

# An Introductory Comparative Study on the Role of Corbin and Izutsu in the Philosophy of Contemporary ‘Iranian Islam’: Analyzing Its Motives and Resources from Heidegger to Massignon

Ehsan SHARIATI

Henry Corbin was among those spiritual philosophers of the contemporary world who deserve novel and serious investigations, particularly in the realm of comparative<sup>1</sup> philosophy (and mysticism) with a phenomenological-hermeneutic vein serving as a connective bridge between the contemporary western philosophy (in the continental Europe) and the oriental philosophy (in Iran and in the Islamic world- and in particular, Shiism). This French philosopher was on the one hand, an expert in German philosophical language and translated for the first time two works by Martin Heidegger into French, while on the other hand, and at the same time, as a pupil of the eminent historian of the Middle Ages, Etienne Gilson, and of the protestant theologian, Jean Baruzi, and eventually under the guidance of Louis Massignon (as of 1928 onwards), turned to the spiritual philosophy, mysticism and Sufism in the Islamic World and the Shiism. After an initial fascination with Ibn Arabi, he particularly undertook a re-reading of the works of Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (m. 1191 AC) and his *Hikmat Al-Ishraq* (*Theosophia Matutina* or the Oriental Theosophy). He later set out to systematically introduce worldwide other-less known- Iranian Shiite theosophers such as Mirdamad, as well as Mulla

Sadra and his *Hikmat Motaalyiah* (the Supreme Theosophy). In escaping from his 'occidental exile', Corbin sought the Orient (in the sense intended by Suhrawardi) and discovered it in the center point and the standard-bearer land of Pars (or Iran) as a sort of 'idea' (Image). The advent and the works of Corbin in Iran influenced a generation of Iranian philosophical intellectuals brought up in the Islamic culture, especially in the sense of boosting their self-confidence by recognizing them (e.g. such figures as Ahmad Fardid, Daryoush Shayegan, Reza Davari, etc.) He also influenced other figures of common perspectives worldwide. In France, he presented the Iranian Islamic tradition of philosophy and mysticism, and his works attracted even such neo-philosophers as Christian Jambet. Toshihiko Izutsu was a prominent philosophical figure and Islamologue in Japan and worldwide who apparently under the influence of Corbin turned to the study of comparative philosophy and comparing the intellectual heritage of Ibn Arabi with the Taoist teachings. The collection of his researches on Iran and the Islamic world has been the subject of serious attention (and still-ongoing criticism and study).

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The most significant lesson Corbin learned from Heidegger was that the existence of *Dasein* is shaped by the *Dasein*'s ongoing understanding (interpretation) of himself. As Heidegger points out in *the dialogue with a Japanese friend (Dialogue on Language*<sup>2</sup>) about his past intellectual progress, he had been long familiar with Dilthey's reading of the concept of 'hermeneutics' through his early theological studies in his youth. Heidegger's intention is to open a realm wherein revelation in *Logos* becomes possible<sup>3</sup>. However; unlike Heidegger, Corbin applied this hermeneutic key or interpretation method for other purposes which differed from the deeply finitude-oriented worldview of the master of Freiburg in line with ex-istence and horizontal transcendence. Corbin applied this hermeneutic key to open another world known as the world of 'ideas' (the world of 'images, land of no-where, Malakout, Horquelia or Suhrawardi's 'eighth climate'<sup>4</sup>) which is not necessarily death-directed but rather, is on the other side of or 'beyond' death. In Corbin's view, the realm of *Malakut* (the world of angels) which is located in between the realms of *Nassut*

(nature, or sense perception of empirical data) and *Jabarut* (the world of reasons or the categories of heavenly pure reasons) is the bridging sphere of human soul or 'psyche'; it is the field of 'active imagination' which connects the other two spheres by its two-way movement. Corbin's phenomenology, in order to respond to the irresolvable questions of Heidegger's thought, and in its methodologically hermeneutic tour, relies on 'spiritual interpretation' or referral of the exoteric to the esoteric, the unveiling of the hidden (equal to Heidegger's *Entdecktheit*, and Shiite theosophers' reception of truth as the 'unveiled'<sup>5</sup> (*kashf al-mahjûb, a-letheia*)).

The attraction of Heidegger's thought (after Henri Bergson and his theory of Duration or *durée*) was- in addition to his discussion of thought and 'language'- due to his presentation of novel conception of 'time'. Heidegger pictured time as an integral whole originated in the future, and at the same time, as the way of resumption of the past tradition (in the service of the future), which was quite innovative. In Heidegger's terms, evolvments in historical eras lacked any necessary logical and pre-structured chain of progress, as versus the Hegel's idea of linear progression. Apparently, this notion of time and history resembled the Islamic understanding of the concept of time in one aspect. Massignon has described the Quranic conception of 'time and space' as a milky way of 'instants' and 'points'<sup>6</sup>.

