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**Open Secret: Henry Corbin, Elliot Wolfson, and the
Mystical Poetics of Deification**

by

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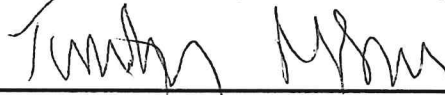
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DEDICATION

To my Mother, Father, and Brother

Why write, if not in the name of an impossible speech?

Michel de Certeau¹

An author of the impossible is someone who knows
that the Human is Two *and* One.

Jeffrey Kripal²

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011/1988), p. 194.

² Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 270.

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation seeks to answer two fundamental questions. First, what is *theosis* or deification? And second, given that mystics in the three Abrahamic faiths have written experientially of deification, what might be some of the phenomenological and anthropological lessons that we can learn today from their insights into the nature of reality and from those of the scholars who study them?

To answer these questions, after initially offering my preferred working definition of *theosis* or deification from the Christian tradition, I subsequently refract it through the lens of what is essentially a history of religions or reflexively comparative approach to a deep reading of the same theme in some representative texts of two major authors in the modern study of Islamic and Jewish mysticism respectively, Henry Corbin and Elliot Wolfson. This exploration is done in the service of gaining greater insight into the phenomenological and anthropological significance of the specific mystical category of deification via the “academic esotericism”¹ of these two authors. The goal of undertaking such a dialogical study of each author’s treatment of deification is to journey toward a more mystical, poetic, and, hence, constructive understanding of what it means to be

¹ I am borrowing this designation from Jeffrey Kripal. See his *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 25.

human. My fundamental argument is that, when viewed in the dialogical light of Corbin's and Wolfson's esoteric works, deification can be seen to be pointing to a relatively common cross-cultural mystical experience that bears witness to the essential and paradoxical oneness of humanity and divinity.

This study is therefore an extension of Jeffrey Kripal's general thesis that "the history of mysticism as an academic discipline shares in the history of mysticism as a historical phenomenon,"² and as a development of his key notion of "the Human as Two" (and One).³ As such, this dissertation is a comparative exercise in attending to the "open secret" of our inherent paradoxicality—"be it conceived ontologically, epistemologically, or hermeneutically"⁴—and an invitation to reimagine our human identity in the light of the impossible possibility of becoming divine.

Thus two interrelated theses are put forward, a foundational one and the main thesis that is built upon it. Regarding the former, inasmuch as this dissertation is both historical and constructive in nature, its foundational thesis is twofold: by using a comparative lens to attend closely to the thread of deification in the mystical weave of Corbin's and Wolfson's works, we can (a) gain a deeper insight into the nature of the experience of deification through its textual representations and refractions (the historical project), and (b) thereby arrive at a better understanding of what it means to be human

² Ibid., p. 31.

³ See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 36 and 428, where he defines this "gnomon" as follows: "*The Human as Two*. Each human being is two, that is, each person is simultaneously a conscious constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifests only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy, which the religious traditions have historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward into the sky as divine, as 'God' or introjected inward into the human being as nirvana, brahman, or located in some sort of experienced paradoxical state that is neither inside nor outside, as in the Chinese Dao or the American paranormal."

⁴ Jeffrey J. Kripal, "The Gnostic Garden: Kabbalistic Motifs in a Modern Jewish Visionary," *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 3:2 (2018), p. 240.

(the constructive or mystical anthropology project). The main thesis is that to understand properly and make one's own the subtle, imaginal, contemplative experience of deification necessitates a radical openness to the participatory or nondual reality that is both veiled and revealed by the dualisms that dominate conventional Western discourse: self/other, mind/body, reason/emotion, divinity/humanity.

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“Blessed and precious beyond price are the friends who dare to accompany us as we struggle on the hard path to truth.”

– Richard of St. Victor

There are many people without whom this dissertation would not have been possible.

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circumstances were such that I was not able to study with her, Dr. Marcia Brennan was a very generous, thoughtful, and steady presence during my time at Rice, and I cherish her friendship as well.

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Finally, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my family. Words truly cannot express how much I appreciate the patience, kindness, support, and unconditional love that my mother Roberta, my deceased father John, and my brother Jay have shown me over the years. In many ways, they have been and are my greatest teachers. Therefore it is to them that this impossible work is lovingly dedicated.

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God is all reality, but not all reality is God... God is found in all things, and all things are found in God, and there is nothing devoid of God's divinity, God forbid. Everything is in God, and God is in everything and beyond everything, and there is nothing else beside God.

Moses Cordovero¹

My *me* is God, nor do I recognize any other *me* except my God.

Saint Catherine of Genoa²

Therefore the knower and the known, the one who arrives and what he arrives at, and the seer and the seen are one. "The knower" is His attribute and "the known" is His essence, and "the one who arrives" is His attribute and "what he arrives at" is His essence. In fact, the attribute and that to which it is attributed are one. That is the explanation of the saying, *Whoever knows their self, knows their Lord*.

Ibn 'Arabi³

¹ R. Moses Cordovero, Elimah Rabbati 24d-25a. (The first sentence is: *ha'eloha kol nimitza, v'ein kol nimitza ha'eloha*.) See Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 150. As cited in Jay Michaelson, *Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism* (Boston: Trumpeter, 2009), pp. 62-63.

² *Vita mirabile e dottrina santa della Beata Caterina da Genoa* (Genoa, 1551, 1847) 50b, quoted in Friedrich von Hugel, *The Mystical Element of Religions as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 2 volumes (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1908), volume 1, p. 265; as cited in James A. Wiseman, "'To Be God With God': The Autotheistic Sayings of the Mystics," *Theological Studies* 51:2 (1990), p. 233; emphases in original.

³ Ibn 'Arabi, *Know Yourself: An Explanation of the Oneness of Being*, trans. Cecilia Twinch (Cheltenham, UK: Beshara Publications, 2011), p. 40; italics in original.

CAVEAT LECTOR

What God is, no-one knows.
God is neither light, nor spirit
God is not bliss, not unity,
Not what we call “deity.”
God is not wisdom, nor reason,
Nor love, nor will, nor goodness.
God is not a thing, nor a nothing.
Nor is God essence.
God is what neither I nor you
Nor any creature can understand
Without becoming what God is.

Angelus Silesius¹

I realize that dissertations do not usually come with caveats.² But this is an unusual dissertation, perhaps even by the blessedly unconventional standards of Rice University. Allow me to explain.

To begin with, this is a dissertation about the impossible possibility of deification or “becoming God” in the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as reflected in and refracted through the prism of the scholarly oeuvres of Henry Corbin and Elliot Wolfson. In describing deification paradoxically as an *impossible possibility*, I do so in a manner that is consistent with Jeffrey Kripal’s understanding of the impossible and in a like spirit.

¹ *Becoming God: 108 Epigrams from The Cherubic Pilgrim by Angelus Silesius*, trans. Andrew Harvey (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2019), p. 1.

² I was inspired to offer this caveat upon reading Mark Roblee’s dissertation, “‘Greetings, I am an Immortal God!’: Reading, Imagination, and Personal Divinity in Late Antiquity, 2nd-5th Centuries CE” (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2019), in which he does the same.

I begin with an impossibility, then, not to pretend some knowledge that I do not possess (like the debunkers or the believers), but to provoke and perform our own almost total ignorance and, more positively, to call us out of our rationalist denials into a more spacious and generous Imagination. I am not after easy rational solutions, much less “beliefs” in this or that cultural mythology. I am after liberating confusions. I am after the Impossible.³

Thus, for me, deification is essentially a cross-cultural phenomenon experienced by mystics of every time and place as a “liberating confusion” that calls them and us “into a more spacious Imagination.”

As such an impossible and yet very real possibility, *theosis* or deification is a phenomenon that warrants our close attention. This is because in reflecting on it, thinkers from ancient times to the present have sought to clarify for themselves and others what it means to be wholly human and thus fully alive. In this regard, and among this lineage of thinkers, Corbin and Wolfson are two of the most penetrating contemporary scholars who, in their own similar but distinctive ways, have examined deification in order to make sense of what divinity is (not) and its relationship to humanity. I am trying to do the same.

I do so from my unique perspective as a scholar-practitioner of the Christian monastic tradition that has its roots in the fourth-century deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria—a tradition for which the experience of deification was (and is) central. Not

³ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 2.

surprisingly, over the millennia Christian mystics have used a variety of models, metaphors, or symbols to describe this experience that is both the ground and goal of the Christian life properly understood, or so I would argue. Among the more prominent of these mystical metaphors or categories are those of contemplation, the vision of God, ecstasy, the birth of the Word in the soul, and union with God. Needless to say, none of these categories have been interpreted univocally. However, as Bernard McGinn affirms, all of them are different but complementary ways of speaking about and accounting for the consciousness of what can be described as “the immediate or direct presence of God”⁴ (i.e., God-consciousness), which is the experiential essence of deification.

My preference for this broad and flexible understanding of deification will be explained in the following pages. Here, though, I want to emphasize that my reading of *theosis* or deification is consistent with how a number of influential Christian monk-scholars of late antiquity interpreted it. One such figure whose thought will be treated in this dissertation is the anonymous late fifth- to early sixth-century Syrian monk and mystical theologian known as Pseudo-Dionysius. Another figure, an intellectual and spiritual heir to Pseudo-Dionysius who receives only passing mention in these pages but whose thought has nonetheless had a significant influence on my own, is the seventh-century monk, scholar, and theologian Maximus the Confessor.

As Lars Thunberg states, “Maximus’ understanding of deification depends to a great extent on that of [Pseudo-Dionysius], as his use of the term *theosis* clearly shows.”⁵

⁴ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), p. xvii.

⁵ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pp. 429-430. It was in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius that the word *theosis* finally replaced *theopoiesis* as the technical term for deification in the Christian tradition. See Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 429.

But Maximus' main personal contribution is the way in which he sought to flesh out Pseudo-Dionysius' "moderate non-dualism"⁶ by combining the doctrines of incarnation and deification via the insofar as (*tantum-quantum*) formula that he linked with the concepts of mutual interpenetration (*perichoresis*) and the communication of properties or attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*) that are theological terms of art used to describe the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Christ.⁷ This position makes it possible for Maximus to maintain that God becomes human *insofar as* the human being has deified herself—on the basis that the human being, as image of God, has a natural capacity and desire for divinity.⁸

Parenthetically, and to anticipate a key element of the argument contained in these pages, centuries later Meister Eckhart would mine the nondual depths of Maximus' *tantum-quantum* formula in an effort to shock his audiences into seeing reality from the divine perspective. Specifically, he wanted his readers and listeners to recognize that—insofar as from God's point of view the act/event of incarnation (along with creation) is continually happening and all is one in the undifferentiated yet differentiating ground of the Godhead, including divinity and humanity—they are always already in a continuous state of union with God, which is to say, deified. According to Eckhart's bold reading of Maximus, then, to deify oneself is to progressively realize and actualize this continuous state of union which, in language that is meant to both confuse and enlighten, he referred to paradoxically as a union of indistinction (*unitas indistinctionis*). A union that

⁶ James Charlton, *Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne: A Theopoetic Reflection* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 128. Charlton distinguishes "moderate" nondualism from "absolute" nondualism which he basically equates with pure monism. Much more will be said about my understanding of nondualism in the pages that follow.

⁷ See Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, p. 430.

⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 431.

significantly “...is not an ‘experience’ in any ordinary sense of the term—it is coming to realize and live out of the ground of experience, or better, of consciousness. It is a new way of knowing and acting, not any *particular* experience or act of knowing *something*.”⁹

Thus, for Maximus, as well as for his predecessors and successors, deification is as it were simply the other side of incarnation—that is, incarnation in both Christ and the individual—which takes place wherever and whenever “the Divine can be said to ‘penetrate’ into the human in virtue of the exchange of attributes which comes about through the hypostatic union”¹⁰ (a union that, as Eckhart maintained, is always already the case through, with, and in the groundless ground of the Godhead that is our deepest and truest self.) Moreover, this penetration is only possible because, in Thunberg’s reading of Maximus, “Nature and grace are not in opposition to each other, for when human nature is truly developed, it is open to divine grace which establishes that relation to God, for which human nature is created.”¹¹ Accordingly, for Maximus and others, the doctrine of *theosis* or deification was not an abstraction, because incarnation was not abstract. On the contrary, it was viewed as an event of “transcorporeal relationality”¹² that is to be progressively realized and embodied in the present moment. Consequently, as James Charlton has observed, the experience of divine-humanity that is deification/incarnation, “was not necessarily conceived as exalted or ethereal; it did not have to be ‘transcendent’ in an abstract and other-worldly sense.”¹³ Indeed, this was the point that Anastasius of Sinai (a near contemporary of Maximus) was making when he

⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), p. 149; emphases in original. See also pp. 47 and 49.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 432.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 433-434.

¹² Charlton, *Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne*, p. 129.

¹³ Ibid.

stated that deification implied “neither a diminution nor an alteration of (human) nature.”¹⁴

Another unconventional aspect of this study is its methodology. In the introduction I treat at some length the various components of my hybrid approach, so here I simply want to make explicit something that is implicit in the subsequent pages. Specifically, I want to foreground the central role that empathy plays in my approach to the study of religion in general and to the work of Corbin and Wolfson in particular. Following Joseph Palmisano’s reflection on the significance of empathy in the life and work of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Edith Stein, I understand empathy to be an experience of *transsubjectivity*, “where the physical and spiritual worlds of oneself and another begin to meet across a widening range of sociopolitical and theological perspectives.”¹⁵ Alternatively put, empathy is an experience of the dynamic “intergivenness” or “interbeing” of reality, whereby the self is both emptied and filled through “*feeling one’s way* into the life of the other where one and the other enter a ‘new horizon’ of relationality.”¹⁶ As such, empathy is the faculty by which, in the words of Ewert Cousins, “we can extend our consciousness so that it enters into the consciousness of another and perceives reality from the perspective of the other’s experience.”¹⁷

¹⁴ The quotation is taken from Basil Tatakis, *Byzantine Philosophy*, translation and introduction by N. J. Moutafakis (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2003 [1949]), p. 67. As cited in Charlton, *Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne*, p. 129.

¹⁵ Joseph Redfield Palmisano, *Beyond the Walls: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Edith Stein on the Significance of Empathy for Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 72.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 69; emphasis in original. For the term “intergivenness,” see Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 324. As cited in Palmisano, *Beyond the Walls*, p. 25. For the term “interbeing,” see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, 3rd edition (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987).

¹⁷ Ewert Cousins, *Global Spirituality: Toward the Meeting of Mystical Paths* (Madras: University of Madras, Radhakrishnan Institute of Advanced Study in Philosophy, 1985), p. 24. As cited in McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 325. It is to be noted that Cousins’ method is the same as that of the History of Religions school of thought as articulated by Mircea Eliade and others. For, like the History of

In the light of this understanding, therefore, I see my project as being at heart the fruit of an ongoing quest for an ever more profound “interreligiously attuned phenomenology of empathy.”¹⁸ And yet it is also an historical, theological, anthropological, and ontological inquiry “insofar as a *hermeneutics from empathy* encourages a *fundamental* engagement with the other”¹⁹ and oneself. In this way, by seeking to understand “the other within and the other without,” by endeavoring “to heed and discern the alterity of alterity,”²⁰ or the otherness of the other who is paradoxically the same by virtue of being different, I believe that a harmonic resonance between phenomenology, history, theology, anthropology, and ontology may occur at the implicit crossroads of ethics vis-à-vis the comparative exploration of the theme of deification in the work of Corbin and Wolfson.

Given that the structure of this dissertation is also unusual an initial word of orientation is in order. The preface and introduction will provide you with important preliminary discussions of context, methodology, terms, et cetera. But, in order to discover and get a feel for what is at the center of this dissertation, we will have to take a journey. This will be an arduous, circuitous, but hopefully interesting journey of exploration through the life and work of Corbin and Wolfson, whose similar yet different approaches are meant to provide the reader with complementary entryways into a difficult and confusing topic: deification. You will know that you have reached the “center,” when you find yourself at the non-end of the open-ended non-conclusion which

Religions method, Cousins’ approach “consists of a phenomenological analysis of mystical experience that explores the structures of consciousness revealed in the text through the cultivation of the faculty of empathy” (McGinn, *ibid.*).

¹⁸ Palmisano, *Beyond the Walls*, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

²⁰ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. xvi.

more or less captures the paradoxical spirit of the work. For a more detailed orientation, I refer you to the introduction below.

Also, given the tricky nature of the text that you hold in your hands, I want to suggest four ways to constructively engage with this project. First, it can be viewed as an intellectual history—a history of ideas and mentalities—concerning the relationship between hermeneutics, imagination, and divinity. Second, it can be regarded as a performative invitation to empathetically enter into the thought-worlds of people in the past and present so as to see through their eyes. Third, this dissertation can be used as a mirror that you use to reflect on your own thinking about such topics as hermeneutics, the imagination, the nature of time, and the relationship between divinity and humanity. And fourth, it ideally can be engaged in all of these ways simultaneously.

Finally, allow me to offer a word about my use of sources. If my extensive use of primary and supporting secondary source material appears to obscure what is my contribution to scholarship, know that this is as it should be. For, as will be amply demonstrated in the pages that follow, my argument resonates deeply with and is a manifestation of the dialectic of esotericism at play in the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As Wolfson succinctly describes this dialectic, with specific reference to kabbalistic theosophy, “every act of revealing is a concealing, for truth cannot be revealed unless it is concealed. Disclosure is thus a form of occlusion, letting-go a holding-in.”²¹

Then, too, my extensive use of sources has been motivated by the desire to have this dissertation serve as a sort of florilegium or “bouquet” of textual “flowers” that I find

²¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 17.

beautiful, nourishing, and provocative. In sharing them, my hope is that after sampling the offerings in this dissertation, the curious or adventurous reader will be inspired to delve more deeply into the respective oeuvres of Corbin and Wolfson—two mystical scholars who, in daring to transgress the limits of the ordinary, beckon us to do the same.

So, dear reader, consider yourself warned.

Preface

We are all coexistent with God,
members of the Divine body.
We are all partakers of the Divine nature....
He [Jesus Christ] is the only God.
But then so am I, and so are you.

William Blake¹

What is *theosis* or deification? How is it related to mystical union? What does it mean to say that God—“that than which nothing greater can be conceived” (*id quo maius cogitari nequit*), in the words of Anselm—and the human person are united, or indeed one? What does it mean to experience this union, this oneness? What does it mean to experience deification? How is the experience of deification and/or union possible? Alternatively and more precisely put: Given that some of the boldest and arguably most interesting mystics in the three Abrahamic faiths have written experientially of deification, poetically affirming their direct experience of God in the ground of their souls, how are we to understand the human person in order to take seriously their witness? What is the anthropology that underlies the assertions of these mystics?² How are their insights into human nature similar or different? What might be some of the lessons that we can learn today from the mystics and from the scholars who study them? Over the course of my

¹ William Blake, as quoted in *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, edited by Thomas Sadler, two volumes in one (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898), volume 2, p. 25.

² John Arblaster and Rob Faesen pose a similar question in their introduction to the volume, *Mystical Anthropology: Authors from the Low Countries*, ed. John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 1.

almost three decades as a Benedictine monk, I have wrestled with these questions. This dissertation is a record of my thinking to date.

How I Got Here: Some Bibliographic and Academic Milestones

Actually, deification/mystical union has been a subject of interest for me for some time, predating my entrance into the monastery. It began while I was still in high school, when as a bookish teenager I discovered the work of a kindred Blakean spirit whose influence on my life would prove to be lasting and profound. I am referring to the work of Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the American poet, monk, theologian, mystic, social activist, literary critic, and scholar of comparative religion, whose diverse writings have had and continue to have a significant impact on contemporary spiritual life.

The first book of Merton's that I read was one of his mature offerings, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), which he characterized as "a series of sketches and meditations, some poetic, and literary, others historical and even theological, fitted together in a spontaneous, informal philosophic scheme in such a way that they react upon each other, [resulting in] a personal and monastic meditation, a testimony of Christian reflection in the mid-twentieth century, a confrontation of twentieth-century questions in the light of a monastic commitment, which inevitably makes one something of a 'bystander.'"³ It was filled with passages like the following:

³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1966), pp. v-vi.

To live well myself means for me to know and appreciate something of the secret, the mystery in myself: that which is incommunicable, which is at once myself and not myself, at once in me and above me.⁴

[T]he more I am able to affirm others, to say “yes” to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says *yes* to *everyone*.... If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.⁵

Again, that expression, *le point vierge* (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness...is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us.... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all

⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

⁵ Ibid., p. 129; emphasis in original.

the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.⁶

Strongly resonating with these and other similar passages, I was hooked and proceeded to read everything by Merton that I could get my hands on.

Eventually, inspired by the words and example of “Uncle Louie” (as he was affectionately known by some of his friends and monastic confreres, Louis being his name in religion), I too became a monk. Among other blessings, this afforded me access to a substantially larger library, of which I took full advantage. As a result, not only did I devour books by other monastic authors like Bede Griffiths and Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda), but I immersed myself even more deeply in the sea of Merton’s corpus, reading among other things all seven volumes of his unexpurgated journals, as well as his voluminous correspondence.

In the course of doing so, in the volume of letters devoted to religious experience and social concerns, I read something that again spoke to my own Blakean “heretic blood.”⁷ In a letter dated March 12, 1959, Merton introduced himself to D. T. Suzuki, the

⁶ Ibid., p. 142. Merton came across the expression *le point vierge* in the writings of the distinguished Islamicist Louis Massignon (1883-1962), with whom he began a correspondence in 1959. The closest Merton comes to translating this expression is to refer to it as the “dawn state” and “unspeakable secret” of paradise which is “all around us” and “wide open,” but “we do not understand” (pp. 117, 118). Dorothy C. Buck calls *le point vierge* “the Virgin Heart.” See Dorothy C. Buck, “The Theme of *Le Point Vierge* in the Writings of Louis Massignon” at <http://www.dcbuck.com/Articles/Keryell/PointVierge.html>.

⁷ See Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (New York: Stoddart Publishing Co., 1998). In this work, Higgins compares Merton with “the arch-rebel” (p. 3) William Blake, who was the monk’s intellectual and spiritual hero. He writes: “Blake’s ‘heretic blood’ courses through Merton’s veins. As a poet, and as a monk, Merton understood his task to be nothing short of the Blakean undertaking to reintegrate shattered humanity. Simply put: Thomas Merton is the William Blake of our time. He was engaged in the same kind of spiritual and intellectual tasks: the critiquing of a dehumanizing culture; the subverting of conventional modes of perception; the radical re-visioning of human destiny; the liberating of our senses from the shackles of constrictive reason; the commingling of the imaginative arts” (p. 4). As is well known, Merton wrote his master’s thesis on Blake in 1939 as a student at Columbia University. Entitled “Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation,” it

well-known scholar-practitioner of Zen Buddhism who played a significant role in translating and introducing the teachings of this tradition to the West. As Christopher Pramuk observes, after receiving a warm reply and some poems from Suzuki, Merton wrote a second letter that is striking for a number of reasons, the least not being “the intimacy with which this Catholic monk from the West opens himself to a Japanese Buddhist he has never met on the mystery of Christ as experienced in prayer.”⁸ Merton writes:

The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, is our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be “found in Him” and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself. You see, that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom), it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men and stand in the way of God’s freedom. But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him...and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. *He is ourself*. Oh my dear Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are “doctors in Israel.”⁹

can be found in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1985), pp. 385-453.

⁸ Christopher Pramuk, “‘Something Breaks Through a Little’: The Marriage of Zen and Sophia in the Life of Thomas Merton,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 28 (2008), p. 68.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 564; emphasis in original. Pramuk also cites this passage (see, “‘Something Breaks Through a Little,’” p. 68).

Christ is our self. Here was a clear and provocative affirmation of the truth of deification, of mystical union, that reflected the alluring paradox of the koan-like words of William Blake that serve as the epigraph to this preface. A few years later, in his now classic *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton would proclaim to all of his readers the central importance of this truth. “Therefore,” he wrote, “there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God.”¹⁰ Elsewhere in this same work that in many respects was a harbinger of things to come in *Conjectures* and other volumes, Merton would repeatedly sound variations on this theme that is at the heart of his mystical vision. Thus, as but one further example, he averred: “Our reality, our true self, is hidden in...nothingness...God Himself...live[s] in me not only as my Creator but as my other and true self.”¹¹

After obtaining my undergraduate degree in philosophy and making solemn profession of monastic vows, I was fortunate enough to pursue my master’s degree in theology and monastic studies under the tutelage of Rev. Dr. Columba Stewart at St. John’s School of Theology in Collegeville, Minnesota. Stewart is a monk of St. John’s Abbey who, after studying at Harvard, did his doctorate in philosophy and patristics at the University of Oxford with the distinguished Eastern Orthodox scholar and bishop Kallistos Ware. An internationally recognized historian of monasticism who has authored acclaimed monographs on the Messalian controversy of the fourth and fifth centuries as well as John Cassian (c. 360-435 CE),¹² it was Columba who mentored me in

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 1962/1972), p. 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 281, 41.

¹² See Columba Stewart, *“Working the Earth of the Heart”: the Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to A.D. 431* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). The Messalians were an ascetic group whose name, of Syriac origin, denotes the “praying people.” Their extraordinary claims and vivid spiritual vocabulary were considered

the rigorous study of such monastic luminaries of late antiquity as the Cappadocian Fathers, Evagrius of Pontus, and Cassian. He communicated to me his own love of these monastic forebears, and as a result I became increasingly interested in their teachings on deification/mystical union, which as monks was necessarily of central concern to them – and to me.

The time I spent with Stewart immersed in monastic studies passed all too quickly, and upon graduation I returned to my monastery, where I served in various capacities to meet the specific needs of my community. Over the next sixteen years I would, among other things, oversee the maintenance of the abbey's physical plant, care for my sick and aged confreres, foster the work of Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique/Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM/MID),¹³ and assist in the leadership of the community as its subprior,¹⁴ often functioning in a number of roles concurrently. During this time, as I continued to read voraciously and amass a sizeable personal library, I began to increasingly miss the stimulating halls of academia. Accordingly, the desire to pursue doctoral studies steadily grew. Circumstances, however, always seemed to conspire to thwart or at least mitigate this desire.

In addition, these years found me increasingly discontented with the dogmatic quality of traditional Christian theology and frustrated with its sclerotic inability to speak

heretical by the early Christian Church, and so they were condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. John Cassian, a disciple of the thrice-condemned Evagrius of Pontus (345-399 CE) and avid student of his sophisticated spiritual theology, was the foremost translator of Egyptian desert monasticism to the West. As such, he exerted a major spiritual influence on both the *Rule of the Master* and the *Rule of Benedict*, among other foundational monastic texts.

¹³ Per its website, DIM/MID “is an international monastic organization that promotes and supports dialogue, especially dialogue at the level of religious experience and practice, between Christian monastic men and women and followers of other religions.” For the full mission statement of this organization and access to its online peer-reviewed journal, *Dilatato Corde*, see <https://dimmid.org/>.

¹⁴ In Benedictine monasticism, there are three “superiors” ranked in descending order: the abbot, the prior, and subprior. The abbot is elected by all solemnly or finally professed members of the community, and it is the abbot who appoints the prior and subprior. Basically, in any given Benedictine monastery, the subprior can be considered the “third in command,” as it were.

to the depths of human experience. In light of this mounting discontent and frustration, I kept returning to the words of the English Benedictine monk Dom Sebastian Moore (1917-2014) that I had read as a novice with electrifying recognition and relief. In his aptly titled book *God is a New Language* (1967), Moore writes: “The heart, the centre of the Christian mind, is grown old and arthritic. The joy and bounce, the intellectual agility and adventurousness, have gone.”¹⁵ Truly, I longed for such joy and bounce, such intellectual agility and adventurousness. But where were these to be found if not in the field of theology?

The seed that would become the answer to this question was planted by Dr. Judith Simmer-Brown, a senior teacher in the Shambhala lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and professor at Naropa University, whom I had befriended over the course of my many years of working with Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. During a conversation in which I shared with her my growing and frequently thwarted but admittedly directionless desire to pursue doctoral studies, as well as my frustrated longing for intellectual agility and adventurousness, joy and bounce, she asked if I was familiar with the work of Jeffrey Kripal, a professor of religious studies at Rice University. While I had come across his name as a result of my regimen of voracious reading, I had not yet actually read anything by him. As a result of my conversation with Judith, however, I made a mental note to do so as soon as possible.

¹⁵ Sebastian Moore, *God is a New Language* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1967), p. 168. Moore, who died in 2014 at the age of ninety-six, was the author of some of the most original and influential theological works of the past fifty years. For example, in addition to *God is a New Language*, see *The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger*, revised edition (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977/2018); *The Body of Christ: The Shudder of Blissful Truth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2011); and *The Contagion of Jesus: Doing Theology as if it Mattered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

Not long thereafter, I picked up a copy of Kripal's second book *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001),¹⁶ and it opened up a whole new world for me that I had theretofore only intuited and dreamed was possible. For here was a scholar who not only demonstrated "how the modern study of mysticism has often been inspired by the mystical experiences of the scholars themselves," but who also unabashedly analyzed his own mystical experiences in "a series of revealing autobiographical essays...that envision the study of mysticism as a mystical phenomenon, with its own unique histories, psychosexual dynamics, ethical disciplines, existential paradoxes, and unitive goals." In so doing, I felt that Kripal had brought, in the words of Peter Homans, "a new dignity to...the modern study of religion."¹⁷ Beyond this, however, through Kripal's decidedly Blakean text, I felt that I had found another kindred spirit whose words made me feel a little less alone.

Beginning with *Roads of Excess*, therefore, I started to read everything by Dr. Kripal that I could get my hands on. In relatively short order, the initial sense of kinship I felt was deepened and solidified by the exhilarating realization that he shared my keen interest in and devotion to the theme of *theosis* or deification. Indeed, as Kripal states in the introductory essay that is to be found on his faculty homepage, *theosis* is one of the four Greek philosophical terms that he uses to denote the four basic cycles into which he believes his body of work can be divided (the others being *eros*, *gnosis*, and *nous*). He writes:

¹⁶ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), back cover.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The fourth and much more speculative term or cycle in my corpus is that of *theosis* or "deification," that is, the common mystical and mythical theme of "becoming a god." This is where I believe that the "secret body" of the books and essays are ultimately headed. And by "headed," I mean "not there yet." And that is a gross understatement, since, as a discipline, we have barely begun to recognize the omnipresence of this kind of human experience. Accordingly, we have hardly begun to classify and compare the various forms and nuances of human deification, much less theorize these and make them our own, as it were. I am struck, though, by how this "impossible" theme has appeared, and yet not appeared, as a kind of invisible black hole around which all my books appear to orbit, as if they fear what they cannot see but ominously sense. This, in a word, may be their final gravity.¹⁸

Upon reading this, I knew in my heart of hearts that if I was ever to pursue doctoral studies it would be—indeed could only be—with this unconventional, even maverick historian of religion. This scholar who in good Blakean fashion proclaims himself convinced that everything partakes of and hence manifests one reality, which "is fundamentally nondual."¹⁹ This professor with a monastic background, who refuses to separate rationalism and mysticism, who believes: "The impossible is possible. The physical is metaphysical. The evolutionary mythologies and mysticisms are true. And we

¹⁸ Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Introductory Essay," at <https://kripal.rice.edu/essay.html>.

¹⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Frequently Asked Questions," at <https://kripal.rice.edu/faq.html>.

are living them.”²⁰ This intellectual adventurer who—playfully but also seriously—seeks to transform consciousness and culture by expanding “the imaginative possibilities and present institutional structures of the humanities in the university” unto “the furthest horizon of thought,” where “the humanities become the divinities.”²¹ It would take some time and effort, but eventually the stars would align in seemingly miraculous fashion to allow me to study with Dr. Kripal and so further explore the impossible possibility of deification—the central focus and major subtext of my own spiritual life.

