s spatializing activity; it is a mode of one’s existence in the world.”² In reference to the notion of “Orientation,” which is a spatializing activity, Corbin explains it as

a primary phenomenon of our presence in the world. A human presence has the property of spatializing a world around it, and this phenomenon implies a certain relationship of man with the world, *his* world, this relationship being determined by the very mode of his presence in the world. The four cardinal points, east and west, north and south, are not *things* encountered by his presence, but directions which express its *sense*, man’s acclimatization to his world, his familiarity with it. To have this sense is to orient oneself in the world.³

Therefore, our experience of space is not something predetermined by pre-existing geographical coordinates in space, but by our mode of presence, which *spatializes* the world. More importantly for Corbin, this space is not measured by extension in physical space, qualitative *res extensa*, but by the internal fluctuations of the soul and its various states (*ahwal*).

Spaces which are measured by inner states presuppose, essentially, a qualitative discontinuous space of which each inner event is itself the measure, as opposed to a space which is quantitative, continuous, homogenous, and measurable in constant measures. Such a space is existential space, whose relationship to physico-mathematical space is analogous to the relationship of existential time to the historical time of chronology.⁴

Existential space, the space of presence, is created by the projective geometry of the soul as a spatializing power. Therefore, a mode of being/presence determined by the *Da*, the worldview or *Weltanschauung*, of Heidegger’s *Dasein*, is qualitatively different from a mode of presence, which posits a hierarchy of spiritual worlds in ascensional order peopled by spiritual figures and angels. It is human presence that spatializes a world around it according to the mode of being of that presence. This “presence carries its space along with it” such that the locus of “psycho-spiritual events” and the space of “hierophanies” is always centred on the presence and mode of being of the soul.

² Robert Avens, “The Idea of Subtle Embodiment in Henry Corbin,” *Hamdard Islamicus* VI, Number 4, Winter, (1983), p. 11.

³ Corbin, *Man of Light*, p. 1.

⁴ Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 187.

In such a space physical topographical features assume a “psycho-cosmic” quality and events that take place in this sacred place are the very acts of *seeing*, for the events are “psychic events.”⁵ The “archetype-Image” of religious meditation projects onto physical geographical spaces and “transmutes them by bringing them back to itself as Center, in such a way that the hierophanic space is always and in each case at the center.”⁶ There is therefore never a confusion between physical or visionary topographies. “Visionary geographies” presuppose a transmutation of sensory data into symbols and archetype-images of the soul, into a “psycho-geography.”

It is the spatializing power of the soul that consecrates physical localizations as sacred space and not the other way around. “Hierophanies take place in the soul, not in things,” for it is the “event in the soul that situates, qualifies, and sacralizes the space in which it is imagined.”⁷ The sacred space is, therefore, not *situated* in a physical place because it itself is *situative*;⁸ it ontologically precedes the physical place and events. The soul is no longer bound by psychical spatial coordinates. “Instead of “falling into,” of having to be situated in a predetermined space, the soul itself “spatializes,” is always the origin of the spatial references and determines their structure.”⁹ This notion of space finds parallels in the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, which Henry More and the Cambridge Platonists called the *spissitudo spiritualis*. It is also the world of Swedenborg’s Heaven.¹⁰

⁵ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 16.

⁶ Ibid, p. 16. see also Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1971), p. 380-382. and Mircea Eliade. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbols*, translated by Philip Mairet, (London: Harvill Press, 1961), p. 27-56 (chapter on the Symbolism of the Center); The most profound meaning of sacred space, Eliade tells us, is to be found in the symbolism of “the Centre.” Every one tends towards a centre, whether consciously or unconsciously, which is called “the centre of the world,” and which constitutes his/her axis mundi; at the centre is sacredness, at the centre is “Reality.” For Eliade, the centre is “the desire to find oneself always and without effort in the Centre of the World, at the heart of reality, and by a short cut and in a natural manner to transcend the human condition...” Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, p. 55.

⁷ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 23.

⁸ Ibid, p. 16.

⁹ Ibid, p. 20.

¹⁰ On numerous occasions in his writings, Corbin alluded to the Cambridge Platonists. For a detailed expose of these authors, see Corbin, Henry. *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée* (Tehran: Academie Imperial Iran de philosophie, 1977). For a study of the Norman Philosopher Nicholas Oresme, see Henry Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, translated by Peter Russell, (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1981), p. 20-24.

Hierohistory

Just as a primordial presence spatializes a world and is *situative*, so too it temporalizes the world. With Corbin's analysis of time, we arrive at an even more fundamental consideration of "Being-there," *Dasein*. Corbin borrowed this primordial structure of time from Heidegger's notion of "historicality" and expanded it.¹¹ For Heidegger, "historicality" is the ontological structure of *Dasein* that makes the very notion of history possible.¹² In Corbin's terms, this means that the exterior and manifest events of history are made possible by the interior and hidden structure of the *There* of "Being-there." However, this ontological structure hidden beneath the ontic flux of everyday events is concealed and forgotten and requires a phenomenology, a *kash al-mahjub*, to unveil the ways in which it determines our various modes of presence.

Thus, there are various modes of temporality depending on the mode of being/presence. Heidegger was crucial for Corbin's understanding of temporality:

Is it even necessary for me to say that the direction my research has taken had as its starting point the incomparable analysis we owe to Heidegger showing the ontological roots of the Historical sciences, showing effectively that there is a more original, more primitive historicism than that which we call the "universal History"; the History of external events, the *Weltgeschichte*, or simply History in the ordinary everyday sense of the word. To signify this idea I forged the term *historiality*, and I believe it is a term worth holding on to. The same relation exists between the terms *historiality* and *historicism* as between *existential* as "existentiating" and *existential* conceived as a simple attribute [*existential* and *existentielle* in the French]. It was a decisive moment.¹³

It was a decisive moment for two reasons. First, it was thanks to Heidegger's incomparable analysis that Corbin realized that the very term "historiality" meant that one had the existential choice to refuse to be "inserted into the historicism of History, into the weave of historical causality" because behind historical causality lies a more primordial temporality. The "historicism of History" that claims to possess the meaning of history is nothing but an ontic presupposition forcing us into 'unauthentic' modes of being. As Corbin reminds us, "if there is a 'meaning to History', it is not by any means in the historicism of historical events; it is in this 'historiality', in these secret, esoteric, existentiating roots of

¹¹ Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi", p. 6.

