

Phenomenology through the eyes of an Iranologist: Henry Corbin (1903-1978)

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Henry Corbin's incursion into the field of Islamic Studies was marked by great ingenuity and innovation. He brought into the field of Islamic Studies methodological considerations from established traditions and, as a result, proposed a fresh and intellectually challenging way of interpreting Islamic thought. He achieved this by staying away from more traditional and descriptive-type approaches. Two of the most important traditions from which he nourished his philosophical reflection were philosophical phenomenology and hermeneutics both of which he encountered during the philosophical studies of his early years. Although, phenomenology of religion also played a role in the elaboration of his method, he made a strong stand against any method which made history the central element of its approach. His alternative position was more of a spiritual-type phenomenology. In light of this, it would seem insufficient to dwell only on Corbin's contributions to the field of Islamic Studies, in spite of the fact that these are too numerous to mention. More important for any critical and, hopefully, constructive analysis of his work is to shed some light on a few aspects of his thought which are brought about by his methodological approach; this being far from what some might call "Corbin bashing."¹

Philosophical Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Phenomenology of Religion

Corbin's intellectual background, similar to that of most modern phenomenologists, owes much to the thought of Edmond Husserl (1856-1938). Husserl elaborated an abstract and philosophical phenomenological approach. He attempted to redefine our apprehension of the phenomena — the *phenomenon* i.e. "that which appears" — as they occur in the outside world. Husserl's phenomenology sought to describe the structure of the experiences of our daily life, our common experiences in the *Lebenswelt*, (life-world), as the original data lived and experienced by conscious subjects. Certainty belonged to the realm of consciousness.

Philosophical phenomenology branched out after Husserl's elaboration of a pure phenomenology. In line with his original intention to investigate the *Wesensschau* (intuition of essences), one school attempted to explore the "essences" of the phenomena; for example, Max Scheler (1874-1928) or Adolf Reinach (1883-1917). Another offspring of phenomenology took up the investigation of the *Daseinschau*

(intuition of existence) of the phenomena. Heidegger (1889-1976) with his attempts to rediscover the lost meaning of *True Being*, and Sartre (1905-1980) and the existentialist movement represent this latter group. While Corbin can be said to be among the former, his thought was also nourished by the works of Heidegger and its quest for *Being*.

Corbin owes much to Husserl's method of understanding the phenomena of human experience. For Husserl, the phenomena is the product of the activities and structures of consciousness. However, for Corbin, it goes beyond any individual consciousness; understanding is to seek the "essence" of the different individual religious phenomena. The subjectivity of the individual consciousness, although at the core of Corbin's phenomenology is merely ascribed to an intermediary position and role; i.e., it becomes a stepping stone leading to transcendent truths and principles. What was a quest for a pure transcendental subjectivity for Husserl — that is, an attempt to discover the essential: the objective or absolute² — is replaced by Corbin with universal and prophetic truths. In Corbin's new settings, revelation and the doctrine of the Imâmât have replaced Husserl's transcendental subjectivity as donator of meaning to human activities, and ultimately to science. It is these religious principles which give meaning to human experiences. One of the results of Corbin's interpretation is a reconciliation of a paradoxical position, namely, that prophets and Imâm's have a share, with their distinctive nature, in both the particular and the divine realms. They play a central role in the appearance of religious phenomena.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), an existentialist and a disciple of Husserl, was greatly influenced by the former's phenomenology. Heidegger, however, did not focus on consciousness; rather, he centered his studies on *Being* as the phenomenon underlying all realities. Corbin, the student and translator, was drawn to this central element of Heidegger's thought. Heidegger has attempted to return to a forgotten notion of *Being* (*sein*), as well as to emphasize a Pre-Socratic understanding of the notion (e.g. in Parmenides). *Being* lurks behind the human existence of men, the *Dasein*, the "*Being-there*". Embarking on Heidegger's path, Corbin focused on the problem of *Being*, making it part of his own philosophical quest.

Heidegger made use of a theory of interpretation aimed at divulging the intrinsic and hidden meanings of existence.³ A theory of interpretation was the second element Corbin needed: an hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, as an autonomous discipline, goes back to the Biblical exegesis of eighteenth and nineteenth century theologians such as Luther and Hamann to whom Corbin devoted some studies. In its origin, both Protestant and Lutheran hermeneutics concerned themselves with interpreting the sacred and revealed Books. It was basically a religious exegesis. These theologians, together with the hermeneutic approach of the historical tradition, i.e., with Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) who developed theories of interpretations, inspired Corbin.

Dilthey's hermeneutic principles such as that of *Weltanschauungs* (visions of the world or world views) and *Verstehen* (comprehension), are both elements underlying

our knowledge of reality. Dilthey emphasized the particular modes of investigation applicable to the social sciences (as opposed to those of the natural sciences) which must question our understanding of the events in terms of intentions and meanings. Consequently, he suggested that knowledge was time-bound and context-laden, thus introducing a radical relativism (today, historicism). Reading of history, which Dilthey believed to be a perpetual re-reading, was in need of a theory of hermeneutics of the texts. Like earlier hermeneutists, Corbin had set out to understand the ideas, intentions and feelings of Eastern philosophers and the development of their intellectual history.

