

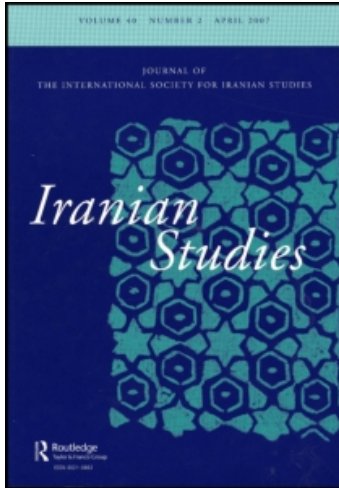
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### History and Religion: The Fallacy of Metaphysical Questions (A Review Article)

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*Maria E. Subtelny*

## **History and Religion: The Fallacy of Metaphysical Questions (A Review Article)**

Steven M. Wasserstrom. *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. 368 + xii pp. ISBN 0-691-00539-7 (cloth), 0-691-00540-0 (paper).

IF THIS BOOK HAS A HERO, IT IS GERSHOM SCHOLEM, THE GREAT GERMAN-ISRAELI scholar of Jewish mysticism. And if it has a villain, it is Henry Corbin, the great French scholar of Islamic mysticism and Persian esotericism. For this reason alone it will be of interest to readers of *Iranian Studies*, and not just to those interested in religion, but to historians as well.

The book chronicles the activities and interaction of three seminal thinkers in the field of religion—Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin—who lectured in the circle of Eranos scholars in Ascona, Switzerland, between the end of World War II and the late 1970s. It discusses their approaches to the study of religion by focusing on the role each accorded to mysticism and myth in the monotheistic traditions they studied, and it does so in the context of European philosophical and intellectual currents that may have exerted an influence on their thought. It also presents a model, or rather a counter-model, for the scholarly study of religion in the wake of their formidable legacies.

The book has caused something of a stir among professional scholars of religion—or as the author, Steven M. Wasserstrom, prefers to call it, the history of religions—and it has been accompanied by what appears to be a collective *crise de conscience* in the field. It has even been the object of a panel discussion at an annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the papers from which were published in the Academy's *Journal* (69:2, 2001), with a response from the author. As usual, it has taken longer to percolate down to the field of Islamic studies, not to mention Persian studies, but *mieux vaut tard que jamais*, as there is much in this book that touches on both of these fields, and that scholars working in them should be cognizant of. Moreover, while Wasserstrom's treatment of Scholem and Eliade has been subjected to critical reviews, there has to date been no specific response to his treatment of Corbin. Given Corbin's contributions to the field of Perso-Islamic thought and philosophy, this journal is an

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appropriate venue for an examination of the way in which he has been perceived by a specialist in the field of religion.

This review does not pretend to cover all aspects of the book. It cannot do justice to Wasserstrom's assessment of the work of all three scholars, nor to the impressive scope and complexity of the secondary literature he cites on the topics of religion, myth, and symbol, which constituted the philosophical background to their ideas. Rather, it will limit itself to the central theme of the book, which is an ardent appeal by the author for a historical approach to the study of religion ("The history of religions, I conclude, must end up being a historical study or it may be no study at all" [238]), and it will examine Wasserstrom's application of such an approach in his assessment of the *oeuvre* of Henry Corbin.

In his presentation, Wasserstrom pits the scholarly method of Gershom Scholem, whom he calls "the epitome of the working historian" (244), who "championed historical research and the historical method" (159), and who employed the "enlightenment of reason" (245), against the approach of Corbin, who is described as "anti-historicist" (159), as an "overtly mystifying esoterist" (13), and "a dazzling master" (149) of the literature of Western Occultism: "It is my conviction that [Corbin] may have been the most sophisticated and learned esoterist of the century" (172). Wasserstrom decries the influence Corbin's work has exerted, and he presumes to speak for his readers when he makes such pedagogically proprietary statements as, "Corbin was an apostle to the classroom. . . a prophet who sought disciples among *our* students and received plenty of them" (154, italics mine). Wasserstrom himself admits that his presentation is asymmetrical (13), and phrases like "Scholem alone" and "only Scholem" recur like a leitmotif throughout the book (25, 102, 166, 190–91, etc.) which ends, predictably, with a kabbalistic cadence. In fact, one is left with the impression that, in Wasserstrom's hands, Corbin (and to a lesser extent, Eliade) is nothing more than a foil for Scholem.