¹² Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 7.

¹³ Henry Corbin, "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p. 6.

History and of the historical.”¹⁴ Here, Corbin is forcing upon us the crucial realization that we are not permanently at the mercy of the “terror of history”¹⁵ and that “we can extricate ourselves from historicisms” because we are not talking about man being in history” but “history which is experienced as being *in* man.”¹⁶ “Thus we are dealing with sacred history, hierohistory, whose events are accomplished in the interior consciousness of man.”¹⁷

In this move beyond empirical history, Corbin has extended the notion of objectivity, historical objectivity, to include the much-expanded subjectivity of the interior world of the soul. The exoteric history is caused and finds its source and origin on the esoteric level. This “historiality” or “historiosophy”¹⁸ is concerned with “spiritual facts,” which transpire on the plane of “metahistory” or “hierohistory” and these events can be perceived by those who possess a “hierognosis” or “theophanic perception which alone is able to apprehend a *mazhar* or theophanic form.”¹⁹ This “theophanic perception” never confuses the “eternal *haqiqah* whose manifestation is actualized only for the heart” with the manifestation or “external appearances” which are visible by all. Without this ability to apprehend the eternal *haqiqah* beneath the theophanic form we are victim to all the horrors of a nihilistic “agnostic reflex.”

The second reason why it was a decisive moment is because it is when Corbin, leaving Heidegger behind, found hermeneutical levels that “His [Heidegger’s] program had not yet envisioned.”²⁰ Corbin had borrowed the *clavis hermeneutica* from Heidegger, Heidegger’s Analytic, but had taken it into regions of Being unavailable to the *presence*, the *There*, of Heidegger’s Dasein. True enough, Corbin’s phenomenology involved an impassioned call for the authentic self, but unlike Heidegger’s Resoluteness in the face of the finitude of a *Being-*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Mircea Eliade, “Terror of History,” *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959).

¹⁶ Corbin, *Comparative Philosophy*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ According to Wasserstrom, Corbin attended a lecture given by Benz at Eranos, in which the latter speaks of Franz von Baader’s “profound interest in the dark side of existence.” (Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 55) In the same book, Wasserstrom makes the following correct claim: “Corbin adopted the related conception of ‘historiosophy’ from von Baader and Schelling.” (Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 159-160) In this regards, Corbin has this to say: “By contrast, that which certain Western philosophers, like Baader, and Schelling, have called ‘Historiosophy’ would not be able to do without a metaphysics, for if one ignores or excludes the hidden, esoteric sense of things, the living phenomena of this world are reduced to those of a cadaver.” (Corbin, “For the concept of Irano-Islamic Philosophy,” *The Philosophical Forum* 4 (1972): 114-123 at 121) quoted in Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, p. 159-160.

¹⁹ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 62.

²⁰ Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 6.

Towards-Death, Corbin called for a Resoluteness for a *Being-Towards-Beyond-Death*²¹ in the here and now; an ever present eschatology. What for Heidegger was ontological, *Being-Towards-Death*, is for Corbin nothing but an instance of a historically conditioned *Weltanschauung*²², beyond which there are hermeneutical levels Heidegger could not see. Even Heidegger could not escape the effect of that “agnostic reflex” that had infected Western philosophical thought and culture. The capacity to be *oriented* towards the eternal, towards the absolute, towards that which is “on the other side of death,” had been lost to the modern world.

The mode of presence assumed by Corbin’s theosophers, mystics, and visionaries, on the other hand, presupposes an entire metaphysical structure on the plane of “metahistory.”

It is this metahistory that bestows meaning on history, because it makes it into a hierohistory. In the absence of metahistory—that is to say, in the absence of anteriority ‘in Heaven’- and in the absence of an eschatology, to speak of a ‘sense of history’ is absurd.²³

Corbin is talking here about a “hierophantic-history,” that is not concerned with the outward facts and data of a “history of the saints” or a “history of salvation;” the only history Corbin is interested in is “sacred history,” which is none other than “esoteric hidden beneath the phenomenon of the literal appearance”²⁴ of sacred narratives of Holy Scripture. The imaginative data of prophetic revelations presupposes a trans-historical or trans-empirical reality, a true Reality (*haqiqat*) of events and spiritual figures concealed within the letter and outward form of metaphor (*majaz*). The arc of this “sacred history” of events and metaphysical figures begins in pre-eternity, before the ‘time’ of creation, and ends in the eternity. Thus, as Corbin explains, “sacred history,” “*hierohistory*,” “*metahistory*,” follows the traces of “spiritual energies” and the “superior universes which implant their traces in the world.” The cycle of this “hierohistory” is not a linear evolutionary one but one that “takes us back to the origin,” because “by envisaging that which constitutes the ‘descent’, in order to conclude by describing the ‘re-ascent’, the closing cycle.”²⁵

²¹ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 10.

²² Ibid.

²³ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 63.

²⁴ Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 7.

²⁵ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 62.

The kind of philosophy this entails is far from Heidegger's. It is a "prophetic philosophy," as we shall see in the next article, "...which moves in the dimension of a pure theophanic historicity, in the inner time of the soul; external events, cosmologies, the histories of the prophets, are perceived as the history of spiritual man."²⁶

Prophetic philosophy, looks for the meaning of history not in horizons, that is, not by orienting itself in the latitudinal sense of linear development, but vertically, by a longitudinal orientation extending from the celestial pole to the Earth, in the transparency of the heights or depths in which spiritual individuality experiences the reality of its celestial counterpart, its lordly dimension, its second person, its Thou.²⁷

Eternal Present and Presence

The metaphors of heights and depths, spatial metaphors, are crucial for understanding Presence. The ubiquity of the present in Islamic consciousness is explained partly by the fact that it never had to confront the problems posed by "historical consciousness."²⁸ More importantly, philosophical thought in Islam is characterized by a double tendency: one "issuing from the Origin (*mabda'*), and returning (*ma'ad*) to the Origin, issue and return both taking place in a vertical dimension." As a result, Islamic thought perceives the world as "ascending: the past is not behind us but 'beneath our feet.'" Along the vertical axis are a hierarchy of spiritual worlds each corresponding to and symbolizing with the one above it. Thus, Corbin tells us, "Forms are thought of as being in space rather than time."²⁹ If "Forms of thought" are in "space rather than time," then we are free to "give a future to the past" and free it from the trap of secular and historical consciousness.

