

Journal of Qur'anic Studies



VOLUME VII ISSUE I 2005

CENTRE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES
School of Oriental and African Studies
University of London

Formation of the Classical Islamic World has a limited scope determined by the title of the series). The real desideratum would be a new textbook, maybe along the lines of a Cambridge companion that pools together existing expertise and represents the 'real cutting-edge'. However, *Shī'ism* can function as an excellent complement to existing works and, alongside *Shī'ite Heritage*, is an indispensable part of any library on Islam.

SAJJAD H. RIZVI



Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam. By Henry Corbin. Trans. Leonard Fox. Swedenborg Studies Monograph Series. Swedenborgian Foundation: Pennsylvania, 1995. Pp. 149. £8.00.

Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), natural philosopher, visionary and theosopher, initiated a mystical Christian movement which continues to this day: 'Inspired by Leibniz, Malebranche, Platonism and Neoplatonism, he unfolded a doctrine of correspondence (*A Hieroglyphic Key*, 1741) to account for the relation between body and soul and between the natural and spiritual worlds, and applied it to biblical exegesis' (*Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 893). The well-known Iranologist and Chair in Islam at the Sorbonne from 1954 to 1974, Henry Corbin (1903–78), was an enthusiastic reader of Swedenborg and found uncanny similarities between Swedenborg's esoteric interpretation of events in the Old Testament, such as the Fall of Adam, and Qāḍī Nu'mān's esoteric interpretations of the same events as recounted in the Qur'an. The Swedenborg Foundation of West Chester, Pennsylvania, has published two of Corbin's essays: the first entitled 'Mundus Imaginalis', a term coined by Corbin and now commonly used by scholars of mystical traditions, in which he discusses the nature of the imaginal realm and explores the means of perceiving it, the second 'Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics', in which he makes a comparative analysis of Swedenborg's and Qāḍī Nu'mān's esoteric exegeses. Corbin's essays are profound and carefully written, although not purely in the pragmatic style of the European academic tradition; rather they fuse a tone of impartiality with that of the semi-poetic, mathematically crafted essays of the great Muslim scholar-mystics. Leonard Fox, who has translated these essays from the French, has managed to convey clearly some of the more complex Corbinian concepts, such as that of two realms 'symbolising with' each other (existing symbolically side by side, highlighting one another's symbolism).

'Mundus Imaginalis' elucidates the realm of existence that lies between the material and spiritual worlds, or 'the *sensory* world and the *intelligible* world' (p. 19), which is conveyed both in Neoplatonism and Shī'ī Islam. Corbin takes the actual existence of the *mundus imaginalis* as a given. He opens the essay with a careful explanation of why he has selected the term 'imaginal' over 'imaginary': the *mundus imaginalis* exists as 'a precise order of reality corresponding to a precise mode of perception' (p. 1); it is not a product of the human imagination. This order of reality has been explicated by figures in Islamic history, such as Ibn Sīnā, in his *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, in his *Tale of Occidental Exile*, whose '*nā-kojā ābād*', or 'no-where city', correlates to the *mundus imaginalis*. In the esoteric Shī'ī tradition, the *mundus imaginalis* is also where the hidden imām resides, and Corbin recounts two well-known stories in which the protagonists journey unexpectedly to the imaginal realm and encounter the imām. In doing this he raises the question: do not these individual accounts, which are just two of the many that exist, prove that the imaginal realm is real?