Corbin, under the influence of Heidegger's critique of Hegelian philosophy of history, revived the archaic French term 'historial' to mark the difference with the term 'historique' in order to distinguish between the two notions of the 'empirically historical' (the ontic conception) and 'history as destiny' or *geschichtlich* (the ontological conception). He turned the Heideggerian realm of historicity and horizontal transcendence to a kind of vertically ascending and spiritual-divine 'metaphysics' (though not 'metaphysics' as intended in the negative sense by Heidegger).

The radical criticism of modern subjectivity by Heidegger paved the way for restoration of the dignity and revival of expectations from the art (poetry) for the purpose of resuming the tradition and even preparing for the return of the divine, as well as for meditative thought as paving the

ground for the advent of the future God. The hidden sources of this thinking, rather than originating in the Christian mysticism (Eckhart, etc.), had its roots more deeply in persistent perusal of the texts and translations of the oriental wisdom of the Taoist tradition<sup>7</sup>. However; despite his belief in serious dialogue with theologians, particularly those of Kierkegaardian inclinations, and in spite of his acquaintance with the thoughts of such figures as Karl Barth (d. 1968) and his impacts on the thoughts of figures like Rudolf Bultmann, he did not tolerate 'theological' reading of his works (for instance, efforts to build a Christian philosophy with a neo-Thomist approach as undertaken by Gilson) and considered it incompatible with the radical questioning of philosophy which he regarded as being methodologically atheistic. Even his quasi-mystic tendencies or his attention to the 'sacred' (*heilige*) in particular in the fields of art and poetry cannot qualify as a 'religious' or 'theological' mysticism (though on the other hand, his thought cannot be considered non-theological or atheistic in the sense that the works of Sartre can be so described). It so appears that similar to Wittgenstein in this sphere, Heidegger believed that 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. This type of agnostic skepticism, though limited to the methodology of philosophizing, apparently could not quench the spiritual thirst in Corbin. By learning from Gilson's knowledge of the history of Islamic and Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages, he had been influenced by the passion of a figure like Massignon, who followed the transfiguring Hallaj-wise path towards the live deity in an existential manner and in the lived experience, while treading on the footsteps of Salman Parsi after an heartfelt method of thinking ('thinking by the heart' to use the Quranic term).

By seeking shelter in Massignon's thought, he adopted an overall approach toward esoterism or the spirituality and mysticism (Sufism) of the Iranian Islam (Refer to this conception in the title of the treatise '*Salman Parsi: the First Spiritual Blossoms of the Iranian Islam*'-1934). The name of Salman-e-Pak (and his spiritual development path from Mazdaism through Christianity and towards Islam and Shiism) typically represents such an approach and direction toward the Iranian and Islamic spirituality and mysticism.

However; the master and the pupil disagreed in certain respects<sup>8</sup>:

- First, Massignon's approach to the Islamic world always incorporated two aspects of the religious-mystic and the socio-historical, whereas Corbin was in search for a meta-historical sphere for establishing dialogue with other spiritual traditions worldwide, eventually leading to the differences between these two figures in holding two distinctive types of relationship between mysticism and social commitment;
- The second difference between the two figures lies in their respective sensitivities in assessment and criticism of the strong points and the weak points in the Iranian Shiism;
- And the third difference is in their evaluation of Ibn Arabi's intellectual heritage, and in particular, the doctrine of the unity of being.

Massignon suspected the late theoretical (or being-based) mysticism, as compared to the early intuitional mysticism, to have been intermingled with the Christianized version of the neo-Platonic philosophy<sup>9</sup> (i.e. the doctrine of emanation), which threatened to metamorphosize the intuitional-psychical 'passion' into a sort of categorical-mental thought of Greek nature (*Logos*)- without benefitting from- in Nietzschean terms- the natural gay character of the Greek in skepticism and suspension of natural intellectual-critical theorizing in various fields- from cosmology through ethical philosophy and politics).

On the one hand, Massignon described the doctrine of the unity of being as some form of existential monism of pantheistic nature which is not technically identical to monotheism in the sense of the unity of the multifarious, while on the other hand, he believed that the over-density of the intellectual-theoretical approach in the sphere of mysticism would deprive the religious concepts- in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term- of their tragic-paradoxical profundity.