Wasserstrom is relentless and unsparing in his critique of Corbin, whose work he says was "suffused with metaphorical violence," and whom he depicts as a "blatantly aggressive" advocate of esotericism (18). He calls Corbin a "committed cold warrior" (176), who "declared eschatological war on history" (180). Again presuming to speak for his audience, Wasserstrom states that "*he* declared war on *us*" (156, italics in original). Corbin's scholarship is denigrated as a "kind of esoteric science complemented by the acceptable apparatus of footnotes" (172), and Corbin himself is described with undisguised contempt as "an amphibian professor, publicly holding a professorship at the Sorbonne while conducting a private war on reason" (154). But this is not the half of it, as Wasserstrom charges that Corbin's "otherworldly bellicosity" hid a political motive, and that it only served to mask the related war he waged on "modernity" (156).

The unambiguously polemical tone adopted by the author in this book belongs to the category of historians' fallacies known as substantive distraction, and it is inappropriate in any scholarly publication, let alone one that advocates the application of historical method.<sup>1</sup> At times strident, at others insinuating, the tone discredits what might otherwise have been a valuable contribution to the history of the study of religion. But

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1. For this and other historians' fallacies discussed in this review, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, 1970; many reprint editions).

every polemic testifies to the potency of what is being polemicized against, and Corbin's influence on the study of mysticism, not only Islamic but also Jewish, was profound and transforming. Unfortunately, Wasserstrom gives short shrift to such seminal ideas of Corbin's as the concept of the imaginal (*mundus imaginalis*) (148), which, not surprisingly given Corbin's influence on Scholem (notwithstanding Wasserstrom's assertions to the contrary), was adopted wholesale by Scholem's most prominent successors in the field of Kabbalah. And he devotes only one sentence to his views on angelology, even though he concedes that, "Here more than anywhere else . . . Corbin's brilliant insights and far-reaching vision produced a valuable result" (148). Instead, Wasserstrom focuses on the idea of "prophetic philosophy" and on what he calls the "theory of hidden authority," and in his presentation of these ideas as they were interpreted by Corbin, he exhibits many of the classic fallacies known to all students of history. The result is an unbalanced and methodologically flawed critique of Corbin and his scholarship, which ultimately undermines the central thesis of the book.

From the outset, we run into a methodological problem related to question-framing, as Wasserstrom states that he is assessing Corbin's scholarship in historical terms. However, Corbin stated unequivocally on innumerable occasions that he was not a historian, but a phenomenologist, and that the ideas of the medieval Islamic theosophists he was interpreting were not to be construed as history, that they were in fact ahistorical. Corbin was not interested in historical truth ("ce qui est historiquement vrai"), but rather in what was phenomenologically true ("ce qui est phénoménologiquement vrai"), in what he called the "religious fact" ("le fait religieux").<sup>2</sup> His history was hierohistory: "Non pas l'Histoire officielle de l'humanité, mais son histoire secrète et divine."<sup>3</sup> He understood that what he was treating could not be subjected to objective historical analysis: "On n'entre pas dans l'Histoire, on ne devient pas une puissance historique et on ne fait pas de l'histoire avec des théophanies et des visions d'Ange . . ."<sup>4</sup>

Since the first task of a historian is to evaluate his sources on their own terms, and not to impose a framework that those sources cannot support, much of the argumentation that flows from the methodological assumptions made by Wasserstrom must necessarily also be flawed. The same sort of *a priori* assumptions are applied by Wasserstrom to Corbin's *History of Islamic Philosophy*. In his assessment of this work, Wasserstrom actually goes so far as to count the number of pages that Corbin devoted in it to the Qur'an, to Sunni theology (*kalam*), etc., in order to demonstrate that "less than one-eighth of the whole" is devoted to what "statistically, makes up the bulk of Islamic religious thought" (174). However, the topic of the book, as clearly stated in its title, was not "religious thought," but Islamic philosophy. Does Wasserstrom then expect a book on Qur'anic exegesis or Islamic law to include a discussion of philosophy, or what is even more unlikely, of theosophy?