This essay, completed in 1964, provides a direct challenge to the methodologies of present-day hermeneutics and religious studies scholarship in general; for Corbin's points, by extension, imply the need for a radically different approach to religious images and stories which have been analysed mainly as 'allegories', 'myths' or simply as symbolic expressions of a community's psychology. Corbin suggests that, in order to really understand what such images and stories are, scholars need to develop their imaginative faculty in order to attain a level of *hierognosis*: 'higher sacral knowledge' (p. 21). A sceptical, critical approach will, he says, merely prove his point about the perception of reality in a modern, secular civilisation: 'instead of the image being elevated to the level of a world that would be proper to it, instead of it appearing invested with a symbolic function, leading to an internal sense, there is above all a reduction of the image to the level of sensory perception pure and simple' (p. 31). The sense of the imaginal is lost. Images no longer have a sacred function, and sacred images are no longer understood. Thus, Corbin implies, contemporary secularised civilisation has lost the ability to access the particular mode of perception which connects with the realm of sacred images and is able to comprehend it, and this is because that realm is no longer considered to be real, but it is not the *mundus imaginalis* which lacks substance; it is we who lack the ability to perceive it.

The discussion of these issues in 'Mundus Imaginalis' prepares the reader for the hermeneutical comparison undertaken in 'Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics' by establishing a conceptual foundation of an internal reality which is rarely acknowledged in contemporary, post-modern hermeneutics. This second essay is an extended comparative study of Swedenborg's theory of correspondences and Qāḍī Nu'mān's esoteric exegesis of the Fall of Adam and the Flood. In comparing the

almost identical methodologies of Swedenborg and Qāḍī Nuʿmān, Corbin makes his case, not only for the necessity of radically re-thinking methods of interpretation of 'history' and of 'texts', but also for the strong possibility that the realities to which these two scholars refer, writing in separate times and places, do actually exist.

'Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics' opens with an analysis of the Arabic word *ḥikāya* 'which connotes simultaneously the sense of narrative, account, history, and that of imitation' (p. 35). This word is the basis of the essay, for both Swedenborg and Qāḍī Nuʿmān give almost identical interpretations of the historical stories which can actually be considered as *ḥikāyāt* of events which took place on a higher spiritual plane. 'A *ḥikāyat* is, therefore, an imitation (a *mimesis*), a representation, a *history* certainly, but a history that is essentially an image or symbol' (p. 36). Behind this history (or histories) lies a spiritual truth. It is this spiritual truth which Corbin attempts to demonstrate by comparing two scholar-mystics of different traditions, times and countries.

Corbin says that, according to Swedenborg, *hierognosis* can be defined as 'a gnoseology [philosophy of cognition] that places at the highest degree of cognition an immediate spiritual perception' and which is linked to a form of hermeneutics 'governed by a general doctrine of correspondence' (p. 40). Swedenborg seems to be talking about that which, in Islamic mysticism, is called *'ilm ḥudūrī*, 'knowledge through presence'. Given that he was living at a time when Enlightenment rationalists were trying to get to the truth of the biblical text by 'stripping' it of all mystical elements, it can be seen just how much Swedenborg's concept of *hierognosis* went against the grain of his times.

Dividing the internal history of the human race into three phases: the 'celestial humanity', the 'spiritual humanity' and 'material humanity', Swedenborg explains that this *hierognosis* was the means by which reality was perceived by the first, celestial humanity. By perceiving through a system of correspondences, the celestial humanity saw that everything in the natural world which is seen with sensory sight in fact corresponds with a higher, celestial reality. Once celestial humanity lost its ability to perceive immaterial reality (and therefore truth) directly, it became the spiritual humanity. Those of the spiritual humanity, while not being privileged with *hierognosis*, nevertheless retained a vague memory, and sometimes only a belief, in immaterial reality. Finally, humanity lost even this belief in immaterial reality: 'in the humanity that was obliged to pass through the spiritual catastrophe called the Flood, there was no longer perception of anything else in external objects except what is of this world' (p. 63), and worse, 'communication of man with his hell was opened' (see Q. 19:58–9).