Thus, from the outset, my interest in deification and/or mystical union has been a matter of vital concern. Indeed, it is the contemplative “black hole” around which my entire life appears to have been orbiting. As such, it is a matter of identity, of answering the fearful and fascinating question that in actuality is at the heart of the queries posed above: Who am I? According to the mystical traditions of all three Abrahamic faiths, the numinous answer to this question is to be found in union with God, in the transfiguring adventure that is *theosis* or deification, which ultimately surpasses understanding. A parable told by the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello succinctly captures this truth, the paradoxical nature of which will be unpacked and explored in the following pages.

“How does one seek union with God?”

“The harder you seek, the more distance you create between Him and you.”

“So what does one do about the distance?”

“Understand that it isn’t there.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Introductory Essay,” at <https://kripal.rice.edu/essay.html>.

“Does that mean that God and I are one?”

“Not one. Not two.”

“How is that possible?”

“The sun and its light, the ocean and the wave, the singer and his song—
not one. Not two.”²²

²² *Anthony de Mello: Writings*, edited with an introduction by William Dych (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 73.

Introduction

So we are grasped, by that which we could not grasp,
at such great distance, so fully manifest —

and it changes us, even when we do not reach it,
into something that, hardly sensing it, we already are...

Rainer Maria Rilke¹

This dissertation seeks to answer two fundamental questions. First, what is *theosis* or deification? And second, given that mystics in the three Abrahamic faiths have written experientially of deification, what might be some of the phenomenological and anthropological lessons that we can learn today from their insights into the nature of reality and from those of the scholars who study them?

To answer these questions, after initially offering my preferred working definition of *theosis* or deification from the Christian tradition, I subsequently refract it through the lens of what is essentially a history of religions or reflexively comparative approach to a deep reading of the same theme in some representative texts of two major authors in the modern study of Islamic and Jewish mysticism respectively, Henry Corbin and Elliot Wolfson. This exploration is done in the service of gaining greater insight into the phenomenological and anthropological significance of the specific mystical category of deification via the “academic esotericism”² of these two authors. The goal of undertaking

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, “A Walk” (Muzot, Switzerland, the Alps, March, 1924), translated by Cliff Crego in his *Rilke in the Wallows*, 2nd ed. (picture-poems.com, 2010). This poem can also be found at <http://picture-poems.com/week6/susten.html>.

² I am borrowing this designation from Jeffrey Kripal. See his *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 25.

such a dialogical study of each author's treatment of deification is to journey toward a more mystical, poetic, and, hence, constructive understanding of what it means to be human. My fundamental argument is that, *when viewed in the dialogical light of Corbin's and Wolfson's esoteric works, deification can be seen to be pointing to a relatively common cross-cultural mystical experience that bears witness to the essential and paradoxical oneness of humanity and divinity.*

This study is therefore an extension of Jeffrey Kripal's general thesis that "the history of mysticism as an academic discipline shares in the history of mysticism as a historical phenomenon,"³ and as a development of his key notion of "the Human as Two" (and One).⁴ As such, this dissertation is a comparative exercise in attending to the "open secret" of our inherent paradoxicality—"be it conceived ontologically, epistemologically, or hermeneutically"⁵—and an invitation to reimagine our human identity in the light of the impossible possibility of becoming divine.

Thus two interrelated theses are put forward, a foundational one and the main thesis that is built upon it. Regarding the former, inasmuch as this dissertation is both historical and constructive in nature, its foundational thesis is twofold: by using a comparative lens to attend closely to the thread of deification in the mystical weave of Corbin's and Wolfson's works, we can (a) gain a deeper insight into the nature of the

³ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴ See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 36 and 428, where he defines this "gnomon" as follows: "*The Human as Two*. Each human being is two, that is, each person is simultaneously a conscious constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifests only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy, which the religious traditions have historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward into the sky as divine, as 'God' or introjected inward into the human being as nirvana, brahman, or located in some sort of experienced paradoxical state that is neither inside nor outside, as in the Chinese Dao or the American paranormal."

⁵ Jeffrey J. Kripal, "The Gnostic Garden: Kabbalistic Motifs in a Modern Jewish Visionary," *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 3:2 (2018), p. 240.

experience of deification through its textual representations and refractions (the historical project), and (b) thereby arrive at a better understanding of what it means to be human (the constructive or mystical anthropology project). The main thesis is that to properly understand and make one's own the subtle, imaginal, contemplative experience of deification necessitates a radical openness to the participatory or nondual reality that is both veiled and revealed by the dualisms that dominate conventional Western discourse: self/other, mind/body, reason/emotion, divinity/humanity.

In this introduction, I will first offer a brief word or two about the history and current state of scholarly interest in the topic of deification. This will help to situate in its proper context what is to follow. After indicating where the study of deification currently stands, the question of what deification is and why I have chosen it as a topic will be briefly addressed. It is here that I will offer my working definition of deification that subsequently will be refracted through the lens of Corbin's and Wolfson's selected works. Next, it will be necessary to explain why I am focusing on the works of Henry Corbin and Elliot Wolfson. This will suggest how my text relates to and expands upon the previous work of other scholars in the field of religious studies. Then, in the interest of transparency and full disclosure, I will offer some disclaimers and clarifications concerning my particular perspective and also specify some of the assumptions underlying it. This will be followed by a brief consideration of the general approach or methodology that I have adopted in writing this dissertation. Finally, I will outline the argument and flow of this study.

On the History and Current State of the Study of Deification

With specific reference to the history of Christianity, as numerous scholars have observed, the patristic concept of deification or *theosis* (θέωσις) has long been a controversial issue.⁶ Filip Ivanovic notes that the term as such “does not appear in the Scriptures or in the Apostolic teachings, and it was considered by many an embarrassing aberration of Greek patristics, due to its close relationship with pagan Hellenism” and that culture’s notion of *apotheosis*.⁷ The ancient Romans adopted this notion. It served as the justification of their custom of deifying emperors and worshiping them as gods, with the result that when the idea of *theosis* or deification was taken up by some of the early Church fathers there were those who viewed it with suspicion. This suspicion was passed down the ages, such that in certain circles deification seemed to be—in the words of Benjamin Drewery—a “disastrous flaw in Greek Christian thought,”⁸ whose supporters were “guilty of pushing a paradox into the realms of the nonsensical.”⁹

Among those who distrusted the doctrine of *theosis* was the influential German Lutheran theologian and church historian Adolf von Harnack, who saw it as one of the crucial

⁶ See Filip Ivanovic, *Desiring the Beautiful: The Erotic-Aesthetic Dimension of Deification in Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), p. 13. Some other recent examples are: *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006); *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011); Paul M. Collins, *Partaking in Divine Nature: Deification and Communion* (New York: Bloomsbury/T and T Clark, 2010); Vladimir Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole: The Concept of Theosis in the Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009); *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Filip Ivanovic, *Desiring the Beautiful: The Erotic-Aesthetic Dimension of Deification in Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), p. 13.

⁸ Benjamin Drewery, *Origen and the Doctrine of Grace* (London: Epworth, 1960), p. 200; as cited in Ivanovic, *Desiring the Beautiful*, p. 13.

⁹ Benjamin Drewery, “Deification,” in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp*, ed. P. Brooks (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 52; as cited in Ivanovic, *Desiring the Beautiful*, p. 13.

concepts responsible for the Hellenization of Christianity, a transformation that he found lamentable inasmuch as it changed “glowing hope of the kingdom of heaven into doctrine of immortality and deification.”¹⁰ This assumption was reinforced by the crisis theology of Karl Barth, who emphasized the radical “Otherness” of God and so found any notion of “partaking of the divine nature” or “becoming God” to be blasphemous.

But, as Vladimir Kharlamov observes, that is just one end of the spectrum. On the other end is a long list of modern Eastern Orthodox, and some Roman Catholic, theologians who “not only support the concept of deification as genuinely Christian but also see deification as the representative...approach to the soteriology that has been expressed by patristic authors from the beginning.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, this position has not been without its critics. One prominent example worth mentioning with Kharlamov is Jean Daniélou, who was critical of what he regarded as “the anachronistic inaccuracy of interpreting the early fathers in light of the later developments of patristic theology.”¹²

The various debates surrounding deification notwithstanding, the attitude toward this doctrine has changed over time as a result of increased scholarly interest in it. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia, Ivan Popov’s essay “The Idea of Deification in the Early Eastern Church” is, in the words of Kharlamov, “the first comprehensive and critical theological assessment of this notion in modern patristic

¹⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), vol. 1, p. 45; as cited in Vladimir Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole: The Concept of Theosis in the Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p. 1.

¹¹ Vladimir Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole: The Concept of Theosis in the Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), p. 1.

¹² Jean Daniélou, “Introduction,” in Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *La deification de l’homme, selon la doctrine Pères grecs* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1970), p. 15; as cited in Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, p. 2.

scholarship.”¹³ In the West, writing at the same time, the Spanish Dominican friar Juan Arintero wrote a two-volume essay on the theory and practice of the spiritual life that was essentially an extended apologia for the concept of deification, which—anticipating the later work of Teilhard de Chardin—he referred to as “mystical evolution.”¹⁴ The first scholar to take a more historical approach to the study of deification in an effort to rehabilitate it for Western European theology was Myrrha Lot-Borodine, who in 1932-33 published a series of articles in French on the doctrine of deification in the Greek Church until the ninth century, which were collected after her death and reprinted as *La deification de l'homme selon la doctrine Pères grecs* (1970).¹⁵ In 1938, Jules Gross published his extensive survey of deification entitled *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les Pères grecs: Contribution historique a la doctrine de la grace*.¹⁶ Similarly, the work of such scholars and theologians as Vladimir Lossky, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri du Lubac, and more recently John Meyendorff and Norman Russell have contributed significantly to the renewed ecumenical interest in the theme of *theosis*.

As suggested above, the human longing for union with the divine that animates the doctrine of deification is “a significant element in many religious traditions and is not a new concept introduced by Christianity.”¹⁷ And while it is true that, as previously mentioned, deification as such does not appear in the Bible, there are certain scriptural

¹³ Vladimir Kharlamov, “Introduction,” in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), p. 16.

¹⁴ John G. Arintero, *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, tr. Jordan Aumann, 2 vols. (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978). This work was first published in Spain in 1908.

¹⁵ Heleen E. Zorgdrager, “A Practice of Love: Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882-1954) and the Modern Revival of the Doctrine of Deification,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 64:3-4 (2012), p. 288.

¹⁶ Jules Gross, *La divinisation du chrétien d'après les Pères grecs: Contribution historique a la doctrine de la grace* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1938). Translated into English as *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers* (Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002). As cited in Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, p. 4.

passages that have served as the basis for Christian reflection on human beings becoming divine.¹⁸ Among these is Psalm 82:6, which affirms, “You are gods; you are all children of the Most High.” Another passage is 1 Corinthians 15:28 which states that, “when all things are subjected to him, then...God may be all in all,” and 2 Peter 1:4 which proclaims that, “he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature.” Likewise, in the letters of Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:2), and “Let this mind be in you, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

In actuality, therefore, the Greek thinkers of the first centuries of Christianity had “a solid basis, found in both philosophical tradition and Scripture, on which they could build the teaching of partaking in God and becoming like God,”¹⁹ which again is animated by the human longing for and experience of union with the divine. This fluid and participatory teaching was understood according to different conceptual models that all fell under the umbrella term of deification, regardless of whether a given thinker drew more from the philosophical tradition or the scriptural tradition for terminology to articulate it.

With respect to the former tradition, the contemplative notion of deification as the embodiment of mystical union appears already in the work of the Jewish philosopher Philo,²⁰ who influenced such early Christian thinkers as Justin Martyr. The idea was further developed by Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus of Rome, Origen, Athanasius of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, Evagrius of Pontus, John Cassian,

¹⁸ Ivanovic, *Desiring the Beautiful*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For an extensive study of mystical union and embodiment (i.e., deification) in Judaism, see Adam Afterman, *“And They Shall Be One Flesh”: On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016).

and Dionysius the Areopagite or Pseudo-Dionysius, to name a few of the doctrine's more prominent exponents. It was Clement of Alexandria who first used the Greek verb *theopoieō* (θεοποιέω), literally “to make god,” to describe how the Christian philosopher may be called a god because he has become like God through the attainment of gnosis, which is contemplative or experiential knowledge/wisdom, and *apatheia* (ἀπάθεια), which is literally translated as “without suffering or passion,” but which I think is better rendered by the paradoxical term “passionate equanimity.”²¹

It must be noted that for such thinkers as Clement, Origen, Anthony, and Evagrius, all of whom eagerly appropriated and creatively adapted a full range of contemporary mystical themes found in the school of Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy, the Platonic tradition (including Neoplatonism), and Gnosticism, the word “passion” had a

²¹ On Clement of Alexandria's use of *theopoieō*, see Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 9. On his appropriation and use of the Greek term for direct, illuminated, contemplative, or experiential knowledge, *gnosis* (Latin *intellectus*), see Arkadi Choufrine, *Gnosis, Theophany, Theosis: Studies in Clement of Alexandria's Appropriation of His Background* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002) and Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1997). For the term “passionate equanimity,” I am indebted to Ken Wilber and his late wife Treya Killam Wilber. See Ken Wilber, *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000). A similarly paradoxical locution that more accurately captures the experiential substance of *apatheia* is Holly Hillgardner's notion of “passionate non-attachment.” See Holly Hillgardner, *Longing and Letting Go: Christian and Hindu Practices of Non-Attachment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). It must be noted that for such thinkers as Clement, Origen, Anthony, and Evagrius, all of whom eagerly appropriated and creatively adapted a full range of contemporary mystical themes found in the school of Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy, the Platonic tradition (including Neoplatonism), and Gnosticism, the word “passion” had a very specific meaning. As Peter Brown points out, the passions “were not what we call feelings: they were, rather, complexes which hindered the true expression of feelings” (*The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], p. 130). Hence, more broadly, for these early Christian thinkers, a “passion” was any disordered desire, uncontrolled emotion, afflictive thought, or self-absorbed story that overcomes one, that knocks one off balance, or with which one identifies to the extent that the expression of one's true identity in Christ is hindered or obscured. In this, a “passion” was essentially an addiction to the reactive mind and hence a form of dis-ease. It was not, as some mistakenly think, a blanket term denoting all feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Thus, when Evagrius, for example, counsels vigilance with respect to thoughts and promotes *apatheia*, he is encouraging dis-identification with the reactive mind specifically. As Martin Laird puts it, “Reactive mind does not so much identify thoughts as *identify with* thoughts. Evagrius means to change our identification with thoughts (I am my thoughts) to allowing thoughts simply to be what they are. Just thoughts.” See Martin Laird, *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 80; emphasis in original.

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In the fourth century Gregory of Nazianzus began to use the term *theosis* (θεώσις) to refer to deification or divinization. And, like the earlier patristic writers before him, Gregory used deification as a bold metaphor to communicate the heights of human perfection or holiness, the meaning of which he just took for granted that his readers understood.²² It was not until Pseudo-Dionysius wrote in the sixth century that “divinization [or deification] consists of being as much as possible like and in union with

²² Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, p. 1.

God”²³ that the first formal definition of deification was given. Indeed, as Ivanovic contends, it was with Pseudo-Dionysius (and later Maximus the Confessor) that the doctrine of deification “received its fullest expression” and came to represent “the unavoidable basis for all future discourse on deification, up to the fourteenth-century great hesychast Gregory Palamas.”²⁴ I will have more to say about Pseudo-Dionysius’ notion of deification below.

Thus, from this brief sketch, it is clear that there is a long history of deification in Christianity. Indeed, following Kharlamov, it can be argued that in one form or another, to one degree or another, “the notion of *theosis* is a continuously occurring belief that is present in Christian theology from the beginning.” At the same time, however, “there is no unilateral consensus among early Christian authors about the precise meaning of this notion”; that there seems to be “no necessary continuity between the [different] ideas concerning deification” found in the Greek fathers of late antiquity. Granted, there is a certain consistency in this period of theological flux insofar as *theosis* is addressed in conjunction with or in the context of such theological issues as “the full divinity of Christ, immortality and eternal life, the image and likeness of God in the human being, sanctification, redemption, sacramental theology, and general and individual eschatology.” But given this diversity of theological issues that fed into the stream of Christian thought concerning deification or divinization, it is impossible to view its development as being in any way homogenous. Rather, the presence of *theosis* in patristic thought should be regarded “in the context of theological marginal

²³ *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 198. The passage is taken from *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 1.376A. See also Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, p. 1.

²⁴ Ivanovic, *Desiring the Beautiful*, p. 15.

multidimensionality that on occasion can be reflected within the content of the writing of a single author.”²⁵ And, again, it is really not until the end of late antiquity with the anonymous Syrian monk Pseudo-Dionysius that deification emerges in the Christian *imaginaire* as a central theological topic in its own right.²⁶

Before circling back to consider the current state of the study of deification, I want to draw attention to and make explicit something that is only implied above in my references to Philo and Clement of Alexandria’s linking of contemplation (gnosis) and *theosis*. In light of this linkage, which yields what Jacob Sherman refers to as “contemplative divinization,”²⁷ it is important to keep in mind that it was not the Greek context alone that determined the meaning of contemplation (*theoria*) and hence deification for the early Christians. Indeed, as Sherman avers, “the early Christian use of *theoria* owes as much to the visionary, esoteric, and apocalyptic Judaisms that were widespread in the first century, and to the *merkavah* mysticism that is discernible at least in the writings of St. Paul and John of Patmos, as it does to the Western contemplative tradition articulated before Christianity.” He continues:

Already in Alexandria, where so much of the Christian spiritual tradition would later emerge, Philo linked middle-Platonic speculations about philosophical *theoria* to the biblical concepts of person, covenant, and

²⁵ Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, p. 5. It should be noted that in the inherently marginal movement of early Christian desert monasticism – in particular the tradition associated with the Alexandrian school of thought, which was led by such figures as Antony of Egypt, Macarius the Elder, Macarius the Younger, the Tall Brothers, and Evagrius of Pontus – the theme of *theosis* was central to the theorizing of the monastic life. See for example Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁷ Jacob Holsinger Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 17.

relationality. These Jewish traditions located the center of the human being in the heart instead of the mind, and held to a personalist anthropology that integrated body, soul, and spirit, rather than relegating the essence of the human being only to an intellectualized version of the latter term.²⁸

Sherman goes on to state that, the diversity of the Western contemplative tradition notwithstanding, early Christians like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, following Philo, adopted the term *theoria* but now applied it to or coupled it with a mystical understanding of personal participation in or union with Godself (*theosis*)—an understanding that is reflected in “the technically false but substantively revealing Byzantine etymology that derived *theoria* from *theon horan*: to see God in all things.”²⁹ It is therefore important to keep this “integral and broadly catholic”³⁰ sense of contemplation-deification in mind.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁹ Ibid. It is worth mentioning that in footnote 51 on this page, regarding Jewish influence on the Christian coupling of contemplation (*theoria*) and deification (*theosis*), Sherman writes: “G. G. Strousma notes that early architects of the contemplative tradition, such as Clement and Origen, were not only proficient in Greek thought but also claimed to have learned from Jewish masters, and Jerome reports that Eusebius was likewise apprenticed to a Jewish master.” Among the noteworthy works that explore the second-temple roots of Christian contemplation and hence deification that Sherman cites here are the following: Guy G. Strousma, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed. (Boston: Brill, 2005); Alexander Golitzin, “Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mysticism?”, *Pro Ecclesia* 12:2 (2003), pp. 161-212; Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 34-71; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984). On the Jewish merkabah traditions, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), pp. 40-79; and Rachel Elior, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism*, trans. David Louvish (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004). For a more recent and comprehensive work that treats the theme of deification in terms of the notion of a heavenly double – an angelic twin of an earthbound human – as found in the Jewish pseudepigrapha (books from the Second Temple period that were attributed to biblical figures but excluded from the Hebrew Bible) that influenced the Christian, Manichaean, Islamic, and Kabbalistic traditions, see Andrei A. Orlov, *The Greatest Mirror: Heavenly Counterparts in the Jewish Pseudepigrapha* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

³⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

That having been said, if we turn our attention to the current state of the study of deification, we notice that this often neglected and maligned concept has been enjoying something of a renaissance in both theological circles and the hallowed halls of academia.

Regarding the former, as Heleen Zorgdrager has observed, there has been an increasing ecumenical interest in the theme of *theosis*, which has become “one of the most significant and fruitful subjects of Christian dialogue between Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants.” While it is true that “male theologians generally dominate the scene, with only a few women taking part,” it seems that this too is gradually changing thanks to such theologians and patristic scholars as Elisabeth Behr-Siegel, Anna Williams, and Nonna Verna Harrison. Beyond this, in the halls of academia, both male and female theologians and historians from different confessional backgrounds or none, with their own, often feminist, postmodern, and post-postmodern agendas, are increasingly engaging in the debates surrounding the issue of deification or divinization. This is due to the fact that they find in the tradition of *theosis* “resources for a more integral spirituality, for a renewed appreciation of creation, and for an open-ended, apophatic anthropology.”³¹

Yet if we dig a little deeper to inquire into what might be driving this renewed multidimensional interest in the ancient theme of deification, we find a number of significant contributing factors. For example, in addition to the comparative study of mysticism, one can point to the keen thirst for authentic spiritual experience that was characteristic of both the American counterculture of the 1960s and the so-called New Age movement of the 1980s and '90s that it spawned. Correlatively, another factor has been the growing weariness with the shallow and often hypocritical moralizing of

³¹ Zorgdrager, “A Practice of Love,” pp. 287-288.

institutional religion. Such weariness is characteristic of an increasingly large segment of the population in general and of those who identify themselves as being “spiritual but not religious” in particular, the latter being a demographic whose ranks have been steadily swelling since the 1990s. Also, as suggested above, still another contributing factor, and one that reflects favorably on institutional religion by contrast, is the ecumenical movement that has fostered increased understanding among the various Christian denominations for more than fifty years, and the multiple forms of interreligious dialogue that the Roman Catholic church has participated in since the Second Vatican Council in its efforts to foster mutual understanding among the world’s religions.

A number of other examples could be adduced, but these are sufficient to suggest how a variety of factors have contributed to the contemporary Western Christian renaissance of interest in deification. But if one had to choose a single factor to highlight the connection between the aforementioned cultural phenomena and the contemporary rebirth of interest in deification, what might that be? I would submit that the central factor and common thread that unites them all is the persistent and ever increasing thirst for genuine spiritual or mystical experience. Indeed, as the theologian Roger Olson has observed, “[t]he search for transformation through spirituality [read: mystical experience] lies at the heart of the new interest in deification.”³²

The search for spiritual transformation that is at the heart of deification—or “mystical evolution,” as Arintero put it—is likely a constitutive feature of humanity itself, of *homo religiosus* in Mircea Eliade’s terminology, or *homo mysticus* in that of

³² Roger E. Olson, “Deification in Contemporary Theology,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007), p. 188.

Erich Neumann.³³ Deification in this model is thus both ever ancient and ever new, and is—in the words of the contemporary historian M. David Litwa—“one of the most terrifying and exhilarating ideas imagined by humankind.”³⁴ Moreover, according to the Camaldolese monk and scholar Bruno Barnhart, deification is “the ultimate affirmation of the human person” and hence the mystic heart of Western history, the tragic side of which “always involves the eclipse and suppression of this arch-truth.”³⁵

Thus with Litwa we observe that, while the aspiration for and vocabulary of deification has been with us for millennia, “we stand on the brink of a new discourse.” This is so because, for the first time, “deification is being used as a scholarly category in religious and biblical studies for understanding humanity and the human vision of salvation.” And although this new scholarly category includes Christian forms of deification, in the new comparative milieu, it “is not restricted by the norms of Christian theology” or its institutional demands for doctrinal orthodoxy.³⁶

It is, then, within this overall contemporary and pluralistic religio-socio-cultural context that this dissertation is to be situated. In terms of the personal context, as stated above, the project is born of my desire to explore the mystical notion of deification via the “academic esotericism” of Corbin and Wolfson. More will be said about the personal context of my project below.

³³ See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959) and Erich Neumann *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954/2014).

³⁴ M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), p. ix.

³⁵ Bruno Barnhart, *Second Simplicity: The Inner Shape of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 116.

³⁶ Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, pp. ix-x.

The What and Why of Deification

But at this point we do well to ask: What *is* deification? Etymologically, as the Latin translation of the Greek *theosis*, deification means the process of making (from the Latin *facere*) someone or something a god (from the Latin *deus*). In its broadest sense, however, deification is “the attainment of some sort of...transcendence” that can be described in a variety of terms inasmuch as there is no single form of deification; indeed, there are as many forms of deification as there are human conceptions of God, or ultimate reality by any other name.³⁷ Nevertheless, the many types of deification are united in the understanding that “[i]f humans are to experience transcendence—even ultimacy—they must in some way become like (the) God(s), and even gods themselves.”³⁸ That is, they must in some way become, or come to know themselves to be, what God is.

Thus my own working definition of deification is based on this insight and a particular set of theological and ontological convictions that I want to acknowledge and at least begin to elucidate here. Consistent with the ancient monastic linkage of it to contemplation (*theoria* or *gnosis*), I understand deification to be *the ever-deepening existential or embodied realization of humanity’s (and, ipso facto, all of creation’s) unity with God*. By “God” I mean, to paraphrase Raimon Panikkar, the abyssal depth dimension of every being. This “God” is both transcendent to and immanent in the natural order.³⁹ Within such a theological frame, God or the divine is “the essence that

³⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 1-2. Litwa goes on to note that deification is referred to by many names, such as “divinization,” “theosis,” “apotheosis,” and “exaltation.” He adds that for the sake of clarity and simplicity he uses the term “deification” as an umbrella category that includes the other terms. I am following him in this regard.

³⁹ See Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 61. Accordingly, my theology (and theological anthropology) is a panentheistic, theomonistic, or nondual one. The precise meaning of these terms will be made clear in the pages that follow.

[embraces] all essence.”⁴⁰ Such statements of course cry out for further explication, which is why in the following chapters I will be exploring these and related notions at greater length through the prism of Corbin’s and Wolfson’s respective oeuvres.

It is in the light of this working definition, then, that a couple of the reasons for my choosing deification as the topic of this dissertation begin to emerge and become a bit clearer. The first reason is that, with Litwa and Barnhart, I believe “deification is an important part of the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the West,”⁴¹ even if—or, rather, precisely because—it has often been feared, marginalized, and suppressed. Granted, the unconventional notion of deification may strike the vast majority of people as being fantastic, impossible, incredible, heretical, or “queer.”⁴² But it is precisely the “otherness” of deification that makes its exploration so exhilarating and paradoxically familiar. For while it is true that deification is “other” to most of us in postmodern Western culture, the “other” is and always will be within.⁴³

The second reason for my having chosen to focus on deification has to do with the fact that the creative way I (mis)read this theme is consistent with Jeffrey Kripal’s notion of “the Human as Two”—which “doubleness,” he acknowledges, is “the fundamental structure and paradox” of his own entire oeuvre.⁴⁴ Kripal summarizes this central aspect of his work in the following “gnomon”:

⁴⁰ Meister Eckhart, Sermon 19 (Q 71), *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O’C. Walshe (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009), p. 141.

⁴¹ Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, p. 239.

⁴² See Andy Buechel, *That We Might Become God: The Queerness of Creedal Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

⁴³ See Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, p. 239.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 4.

Each human being is two, that is, each person is simultaneously a conscious constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifests only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy, which the religious traditions have historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward into the sky as divine, as the gods or God, introjected inward into the human being as nirvana or brahman, or located in some sort of experienced paradoxical state that is neither inside nor outside, as in the Chinese Dao or the American paranormal.⁴⁵

In other words, following Kripal (and Eliade before him), I have chosen deification as the topic of this dissertation because I am interested in exploring the phenomenological and ontological relations of “the Human as Two as both particularized historical ego and transtemporal Mind.”⁴⁶

Consequently, my treatment of deification is intended to offer a way of reading religion that is constructive rather than merely deconstructive. As such, it is meant to “tell a better story”⁴⁷ about who we are, one that will “help awaken the dignity and responsibility of the individual by providing a holistic vision,”⁴⁸ a re-enchanted myth that reflects the paradoxical truth of what William Blake called our “divine humanity.”

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 428.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 403.

⁴⁷ See Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), and, with Whitley Strieber, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁴⁸ Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), p. 6.

Ultimately, therefore, my reasons for choosing deification as the topic of this dissertation are at once existential, theological, and speculative in nature.

The Work of Henry Corbin

This brings us to the question of why I have chosen to explore the theme of deification in the work of Henry Corbin (1903-1978), the distinguished French scholar of Islamic mysticism and philosophy. I do so for four reasons. First, as is widely recognized by friend and foe alike, he was “one of the great esoteric scholars of the twentieth century.”⁴⁹ Indeed, in the words of one of his critics, Corbin “may have been the most sophisticated and learned esotericist of the [last] century,” whose mystical scholarship or scholarly esoterism was “a brilliantly polished, absolutely authentic, and utterly irreproducible mixture” of medieval philosophy, occultism, History of Religions, Lutheran theology, and Shi’ite ideology, to name only some of the more well-known influences on his thought.⁵⁰ Thus, to my mind at least, the fact that Corbin wrote what he referred to as “prophetic philosophy”⁵¹—what the same critic describes as “a kind of esoteric science complemented by the acceptable apparatus of footnotes” and characterized by “a genius for sympathetic representation”⁵² of his sources—makes his

⁴⁹ Gary Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 2015), p. 171.

⁵⁰ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 172.

⁵¹ Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977/1989), p. xii: “The Prophet is not a diviner of future events but the spokesman of the invisible and of the Invisible Ones, and it is this that gives its sense to a ‘prophetic philosophy’ (*hikmat nabawiya*). A prophetic philosophy is thus a ‘narrative philosophy,’ absolved of the dilemma which obsesses those who ask: is it myth or is it history? In other words: is it real or is it unreal?”

⁵² Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, pp. 172, 175.

work not only unique and controversial but, much more important, eminently worth studying.

The second reason why I am choosing to focus on the work of Corbin is because I strongly resonate with a central idea that animated his esoteric scholarship and inspired the founding of his center for comparative spiritual research, the University of Saint John of Jerusalem. I am referring to the desideratum of “an Abrahamic oecumenism founded upon a sharing of the hidden treasures of the esoteric traditions” of the Religions of the Book.⁵³ Thus I hope that my proposed study will in some small way help to foster the kind of Abrahamic ecumenism Corbin had in mind.

Related to this is the third reason why I have chosen Corbin as a dialogue partner of my dissertation. Specifically, I am referring to the fact that a major theme running through his vast oeuvre like a red thread is that of the practical goal of Islamic mystical philosophy, which is designated as *ta'alluh*. This Arabic word comes from the same root as Allah and means “being like God” or “conforming to God” or “deiformity.”⁵⁴ It is therefore, as Corbin notes, the Arabic equivalent of the Christian notion of *theosis* or deification,⁵⁵ which phenomenon in one form or another is common to the mystical traditions of all three Abrahamic faiths.⁵⁶

⁵³ Henry Corbin, “Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview,” trans. Matthew Evans Cockle, p. 40. URL = <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/biography/biographical-post-scriptum-to-a-philosophical-interview/>. It is worth noting that Corbin found in the work and person of Gershom Scholem support for this idea. In the same biographical post-script, he writes: “[Scholem’s] monumental work is for us, not only an unlimited resource but one that carries with an imperative message we cannot ignore: we must no longer consider the ‘esoterisms’ of the three great ‘Religions of the Book’ as isolated phenomenon” (p. 36).

⁵⁴ William Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Dīn Kāshānī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 73.

⁵⁵ See for example Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1998), p. 121.

⁵⁶ It is perhaps worth mentioning that, just as the mystical or esoteric traditions of all three Abrahamic faiths embrace the experiential phenomenon of deification, most of the conventional or exoteric forms of these same faiths consider deification to be a serious error worthy of condemnation.