Nevertheless, Corbin never became an Heideggerian hermeneutist; he mentions that he went beyond Heidegger's own ontological preoccupations.⁴ His task was to define the religious phenomena; that is, religious facts or religious experiences. In Islamic culture the phenomena are embodied in the works of the revealed texts and their numerous interpretations; they are the phenomena to be understood and comprehended.⁵ Corbin was trying to incorporate in his own phenomenological approach the interpretative methods of hermeneutics, putting an emphasis on the comprehensive, (to "understand") aspect. Naturally, he found the same type of approach in Islamic works of exegesis of the Qur'ân. Corbin was to find both the emphasis on questions pertaining to *Being* and the problems of interpretation of the religious texts in the Iranian Islamic philosophical tradition. His studies of Shihâb (Yahyâ) Suhrawardî (d. 587/1191), the Shaykh al-Ishrâq, introduced him to this new cultural intellectual horizon.

Nineteenth century Holland and Scandinavia also saw the emergence of yet another tradition of importance for the understanding of Corbin's metal. This tradition belonged to the phenomenological tradition (in its broad sense) that owed much to the works of Heidegger. It was greatly influenced by Van der Leeuw and his studies of *Religionswissenschaft*, or *phenomenology of religion*. It sought to apply a method deemed more *objective* to religious beliefs and religious experiences, in its quest for a more rigorous method. In fact, it was a pluri-disciplinary approach that made use of different methods used in historical, psychological, philological, social or political approaches. It sought a more "comprehensive, systematic, disinterested presentation of Islam",⁶ when applied to the field of Islamic studies. Corbin, more critical than others owing to his own philosophical preoccupations, retained only the object of this phenomenology of religion — the religious experience as the religious phenomenon — while rejecting the method it proposed to know that which lies *beyond* these religious experiences.

Anti-Historicism and Anti-Historical

Corbin proposed a phenomenological approach which sought to go beyond the shortcomings he perceived existing in other widely used methods. He always opposed his phenomenology to most other approaches when he dealt with

methodological considerations; historicism being the foremost. He subsumed psychology and phenomenology of religions under the general heading of historicism, using them as examples of positions unable to render the essence of their objects: the religious *phenomena*.

Husserl's attacks on historicism and his emphasis on a non-historicist approach to the study of consciousness find an echo in Corbin's phenomenology. Consciousness, Husserl contended, could not be reduced to material beings, either historical or social.⁷ However, as a *Lebenswelt*, (life-world) Husserl's phenomenology tended to be more descriptive since it was concerned and grounded in human experience.⁸ Nonetheless, Corbin departs from Husserl when he substitutes consciousness with religious facts. Corbin makes religious phenomena irreducible facts or events noting that they escape the grasp of any type of historical approach.

Returning to the approach of phenomenology of religion, we see that it proposes criteria of objectivity. This objectivity is defined in sociological, historical, or other terms. Hence, the method it proposes emphasizes mainly on the exterior or, as Corbin would say, the *exoteric* aspect of ineffable realities, i.e., the realities which are represented by religious facts. Historicist methods rely on such criteria as time, making their analyses chronological or linear, or causal; or they rely on psychological, sociological, political or historical considerations. Causes, tendencies, influences or dating events are all preponderant factors. Corbin blames them for defining reality as primarily empirical. By refusing to take into account the *extra-empirical* origin of religious experiences, such methods are thus, essentially reductionist approaches — a claim which Husserl himself had made earlier.⁹

Corbin's main contention is that historicist methods like phenomenology of religions or psychology are inadequate for grasping the *spiritual phenomena* which lie at the core of human spiritual history. What he advocates is a criticism of all historicist approaches, in other words, an anti-historicist approach. However, Corbin pursues the matter further and refuses any distinction between "history" and "myth", or any distinction which emphasizes, on the one hand, the unreal and, on the other hand, reality. Such distinctions, according to him, only achieve and establish false dichotomies. Consequently, his approach is also anti-historical. His work, then, sets out to be a task of re-acquisition. Corbin tells us that his goal in defining a "historiosophy" which follows the traces of the "spiritual energies" and "superior universes which implant their traces in the world", is to include elements which historicist philosophies of history omit; this is the work his comparative phenomenology intends to achieve.¹⁰ On the whole, Corbin's methodology finds more affinities with philosophical phenomenology and hermeneutics than with *Religionswissenschaft*.

The crux of his stand rests on his own philosophical approach: elements of the *extra-empirical* occurring at a *supra-historical* realm are not subject to the same "norms" as those of the empirical realms.¹¹ Man's intellection posits points on the horizon of a *philosophia perennis*, a realm in which myths cohabit with eternal truths.¹² His whole enterprise of circumscribing a field of "Irano-Islamic" philosophy

is moulded and, perhaps, determined by his own quest for a universal philosophy and for the metaphysics that sustains it.