Corbin then makes a brief and concise summary of Swedenborg's interpretation of the meaning of Adam's transgression, which is 'a drama that was by no means the

“drama of the flesh”, but a drama – the drama – of human understanding and consciousness’ (p. 73), in which mankind tried to measure supersensory reality by empirical laws. He also discusses Swedenborg’s account of the Flood: the people of Noah were the residue of the celestial humanity, they ‘no longer had direct perception, but they had a conscience and knowledge’ (p. 84). The story of the Flood is actually an ‘event of the soul’ which has been externally historicised. However, we can never understand the story if we only approach it from its external historicism. The ordeal of the Flood is an initiatory process, not ‘a geological cataclysm’ (p. 88). These interpretations of the biblical stories are not widely known and Corbin’s elucidation provides readers with a type of ‘super-rational’ insight into a history which is shared by approximately three billion of the world’s population.

By linking Swedenborg’s exegesis with Qāḍī Nuʿmān’s *taʿwīl*, Corbin also enables scholars of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic worlds to deepen their comprehension of the significant celestio-spiritual strata by which they are linked. Just as Corbin talks about *hierognosis*, so he also talks about a *hierohistory* (p. 37). Just as he talks about a visionary perception of the *mundus imaginalis*, so he talks about a ‘way of reading and comprehending ... that is, the mental and visionary penetration of an entire hierarchy of spiritual universes’ (p. 38). Again, what Corbin calls the ‘spiritual sense’ of these histories has nothing to do with allegory. In order to understand these histories, Corbin says, we ‘must proceed phenomenologically, that is to say, hermeneutically’ (p. 40). Corbin is therefore trying to say that, rather than interpreting these histories theoretically, we should interpret them through how we intuit them, or, how we perceive them intuitively.

Throughout, Corbin demonstrates how Ismaʿīlī gnosis complements the Swedenborgian concept that mankind’s expulsion from Eden was in fact, ‘the descent of man on earth from the angelic state of the humanity of the previous “cycle of epiphany”’ (p. 107). Qāḍī Nuʿmān taught that the Adam of the Abrahamic line was not the first Adam per se, but the first of the last cycle of prophecy. Adam’s crime was to desire esoteric knowledge which was not his right to know. He desired the esoteric to be laid bare, deprived of its exoteric garment (a desire which can be seen today in many revivalist New Age movements that extract Islamic esoterism from its garment of Shariʿa). Just as Swedenborg saw Noah’s journey as ‘an initiatory process’ in which the Ark guides its passengers safely through the catastrophe of spiritual humanity, so Qāḍī Nuʿmān interprets the water as ‘the knowledge that gives life, and which may become the knowledge that suffocates and causes death, if refuge is not taken in the Ark’ (p. 120). In the same way that Noah, along with some of his community, has been selected by God to be saved from drowning in the negative power of misused esoteric knowledge, ‘the Imam, invested with esoteric teaching, floats in his *daʿwat* [community] like a mystical Ark, together with all those who have responded to his Call (the *mustajībūn*), on the ocean

of knowledge', while 'the waves that he confronts, towering like mountains, are the learned in Law, the literalists (*'ulamā' al-ẓāhir*) who pass as men of science' (p. 118).

Pro-Enlightenment academics have taken note of the recent movement against pure empiricism, and the sometimes 'popular' search for a metaphysical understanding of reality. What both Swedenborg's and Corbin's work demonstrates, however, is that this movement is not new. 'Mundus Imaginalis' and 'Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics' demonstrate how, methodologically, the intuitive interpretation of texts which are said to have esoteric dimensions may be actually made within a secular, academic framework. Current trends in religious studies still forbid absolutely any debate about whether such dimensions exist and whether such a discussion is actually valid. Corbin's essays go to the heart of human existence, while maintaining scholarly excellence and a balanced degree of detachment, although occasionally his phraseology can be a little obscure. Furthermore, he includes an exposition of Swedenborg's theory of God as 'the Grand Man' (*homo maximus*), (corresponding to a similar theory of Ibn al-^cArabi), which disrupts the flow of elucidation from the first essay to the second. Nevertheless, both of these works highlight clearly what is sadly lacking in our common understanding of the Adamic heritage.

AISHA R. MASTERTON

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.