The fourth reason I want to briefly mention is the fact that Elliot Wolfson has repeatedly acknowledged Corbin as a major influence on his own work on Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. Specifically, Corbin's seminal idea of the "imaginal" has featured prominently in Wolfson's vast oeuvre.⁵⁷

The Work of Elliot Wolfson

At this point, the additional question of why I have chosen to explore the theme of deification in the work of Elliot Wolfson needs to be addressed. There are a number of reasons for this choice, all of which echo what was said above about Corbin.

Thus, to begin with, despite being controversial, Wolfson is held in high regard by his scholarly peers. For instance, after noting that Henry Corbin has "markedly informed the interpretation of the role of the imagination in Kabbalah by Elliot Wolfson," the Israeli scholar of Jewish mysticism, Jonathan Garb, writes that Wolfson is "the leading theoretician of the post-Scholem era" in modern Kabbalah scholarship.⁵⁸ Similarly, Jeffrey Kripal has written that "[n]o contemporary historian of religions has thought more deeply and written more eloquently about the hermeneutical experience and its potential mystical dimensions than the American Kabbalah scholar Elliot Wolfson."⁵⁹

And this acclaim is well-deserved both within the field of Kabbalah studies (Garb) and within religious studies or the history of religions (Kripal). Wolfson has been publishing since 1987 and to date has written fifteen books, edited or co-edited five

⁵⁷ As but two examples, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), and "'Imago Templi' and the Meeting of the Two Seas: Liturgical Time-Space and the Feminine Imaginary in Zoharic Kabbalah," in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 51 (Spring 2007), pp. 121-135.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul: Psychological Thought in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 7.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 258.

volumes, contributed book chapters to over fifty volumes in a variety of languages, and published well over fifty journal articles, also in various languages, in addition to lecturing internationally. Despite the remarkable quality and quantity of his output, or perhaps because of it, there has not yet been written a full-length comparative monograph that treats Wolfson's "academic esotericism" (Kripal's expression), much less in relationship to that of Corbin via an exploration of a specific theme (i.e., deification) that is common to both of their multifaceted and interdisciplinary bodies of work.⁶⁰ This being the case, the proposed dissertation is in some small way an effort to begin filling this lacuna.

It is also an attempt on my part to redress what I perceive to be an unfortunate state of affairs, which is that Wolfson's mystical and philosophical thought has not received the kind of sustained, serious attention it deserves.⁶¹ This may be due to a variety of reasons. As suggested above, it could be that scholars far wiser and more

⁶⁰ This is not to say that there have been no studies done on specific aspects of Wolfson's thought and multifaceted oeuvre. Various authors have in fact written such studies in the form of book chapters or sections of chapters. See, for example, Jeffrey Kripal, "The Mystical Mirror of Hermeneutics: Gazing into Elliot Wolfson's *Speculum* (1994)," in *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), and Aaron Hughes, "Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait," in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015). For a recent chapter section, see the chapter entitled "'Single Unification, Single Bond': The Language of Union and Unity in the Zohar," in Adam Afterman, *"And They Shall Be One Flesh": On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016). Also, studies have been written on Wolfson's poetry and painting. See Barbara Ellen Galli, *On Wings of Moonlight: Elliot R. Wolfson's Poetry in the Path of Rosenzweig and Celan* (Montreal/Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007) and Marcia Brennan, *Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot Wolfson* (Houston: Rice University Press, 2009).

⁶¹ This is one of the ways Wolfson differs from Corbin, about whose thought a number of serious works have been written in both French and English. See, for example, Christian Jambet, *La Logique de Orientaux: Henry Corbin et la science des forms* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983); Daryush (Dariush) Shayegan, *Henry Corbin: La Topographie Spirituelle de l'Islam Iranien* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1990); and Tom Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism* (Woodstock, CT: Spring Journal Books, 2003), *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), *After Prophecy: Imagination, Incarnation, and the Unity of the Prophetic Tradition* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), and *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2012).

prudent than I have found the sheer volume, diversity, and brilliance of Wolfson's work too daunting. Or it could be that academics are wary of Wolfson who, in establishing himself – in Garb's words – as “the leading theoretician [of Kabbalah] of the post-Scholem era,” has not shied away from challenging the status quo in both scholarly and popular circles. Indeed, as one of his colleagues has observed, in addition to challenging his scholarly peers, Wolfson “has also consistently rejected the glib, platitudinous understandings of Jewish mythology and symbolism prevalent in work written for a popular audience. This eschewing of cant and easy cliché is consistent with the restless, searching spirit evident in his scholarship.”⁶² Then, too, it could be a combination of all of the above, and more besides.

But whatever the reason(s) may be for this relative neglect, the fact remains that Wolfson's body of work is too little known, in my estimation. Hence, in the hope of helping to remedy this situation, I have chosen to consider his thought at length, in dialogue with that of Corbin, via an exploration of the mystical phenomenon of deification. This is not to say that I will do justice to Wolfson's work (or Corbin's, for that matter), but only that I see my dissertation as being a practical step in this direction.

Some Clarifications and Disclaimers

Before considering the general approach or methodology that I will be adopting in my dissertation, some words of clarification are in order. Specifically, I want to make clear that I am not writing as an expert in either Islamic or Judaic Studies but, rather, as a theologically inclined comparative thinker who has read most of Corbin's and Wolfson's

⁶² Pinchas Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah in the Wake of Scholem,” *Religious Studies Review* 25:1 (January 1999), p. 23.

oeuvres in English and has benefitted both intellectually and spiritually from doing so. To be more precise still, my interest is primarily that of a contemplative practitioner, philosopher, theologian, and historian of religions who finds Corbin and Wolfson to be brilliant and multifaceted interlocutors from whom much can be learned. Thus, to be clear, the general approach that I have taken in this dissertation of using a series of close comparative readings to show that deification and hence human being can be read and interpreted differently—reimagined—using conceptual tools borrowed from the mystical writings of Corbin and Wolfson is a constructive one that is meant to foster growth both in myself and others.⁶³ That is to say, as a Christian scholar whose love and knowledge of the Abrahamic religions is genuine but by no means uncritical, I am interested in (a) exploring how Corbin’s and Wolfson’s readings of the mystical traditions of Islam and Judaism respectively can contribute to reimagining the ancient doctrine of deification, to which I am personally committed, and (b) in demonstrating how the comparative reading of their selected works can help to elucidate what I would call the “open secret” of our divine humanity and so contribute to a new vision of reality and the transformation of consciousness, which I believe is needed if we hope to see a better future. In the end, therefore, this is a work of constructive mystical theology as much as it is a scholarly exploration of the work of Corbin and Wolfson.

Furthermore, in order to honor the self-implicating nature of the academic discipline of religious studies, as well as the mutually interpenetrating relationship of the

⁶³ In this, my methodology bears some resemblance to that of Philip Wexler. See, for example, Philip Wexler, *Mystical Interactions: Sociology, Jewish Mysticism and Education* (Los Angeles, CA: Cherub Press, 2007); *Mystical Sociology: Toward Cosmic Social Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013); *Jewish Spirituality and Social Transformation: Hasidism and Society* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019); and *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe’s Transformative Paradigm for the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019).

conceptual and the experiential, the comparative and constructive approach that I am taking is rooted in my vocational commitment and practice as a Benedictine monk, the most “poetical” of religious orders in the Roman Catholic church, according to John Henry Newman.⁶⁴ Hence my exploration of the religious experience of deification and its poetics (i.e., the imaginal nature of “becoming divine”) is necessarily colored by my monastic calling or way of life, the practical goal of which—as I have come to understand through my study—is nothing less than *theosis* or deification.⁶⁵

Consequently, the methodological approach that I have taken in this dissertation is not that of an expert of either Sufism or Kabbalah. Rather, as suggested in the preface, my approach is that of a simple monk and aspiring historian of religions who recognizes the omnipresence of the human experience of deification and who wants to make sense of this experience for himself and others in an attempt to make it increasingly his own.

Finally, given the foregoing, the methodological approach that I will be taking in my dissertation will be an exercise in boundary crossing so as to follow and highlight deification as a particular aspect of “the close relationship” between Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religiosity, and thereby contribute to “providing an apt balance to the growing particularism” of certain conservative forces in all three Religions of the Book.⁶⁶ In doing so, I will be implementing what Edith Wyschogrod calls a “postmodern historicity” that “takes cognizance of the traces or spoors that must be hunted down in

⁶⁴ John Henry Newman, *The Mission of the Benedictine Order* (London: John Long, 1908), p. 17; <https://archive.org/details/missionofbenedic00newm>.

⁶⁵ When properly understood, from the perspective of the Christian mystical tradition, *theosis* or deification is the goal of all creation. See, for example, the writings of Maximus the Confessor (590-662 CE), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-c. 1328 CE), and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464 CE).

⁶⁶ Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul*, p. 127.

order to think what is as yet unthought of in them.”⁶⁷ For, as a Christian monk and scholar, I agree with an observation that Wyschogrod made relative to Christianity and Judaism, which I want to expand to include Islam as well: that Christian thinkers can no longer confine themselves to interpreting their identities in simplistic and offensively triumphalistic terms relative to Judaism and Islam, but rather the “whole field of Jewish [and Islamic] textuality” should become the “discursive space in which Christianity must ceaselessly confront and re-articulate itself.”⁶⁸ And, as Wolfson notes, this sensibility necessarily engenders what Wyschogrod describes as a “wandering across the limen that separates Judaism and Christianity [and Islam], a boundary that is always already breached through the crossover of texts.”⁶⁹ No doubt significantly, Wyschogrod was one of Wolfson’s early teachers.

In light of this, then, the dissertation can be seen as a postmodern (or, perhaps better, metamodern) tale of deification that is rooted in a comparative mystical hermeneutic.⁷⁰ As such, our tale of soul-making or becoming divine “will weave together numerous images and motifs arising from...Jewish and Christian [and Islamic

⁶⁷ Edith Wyschogrod, “Crossover Dreams,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54:3 (1986), p. 544. As cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Apophysis and the Trace of Transcendence: Wyschogrod’s Contribution to a Postmodern Jewish Immanent A/Theology,” *Philosophy Today* 55:4 (November 2011), p. 337.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ On metamodernism, see Linda C. Cieriello, “Metamodern Mysticism: Narrative Encounters with Contemporary Western Secular Spiritualities” (PhD dissertation, Rice University, 2018). See also *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, eds. Robin Van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Hanzi Freinacht, *The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One* (Metamoderna ApS, 2017); and Lene Rachel Andersen, *Metamodernity: Meaning and Hope in a Complex World* (Nordic Bildung, 2019).

mystical] sources,”⁷¹ as we accept Corbin’s “invitation to dare the adventures of the Spirit”⁷² and follow Wolfson along “the path beyond the path.”⁷³

Some Underlying Assumptions

Here, before turning to a consideration of the method behind my madness, as it were, I want to specify some interrelated assumptions that are fundamental to my understanding of deification. This will help to further set the stage for what is to come.

My first assumption is that the human species is currently going through a massive identity crisis, and that this lack of self-understanding is at the heart of the various global crises we face—crises that threaten the future of the human race and nature alike. I therefore believe that the deepest meaning of our all-embracing identity crisis is that it is an evolutionary crisis of consciousness. It is at once, in the words of Andrew Harvey, “a death of all our agendas, illusions and fantasies,...and a birth—whose crucible is tragedy, heartbreak and devastation—of an embodied divine humanity capable of and inspired to work directly with the Divine to transform all existing ways of being and doing everything.”⁷⁴ This has significant ramifications. For seeing the crisis in this way “not only enables us to endure its necessary horrors and ordeals with faith, perseverance, and grace; it aligns us with the design of the divine intelligence of

⁷¹ Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul*, p. 18.

⁷² Henry Corbin, “Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview,” trans. Matthew Evans-Cockle, p. 25, URL= <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/biography/biographical-post-scriptum-to-a-philosophical-interview/>.

⁷³ See, for example, the lecture of Elliot R. Wolfson “The Path Beyond the Path: Mysticism and the Spiritual Quest for Universal Singularity,” given at the Rothko Chapel in Houston, TX in 2011. This lecture can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/24132743>.

⁷⁴ Andrew Harvey, “Foreword” to Philip Shepherd’s *New Self, New World: Recovering Our Senses in the Twenty-first Century* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), p. xiii.

evolution itself.”⁷⁵ Or, put somewhat differently, seeing our identity crisis as an evolutionary crisis of consciousness enables us to radically open ourselves to the experiential horizons of our being and transform our understanding of what it means to be human in accord with the divine intelligence of the generative mystery of life or reality that is continuously moving from undifferentiated unity to differentiation-in-unity, which is to say, “toward complexity, toward ever-thicker and ever-richer patterns of self-manifestation.”⁷⁶ In this, we are empowered to, in the words of Jorge Ferrer, “bear witness to a greater-than-ever plurality of visionary and existential developments grounded in a deeply felt sense of spiritual unity” that is rooted in the lived experience of “the generative dimension of the mystery” of our own being.⁷⁷ And it is this lived experience of unity-in-diversity that will “engender a sense of belonging to a common spiritual family committed to fostering the spiritual individuation of its members and the eco-socio-politically responsible transformation of the world” that we want and so desperately need.⁷⁸

Second, I assume that we are mysterious beings; that the myth of the Incarnate God is the myth of us all; that we are a “super natural”⁷⁹ union of the divine and human. This is another way of saying that I subscribe to Kripal’s paradoxical gnomon of the Human as Two, which was referenced above. Actually, as Kripal himself has occasionally done in his own terms, I should point out that this gnomon can also be

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 24.

⁷⁷ Jorge N. Ferrer, *Participation and the Mystery: Transpersonal Essays in Psychology, Education, and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), pp. 239 and 240.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 240.

⁷⁹ See Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

referred to as that of the Human as (Not)Two, or the Human as Nondual, which amounts to the same thing.⁸⁰

To be clear, following Raimon Panikkar, I understand the term “nondual” to be a metaphysical expression for the irreducibility of reality to either pure unity (monism) or mere duality (dualism), which many religions have elaborated philosophically. We see this, for example, in Hinduism’s notion of *advaita* and Christianity’s trinitarian notion of the *perichoresis* or mutual indwelling of the real. See Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, trans. Alfred DiLascia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), pp 182-183:

It is worth saying that the nondual [or trinitarian] *advaita* to which I refer is neither a dialectical negation of duality nor a secondary act of the intellect – or perhaps better, the human spirit. Rather, it is a direct vision that transcends rationality (without denying it). I do not intend to say that duality comes “first” and is subsequently denied but that we see relationality immediately “before” any duality. In this sense we may also call it “non-unity.” The constitutive relational nature of reality—or, better, its correlationality—cannot be characterized as either

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unity or duality. In fact, both the latter are no more than what human thought requires when it breaks out of the primordial silence from which it originates.

Third, to reiterate, as a Benedictine monk and Christian intellectual, I understand deification primarily in terms of mystical union with God—a nondual union that is always already the case and that needs to be progressively realized through an ever more profound transformation or evolution of consciousness.⁸¹

In understanding deification in terms of mystical union I am essentially following Arthur Versluis who, in his book *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), understands “mysticism” to refer more broadly to religious experiences corresponding to

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First, it makes clear that mysticism is a type of cognition. Second, it recognizes that this kind of cognition is beyond instrumentalizing rationality that infers what is true; it is, rather, direct cognition of a “transcendent reality,” without thereby limiting what that term means except to say that it is “beyond the division of subject and object.” Hence, third, while precise, this definition is also broad enough to include both apophatic and visionary [kataphatic] mysticism. The transcendence of subject and object can be understood as taking place on a continuum. The heart of this transcendence is known as *via negativa*, or apophatic experience, meaning the fundamental or primordial reality beyond any conceptual and sensory representation. But the same definition also holds for visionary experiences that take place hierophanically, in an inner dimension where the observing subject is not separate from the revealing object, but rather where the divine “other” reveals itself to “me” (p. 3).

It is to be noted that Litwa has reservations about understanding deification through the concept of union with God. In his contribution to the collection *Religion: Super Religion*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kripal (Farmington Hills, MI: MacMillan Reference USA, 2016), “Becoming Gods: Deification and the Supernatural,” Litwa writes: “The problem of union language is its vagueness: it could refer to composition, blending, or fusion,” and the latter two descriptors are freighted with “negative nuances” (p. 100). Be this as it may, however, while I appreciate Litwa’s efforts to generate new categories of deification using language that may be less ambiguous than that of mystical union and hence potentially freer of negative connotations, I think such “vagueness” is not so much a problem as it is a reflection of the mysterious and hence ultimately indeterminate nature of the phenomenon in question (i.e., deification/mystical union). Thus, for reasons that will become even clearer below, I think understanding deification in terms of mystical union with God is more of an asset than a liability—one that affords the kind of interpretative flexibility Versluis describes.

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I thus see it as an imaginal experience that is inherently paradoxical and indeterminate.⁸² In this, while there are different forms and notions of deification, my understanding most strongly resonates with what Litwa has called the "gnostic" model, which he describes as consisting of three fundamental elements. Referring to the ancient gnostics (many of whom were Christians), he writes:

(1) They posited an intimate relation between a lower, immanent self, and a higher, divine Self. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, wrote that assimilation to (or integration into) one's higher Self may come 'in the flash of one tremulous glance' (7.17.23), but in most cases the cultivation of one's divine Self is a lifelong process. It is a process of recollection: remembering who one truly is, and thus becoming who one truly is. Out

⁸² In using the term "imaginal" I am following Elliot Wolfson, who in turn is following Henry Corbin. Thus, for me, the term designates "a subtle level of consciousness, the *realm of the imaginal*, a psychic province" where paradox and symbol reign, and one attains to "the suprasensible knowledge (*hierognosis*)...that facilitates the disclosure of the concealed in the concealment of the disclosed, a conversion of contraries that destabilizes the opposition between concealment and disclosure," matter and spirit, human and divine. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of the Imagination* (Cambridge: Zone Books, The MIT Press, 2011), pp. 51, 199; italics in original.

of the self's own reflexive awareness of its divinity, the process of deification occurs.

(2) Gnostic technologies of the self support contemplative, ethical, and ritual acts not of self-renunciation (since the fleshly body is not the true self), but of Self-realization. The human self realizes itself as divine Self. Such practices are the instrumental causes of deification. They grow out of the Self-recognition of one's inward divinity, and are means to an end. The purpose of assimilation is to realize oneself as the divine Self (which is higher than the social self, or any possible human self-conception).

(3) The Gnostic Savior (who is often Jesus) may come to the self as other, but he (or she) also comes as the fullest manifestation of the Self. As in other forms of deification, the Savior is the god to whom one conforms. But since the Savior is also the higher Self, the gnostic truly becomes who he or she fundamentally is.⁸³

Thus, to the extent that I understand deification to be the progressive realization of a nondual union with God or divinity that is always already the case, my notion of "becoming divine" is inherently gnostic. This means that the transformation and transfiguration associated with the process of deification is more perceptual or epistemological than ontological. In other words, it is not so much the fundamental nature of being or reality that changes in this process, but rather it is how we perceive

⁸³ Litwa, "Becoming Gods," p. 96.

reality that changes. Yet it is precisely this change in perception or view—this transformation of consciousness—that enables us to grow in wisdom and compassion, love and freedom, as we are ever more radically opened to the “cosmotheandric”⁸⁴ nature of reality, which is ever ancient and ever new. In this, deification is fundamentally a matter of progressive acknowledgement or recognition of the true nature of being.

As a parenthetical aside, this “gnostic” model of deification finds an exemplar in Pseudo-Dionysius, whose thought is far more daring than conventional interpretations allow. For, as Nicolò Sassi has demonstrated, Pseudo-Dionysius does not conceive deification to be a process of “radical dehumanization or overhumanization”; rather, it is “the awakening of awareness of the primeval and perpetual condition of union with the divine.” This understanding is rooted in Pseudo-Dionysius’ panentheistic or theomonistic worldview.⁸⁵ According to this worldview, Pseudo-Dionysius (a) maintains

⁸⁴ This is a neologism coined by Raimon Panikkar. See his *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, edited and with an Introduction by Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 60, where he defines the cosmotheandric principle or intuition as follows: “The cosmotheandric principle could be formulated by saying that the divine, the human and the earthly – however we may prefer to call them – are three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real, i.e., any reality inasmuch as it is real.... What this intuition emphasizes is that the three dimensions of reality are neither three modes of a monolithic undifferentiated reality, nor three elements of a pluralistic system. There is rather one, though intrinsically threefold, relation which manifests the ultimate constitution of reality. Everything that exists, any real being, presents this triune constitution expressed in three dimensions. I am not *only* saying that everything is directly or indirectly related to everything else: the radical relativity or *pratīyasamutpāda* of the buddhist tradition. I am also stressing that this relationship is not only constitutive of the whole, but that it flashes forth, ever new and vital, in every spark of the real.” Emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ Although these terms will be explicated at some length in the chapters that follow, we do well to briefly define them here. *Panentheism*, as Loriliai Biernacki states, suggests that “God is both in the world, immanent, and also beyond the confines of mere matter, also transcendent,” even as the world is in God. Like most “theisms,” panentheism is about “mapping relationships: between the self and the world, between the self and God, and between God and the world.” But, of all the different theisms, panentheism is an especially rich and promising concept for our twenty-first century world inasmuch as it posits, or at least affords the possibility of, a dynamic permeability between all of these terms. This is encoded in the complex syntax of the word itself: *pan* (“the whole”)-*en* (“in”)-*theos* (“God”), and vice versa. This radically dynamic, paradoxical, esoteric, “at times heretical and habitually mystical” concept, therefore, is essentially nondual. See Loriliai Biernacki, “Introduction,” in *Panentheism Across the World’s Traditions*, ed. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 2, 16. Similarly, as Michael Stober observes, *themonism* is radically paradoxical in understanding the Divine to be both transcendent and immanent, “static and active, non-dual and distinctive, impersonal and personal.” Accordingly, like panentheism, theomonism is an esoteric, at times heretical and habitually mystical

that humanity and God are constantly united, in a manner analogous to how a cause always permeates its effect, and therefore “mystical union is not a shift into a new state of being”; (b) the process of awakening to an ever more profound experience and understanding of mystical union (that is, deification) entails a progressive removal, unknowing, or apophasis of all that prevents us from seeing the true nature of reality as divine (i.e., the *via negationis* or *via negativa*); and (c) there is thus “a straightforward connection between the *via negationis* and deification itself: when all determinations are eliminated, so are all differences between human and divine; if the divine is not ‘something’ (i.e., is not a determinate being), then it cannot be ‘something else’ either.” Thus, in the recognition of God as Not-other (*non aliud*), “the mystic acknowledges the presence of the highest reality of the universe in one’s self. This acknowledgement is the completion of the highest beatitude and the actual realization of the *unio mystica*.” Sassi therefore concludes that, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, the mystic, the person who has experienced deification, is the one who has had “the spiritual strength to overcome every idol” as well as the courage to “investigate the abyss which opens behind every literal meaning of the scriptures” and recognize their “identity with God.”⁸⁶

concept that posits “a type of post-monistic theistic experience, wherein the monistic mystic comes to exhibit and express elements that can only be associated with theistic mysticism. Phenomenologically, this is understood in terms of a mystic teleology of self-transformation to divinity [i.e., deification].” Stoeber continues: “The monistic experience involves a movement towards realization of primary-Self, an essence that has its grounding in the very non-dual, static and impersonal essence of a personal Divine. The mystic identifies monistically with the apophatic Source; and this essential association is a purifying moment wherein the mystic becomes a unique medium of elements and energies of the cataphatic Divine. In experiencing the non-dual, static and impersonal Source, the mystic naturally comes to express distinctively and actively aspects of the personal Divine.” See Michael Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), pp. 19, 3. In light of this, the terms panentheism, theomonism, and nondualism (again, denoting what is neither purely monistic nor dualistic) can be regarded as synonymous and consistent with the “gnostic” model of deification.

⁸⁶ Nicolò Sassi, “Mystical Union as Acknowledgment: Pseudo-Dionysius’ Account of *Henosis*,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 56 (2016), pp. 771-772, 772 and 784.

Fourth, consistent with the foregoing, I conceive of the human person as being an inherently mystical or “apophatic” subject who is to be seen ultimately “not as self-transparent master of its world but as incomprehensible image of an incomprehensible God, who himself becomes visible—as invisible—in and through a world that is thoroughly theophanic.”⁸⁷ This mystical or apophatic anthropology is reflective of and indeed rooted in the thought of not only Pseudo-Dionysius but (among others) that of Meister Eckhart as well, particularly his notion of the *grunt* or ground. As Susanne Köbele reminds us, for Eckhart, “*grunt* has...no other ‘meaning’ than the identity of the divine ground with the ground of the soul. This identity is a dynamic identity.”⁸⁸ It is also an identity without distinction, or an indistinct union, which is a paradoxical notion that Eckhart delighted in using as a means “to confuse in order to enlighten.”⁸⁹ The “wandering” and “playful” identity or union of indistinction between the “groundless

⁸⁷ Thomas A. Carlson, “Locating the Mystical Subject,” *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, eds. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 207. My preference for an “apophatic anthropology” is also informed by the work of Charles M. Stang, who writes in his book *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: “No Longer I”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 3: “Most importantly, I contend, Paul serves as a fulcrum for the expression of a new theological anthropology, what I am calling (following Bernard McGinn and Denys Turner) the ‘apophatic anthropology’ of Dionysius. Dionysius’ entire mystical theology narrates the self’s efforts to unite with the ‘God beyond being’ as a perpetual process of affirming (*kataphasis*) and negating (*apophasis*) the divine names, on the conviction that only by contemplating and then ‘clearing away’ (*aphaeresis*) all of our concepts and categories can we clear a space for the divine to descend free of idolatrous accretions. What Paul provided Dionysius is the insistence that this ascent to ‘the unknown God’ delivers a self that is, like the divine to which it aspires, cleared away of its own names, unsaid, rendered unknown to itself—in other words, *no longer I*. Thus apophatic theology assumes an apophatic anthropology, and the way of negation becomes a sort of asceticism, an exercise of freeing the self as much as God from the concepts and categories that prevent its deification.” See also Stang, “Dionysius, Paul and the Significance of the Pseudonym,” in *Rethinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 11-25; Stang, “‘Neither Oneself nor Someone Else’: The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite,” in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, eds. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 59-75; and Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁸⁸ Susanne Köbele, *Bilder der unbegriffenen Wahrheit: Zur Struktur mystischer Rede im Spannungsfeld von Latein und Volkssprache* (Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 1993), p. 187. As cited in Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), p. 48.

⁸⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man From Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 49.

ground” of the soul and the “groundless Godhead” that is the essential meaning of Eckhart’s teaching of the *grunt* thus implies the contemplative or gnostic insight that was common to many Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mystics: that if God is ultimately unknowable and therefore unnameable, and if the soul in its ground is absolutely one with God, then the soul too must be as nameless and unknowable (and hence, paradoxically, infinitely known) as God.⁹⁰

Following therefore in the footsteps of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Abraham Abulafia, Muhyeddin Ibn ‘Arabi, and others, I subscribe to “a form of negative mystical anthropology in which God and soul are ultimately one because both are radically unknowable”⁹¹ and, hence, paradoxically, infinitely knowable. This presupposes a nondualistic ontology that overcomes the dichotomizing tendencies of Western thought by viewing both person and Being as essentially theophanic, or, in a less theological register, inherently relational.⁹² To know oneself, therefore, is to become ever more aware of the nondual or trinitarian nature of life; it is to increasingly realize the indistinct union or *coincidencia oppositorum* of the human and divine; it is to be more and more conscious of the paradoxical and ultimately poetic nature of incarnation, which is to say, of deification.

Fifth and finally, this leads me to another important point that underlies this whole project: the definition of heresy and its place in the study of religion. While I only touch upon heresy in the body of the dissertation, it nevertheless forms a significant part of its

⁹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² It is worth noting that this is precisely the problematic articulated by Heidegger in his *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, where he redefines *Da-Sein* as *das Zwischen*, the “in-between.” See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

subtext. For as someone who has been trained as a philosopher, theologian, historian of religions, and Benedictine monk, I am keenly aware of the cruelty and inhumanity that have been perpetrated over the millennia in the name of defending so-called orthodoxy against so-called heresy, and as a result I believe that these terms need to be handled and defined with greater care, sensitivity, and nuance in all spheres where religion exerts an influence. Fundamentally this means that, in the words of Brad Bannon, “[W]e must recognize that *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy* are not opposite terms. The teachings of the other (heterodoxy) may be the right teachings (orthodoxy). In fact, we might even regard the teachings of the other as right *for* the other such that we could envision a hetero-orthodoxy.... The teaching of the other may not be right for me, but this does not mean that it is wrong for the other.”⁹³

It is with this in mind, therefore, that I find Shaul Magid’s notion of a “dialectic of heresy” to be both significant and congenial. Accordingly, with Magid, I understand heresy to mean not the overt and blatant abrogation of traditional norms, but rather “the more subtle and nuanced way critics of a religious status quo affect change hermeneutically, that is, through subversively reading canonical texts.” It is by means of this subversive reading that these heretics create “the religious critique inside tradition,” albeit usually on the margins, sufficient for those who follow them “to read (or misread) them and implement that critique in a more overt fashion.” This constitutes what Magid calls a “dialectic of heresy,” whereby heresy is not to be feared but valued inasmuch as it is “the very thing that enables a tradition to survive by expanding the boundaries of

⁹³ Brad Bannon, “Ontonomy: The Eco-Areteological Ethics of Contemporary Advaitic Philosophy,” unpublished thesis for the Licentiate in Philosophy, submitted to the faculty of Dharmaram Vidyā Kshetram, Pontifical Athenaeum of Philosophy, Theology and Canon Law (Bangalore: February 2008), p. 63; italics in original.

legitimacy in order to push the tradition towards its redemptive end.”⁹⁴ Viewed in this light, then, this dissertation can be regarded as a heretical text.

The General Approach or Methodology

That having been said, we are now in a position to briefly consider the general approach or methodology that I have adopted in my dissertation. I will begin with a wide-angle view of the project and methodology, and then proceed to a more close-up or granular one.

The Wide-Angle View

To begin with, insofar as I examine the human experience of deification, this dissertation is concerned with explicating a paradoxical model of subjectivity that perceives the human person to be inherently nondual, infinitely open, and hence ultimately unknowable in its knowability.⁹⁵ As such, the mystical anthropology and subjectivity that this dissertation seeks to elucidate necessarily eludes our ability to capture or adequately represent it in expository language. In other words, by its very definition, the mystical subject of deification that this study seeks to clarify and make sense of exceeds the capacity of the rational discourse that is employed for the task—a discourse that at best can only point to the subtle experience and imaginal nature of “becoming divine,” which traditionally has been held to be accessible by intuitive or contemplative modes of knowledge alone.

⁹⁴ Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), pp. 253 and 254.

⁹⁵ In this section I am adapting some of the congenial language found in Jay Johnston’s fine work *Angels of Desire: Esoteric Bodies, Aesthetics and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1-2.

Because of this, the disjuncture between the subject being explored and the rational discourse that is employed in its service must be and is acknowledged at the outset. Significantly, however, no matter how much this paradox consistently challenges and subverts the dissertation's purpose, it also reflects and enacts one of its most crucial concerns: how to bring to and maintain in one's conscious awareness both the personal particularity (otherness) and reported or claimed transpersonal universality (sameness) of the deified subject. The intent, then, is to explore the participatory or nondual nature and poetics of this *coincidentia oppositorum*—this unity-in-duality, what Henry Corbin referred to as a state of bi-unity, a *unus-ambo*, or dualitude⁹⁶—rather than claim mastery of a subject, which, by virtue of its paradoxical constitution, escapes all definitive boundaries.