Wasserstrom claims to have uncovered the source of inspiration for Corbin's interpretation of the works of medieval Muslim mystical thinkers in Christian Kabbalah,

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2. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1971), 1: xix (italics in original).

3. Henry Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris, 1981), 43.

4. Corbin, *Le paradoxe*, 124: "One does not enter into history writ large, become a historical force, or make history with theophanies and visions of angels. . . ."

which he maintains constituted the “heretofore unremarked [intellectual] context” for the study of religion as conceived by all three scholars under discussion (49). This is the “untold story,” the “secret history” that he purports to tell in the book. It seems to me that, while he was certainly aware of their writings, Corbin hardly needed to take a cue from the Christian Kabbalists when he had direct and unmediated access to the works of the greatest of the medieval mystagogues in his chosen field—Ibn ‘Arabi and Suhrawardi, Ruzbihan Baqli and Abu Ya‘qub Sijistani, Rajab Bursi and Mulla Sadra, among others. So exactly what Wasserstrom is unmasking here remains rather opaque.

What is clear, however, is that in his attempt to “unmask” what he calls Corbin’s “incognito” (156), he has succumbed to the infamous furtive fallacy, which although not quite a conspiracy theory, nevertheless holds that things are never quite what they appear to be. Corbin is variously depicted as claiming to be a prophet, as belonging to a militant secret order, of blending an “Aryan” totalitarian tendency with the occult, of being anti-democratic, anti-Western, anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic, as rejecting monotheism, and what is perhaps most serious from our particular perspective, as misrepresenting Islam. In short, we have here a polemical work that does not deserve to be called objective scholarship, and that is seriously flawed in terms of historical method.

Wasserstrom criticizes what he refers to as Corbin’s “esoteric” style of writing, which “*in plain language*” he calls “*a form of lying*” (154, italics in original). It would appear, then, that it is not merely the substance of Corbin’s ideas that Wasserstrom takes issue with, but chiefly the form in which they were presented. To be sure, Corbin’s French was highly literary and his writing style dense and often challenging. But his prose did have an aspect that may appear “esoteric” to some—and that was its poetic gesture. Wasserstrom gets it right when he grudgingly concedes that Corbin seems to have been one of those scholars who were “*poetically accurate inheritors of indigenous and other esoteric interpretations*” (240, italics mine). While this appears to be precisely what he finds so objectionable, he nevertheless claims to be able to replicate it himself when, striking a pretentious note, he declares, “Even in our critique. . . we may still perform this poetics, if only in a different key” (111). Unfortunately, Wasserstrom’s “poetics” consists mainly of copious citations from the poetic words of others, Corbin’s included, and his writing style often lacks the clarity that he himself argues for, as in the following representative sample: “*Coincidentia oppositorum*, as it turns out, leads historical inquiry into certain impulses constitutive of their historical moment” (67).

Let us begin with an examination of Corbin’s alleged “militancy” and membership in a “secret militant order” (16). In what appears to be a case of the fallacy of misplaced literalism, Wasserstrom infers from Corbin’s references to the “Fedeli d’Amore,” that he must have been a member of a clandestine group “of some sort, probably Martinist” (212). Even while conceding that, “the historicity [of this group] is impossible to ascertain” (16), Wasserstrom insists that Corbin “anticipated, called for, even demanded, the reconstitution of a hidden order, a chivalric order,” one that even presumed “political action, though of an entirely cryptic kind” (150). Cryptic indeed, as no evidence is presented to substantiate the existence of such a group, let alone Corbin’s membership in it. The fact is, not only were the Fedeli d’Amore not a real or even a historical group, but the phrase was explained by Corbin himself on several occasions as “the best means of translating into a Western language the names by which our