Corbin's position is therefore anti-historicist. He himself avowedly states that his position is sometimes "against *historicism*". Furthermore, he also puts forward a position which he says could be characterized as a type of "anti-history". His anti-historical position opposes the linear and unidimensionality of most historical approaches. He refuses to make any value judgements established on the basis of historical considerations.¹³ Corbin's justification is well expressed in his accusation of the historical approaches as the roots of a "secularization of the absolute Being [*Esprit*]." When the empirical level of the exoteric history is the element considered as *real*, a reduction of the spiritual to the temporal is operated; a reduction of the sacred to the profane then follows. For Corbin, a confirmation of this secularization is embodied in the growing trends of agnosticism.¹⁴

Spiritual Phenomenology

What were the object and the method of Corbin's phenomenological approach? The object of his investigation was identical with that of the phenomenologists of religion: the religious experience embodied in the religious *phenomena*. These are the spiritual events, or events of the soul, which constitute the *internal life* of those who experience them; they are the "spiritual facts", or phenomena of the "understanding" of those who experience them.¹⁵ Corbin's phenomenology, in line with the original Greek meaning of phenomenon (knowledge of the appearance) was defined as a method which attempted "to Save the Phenomena", that is, it tried "to search for them *where they are found*"; therefore, what was posited as object was that which "lets itself be shown that which has shown itself to whom and by whom they show themselves".¹⁶ For Corbin, the phenomena of religious experiences are not immanent and neither can they be reduced to the historical events of this world: they are transcendent. He refused the historicist's reduction of the metaphysical perceptions of more subtle and invisible worlds, i.e., the world of the soul, to empirical criteria.¹⁷

In order to describe and try to analyse these religious facts, Corbin proposed a method which enables one to seek "internal explanation" by turning away from the exoteric and embarking on the path of the exoteric — since the phenomenologically true, he asserts, does not imply its truth.¹⁸ The speculative is not the theoretical but the esoteric: "the philosophical work is fundamentally hermeneutic."¹⁹ His method, primarily a philosophical phenomenology, relies heavily on an hermeneutics of the texts, and is dominated by a quest for "understanding," as well as a quest to "make understand."²⁰ The hermeneutics it used implied a method for interpreting, or for unveiling the *hidden*. The Islamic tradition itself had faced similar problems of interpretation with its sacred texts. It had also developed its own hermeneutic tradition which, in turn, inspired Corbin in the elaboration of his phenomenology.

The *kashf al-mahjûb*, or the unveiling of the hidden, was to become the foundation of Corbin's interpretative method. It was the hermeneutic approach he discovered in the Iranian Islamic tradition. Comparable to the exegetical exercises of Western theologians, this hermeneutic method is primarily the exegetical practice of Shî'î theologians; more specifically, it is the essential interpretative method of Ismâ'îlî exegesis which plays an important role in certain Sufi traditions, for example, in the works of Najm al-Dîn Kubrâ.²¹ The unveiling of the hidden, as it is embodied in *ta'wîl* (spiritual exegesis), is the method *par excellence* for unveiling the meanings and significance of the *true* reality that lies behind and beyond the revealed words. *Ta'wîl*, as a *spiritual hermeneutics*, literally means to "bring back to" its origin; in other words, to go back to the esoteric and hidden meanings of the sacred texts. This method also allows a greater role to the intellect (reason) to which it gives greater independence. *Ta'wîl*, often opposed to *tafsîr*, or a more literal form of exegesis or interpretation, is mainly concerned with seeking the *bâtin*, or the internal and esoteric meanings of the texts. The spiritual hermeneutics (*ta'wîl*) is usually used along with or to complement *tafsîr* (exegetical commentaries), which is the method primarily concerned with the *zâhir*, the external, the apparent and exoteric.²² Like the two faces of a coin, these two methods of interpretation are regarded as opposites by Corbin. Similar radical oppositions are also defined by Corbin between other pairs of terms such as *sharî'ah/haqqîqah*, *ta'wîl/tanzîl*, *'ilm al-yaqîn/haqq al-yaqîn*, and *nubûwwah/imâmah*.²³

The ontological basis on which rests this spiritual hermeneutics is the existence of an absolute invisible *True* reality, of which signs can be manifested and perceived on the empirical existence of an intermediary world: the *'alam al-mithâl*, or *Mundus Imaginalis* — sometimes called the world of the *barzakh*. The "imaginal world" is found in the works of Ibn 'Arabî (d. 638/1240) and Suhrawardî (d. 587/1191); however, it was with Mullâ Şadrâ Shîrâzî (d. 1050/1640) that it became an elaborated ontological and cosmological concept. The importance of such a fundamental concept for the Irano-Islamic philosophy lies in the fact that it renders possible the reality of the religious phenomena by grounding them in a real world where both the concrete and the "suprasensible" can be perceived.²⁴ Its importance is vital since it guarantees the validity of spiritual experiences and, therefore, the religious experience of man. More generally, it is usually considered a solution to the ongoing dispute between the literalism of the theologians and the excessive use of abstractions of the philosophers. In addition to the sensible and the intelligible, there is the active imaginative faculty, a third dimension ascribed to man. The imaginative faculty belongs to the faculties of the soul: it becomes the intermediate faculty between the faculties of the body and the Spirit (*Espirit*).