Last, not only Massignon did not stand in good terms with the Sufistic seclusion from the world and evasion of the society, but rather, he saw in the sense of social responsibility towards the people and the creation an equivalent of one's faith and love of the divine. However; as a result of his

philosophical taste and upbringing, he welcomed the theoretical (and Platonic) aspect of Ibn Arabi's mystical heritage, especially his theorizing on active imagination. He regarded the unity of being identical with esoteric monotheism (*There is nothing in being but Allah*), as versus exoteric monotheism (*There is no God but Allah*)<sup>10</sup>, and did not accept the monistic charge. Corbin avoided any reduction of the divine and cyclical history to sociological historicism and showed no apparent interest in political matters.

In Abrahamic religions, the concept of a 'personified (and moral) God' has been relied upon figuratively to establish a dialogical relationship with man. In the words of Iqbal Lahouri: *'the anthropomorphic conception of God is inevitable for understanding of life... this typical representation of the ideal person is one the most fundamental elements of the Quranic conception of God...'*<sup>11</sup>

But in Corbin's view, the exoteric form of monotheism is paradoxically susceptible to the danger of falling into two potential abysses: on the one hand, there is the risk of 'assimilation' (incarnate anthropomorphism such as the dogma of incarnation in Christianity); and on the other hand, it is faced with the threat of 'abstention' (abstract agnosticism)<sup>12</sup>. Esoteric monotheism treads on the thin line between these two abysses of heresy.

Establishment of a dialogical relationship between the Islamic (theoretical) mystical conception of a personified and intimate God and the ontological divine reality of the oriental wisdoms- of the Taoist and the Buddhist traditions- may contribute to purification of the anthropomorphic conceptions of the deity (which are regrettably prevalent nowadays in the lands and among the sons of Abraham) by adopting some form of *theologia sive via negationis* (negative theology). On the other hand, one can introduce the spiritual-mystic experience of the Islamic world and Iran in bringing together the various transcendent spheres of being among people to the culture and spirituality of the far east by taking inspiration from the approach adopted by the late Izutsu and thus shed light on certain possible unconscious defaults in this realm of civilization.

In the face of the principle or dogma of incarnation in Christianity, the Christian mystics sought to extend the conception of God to the cosmic

divine entity by relying on negative theology. In contrast, the Islamic mystics endeavored to emphasize the personified figures and attributes of God as described in Quran against the principle of the absolute abstraction and unity of the Islamic deity.

On the other hand, the ontological and non-anthropomorphic mysticism of the Far East (as especially crystallized in Taoism) apparently has some conformity with the Eckhartian negative theology, Heideggerian ontology and the (supreme) unity of being in Ibn Arabi. In his book 'Sufism and Taoism', Professor Izutsu speaks of the possible conformities and comparisons between the ontological mysticism of the Far East and Ibn Arabi's thought.

At any rate, our world today more than ever is in need of certain serenity (Gelassenheit), and in this global spiritual dialogue, the oriental wisdoms can afford thought-provoking reflections for the use of the 'last man' (the mediocre man). However, as late Izutsu points out, the precondition for such a dialogue is to have a common linguistic basis<sup>13</sup>. The destination of this type of dialogue and esoteric dialogical communication is the (philosophical) Orient and its common language in oriental semiology of the synchronized structure in the tripartite articulation theory of Izutsu (which is the focal point of his thought): 1- The world of essences (senses and natures) which are distinct and based on the principles of identity and non-contradiction; 2- Complete absence of structural articulation or 'negation' of the acquired knowledge through religious and mystical meditation and practice as well as deconstruction of the world and the first encounter of the conscience with the world; 3- by departing from this zero point of consciousness, revival of a new form of articulation and attainment of an unmediated self-articulation of 'non-being', the mystical divine, or the One. At this stage, everything comes up blinking and inter-permeates flexibly and transparently. At the second stage, by further deepening the experience, a creative and magical form of language starts speaking out whose semantic energy had previously been hidden in the 'non-articulation of the absolute'.

Aligning with Corbin, Izutsu call this deep sphere of consciousness and being (essence) the 'Orient' and undertakes to analyze the various oriental

traditions such as Taoism, ‘vacuum of phenomena’ in Buddhism, Brahma, the ‘divine names’ in Sufism, Sepherots in Jewish Kabbalah, etc. and evaluates them in the lights of the works of such contemporary figures as Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, and Derrida.