[medieval] mystics called themselves in Arabic and Persian (*‘ashiqun, muhibbun, arbab al-hawa* etc.)—that is, “lovers”—while at the same time suggesting that they were like their Western counterparts, the companions of Dante.<sup>5</sup> This same phrase, translated into French as “les Fidèles d’amour,” was used by Corbin in the title of his translation of the work by the twelfth-century Persian mystic, Ruzbihan Baqli, *Kitab-i ‘abhar al-‘ashiqin*.<sup>6</sup> It turns out that members of this supposedly “militant clandestine group” included the great Spanish Arab theosophist, Ibn ‘Arabi, and the Iranian mystic poet, Fakhr al-Din ‘Iraqi—both of the thirteenth century! And it was as an interpreter of the medieval mystics, with whom he felt a kind of sympathetic solidarity, that Corbin applied the designation to himself as well.

Equally flawed is Wasserstrom’s treatment of Corbin’s idea of “prophetic philosophy.” Wasserstrom calls it “self-designated” (145), and states that Corbin “explicitly identified himself” as a “prophetic philosopher” (163). But despite Wasserstrom’s frequent assertions to this effect (e.g., “I have answered the question of Corbin’s identity—he was not a professor so much as a prophet” [154]), there is no evidence to suggest that Corbin himself ever made such a claim. In fact, if anyone can be said to have seen himself as something of a messianic figure, it was Scholem, who, in one of the many epigrams cited by Wasserstrom, referred to himself as “the Awaited One,” whose very name, “the perfect,” had marked him as the one chosen “to find his people’s soul” (139). More accurately, Corbin stated that the ideas he was interpreting from the medieval Arabo-Persian theosophical sources could be qualified as “prophetic philosophy.” As a rule, Corbin was careful to define the terms he used and the precise way in which he was using them. This was the case with the now-famous *mundus imaginalis*,<sup>7</sup> and it was also the case with the term “prophetic,” which he explained as being rooted in the Avicennan concept of the Active Intelligence, and as denoting the possibility of personal prophetic revelation in Islam. The vehicle of prophetic philosophy was prophetic hermeneutics (*ta’wil*), which were based on the idea of an inspired personal interpretation of Scripture.<sup>8</sup> The concept of *ta’wil* was not Corbin’s invention. It was a central and fundamental concept in Sufism, which was essentially an esoteric interpretation of Islam; the Sufis interpreted the Qur’an in the same way that the Jewish Kabbalists interpreted the Torah—in an esoteric way. This tendency on Wasserstrom’s part to conflate Corbin’s interpretation of the ideas of the medieval Muslim theosophists and Corbin’s own views, is a fallacy of narration that does not lend clarity to either.

This leads to the larger question of the role of esotericism in monotheistic religion, and it seems that this is what Wasserstrom has a problem with, although he prefers to use the term “gnosticism,” with its residual negative connotations. His stance is militantly anti-mystical, and he exhorts historians of religion not to study the mystical cur-

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5. Henry Corbin, *L’imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn Arabî*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1993), 91; see also 31, 47, 60, 84–85, etc.

6. Rûzbehân Baqlî Shîrâzî, *Le jasmin des Fidèles d’amour (Kitâb-e ‘Abhar al-‘âshiqîn)*, trans. Henry Corbin (Paris, 1991), 37.

7. Corbin even cautioned against using the term outside the specific frame of intention of the medieval Iranian philosophers.