Corbin closely follows Iranian Islamic thinkers when he makes imagined religious phenomena present to the individual consciousness just as real as the imagined representations of external sensible phenomena. Consequently, two types of perceptions are acknowledged. One of these perceptions leads to the *zâhir*, or the external

appearances, while the other leads to the *bâtin*, or the internal appearances. However, only the latter leads to the "essence" of things, i.e. to the acquisition of a certitude, since

The Form-image which emerged out of contemplation directed towards the suprasensible and the illumination of the world of *Malakût* [imitates] perfectly the divine matters.²⁵

The intermediary level posited as a threshold to this world of *Malakût* (divine matters) is the *‘alam al-mithâl*, or the "imaginal world." It is a world of the "Forms or Images [in suspension] (*muthul mu‘allaqah*), which exist as autonomous forms of a subtle stage." This "imaginal world", as Corbin calls it, has a threefold function. First, it is by means of this intermediary world that resurrection can take place because it is the locus of "subtle bodies". Second, it is a necessary element of any type of recognition of the authenticity of prophetic visions. And finally, it is the basis on which rests *ta'wil*, or spiritual interpretation, as it is to be found especially among Shî‘î thinkers.²⁶

The human faculty which corresponds to this intermediary level of existence is the imaginative faculty. Corbin circumscribes this faculty, following the writings of Mullâ Şadrâ, and goes on at length to show its function within Islamic thought — especially prophetic vision, prophecy and the Imâmate — in order to account for religious phenomena. He points out that the imaginative faculty is capable of perceptions which are different and distinct from the sensible perceptions of events which take place at the level of the empirical world. The objects of the imaginative faculty are the *bâtin*, or esoteric, meanings of the *True* reality. Perceptions of this *trans-empirical* level, or "suprasensible universes", as Corbin calls them, are perceptions that occur at higher planes; for example, at the "visionary level of *Malakût*".²⁷ This *Mundus Imaginalis* was able to take into account and open the way for the possibility of an ongoing prophetic message to which Imâms — heirs to the Prophet — were to have access.

It is the imaginative conscience and its corresponding imaginative perception of the world, more precisely, the "imaginal world", that is postulated as an additional epistemological locus between the sensible and the intelligible.²⁸ Its place in the thought of Corbin is so important that Christian Jambet has devoted a third of his work on Corbin to the logic of the "imaginal".²⁹ The "imaginal world" is just as much an ontological element of Corbin's own ontology as it is for the Iranian Islamic philosophers and theologians whose thoughts he studied. Indeed, it is fundamental to Corbin's phenomenology and critical approach to other methodologies of religious phenomena, for all such methods must be able to take into account the imaginative conscience, perception and world.

The perceptions of the phenomena at a *trans-empirical* level — whether they may be conceived also as empirical in their own right or not — is presupposed by Corbin's "historiosophy". His historiosophy, he goes on to say, follows the traces of the "spiri-

tual energies" and "superior universes which implant their traces in the world".³⁰ It cannot be studied for its own sake but as the driving force behind history. His elaboration of a trans-empirical plane departs from more prevalent conceptions of objectivity in its attempt to include in the realm of the empirical a greater subjectivity encompassing the individually experienced religious phenomena. Corbin's methodology might be labelled a spiritual phenomenology of spiritual phenomena, perhaps even a spiritual phenomenology in its own right.

Corbin's Methodology Revisited

In the scholarly field of Islamic Studies, Corbin stands out as a scholar endowed with much insight and originality. Nonetheless, he is often criticized; first, for his anti-historicism, second, for his "spiritual hermeneutics", and finally for the integration of some of his own spiritual concerns into the body of his works. Let us look at each of these points in turn.

Corbin's *anti-historicism* is embodied first in his use — or rather, his neglect — of history. This represents his general attitude, although he was undoubtedly aware of the necessity to provide historical data, as is testified by his own editorial work of many Arabic and Persian texts as well as by a few historical studies.³¹ A case in point is his work *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, in which historical discussions are unavoidable; however, he does not always tackle historical problems. For example, although Corbin does mention the tremendous importance that the *Nahj al-Balâghah* book plays in Shî'î thought and does acknowledge the problems surrounding authenticity of some of its parts, nonetheless, he brushes these historical considerations aside. He proposes to approach the text "phenomenologically"; that is, as it is underlined by the "intentions" of its writer or writers for "whoever holds the pen, it is truly the Imâm who speaks".³² The extent of Corbin's willingness to engage in historical discussions is defined in accordance with whatever minimum historical considerations are required to validate his claim regarding religious phenomena.³³