Derrida’s Archi-Writing or Archi-Trace is equal to Izutsu’s deconstructive articulation of the second stage, after the deconstruction of the first-stage articulation. At this stage, the language starts eschatological ‘dissemination’ through ‘non-articulation of the absolute’<sup>14</sup>, in the same way that Derrida changes the spelling of the term *différance* to *diffèrAnce* by turning ‘e’ to ‘a’ so that it turns into a motive and active noun denoting both the differentiating and the delaying functions of the language.

Such comparative searches for synonyms which may be prone to faults in some occasions were among the characteristic features of Corbin’s and Izutsu’s critical method wherein, in order to avoid syncretism, each concept can be understood only in its respective system by applying the method of appropriateness, though in this way, comparison among different thought systems also becomes possible.

As the concluding remark, it should be pointed out that if the common esoteric and spiritual direction of all Orientals of the world from any civilization and religion be identical, it would not be inappropriate to quote- in tribute to both Corbin and Izutsu- Corbin’s famous motto:

## “Orientals of the World, Unite!”

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the ‘comparative methodology’ science P.Masson-Oursel, see H.CORBIN, «*Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée*», Téhéran: Académie de Philosophie, 1976 , trad.pers., S. J.Tabatabai, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> GA12, 91

<sup>3</sup> P.Arjakovsky, F.Fédier, H.France-Lanord, *Le Dictionnaire M.Heidegger*, art. «*Herméneutique*», Paris: Cerf, 2013, p.60 ¶; + GREISCH, J., «*Ontologie et temporalité* », Paris :PUF, 1994



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<sup>4</sup> See the old notion of seven geographic climates where the world is divided into seven equal circles.

<sup>5</sup> See Fadai Mehrabani, M., "Istâdan dar ân Suye marg" (stand beyond death, responses of H. Corbin to Heidegger in perspective of the Shiite philosophy), Tehran: Ney, 2012

<sup>6</sup> « Pour l'Islam, qui est occasionnaliste, et ne saisit la causalité divine que dans son « efficience » actuelle, seul existe l'instant, hîn (Q. 21, III ;...), ân (Q. 16, 22), clin d'œil » (Q. 16, 79 : lamh al-basar)... » ; « le temps n'est donc pas une « durée » continu, mais une constellation une « voie lactée » d'instant (de même que l'espace n'existe pas, il n'y a que des points). » ; L.MASSIGNON, « Le temps dans la pensée islamique » (Eranos, XX, 1952, pp.141-148), in *Opera Minora de L.M.*, tome II, 1963, p. 606

Voir aussi: IQBAL, Muhammad, *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*, London: Oxford UP, 1934, rep. A.P.P., 1986, pp. 73 sq. (III.The Conception of God).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Reinhard May, „*Ex oriente lux: Heideggers Werk unter ostasiatischem Einfluss*“, Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden; Eng. Trans. Parkes, Graham, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, Routledge, 1996 ; voir aussi LÖWITH, Karl, «*Remarques sur la différence entre Orient et Occident*», in Rev. «Le philosophe», Labo. de philo., N°41 (printemps 2014), Paris: Vrin, pp. 181-127

<sup>8</sup> JAMBET, Ch., «*Le soufisme entre L.Massignon et H.Corbin* », in «*Le Caché et l'Apparent*», Paris l'Herne, 2003, p. 145 sq. ; + *Opera Minora de L.M.*, tome II, 1963, *Mystique musulmane et mystique chrétienne au Moyen Age*, pp.480 sq. (Monisme testimonial/Monisme existentiel)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, t. II, 1963, p.481

<sup>10</sup> Corbin, H., *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, Paris: l'Herne, 1981, pp. 14, 19

<sup>11</sup> IQBAL, M., *ibid.*, pp.59, 63

<sup>12</sup> Corbin, 1981, *ibid.*, p. 101, *De la nécessité de l'angéologie*

<sup>13</sup> « ...I started this study prompted by the conviction that what Professor Henry CORBIN calls '*un dialogue dans la métahistoire*' is something urgently needed in the present world situation. For at no time in the history of humanity has the need for mutual understanding among the nations of the world been more keenly felt than in our days. 'Mutual understanding' may be realizable - or at least conceivable - at a number of different levels of life. The philosophical level is one of the most important of them... These considerations would seem to lead us to a very important methodological problem regarding the possibility of meta-historical dialogues. The problem concerns the need of a common linguistic system. This is only natural because the very concept of 'dialogue' presupposes the existence of a common language between two interlocutors...» T. IZUTSU, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983, pp.469, 471

<sup>14</sup> Cf. M.Dalissier, S.Nagai, Y.Sugimura, « *Philosophie japonaise, Le néant, le monde et le corps* », Paris : Vrin, 2013, p.362-364