8. Corbin, *L’imagination créatrice*, 68.

rents in religions: “We teachers should resist mystocentrism, with its Self-centered privileging of the esoteric” (240). An interesting appeal, presumably to professional historians of religion, to embrace the fallacy of selective or tunnel history. In the field of Islam, this would rule out the study of some of the finest thinkers and poets of any time and tradition, such as Ibn ‘Arabi and Jalal al-Din Rumi. Moreover, the mystical current in Islam was historically by no means a marginal phenomenon. The entire Shi‘ite tradition is essentially esoteric, and much of medieval Islamic religious thought of the Sunni “orthodox” variety was suffused with mysticism, to judge by the writings of al-Ghazali alone. To discount or ignore the mystical dimension of Islam is to ignore what was arguably *the* most important response that Islam provided of itself to itself, the hostility of Islamic “orthodoxy” notwithstanding. The clash between “orthodoxy” and esotericism was played out in the career of many a prominent medieval Muslim mystic, as the dogmatists and doctors of the law viewed *ta’wil* as a dangerous means of personal empowerment (to put it in modern terms), that undermined their hermeneutical monopoly. But even as esotericism was hostile to orthodoxy, just as orthodoxy was hostile to it, it could not dispense with it, since any esoteric, hidden meaning necessarily requires an exoteric, literal one which it plumbs and transforms; thus, the Qur’an and the prophetic Traditions served as the foundation of the symbolism of the Sufis, just as the Torah served as the foundation of the symbolism of the Kabbalists.

That Corbin favored the esoteric *mentalité* over exoteric, normative interpretations of Islam, and that he was opposed to orthodoxy and legalism, is no secret. It was a central theme in his thinking.<sup>9</sup> But Wasserstrom ventures a step further by interpreting Corbin’s rejection of orthodox “legalism” as antinomianism, as a rejection of “monotheism’s classical theology” (66), and as a rejection of the “non-gnostic monotheistic God” (180). Related to this is Wasserstrom’s concern about the lack of a moral imperative in mysticism, about its “ethical exceptionalism” (232), and he concludes that, in Corbin’s thinking, “the *ontical* effectively replaced the *ethical* at the centre of intellectual concern” (225, italics in original).

In his *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, which Wasserstrom lists in the bibliography, Corbin presented in a nutshell his entire philosophical reading of medieval Islamic theosophy, with a focus on the essentially paradoxical nature of monotheistic belief systems.<sup>10</sup> He stated clearly his position on monotheism—which neither he nor any of the medieval Islamic mystics could ever have rejected without causing the concomitant collapse of the entire system of theosophical thinking—in terms of what he called an “integral ontology,” which was based on Ibn ‘Arabi’s fundamental concept of *wahdat al-wujud* (the Unicity of Being), a topic to which Wasserstrom devotes virtually no attention, and which he does not appear to have grasped. As for Wasserstrom’s concern about the suspension of the ethical, it seems that here too he has missed the point. The idea of “spiritual chivalry,” which represented in fact a code of ethics, was viewed by Corbin as being inseparable from medieval Sufi thought and practice, and he devoted

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9. E.g., Corbin, *L’imagination créatrice*, 14.

10. See in particular the essay entitled, “Le Dieu-Un et les dieux multiples.”

much attention to it, both in his work on the Treatises on Spiritual Chivalry (*Rasa'il-i Javanmardan*), and especially in the fourth volume of his *En Islam iranien*.<sup>11</sup>

What is really troubling, however, is Wasserstrom's peculiar interpretation of the term "legalism," which appears to be based on a semantic distortion. Wasserstrom states categorically, as if it were an accepted definition, that this is "a routine trope of anti-Semitic rhetoric" (179). As far as I have been able to ascertain, the word "légalisme" has no such connotation in French. Nor did Corbin have Judaism in mind when he used it. Islam provided him with a rich enough "legalistic" (i.e., jurisprudential) tradition, and a richly documented history of conflict between the guardians of the gates of orthodoxy and their Sufi opponents. If Corbin did have a *bête noire*, it was Pauline Christology or what he called the "magistère" of the Catholic church, which he denounced as having arrogated to itself the potential for the kind of "prophetic hermeneutics" already discussed above.