As is appropriate for such an elusive, paradoxical, and allusive subject matter, my research is broadly interdisciplinary and cross-cultural (read: comparative). That is to say, it traces across disciplinary and religious boundaries various metaphysical and ontological concepts that comprise the mystical and mythical theme of “becoming divine,” drawing attention to both similarities and differences of thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam via a careful and rigorous but always sympathetic reading of—really, a philosophical and poetic meditation on—selected works by Corbin and Wolfson. In this my project is also transdisciplinary, in the sense that Antoine Faivre employs the term to designate “the form of esoteric thought” that “answers to three criteria, each independent but in interrelationship: the idea that several levels of reality can exist, the activation of forms of logic that are not classical (nonbinary) [, and,] finally, the idea that

⁹⁶ See, for example, Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1994), pp. 7, 97. See also Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 96.

the subject is to be found placed in the very center of his or her own research.”⁹⁷ Thus, following Kripal, Corbin, and Wolfson, it seeks not only to elucidate but also to evoke something of the experience of deification—or, failing this, by keeping the experience of deification in view, to point readers back to the texts of these authors (and others), where, perhaps, they may find the freedom to take a truly personal step along the way to becoming wholly human and thus fully divine.

Therefore, as will be seen below, the methodology to be employed, which is grounded in textual analysis and an especially Kripal’s Blakean work *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, draws together a number of discourses from the disciplines of philosophy, theology, religious studies, and contemplative studies (to name a few), across primarily three philosophical and mystical traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These traditions and this particular theme are rarely considered together in this manner, and the unique approach that I am taking has been developed to accommodate the conceptual interrelations and correlations that an interreligious consideration of deification invokes. Specifically, this approach makes possible the main thesis of the project, which is that to properly understand and make one’s own the subtle, imaginal, contemplative experience of mystical union or deification necessitates a radical openness to the participatory or nondual reality that is both veiled and revealed by the dualisms or binary logics that dominate conventional Western discourse: self/other; mind/body; reason/emotion; divinity/humanity.

Before proceeding to a brief consideration of some specific components of my hybrid methodology, it is important to emphasize the fact that at the heart of the radical

⁹⁷ Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. xxx.

openness just mentioned is the entangled interrelationship of aesthetics and ethics. This means that to understand and make one's own the experience of deification calls for modalities of contemplation or "vision" (*theoria*) that require conscious cultivation. Moreover, the change in perceptual and experiential literacy that arises from the cultivation of such contemplative modalities or practices has direct ethical implications for how we relate to reality as a whole. From this perspective, then, "how one 'looks,' the development and use of particular modes of perception, is a conscious choice." Thus, a modification of aesthetic sensitivity relative to the phenomenon of deification requires "a radical re-evaluation of ethical responsibility."⁹⁸

The Close-Up View

With that said, as suggested above, the general methodology applied in this investigation is framed and inspired by the work of Jeffrey Kripal. It has its roots in his book *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* and his exploration therein of what he calls "academic esotericism." This expression encapsulates his insight that "the academic discipline of the history of religions can and sometimes actually does function as a kind of mystical tradition in modern (and now post-modern) dress."⁹⁹ Kripal has already demonstrated this with specific reference to Wolfson in *Roads of Excess*, and as previously noted Corbin is widely regarded as an "esoteric scholar" of considerable repute.

Thus, with an understanding of mysticism as "that which exceeds and transgresses and goes beyond" the normal workings of human awareness to awaken us to "new forms

⁹⁸ Johnston, *Angels' of Desire*, p. 2.

⁹⁹ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 25.

of consciousness and their subsequent wisdom,”¹⁰⁰ the foundational assumption upon which my methodology is built is twofold. On the one hand, I assume that Corbin and Wolfson are best read as mystical scholars of mysticism, or as practitioners of Kripal’s academic esotericism. On the other hand, I believe that “the mysticism of scholars of mysticism represents something new in the history of mysticism, that is, a kind of culturally aware, psychologically reflexive, and theoretically rigorous religious positioning that struggles openly, if agnostically, with issues of reductionism, relativism, and religious pluralism, and this in a liberal cultural milieu that, for all its faults, nurtures and protects freedom of thought and expression, even—and especially—when it calls into question time-honored authorities, be they human or divine.”¹⁰¹ In this my approach to the scholar as mystic shares in the same Blakean spirit that inspired Kripal to write *Roads of Excess*, and thus it too is “unabashedly positive, poetic, and romantic.” Moreover, inasmuch as my general method can be similarly described as “mimetic, reflexive, and literary,” I likewise want my dissertation to replicate or perform in its own way Kripal’s thesis that “academic writing can also be a form of mystical writing.”¹⁰²

Turning, then, from the general to the more specific, the methodology applied in my dissertation is a hybrid history of religions approach that incorporates Kripal’s “new comparativism” (which essentially involves engaging contemporary extreme or paranormal phenomena in order to understand similar past historical material), Elliot Wolfson’s “modified contextualism/perennialism” (which basically avoids the extremes of relativism in the case of the former and essentialism in the case of the latter), and—

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 28.

venturing beyond the shores of academic exploration—the ancient monastic practice of “divine reading” or *lectio divina*.

Thus, as mentioned above, the method of this project is broadly interdisciplinary, comparative, and transdisciplinary. As such, it is a method that emphasizes a descriptive phenomenological and comparative approach that results in both ontological and hermeneutical insights. By employing it, I seek to approach the study of “mystic experiential accounts”¹⁰³ in a manner that is consistent with Kripal’s “methodological nondualism,” which intends to “challenge the dichotomy between insider and outsider and not assume *either* that the historian, psychologist, or anthropologist who seem to be outside—and in many senses truly is—does not also know and appreciate something of the shimmering truths of which the [religious] insider so passionately speaks *or* that the insider, however devoted to an ideal, cannot also see clearly and bravely something of the actual of which the scholar tries to speak.” And I do so because, following Kripal, I believe that, “in the end, as many of the mystical traditions teach, there really is no inside or outside, no *nirvana* or *samsara*, no either-or on which to hang our dichotomous categories and concerns”; that ultimately everything we know and experience “really is a reflection in the double mirror of ourselves and the perceived world, each reflecting the other in a world turned doubly inside out by the gazes of the mystic and the hermeneut.”¹⁰⁴ Essentially, therefore, what I seek to practice is a “mystical hermeneutics,”¹⁰⁵ about which more will be said below.

¹⁰³ Jason N. Blum, *Zen and the Unspeakable God: Comparative Interpretations of Mystical Experience* (University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 323; italics in original.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

In what follows we will be taking a closer look at each of the aforementioned elements of our hybrid methodology: Kripal's "new comparativism," Wolfson's "modified contextualism/perennialism," and the monastic practice of *lectio divina*. We begin with a consideration of the approach of the history of religions school of thought.

A History of Religions Approach

In his essay "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religion's Symbolism," Mircea Eliade writes that "the historian of religion uses an empirical approach" to understand religious experience or a given religious conception of the world and to make such religio-historical facts intelligible to others. This is because the historian of religions is "attracted to both the meaning of a religious phenomenon and to its history; he tries to do justice to both and not to sacrifice either one of them." Of course, as Eliade notes, "the historian of religions also is led to systematize the results of his findings and to reflect on the structure of the religious phenomena. But then he completes his historical work as phenomenologist or philosopher of religion." Hence, broadly speaking, the history of religions methodology "embraces the phenomenology as well as the philosophy of religion."

But Eliade is quick to remind us that, strictly speaking, the historian of religion can never ignore what is historically concrete about a given religious phenomenon. This is because the historian of religions, by Eliade's definition, must always apply herself "to deciphering in the temporally and historically concrete the destined course of experiences that arise from an irresistible human desire to transcend time and history. All authentic religious experience implies a desperate effort to disclose the foundation of things, the

ultimate reality. But all expression or conceptual formulation of such religious experience is imbedded in a historical context.”¹⁰⁶

This, then, is a sketch of the fundamental methodology that I will be employing in my dissertation. It is an approach that is rooted in and reflective of the methodology used by Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, and, to a lesser extent, Gershom Scholem in their own unique ways; a methodology that was based on their shared theory of religion, which each characterized as both a “phenomenology of religion” and a “History of Religions.” I mention these scholars in particular to affirm my place in their lineage (to which Wolfson and Kripal also belong) and to make explicit my intention to follow them in their distinctive way of practicing the history of religions methodology, which is based on a shared theory of history and religion that was and still is quite counter to prevailing definitions of these terms. It was and is counter because, insofar as their understanding of history and religion posited the epistemological centrality of mystical experience, myth, gnosis, esotericism, eschatology, language, hermeneutics, and symbolism, the approach of Eliade, Corbin, and Scholem (and that of their heirs Kripal and Wolfson) is essentially an aesthetic one. That is to say, each was a historian of religions but, in the disapproving words of Steven Wasserstrom, “with an explicitly metahistorical – if not idealist – agenda.”¹⁰⁷

Contrary to critics like Wasserstrom, I do not think that this is a weakness to be abjured. Rather, in my estimation, the fact that Eliade, Corbin, and, to a lesser extent,

¹⁰⁶ Mircea Eliade, “Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religion’s Symbolism,” *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, eds. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959); at <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/methodological-remarks-on-the-study-of-religions-symbolism-by-mircea-eliade/>.

¹⁰⁷ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 5.

Scholem each in his own way positioned the aesthetic or metahistorical reality of mystical experience or contemplative knowledge (*gnosis*) at the center of his history of religions program—and that each, finally, “placed as a mystery at the heart of that gnosis a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a godhead unifying opposites, transcendent but apprehensible through symbols”¹⁰⁸—is a strength to be embraced. Admittedly, according to Wouter Hanegraaff’s slightly pejorative label, this makes me a “religionist,” which he defines as someone who adopts “an approach to religion...that presents itself explicitly as ‘historical’ but nevertheless denies, or at least strongly minimizes, the relevance of any questions pertaining to historical ‘influences,’ and hence of historical criticism, because of its central assumption that the true referent of religion does not lie in the domain of human culture and society but only in a direct, unmediated, personal experience of the divine.”¹⁰⁹ But I am fine with such a designation; indeed, it is a label that I wear proudly.

A New Comparativism

Turning now to a consideration of Kripal’s “new comparativism,” one does well to ask: What exactly is it, and how does it work? Kripal himself admits that this is one of the most common questions he is asked, and one that he finds difficult to answer since he is in a very real way making it up as he goes along. “[T]he truth,” he writes, “is that I have long been suffering, intuiting, and imagining my way into a new comparativism from below, not declaring one from on high.”¹¹⁰ Thus he does not know exactly what this new

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 149.

¹¹⁰ Kripal, *Secret Body*, p. 363.

comparativism is or precisely how he is doing it. “The plausibility and wholism of the secret body of my thought is confusing to me as well,” Kripal confesses.¹¹¹

Nonetheless, he does offer some cogent suggestions as to what it is he is recommending. “What I am proposing with the new comparativism is another kind of historical imagination that participates in both...the modern and postmodern without quite being either.... But I am also proposing that...historians of religion should take very seriously the new real of the sciences and rethink their philosophical assumptions and historical practices in this new light.”¹¹² Put another way, by proposing a new comparativism, Kripal is advocating for an unconventional historical imagination that finds legitimacy in all of those seemingly anomalous experiences or phenomena that the conventional materialist study of religion has traditionally dismissed as too speculative, metaphysical, or merely anecdotal to be worthy of serious attention.¹¹³

This is why Kripal always finds it difficult to articulate what exactly this new comparativism is and how one goes about practicing it. “No wonder that when I am asked what it is I ‘do,’ I always trip and tumble. I am, after all, an expert on nothing. That is to say, the historical material I work on and think about is ‘nothing’ to the discipline in which I locate myself. I am laboring in a historical field that has not yet been named, much less established as the object of grants, faculty searches, and doctoral programs.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 366.

¹¹³ As Kripal has noted elsewhere, and as is alluded to below, a fundamental step of this characteristically novel move “is to take the mystical or anomalous experiences in the present and use them to reread and interpret the past materials – what I call ‘the future of the past’; it is this privileging of the contemporary and the accessible (since these subjects are often still alive) that renders the comparativism ‘new’ in this way” (personal communication, August 1, 2018).

¹¹⁴ Kripal, *Secret Body*, p. 371.

Still, for those who are presently working in this no man's land of the study of religion or are interested in doing so in the future, for those who are or will be "laboring at the far edge or boundary of our knowledge," Kripal helpfully delineates "three basic steps through which intellectuals will have to work over the next decades." These are as follows:

(1) a deconstructive, suspicious, and critical stage aimed directly at the ideology of physicalism that presently defines our reigning episteme, in all its power and problems, and so locks us into what [Charles] Taylor has called "the immanent frame"; (2) a realist comparative practice with respect to our historical materials in conversation with the empirical data of the French *métapsychique*, British psychical research and European and American parapsychological literature; and (3) a speculative positing of new ontologies, sociologies, and ecologies that can replace the conventional materialist and historicist ones and make more sense of all that we encounter, at every turn, in the history of religions.¹¹⁵

The conclusion of this new comparativism is thus a relatively simple and obvious one. For, according to Kripal, "if we do not propose new ontologies, sociologies, and ecologies, the baseline materialist historicism will remain in place."¹¹⁶ And if we fail in this regard, if such a stultifying baseline is not dislodged and replaced with something more comprehensive and reflective of the truly weird, strange, or mysterious nature of

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 374.

reality, the study of religion will continue to restrict itself to a worldview that is as depressing as it is inadequate.

A Modified Contextualism (or Perennialism)

This brings us to Elliot Wolfson's "modified contextualism," which is also a modified perennialism – one that, like Kripal's own position, "impl[ies] some sort of psychic universalism...[that] is of a much more reflexive, critical, culturally relative, and participatory sort than is usually imagined when people invoke the dreaded label of 'perennialism.'"¹¹⁷ The theoretical principal behind Wolfson's formulation is one that he derived from the work of Mircea Eliade and Gershom Scholem.

With respect to the former, Wolfson affirms his agreement with the structuralist view espoused by Eliade: "In the history of religions, as in other mental disciplines, it is knowledge of structure which makes it possible to understand meanings...[and] each case separately."¹¹⁸ Similarly, with respect to the latter, Wolfson cites approvingly Scholem's reflection on the dual-aspect, both-and, or particular-universal nature of the general phenomenon of mysticism: "[T]here is no such thing as mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon or experience which has no particular relation to other religious phenomena.... That there remains a common characteristic it would be absurd to deny, and it is this element which is brought out in the comparative analysis of particular mystical experiences."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 410.

¹¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 110. As cited in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 54.

¹¹⁹ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1956), pp. 5-6. As cited in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 55.

Based on this, Wolfson stakes out a third way or intermediate position between the relativizing contextualists and the absolutizing perennialists. “One can avoid the extremes,” he writes, “of relativism or nominalism (hyper-Kantianism) and absolutism or essentialism (the doctrine of unanimity) by positing an intermediate position that seeks to determine the common structures underlying the manifold appearances of the phenomenon.”¹²⁰ He continues, and draws the important conclusion: “By determining those structures we can appreciate the unique status of mystical [experience] in different cultural and religious contexts. Within the diversity of manifestations of mystical [experience] in different cultural and religious contexts there must be some unity of resemblance, for without such unity through diversity the expression becomes meaningless, referring to everything and nothing.”¹²¹

Such, then, is the theoretical principal behind the methodological middle way that Wolfson calls his “modified contextualism,” which simultaneously is a modified perennialism. He thus summarizes his paradoxical or nondual position as follows:

The modified contextualism that I am advocating in light of a structural assumption regarding the nature of mystical experience—or more specifically, mystical vision—implies neither that all mystical experiences are the same and the description of those experiences vary in accord with the different cultural-religious settings, nor that all mystical experience can be divided into “types” that cut across cultural boundaries and differ only in terms of the language used to describe them. To reiterate my

¹²⁰ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 54.

¹²¹ Ibid. This is precisely Kripal’s position as well.

epistemological assumption..., the interpretative framework of a mystic's particular religion shapes his or her experience at the phenomenal level and not merely in the description or narrative account of the experience. *This does not, however, logically preclude the possibility of underlying patterns of experience or deep structures that may be illuminated through a comparative study of various mystical traditions.*¹²²

In light of this, it seems to me both appropriate and desirable to incorporate Wolfson's model since it provides an antidote to the extremes of absolute contextualism and perennialist universalism.¹²³

Lectio Divina

Finally, we come to the monastic practice of divine or sacred reading (*lectio divina*). As was the case with Kripal's new comparativism, one does well to ask: What exactly is *lectio divina*? Moreover, it is important to ask the additional questions: What justification is there for incorporating *lectio divina* into my methodology for this dissertation? And what difference does it make?

To begin with the first question, simply put, *lectio divina* is the ancient art of prayerful reading or "spiritual exegesis."¹²⁴ That is to say, it is a holistic way of reading

¹²² Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 54-55; emphasis mine.

¹²³ It is worth mentioning that Robert Forman's notion of "incomplete constructivism" and William Parsons' distinction between three "subtypes" or "models" of perennialism – the "perennial invariant" model, the "perennial variant" model, and the "typological variant" model – are also relevant here. See Robert K.C. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 13. See William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 113.

¹²⁴ I am employing this designation in a manner consistent with Henry Corbin's usage of the Arabic term *ta'wil* to describe a hermeneutical and phenomenological method of "bringing back" the soul to its divine

that is rooted in ancient philosophical and theological tradition, the origins of which lie in the veneration of the Torah and meditation on the sacred scriptures that characterized ancient Judaism, according to Philo of Alexandria, who described its practice by Jewish ascetics in Egypt and Palestine.¹²⁵ This practice was subsequently adapted as part of “the developing apophysis of the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Christian tradition,”¹²⁶ becoming fully developed within its monastic expression beginning in the Egyptian desert of the fourth century. From there it spread to other monastic settlements in the deserts of Palestine, Arabia, Persia, and beyond.¹²⁷ Thus, as the contemporary Benedictine monk and scholar Luke Dysinger writes:

[I]t was in early Christian monasticism that the practice of *lectio divina* reached its full flower. Faithful to the traditions of St. Basil and the Egyptian monastics of the desert [best exemplified in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus, which were transmitted through his disciple John Cassian to Benedict in the west], St. Benedict encouraged his monks to reserve the best hours of each day for *lectio divina*, a form of prayer that

origins, by which is facilitated the soul’s metamorphosis. See, for example, Henry Corbin’s treatment of this theme in *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, tr. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); and *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969/1997). See also note 59 below.

¹²⁵ See Luke Dysinger, “Lectio Divina,” *The Oblate Life*, ed. Gervase Holdaway (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), p. 107.

¹²⁶ Brendan Cook, *Pursuing Eudaimonia: Re-appropriating the Greek Philosophical Foundations of the Christian Apophatic Tradition* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 8.

¹²⁷ Subsequently, there developed in Islam a corresponding practice of spiritual reading or exegesis known as *ta’wil*. About this practice, Henry Corbin writes: “Hence, the *ta’wil* is preeminently the hermeneutics of symbols, the ex-egesis, the brining out of hidden spiritual meaning.... The *ta’wil*, without question, is a matter of *harmonic perception*, of hearing an identical sound (the same verse, the same *hadith*, even an entire text) on several levels simultaneously” (*Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran*, tr. Nancy Pearson [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977], pp. 53, 54; emphasis in original).

he, unlike some of his predecessors, regarded as a contemplative joy rather than an ascetical burden.¹²⁸

Hence, *lectio divina* continues to be practiced to this day both within monastery walls and without. But, as Dysinger observes, it is “a method of reading that is radically different from what is taught in modern schools.” For its goal is to interiorize a text, “taking a text in, allowing it to literally become part of the self... not to master a text, to mine it for information, but rather to be touched, to be formed by it.” This requires a certain amount of interior quiet that “facilitates an ability to read gently and attentively,” inwardly listening in humility “with the ear of the heart,” as Benedict writes in his Rule for monasteries.¹²⁹

Be this as it may, is there any scholarly justification for incorporating *lectio divina* into one’s dissertation? Interestingly, despite its radical difference, or in fact because of it, one can find in academia growing appreciation of and support for this holistic and transformative method of reading. For as the philosopher and theologian John Conley has observed concerning the humanities, the ultimate “cash value” of these various academic disciplines “lies in their capacity to provoke transcendence [or transformation] as the soul awakens to deeper ways of being human,”¹³⁰ which is precisely what *lectio divina* is meant to do as well.

¹²⁸ Dysinger, “Lectio Divina,” p. 107.

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 109-110. Here it must be noted with Jeffrey Kripal that the monastic practice of *lectio divina* “is so close to what [Mircea] Eliade meant by ‘creative hermeneutics.’ The only difference is that Eliade’s ‘scripture’ was global and comparative and not restricted to the Christian tradition.” Personal communication, November 5, 2018.

¹³⁰ John J. Conley, “Humanities and the Soul,” *America* vol. 213/no. 19 (December 10, 2015), p. 3; at <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/humanities-and-soul>. This article can also be found as p. 29 at http://jesuits.org/Assets/Publications/File/USA_AmericaMag_2015-12-21.pdf.

Given this commonality of purpose therefore, it is not surprising that Mary Keator, a professor of ancient/medieval literature and religious studies, recently authored an entire book to explain how this ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina* “can be adapted within the Humanities to help students to experience wisdom [as they learn] to read deeply, interpret critically, and respond meaningfully to the human condition reflected in...texts.”¹³¹ Similarly, the contemporary scholar of Jewish mysticism, Jonathan Garb, has noted the importance and applicability of ancient Christian texts that describe the contemplative reading of scripture as “transcribing divine truth in the book of the reader’s heart.”¹³² Accordingly, he singles out for special mention “the felicitous formulation” found in Robin Bower’s discussion of the Christian monastic practice of transformation through divine reading: “*Lectio divina* thus becomes a writing that inscribes the text of scripture upon both the body and the soul. The fruitful engagement of reading and memory reconstitutes human interiority and desire.”¹³³ And after citing this passage approvingly, Garb draws the following conclusion: “I believe that a rich phenomenology of reading and writing around religious and mystical themes is of great value for all, inside academia and outside, who share this endeavor.”¹³⁴

Needless to say, I agree with Conley, Keator, and Garb (among others). Indeed, as a “poetical” Benedictine monk whose contemplative practice of prayerful reading or spiritual exegesis and scholarship continue to mutually enrich one another—as someone

¹³¹ Mary Keator, *Lectio Divina as Contemplative Pedagogy: Re-appropriating Monastic Practice for the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. ix.

¹³² Jonathan Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul*, p. 166.

¹³³ Robin M. Bower, “Ca Falleció El Libro: Ascetic Reading and Restorative Hermeneutics in *La Vida de Santo Domingo de Silos*,” *Hispanic Review* 73/2 (2005), pp. 185-209, esp. p. 196. As cited in Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul*, p. 166.

¹³⁴ Garb, *Yearnings of the Soul*, p. 166.

who is intent on “writ[ing] down the soul in writing up [my] research”¹³⁵—it is both natural and fitting for me to incorporate *lectio divina* into my study of Henry Corbin and Elliot Wolfson. In addition to this, however, is the fact that the scholarship of both men is contemplative and poetical inasmuch as they sought through their mastery of language to transcribe and so make available to the reader a transformative mystical experience.

Thus, in terms of what difference incorporating the practice of *lectio divina* into my dissertation makes, I contend that it affords me a unique point of entry into Corbin’s and Wolfson’s esoteric work, and thereby contributes to my own growth in wisdom and grace. At the same time, I hope that this academically and religiously unorthodox use of *lectio divina* helps those who read this study to be better able to appreciate the work of both men, and that this in turn will contribute to the reader’s growth or transformation as well. In this, I see the practice of *lectio divina* as being part of the constructive nature of my overall project.

Moreover, I see my heterodox use of this monastic practice as being very similar—if not identical—to what the philosopher, theologian, poet, musician, and biodynamic farmer Michael Martin likes to call (with a nod to William Desmond) *agapeic criticism*. As Martin notes, like Nicolas Berdyaev’s “mystic philosophy,” this unique form of sympathetic and indeed loving criticism is grounded in phenomenology and “allows us to view the literary artifact not as a dead mechanism of history/subjectivity but, indeed, as ‘something alive, a living organism.’” In this, agapeic criticism as method attends to the given text “as a ‘living artifact’ (oxymoron intended) which contains access to being, the being of the [text] as well as the being of the [author],

¹³⁵ Robert D. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), p. xi.

not to mention, in the most remarkable of cases, the being of the absolutely Other.”

Thus, as Martin affirms, in the contemplative presence to a text that is characteristic of agapeic criticism, the text “becomes one’s environment.” One truly enters into the text and is entered by it, as one comes to abide with the presence(s) that inform it.¹³⁶

Interestingly, Martin himself acknowledges the similarities between agapeic criticism and *lectio divina*, but ultimately distances the former from the latter. “It might be argued,” he writes, “that the agapeic critical gesture is merely *lectio divina* masquerading as philosophy, but this is not the case.” Why? Because, Martin maintains, while *lectio divina* may indeed “sometimes result in the experience of astonishment common to phenomenological readings—seeing that *lectio divina* is oriented to ‘science and knowledge’ by theologians and ‘wisdom and appreciation’ for contemplatives”—*lectio divina* is nevertheless “just as predetermined (though perhaps more generous of spirit) [as] critical gestures arising out of theory.” For, according to Martin, *lectio divina*, like theory-driven readings, “does not hold the epoché.” He continues:

Entering into an encounter with a text, a phenomenon, without a goal in mind is what opens the possibility for the epoché to result in an experience of astonishment. And this astonishment occurs when we encounter truth—for what is more astonishing than truth? The epoché, then, becomes an agapeic opening to the truth behind, buried within, and

¹³⁶ Michael Martin, *The Incarnation of the Poetic Word: Theological Essays on Poetry and Philosophy, Philosophical Essays on Poetry and Theology* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017), p. 12. Per Martin’s note on this page, the interior quotations are taken from Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 68.

abiding with the phenomenon; or, in Heidegger's words, "the clearing and concealing of what is."¹³⁷

But is this really the case? Does such a distinction actually obtain between the agapeic critical gesture and *lectio divina*? Is *lectio divina* really just as "predetermined" as other forms of critical theory? I would say that everything depends on the distinction Martin makes (with the help of the Benedictine monk Jean Leclercq) between the scholastic orientation of *lectio divina* that seeks only "science and knowledge" and the monastic orientation that is more in pursuit of "wisdom and appreciation." If you have only one orientation without the other, then I think that the case could be made that *lectio divina* is in a certain sense "predetermined."

Yet what would happen if the boundaries supposedly separating these two orientations or types of *lectio divina* were regarded as permeable rather than rigid? That is, what if both orientations are combined in one practice, if the scholastic and monastic orientations mutually inform one another? What then? Then, I would contend, you have the kind of boundary crossing or heterodox form of *lectio divina* that I practice and employ in this dissertation—the kind that is very similar (if not identical) to agapeic criticism as Desmond and Martin describe. Indeed, Martin seems to concede this very point when, immediately following the citation above, he references one of Edmund Husserl's prize students and a colleague of Martin Heidegger's: namely, Edith Stein, who

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 14. The interior quotations that distinguish between the theological and contemplative orientations of *lectio divina* is from Jean Leclercq's classic work *The Love of Learning and Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), p. 89; as cited by Martin. The quote from Heidegger is from his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), p. 72; as cited by Martin.

after reading Teresa of Avila's autobiography in a critically agapeic manner converted from Judaism to Catholicism and became a Discalced Carmelite nun, was martyred in Auschwitz in solidarity with her people whom she never ceased to love, and was later canonized. Referring to the "agapeic opening to the truth behind, buried within, and abiding with the phenomenon" of a given text, Martin writes:

Such an openness clearly informed Edith Stein's approach to reading, particularly her encounter with St. Teresa of Avila's autobiography, a book she read in one sitting and which compelled her upon completing it to acknowledge, "This is the truth." Such a disclosure of truth witnesses to the poetic, to poesis: an encounter with the maker, a moment of ἀναγνώρισις [*anagnorisis*], recognition. As Stein's colleague Heidegger observes, "*All art*, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*." Of course, not all art is art and not all poetry is poetry. We know this. This complicates things. The kind of art I am considering is that which, as Stein writes, "mysteriously suggests the whole fullness of meaning, for which all human knowledge is inexhaustible. Understood in this way, all genuine art [be it poetry or scholarship] is revelation and all artistic creation is sacred service." Only an agapeic reading can affirm a [text's] access to being.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp. 14-15. The quotes from Edith Stein are taken from Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., Introduction to *The Science of the Cross* by Edith Stein, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 6, trans. Josephine Koeppl (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), pp. xiv and 12; as cited by Martin. The quote from Heidegger is again from "The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 72; emphasis in original; as cited by Martin.

And thus it is precisely this type of reading that is meant to characterize this dissertation.

Outline of Chapters

As a final preamble to my agapeic reading of the theme of deification in the selected works of Corbin and Wolfson, I want to briefly reiterate the argument I am putting forward and then outline the chapters of this dissertation. The argument basically has two parts: First, when viewed in the dialogical light of Corbin's and Wolfson's esoteric works, deification can be seen to be pointing to a relatively common cross-cultural mystical experience that bears witness to the essential and paradoxical oneness of humanity and divinity, however these two categories are defined in a particular cultural or historical context. Second, and perhaps more constructively still, to properly understand and make one's own the subtle, imaginal, contemplative experience of deification necessitates a radical openness to the poetics of the *coincidentia oppositorum*,¹³⁹ to the participatory or nondual reality that is both veiled and revealed by the dualisms that dominate conventional Western discourse: self/other, mind/body, reason/emotion, divinity/humanity.

With this twofold argument in mind, I have structured this dissertation in such a way that it will allow us to gradually and meticulously lay out, explore, and support it, by treating the theme of deification in both authors, in order to be able to consider various elements of their exposition and combine them into a synthetic and comparative re-vision of the mystical poetics of deification. Again, I have undertaken this dialogical task for the purpose of not just exploring deification for its own sake, but also of showing how

¹³⁹ On the significance of the poetics of the *coincidentia oppositorum* to the thought of Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin, see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, pp. 73-75.

and why this mystical experience is of contemporary relevance; that it need not and indeed should not be viewed, much less studied, as merely a curious notion or anachronism that belongs to the past or in the dustbin of history. On the contrary, I believe that the study of the cross-cultural phenomenon of deification can and should lead us to a more mystical, poetic, and, hence, constructive understanding of what it means to be human.

Since I had before me a plan to study the concept of deification in Corbin and Wolfson, I have decided to present them chronologically and systematically, in the sense that I first explore the theme of deification in Corbin, and then in Wolfson. The dissertation is laid out in two parts of unequal length. These two parts are preceded by a brief preface and this extensive introduction, and are followed by a conclusion in which I highlight some of the phenomenological and anthropological lessons that can be drawn from these two authors' treatment of the specific mystical category of deification via their academic esotericism.

The first part devoted to Henry Corbin consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 considers his life and work in an effort to provide a biographical sketch and intellectual portrait of Corbin. Chapter 2 offers an overview of some of the major themes of his thought and spiritual-intellectual (read: mystical) vision, such as his notion of the *mundus imaginalis* or imaginal world and *ta'wil* or spiritual hermeneutics. In chapter 3, I examine Corbin's notion of *ta'alluh* or deification in the light of a late essay of his and other selected works.