Corbin's anti-historical approach was most certainly commanded by the necessities of his phenomenological approach. As already mentioned, he did not walk on the path of traditional *Religionswissenschaft*, characterized as it is by its pluri-disciplinarity and its emphasis on the presence of certain objective elements.³⁴ Rather, Corbin's anti-historicism led him to neglect to locate the religious phenomena in the original historical context in which they revealed themselves. The motor of history, he believed, was to find its origin beyond the empirical reality at the level of a metahistory, the sole founder of "historical existence".³⁵ What can be witnessed is the elaboration of Corbin's own personal approach; indeed, he has mentioned that his phenomenology is not linked to any particular methodological school.³⁶

Regarding the criticism of Corbin's "spiritual hermeneutics", we begin by noting that Corbin's phenomenology made use of an hermeneutic approach, i.e., the *ta'wîl* method of spiritual interpretation. In order to do justice to religious phenomena,

Corbin made use of an interpretative or hermeneutic method, which requires one to call upon an element of *understanding* in order to describe these phenomena, since "modes of being express themselves in the modes of understanding". The difficulty arises when one tries to define these primary modes of understanding of the modes of *being* (*modi essendi*). The modes of understanding are, according to Corbin, twofold: (a) they are modes of understanding of those who originally experienced these religious *phenomena* but, and this should not be neglected, they are also (b) the modes of those who try to understand the original modes of understanding (a).³⁷

However, Corbin also acknowledges that any mode of understanding "is conditioned by the mode of being of the one who understands"; this is the "hermeneutic perspective" that occurs in any given "hermeneutic situation". Consequently, in both of the above modes of understanding — (a) and (b) — an *hermeneutic perspective* occurs.³⁸ What should not be overlooked is the fact that Corbin, the phenomenologist, belonged to the latter (b) category of individuals. Hence, he could not escape any type of subjective commitment which was necessarily implied by his own hermeneutic perspective. Consequently, he could not, it would seem, avoid reading into his object some of his own philosophical and spiritual conceptions by exerting his "own personal understanding".

This latter point touches on the third criticism of Corbin's approach; namely, that he integrated some of his own spiritual concerns in the body of his works. Corbin's philosophical and spiritual concerns led him to centre mainly on the mystical or gnostic elements that occurred within the Shī'ī tradition, especially among the Ithnā 'Ashariyah, but among the Ishmā'īlī branch as well. The ensuing result was his emphasis on the *ghayb*, or the hidden. This led him to evaluate Islamic philosophy in the light of this emphasis on the mystical and the gnostic and, therefore, to distinguish *Hikmah Ilāhiyah*, (theosophy) from *Kalām* (theology) and *Falsafah* (philosophy) in such a way as to qualify Iranian theosophical thought as the "original" Islamic endeavour. It is "original" in the sense that it was "purely Islamic" and, as such, it represents the "essence" of Islam, since the true "speculative is the esoteric".³⁹ It also led him to venture into the study of parallels that could exist between these ancient gnostic traditions — mostly Christian, but also Greek and old Persian traditions — and latter Islamic thought.

Furthermore, Corbin's focus on the esoteric aspect of Shī'ī Islam in Iran is generally regarded as a selective view of the history of Islam as a whole, as Algar and Adams have already pointed out. It plays down, for example, the importance of nine centuries of religious experience among Sunnī Islam in Iran.⁴⁰ More generally, his neglect of the various facets of Islam, even within the geographical boundaries of Iran, made him overlook and over-shadow the "multiformity" of the Islamic experience.⁴¹ His methodological approach thus permitted him to project a reading in which he can be seen advocating his own spiritual concerns.⁴² His spiritual interests guided him towards the *esoteric* manifestation of Shī'ī Islam, while the *exoteric* remained somewhat neglected. In so doing, he opposed Sunnī "legalist" Islam to Shī'ī

"esoteric" Islam in the same manner in which he opposed "mundane history" to "spiritual history". The interplay of his spiritual concerns and his scholarly work resulted in a picture of the reality of the practiced Islamic religion, from its origins to the present day, which over-emphasizes one aspect of it to the detriment of others.

It can be argued that Corbin's contempt for history was the result of his phenomenological approach; that is, of its anti-historicism as well as its spiritual hermeneutics but, perhaps more importantly, it was also the result of his mystical interests. Such emphases on certain elements mirror the paradoxes to which his own hermeneutic conception led him to since his *phenomenological* interpretations are the result of his methodological approach. His project of letting the *True* reality behind the phenomena speak entirely for itself would not seem to rest entirely on objective criteria. Independently of the possible existence of ineffable realities underlying the religious phenomena, the general problem of interpretation per se still remains unsolved. The multiplicity of interpretations of the sacred texts (or of any text for that matter) and of the symbols it uses is only limited by the realm of the possible types or modes of *understanding* applied to them. Corbin himself mentioned that the spiritual phenomenon "is never decoded once and for all".⁴³ Paradoxically, the consequences of his use of a *spiritual hermeneutics* has led him to create his own vision of Islam as a reflection of his own *understanding*.