Corbin's emphasis on "gnosticism" is also interpreted by Wasserstrom as being "implicitly anti-Jewish," supposedly because many early gnostic currents were hostile to the "High God of the Hebrew Bible," an assertion Wasserstrom supports by quoting Scholem who had stated that gnosticism was "the greatest case of metaphysical antisemitism" (179, 190). This circular argument leads back to Scholem, however, since the latter statement was not "repeated" by Corbin with reference to medieval Islamic mysticism, as Wasserstrom implies (190), but rather was cited by Corbin in Scholem's name precisely in reference to "the [Jewish and Christian] gnostic currents of the first centuries" (326, n. 45).

Corbin is also taken to task for his treatment of the ancient Iranian mythical figure of Ahriman, which Wasserstrom charges he employed "in ways that tended to blur into a kind of philosophical anti-Judaism" (177), although he never actually demonstrates the "ways" in which he supposedly did so. And in a discussion of Carl Jung's controversial book, *Response to Job*, Wasserstrom concludes that "[Corbin] agreed, in effect, on the fundamental (if esoteric) principle that the High God of the Hebrew Bible was in fact a monstrous demiurge, one of whose many names is Ahriman" (179). So "esoteric" is this principle that it would be news to any specialist in the history of ancient Iranian religions. Wasserstrom later partially retracts the charge by stating that Corbin's treatment was "least obviously a case of what Scholem called 'metaphysical antisemitism'" (178), only to reiterate it again: "That being said, Corbin did revile Ahriman, the planetary antagonist, in terms that the reader could associate with rabbinic Judaism" (179). While he admits, "There is no evidence that Henry Corbin was anti-Semitic" (179), and that he "meant no known offense to Jews" (179), Wasserstrom nevertheless faults him for "never [having] repudiated the implications of his imagery, which thrived in circles around him throughout his long life" (179).

These are not historical proofs. At best, they are circular arguments or assumptions based on circumstantial evidence. At worst they are irresponsible and unsubstantiated allegations. Moreover, in light of Corbin's oft-stated stress on the commonality of the Abrahamic tradition of the monotheistic religions, which he called the "Abrahamic harmony," the charges ring hollow.

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11. See book 7, entitled "La chevalerie spirituelle," esp. 414.



Let us now deal with Wasserstrom's treatment of the concept of "hidden authority" (also variously, "discipleship" and "secret authority"), which is an example of his use of insidious analogy, compounded by the now well-attested furtive fallacy. Wasserstrom again manages to attribute the idea to Corbin himself and he states that his espousal of it was anti-democratic and anti-modern: "My concern, to speak plainly, is that such hidden authority demanded by Corbin was in fact but another spiritualized version of an all too familiar assault on democracy and science" (155). Although he never explains what he means by the concept of "discipleship" (a misleading translation, by the way, of the term *wilaya* to which he is alluding), he warns that this is a theory "we embrace at our own intellectual peril" (145), and he sees in it a "social program" to create a Brave New Superman (214). This is truly baffling, as the concept of "hidden authority" ("trusteeship" would be more accurate), which refers to the spiritual ministry of the Shi'ite imam and the idea of his occultation (*ghayba*), was and is the central tenet of Shi'ism. Without entering into a discussion about the relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism, which in some respects Corbin perhaps overemphasized, suffice it to say that the idea of *wilaya* is related both to prophethood and prophetic inspiration. The Sufis used it to refer to the idea of "sainthood," or simply to the mystic's heart as his guide, and sometimes to the mythical inspirational figure, Khidr (=Elijah). Wasserstrom, astoundingly, connects the idea to what he calls "an unreconstructed Aryan triumphalism" (135), which he says stemmed from Corbin's "distinctively Persianizing" approach to Islam (134). The long and the short of his convoluted argument is that Corbin was guilty of fascist thinking (155), a charge Wasserstrom then withdraws, saying, "While I would not claim that Corbin was a fascist. . ." (155), and which, in the now-familiar pattern of accusation and retraction, he later again reasserts: "Given what we now know about the life and work of Henry Corbin, this assertion is not only fair but necessary" (155).