The second part is devoted to Elliot Wolfson and is considerably longer than the first. This is due to the fact that I have a greater interest in Wolfson's work and deem it

of greater significance than Corbin's. In saying this, I in no way mean to denigrate or minimize Corbin; on the contrary, I very much admire his life and work. However, in explicitly acknowledging his debt to Corbin, Wolfson nevertheless offers some legitimate critiques of his work and goes beyond it in ways with which Corbin likely would not agree, but that I find compelling. Thus in many respects Wolfson's sophisticated and difficult work transcends and includes that of Corbin, and this is why I have felt it necessary to devote several more chapters to its exploration.¹⁴⁰

The second part of the dissertation, therefore, consists of five chapters. Chapter 4 considers Wolfson's life and work in an effort to provide a biographical sketch and intellectual portrait of him. This will serve as a sort of preliminary map, as it were, of his complex thought. Chapters 5 and 6 extend the intellectual portrait of Wolfson begun in chapter 4, and thereby add topographical detail to the map. Thus chapter 5 explores some of the major themes of Wolfson's thought and spiritual-intellectual (read: mystical) vision, such as the imagination and hermeneutics and temporality, by considering two of his most prominent books, *Through a Speculum That Shines* and *Language, Eros, Being*. This is followed by chapter 6, which explores such themes as secrecy and comparison through his book *Open Secret*, dreams and the chiasmic structure of reality through *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream*, and the notion of the gift through his *Giving Beyond*

¹⁴⁰ In speaking of the compelling sophistication and difficulty of Wolfson's work, I am reminded of José Faur's description of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. "The style is nonlinear, at times scintillating and exasperating.... Following Maimonides' train of thought is like moving at a vertiginous speed along a labyrinth, branching up and down in all directions. Throughout the text are concealed ideas affecting the ebb and flow of moods and thoughts. Stark, primordial emotions insinuate themselves into the reader's consciousness. The *Guide* functions like a multi-faceted mirror, reflecting distant, unmapped regions in the readers' psyches. What the reader finds at the conclusion of the road is a jazzy, kaleidoscopic portrait of himself/herself as reflected in the work of the great master. In this type of 'reading' the most arduous task comes *afterward*: she/he will spend the rest of her/his life writing a postscript to his/her own *Guide*." See José Faur, *Homo Mysticus: A Guide to Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 12; emphasis in original.

the Gift. Chapter 7 circles back to take a deeper dive into Wolfson's understanding of kabbalistic hermeneutics, in the light of which chapter 8 further explores *Open Secret* and his notion of messianic consciousness or deification. The dissertation will be brought to a close of sorts with an open-ended conclusion that draws out some of the anthropological lessons to be learned from our exploration of the open secret of deification.

Finally, it is to be noted that when all is said and done this dissertation is essentially nothing more than an invitation to the reader to join me in wrestling with the necessary angels of Corbin's and Wolfson's respective oeuvres (more the latter), as I seek the blessing of an answer to the existential question of deification. It is thus an invitation to read over my shoulder, as it were, as I explore widely and deeply the mystical terrain of these two authors' academic esotericism. For the hope is that, by the end of this laborious exercise in exploration and synthesis, I will have produced at least a serviceable map of their thought, especially as it pertains to deification, and that others will want to explore the stimulating work of these scholars for themselves in search of answers to their own questions. Consequently, in writing this dissertation, I have operated on the assumption that it is the work of Corbin and Wolfson that should be foregrounded, while I labor in the background to synthesize the various parts of their work into a coherent (or at least semi-coherent) whole. Accordingly, because it is of the utmost importance to preserve the integrity and context of the texts examined, I have offered ample textual citations to allow the authors to speak for themselves, and to enable the reader to directly approach them him- or herself, with as little interference from me as possible. Thus my interpretation is kept to a discrete minimum.

In similar but different ways, to be properly and truly understood, the esoteric or mystical work of both Corbin and Wolfson demand a transformation of consciousness, an existential metamorphosis, in the reader. For, in the end, they want the reader to become through the experience of mystical hermeneutics the author—what Kripal has referred to as an “author of the impossible.”¹⁴¹ Therefore, the aim or core task of this dissertation is not to scientifically prove or demonstrate or establish some incontrovertible truth, but rather to point out, to serve as a signpost or guide of sorts. Accordingly, the present work is not a scientific elaboration or narrowly historical analysis of the oeuvres of Corbin and Wolfson. Rather, following them, the method to my madness is unavoidably hermeneutic and admittedly idiosyncratic. Thus, as with all “impossible” or esoteric or mystical literature, the ultimate objective of this humble work is not so much the systematic exposition of the cited texts herein, but the shedding of a light that will help to awaken new levels of consciousness. Mircea Eliade referred to this type of practice as a “creative hermeneutics” that “unveils significations that one did not grasp before, or puts them in relief with such a vigor that after having assimilated this new interpretation the consciousness is no longer the same.”¹⁴² It is my hope that this study will contribute to such a transformation of consciousness.

¹⁴¹ See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹⁴² Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 62.

Part I

Henry Corbin

[E]ach creature has a twofold dimension: the Creator-creature typifies the *coincidentia oppositorum*. From the first this *coincidentia* is present to Creation, because Creation is not *ex nihilo* but a theophany. As such, it is Imagination. The Creative Imagination is theophanic Imagination, and the Creator is one with the imagining Creature because each Creative Imagination is a theophany, a recurrence of the Creation.

Henry Corbin¹

¹ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 215.

Chapter 1: The Life and Work of Henry Corbin

I am neither a Germanist nor an Orientalist, but a Philosopher
pursuing his Quest wherever the Spirit guides him.

Henry Corbin¹

Henry Corbin (1903-1978) was a philosopher, theologian, Iranologist, professor of Islamic Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, France, and, by all accounts, as well as by the evidence of his own work, “a mystic, with a remarkable ability to see into the beyond.”² For nearly fifty years he was an eclectic and prolific scholar who produced a massive body of work that even his staunchest critics admire for its remarkable quality. Indeed, one such critic, Steven Wasserstrom, has admitted that Corbin’s voluminous corpus is extremely rare inasmuch as “[its] breadth is easily matched by its depth.”³

Referring to his own experience as an orientalist and philosopher, Corbin acknowledges how rare this pairing is and comments on what is lost when specialization conspires to keep these disciplines apart.

¹ Henry Corbin, “De Heidegger à Suhrawardi: Entretien avec Philippe Nemo” in *Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet, *Cahiers de L’Herne*, No. 39 (Paris: Éditions de L’Herne, 1981), p. 24 (see also “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi: An Interview with Philippe Nemo,” tr. Matthew Evans-Cockle, p. 1; at <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/biography/from-heidegger-to-suhrawardi/>).

² Tom Cheetham, *Imaginal Love: The Meaning of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman* (Thompson, CT: Spring Publications, 2015), pp. 29-30.

³ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 145.

One can be an orientalist, and one can be at the same time a philosopher, of rigorously and technically philosophical training. Those are the same two disciplines that are too rarely found in the same man, so rarely even at least concerning Islam, that a whole sector of Orientalism has long been left fallow, and that simultaneously the philosophers remain ignorant of one of their most beautiful provinces.⁴

The man in whom these apparently contradictory characteristics and disciplines combined to produce so many works of rare breadth and depth was born in Paris on April 14, 1903.⁵ Six days later his mother died. Corbin's health was fragile in his early years, and as a result he was frequently forced to interrupt his studies. He showed a strong affinity for music and studied organ and music theory as a child.

⁴ Henry Corbin, "Humanisme actif," in *Mélanges d'art et de littérature offerts à Julien Cairn*, Paris, 1968, p. 310. As cited in Nasr, "Henry Corbin," p. 274: "On peut être un orientaliste, et l'on peut être en même temps un philosophe, de formation rigoureusement et techniquement philosophique. Ce sont même les deux disciplines qui se trouvent beaucoup trop rarement conjuguées dans le même homme, si rarement même du moins concernant l'Islam, que tout un secteur de l'orientalisme est longtemps resté en friche, et que simultanément les philosophes sont restés dans l'ignorance de l'une de leurs plus belles provinces." My translation. Whenever possible I will use published translations. When not possible, and unless otherwise noted, the translations will be my own.

⁵ The brief biography that I am sketching here derives from many sources. Foremost among these are the following: Henry Corbin, "Repères biographiques," pp. 15-20, "De Heidegger à Suhrawardi: Entretien avec Philippe Nemo," pp. 23-37, and "Post-Scriptum biographique à un entretien philosophique," pp. 38-56, in *Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet, *Cahiers de L'Herne*, No. 39 (Paris: Éditions de L'Herne, 1981). See also Matthew-Evans-Cockle's translations of "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi: An Interview with Philippe Nemo" and "Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview," respectively, at <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/biography/from-heidegger-to-suhrawardi/> and <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/biography/biographical-post-scriptum-to-a-philosophical-interview/>. Additional sources include but are not limited to Tom Cheetham's *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism* (Woodstock, CT: Spring Journal Books, 2003), pp. ix-xii; Nasr's "Henry Corbin: The Life and Works of the Occidental Exile in Quest of the Orient of Light," in *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1987), pp. 273-290; Hadi Fakhoury's "Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture," in *Philosophy and the Abrahamic Religions: Scriptural Hermeneutics and Epistemology*, eds. Torrance Kirby, Rahim Acar and Bilal Baş (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 345-369, particularly pp. 345-355; and Dariush (Daryush) Shayegan's *Henry Corbin: La topographie spirituelle de l'Islam Iranien* (Paris: Ed. de la Différence, 1990).

Corbin attended the monastery school at St. Maur, later the Seminary School of Issy, and received a certificate in Scholastic philosophy from the Catholic Institute of Paris in 1922. In 1925, he took his licentiate in philosophy under the renowned scholar of medieval philosophy Étienne Gilson at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, with a thesis entitled “Latin Avicennism in the Middle Ages.” As Tom Cheetham observes, “Corbin was entranced by Gilson’s scholarship and his ability to bring medieval texts to life.”⁶ At that time, Gilson was just beginning his own study of the role of Islamic philosophy in the development of Scholastic thought in the West, and this sparked what would prove to be a lifelong interest in Corbin, who greatly admired Gilson and took him as his model.

Of this stimulating period and its lasting impact Corbin writes, “That was my first contact with Islamic philosophy. I detected therein a certain connivance between cosmology and angelology (I believe that this interest in and consideration for angelology is something that has stayed with me ever since), which led me to wonder whether it would not be possible to explore this correspondence at greater length and from other angles.”⁷

During that same time period he attended the lectures of another philosopher whose researches broadened his intellectual and spiritual horizons, namely, Emile Bréhier. When Corbin first encountered him, Bréhier was immersed in translating and establishing the critical edition of Plotinus’ *Enneads*. In 1922-1923 he had given a series of lectures on Plotinus and the *Upanishads*, the richness of which continued to benefit subsequent classes in the years to come. They proved irresistible to Corbin: “how could a

⁶ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. ix.

⁷ Corbin, “Post-Scriptum biographique,” p. 39; see also Corbin, “Biographical Post-Scriptum to a Philosophical Interview,” tr. Matthew Evans-Cockle, p. 2.

young philosopher, eager for metaphysical adventure, resist the call to investigate the influence and trace elements of Indian philosophy to be found in the works of the founder of Neo-Platonism?” Thus inspired by Bréhier’s lectures on Plotinus and the *Upanishads*, and since he had already mastered Latin and Greek, there followed what Corbin refers to as “a great period of mental asceticism” in which he undertook the “heroic” study of both Arabic and Sanskrit. This course of studies lasted for two years, at the end of which Corbin came to, in his words, “a ‘significant milestone’ that would indicate to me a decisive direction from which there was to be no return: from then on, my path was to go by way of Arabic and Persian texts.”⁸

The milestone in question was his encountering in 1928 Louis Massignon, then the Director of Islamic Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. This encounter came at a difficult time for Corbin, who as a philosopher studying the Arabic language felt “astray among the linguists” and at risk of perishing “for lack of nourishment having nothing but grammar books and dictionaries with which to sustain myself.” More than once in these circumstances he questioned the wisdom of his chosen course of study. Fortunately, however, there was what he described as “one final and remarkable refuge for me,” namely, Louis Massignon.

For in Massignon he found a mentor whose teachings made available “the very finest substance of Islamic Spirituality.” But, Corbin admits, the contrast between the methodical and rigorous classes given by Gilson and those of Massignon was “extraordinary” to say the least.

⁸ Ibid.; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 3.

Of course, at the beginning of the year the Professor distributed a program with an overview of the general theme of the class in question divided up into a certain number of lessons. But of what use such programs! On occasion lessons took as their starting point a number of the fulgurating intuitions that—great mystic that he was—Massignon was especially prodigious in. Then a parenthesis would open up, and then another, and then another... Finally, the listener would find him or herself exhausted and lost smack in the middle of the Professor's grappling with the problems of British politics in Palestine...⁹

These mystical and seemingly undisciplined tangential flights left some of Massignon's students bewildered and frustrated. But, as Corbin was quick to point out, one had to recognize, and not everyone did, "that this was simply a necessary aspect of the passion burning inside of Massignon." Corbin himself was warmed by the fires of this passion, and his contact with Massignon was decisive in confirming his own proclivity for the mystical element in oriental studies.

This is not to suggest, however, that Corbin and Massignon were always of a like mind. They were not. For instance, Corbin recalls being somewhat perplexed and frustrated by "the occasional wavering" in Massignon's vocabulary and even "in his formally stated opinions," especially as these pertained to his beloved Shi'ite Islam. "I have known, on certain occasions," Corbin remembers, "an ultra-Shiite Massignon... On other days, however, I found him vituperating Shiism and the Shiites, the great texts of which were still foreign to him." Corbin, of course, was then undertaking "a vast study"

⁹ Ibid., p. 40; see also "Biographical Post-Scriptum," p. 3.

of Ismaili gnostic texts and so felt compelled to vigorously defend this tradition, with the result that Massignon was reportedly “astonished” by his “ultra-Shiism.” Yet there was nothing about such disagreements that diminished their mutual regard. Indeed, as Corbin states, perceiving certain “vulnerable sides” to his thinking “in no way alters the veneration with which I evoke the memory of Massignon.”¹⁰

With respect to the notion of his “ultra-Shiism,” as Corbin observes, it has to be interpreted with reference to the “phenomenon of the sacred Book” (i.e., the Quranic revelation) since it is in relation to this phenomenon that the different schools of Islamic

¹⁰ Ibid.; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 4. Cf. Henry Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, tr. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998), p. 96: “I have never been able to understand the obscure reasons for his [Massignon’s] exclusion of certain individuals and spiritual schools of Islam from the light of his intuitive understanding. But I do believe that my own extension of the spirit of his method to these neglected areas has established an essentially positive link between them and Massignon’s teaching. It might seem that the motivations which inspired my extension would alter this relationship; yet such an alteration amounts to no more than the exclusion of an exclusion, the negation of a negation.” Cf. Christian Jambet, “Le Soufisme entre Louis Massignon et Henry Corbin,” in *Consciousness and Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, eds. Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshityānī, Hideichi Matsubara, Takashi Iwami, and Akiro Matsumoto (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 259-272. For more on the complex and interesting relationship between Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin, see Jean Moncelon, “Louis Massignon et Henry Corbin,” in *Louis Massignon et ses contemporains*, ed. Jacques Keryell (Paris: Karthala, 1997), pp. 201-219, and Pierre Roclave, “Louis Massignon et Henry Corbin,” *Luqmān* 10.2 (1994), pp. 73-86; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 346.

With respect to the notion of his “ultra-Shiism,” as Corbin observes, it has to be interpreted with reference to the “phenomenon of the sacred Book” (i.e., the Quranic revelation) since it is in relation to this phenomenon that the different schools of Islamic thought are to be properly understood. This is especially true relative to the largest and oldest split between the majority Sunni and the minority Shiite Muslims. (The former considers itself the orthodox branch of Islam and the latter the unorthodox or heretical branch. This is due in part to the fact that the Shia claim that Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, was his rightful successor). Not simply because, in Corbin’s words, according to Shiism, “the Quran that we possess today is a mutilated form of the original, but because the truth of the holy Book in our possession must be sought at the heart of its hidden depths, in the plurality of its esoteric meanings. The key to these hidden depths is the Shiite doctrine of the Imām and of the *walāyah*—the initiatic charisma of the ‘Friends of God’—as the esoteric aspect of prophecy. Seen in this light, the task of philosophy is fundamentally hermeneutic.” See Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain and Philip Sherrard (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 255-256. See also *ibid.*, p. 1, where in speaking of the Jews, Christians and Muslims as the “people of the Book,” Corbin writes: “All of these communities are faced with the problem of the basic religious phenomenon which is common to them all: the phenomenon of the Sacred Book, the law of life within this world and guide beyond it. The first and last task is to understand the *true meaning* of this Book. But the mode of understanding is conditioned by the mode of being of him who understands; correspondingly, the believer’s whole inner ethos derives from his mode of understanding. The lived situation is essentially *hermeneutical*, a situation, that is to say, in which the *true meaning* dawns on the believer and confers reality upon his existence. This true meaning, correlative to true being—truth which is real and reality which is true—is what is expressed in one of the key terms in the vocabulary of philosophy: the word *ḥaqīqah* [true/spiritual meaning; italics in original].”

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true—is what is expressed in one of the key terms in the vocabulary of philosophy: the word *ḥaqīqah* [true/spiritual meaning; italics in original].”

It was, after all, Massignon who first introduced Corbin to the writings of Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (1154-1191), “the Iranian theosopher of Oriental Light,”¹¹ who affected the course of his life in ways both lasting and profound. Of their first meeting, Corbin recalls that it occurred in the course of the 1927-28 academic year. That day he spoke with Massignon of the reasons why he, as a philosopher, was drawn to the study of Arabic, and they discussed the questions that he had regarding the connections between the philosophy and mysticism of Suhrawardi, about whom he then knew relatively little, based on “a rather meagre German resume.” According to Corbin, as they spoke, Massignon “received an inspiration from the Heavens.” For it just so happened that the elder mystic scholar had recently traveled to Iran and brought back with him a voluminous lithographed edition of the principal work of Suhrawardi, *Hikmat al-Ishrâq* or *The Oriental Theosophy*. “Here,” Corbin recalls Massignon saying to him, “I believe that there is something in this book for you.” “That ‘something,’” he writes, “was the presence and company of the young Shaykh al’Ishraq and it is something that has not left me over the course of my lifetime.” Corbin continues to reflect on the life-changing nature of this encounter with Suhrawardi, which was generously facilitated by his mentor Massignon:

I have always been a Platonist (in the broadest sense of the term, of course). I believe one is born a Platonist, just as one can be born an atheist, a materialist, etc. It is a question of the impenetrable mystery of

¹¹ Cheetham, *The Word Turned Inside Out*, p. x.

pre-existential choices. In any case, the young Platonist that I was could not help but burn at the very contact of he who had been the “Imam of the Persian Platonists”.... By my encounter with Suhrawardi, my spiritual destiny in my passage through this world was sealed. This Platonism of his expressed itself in terms belonging to the Zoroastrian angelology of Ancient Persia and in so doing illuminated the path I had been searching for.¹²

Having made this discovery, there was no more need for Corbin to remain torn between Sanskrit and Arabic. For, with his introduction to Suhrawardi, the main lines that his research would take became clear, and he devoted himself to the study of Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. Thus was launched “the ‘career’ of the Orientalist Philosopher, and his decisive encounter with that Iranian land said to be the ‘color of sky’ and ‘homeland to philosophers and poets.’”¹³

¹² Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” pp. 40-41 and 41; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” pp. 4 and 5. Here it is worth noting that the interpretation of Suhrawardi that Corbin shares with Seyyed Hossein Nasr and others has been the source of scholarly debate. As Cheetham points out, John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai in particular have challenged Corbin’s interpretation on the grounds that his approach is too gnostic and/or “mythological.” They, by contrast, prefer to emphasize the philosophical aspects of Suhrawardi’s teachings. Thus, in their Introduction to their translation of Suhrawardi’s *Hikmat al-Ishraq* entitled *The Philosophy of Illumination*, they write: “Corbin’s interpretation is expressed not just in his studies of Suhrawardi but also in his translations and even his critical editions of Suhrawardi’s works. The use of renderings like ‘theosophy’ and ‘oriental’ indicate the fundamentally mythological focus of Corbin’s interests and interpretations. His translation of *The Philosophy of Illumination* omits the logic, and his editions of the three ‘Peripatetic’...works omit the logic and physics of each work and contain only the sections on metaphysics. Such methods inevitably downplay the strictly philosophical aspects of Suhrawardi’s thought.” See Walbridge and Ziai’s Introduction to Suhrawardi’s *The Philosophy of Illumination: A New Critical Edition of the Text Hikmat al-ishraq*, with English Translation, Notes, Commentary, and Introduction by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), p. xix, and references therein. As cited in Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. xi.

¹³ Ibid., p. 41; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 5.

There was another, “essentially complementary” encounter that took place during this period with another country that proved to be equally decisive, specifically “the old Germany that was also once ‘homeland to philosophers and poets.’” This came about through Corbin’s taking the courses of “the astonishing and inimitable Baruzi brothers,” Joseph and Jean, at the Collège de France. It was the younger of the two brothers, Jean, who had the most impact. For it was through him that Corbin discovered the theology of the young Luther, and subsequently “the great Protestant spirituals” such as Sebastian Franck, Caspar Schwenkfeld, Valentin Weigel, Johann Arndt, Jacob Boehme, and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger.

Thus, under the tutelage of Jean Baruzi, another vital horizon of spiritual thought was opened to Corbin, that of the German theological tradition or what he would later call the “lineage of hermeneutics,” which included not only Luther and Boehme but Hamann and Schleiermacher, and eventually Dilthey and Heidegger.

This revelation led Corbin to make several trips to Germany between the years 1930 and 1936. It was during these years that he came into contact with many contemporary philosophers and theologians, most notably Rudolf Otto, Karl Barth, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Martin Heidegger, and Ernst Cassirer.

Cassirer, the philosopher of symbolic forms, introduced Corbin to the Cambridge Platonists, in whom he recognized “yet another branch of my spiritual family thereby broadening my path as well as the scope of what I was ultimately searching for,” which at that time he still had but “an obscure presentiment” of exactly what that was. Only with the clarity of hindsight was Corbin able to write, “What I was looking for was precisely

that which was later to become all my philosophy of the *mundus imaginalis*, whose name, as it happens, I owe to our Persian Platonists.”¹⁴

It was also during this same time period that Corbin was first introduced to the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, whose immense oeuvre was to accompany him the rest of his life, and which helped to clarify his conception of the correspondence between the natural and spiritual worlds.¹⁵ So enduring was his interest in Swedenborg that, as his translator Leonard Fox notes, Corbin told the director of the Swedenborg Verlag in Zurich that he frequently spoke with his Shi’ite friends in Iran about the significance of Swedenborg’s thought and its similarity to esoteric Islam.¹⁶ This respect for Swedenborg’s work and interest in its correspondences to esoteric Islam gave rise to a lengthy essay that he later wrote entitled “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics,” in which he compared the two hermeneutic traditions of Christianity and Islam, the former being represented by Swedenborg, who, Corbin says, “was truly, in his immense work, the prophet of the internal sense of the Bible.”¹⁷

Another instance that well illustrates the significance of Swedenborg to Corbin is to be found in a lengthy footnote in his classic work *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*. There he recounts a memorable conversation that he had with the master

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 43; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 8. See also Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 347. For more on Corbin and Heschel, see Paul Fenton, “Henry Corbin and Abraham Heschel,” in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Philosophy, Theology and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Stanisław Krajewski and Adam Lipszyc (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), pp. 102-111. Fakhoury also cites Fenton in this context.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 42-43; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 7. See also Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 347.

¹⁶ See Leonard Fox, “Translator’s Preface,” in Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, tr. Leonard Fox (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), p. viii.

¹⁷ Henry Corbin, “Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics,” in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, tr. Leonard Fox (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), p. 38. As Fox observes, this essay, “Herméneutique spirituelle comparée,” which was first given as a paper at the Eranos Conference, was originally published in 1964 in the corresponding *Eranos Yearbook* and reprinted in a posthumous collection of Corbin’s essays entitled *Face de Dieu, face de l’homme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984; pp. 41-162).

of Zen Buddhism, Daisetz Teitaro (D. T.) Suzuki. This conversation, we are told, took place at Casa Gabriella in Ascona, Switzerland on August 18, 1954, in the presence of Olga Fröb-Kapteyn and Mircea Eliade. Corbin writes that he and his conversation partners asked Suzuki what his first encounter with “Occidental spirituality” had been. One imagines that it was with some surprise that they learned the Zen master’s first contact with the West had come “some fifty years before” when he had translated four of Swedenborg’s works into Japanese. Corbin continues:

Later on in the conversation we asked him what homologies in structure he found between Mahayana Buddhism and the cosmology of Swedenborg in respect of the symbolism and correspondences of the worlds (cf. his *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, First Series, p. 54, n.). Of course we expected not a theoretical answer, but a sign attesting the encounter in a concrete person of an experience common to Buddhism and to Swedenborgian spirituality. And I can still see Suzuki suddenly brandishing a spoon and saying with a smile: “This spoon *now* exists in Paradise....” “We are *now* in Heaven,” he explained. This was an authentically Zen way of answering the question; Ibn ‘Arabi would have relished it. In reference to the establishment of the transfigured world to which we have alluded above, it may not be irrelevant to mention the importance which, in the ensuing conversation, Suzuki attached to the Spirituality of Swedenborg, “your Buddha of the North.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 354-355. Originally published in French as *L’Imagination créatrice dans le Soufisme d’Ibn ‘Arabi* by Flammarion in 1958, and in English as *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* by Princeton University Press in 1969.

It is thus clear that the thought of Swedenborg was of no little significance to Corbin.

This being the case, the year 1931-1932 brought another significant but shorter-lived influence into Corbin's life, namely, that of Karl Barth. Inspired by Barth, whom they hoped would bring about the renewal of Protestant theology, Corbin, Denis de Rougemont, Roland de Pury, Albert-Marie Schmidt, and Roger Jézéquel founded the small and ephemeral review entitled *Hic et Nunc (Here and Now)*. It was ephemeral in part because Corbin quickly became uncomfortable with Barth's dialectical theology and "Barthism."¹⁹ Although he does not specify exactly what it was about Barth's dialectical theology and Barthism that made him and his colleagues uncomfortable, it is safe to say that they objected on both phenomenological and theological grounds.

For phenomenologically speaking, because it ignores the intentional structure of ordinary consciousness, Barthism, by "taking refuge in a certain fideism," tends to a kind of subjectivism that ultimately reduces religious experience to psychologism. Thus, as Jean Hering writes, phenomenologists reproach Barthians and Barthism for their "inexact, and often dishonest, description of religious phenomenon—any conscientious phenomenological description having to recognize the presence in religion of data inexplicable in a psychological way."²⁰

Similarly, from a theological perspective, because of its reactionary "unilateral transcendentalism," Barthism, like all reactions, predictably gave rise to the opposite reaction of "an equally exacerbated immanentism." This took the form of equally one-

¹⁹ Corbin, "Post-scriptum bibliographique," p. 45; see also "Biographical Post-Scriptum," p. 10.

²⁰ Jean Hering, "Phenomenology in France," in *Philosophic Thought in France and the United States: Essays Representing Major Trends in Contemporary French and American Philosophy*, ed. Marvin Farber (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1968), p. 69.

sided and simplistic theologies, the most famous of these being the “death of God” and “secular Christianity” theologies. Indeed, as Louis Bouyer explains, Barthism’s naïve belief in an utterly transcendent God, isolated in his “sovereign grandeur,” such that “the human being and every other creature is denigrated,” resulted in “a notion of salvation whose gratuity people felt could be maintained only by emptying it of any verifiable content,” and it was this that opened the door for such reactionary theologies to emerge. According to Bouyer, Barth had unconsciously prepared the stage for this “simply by opposing the divine Word to all ‘religion,’ to all humanly expressible sacrality.” This being the case, it is inevitable that the human person in his or her actuality, “who can neither give up living nor live in a world that is really [their] own,” must eventually take a reactionary and one-sided notion of the “death of God” as “the preliminary condition of his accession to adulthood,” as well as the “denial of all sacrality as the necessary means for the ‘humanization’ of the cosmos.”²¹ In short, at the risk of oversimplifying matters, with Barthism, not only can humanity not attain to God, but God cannot attain to humanity.²² This Barthian “new Protestantism,” Bouyer maintains, is but “a revival of the old liberalism, pushed to its ultimate consequences.”²³

In light of this, given their disillusion with Barthism, Corbin and his colleagues subsequently adopted Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky as spiritual forefathers. “That was good,” Corbin recalled, “but it was not enough to jar philosophy in the way that my friends intended to.” He, on the other hand, had already found in Suhrawardi a suitably disruptive spiritual forefather who “show[ed] me a sign, warning me that since this

²¹ Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God: Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit*, tr. Charles Underhill Quinn (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), p. 151.

²² See H. Francis Davis, “The Essence of Barthism,” *The Downside Review* 68:2 (April 1950), p. 131.

²³ Bouyer, *The Church of God*, p. 152.

‘jarring’ operated at the expense of a philosophy that no longer merited the name, it was necessary to rediscover the Sophia of another philosophy.”²⁴

In addition to Suhrawardi, Corbin found another kindred spirit in the “rebellious prophet”²⁵ and Russian Orthodox émigré philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, whose acquaintance he made around this time. Berdyaev was for Corbin not only a like-minded friend but also “a source of continuous inspiration.” Indeed, as Fakhoury writes, of all the contemporary thinkers who influenced Corbin, Berdyaev “had the most significant and lasting impact on his thought.”²⁶ Among the many important themes Corbin inherited from the older Berdyaev were the rejection of historicism and of the socialization or collectivization of spiritual life, the theosophical understanding of Sophia, the idea of divine-human creativity or *theandry*, and a realized eschatological understanding of Christianity as being meant to foster the fulfilment of an *ecclesia spiritualis*, a church of the spiritual, a church dominated by contemplatives as opposed to mere clerics. Corbin would later say of the Russian devotee of Sophia that, “if I have been able to confront freely as a philosopher the philosophical problems with which I have been faced, I believe I owe it to a large extent to Berdyaev.”²⁷ Thus, with Fakhoury,

²⁴ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 45; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 10.

²⁵ This is a reference to the title of Donald A. Lowrie’s biography of Berdyaev, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolai Berdyaev* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960).

²⁶ Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 348. In n. 15 on this page, Fakhoury elaborates, “Berdyaev is the only contemporary philosopher in whom Corbin takes continuous and increasing interest, as is evident from the frequent references to him in Corbin’s works from 1953 right up through *En Islam Iranien*.” Arguably not even Heidegger, who was undeniably significant to the development of Corbin’s thought, warranted his “continuous and increasing interest.”