Platonic Spiritual Hermeneutics and Spiritual Empathy

On the whole, Corbin's philosophical position is undoubtedly Platonic. This is embodied, for example, in his conception of *ta'wîl*, or spiritual hermeneutics, which he defines as a "spiritual hermeneutics re-driving everything to its archetype (*aşl*)".⁴⁴ The object of this spiritual hermeneutics is the quest for the origins and its founding principles. In some ways, it is similar to the Platonic quest of the archetypes, or Ideas, from which everything originates and of which they are copies. An illustration of this is Corbin's parallel between the conception of the "perfect *Anthropos*", or "celestial *Anthropos*", of pre-Islamic tradition and its Islamic equivalent, the *Insân Kâmil*, or the Perfect Man.⁴⁵ All of these conceptions somehow have their justification in man's quest for an origin lying beyond the realm of man's physical world.

Corbin's quest for the universal requires metaphysical foundations which are irreducible to the concrete and the historical. What Corbin found in the East is not a new intellectual and spiritual tradition. In his quest for "the 'noema' of the Orient" (Jambet's expression), he found a living spiritual tradition, which had affinities with the almost extinct European gnostic tradition he was pursuing.⁴⁶ It is in the works of Iranian philosopher-theologians that he found what he was searching for.

Corbin's own intellectual horizon is essentially metaphysical. His work, a general rejection of immanence in favour of transcendence, requires a transcendental *end* which lies beyond the proposed finality of a growing modern agnostic world. This *end*, or finality, is the one which supersedes the spiritual reality of the Christian

Gnostics, as well as the Muslim. But, it is also by virtue of the pre-eminence of this transcendental finality that he can posit, just as his Islamic predecessors had done, the existence and necessity of the *Mundus Imaginalis*, or imaginal world, i.e., a place where the perceptions of the transcendental truths by the *walīs* (the ones close to God), the *rasūls* (the messengers), and the *nabīs* (the prophets) are brought to existence.

Corbin's transcendental *end* appears to have some affinities with Hegel's vision of history. For the latter, the Absolute only realizes its nature in the history of the world through a dialectical process. It is within the course of history that the activities of Divine reason take place. Likewise, for Corbin, the historical motives and ends of history depend not only on his philosophical presuppositions, but also on his mystical positions which conceive of the cause and the source of the "exoteric" history to be located on the "esoteric" level. It is on this latter level that the *true* history originates, producing an "exoteric" history which is only a facade or reflection of its *true* self.

Corbin advocated, as a new philosophy of history, the project of "historiosophy". To the historicists' views he offered a metaphysics of pluralities: pluralities of levels, beings, times and spaces.⁴⁷ His "historiosophy" is a history of the "theophanies" or "epiphanies" as visionary events. This, he claims, is possible because "historiosophy", which is intrinsically irreconcilable with agnosticism, is the only safeguard against the "secularization of the absolute Spirit".⁴⁸ He recognizes that his position runs counter to prevalent views. For him, as for the Iranian philosopher-theologians, man's imaginative faculty — which enables him to grasp spiritual phenomena — is a "pure psycho-spiritual faculty, independent of the perishable physical organism".⁴⁹ Therefore, what is regarded by historicists as merely "allegorical" or "mythical" becomes part of a more comprehensive reality on the level of a "hierohistory", where the "epiphanies of the Holy Spirit" can be witnessed as existing realities.⁵⁰ His "spiritual hermeneutics" seeks "the [literal spiritual] truth" of the revealed texts.⁵¹

The possibility of conceiving of a "historiosophy" presupposes the possibility of perceiving events at another level than the empirical world. Corbin states that the historiosophy "follows the traces of the spiritual energies and of the superior universes which impress their remnants in our world".⁵² These "spiritual facts", which take place on the level of a "metahistory" and "transpire" in this world can only be perceived by those who possess "this [theophanic perceptions]. The only perception able to grasp a *mazhar*, a theophanic form."⁵³ The novel historical data introduced, and to be contended with belongs to the realm of "epiphanies" and "hierophanies". These are the essential components of the prophetic philosophy Corbin attempts to unveil, for they are essential to his "hierohistory", a history of the manifestation of these phenomena on the "metahistorical" level. His trans-historical "metahistory" embraces such phenomena as allegories, as well as myths (such as the ancient Iranian founding myths), and incorporates them within a comprehensive structure that reaches beyond the sensible level, so as to embrace the suprasensible level, itself consisted of many strata.