To connect Corbin's interpretation of medieval Perso-Islamic theosophical thought, some of the sources of which he saw in ancient Iranian religions, to the Nazi concept of "Aryanism" is surely anachronistic. Moreover, Wasserstrom seems to suggest that "Persian" Islam is an aberration of sorts, a not entirely legitimate interpretation of Islam—a view that is lamentably passé in the field of Islamic studies, and nothing short of insulting to Iranian Muslims. Wasserstrom thus deems Corbin's interpretation of Islam "imaginal" (153), a "most un-Islamic reading of Islam" (173), and he wonders "what the vast preponderance of Muslims possibly make of this" (173). He states that Corbin "routinely derided the ancient, legitimate, legal tradition. . .of living Islam" (181), and that he was "not *ultimately* interested in Islam" (174, italics in original), that his was not "the Islam of Muhammad, the Qur'an, or the *shari'ah*, and certainly not that of Ayatollah Khomeini" (153). Wasserstrom works himself up to the climactic conclusion that Corbin was "the enemy of Islamic history, of *shari'ah*, even of the Allah of the overwhelming majority of Muslims" (180). One might well ask who Wasserstrom is to speak for the "self-understanding of millions of ordinary [Muslim] believers" (182), and, given the multiplicity of responses to Islam throughout its long and multicultural history, what "ordinary" believer means anyway.

But there is more. Corbin also had a "metapolitical agenda," and he is depicted as collaborating with the "Aryan" Shah of Iran, as it seems that his particular vision of "Iranian Islam" corresponded "nicely" to the cultural policies of the Pahlavi regime (150–51). The source for this intelligence is Hamid Algar (316, n. 48), hardly an impar-

tial critic either of the Iranian monarchy or of Corbin, as he was the most vocal academic supporter in the U.S. of Khomeini's notion of an Arab-centered and non-mystical Islam. Not only was Algar opposed to the Pahlavi regime and everything it stood for—particularly its emphasis on the culture of pre-Islamic Iran—but he wrote a scathing posthumous review of Corbin which appeared soon after the Islamic Revolution (with which Corbin's death roughly coincided).<sup>12</sup> Basing himself solely on this biased source, Wasserstrom would have us believe that Corbin served not only imperial Iranian interests, but also those of the U.S. petroleum industry, specifically Paul Mellon, who was a supporter of the Bollingen Foundation which published some of Corbin's works and the Eranos lectures. Lest readers of this journal think that I am misinterpreting him, I will cite Wasserstrom in full on this point: "Corbin's self-described 'spiritual' Iran served the Shah's 'imperial' Iran, a Cold War ally who stabilized extraction of petroleum for a billionaire American, who in turn, from his profits, subsidized that 'spiritual' self-image" (152).

It is highly unlikely that the shah of Iran, who looked to the ancient history of Iran for the sources of his imperial ideology, would have been eager to support the concept of "hidden authority" in the Shi'ism he tried so hard to downplay, Algar's views on the subject notwithstanding. Nor is it likely that Mellon's patronage of the Bollingen Series of Princeton University Press had any impact whatsoever on the direction of Corbin's scholarship on the medieval Islamic theologians. Wasserstrom's opinions on these topics are superficial and derivative and they will impress only those unaware of the complexities of the Iranian politico-cultural context, not to mention the problems of objectively evaluating the secondary literature on it.<sup>13</sup>

Even if we were to grant that Corbin's interpretation of "Persian Islam" was to some extent idiosyncratic, the Islamic revolution was, it seems to me, not entirely a repudiation, be it implicit or explicit, of the concept of *wilaya* "in the name of an authentic indigenous religiosity" (181), as Wasserstrom puts it. To the contrary, the "trusteeship of the jurisconsult" (*willayat-i faqih*), which was formulated by Khomeini and other Shi'ite jurists, and which constituted the chief ideologico-theological tenet of the Revolution, may in fact be interpreted as an innovative adaptation of it.