²⁷ Corbin, “Allocution d’ouverture,” in *Colloque Berdiaev. Sorbonne, 12 Avril 1975*, ed. Jean-Claude Marcadé (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 1978), p. 49. As cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 348.

one could argue that Berdyaev was “one of the most nearly congenial contemporary philosophers to Corbin’s way of thinking.”²⁸

Because of this, it behooves us to dwell a bit longer on Berdyaev and his thought, to flesh out as it were the precise nature of the above mentioned congeniality with Corbin’s way of thinking. As Fakhoury observes in his valuable study of the influence of Russian religious thought on Corbin, there are four interrelated aspects of Berdyaev’s influence in particular that stand out: (1) as a “religious existentialist,” Berdyaev shared “family traits” with such contemporary thinkers of the 1930’s as Karl Barth, Lev Shestov, Martin Buber, and Gabriel Marcel, all of whom were “key names for Corbin in that period”; as a critic of (2) Barth and (3) Heidegger, “Berdyaev had a decisive impact on Corbin’s critical engagement and ultimate break with these thinkers”; (4) and just as importantly, as a representative of Russian religious thought, Berdyaev “revealed to Corbin what was specific to Eastern Christian thought, and in so doing, facilitated his vocational turn to the East and Eastern thought at the end of the 1930s.” It is in this sense, then, that, as Fakhoury writes, Berdyaev “served as a bridge between East and West for Corbin.” A function that was greatly facilitated between the years 1932-1934 by the publication in French of four anthologies of Berdyaev’s articles, in addition to the

²⁸ Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 348. Here it is worth quoting in full Fakhoury’s n. 17 on this and the subsequent page: “Despite this influence and importance, Berdyaev has until now been largely neglected in secondary literature on Corbin. A close comparative analysis of Corbin and Berdyaev would yield illuminating results. We intend to undertake this effort in the near future. Meanwhile, the interested reader will find a partial thematic comparison in Klaus Bambauer, “Aspekte der Theoandrie bei Nikolai Berdjajew: Ein Vergleich mit Henry Corbin und Raimon Panikkar,” in *Warheit und Offenbarung: Prolegomena zu einer Kritik der Offenbarung*, by Nikolai Berdjajew (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1998), 94-109.” (Needless to say, Bambauer’s essay is of personal interest, particularly given that he includes Panikkar in his study.) See also Fakhoury’s *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought* at http://www.amiscorbin.com/images/documents/pdfs/Fakhoury_Henry_Corbin_and_Russian_Religious_Thought.pdf (this was his Master’s thesis that he submitted to McGill University, Montreal in August 2013), as well as his “Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought, Part I: Early Encounters,” *Dionysius*, vol. 32 (December 2014), pp. 173-218, and “Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought, Part II: Themes and Variations,” *Dionysius*, vol. 33 (December 2015), pp. 223-275.

publication of the French editions of his landmark works *Freedom and the Spirit* in 1933, and *The Destiny of Man* in 1935, “through which his philosophical views became known to the French public.”²⁹

The mention of these two works provides entrée into a brief consideration of Berdyaev’s thought in itself, for implied in both titles is the foundation of Berdyaev’s distinctive brand of religiously existential personalism, which is to say, his notion of philosophical anthropology. What is Berdyaev’s conception of philosophical anthropology? As Georg Nicolaus observes, if we turn to *The Destiny of Man*, we find the beginnings of an answer to this question.³⁰ For therein Berdyaev writes: “Philosophy must get rid of psychologism, but it cannot get rid of man. Philosophy must be consciously, not instinctively anthropological.”³¹

Following Nicolaus, this means that, for Berdyaev, the human person as she becomes conscious of herself through philosophy “is more fundamental than the [person] of history, sociology, empirical anthropology, biology, or experimental or depth psychology.” Why? Because, according to Berdyaev, philosophy has always been inherently, if largely unconsciously, anthropological or centered on humanity from the very beginning. In order to become consciously and not just instinctively anthropological, therefore, philosophy and philosophical anthropology need to undergo a radical conversion in how they understand themselves. In other words, as Nicolaus states, instead of philosophical anthropology being oriented towards and even reduced to “the special sciences of the humanities and somehow trying to integrate them,” it—and by

²⁹ Fakhoury, *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought*, pp. 30 and 37.

³⁰ Georg Nicolaus, *C. G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 31-32.

³¹ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, tr. Natalie Duddington (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), p. 45. As cited in Nicolaus, *C. G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev*, p. 32.

extension philosophy as a whole—“has to become conscious of its most persistent and ineradicable presupposition”: the individual human person. For it is always the person herself, the human subject, who philosophizes, and any attempt to get rid of her for the sake of some spuriously objective philosophical or scientific truth has failed to understand that the anthropological nature of philosophy is not and can never be equated with or reduced to psychology, history, sociology, politics, physics, etc. Indeed, the opposite is true. For, again in the words of Nicolaus, according to Berdyaev, on the anthropological presupposition rests “the very nature of philosophical truth, as opposed to the relative truth of specialist knowledge within regional ontologies,” which are blind to and alienated from the profound significance of the divine-human spirit. It is this divine-human spirit that is foundational for Berdyaev, and as such philosophy—like all forms of culture—is a creative manifestation of it.³²

Here a few more important characteristics of Berdyaev’s thought emerge that help to shed additional light on the aforementioned themes that Corbin inherited from his older contemporary. To begin with, Berdyaev’s rejection of historicism and of the socialization or collectivization of spiritual life is rooted in his critique of a perverted “naturalism,” which is the umbrella term that he uses for all perspectives—philosophical or otherwise—that are, to varying degrees, caught in a fundamentally alienated viewpoint that opposes the object to the subject. This pernicious objectification implies a loss of interiority and freedom and, hence, a subjection of the spirit to an exterior and

³² Nicolaus, *C. G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev*, p. 32. Here it must be noted with Nicolaus that Berdyaev’s emphasis on the universal importance of anthropology is directly influenced by the work of Ludwig Feuerbach and what Martin Buber referred to as his “anthropological reduction.” However, by virtue of his distinctive brand of religiously existential personalism, Berdyaev takes Feuerbach’s “anthropological reduction” and gives it an interpretation which, in the words of Nicolaus, “is diametrically opposed to the atheistic naturalism of Feuerbach” (pp. 31, 206).

mechanical necessity. For, in the words of Berdyaev, one of the defining marks of this “natural,” objectified condition (which is really un-natural insofar as the spiritual dimension is lost) is “the rule of necessity, of determination from without, the crushing of freedom and the concealment of it” and the spirit alike, since the spirit is freedom and pure interiority.³³ Thus, as Nicolaus explains, Berdyaev’s use of the generic term “naturalism” in this sense “covers everything from blunt materialism, to a traditional ontological metaphysics. What is common to all these viewpoints is that in them the *personal*, the interiority and freedom of the spirit, gets crushed and subjected to the impersonal, the common and the extrinsic that obey some mechanical order of necessity.”³⁴

Intrinsic to Berdyaev’s rejection of this spiritually bereft “naturalism” was his Christian theosophical understanding of Sophia, which had its antecedents in biblical texts, Greek and Jewish Platonism and Neoplatonism, Gnosticism and Kabbalah, as well as the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme and later the Sophiology of Vladimir Solovyov.³⁵ But what exactly is Christian theosophy, and who or what is Sophia?

Regarding the former, and taking the above antecedents into account, Arthur Versluis has outlined six different characteristics of Christian theosophy to more precisely define and situate it within the context of Western esotericism more generally. These characteristics are as follows:

³³ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, tr. R. M. French (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 62. As cited in Nicolaus, *C. G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev*, p. 38.

³⁴ Nicolaus, *C. G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev*, p. 39; emphasis in original.

³⁵ See Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 72.

1. Focus upon the figure of divine Wisdom or Sophia, the “mirror of God,” generally conceived as feminine;
2. an insistence upon direct spiritual experience or cognition, meaning both insight into the divine nature of the cosmos and metaphysical or transcendent gnosis;
3. non-sectarianism, and self-identification with the theosophic current;
4. a spiritual leader who guides his or her spiritual circle through letters and spiritual advice;
5. reference to the works and thought of Jacob Böhme [also spelled Boehme]; and perhaps
6. visionary insight into nature and non-physical realms, though 6 is actually a subset of 2.

Versluis goes on to observe that, in his extensive study of the “theosophic current,” he has yet to find a single figure who “does not exemplify at least four of the first five characteristics listed here.”³⁶ Thus we can say that Christian theosophy (as distinct from the Theosophy associated with Madame Blavatsky) is marked by these five or six fundamental characteristics.

Accordingly, in this stream of Western esotericism, Sophia or divine Wisdom or the eternal Feminine is a multifaceted figure of great significance. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, through her analysis of the writings of the late-nineteenth-century Russian poet and philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, examines this ever ancient and ever new figure to

³⁶ Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom's Book: The Sophia Anthology* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2000), pp. 10-14. As cited in Arthur Versluis, “What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism,” p. 2; at <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm>.

great effect. In so doing, she offers a striking answer to the question: what is Sophia? “Like an icon,” she writes, “Sophia brings heaven to earth and in the interaction of the opposites creates a new whole: a poetic, often joyful, light-infused creation. She is the mediator and the element that causes us to see reality from more than one perspective at once.” Deutsch Kornblatt continues:

Whether a conjoining principle, a personal mystical vision, or the union of believers in the united and transfigured church, she is a tension, the energy that binds and transforms through the binding itself. She alters reality, making it better, truer, and more beautiful. With her interaction, spirit is incarnated and matter divinized. She can have many names, faces, and functions, because she, who is the “true reason for creation and its goal,” is one thing. Sophia not only links but fully participates in two opposites and in the new creation their relationship produces.³⁷

As such, this coincidence of opposites or *coincidentia oppositorum* is, in the words of the twentieth-century poet-monk Thomas Merton, the “invisible fecundity” and “hidden wholeness” of all creation that is simultaneously “my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art within me.”³⁸

³⁷ Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia*, p. 94. The interior quote is, per her citation, from *Stikhotvoreniia Vladimira Solov'eva* [SS: *The Poetry of Vladimir Solovyov*] (Moscow: 1891/1915), 11:298.

³⁸ Thomas Merton, “Hagia Sophia,” in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 61. See also Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 301. As Pramuk notes on pp. 196-197, this poem is also found in *A Thomas Merton Reader: Revised Edition*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 506-511; *Merton and Hesychasm: Prayer of the Heart: The Eastern Church*, eds. Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), pp. 255-260; *The Collected Poems of Thomas*

This notion of Sophia was central Berdyaev's thought inasmuch as it informed his understanding of the idea of divine-human creativity or *theandry*, which is intimately related to a realized eschatological understanding of Christianity. Theandry or theandristism is the classical concept of Christian theology that, as Raimon Panikkar says, is the "traditional term for that intimate and complete unity which is realized paradigmatically in Christ between the divine and human and which is the goal towards which everything here below tends—in Christ and the Spirit."³⁹ Importantly, in the Christian mystical tradition this experience of being that is at once "fully human and fully divine," which is inextricably tied to the understanding of incarnation, has been extended to include the cosmos—an insight that found eloquent expression as far back the seventh-century in the writings of the monk, scholar, and theologian scholar Maximus the Confessor.

Similarly ancient is the realized eschatological understanding of Christianity. Eschatology is the doctrine of, or discourse about, the "last things" which have both a theological and temporal sense. That is, as Mikel Burley (following Jerry Walls) explains, "the 'end' with which eschatology is concerned can be the purpose or goal as well as the *terminus ad quem*, the endpoint towards which human life or history more

Merton (New York: New Directions, 1980), pp. 363-371; and *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 257-264

³⁹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 71. As Panikkar notes, his notion of theandristism, while rooted in a Christian and trinitarian understanding of spirituality, is not limited to it. As he writes on p. 72 of *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*: "I do not deny that my interpretation of theandristism is in fact trinitarian and christian, but I wish to make very clear is that this theandristism is not a concept inherent in and introduced by christian faith alone but that it is already present as the end towards which the religious consciousness of humanity tends, and also as the most adequate interpretation of mystical experience (which is itself the culmination of all religious experience)." It is this open understanding of theandristism to which I subscribe.

generally is heading.”⁴⁰ Thus, provided it is not construed in too narrow a fashion, there are multiple ways to understand eschatology both within the context of Christian theology and that of other religions, although presently we are concerned with the former.

As Burley notes, one such understanding, “realized eschatology,” is a term that was technically coined by C. H. Dodd in his 1935 book *The Parables of the Kingdom*. It is a term of art that denotes an interpretation of the New Testament according to which the coming of the kingdom or reign of God is not something that would occur only after the completion of Jesus’ ministry—either imminently or at the eventual apocalyptic end of time—but rather, it was brought into reality (i.e., realized) through, with, and in that ministry itself—in the person of Jesus and the faith of his followers that, in the words of Rudolf Bultmann, constituted “the Revelation of God’s ‘reality’” that “radically transposed eschatological occurrence into the present.”⁴¹ Yet, while “realized eschatology” may have been coined by Dodd as a technical theological term, like all of Christian theology, its provenance can be traced back to the New Testament, particularly the four gospels and letters of Paul.

Moreover, consistent with the term’s origins and multivalence, realized eschatology has been interpreted by mystics over the centuries to denote a reality that is always already the case. For example, the writings of the fourth-century monk, scholar, and theologian Evagrius of Pontus can be fruitfully read (or creatively misread, some might contend) as speaking to the experience of this reality. Hence, understood in this

⁴⁰ Mikel Burley, “Dislocating the Eschaton? Appraising Realized Eschatology,” *Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions* 56:3 (2017), p. 436. As Burley notes, he is here following Jerry L. Walls’ introduction in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Wall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

⁴¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 58 and 79. As cited in Burley, “Dislocating the Eschaton?”, pp. 436–437.

way, the fullness of time, both in its “beginning” and its “end,” can and must be tasted or experienced here and now, in this and every moment, if only proleptically. Paul Marshall, in his book *The Shape of the Soul*, provides an excellent synopsis of what this means existentially. He writes:

The upshot of placing the totality of time in each moment is that the entire working-out of the creative process, from origination to fulfillment, from "alpha" to "omega," is eternally present in each moment, at every step of the journey. In the phenomenal view, fulfillment is a long way off, not at all suspected or just dimly intuited, but in the noumenal view, it is completely realized here and now, in the eternal present. God as fully evolved derivative nature and higher self—and indeed God as everpresent essential nature—is here and now at all moments of the universal process [of deification]. Thus fulfillment is not limited to a distant future, an end time or "eschaton," since it is eternally realized in each moment, as Traherne insisted, the all-encompassing heavenly "Kingdom" and "secret self" already present and open to discovery by those who care to look.

Accordingly, as Berdyaev and his fellow sophiologists contend, it is in the light of realized eschatology that the open secret of our divine-human self is continually being revealed, if only we care to look and have the eyes with which to see.

And thus we come to another theological notion that was central to Berdyaev's thought and important to Corbin, namely, *theosis* or deification. For Berdyaev's

theosophical understanding of Sophia (his sophiology) is primarily concerned with “the spiritualization of matter, of the flesh, through the disclosure of the unfallen aspects of natural bodies,” that is, with “regeneration—of the human person (religion), of nature (science), of culture (art)—and attests to the sacramental nature of All that is.”⁴² Thus this notion of deification necessarily emphasizes the inextricable relationship between ontology, epistemology, anthropology, and theology in its key claim that “the human person is not *tabula rasa*, but in the deepest recesses of the human mind and heart, indeed, in the fabric of corporeality and Being itself, there lives a hidden memory and experience of God that, whether or not we are conscious of it, binds everything together across all distances, cultures, physical landscapes, and times.”⁴³ In this, *theosis* or deification denotes an ever deepening experience of neither the permanent dissolution of the human in the divine, nor the separation of the human from the divine, but the fulfillment of human existence in a nondual or paradoxical union with the divine that is always already the case.

Such a radical metaphysical claim—the claim of nondualism, or what Berdyaev’s older contemporary Solovyov referred to as “pan-unity”—is born of a cosmotheandric⁴⁴ vision in which cosmology and anthropology are wed in a spirituality of deification.⁴⁵ Moreover, this claim “is rendered epistemologically credible...only to the degree our lives and traditions cultivate the experiential consciousness of it.”⁴⁶ This insight is at the

⁴² Michael Martin, *The Submerged Reality: Sophiology and the Turn to a Poetic Metaphysics* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015), p. 7.

⁴³ Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 279.

⁴⁴ I am borrowing this neologism from Raimon Panikkar. See his *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, edited with an introduction by Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁴⁵ Pramuk, *Sophia*, pp. 279 and 157.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

heart of Berdyaev's critique of the institutional church and his call for an *ecclesia spiritualis*, a church of the spiritual, a church dominated by contemplatives, or those who cultivate the experiential consciousness of deification, as opposed to mere clerics, or those who do not. Accordingly, Berdyaev, alongside such other representatives of Russian religious and philosophical thought as Vladimir Solovyov, Sergei Bulgakov, and Paul Evdokimov, considered the existential experience of incarnation or divine-humanity as actualized in the person of Jesus Christ to be of paramount importance. Berdyaev therefore deemed the personal and existential cooperation of God and humanity to be indispensable inasmuch as it constitutes and manifests in "the experience of complete existence," which is envisaged in the doctrine of *theosis* or deification.⁴⁷

Here it is worth mentioning that, as Fakhoury points out, Berdyaev criticized Barth for lacking an understanding of the essence of Christian mysticism, which he (Berdyaev) rightly maintained is based on and rooted in deification.⁴⁸ Consequently, and not surprisingly, Berdyaev's critique of Barth from an Orthodox point of view was of great significance to Corbin, who later said that it was thanks to thinkers such as Berdyaev that he became aware of "what is specific to, and yet to come in, Eastern Christianity."⁴⁹ And it was precisely the Orthodox notion of *theosis* or deification that proved to be of particular significance to Corbin in that it "allowed him to transcend the radical dualism between God and man in Barth."⁵⁰ Indeed, as Fakhoury notes, Corbin later said that it was Berdyaev who revealed to him the idea that "the divine mystery and

⁴⁷ Katarzyna Stark, "The Idea of God-Man in Nicolas Berdyaev's Existentialism," *Analecta Husserliana: Phenomenology and Existentialism in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 103, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), p. 217.

⁴⁸ Fakhoury, *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," p. 48. As cited in Fakhoury, *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ Fakhoury, *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought*, p. 41.

the human mystery [are] one and the same mystery.”⁵¹ It was this deificatory theme that characterized Corbin’s interpretation of the Shi’ite notion of the Imam, as well as his later concept of the imaginal world or *mundus imaginalis*.⁵²

Another important Russian émigré whom Corbin befriended in that period of the 1930s was Alexandre Koyré. “His was one of the most beautiful minds I have known,” Corbin recalled. Originally renowned for his “monumental work” on the philosophy of Jacob Boehme, Koyré later became known for esteemed publications on the history of science. We are told that, because of his work on Boehme and other publications concerning those “Spirituals” that Jean Baruzi also studied, many imagined Koyré to be “a great mystical theosopher” himself. He was, however, “a man of tremendous modesty and discretion concerning his intimate convictions,” and he took whatever secrets he harbored with him to the grave.⁵³ It was Koyré whom Corbin replaced at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in 1937, teaching courses on Luther, Kierkegaard, Hamann, and Lutheran hermeneutics, while at the same time publishing translations of Suhrawardi and Barth.

As suggested above, the writings of both Luther and Hamann profoundly affected Corbin’s understanding of Islamic mysticism and philosophy. “The primary importance of Luther,” Cheetham writes, “was to provide insight into the contrast between the Revealed and the Hidden God and into the meaning of *significatio passiva*: the presence in us of those characteristics by means of which we know God.” While Hamann, he

⁵¹ Corbin, “Allocution d’Overture,” p. 49. As cited in Fakhoury, *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought*, pp. 41-42. Fakhoury also helpfully includes the original French: “C’est à [Berdiaev] que nous avons dû d’entendre l’appel à méditer le mystère divin et le mystère humain comme n’étant qu’un seul et même mystère.”

⁵² Fakhoury, *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought*, p. 42.

⁵³ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 44; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 9.

continues, “provided the foundations for a ‘mystical hermeneutics’ which was central to Corbin’s philosophical development.”⁵⁴

Because Luther’s insight into the meaning of *significatio passiva* or passive signification was fundamental for Corbin, a brief excursus on it is warranted. Although he mentions it in various works with varying degrees of clarity, there are a few passages in *Alone with the Alone* that can help to elucidate this notion. Corbin begins by treating of what he refers to as “the starting point of Ibn ‘Arabi’s personal theosophy,” which (in a manner reminiscent of Abraham Joshua Heschel, whom he references in two endnotes) is “the sadness of a ‘pathetic God.’” How, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, Corbin asks, does the mystic come to regard this sadness as being constitutive of the existential sympathy that exists between the invisible and the visible, as “the secret of a human-divine *sympathetism*?”

To answer this question Corbin begins by recalling the *hadith qudsi* or extra-Qu’ranic saying of God that has played a prominent role in Islamic mysticism and philosophy for centuries, the *hadith* in which the Godhead reveals the secret of its sadness or passion (*pathos*): “I was a hidden Treasure and I yearned to be known. Then I created creatures in order to be known by them.” Or, as Corbin translates it in order to be more faithful to Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought: “in order to become in them the object of my knowledge.” This divine passion, this desire to reveal Herself and to know Herself in beings through being known by them,⁵⁵ Corbin explains, “is the motive underlying an

⁵⁴ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. xii.

⁵⁵ A note on my use of gendered pronouns when referring to God: In doing so, I am following the example of Aydogan Kars in his *Unsayings God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). In this work (pp. 16-20), he explains that he has set up a deliberate tension between his own voice and that of the sources he cites and translates. On the one hand, he acknowledges that his medieval Arabic and Persian sources generally use the singular third-person male pronoun “He” (*huwa*) when addressing God in a way that is meant to indicate that God essentially transcends and includes

entire divine dramaturgy, an eternal cosmogony.” This cosmogony is not a matter of emanation as in Neoplatonism, nor of creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), as this is traditionally understood in the Judeo-Christian context. Rather, it is “a succession of manifestations of being, brought about by an increasing light,” within the originally undifferentiated Godhead, the essence of the unknown God (*Theos agnostos*), the unrevealed God (*Deus absconditus*) beyond all name and form, who yearns to be known; as such, it is “a succession of *tajalliyāt*, of theophanies.” This, Corbin avers, is the context of one of the most characteristic themes of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thinking, the doctrine of the divine Names, which are and are not of the divine essence itself, because, “though not identical with the divine Essence as such, the attributes they designate are not different from it, have existed from all eternity.”⁵⁶

Importantly, according to Corbin, we know these divine Names “only by our knowledge of ourselves (that is the basic maxim).” That is, God describes Herself to us through ourselves. Which means that the yearnful divine Names of the revealed God (*Deus revelatus*) are essentially relative to the beings—the theophanies—who name and reveal them, since these beings discover and experience them in and as their own mode of being. Thus the divine Names which are and are not of the divine essence “have meaning and full reality only *through* and *for* beings who have their epiphanic forms (*maẓāhir*),

gender binaries, and that he will remain as faithful as possible to his sources when quoting them in this regard. On the other hand, however, Kars declares his independence from the grammatical boundaries and theological inclinations of his sources insofar as he refuses to assume that in English only “He” (rather than “She” or even “It”) can be read as a term that transcends and unites gender. In an effort “to resist the common temptation to unjustifiably promote a specific linguistic gender ideology and theology over others,” therefore, Kars, when speaking in his own voice, chooses the singular feminine pronoun in addressing God. In this, he is not only being faithful to the likes of Ibn ‘Arabi who defended the superiority of the feminine over the masculine in the divine nature (see, for example, pp. 17n.20 and 18n.21), but he is resisting “the hegemony of androcentrism in academic and theological discourse without compromising historical rigor in rendering my sources.” Accordingly, I am doing the same.

⁵⁶ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 114.

that is to say, the forms in which they are manifested.” And these manifestations or theophanies are constituted by the “nostalgia of the divine Names yearning to be revealed,” which nostalgic yearning “is nothing other than the sadness of the unrevealed God,” the anguish She experiences in Her unknownness and occultation.⁵⁷

Furthermore, according to this eternal dramaturgy or cosmogony of specular yearning, it is from the inscrutable depths of the Godhead that this sadness calls forth a “sigh” or “breath” of divine compassion (*Nafas Raḥmānī*) that marks its sym-pathetic release with the anguish and sadness of Her divine names “that have remained unknown, and in this very act of release the Breath exhales, arouses to active being, the multitude of concrete individual existences by which and for which these divine names are at last actively manifested.” Thus, as Corbin observes, “in its hidden being every existent is a Breath of the existentiating divine Compassion,” and so “mystical gnosis starts from the *Theos agnostos* of negative theology to open up a path to the ‘pathetic God.’”⁵⁸

Hence, this sigh or breath of divine compassion, inasmuch as it is a phenomenon of primordial and unconditional love, “is at once an active, creative, and liberating potency and a passive potency”; that is to say, it is what fashions every existent (active) and what is likewise fashioned (passive) in them. And it is with the recognition of this twofold nature of being that we are in a position to better appreciate the significance that Luther’s insight into passive signification or *significatio passiva* had for Corbin. He writes:

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 114-115; italics in original.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 115.

This twofold dimension is encountered at every degree of being, just as the divine Names are at once active, insofar as they determine the attribute which they invest in the concrete form to which they aspire, and passive insofar as they are determined in and by that form which manifests them according to the requirement of its eternal condition. And it is this structure which both posits and fulfils the conditions of an Understanding that is not a theoretical inspection but a *passion* lived and shared with the understood object, a com-passion, a sympathy. For the divine Names are not the attributes conferred by the theoretical intellect upon the divine Essence as such; they are essentially the vestiges of their action in us, of the action by which they fulfil their being through our being, and which in us then assumes the aspect of what, in accordance with the old medieval terminology, may well be called *significatio passiva*. In other words, we discover them only insofar as they occur and are made within us, according to what they make of us, insofar as they are our *passion*. As we said [before]: God describes himself to us through ourselves.⁵⁹

In this, Luther's life-changing discovery provided Corbin with a key to understanding the work of many of the great mystic philosophers of Islam, the least of these not being Ibn

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 116-117; emphasis in original. In anticipation of what is to follow, it must be noted that Corbin describes this twofold structure of being that is rooted in and reflective of the twofold (active and passive) nature of the divine Names in essentially paradoxical or nondual terms. In *Alone with the Alone*, p. 300n.24 (emphases in original), he writes: "Thus the structure of each being is represented as an *unus ambo*, its totality being constituted by its being in its divine creative dimension (*tahāquq*) and in its creatural dimension (*takhalluq*); neither the *one* that is *two* nor the *two* that are *one* can be lost, for they exist only insofar as they form an essential interdependent whole (*ta'alluq*). This is not a 'dialectic'; it is the foundation of the *unio mystica* as *unio sympathetica*." As suggested in my introduction, this insight into the paradoxical or nondual structure of reality is foundational in the work of both Kripal and Wolfson.

‘Arabi.⁶⁰ Moreover, this key also helped Corbin to better grasp “the triumph of hermeneutics as *Verstehen* [understanding], meaning that that which we truly understand, is never other than that by which we are tried, that which we undergo, which we suffer and toil with in our very being. Hermeneutics does not consist in deliberating upon concepts, it is essentially the unveiling or revelation of that which is happening within us, the unveiling of that which causes us to [create] such or such concept, vision, projection, when our passion becomes action, it is an active undergoing, a prophetic-*poietic* undertaking.”⁶¹

But it was Corbin’s reading of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in 1930 that was to be “the defining moment in his struggle to grasp the meaning of hermeneutics as the science of interpretation.”⁶² The two met for the first time in Freiburg in April of 1934 and again in July of 1936. This is the period in which Corbin had “the privilege and pleasure” of working on a translation of a collection of essays that would be published in 1938 under the title *Qu’est ce que la Métaphysique?*, or *What is Metaphysics?*, which was the first of Heidegger’s works to appear in French.⁶³

⁶⁰ See Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 4. See also Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 300n.25 (emphases in original): “Years ago (1938-39) we devoted an entire lecture to the dramatic experience which the discovery of the *significatio passiva* was for the young Luther (still under the influence of Tauler’s mysticism). In the presence of the Psalm verse *In justitia tua libera me* [Ps. 71:2 KJV: ‘In thy justice deliver me.’], he experienced a movement of revolt and despair: what can there be in common between this attribute of justice and *my* deliverance? And such was his state of mind until the young theologian Martin Luther perceived in a sudden flash (and his entire personal theology was to result from this experience) that this attribute must be understood in its *significatio passiva*, that is to say, *thy* justice whereby we are made into just men, *thy* holiness whereby we are hallowed, etc. Similarly in the mystic theosophy of Ibn ‘Arabi, the divine attributes are qualifications that we impute to the Divine Essence not as convention might bid us to postulate it, but as we experience it in ourselves. Here we wish merely to suggest a parallel which, for lack of space, we cannot discuss in detail.”

⁶¹ Corbin, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 4; emphasis in original.

⁶² Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. xii.

⁶³ Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohrawardi,” pp. 23-24; see also “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 1.

The chief merit of Heidegger for Corbin was to be found in his having “centered the act of *philosophizing* in hermeneutics itself.”⁶⁴ In the lengthy interview he did with Philippe N  mo toward the end of his life, Corbin averred that it was Heidegger who showed him how the *clavis hermeneutica*—the hermeneutical key—could be used and adapted to open “all the locks that close access to the veiled, to the occulted, to the esoteric.”⁶⁵ But in response to “certain ‘historians’” whose “sheer ineptitude” prompted them to insinuate that he had somehow “mixed up” Heidegger with Suhravardi, Corbin explained that “to make use of a key to open a lock is not at all the same thing as to confuse the key with the lock. It wasn’t even a question of using Heidegger as a key, but rather of making use of the same key that he had himself made use of, and which was at everyone’s disposal.”⁶⁶

What Corbin owed to Heidegger therefore was the rediscovery of “the idea of *hermeneutics*” and the recognition of how ubiquitous and important this “key” was to the history and future of both philosophy and theology, especially the theology that emerged from within the three great Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Indeed, for Corbin, the renewal of philosophy and theology alike depended on the restoration of the theological origins of the concept of hermeneutics and a deeper appreciation of the concurrent way in which the aforementioned traditions practice hermeneutics. Of course, this reciprocal or complementary renewal that depended on restoring the link between hermeneutics and theology was itself dependent on the restoration of a notion of theology that is not defined by or subservient to sociology and/or politics. Thus, as Corbin declared in the same interview, “[t]his restoration could only come about through the

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 24; emphasis in original; see also “From Heidegger to Suhravardi,” p. 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 30; and “From Heidegger to Suhravardi,” p. 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 25; and “From Heidegger to Suhravardi,” p. 3.

concurrence of the hermeneutics practiced within the Religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, for it is therein that hermeneutics has developed as a spontaneous exegesis, and therein lie reserved its future palingenesis.”⁶⁷ In other words, the renewal of theology and hermeneutics in the West, as well as the future rebirth of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, can only come about through the concurrence of the imaginal hermeneutics practiced within the Religions of the Book—the spiritual exegesis of the word that was, is, and ever shall be the very life-blood of these traditions.

Consistent with this position, then, Corbin was able to maintain that, while it was Heidegger who gave him the *clavis hermeneutica* that unlocked a deeper understanding of the thought of his beloved Islamic philosopher-mystics, this “key” was already to be found therein. Hence he writes: “What I was looking for and which I understood thanks to Heidegger, is precisely that which I was looking for and found in the metaphysics of Islamic Iran.”⁶⁸ As Fakhoury notes, revealing in this regard is the fact that Corbin’s copy of *Being and Time* was marked throughout by glosses in Arabic.⁶⁹ Thus from Corbin’s perspective, Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was “a moment in a cross-cultural conversation that includes the central concept of Shiite hermeneutics, *ta’wil*.”⁷⁰ Accordingly, he later asked: “Is not then phenomenological research what our old mystical treatises designate as *kashf al-mahjūb*, the unveiling or revealing of that which is hidden? Is it not also what

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 24; italics in original; see also “From Heidegger to Suhravardi,” p. 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid.; and *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 26; and “From Heidegger to Suhravardi,” p. 5. See Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 350.

⁷⁰ Tom Cheetham, *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2012), p. 14. See also Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 350.

is designated by the term *ta'wīl*, so fundamental in the spiritual hermeneutic of the Qur'ān?"⁷¹

But if Heidegger gave Corbin the hermeneutical key that enabled him to better understand his beloved Islamic philosophers and mystics, it was they who would reveal to him the limits of Heidegger's "incomparable analysis." "If the moment [of discovering the work of Heidegger] was decisive," Corbin recalled, "it is because it was also without any doubt, the moment in which, while following the example of the Heideggarian Analytic, I was drawn [by the likes of Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi] to explore hermeneutical levels that his program had not yet envisioned."⁷² Regarding these unforeseen hermeneutical levels, Corbin goes on to explain:

I am speaking of a dimension of the "act of presence" in which we feel ourselves to be in the company of the divine hierarchies of Proclus, the great neoplatonist [sic], as well as those of Jewish gnosis, of Valentinian gnosis, of Islamic gnosis. Thenceforth it is the future yet-to-come, and the dimension of the future, which are being decided. If the "act of presence" is in fact the future ceaselessly constituting itself in the present, if the process of the yet-to-come constituting itself as my being-present is dependent upon my act of presence, then what is this yet-to-come future to be? The choice cannot be avoided...for this choice is decisive: the hermeneutic merely discloses it.⁷³

⁷¹ Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et Philosophie comparée* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1981), p. 23. As cited in Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture," p. 350.

⁷² Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohrawardi," p. 28; and "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p. 8.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 32; and "From Heidegger to Suhrawardi," p. 13.