For Corbin, Suhrawardi and Avicenna or any figures of gnosis for that matter, do not represent figures of a "bygone age" but of an ever present possibility because the past and the

²⁶ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 81.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ In a fascinating study on the nature of Time in Islam, Gerhard Bowering explains that "while Muslim notions of time oscillated between Aristotelian motion and Plotinian duration, it was the atomism of Democritus that appealed most strongly to the creators of normative Islamic theology." Heir to the pre-Islamic Arab notion of *dahr*, defined as the "infinite extension of time, which like the desert wind, erase footprints in the sand that stretches to the horizon" and the pre-Islamic Persian notion of *zaman*, which in Mazdean view of time means the "gnostic return to an eternal origin, not as that of an eternally returning time," Islam redefined time by removing its fatalistic underpinnings while preserving its atomism and deep sense of eternity." Gerhard Bowering, "Ideas of Time in Persian Mysticism," in *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, edited by Richard G. Hovannissian & Georges Sabagh, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁹ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 5.

future “are not characteristics of things external to the soul; they are characteristics of the soul itself. It is we who are living or dead, and it is we who are responsible for the life and death of these things.”³⁰ A hermeneutical phenomenology of the kind Corbin is advocating must always be a “Being-there” (*da-sein*), because it is precisely by this “act of presence” that that which is occulted by the phenomenal appearances are made manifest.

The possibility of the past assuming a new life, having a future, falls upon the soul, a conscious decision “which restores a future to that past;”³¹ to let this past live in the here and now, to give it a life. “The decision of the future falls to the soul, depends upon how the soul understands itself, upon its refusal or acceptance of a new birth” because “life and death are attributes of the *soul*, not of past or present *things*.”³² It is a question of understanding “what once made that past possible, caused its *advent*”³³ in order to give it a future. The “act of presence” consists in precisely this: to allow those possibilities that conceal themselves within so-called “bygone events” to become present once again.

We can see immediate similarities here with Heidegger’s own analysis of presence and its relation to time and space, which explains how Corbin could find in Heidegger’s ontology a path that led him to Islamic Iran.³⁴ Corbin asks: “Do the acts of human-presence come to pass purely and simply in the past? Or do they not remain in the present in the sense that they ‘are’ ‘having been’?” The ‘having-been’ cannot presently *be*-having been (*Gewesenheit*) except as being born constantly out of the future. “Everything depends upon the act of ‘being-there’ (*da-sein*) by which the having-been *is* there (*da-gewesen*).”³⁵

Corbin found this intuition in profound accord with that of his Islamic theologians. In Islamic Iran, for example, Alaoddawleh Semnani (1336) envisages a law of correspondences, a homology, between events that occur in the outer world and the inner events of the soul. The homology between what Semnani calls “*zaman afaqi*” or the “time of horizons” or “horizontal time,” which is physical historical time, and “*zaman anfosi*” or “psychic time, the time of the world of the soul.”³⁶ A similar distinction can be found in another of Corbin’s theologians, Qadi Sa’id Qummi who distinguishes between “*zaman kathif*” or “opaque and dense temporality,” and “*zaman latif*” or “subtle temporality.” This notion of a “time of the

³⁰ Henry Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, vol. 1, p. 37. (My translation).

³¹ Corbin, *Man of Light*, p. 13.

³² Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, p. 10.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Cheetham, *World Turned Inside Out*, p. 12.

³⁵ Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 7.

³⁶ Corbin, *Man of Light*, p. 123.

world of the soul” or “subtle temporality” demands a *presence to* the object of its cognition, which is none other than the act of being present to the worlds of the soul.

Corbin’s hero for this *presence to* was Suhrawardi who attempted to “resuscitate,” in the heart of Islam, “the Light of the ancient Persian Sages.” From a historian’s point of view, it might have been conceived as a “piece of idle fancy,” but Suhrawardi never claimed to be a historian; he neither deliberated upon concepts nor did he concern himself with historical traces, vestiges, or influences. As Corbin explains, Suhrawardi “is quite simply there,” because he takes charge of the Zoroastrian past and engages in an “act of presence” of a “being-there,” thereby rendering this past present. This past is no longer a “bygone” past, forever irretrievable. Despite the material and historical lineage being interrupted by over a thousand years and an almost non-existent tradition, Suhrawardi succeeds in restoring to this past a “future-yet-to-come”³⁷ because the *spiritual filiation* he has with this past defies any historical rupture with it. “In this I have no precursor,” Suhrawardi tells us because his only precursors are those to whom he has made himself present, the ancient Persian Sages. It is this act of “being-there,” Corbin tells us, “that is the *historically true*.”³⁸

The act of being there, the presencing, the place of visionary events, the place of encounter with the Angel, is enacted in that region of being for which Corbin coined the term the *mundus imaginalis*.

Mundus Imaginalis: Ontological Reality

“Imaginal” was the term coined and introduced by Corbin to designate this spiritual space of the soul. Corbin derived this term etymologically from the Latin term *mundus imaginalis*, which was the title of an essay on the subject. The *mundus imaginalis*, or the imaginal, corresponds to a number of synonymous Arabic and Persian terms such as: *malakut* (the subtle world of the souls), the *barzakh* (the interworld), *hurqalya* (the world of the celestial Earth), *na koja abad* (the land of nowhere), and ‘*alam al-mithal* (the world of images and archetypal ideas). Each one of these terms, as we shall see, designates one dimension of what Corbin has tried to capture in the Latin *mundus imaginalis*.

The first to provide an ontological foundation for the reality, *sui generis*, of the ‘*alam al-mithal*, the *mundus imaginalis*, was Suhrawardi. In his “Book of Conversations,” Suhrawardi writes:

³⁷ Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 8.

³⁸ Ibid.