Like a mantra, Wasserstrom repeats the phrase, "the greatest scholars require the closest study," at regular intervals throughout the book in order to lull the reader into believing that this is in fact what he has done. In the case of Corbin, however, he should have devoted closer study to the works themselves and less attention to the imaginary view of Corbin that he has constructed on the basis of conjecture and pseudo-proof. To

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12. Hamid Algar, "The Study of Islam: The Work of Henry Corbin," *Religious Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (1980): 85–91. Note his comment that, "There is no substantial pre-Islamic substratum in the mainstream religious history of Islamic Iran."

13. The fact, for example, that Corbin's four-volume *En Islam iranien* was published in Iran under the aegis of various Iranian government ministries and cultural organizations meant little in the context of book publishing at the time, as scarcely any important book in Persian, let alone one in a foreign language, would have been published without such support. Besides the Society of Petroleum, the National Bank of Iran subsidized countless books on topics ranging from historical geography to medieval hagiography, and many publications also featured full-page portraits of the shah and empress.

summon “the angel Reason” to the task of scholarship is always a good idea, but Wasserstrom would also have done well to enlist the aid of the historian’s helpers, the angels Evidence, Objectivity, and Balance.

Perhaps there may still be room to dwell on two technical aspects of the book that are particularly troublesome and distracting. The first is the lack of a proper bibliography, especially in the case of the three authors under discussion. Almost without exception, only their works in English or English translation have been provided, so not only are their bibliographies incomplete, but one has to search endlessly through the footnotes for references to works written originally in other languages. In the case of Corbin, there are practically no bibliographical references that attest to his immense contribution to the edition and translation of primary sources (a comment to this effect is relegated to a footnote, 323, n. 1). The second is the scandalous state of the citations from French and German, which are so riddled with typographical errors that the meaning is often unintelligible (e.g., “C’est vous qui vous apportez encore le soffle prophétique,” 53; “Tout léphémère ne rien que symbole,” 88; “Sie wollte erfriffene Redner. . . obwohl sie alle Professoren hiesßen,” 32; Lieb instead of Leib, 35; Ergriever instead of Ergreifer, 31, etc.). Needless to say, they undermine the reader’s confidence in Wasserstrom’s ability to utilize materials written in these languages by the scholars under discussion. Of the few Arabic and Persian terms cited, even the important concept of *alam al-mithal* is rendered incorrectly as *al-alam al-mithal* (148).

To conclude, every field of scholarly inquiry has its own inner logic. The logic of historical thought has been well studied, and the pitfalls of historical method have been pointed out to students by seasoned travelers along that path. If historians of religion are to insist on a historical approach, they should apply historical methodology, which consists first and foremost in evaluating primary sources on their own terms and in their own contexts, and they should utilize the tools of the professional historian. There are many questions in the field of religion that have still not been answered to everyone’s satisfaction—most notably, the reasons for the rise of mystical currents in the monotheistic religions, and the connections, frequently pointed out by Henry Corbin but still largely unexplored, between Jewish and Islamic mysticisms—and historical research might yield valuable answers to them. But it just may be that to apply the logic of historical thought to the study of religion is not always appropriate, and that to try to do so in certain cases constitutes the greatest fallacy of all—that of metaphysical questions, which consists in the attempt to resolve non-empirical problems by empirical means. It seems to me, that if one were to study Corbin’s works closely and deeply, with an open mind if not an open heart, one would have to admit that this was one methodological pitfall he scrupulously avoided.

Corbin’s signal achievement—and it has yet to be equaled—consisted in recreating, through his poetical hermeneutical technique, the *weltanschauung* of the medieval Islamic mystics and visionaries in a way that not only made them accessible to those without the requisite philological training to penetrate the textual sources, but that utterly transformed the way in which sensitive scholars of medieval mysticism, in both the Islamic and Jewish traditions, looked at their sources. Where Wasserstrom sees religion *after* religion, Corbin saw religion *within* religion, and in doing so he enriched our understanding of the self-understanding of the medieval Muslim theosophists and

mystics who, through their writings, contributed to the diversity of interpretive responses to the *mysterium* of monotheism.