Furthermore, Corbin's anti-historicist perspective, in line with his phenomenological approach, centres more on the individual as the locus of an experience that takes place on an "existential level". Therefore, in order to integrate these "existential levels" with the general metaphysical framework, Corbin appeals to the notion of "contemporaneous periods". With this notion of "contemporaneity", his anti-historicist approach is able to take into account the time of occurrence of these religious phenomena, regardless of their location on the mundane, or exoteric history since they also participate in the spiritual, or esoteric, history.⁵⁴

Undoubtedly, Corbin was not a historian of religion in the sense that this discipline has tried to establish itself; that is, as an autonomous and recognized discipline within the social sciences. This was never his claim. It is perhaps excessive to define, as some have done, Corbin's enterprise as a "rarefied and idiosyncratic form of spiritual colonialism",⁵⁵ whether or not his work was the outcome of a conscious impetus that lurked beneath his scholarly work. Then again, perhaps he was the "missionary of a spirituality", the driving force behind his philosophical stands.⁵⁶ Criticism, if it is to be in any way constructive, must lead scholars not only to a better knowledge of their object, but, more important, to a greater awareness of the role that they themselves play in the uncovering and transmitting of this knowledge. The problem of a scholar's commitment, particularly in view of the prevalent discussions about "Orientalism", needs to be highlighted.⁵⁷ In any case, what is important to realize is that Corbin's approach resulted in unfortunate phenomenological distortions of his object, as paradoxes of his methodological approach.

Serious research attempts to analyse and understand the true nature of the reality under study. In this, religious experiences indeed pose certain difficulties. The essence of the reality of religious experience was constantly questioned by Corbin as he struggled to re-define it. In any enterprise of knowledge, the role of the scholar is of great importance; this is even more true in the realm of the social sciences. Not only did Corbin's philosophical and mystical preoccupations guide his analyses and interpretations of the authors he surveyed, (e.g. his emphasis on gnosticism, on the Orient, etc.); reciprocally his own thought was modelled on the thoughts of the authors he was encountering and discovering (e.g. his hierohistory, his metahistory, etc.).

The problem of striking a just balance between the religious, the social and the political elements of any given explanation for both thoughts and social orders is not an easy one. More often than not, there is an overemphasis of one of these two poles. Corbin's approach side-steps a great deal of the social, political and historical components as possible features of his explanations of the development of the Iranian-Islamic thought. Instead, like his teacher Louis Massignon (1883-1962), he believed the East to be the possessor of the spiritual elements the West had lost. For instance, he states that the Iranian spiritual universe is not the "product" of an "Iranian consciousness" or "genius"; but rather, that the Iranian consciousness, as the history of Shi'ism

testifies, "has been called upon to be the *witness* and the *spokesman*" of this spiritual realm.⁵⁸ Corbin, the advocate, characterizes the Iranian mind as having a natural ability to access the realm of the invisible. This should be called, more appropriately, Corbin's Iranianism, for it excessively sides with and emphasizes on the Iranian characterization of the religious experience, both pre-Islamic and Islamic, in its attempt to explain what ought to constitute the "essence" of Islamic religious experience.

In the debate about Orientalism, Corbin could be considered as having purported sometimes too idealistic and empathetic an attitude towards his object. Nevertheless, he relentlessly fought what he considered an invading rationalism and its disastrous effects on the knowledge of any spiritual phenomena. He worked closely with a great many of Iran's modern thinkers, individuals who embodied the living philosophical and theological tradition with which he was infatuated. From the Muslim's perspective — also avid critics of this "Western" tradition — Corbin is a *munṣif*, a fair and equitable scholar who speaks positively of Islam and even praises it.⁵⁹ With his long career, one could rightly say that Corbin was perhaps the best spokesman that Shī'ī Islam had in the West and contributed greatly to a better understanding of it. Has he not even earned a reputation among Iranians themselves? Needless to say, his works have already begun to be published in Persian.

On the whole, Corbin's work is an attempt to understand the internal structures of the thought-systems of the thinkers he studied without having recourse to external structures, i.e. those of sociology, psychology, ethnology, anthropology, etc. This is a work he did with great skill; his thought, at times, espousing his object. The central problem of his methodological approach is the very nature of these religious facts, and the fact that beliefs — by virtue of their nature — seem to escape the realm of empiricity. Perhaps the more inclusive type of approaches are still the ones which remain the more explicative. Proposing a phenomenological method for these religious phenomena remains an open arena.

NOTES

1. The completion of this paper in its present form could not have been possible without the valuable remarks about a previous version made by Herman Landolt.
2. Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement. A Historical Introduction* (1960), 3rd. ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), p. 688.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 383-401. He conceived his theory of interpretation as a more essential and basic phenomenology; it was an hermeneutic phenomenology (p. 417 n. 81). He referred to the interpretations of "non-symbolic facts of the real world, to human being or *Dasein* (. . .) determined by the 'things themselves'" (p. 384), and to "be defined as a method of bringing out the normally hidden purposes of such goal-determined beings as man" (p. 385).
4. Daryush Shayegan, Henry Corbin, *La topographie spirituelle de l'Islam iranien* (Paris: La Différence, 1990), p. 41.