When you learn from the writings of the ancient Sages that there exists a world possessed of dimensions and extent, other than the pleroma of Intelligences and the world governed by the Souls of the Spheres, and that in it there are cities beyond number among which the Prophet himself mentioned Jabalqa and Jabarsa, do not hasten to proclaim it a lie, for there are pilgrims of the spirit who come and see it with their own eyes and in it find their heart's desire. As for the rabble impostors and false priests, they will deny what you have seen even if you bring proof to expose their lie. Therefore remain silent and have patience, for if you come eventually to our Book of Oriental Philosophy, no doubt you will understand something of what has been said, provided your initiator gives you guidance. If not, be a believer in wisdom.³⁹

In the Islamic cosmology of Suhrawardi there exist three hierarchical worlds each with its own ontological reality: there is the *Jabarut*, the world of the luminary beings of Light or pure archangelic intelligences; the *Malakut*, the suprasensory world of the Soul or Angel-Souls of which the intermediary world of the '*alam al-mithal*, the *mundus imaginalis* is a part, which begins "on the convex surface of the Ninth Sphere;" and there is the *Mulk*, our earthly world governed by human souls and the sidereal universe governed by the Souls of the Spheres, world of material objects and sensible perception. To this triadic structure of the universe, there correspond three organs of knowledge: the intellect, the imagination, and the senses; and an anthropological triad: body, soul, and spirit.⁴⁰ These triadic structures regulate man's triple growth out of this world to the resurrections in the other worlds along the 'arc of ascent' through the intensification of light-being.⁴¹

These ontological levels of hierarchical reality symbolize the hierarchical levels of mystic knowledge. To each level of reality there corresponds a mystical or spiritual station (*maqam*) such that the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm, which contains all these hierarchical worlds as interior modes of being. The perception of these worlds presupposes a hierarchy of "psycho-spiritual organs" that give access to these other worlds through the "interior metamorphosis" of the soul.⁴²

In light of such a metaphysical structure, the ontological and cosmological continuity between human souls and celestial souls becomes quite clear.

³⁹ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 118, selections from Translated Text 1, *The Book of Conversations* by Suhrawardi.

⁴⁰ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 8; see Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, vol 4, p. 106.

⁴¹ See my Introduction to the Thought of Henry Corbin.

⁴² Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, vol1, p. 178f; and vol.4, p. 89f.

Celestial Souls and human souls share the modality of not being purely intelligential or intellective in the first constitution of their essence; they have in common the function of ruling and governing physical bodies. To do this, they must *imagine*. The whole immense world of the imaginable, the universe of symbol (*alam al-mithal*), would not exist without the soul.....The body which they [the Angels] are furnished and which “materializes” the thought of the same Archangel is made of a “celestial matter,” a subtle and incorruptible *quinta essentia*. For this reason, and because unlike human imaginations, theirs are not dependent on sensible knowledge, their imaginations are *true*.⁴³

The Celestial and human souls *imagine*, in terms of imaginative Forms. These imaginative Forms constitute the ‘*alam al-mithal* or “the world of images and archetypal ideas.” This has Platonic overtones and indeed, it should. Corbin referred to Suhrawardi and the *Ishraqiyun* as the “Platonists of Persian.” However, there are substantial differences because of the peculiar nature of Suhrawardi’s cosmology. We recall that he combined a Mazdaen angelology with a Zoroastrian philosophy of Light and Darkness with Platonic Ideas in addition to the monotheism of Islam. Therefore, the ‘*alam al-mithal* is distinct from Plato’s world of Ideas. “These autonomous Images and Forms are not the Platonic Ideas, for the Ideas of Plato are of pure, immutable light,”⁴⁴ Suhrawardi tells us. However, as Suhrawardi’s commentator, Qutbuddin Shirazi, reminds us: “The Sages of old, such as Plato, Socrates, Empedocles and others, not only affirmed the existence of the Platonic Ideas.....but also the existence of autonomous imaginative Forms.....They affirmed that these are separate substances, independent of material matters.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the ‘*alam al-mithal* is situated below the intelligible world of Plato’s Ideas but above the empirical world of the senses. The imaginative Forms of the ‘*alam al-mithal* are intermediary between the sensible world and the intelligible. Suhrawardi had indeed read the *Theology of Aristotle*, whose real author was Plotinus. In Plotinus, we find a similar affirmation, which is that in between the Platonic realms of the intelligible and sensible, there exists the “psychic dimension” or the “immaterial and invisible forces” that “animate” and “permeate” the spatio-temporal world; these are the “psychic principle and magical forces” which are the “hidden causes” and “intermediaries” between the intelligible and sensible realms; they are the “providential order” and “harmony” of the planetary spheres which keep the whole in

⁴³ Corbin, *Avicenna and The Visionary Recitals*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Suhrawardi, *Book of Oriental Theosophy*, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 129.

⁴⁵ Qutbuddin Shirazi, *Commentary on the Book of Oriental Theosophy*, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 129.

order.⁴⁶ This intermediary realm is not to be confused with a distinct hypostasis, however, it is like “the principle of unity-in-diversity, of the separation and uniting of contraries in the material world.” It is also considered as an “intermediary between the Divine and the material world.....between God and the material creation.”⁴⁷ Corbin would later designate the *mundus imaginalis* as the realm of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. It is the place of encounter between God’s descent as *theophany* towards his creatures and the creature’s ascent through *hermeneutics* towards God. “Here human and divine imaginations meet and the pure intelligible archetypes enter knowledge.”⁴⁸ It is where the spiritual is *materialized* and the material *spiritualized*.

We saw that in Suhrawardi’s cosmology the universe is populated by angels. Thus, for Suhrawardi, the images of this *world of images* are interpreted in terms of an angelology. The angels are the lords of a species and these angels or lords have an ontological and cosmological continuity with the species over which they rule by theophanic vision. Corbin,

Each of them [angels] is the angel or lord of space [*rabb al-nu’*], of the image or icon [*sanam*], of theurgy [*tilisme*], that constitute the corporeal species of which he is the angel because of its theurgic action. The notion of archetype is no longer exactly that proposed by classic Platonism. On the other hand, it guides all the piety and spiritual life of the *Ishraqiyun*. The angelological interpretation of Platonic ideas, the *ta’wil* of the theory of ideas is, in brief, what Suhrawardi considered most precious about the theosophy of ancient Persia and all its decisions—in physics, psychology, cosmology, and metaphysics—were taken with a view to preserving it.⁴⁹

The images of the world of archetypes are therefore no longer abstract Ideas or immutable entities as in Plato but are animated persons or figures who enjoy a cognitive and initiatory function with respect to their respective species. The Angel of Humanity, the

⁴⁶ John. Bussanich, “Mystical Elements in the Thought of Plotinus,” *Aufstieg Und Niedergang Der Romischen Welt (ANRW)*, Band 36, (1994). p. 5306.