To be clear, what Corbin is referring to here are levels or dimensions of understanding and being that transcend and include time, that go beyond and yet are implicated in or “decided” by one’s temporal life and death. These hermeneutical levels unforeseen by Heidegger and others were seen or experienced by the mystics or gnostics of the Religions of the Book. In their contemplative experience, and hence their willingness to be present for the revelation or apocalypse of the divine presence that is ever ancient and ever new, these mystics bear witness to the future that is simultaneously yet to come and being decided or realized by such “acts of presence” that transcend and include our temporal experience of life and death. Accordingly, Corbin resolutely rejected Heidegger’s somber view of human finitude as expressed in his conceptions of “being-toward-death” and “freedom-toward-death,” affirming instead a “freedom for the beyond of one’s death” that took its inspiration from Suhrawardi, Ibn ‘Abrabi, and Mulla Sadra Shirazi, among others.

Thus whereas Heidegger viewed death as being the closure of humanity in its finitude, Corbin saw it as the opening to and actualization of our infinity. “To be free *for that which is beyond* death, is to foresee and to bring about one’s death as an *exitus*, a *leave-taking* of this world towards other worlds. But it is the living, and not the dead, which leave this world.” In this way, while Corbin admittedly owed much to “the armament” with which Heidegger’s hermeneutic equipped him, he nevertheless “used it to attain other heights.”⁷⁴

Here it is worth pausing to note with Fakhoury that Corbin’s engagement with Heidegger can be situated within the broader context of what Wayne Hankey has

⁷⁴ Ibid., italics in original; and “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 14.

described as the twentieth-century French retrieval of Neoplatonism, which—in the words of Wouter Hanegraaff—is the movement that in the late Hellenistic world essentially transformed Platonism “into a religious worldview with its own mythologies and ritual practices,” focused no longer on abstract philosophical speculation and rational knowledge for its own sake, but rather on “the attainment of a salvational gnosis by which the soul could be liberated from its material entanglement and regain unity with the divine Mind.”⁷⁵ Quoting Hankey, Fakhoury observes that Heidegger’s criticism of Western metaphysics “became the stimulus and the presupposition of the French retrieval of Neoplatonism.” However, “ironically, as a result of the Heideggarian impulse, we have discovered that Neoplatonism, better studied and understood, escaped in a number of ways the objections raised by Heidegger against Western metaphysics.”⁷⁶ In many ways, then, “Corbin anticipated and accomplished this reversal.”⁷⁷

In 1939, the year after his pioneering translation of Heidegger was published, Corbin and his wife, Stella Leenhardt, left the Occident for Turkey for what was originally meant to be a three-month assignment “to collect photocopies of all the manuscripts of Suhravardi that could be found dispersed amongst the libraries of Istanbul, in view of a critical edition of his works in Arabic and Persian.”⁷⁸ Officially,

⁷⁵ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism in the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 12.

⁷⁶ Wayne J. Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History* [published in a single volume with *Levinas and the Greek Heritage*, by Jean-Marc Narbonne] (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), p. 108. As cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” pp. 350-351. This last statement echoes the thought of Reiner Schürmann. See, for example, his article “Neoplatonic Henology as an Overcoming of Metaphysics,” *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 13 (1983), pp. 25-41. See also Schürmann, “The One: Substance or Function?” in *Neoplatonism and Nature: Studies in Plotinus’ Enneads*, ed. Michael F. Wagner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 157-178.

⁷⁷ Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 351. For an example of the relevance of Corbin to the study of Neoplatonism, see Gregory Shaw’s essay “Containing Ecstasy: The Strategies of Iamblichean Theurgy,” *Dionysius*, vol. 21 (2003), pp. 53-88. This work is also referenced by Fakhoury on p. 351, n. 29.

⁷⁸ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 46; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 12.

Corbin's assignment was to begin on September 1, 1939 but the outbreak of the Second World War on that date delayed his departure by a month.

So it was that, after much discussion and anxiety, Corbin and his wife eventually journeyed to Istanbul on an assignment that would in fact last nearly six years, up until the end of the war in September 1945. During this period, Corbin gained unparalleled access to a treasure trove of works on Islamic philosophy and mysticism, and mastered the difficult technique of editing and correcting Arabic and Persian manuscripts.⁷⁹

Beyond this, however, and more importantly, he learned the value of silence. As Corbin recalled:

In the course of those years (during which time I served as the caretaker and custodian to our little French Institute of Archeology the operations of which were then more or less suspended), I learned the inestimable virtues of Silence: of that which initiates call the "discipline of the arcane" [the secret] (in Persian *ketmân*). One of the virtues of this Silence was to place me, one on one as it were, in the company of my invisible Sheikh, Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Suhravardî, martyred in 1191, at the age of thirty-six, which was, as it happened, my own age at the time. I translated his Arabic texts day in and day out, guided only by Suhravardi's own commentators and followers, and consequently escaping the exterior influence of the theological and philosophical schools of our days. At the end of those

⁷⁹ See Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 276.

years of retreat, I had become an *Ishrâqî* [i.e., an Illuminist, of which school Suhrawardi was the master].⁸⁰

Interestingly, but not surprisingly since he was in Constantinople, after all, Corbin did allow at least one contemporary external theological influence that he found congenial to penetrate his Ishraqi retreat. For, as Fakhoury points out, parallel to his work on Suhrawardi, Corbin was also translating some of the writings of another Russian Orthodox émigré theologian Sergius Bulgakov, the “harbinger of Sophia and sophianic thought.”⁸¹ Thus, given that he resonated strongly with the work of Berdyaev (as we have seen) and Bulgakov, several aspects of Corbin’s interpretation of Suhrawardi would bear the influence of Russian sophiological thought.⁸² Consequently, it is not surprising that Corbin would proclaim: “An *ishrâqî* is spontaneously a sophiologist.”⁸³

After his replacement arrived in 1945, Corbin and his wife left Istanbul for Tehran. It was on the 14th of September that he “first [set] foot in my country of choice, my chosen hearth, as it was the homeland of Suhrawardi, my invisible shaykh.”⁸⁴ In the

⁸⁰ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 46; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 12. The designation *ishraqî* is derived from the title of Suhrawardi’s most important work, the *Philosophy of Illumination* (*Hikmat al-Ishraq*), which refers to the “Orient of Light” or, in the words of Peter Kingsley, “the point of dawn in the East.” Kingsley continues: “This *Ishrâqî* tradition he [Suhrawardi] gave rise to wasn’t, as people in the West are lazily inclined to suppose, a tradition of pure enlightenment or illumination. It was, much more specifically, the tradition of those who appear with the dawn; who belong to the moment of dawning; who tirelessly and timelessly work at fetching the gifts of the sacred into the light of day.” See Peter Kingsley, *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*, vol. 1 (London: Catafalque Press, 2018), p. 368. It is in this sense that Suhrawardi is known as the “Master of Illumination” (*shaykh al-ishraq*).

⁸¹ Henry Corbin, “La Sophia éternelle,” *Revue de culture européenne* 5 (1953), p. 16. As cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 351. It is worth mentioning that this essay of Corbin’s was his commentary on C. G. Jung’s *Answer to Job*.

⁸² See Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 351, and his Master’s thesis *Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought*.

⁸³ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 46. My translation. Evans-Cockle’s translation differs slightly; see “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, my translation. Evans-Cockle’s translation differs slightly; see “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 13.

words of his former student, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, on that day in Iran, Corbin “immediately discovered his spiritual home.”⁸⁵ Indeed, it was as if “[t]he ‘Master of Illumination’ [Suhrawardi] almost literally took the hands of his Occidental interpreter and guided him to the land to whose ancient culture Corbin had been already attracted as a young man and whose rich intellectual life during the Islamic period he was to discover through his love for the ‘Theosophy of Oriental Light.’”⁸⁶

Not long after he first set foot in his spiritual home, in 1946, Corbin was appointed by the ministry of French Cultural Relations to create, organize, and serve as the first director of a department of Iranian studies at the newly established Franco-Iranian Institute in Tehran. It was in this capacity that, in collaboration with a number of prominent Iranian scholars, Corbin began the series of publications entitled *Bibliothèque Iranienne* (continued later by the Imperial Iranian Academy until 1979), which made available many major texts of Islamic philosophy and Sufism to the contemporary Islamic world as well as the West.⁸⁷

From 1954 until his death in 1978, Corbin spent almost every fall semester in Tehran teaching in the faculty of letters at the University of Tehran and, following his retirement, lecturing at the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy.⁸⁸ It was also in Tehran, in the spring of 1954, that Corbin received word that the Section of Religious Sciences of the École Pratique des Hautes Études was calling him to succeed his old mentor, friend, and occasional sparring partner, Louis Massignon, as director of Islamic studies. Of this appointment, Corbin recalled: “Dear Massignon was aware of the

⁸⁵ Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 277.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid. See also Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” pp. 351-352.

⁸⁸ Ibid. See also Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 352.

decision, and I, for my part was aware of his concerns over our differences of opinion.

He nevertheless considered me to be the candidate closest to himself with regards to prolonging the direction of his research at the school, if not by its specific content, then at least with regards to its meaning and spirit.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 47; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 14. Patrick Laude, in his book *Pathways to an Inner Islam: Massignon, Corbin, Guénon, and Schuon* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 56-58, gives a good summary of the similarities and differences that characterized the thought of Massignon and Corbin. (Their differences of opinion essentially derived from their very personal focus on the importance of Sunni and Shi’a Islam respectively.) Thus with specific reference to their respective understandings of “inner Islam” or Islamic mysticism/Sufism (*tasawwuf*), Laude writes: “The portraits of Sufism, and more generally of ‘inner Islam,’ that have emerged from the preceding pages display certain constant and reoccurring traits throughout the various contributions, while betraying some important differences in outlook. The most obvious lesson to be drawn from reading [these] authors pertains to the authentically Islamic roots of *tasawwuf* and Islamic gnosis, whether in the context of Sunni spirituality [as approached by Massignon] or Shī’ite theosophy as approached by Corbin. Without denying the peripheral influence on Islamic spirituality of such philosophical currents as Neoplatonism or such methodological practices as found in Hindu, or even Taoist, contemplative disciplines, our authors affirm and substantiate the specifically Quranic and Muhammadan nature of Sufism. They also concur in introducing the latter as the culmination [of] or the path to the *haqīqah* [mystical truth] of Islam as such. The ways they reach and unfold these conclusions reveal, however, important differences that have implications for their respective definitions of inner Islam. Massignon and Corbin articulate their vision of Islamic spirituality within the framework of a study of the foundational function of the *Qur’ān*. This commonality of framework does not preclude some very important divergences with regard to the ways in which inner Islam has gained access to the mystical meaning of the Book. Massignon’s perspective is primarily, albeit not exclusively, akin to an understanding of the *Qur’ān* as a compendium of the ascetic virtues upon which is based the development of a ‘rule of perfection’ in early Sufism. For him it is clear that this rule...reveals, from within the Muslim consciousness, a desire for union [with the Absolute] that cannot be satisfied within the confines of the Law. Sufism reproduces the patterns of the Prophet’s contemplative vocation, and the ascending journey of his *Mi’rāj*, while laying open the intimate shortcomings of Muslim devotion. By contrast, Corbin’s emphasis on the intrinsic bond between Islamic mysticism and scripture postulates the need for an entrance into the esoteric or ‘real’ meaning of the *Qur’ān*, and hence the imperative co-presence of an initiator into that meaning, namely the Imām. Inner Islam can be defined, in this context, as a coincidental event conjoining the unveiling of the interior meaning of the Book and the revelation of the inner angel [or eternal identity] of the soul. Such an understanding of Islamic spirituality is very closely linked to the principles of *Shī’a* Islam, and actually interprets the whole of *tasawwuf* as stemming from the latter.... “[Consequently,] Corbin’s sources and affinities led him to restrict artificially the world of inner Islam to a very specific imamology, an orientation that situates the largest segments of Sufism in an oddly displaced context that hardly makes sense of the richness, diversity, and self-productive energy of Sunni Sufism. It is as if the importance of Corbin’s discovery of the uncharted territories of Shī’ite imamology had led him to artificially downplay the spiritual depth and strength of Sunni Islam. Not unconnected with this overemphasis, one must mention the stress on the imaginal world of visions and auditions, the importance of which, in Corbin’s view of Sufism, may be deemed disproportionate, considering that the ultimate goal of classical *tasawwuf* has consistently been envisaged as a state of extinction and permanence in God, irrespective of occasional visionary mediations. As for Massignon, his virtual reduction of Sufism to the Quranic foundations of *mujāhadah* (fight against the soul) and the mystical interferences of Christic archetypes in Islam, cannot but be considered highly selective and even idiosyncratic in its treatment of the material. On the other hand, the respective genius of the two Islamicists has unveiled and elucidated immense areas of mystical Islam, while their often very personal focus and treatment of Sufism has

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Islam in a fresh, regenerating, and seminal fashion. The intimate conjunction of personal engagement, spiritual vocation, and scholarly work to which their life bears witness has introduced a new methodology in matters of mystical studies, dispelling the narrowness and sterility of alleged scientific objectivity and scholarly detachment, to propounding a phenomenological, faith-centered apprehension of the religious fact. Beyond the differences that separate their scholarly procedures from more exclusively spiritual and gnostic modes of exposition, it is actually this spiritual participation in inner Islam that relates Massignon's and Corbin's works."

During his annual pilgrimage to Iran, in addition to devoting himself to his teaching and research, as his reputation as a notable scholar began to grow, various doors began to open to Corbin, and he gradually became acquainted with many of the leading intellectual and spiritual authorities of the country. Notable among the former were such eminent traditional scholars as Badī al-Zamān Furouzanfar and Jalāl Homā'ī. Among the latter were such theosophers/gnostics/mystics as 'Allāmah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabātabā'ī, with whom Corbin regularly discussed esoteric topics, and Sayyid Muhammad Kāzim 'Assār, as well as the supreme master of the Ni'matallāhī Sufī order, Javād Nurbakhsh.⁹⁰ These connections and friendships, in addition to his own scholarly and spiritual labors, yielded the most important fruit of Corbin's Iranian sojourn and his

⁹⁰ Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 277, and Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture," p. 352.

magnum opus: the monumental, four-volume work *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophique*.⁹¹

In the spring of 1949, Corbin received yet another invitation that would exert a profound and lasting influence on “the rhythm and program” of his research until his death. This was the invitation by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn to participate in the Eranos Circle that she had founded in 1932 in Ascona, Switzerland. Eranos was a unique, difficult to define, multidisciplinary research center of international scholars who met annually to do more than merely exchange ideas. In Corbin’s words, it was “something like a laboratory” in which the participants were drawn towards “an integral spiritual liberty” that freed them to gradually discover new branches of research and to speak “from the very depths of ourselves.” Eranos would thus play a decisive role in the lives of Corbin and of the many renowned scholars (“researchers in the symbolic sciences”) whom he met and befriended there, most notably C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, James Hillman, and D. T. Suzuki, among others.⁹²

Reflecting further on the unique characteristics and decisive impact of this singular crucible, Corbin wrote: “All ecclesiastical and academic orthodoxies, of

⁹¹ See Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 352. On Corbin and Iran, see also Matthijs van den Bos, “Transnational Orientalism: Henry Corbin in Iran,” *Anthropos* 100.1 (2005), pp. 113-125; as cited in Fakhoury, *ibid.* To date, the entirety of Corbin’s *En Islam Iranien* has yet to be translated into English. In 2003, Hugo M. Van Woerkom produced an English translation of volume 2, which can be found at http://www.imagomundi.com.br/espirtualidade/corbin_inside.pdf.

⁹² On Eranos, see Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, tr. Christopher McIntosh (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013). See also Steven M. Wasserstrom’s *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Regarding Wasserstrom’s book, I agree with Fakhoury and others that it suffers from some significant flaws and so cannot be recommended without reservation. For a critique of Wasserstrom’s treatment of Corbin in particular, see Arthur Versluis’ review of *Religion after Religion*, in *Esoterica*, vol. 3 (2001), pp. 288-292; Maria Subtelny, “History and Religion: The Fallacy of Metaphysical Questions (A Review Article),” *Iranian Studies* 36:1 (2003), pp. 91-101; and Pierre Lory’s review, “Note on the book *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* at <https://www.amiscorbin.com/journee-henry-corbin/note-sur-l-ouvrage-religion-after-religion-gershom-scholem-mircea-eliade-and-henry-corbin-at-eranos/>.

whatever confessional caste, were and are completely foreign to the Eranos circle. The ‘training’ that we acquired there, towards becoming frankly and integrally one’s self, evolved into a habit that one never lost, even if this in itself could be somewhat of a perilous attribute due to the rarity of it.”⁹³

He made a similar observation in a lecture that he gave at one of the Eranos conferences: “what we should wish to call the meaning of Eranos, which is also the entire secret of Eranos, is this: it is our present being, the time that we act personally, our way of being.” It was a “meeting of... autonomous individualities, each in complete freedom revealing and expressing an original and personal way of thinking and being, outside of all dogmatism and all academicism.”⁹⁴

Corbin gave many lectures over the course of the more than quarter century that he was part of the Eranos Circle, and almost all of these were eventually developed into major works that helped to cement his reputation as one of the foremost Western expositors of Islamic philosophy and mysticism. For instance, the two essays that make up the greater part of his classic *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (1969) were originally given as lectures at two sessions (1955 and 1956) of the Eranos conference.⁹⁵

Finally, mention must be made of the project that Corbin described as “the spiritual blossoming of all my scientific work, as well as the ultimate accomplishment of a life-long dream.”⁹⁶ This was the University of Saint John of Jerusalem, founded in

⁹³ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 48; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 15.

⁹⁴ Corbin, “The Time of Eranos,” in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. xix-xx.

⁹⁵ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969/1997), p. 4.

⁹⁶ Corbin, “Post-scriptum bibliographique,” p. 52; see also “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 21.

1974 by Corbin and a group of colleagues as an international “center of comparative spiritual research.”⁹⁷ Its motivating force was “a spiritual chivalry” that, according to Corbin, was best defined by the fourteenth-century German mystic and one-time leader of the Friends of God, Rulman Merswin, as a particular spiritual state that was “neither that of a cleric nor that of a layman.” The ultimate purpose of the center was, in Corbin’s words, “[t]o create, in the spiritual city of Jerusalem, a common hearth (something that has not yet ever existed) for the study and the spiritual fructification of the gnosis common to all three great Abrahamic religions. In short, it is the idea of an Abrahamic ecumenism founded upon a sharing of the hidden treasures of the esoteric traditions.”⁹⁸

From 1974 to 1988, the University of Saint John of Jerusalem held yearly colloquia at the Abbey of Vaucelles in Cambrai.⁹⁹ These conferences were regularly attended by such noteworthy scholars and philosophers as Gilbert Durand, Antoine Faivre (both of whom collaborated with Corbin in the University’s founding),¹⁰⁰ and the French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément.

Thus, for forty years, Corbin worked with incredible energy and enthusiasm to interpret the “Orient of Light” to an Occident whose influence has since then become

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 52-53. See also Corbin, “L’Université Saint-Jean de Jérusalem: Centre International de Recherche Spirituelle Comparée,” in *Sciences Traditionnelles et Sciences Profanes* (Paris: André Bonne, 1975), p. 8; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 352. One of Corbin’s collaborators in this endeavor was Mircea Eliade, who attested to the fact that Eranos served as a model for the University of Saint John of Jerusalem. On this, see Wasserstrom *Religion after Religion*, p. 314, n. 17.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 53; and “Biographical Post-Scriptum,” p. 21.

⁹⁹ See Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 352. Fakhoury has the University of Saint John of Jerusalem in operation until 1986. However, according to Cheetham in *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. xiii, n. 8: “This organization operated until 1988 and published fourteen volumes of *Proceedings* (Paris: Berg International). Corbin’s contributions are in the first five *Proceedings*. It has since been succeeded by *Cahiers du groupe d’études spirituelles comparée*, Gilbert Durand, President (*Proceedings* published by Arché: Paris).” See also his blog post of December 11, 2008 at <http://henrycorbinproject.blogspot.com/2008/12/cahiers-de-luniversit-saint-jean-de.html>, which includes a list of Corbin’s contributions and the various volumes published by both organizations.

¹⁰⁰ See Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. xiii.

increasingly pervasive and entrenched on a global scale.¹⁰¹ But the influence that Corbin exerted through his teaching and writing in Paris, Tehran, and Ascona has itself been extensive in both the West and the Islamic world (especially Iran), both in the academy and without. Hence, this occidental exile, who found his true home in the “Orient of Light,” who strove continually to reinterpret for his contemporaries a whole spiritual and intellectual world which had languished in obscurity before him, was “one of the greatest living experts on Sufi mystical tradition,” and as such one of the foremost expositors of esoteric wisdom in the twentieth century.¹⁰²

In June 1978, as the opening address of the University of Saint John of Jerusalem, Corbin presented his last paper entitled “Eyes of Flesh, Eyes of Fire: The Science of Gnosis.”¹⁰³ Interestingly, this title recalls the vivid description of Corbin’s “unusual personal aura” by Marie-Madeleine Davy, an expert on medieval theology and a long-standing friend and neighbor of his.¹⁰⁴ He was, she wrote, “someone who had re-awakened before reaching the far shore. In his face and eyes something shone forth that reflected the world to which he belonged. In his written works and lectures he knew how to reveal the sphere of the angels. Reading him one could almost hear the sounds of their wings as they passed by.”¹⁰⁵ After a brief illness, Corbin died on October 7, 1978 in Paris at the age of 75. “It seems,” Nasr writes, “as if one of the angels to whose study he had devoted his life snatched him away from this earthly plane just in time to prevent him

¹⁰¹ See Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 289.

¹⁰² Peter Kingsley, *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*, vol. 1 (London: Catafalque Press, 2018), p. 8. See also Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 289.

¹⁰³ See Corbin, “Eyes of Flesh, Eyes of Fire: The Science of Gnosis,” in *Material for Thought*, vol. 8 (December 1979), at <http://www.farwesteditions.com/mft/EyesOfFire.htm>.

¹⁰⁴ Haki, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, p. 161.

¹⁰⁵ Marie-Madeleine Davy, *Traversée en solitaire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), p. 139ff; as cited in Haki, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, p. 161.

from witnessing the eruptions which transformed both Iran and the interpretation of Shi'ism—in at least certain circles—in such a drastic manner.”¹⁰⁶

Corbin left behind a body of work that consisted of more than three hundred critical editions, translations, books, and articles, in which he mainly dealt with such topics as Twelver Shi'ism, Ismailism, Sufism, pre-Islamic Iranian religions, and Judeo-Christian prophetology/gnosis.¹⁰⁷ Significantly, Corbin approached these traditions not as an historian but as a mystical philosopher who was on a quest of self-transformation, and who actively internalized the teachings of those whom he studied through what he called “a congenital sympathy.”¹⁰⁸ Thus toward the end of his life he wrote, “My formation is originally all philosophical, which is why I am neither a Germanist nor an Orientalist, but a Philosopher pursuing his Quest wherever the Spirit guides him.”¹⁰⁹ He further reflected on the nature of this vocation:

To be a philosopher is to take to the road, never settling down in some place of satisfaction with a theory of the world, not even a place of reformation, nor of some illusory transformation of the conditions of this world. It aims for self-transformation, for the inner metamorphosis which

¹⁰⁶ Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, p. 289.

¹⁰⁷ See Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 353. As he notes, this information is based on the bibliography of Corbin’s writings that Christian Jambet compiled. See his “Bibliographie générale,” in *Cahier de l’Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed., Christian Jambet, pp. 345-360.

¹⁰⁸ In a letter to the Russian scholar of Ismailism, Vladimir Ivanow, Corbin wrote in part: “Pour moi, le philosophe doit prendre en charge le stock d’idées de son auteur et le porter à son maximum de signification. C’est l’ismaélisme dans son ensemble que j’avais en vue et j’en ai commenté et amplifié les philosophèmes, comme si j’étais moi-même Ismaélien. Cela n’est possible que par une sympathie congénitale.” [“For me, the philosopher must take charge of the stock of ideas of his author and bring it to its fullest meaning. It is Ismaelism as a whole that I had in mind, and I commented on and amplified the philosophemes, as if I were Ismaelian myself. This is only possible through a congenital sympathy.”] My translation. See *Correspondence Corbin-Ivanow: Lettres échangées entre Henry Corbin et Vladimir Ivanow de 1947 à 1966*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Paris: Peeters, 1999), p. 126; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 353, n. 42. Fakhoury provides only the untranslated French text.

¹⁰⁹ Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohrevardi,” p. 24; and “From Heidegger to Suhrevardi,” p. 1. Partially my translation.

is implied by the notion of a new, or spiritual rebirth.... The adventure of the mystical philosopher is essentially seen as a voyage which progresses towards the Light....¹¹⁰

And again:

Nothing is past to a philosopher: the metaphysical object, the spiritual reality, are never “in the past”.... Neither life nor death; neither future nor past, are the attributes of things. These are the attributes of the soul. It is the soul that confers these attributes to things which it declares present or which it declares past.... It is a matter of understanding that there are questions that have never ceased, nor will ever cease, to be posed to humanity. It is a matter of being their indomitable witness; and by this witnessing *in the present* to be their *future*.¹¹¹

It was with this understanding of his vocation, therefore, that Corbin sought to bring Islamic mysticism and philosophy out of what he called the “ghetto of Orientalism,” a goal that he labored throughout his career to accomplish.¹¹²

Corbin’s quest was born of and animated by “a passionate ecumenical vision transcending all geographical, historical and religious barriers.”¹¹³ He believed that “[a]

¹¹⁰ Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*, p. 140.

¹¹¹ Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et Philosophie comparée*, pp. 61 and 79; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 354.

¹¹² I am here following Fakhoury in quoting James W. Morris, “Religion after Religion? Henry Corbin and the Future of the Study of Religion,” in *Henry Corbin: Philosophies et Sagesses des Religions du Livre: Actes du Colloque “Henry Corbin,” Sorbonne, 6-8 Novembre, 2003*, eds. Moh. Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet, and Pierre Lory (Belgium: Brepols, 2005), p. 29. As cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 354.

philosopher's campaign must be led simultaneously on many fronts.... The philosopher's investigations should encompass a wide enough field that the visionary philosophies of a Jacob Boehme, of an Ibn 'Arabi, of a Swedenborg, etc. can be set there together, in short that the data of the revealed Books and the experiences of the *imaginal* world may be welcomed as so many sources offered up to philosophical meditation. Otherwise *philosophia* no longer has anything to do with *Sophia*.”¹¹⁴ Accordingly, as mentioned previously, Corbin rejected being defined by conventional academic standards and instead proclaimed himself to be above all a mystical philosopher who was pursuing his spiritual quest wherever it may lead. Thus, he wrote, “If [my quest] has led me to Freiburg, to Tehran, to Isfahan, they remain for me essentially ‘emblematic cities,’ the symbols of a never-ending voyage.”¹¹⁵

Consequently, to read Corbin is to join him on his never-ending quest for gnosis and truth; it is to learn about not only Occidental and Oriental thought alike, but primarily to discover Corbin's own personal philosophy which is simultaneously an inextricable expression of modern French philosophy.¹¹⁶ In light of this, [i]t is...necessary to extract

¹¹³ Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 354.

¹¹⁴ Corbin, “De Heidegger à Suhrawardi,” p. 24; and “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 1. Partially my translation.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 24. This is my translation that combines two others, that of Evans-Cockle, “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” pp. 1-2, and Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 354.

¹¹⁶ See Christian Jambet, “Présentation,” in *Trilogie ismaélienne*, by Henry Corbin (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1994), p. vii; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 354, n. 47: “Henry Corbin s'est engagé dans sa 'quête orientale' à partir des questions héritées de l'ontologie occidentale. La question de l'être, celle de l'Un et du multiple, celle du rapport entre la révélation religieuse et la spéculation métaphysique, la question, enfin, de la gnose et de la vérité.... [Q]u'il soit d'emblée très clair que traduire ces oeuvres ismaéliennes était un exercice métaphysique inscrit dans la philosophie personnelle d'Henry Corbin, c'est-à-dire dans la philosophie moderne française.” [“Henry Corbin embarked on his 'eastern quest' from questions inherited from Western ontology. The question of being, of the One and the Many, of the relationship between religious revelation and metaphysical speculation, the question, finally, of gnosis and truth. It was very clear that translating these Ismaili works was a metaphysical exercise inscribed in the personal philosophy of Henry Corbin, that is, in modern French philosophy.”] The translation is my own since Fakhoury only supplies the French text. On the significance of Corbin in contemporary French philosophy, see Peter Hallward, “The One or the Other: French Philosophy Today,” *Angelaki* 8:2 (2003), pp. 1-32. This article is also cited by Fakhoury.

Corbin himself from the ‘ghetto of Orientalism,’ and to value him...as a philosopher in his own right”¹¹⁷ who was also a genuine mystic. Indeed, only then can his real identity and purpose be truly appreciated – “not as a scholar with some minor mystical leanings but as a mystic, inwardly directed to play the role of academic.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” pp. 354-355.

¹¹⁸ Kingsley, *Catafalque*, vol. 1, p. 364. Kingsley is here recalling this as a key point that Corbin’s widow, Stella, kept returning to during the hours he spent with her in conversation. In a subsequent endnote, Kingsley reinforces the importance of Stella’s point by decrying “the modern academic insistence on promoting Corbin the philosopher at the cost of suppressing, as much as possible, Corbin the mystic.” Kingsley goes on to note: “But Corbin, on his own public admission and as confirmed to me in private on numerous occasions by his wife, was an *Ishrâqî*; for any *Ishrâqî* in the lineage of Suhrawardi, the direct experience of a mystic and the clear thinking of a philosopher were equally indispensable; and, if for some reason a choice ever had to be made between them, the mystical would instantly take priority and precedence over the philosophical. As Daryoush Shayegan observes, what distinguished Corbin from his colleagues wasn’t the fact that he understood and explained the materials he commented on better than anyone else. It was the fact that he had lived, and personally experienced, everything he wrote about.” See Peter Kingsley, *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*, vol. 2 (London: Catafalque Press, 2018), p. 726.

Chapter 2: The Major Themes of Corbin's Thought and Vision

Having sketched a portrait of Corbin's life and work, we are now in a position to consider some of the major themes of his thought pursuant to elucidating his spiritual-intellectual (read: mystical) vision. This will be done by focusing primarily on two over-arching themes that encompass several subsidiary ones, namely, spiritual hermeneutics or *ta'wil* and the world of the imagination or *mundus imaginalis*. Several other themes, of course, could have been selected. But given their undeniable prominence in Corbin's *oeuvre*, exploring the major themes of spiritual hermeneutics and the imagination will be sufficient to provide a sense of his overall mystical vision, particularly as it relates to the notion of deification.

With that said, some additional preliminary observations are in order. In the light of the portrait that was sketched in the previous chapter, it is readily apparent that Tom Cheetham is right in claiming that the place Corbin's life work occupies with respect to the various academic disciplines "is so unique that his opus is impossible to adequately classify." He continues:

This is one reason why his thought is so little appreciated inside, as well as outside, of the world of Islamic scholars. His interests are eclectic and wide-ranging and defy all the traditional boundaries of academic scholarship and, some would argue, good sense.... [H]is stance is less that of a scholar than that of a partisan of certain forms of mysticism, which on his reading escape the bounds of Islam and are to be found as well in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and elsewhere. His approach has

confused and often alienated many within the scholarly community. He was a Platonist in a world of historicists, and his natural colleagues were theologians rather than historians. Adding to the complexity, difficulty, and peculiarity of his thought, he was devoted to a vision of Iran, or more accurately, ancient Persia, as a kind of mediating realm between the religions of the East and those of the West.¹

As we will see, this vision of ancient Persia as “a mediating realm” was consistent with or a reflection of Corbin’s notion of the imagination, which for him held a central place in human experience.