5. Richard C. Martin, "Islam and Religious Studies. An Introductory Essay" in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), p. 8.
6. Charles L. Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henri Corbin" in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin, p. 137.
7. Psychologism, for Husserl, stood for the view that "psychology was both the necessary and the sufficient foundation of logic" and it implied a "sceptical relativism"; see Spiegelberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-7. Historicism, he contended, leads to the contemporary relativisms; *ibid.*, pp. 110, 395. Interestingly enough, Heidegger was interested in what might be called the "historicality" of Being itself; see *ibid.*, p. 396. Corbin's aversion for psychologisms rests on the same analysis of psychologism which, he foresaw, undermines and threatens theology and the religious experience.
8. For Husserl, the *Lebenswelt* is "the world as experienced by a living subject in a particular perspective, however distorted, hence clearly a subjective and relative affair"; *ibid.*, p. 146.
9. See note 7; Henry Corbin, "Comment concevoir la philosophie comparée?" chap. in *Idem., Philosophie iranienne et philosophies comparée* (henceforth *Philosophies comparée*; Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1985), pp. 22, 29; Henry Corbin, "Herméneutique spirituelle comparée (I. Swedenborg - II. Gnose ismaélienne)" chap. in *Idem., Face de Dieu, face de l'homme. Herméneutique et soufisme* (henceforth *Face de Dieu*; Paris: Flammarion, 1983), p. 159.
10. Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (henceforth *Histoire*), vol. I, *Des origines jusqu'à la mort d'Averroès* - 1964; vol. II, *Depuis la mort d'Averroès jusqu'à nos jours* - 1974 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 359-60.
11. Corbin, *Philosophie comparée*, pp. 29-31
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-1, 15.
13. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols., Tome I, *Le Shi'isme duodécimain*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), vol. I, p. xvi.
14. Corbin, *Histoire*, pp. 30, 359; Corbin, *Philosophie comparée*, p. 132.
15. Corbin, *Face de Dieu*, pp. 46-7.
16. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, p. xix; *Idem.*, *La philosophie iranienne islamique aux xvii et xviii siècles*, (henceforth *La Philosophie Iranienne*; Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1981), p. 25; *ibid.*, *Philosophie comparée*, p. 23 (Corbin's italics).
17. Corbin, *Philosophie comparée*, p. 31.
18. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, p. xix; *Idem.*, *Philosophie comparée*, p. xvi.
19. Corbin, *Histoire*, p. 355.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 34
21. *Ibid.*, p. 410.
22. Gilbert Durand, "Images and Imagination" (trans. Sally Gran) in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1986), vol. VII, pp. 111b-112a.
23. Corbin, *Histoire*, pp. 36, 356.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 297-8; see also pp. 261, 475.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 92; *idem*, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, p. 78.
28. Corbin, *Histoire*, p. 92.
29. Christian Jambet, *La logique des Orientaux, Henry Corbin et la science des formes* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).
30. Corbin, *Histoire*, p. 359.
31. For the former, see Corbin, *La philosophie iranienne*, p. 25; *idem*, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, p. xvi. For the latter, see Corbin "De la gnose antique à la gnose ismaélienne," in *idem*, *Temps cyclique et gnose ismaélienne* (Paris: Berg International, 1982), pp. 167-208.
32. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, p. 173; *idem*, *Histoire*, pp. 62, 64-5.
33. On the fringe of what some have called his "ahistorical" approach, some authors, such as Christian Jambet, have tried to demonstrate that Corbin's work proposes a new historical approach, i.e., a historicity that not only takes into account the religious phenomena, but establishes them as the foundation of history on the empirical level. See Jambet, *op. cit.*
34. For example, advocating historical, philosophical and systematic analyses of the religious phenomena; see Adams, *art. cit.*, p. 130.
35. Jambet, *La logique des Orientaux*, p. 17.
36. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, p. xix.
37. *Idem*, *Face de Dieu*, p. 46.
38. Jambet has compared Corbin's "hermeneutic situation" to a "gnostic situation"; see *op. cit.*, p. 17.
39. Corbin, *Histoire*, pp. 26-7, 360.
40. Hamid Algar, "The Study of Islam: The Work of Henry Corbin" in *Religious Studies Review*, 6 (1980), p. 89b; Corbin, *Histoire*, p. 362.
41. Adams, *art. cit.*, p. 140.
42. Algar, *art. cit.*, pp. 87a, 90b; Adams, *art. cit.*, p. 142.
43. Corbin, *Histoire*, p. 36.
44. *Idem.*, *Face de Dieu*, p. 43.
45. *Idem.*, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, pp. 96, 251-4, 268f.
46. Jambet, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
48. Corbin, *Histoire*, p. 359.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 351-2.

55. Algar, *art. cit.*, p. 91a.
56. Adams, *art. cit.*, p. 142.
57. J. D. J. Waardenburg, "Mustashrikun" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd. ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), vol. VIII, pp. 736a-754b.
58. Corbin, *La philosophie iranienne*, p. 12.
59. Waardenburg, *art. cit.*, p. 747b.