⁴⁷ A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, 9Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 205 quoted in John M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 99-100. We also read: “The place to begin is not actually on the noetic level itself, but very close to it on the psychic level. The trajectory of the mystical ascent extends from the material world and the experiences the embodied lower soul has in it to union with the One. However, the first level of reality superior to the material world is not the intelligible world, but the soul, both individuals and the World-Soul.” In Bussanich. “Mystical Elements in the Thought of Plotinus,” p. 5305-5306.

⁴⁸ Bamford, *Esotericism Today*, p. XX.

⁴⁹ Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, Vol. 2, p. 230-231.

Archangel Gabriel, or the Holy Spirit, is the Lord of the Human species who awakens and guides the initiate to mystical and visionary knowledge.⁵⁰

One of the most suggestive names of the *mundus imaginalis* is one Corbin finds in Ibn Arabi, whose metaphysics of the Imagination is in profound accord with that of Suhrawardi, is the “interworld,” the world-in-between, or the *barzakh* (the meeting-place of the two seas.)⁵¹ Ibn Arabi sees it as the place where the world of pure immutable ideas meets with the world of the objects of sense perception.⁵² Its location between the two worlds of the intelligible and the senses gives it a mediating role; it is intermediary because it mediates between the two places and by so doing it assumes the character traits of both places much like an isthmus does or the *barzakh*. On the one hand, the *mundus imaginalis* is a place “where the spiritual takes body” corporealizing the intelligible forms to which it gives form. On the other hand, the *mundus imaginalis* is where “the body becomes spiritual;” dematerializing perceptible forms into their spiritual essences. Because “spirits are embodied and bodies spiritualized,” the *mundus imaginalis* is a vast spiritual topography of image-forms.

Yet another designation of the *mundus imaginalis* Corbin found in Suhrawardi is the Persian term “Na-Koja-Abad” or the “Eighth Climate.” Literally translated it means “the land *abad* of nowhere *na-koja*,” because it does not designate a specific locality or place in extended space;⁵³ it is not “in any physical place, not determined by any coordinates of perceptible space.”⁵⁴ Corbin continues:

Na-Koja-Abad begins at the moment when one ‘leaves’ the sphere that defines all possible orientations in this world, that which carries the cardinal celestial points ideally inscribed on it...Once this limit is crossed, the question “where” (*ubi? koja?*) loses its meaning, at least the meaning that it properly has in space as we all experience it.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ It must be said that Plato’s Ideas were well known among the Islamic mystical philosophers of Iran and were often referred to as the “Platonic archetypes of light” (*muthul aflatuniya nuraniya*) to distinguish them from the images of the *‘alam al-mithal*. Plato’s ideas though were often incorporated and integrated in terms of a prophetology of sorts. The Platonic ideas were defined as “natures with a mission” (*taba’i mursala*), “substances with a mission, sent” (*jawahir mursala*). See Corbin, *La philosophie iranienne islamique*, p. 196.

⁵¹ The exact Quranic term for this is *majma‘ al-bahrayn*,

⁵² Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, p. 266.

⁵³ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 4-5.

⁵⁴ Corbin, *Voyage and Messenger*, p. 168.

⁵⁵ Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, vol 4, p. 379.

The reason is that Na-koja-abad is a “place outside of place, a ‘place’ that is not contained in a place, in a *topos*, that permits a response, with a gesture of the hand, to the question “*where?*”⁵⁶ Once one has crossed the limit into Na Koja-Abad, one no longer finds oneself “*in* the place, but *is himself the place*;” to be in this world is to “have the world in oneself....This is the imaginal space, the space where the active Imagination freely manifests its visions and its epics.”⁵⁷

The voyage to Na-Koja-Abad, to “the Land of Nowhere,” is an initiatory quest, the mystic quest for which the Prophet’s mystic Night Journey is the prototype; it is the quest for the Orient of our being; a quest from our Occidental exile of the natural world to the land of the Orient, the spiritual world “in order for the Stranger, the gnostic, to return *home*.”⁵⁸ Suhrawardi had taught Corbin that this mystic quest for the Orient, for the “nowhere” “cannot relate to a change of local position, a physical transfer from one place to another place, as though it involved places contained in a single homogenous space.” As Suhrawardi’s visionary recitals tell us, the relationship under discussion is, in essence, “a matter of entering, passing into the interior and, in passing *into the interior*, of finding oneself, paradoxically, outside.....’on the convex of the Ninth Sphere.....’ beyond the mountain of Qaf.” By this means of “*interiorization*” one has “*departed* from that external reality” and paradoxically found that the reality, which has been until now “internal and hidden” is revealed to be in actual fact “enveloping, surrounding, containing” the “external and visible” reality. “That is why,” Corbin tells us, “spiritual reality is not ‘in the *where*’. It is the ‘*where*’ that is in it.”⁵⁹

This is the fundamental difference between the “nowhere” of the term *ou-topia* first coined by Thomas More, an abstract no-place, and the concrete reality of *Na-Koja-Abad* of Suhrawardi.⁶⁰ Despite the fact that both terms refer to a *situs* that does not exist in physical place and discernable by sensory organs, Na-Koja-Abad, unlike *ou-topia*, is a real, objective, and concrete reality in a region of Being accessible by suprasensory organs of perception as we shall soon see.

⁵⁶ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Corbin, *Voyage and Messenger*, p. 168.

⁵⁸ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid* p. 4. “Spiritual bodies or spiritual entities are no longer in a world....It is their world that is in them. That is why the Theology of Aristotle, the Arabic version of the last three Enneads of Plotinus which Avicenna annotated and which all of our thinkers read and meditated upon, explains that each spiritual entity is ‘in the totality of the sphere of its Heaven.’” *Ibid*, p. 12-13.

Suhrawardi has also designated the imaginal realm in terms of *Eran Vej*, which designates the “cradle and origin of the Aryan-Iranians in the centre of the central Keshvar (orbs, zone). As the primordial earth of the ancient Persians, this spiritual topography is as concrete and real as our presumed material world; it really exists “outside the exterior location.”⁶¹ It is a “world consisting of real matter and real extension, though by comparison to sensible, corruptible matter these are subtle and immaterial.”⁶² It cannot be found on our geographical maps but it is a visionary “psycho-geography” perceived in conformity with the “celestial pole” like the *Imago Terrae*, the primordial image of paradise. The *Eran Vej*, “the original Iranian land,” is the Mazdean imaginative configuration of the imaginal world. It is the world of infinite lights where the darkness of the sensible world comes to an end. *Eran Vej* is the place to which numerous heroes and ecstatic sovereigns of ancient Persia have set out for and it has been the subject of many visionary experiences. It is the place for which Kay Khasraw, the mystical sovereign of the seven *Keshvars*, the seven parts of the Earth, chose to renounce his crown and retire to; into the mountain valley, near the “source of life,” in the company of the immortals. At the end of his spiritual chivalry, Kay Khasraw attains to the “protective light,” the *Xvarnah*, and is placed besides the immortal knights of this quest at the summit of the “cosmic mountain.”

For Corbin, *Eran Vej* is the “eighth climate,” in the sacred cartography of ancient Persia. According to this system, there are seven *Keshvars* or “climates.” There is the central Keshvar, the eastern Keshvar, the western Keshvar, two to the north, and two to the south. Their situation is deduced astronomically in relation to the Keshvar, which *is* the centre. The centrality of this Keshvar is important because “its presence has the quality of *situating space*, before being *situated in* that space.” That is to say, “it is not a matter of pre-existing, homogenous, and *quantitative* space in which regions are distributed but the typical structure of a *qualitative* space.”⁶³ It is a *medio mundi* situated in the extreme North, at the threshold of the suprasensory world.

We described earlier the projective geometry of the soul and its spatializing power. According to Corbin, the *mundus imaginalis* in the form of an *Imago Terrae* of *Eran Vej* is a spiritual phenomenon, which can be situated only in relation to a being of light, or man of

⁶¹ Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, Vol , p. 335f.

⁶² Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 4.

⁶³ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 17.

light. *Eran Vej*, or the East of Lights, the Orient of Being, is the “heavenly pole”⁶⁴ of a “visionary geography.” To cross the threshold at the pole is to be *oriented* toward the “Light of the East,” towards “the celestial pole at the axis of human existence,” the “eighth climate.”

To conclude, we may say that *Eran Vej* is an imaginal form perceived by the active Imagination, which has the power to transmute the Earth into a symbol, *medio mundi*, an *Imago Terrae*, which from then on it becomes the *situative* power, the centre of the soul, its celestial axis or orientation.

To summarize, we have the world of physical objects, the intermediary world of the *mundus imaginalis*, and the world of intellectual objects. Corbin’s point is that we cannot limit the notion of the concrete to the sensible world for there are also spiritual concrete entities that have an ontological reality *sui generis* in the *mundus imaginalis*, which is the locus of their manifestation (*mazhar*).

The Spiritual Organ of Perception

The tragedy of modern culture, according to Corbin, is that we have lost the ability to perceive these spiritual forms in spiritual space. Corbin laments the fact that this notion of space has all but disappeared in the West since the triumph of Aristotelian scholasticism and the failure of Neo-Platonism in the 12th century. As we said in the first article, the dimension of being which the *act of being* must have in order to be the *place* of visionary events requires an entire metaphysical structure to provide the ontological continuity between Earth and Heaven. This Neo-Platonic Avicennan metaphysical structure was abandoned in the West and with it, its three-tiered cosmology. What remained was a two-tiered structure of reality. There is sense perception of the material world, matter, and there is mind, the domain of concepts and the understanding of the laws governing the material world provided by the data of sense perception. These have formed the basis of Newtonian physics and Descartes’ *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. In such a world, the mode of being is limited by the single dimensional notion of space and as a result, the mode of presence is limited to the physical world.

For Corbin, Western philosophy had acknowledged only two sources of knowledge (*Connaître*). There is sense perception, which provides empirical data and there are abstract concepts of understanding (*Entendement*). Despite the fact that phenomenology had

⁶⁴ Corbin, *Man of Light*, p. 11

questioned this oversimplified epistemology, it had not gone far enough because for Corbin, in between sense perception and intellectual understanding, in-between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, there is the Active Imagination.

Yet the fact remains that between the sense perception and the intuitions or categories of the intellect there has remained a void. That which ought to have taken its place between the two, and which in other times and places did occupy this intermediate space, that is to say the Active Imagination, has been left to the poets.⁶⁵

The *mundus imaginalis* as we saw is a “precise order of reality, corresponding to a precise mode of perception.”⁶⁶ Therefore, corresponding to the threefold division of space, there is a threefold division of knowledge. To the “subtle and immaterial” quality of the *mundus imaginalis* there corresponds the subtle organ of the heart, “imaginative perception,” or the eye of inner vision that is responsible for the perception of visionary events where suprasensory realities, the forms and figures of the *mundus imaginalis*, present themselves to the contemplative or imaginative consciousness. This subtle organ of vision is none other than the imagination itself, which has its own “noetic or cognitive function” because it “gives us access to a region and a reality of Being,” without which it would be impossible to penetrate.⁶⁷ It is the organ that permits the migration from the exterior to the interior “*ab extra ad intra*.” The active Imagination is the spiritual organ with which the soul enacts its *presencing*. However, in a rational and scientific world, an independent “noetic or cognitive function” which provides access to a region of Being/Reality unavailable to the senses, and thus to rational and scientific methods, is anathema. For such a rational and scientific worldview, the imagination is nothing but the imaginary, the fantastic, the unreal.

The Active Imagination does not produce an arbitrary construct obstructing our view of reality, but acts as a “faculty and organ of knowledge just as real as-if not more real than the sense organs.”⁶⁸ It is an organ *sui generis* and not derived from sense perception; its power is by “effecting a transmutation of sensory data,” resolving them into the “purity of the subtle world,” so that they may be restored as “symbols to be deciphered,” the key for such a

⁶⁵ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. vii. (2nd edition)

⁶⁶ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*.

⁶⁷ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. I (2nd edition)

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* .

cipher being “imprinted in the soul itself.”⁶⁹ It is the organ that “permits the transmutation of internal spiritual states into external states, into vision-events symbolizing with those internal states.” Sensory realities and data are “dematerialized” and suprasensory realities and data are “spiritualized” into the forms appropriate to the ontological reality of the *mundus imaginalis*, which are images.

The imaginative data are images but not those of fantasy. They are concrete real images or forms that the *mundus imaginalis* makes possible because of its transmutation of sensible and intellectual forms into imaginal forms; without being “dematerialized” and “spiritualized” the schema of the sensible world and that of the intellectual world would be disconnected. As Corbin explains it: “While we encounter in other philosophies or systems a trust of the Image, a degradation of all that properly belongs to the Imagination, the *mundus imaginalis* is its exaltation, because it is the link in whose absence the schema of the worlds is put out of joint.”⁷⁰

The double movement of dematerializing and spiritualizing is a movement by which the imagination “unveils the hidden reality” of both the sensory data that must be transmuted into symbols, *to occult the apparent*, and the intellectual data that must be revealed, *to manifest the hidden*. It is in this intermediary “world of the mystical cities such as *Hurqalya*, where time becomes reversible and where space is a function of desire, because it is only the external aspect of an internal state,”⁷¹ that the mystics, the *urafa*, or the gnostics, have meditated.

To clarify the power and nature of the active Imagination, Corbin resorts to the theosophy of Ibn Arabi, the other great “metaphysician of the Imagination” as Corbin would call him. Two particular Sufi terms are relevant to our discussion on the spiritual organ of perception: the “heart” (*qalb*), and the “spiritual will” (*himma*). In Ibn Arabi, and Sufism in general, the heart (*qalb*) is the “organ which produces true knowledge, comprehensive intuition, the gnosis (*ma'rifa*) of God and the divine mysteries” or everything that falls under the term “esoteric science” (*ilm al-Batin*).⁷² The “heart” is also the organ of perception that is both experience and intimate taste (*dhawq*). The “heart” is ubiquitous in all the mystical traditions of Christianity as well as India. To be sure, it is not the physical heart of flesh and

⁶⁹ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 11.

⁷⁰ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. ix. (2nd edition)

⁷¹ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 16.

⁷² Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 221.

blood, but the “subtle heart” of a “subtle physiology” elaborated “on the basis of ascetic, ecstatic, and contemplative experience” as Mircea Eliade has expressed it.⁷³ For the Sufis like Ibn Arabi, the “heart” is at the centre of a “subtle body” which is composed of “psycho-spiritual organs” that are distinct from the bodily organs.

This “heart” possesses the power to perceive forms in the *mundus imaginalis*; it is the gnostic’s “eye,” the organ by which he perceives and knows God. Thus, the “power of the heart is a secret force or energy (*quwwat khafiya*) that knows and perceives “divine realities by a pure hierophanic knowledge (*idrak wadih jali*)” without the impurities of mixture. In its pure and “unveiled state,” the “heart” is “like a mirror in which the microcosmic form of the Divine Being is reflected.”⁷⁴ This power of the “heart” is what is designated by the term *himma*, which Corbin equates with the Greek word *enthymesis*. *Enthymesis*, Corbin tells us, signifies “the act of meditating, conceiving, imagining, projecting, ardently desiring.”⁷⁵ Similarly, *himma* signifies the “force of an intention so powerful as to project and realize (essentiate) a being external to the being who conceives the intention.” Therefore, *himma* is a creative power but in an “epiphanic” sense not in any sense of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is alien to Ibn Arabi’s theosophy.⁷⁶ The heart “creates by causing to appear,” or by “preserving” something which already exists in the higher spiritual world. “By concentrating the spiritual energy of *himma* on the form of a thing existing in one or more of the ‘Presences’ or ‘*Hadarat*’,” Corbin tells us, “the mystic obtains perfect control over that thing, and this control preserves that thing in one or another of the Presences as long as the concentration of *himma* lasts.”⁷⁷ The “mode of presence” of this imaginative power of the heart, of *himma*, is no inferior presence, “it signifies to see directly what cannot be seen by the senses, to be a true witness.”⁷⁸

We shall also see in the next article that this science of the heart is inextricably related to the hermeneutics of symbols, a spiritual exegesis. “It is because revealed being is Imagination,” Corbin explains, “that we require a hermeneutics of the forms manifested in

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 222.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “[W]hen the Divine Being manifests itself in this existence whose being consist of the theophanic imagination, it only appears in conformity with the essence of this imagination, not with what it is in itself, in its itness.” Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 182.

⁷⁷ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 226.

⁷⁸ Ibid p. 231.

it.”⁷⁹ This is carried out by a spiritual exegesis, which carries back the phenomena to their true reality by transmuting sensory data into symbols, by spiritualizing material things or “immaterializing” them. The *mundus imaginalis* is therefore “the place of apparitions” of “spiritual beings, Angels and Spirits, who in it assume the figures and forms of their ‘apparitional forms.’” In it, “pure concepts (*ma‘ani*) and sensory data (*mahsusat*) meet and flower into personal figures prepared for the events of spiritual dramas.” We have already seen that the *mundus imaginalis* is also the place “where all ‘divine history’ is accomplished, the stories of the prophets, for example, which have meaning because they are theophanies.”⁸⁰ These theophanies are the true nature of those stories accomplished on the plane of sensory experience, or what we call History. The *mundus imaginalis* is then the “motive force” of the spiritual exegesis, which is none other than *the continuous ascent of the soul*.⁸¹

To summarize, we have seen that the gnostic “heart” is the organ of mystic perception and revelation, of “intimate taste” (*dhawq*), which is an “unveiling” of the divine secrets, a divine epiphany to the heart. The “heart” also has the power to “create” forms by either “causing to appear” that form or epiphany in the *mundus imaginalis* of the otherwise immutable pure form of light or it “preserves” whatever form that has appeared to it. This is what Corbin calls the “science of the heart.” Corbin summarizes our point:

To have the science of the heart is to perceive the divine metamorphoses, that is to say the multitude and transmutation of forms in which the divine self epiphanyzes, whether this be a figure in the external world or a religious belief. It is thus to know the divine Being through intuitive vision (*shuhud*), it is to perceive it in the form where each of its epiphanies [*tajalli*] manifests itself [*mazhar*], thanks to the state of concentration where the mystic becomes like a ‘Quran,’ that is to say the Perfect Man as the microcosm of God, thanks to his *himma*.⁸²

Conclusion

Without the intermediary space of the imagination and its corresponding organ of perception, religious truth is susceptible to radical doubt. All religious phenomena lose their ontological grounding and their meaning in the absence of the imagination and its organ of perception.

⁷⁹ Ibid p. 208.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 189-190.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 209.

⁸² Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, Vol. 3, p. 171-172.

Symbolic images instead of being “invested with a symbolic function” are being reduced to the “level of sensory perception;” this is precisely what is implied in the term “Imaginary” and why Corbin refused to use it.

In discussing the nature of the objective reality of Angelic figures on the Imaginal world, Corbin comments on the following excerpt by Villiers de L’Isle-Adam. “Angels,” Villiers writes, “*are not*, in substance except in the free sublimity of the absolute Heavens, where reality is unified with the ideal....they only externalize themselves in the ecstasy they cause and which forms a part of themselves.”⁸³ Is this not, after all, the true meaning of *ekstasis* “standing apart,” which Greek philosophy has bequeathed to us. For Corbin this excerpt has a “prophetic clarity” because it breaks the “reciprocal isolation of the consciousness and its object, of thought and being.” The key words, Corbin informs us, are “*ecstasy.....which forms part of themselves*,” simply because the Angel *is* the *ekstasis*; the appearance of the figure guide, the Angel-guide, is itself the “change of state,” the moment of the inner metamorphosis, *modus essendi*, that permits the vision of the Angel, *modus intelligendi*, the inner hidden Imam in Shi’ite gnosis.⁸⁴

The degradation of the symbol-Image has been the fate of religious phenomena in the West under the assault of profane approaches like sociology, anthropology, history, etc. For Corbin, this decline in the West begins in the twelfth century, when Averroism prevailed over Avicenan cosmology, with the concomitant loss of the intermediate angelic hierarchy of the *Animae* or *Angeli caelestes* and their imaginative power. The role of these *Animae* could not be over estimated because as Corbin informs us, “Once the universe of these Souls disappeared, it was the imaginative function as such that was *unbalanced* and devalued.”⁸⁵ Without the intermediary function of the *Animae*, the connection between the realm of intellect and that of the senses is severed and communication is impossible. If religious phenomena are not to be reduced to the plane of mere sociological occurrences or psychological disturbances⁸⁶, if we are to avoid a sterile reduction of symbolism to allegory and the spiritual sense to its literal expression, the objective and concrete reality of the *mundus imaginalis* and its “universe of Souls” must be accepted for *it* is “the *place* of the theophanic visions, the scene on which visionary events and symbolic histories *appear* in

⁸³ Quoted in Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 31.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 32.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 17.

⁸⁶ Such has been the fate of religion at the hand of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud.

their true reality.”⁸⁷ The cognitive function of the active Imagination, “of the universe of the Souls,” of the *Animae*, “permits all the universes to *symbolize with one another*.....permits the establishment of a rigorous *analogical knowledge*,” which escapes the paralyzing choice: matter or spirit, history or myth.⁸⁸

Placed between the other two cognitive functions of sensory knowledge and intellectual knowledge, the active Imagination balances between both cognitive functions allowing sensory data to symbolize with intellectual knowledge via the intermediary of the symbol-Image the appearance of which is a “primary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*)” irreducible to anything else other than the plentitude of its own manifestation, unlike allegory, which is a “sheathing.....or disguising” of something already known through other means.⁸⁹ Religious phenomena appear in qualitative time and space as symbols but appear only in their true reality in the *mundus imaginalis*.

The active Imagination guides, anticipates, molds sense perception; that is why it transmutes sensory data into symbols. The Burning Bush is only a brushwood fire if it is merely perceived by the sensory organs. In order that Moses may perceive the Burning Bush and hear the Voice calling him “from the right side of the valley”-in short, in order that there may be a theophany-an organ of trans-sensory perception is needed.⁹⁰

The task of a proper understanding of these “visionary events” is the provenance of a spiritual phenomenology that undertakes to understand (*Verstehen*) the *spiritual facts* of religious phenomena.⁹¹ Any positivist criticism is invalid here because it is “alienated from the *phainomenon* itself which we are trying to understand, since it destroys it instead of examining it.”⁹² The significance of the *mundus imaginalis*, Corbin, reminds us is that it emancipates us from the ongoing sterile debate between the literalism of theologians and the abstract logical universals of the philosophers. Entities in the *mundus imaginalis* are neither logical universals nor concrete singulars of the sensible world, but *spiritual forms*,⁹³ abstract universals being none other than their dead husks. Without an entire cosmology that posits a plurality of spiritual universes in ascensional order symbolizing with each other, “our

⁸⁷ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁹⁰ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 80.

⁹¹ See my first article for a discussion of *Verstehen* and upcoming article for a discussion of a spiritual hermeneutics.

⁹² Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*, p. 120.

⁹³ One can speak here of spiritual realism.

Imagination will remain unbalanced, its recurrent conjunctions with the will to power will be an endless source of horrors.”⁹⁴ Not even the countless modern utopias escape this judgment. “Those who have known the ‘Eight Climate’ have not invented utopias” nor is their thought about social or political fantasies, but “an eschatology, because it is an *expectation*.....a *real Presence* here and now in another world, and a testimony to that other world.”⁹⁵ Much turns on our acceptance or rejection of the *mundus imaginalis*.

Upon it depends...both the validity of visionary accounts that perceive and relate “events in Heaven” and the validity of dreams, symbolic rituals, the reality of places formed by intense meditation, the reality of inspired imaginative visions, cosmogonies, and theogonies, and thus, in the first place, the truth of the *spiritual sense* perceived in the imaginative data of prophetic revelations.⁹⁶

In the third and final article, we shall explore how the *act of being* as presence is enacted as a real event of the soul through a *spiritual exegesis* that leads the soul through its ascent into the *mundus imaginalis* and its encounter with its Angel-Guide. We shall also look at some of the visionary narratives that Islamic mystics have left behind as accounts of their own mystical ascents.

⁹⁴ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 19.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 20.

⁹⁶ For a discussion of the spiritual sense, see my next article on the angel and spiritual exegesis.