But before proceeding with a consideration of the imagination and other major themes of his thought, it is worth pausing to further consider and so highlight a characteristic of Corbin’s work that has already been mentioned and that reveals his particular genius. I am referring to his ability and willingness to cross boundaries that to others mark the limits of what can and should be known.

As Cheetham observes, Corbin’s enormous talents as a linguist certainly facilitated and so were crucial to his “cross-cultural and polyvalent vision.” Yet his “remarkable capacity to move simultaneously among the traces of disparate cultures and intellectual traditions” points to something more than linguistic virtuosity. This “something more” to which Corbin’s boundary-crossing ability points, Cheetham asserts (not uncontroversially), is his little-acknowledged status as “a truly postmodern thinker.”²

¹ Cheetham, *All the World an Icon*, p. 1.

² Ibid., p. 2. As the parenthesis suggests, here it is to be noted that Cheetham’s characterization of Corbin as “a truly postmodern thinker” is debatable. For instance, in a private communication, Jeffrey Kripal has deemed Cheetham’s assertion “very odd” since it was the “postmodern turn” that forbade as inappropriate

As the parenthesis suggests, here it is to be noted that Cheetham's characterization of Corbin as "a truly postmodern thinker" is debatable. For instance, in a private communication, Jeffrey Kripal has deemed Cheetham's assertion "very odd" since it was the "postmodern turn" that forbade as inappropriate and illegitimate the comparativism and ontological commitments that are at the very heart of Corbin's thought. Hence, for Kripal, "[Corbin] seems the very opposite of a postmodern thinker in almost every way to me," and consequently he believes that Cheetham is "just mistaken" or has "over-reached" in describing Corbin in these terms.

It could be argued, however, that Cheetham is applying to Corbin the same logic that Islamicist William Chittick applies to Ibn 'Arabi whom he regards as being in

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It could be argued, however, that Cheetham is applying to Corbin the same logic that Islamicist William Chittick applies to Ibn 'Arabi whom he regards as being in significant ways a precursor of postmodernism. As Cheetham writes elsewhere, "William Chittick has pointed out that there are senses in which Ibn Arabi's worldview is strikingly postmodernist. His spiritual individualism, which influenced Corbin immensely, provides a way to see spiritual and moral truths as *both* individually absolute and historically relative. And it is critical to keep in mind that, as Corbin stresses, what we think of as the individual is really the ego, and the eternal Self is nothing at all like the finite and limited ego of the terrestrial human being. Thus the 'essence' of the individual may not be at all the changeless and immutable Form that a simplistic 'Platonism' suggests, but rather the perpetually changing and ascending soul of the mystic vision" (see "Notes on Corbin's Shadow, Part I," p. 5 at <http://henrycorbinproject.blogspot.com/2009/03/notes-on-corbins-shadow-part-1.html>).

In this context, it should be added that Chittick is not alone in noticing certain affinities between postmodern thought and Ibn 'Arabi. See, for example, Ian Almond's *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004). As Richard Wood observes early in his review of this work, "Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida are paired (although not in opposition, nor as identical) in Almond's book primarily because they both critique rationality and embrace multiple interpretations of texts—a consequence of the limits of human cognition, especially regarding the confining metaphysics of binaries in human thought." See Richard Wood, "Secrets and Aporias in Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida," *Milestones: Commentary on the Islamic World* (December 27, 2017), p. 4; at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/588c2af8be659421ed624113/t/5a442412f9619a2bb2d9a2ce/1514415123852/Secrets+and+Aporias+in+Ibn+al-Arabi+and+Derrida.pdf>.

In light of this, while I agree with Kripal that it may be something of a stretch for Cheetham to describe Corbin as "a truly postmodern thinker," I nevertheless think that Cheetham (in a manner similar to Chittick's and Almond's respective views of Ibn 'Arabi) performs a valuable service in drawing attention to what can be considered—with the appropriate qualifications—some of the more postmodern-like or postmodern-friendly elements of Corbin's thought. Thus, if properly understood and nuanced, I think Cheetham is closer to the mark when he subsequently says that Corbin's approach to reality was "a kind of postmodern" one.

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Because he steadfastly refused to be “bound by the strictures of the prevailing historicist orthodoxy,” preferring instead to adopt what some critics deem “a dangerous and ill-conceived ahistorical eclecticism,” Corbin was—in the words of Cheetham—“early and independently embarked upon a kind of postmodern approach to reality—the ungrounding of literal and totalitarian modes of knowing in favor of something more difficult and subtle, which was for Corbin an extension of what medieval philosophers knew as negative, or *apophatic* theology.”³

It is thus this fundamentally apophatic approach to human knowledge and being that is required to properly understand Corbin’s distinctively mystical and anticipatively “postmodern” (perhaps quasi-postmodern would be more accurate) vision. Moreover, his is a radically *poetic* view of human knowledge and being rather than a discursively rational one. As such, Cheetham is correct to claim that the roots of this kind of “romantic” vision are to be found in the margins of the modern Western tradition, in the thought of those “heretical” figures of the great religions who were particularly dear to Corbin’s heart: Suhrawardi, Ibn ‘Arabi, Mulla Sadra, Swedenborg, Jacob Boehme,

³ Ibid.; italics in original.

Johann Georg Hamann, and more generally the “alchemists and kabbalists, Sufis and Ismailis, poets and visionaries of all stripes who take their stands against the dominant and powerful orthodoxies of their times.”⁴

Because Corbin felt that the world of the Imagination⁵ had been denigrated, marginalized, and left to the poets in the modern Western tradition, he wanted to “reclaim it for philosophy and theology and to place the Imagination at the very center of human life because he believed, along with Ibn ‘Arabi, that it lies at the very center of reality.” This was a very “postmodern” move on Corbin’s part; for “a turn to the Imagination—or less threateningly, perhaps, toward the ‘literary’—characterizes much of Western philosophical and theological thought from at least Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on.” As we have seen, most tellingly for Corbin, Martin Heidegger “placed hermeneutics and not abstract logic or historical materialism at the very heart of human being and knowing.” But, unlike Heidegger, who wanted to free hermeneutics (i.e., the Imagination) from theology, Corbin “turned his hermeneutic gaze back upon a theological vision that is not narrowly Christian but embraces the entire prophetic tradition from Abraham and the Old Testament prophets through Jesus and on to include Muhammad and perhaps others to come.” In so doing, Corbin effectively anticipated by several decades the “theological turn” in contemporary phenomenology, and he did so in “an entirely and essentially ecumenical” way. Consequently, among modern theologians and philosophers it is perhaps only Henry Corbin, with his linguistic virtuosity and penchant for crossing boundaries, who was “able to see the religions of the Book with a sufficiently passionate

⁴ Ibid.; italics in original.

⁵ I am here capitalizing this word because Cheetham tends to follow Corbin’s generally favored usage. I say “generally favored usage” because Corbin himself is not always consistent in how he spells the word *i/Imagination*.

clarity to grasp their essential unities and to show us how we might reimagine the heart of these traditions to bring them alive and whole into a new cosmopolitan world free from the fundamentalisms and conflicts that have nearly obliterated the prophetic message throughout its long history.”⁶

Thus Corbin’s encounter with the gnostic and mystical writings of Islam served to validate his refusal to accept what he regarded as the artificial boundaries that the predominant Western intellectual tradition had created to separate philosophy and theology, rationality and revelation.⁷ Indeed, because Corbin believed that “truly philosophical thought must always be theo-logical, and that theology and philosophy are pointless unless they lead to spiritual transformation,”⁸ he preferred to use the term *théosophie* or *theosophy* to describe the nature of his project, since this term corresponds literally to the Arabic *hikma ilāhīya*, which means “a peculiar type of philosophy that is *both* rational and inspired.”⁹ Accordingly, as Cheetham states, because intellect and revelation are inseparable components of spiritual transformation, for Corbin, “theosophy must consist essentially in the contemplation and the *interpretation* of that which has been revealed: the revealed Word, the Divine Text—whether it is the Holy Book, or the text of Creation itself. Therefore contemplative, transformative spiritual practice *is* hermeneutics.”¹⁰

This being the case, another aspect of Corbin’s multi-faceted thought presents itself for further consideration, though we can only touch upon it briefly here.

⁶ Cheetham, *All the World an Icon*, p. 3.

⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ Hermann Landolt, “Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119:3 (July-September 1999), p. 486; italics in original. Cheetham also references this passage in discussing Corbin’s use of the term “theosophy” in an endnote, but he does not quote Landolt directly.

¹⁰ Cheetham, *All the World an Icon*, p. 4; italics in original.

Specifically, I am referring to the way in which his thought transcends and includes the interests of postmodern philosophy. For if it is true that Corbin's project is related to the hermeneutic and theological concerns of contemporary philosophy (and it is), it is equally true that his theosophy is "far broader in scope and more ambitious in its goals." This is so inasmuch as his distinctively theosophical project assumes as its context "an ecumenical and inclusive post-Islamic conception of Prophecy that has a good deal in common with William Blake's, and aims not at rational understanding but *metanoia* understood as a revolution in the life of the individual." Indeed, as we will see in what follows, for Corbin, the ultimate goal of hermeneutics is nothing less than angelomorphosis, which in Christianity and the Orthodox church in particular is known as *theosis* or deification of the human person.¹¹

What this means, of course, is that in a very real and crucial sense—despite its arguably quasi-postmodern elements—Corbin's project is radically antithetical to how hermeneutics has come to be commonly understood in the postmodern academy; for, as Cheetham contends, the hermeneutics that Corbin champions "never acts to 'explain the text' by assessing the effects of outer forces or influences or by weaving a web of external, causal relations." On the contrary, for Corbin, the text is not a mere object or passive artifact that is there to be interpreted and historically situated by us; rather, it is an active site of encounter, a catalyst of experience, that provides "the *con-text* for an interpersonal dialogue of *mutual interpretation* between the reader and the Word." According to this transformative notion of hermeneutics, the emphasis is on mystery, dialogue, learning, growth, and the primacy of the person, as opposed to any and all forms of reductionism or determinism. In other words, by placing the mystery of the

¹¹ Ibid.

human person at the center of his hermeneutics (and by implication his ontology and epistemology), Corbin is taking a stand against “all reductionisms that attempt to explain texts, or persons or things by accounting for their material, social, and historical causes.”¹²

In so doing, Corbin is intentionally, as he put it, “revers[ing] the perspectives of the usual optics, substitut[ing] the hermeneutics of the human individual for the pseudodialectic of facts, which today is accepted...as objective evidence.” This reversal of perspective is necessary to combat the meaninglessness or nihilism that has resulted from the false distinction that has been made between persons and facts, human beings and events—a distinction that itself is meaningless, according to Corbin, since there can be no facts or events without human persons who perceive, enact, and interpret them. Thus the person or individual is, for Corbin, the “first and last fact, the initial and final event...without whom there could never be anything we call ‘event.’” What is more, “[t]here is no explaining the initial fact of which we are speaking, for it is individual and singular, and the individual can be neither deduced nor explained; *individuum est ineffabile*.”¹³

Thus there are no facts or events without human persons or individuals to interpret, understand, and realize them. For, as Corbin writes, the fact is that, “outside the first and final reality, the individual, there are only ways of being, in relation to the individual himself or in relation to what surrounds him; and this means attributes have no substantial reality in themselves if they are detached from the individual or individuals who are their agents.” What we call “events,” therefore, are likewise “the attributes of

¹² Ibid.; italics in original.

¹³ Corbin, “The Time of Eranos,” pp. xiv-xv.

acting subjects; they are not beings but ways of being”—our ways of being.

Furthermore, Corbin clarifies, these events or acts of understanding, as acts of a subject, are expressed as a verb, which “acquires meaning and reality only from the acting subject who conjugates it.” Consequently,

Events, psychic or physical, do not assume existence, do not “take shape,” except through the reality that realizes them and from which they derive; and this reality is the acting individual subjects, who conjugate them “in their tense,” “in their time,” give them their own tense and time, which is always essentially the present tense and time.¹⁴

Hence, when viewed as somehow “detached from the real subject who realizes them,” facts or events “are merely something *unreal*.” By inverting the true order of things and giving “all reality to facts” we have “alienate[d] the real subject” and “let ourselves be trapped in the system of unrealities that we have ourselves constructed and whose weight in turn falls on us in the form of history, as the only scientific ‘objectivity’ that we can conceive, as the source of a causal determinism the idea of which would never have occurred to a humanity that had preserved the sense of the real subject.”

But, Corbin insists, if we can retrieve and make our own this sense of the real subject, we will then be able to free ourselves from “the yoke of the past,” from the tyrannical determinism of unreal facts or events that have “passed away.” We will “pass beyond” or “transcend” the resentment against this reductionist and nihilistic past, the illusions of a spurious progressivism, and, conversely, “the complexes of reaction.” For

¹⁴ Ibid., p. xvi.

we will realize that “past and future are themselves attributes expressed by verbs; they presuppose the subject who conjugates those verbs, a subject for whom and by whom the only existing tense and time is the *present*.” We will realize that the dimensions of past and future are “measured and conditioned by the capacity of the subject who perceives them,” by his or her present: that they are dimensions of us, for they depend upon us, “on the scope of [our] intelligence and [our] largeness of heart, to embrace the whole of life...to totalize...in [ourselves] all worlds, by falling back to the farthest limit of the dimension of [our] present.”¹⁵

Indeed, according to Corbin, this is what it means to understand, which is “a totally different matter from constructing a dialectic of things that have ceased to exist in the past.” This is what it means to “interpret” things as signs, as hierophanies and theophanies, “explaining not material facts but ways of being,” ways in which beings are revealed in the present to the individual person, to the real subject. Thus, Corbin writes, “Hermeneutics as science of the individual stands in opposition to historical dialectics as alienation of the person.”¹⁶

Corbin’s hermeneutic personalism therefore is meant to rehabilitate the human subject who has alienated himself in servitude to the chimeras of objective history and abstract time. It is meant to foster the rediscovery of “concrete time, the time of persons,”¹⁷ through a greater awareness of the vertical or transcendent dimension of being to which we have largely blinded ourselves. In this, Corbin asserts, hermeneutics

¹⁵ In this context, I want to suggest that Corbin did not abjure all forms of progress or deny evolution as such. Rather, he decried the West’s myopic tendency to focus on the superficial external/exoteric forms of progress at the expense of the more profound interior/esoteric forms of development (i.e., spiritual growth or the evolution of consciousness). It is thus against the “spurious progressivism” to which this myopic and idolatrous tendency gives rise that Corbin focuses on what is essential to all forms of true progress, namely, the theophanic human subject.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii; italics in original.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. xix.

is the emphatic *no* that “must be cried aloud”—it is the adamant refusal that “draws its energy from the lightning flash whose vertical joins heaven with earth, not from some horizontal line of force that loses itself in a limitlessness from which no meaning arises.”¹⁸ As such, hermeneutics is an integral response to a call for perpetual dialogue, to “the Call that constantly calls us” in the “secret alcove of the heart”¹⁹ to open “the living spring of unconditioned *sympathy*, the sympathy that, existing before our deliberate and conscious purpose,” makes human beings of every time and place true “contemporaries.”²⁰

Spiritual Hermeneutics (*ta'wil*)

With this in mind, then, we can proceed with a consideration of some of the major themes of Corbin’s thought. Since from his earliest writings to his mature works hermeneutics (*ta'wil*) was a central—if not *the* central—preoccupation for Corbin, we will view these themes through this particular lens. That is to say, it is within the context of further elucidating Corbin’s notion of hermeneutics that we will treat some of the characteristic themes of his thought.

Corbin’s hermeneutics is intimately related to his understanding of prophetic philosophy. As such, it postulates or presupposes the occurrence of Revelation, the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. xviii.

¹⁹ Daryush Shayegan, *Henry Corbin: La Topographie Spirituelle de L'Islam Iranien* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1990), p. 22: “Penser, c’est dialoguer dans l’alcôve secrète du coeur, penser c’est répondre à l’Appel qui sans cesse nous interpelle.”

²⁰ Corbin, “The Time of Eranos,” p. xix; italics in original. This is consistent with or reflective of Corbin’s mystical relationship to Suhrawardi, who was a – if not *the* – primary inspiration for this hermeneutical understanding.

“epiphanic descent” of the Divine Word or Presence into Creation.²¹ This “incarnation” of the Word (through and in which the spiritual is “corporealized”²² or embodied) progresses according to a dialectic of veiling and unveiling, manifestation and occultation.

The result is a paradoxical metaphysics of being that holds that the fundamental structure of reality consists of two corresponding and contrasting aspects or “faces,” so that, as Corbin puts it, “to everything that is apparent, literal, external, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) there corresponds something hidden, spiritual, internal, esoteric (*bātin*).”²³ The relationship between these two faces is likened by Corbin to that of a mirror and its image: “the mirror shows the image, and in showing it, shows its presence ‘elsewhere’ in *another dimension*.”²⁴ Accordingly, the exoteric is the “apparitional form,” the “epiphanic place” (*mazhar*), of the esoteric.²⁵ In this, as Fakhoury observes, for Corbin, the exterior is not something different from the interior, but rather is the interior itself transposed to a different level of being. Hence, in musical terms, Corbin compares the movement from the exoteric to the esoteric to “[passing] from one octave to a higher octave..., [which] is a progression to a height or pitch that is qualitatively different. All the elements are changed, yet the form of the melody is the same.” He therefore

²¹ See Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 355. He cites Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, p. 225 as the source of the term “epiphanic descent.” It is to be noted, however, that Corbin uses this term repeatedly throughout his corpus. See also Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 113.

²² Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī’ite Iran*, tr. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 177. See also Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, tr. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 1994), p. 106, and *Alone with the Alone*, p. 351, n. 10, for examples of similar locutions.

²³ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 78.

²⁴ Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, p. 225; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 355; italics in original.

²⁵ Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, p. 48; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 355. For a similar usage elsewhere, see Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960/1988), p. 262.

concludes: “Something in the nature of harmonic perception is needed in order to perceive a world of many dimensions.”²⁶

Thus the paradoxical “dual unity”—the contrast and correspondence—of the exoteric and esoteric, the exterior and interior, the visible and invisible dimensions of reality characterizes what Corbin refers to as “the phenomenon of the sacred Book,” which encompasses and is reflective of the dynamic movement at the heart of all Creation, the essential “rhythm of being.”²⁷ He writes:

This dual unity is postulated by the two aspects of the phenomenon of the sacred Book: its revelation, or “descent” (*tanzil*); and its hermeneutic (*ta’wil*), seen as a return to its source. This source is the divine Word. The form of this divine Word is precisely that of being in its imperative form (Arabic *K-N*, Latin *esto*). The meaning of this imperative of being is...the very imperative quality itself of being. This imperative quality constitutes [the descending arc of] the ‘*alam al-amr* (*mundus imperativus*), which is the pole of a totality whose other pole is [the re-ascending arc of] the ‘*alam al-khalq*, or world of creatures.... Descent, and re-ascent: the Word which descends from God...is Word in one of its aspects, and Book in another of its aspects. The Word has the same relation to the Book as the Imperative (*K-N*) does to the *energeia*, or *fi’l*...the Book is the “energy” of this Word. The Book is what is brought by the Prophet (*tanzil*), and the true meaning of this Book, its spiritual meaning, or

²⁶ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. xxviii.

²⁷ See Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

haqiqat, is the Word. Philosophers and mystics have realized that the articulation of the divine Word as human Word is essentially a paradox... Any *orthodox* tradition which forgets this *paradox* inherent in the human word will be incapable of realizing its own mission. The “bringing back” (*ta’wil*) of the Book to its source is the function of the...esoteric aspect of the prophetic mission.²⁸

Accordingly, for the prophetic philosophers of Islam (and of the other two Abrahamic traditions, Judaism and Christianity), the central fact is the existence of the sacred Book as energetic mirror or voice of the Word. And because of this, as Cheetham observes, “[t]he Revelation of a text makes the idea of understanding its true meaning and the hermeneutic situation that this implies the central issue for human life. But in the context of Divine Revelation, ‘text’ takes on a meaning not generally available to modern philosophies of language.”²⁹

To enhance our understanding of the nature of this distinctive meaning of “text” we need to elaborate on something that was said in the previous section about the importance of Luther’s thought to Corbin’s reading of Islamic mysticism and philosophy. There it was mentioned that the primary importance of Luther to Corbin was that the former provided the latter with, in Cheetham’s words, “insight into the contrast between the Revealed and the Hidden God and into the meaning of *significatio passiva*: the presence in us of those characteristics by means of which we know God.”³⁰ Here is

²⁸ Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*, pp. 210 and 211; italics in original.

²⁹ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 113.

³⁰ Ibid., p. xii. Insofar as “those characteristics by means of which we know God” are beyond the machinations of the ego and hence “passive,” the *significatio passiva* is related to William James’ much

Corbin describing in summary fashion the dramatic experience which the discovery of the importance of passive signification (*significatio passiva*) was for the young Luther, who was still under the influence of Tauler's mysticism at the time:

In the presence of the Psalm verse *In justitia tua libera me* [Psalm 71:2: "In your justice, deliver me."], he experienced a movement of revolt and despair: what can there be in common between this attribute of justice and *my* deliverance? And such was his state of mind until the young theologian Martin Luther perceived in a sudden flash (and his entire personal theology was to result from this experience) that this attribute must be understood in its *significatio passiva*, that is to say, *thy* justice whereby we are made...just..., *thy* holiness whereby we are hallowed, etc.

He then suggests a parallel that lack of space prevents him from discussing in detail.

"Similarly," Corbin writes, "in the mystic theosophy of Ibn 'Arabi, the divine attributes are qualifications that we impute to the Divine Essence not as convention might bid us to postulate it, but as we experience it in ourselves."³¹

Thus, for Corbin, Luther's insight helped to illuminate the inherent connection between divinity and humanity—between the divine attributes that we impute to the incomprehensible Divine Essence and those same attributes as we experience them in ourselves and in the rest of manifest creation. Consequently, as Cheetham observes,

later observation that mysticism is generally passive. It is also related to Kripal's notion of the Human as Two, according to which the ego can do or effect nothing in terms of mystical experience. I thank Jeffrey Kripal for pointing out these correlations.

³¹ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 300, n. 25; italics in original.

“[u]pon the *significatio passiva* hinges an entire cosmology, an entire metaphysics of creation,”³² and, by implication, an entire theological anthropology. In this, the crucial notion of passive signification—which Luther derived from the medieval tradition of speculative grammar that held that language reflects as a mirror (*speculum* in Latin) the fundamental nature of reality—provides another way of understanding the connection between ontology, epistemology, and the transformation of the self (i.e., the making of the soul, angelomorphosis, *theosis*, or deification by any other name).

Here is Corbin again on both the imperative nature of being and its *significatio passiva*:

One simple example: the advent of being in this theosophy, is the placing of being in the imperative: *KN* [Arabic], *Esto* [Latin] (in the second person, not *fiat*). This is primary, it is neither *ens* nor *esse*, but *esto*. “Be!” This imperative inauguration of being, is the divine imperative in the active sense (*amr fi’lî*); but considered in the being that it makes be, the being that we are, it is the same imperative, but in its *significatio passiva* (*amr maf’ûli*).

One could say, I believe, that this is the triumph of the hermeneutic as *Verstehen*, to know that what we understand in truth, is never that which we experience and submit to, that which we suffer in ourselves alone.

Hermeneutics does not consist in deliberating on concepts, it is essentially the unveiling of that which takes place in us, the unveiling of that which

³² Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 114.

we make issue from ourselves, a conception, a vision, a projection, when our *passion* becomes *action*, an active suffering, prophetic-poetic.³³

Seen in this light, then, hermeneutics is an unveiling—literally, an apocalypse (from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις, an unveiling, uncovering, revealing, or revelation). As such, it is not a linguistic exercise, conceptual manipulation, or rational operation that is performed on a text in anything like the modern sense of historical or literary criticism. Rather, it is an uncovering, a revelatory process by which we enter into the symbolic or imaginal space between the soul and the text to participate in the blossoming of the spiritual events, “visions,” or images that gave birth to and are the true meaning of the ideas and words contained in the text. By emphasizing the intimate relationship between hermeneutics and the imperative nature of being, therefore, Corbin “forces the insight upon us that understanding as unveiling is our most passionate mode of being.”³⁴

This insight into the hermeneutic intensification of existence is thus the basis of Corbin’s metaphysics of individuation or self-transformation, which he derived from Suhrawardi, Ibn ‘Arabi, Mulla Sadra, and others. Like them, he held that the source of the command to be, the “imperative inauguration of being,” is not the ego but God. And,

³³ Corbin, “De Heidegger à Suhrawardi,” p. 25; italics in original; see also “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” p. 4, and Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 114. Partially my translation. “Un simple exemple: l’avènement de l’être dans cette théosophie, c’est la mise de l’être à l’impératif: *KN, Esto* (à la seconde personne, non pas *fiat*). Ce qui est premier, ce qui n’est ni l’*ens* ni l’*esse*, mais l’*esto*. “Sois!” Cet impératif inaugurateur de l’être, c’est l’impératif divin au sens actif (*amr fi’lî*); mais considéré dans l’étant qu’il fait être, l’étant que nous sommes, c’est ce même impératif, mais en sa *significatio passiva* (*amr maf’ûli*).

“On peut dire, je crois, qu’à là-même est le triomphe de l’herméneutique comme *Verstehen*, à savoir que ce que nous comprenons en vérité, ce n’est jamais que ce que nous éprouvons et submissions, ce dont nous pâtissons dans notre être même. L’herméneutique ne consiste pas à débiter sur des concepts, elle est essentiellement le dévoilement de ce qui se pass en nous, le dévoilement de ce qui nous fait émettre telle conception, telle vision, telle projection, lorsque notre *passion* deviant *action*, un pâtir actif, prophétique-poétique.”

³⁴ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 115.

to paraphrase Cheetham who is following Corbin, this manifestation of being is neither thinking nor acting, but a prophetic-poetic passion or sympathy that transcends and includes both: it is imagining.³⁵

Here again is the existential connection between the divine and the human, between heaven and earth, in which bond is to be found our ultimate freedom and identity. A freedom and identity that are revealed to us in the light of our celestial “twin” or “double,”³⁶ our *Fravarti*, our Angel, through whom the Light of the Divine is transmitted to us in thought, word, and deed. As Corbin writes, the implications of this are profound.

[What this] implies [is] that this person is an *agent* in a superficial and metaphoric sense. More active than the person himself is the thought that is thought through him, the word that is spoken by him (and personified in him). And this thought of his thought is precisely what Nasir Tusi calls the Angel of this thought (or of this word or action). This Angel endows the soul with the aptitude for thinking it and rising by it; he is the Archetype, the finality without which a cause would never be a cause. He is the “destiny” of that soul. The subjective case becomes an instrumental. The act of thinking is simultaneously a “being-thought” (*cogitor*) by the Angel, causing the soul to be what he himself is. The ethic is posited not in terms of values but in terms of the Angel’s modes of being. The propositions stated above (every thought *is* a person...every true thought

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), as well as his *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: “No Longer I”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

has an Angel) describe a hermeneutic circle which fuses the schema of *angelology* with the process of *angelomorphosis* [read: deification], and it is in this fusion that the possibility of exemplification resides.³⁷

Thus, insofar as it leads one to discover the transcendent subject, which is here the angel, this gnostic “hermeneutic circuit” encompasses more of reality than conventional, agnostic philosophy allows.³⁸ And it remains for us, through our prophetic-poetic compassion, to unveil the angelic or theophanic function being; to reveal, that is, the mystic heart of all reality: the pervasive presence of the divine Imagination.

Here it is to be noted that the importance of Corbin’s elision of the prophetic and poetic can hardly be overemphasized. For this marriage captures the inextricable and paradoxical unity of divinity and humanity, as it conveys the insight that our inherent connection with the divine, which we realize through spiritual birth, self-transformation, angelomorphosis, or deification as a never-ending process, is “impossible without the ontological reality of the Imagination, the spark of divine creativity in us *par excellence*.”

This divine spark, personified as the archangel Gabriel or Holy Spirit, is for Corbin “the primary point of contact and communication among the Peoples of the Book.” And as we have seen, in all of his work, Corbin is searching for “the living source of prophetic religion” in the Abrahamic traditions so as to lay bare what he perceives to be an underlying *harmonia Abrahamica*. This living source and foundational harmony, he contends, is found in part in “the primordial and eternal reality

³⁷ Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, tr. Ralph Manheim and James Morris (London/New York: Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 52-53; italics in original.

³⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 52, n. 87.

of the individual [person],”³⁹ which defines the quest or drama of the “Lost Speech” that is common to all three religions of Abraham. In Corbin’s own words:

The drama common to all the “religions of the Book”...can be designated as the drama of the “Lost Speech.” And this because the whole meaning of their life revolves around the phenomenon of the sacred Book, around the true meaning of this Book. If the true meaning of this Book is the inner meaning, hidden under the literal appearance, then from the moment people fail to recognize or refuse this inner meaning, from that instant they mutilate the unity of the Verb, of the Word [Logos], and begin the drama of the “Lost Speech.”⁴⁰

Again, this commonality rests upon the ever dynamic contrast and correspondence between exoteric and esoteric, visible and invisible, prophetic and poetic modes of being. Moreover, this paradoxical and creative movement of the Spirit is “the pivot point around which all of Creation is ordered.”⁴¹ And this view suggests that, as Corbin puts it, “A *tradition* lives and transmits life only if it is a perpetual *rebirth*.”⁴²

It is from this perspective, then, that we are to understand Corbin’s notion of the transformational nature of both hermeneutics and phenomenology. As he wrote,

³⁹ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 116.

⁴⁰ Henry Corbin, “L’initiation ismaélienne ou l’ésotérisme et le verbe,” in *L’Homme et son ange: initiation et chevalerie spirituelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), p. 81. This passage is cited in Cheetham, *Imaginal Love*, p. 86, and Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 356. Because the translations of Cheetham and Fakhoury differ slightly, I have selectively combined them both.

⁴¹ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 116.

⁴² Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, tr. Liadain Sherrard, with Philip Sherrard (London/New York: Kegan Paul, 1993), p. 366.

“Hermeneutics is the proper form of the phenomenologist’s task.”⁴³ But it is also the proper form of all true knowledge. For this transformational or spiritual hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*) is rooted in a prophetic-poetic understanding of the theophanic, symbolic, or angelic function of being. Thus, according to Corbin, in one form or another all created reality is perceived to be “the phenomenon of the Sacred Book,” such that whatever happens in nature and history is a reflection of events in the world of the Soul.

Nature and History are both the visible, external, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) appearance of this spiritual world that is the hidden, the truly real (*ḥaqīqat*), the esoteric (*bāṭin*); it is in this world that true history is revealed by an approach that is called in Arabic *ta’wīl*, spiritual hermeneutics, a process that consists etymologically in “bringing back” everything, every event, to its truth, to its archetype (*aṣl*), by uncovering the hidden and concealing the appearance.... Externally, these events

⁴³ Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohrevardi,” p. 26: “L’herméneutique est la forme propre de la tâche du phénoménologue.” My translation. On the first page of *Alone with the Alone*, Corbin speaks to the importance of phenomenology relative to “the Imagination” and “the imaginative function.” He writes: “Today, with the help of phenomenology, we are able to examine the way in which man experiences his relationship to the world without reducing the objective data of his experience to data of sense perception or limiting the field of true and meaningful knowledge to the mere operations of the rational understanding. Freed from an old impasse, we have learned to register and to make use of the intentions implicit in all acts of consciousness or transconsciousness. To say that the Imagination (or love, or sympathy, or any other sentiment) *induces knowledge*, and knowledge of an ‘object’ which is proper to it, no longer smacks of paradox. Still, once the full noetic value of the Imagination is admitted, it may be advisable to free the intentions of the Imagination from the parentheses [i.e., the Husserlian *epoché*] in which a purely phenomenological interpretation encloses them, if we wish, without fear of misunderstanding, to relate the imaginative function to the view of the world proposed by the Spiritualists to whose company the present book invites us” (p. 3; emphasis in original).

Regarding Corbin’s distinctive understanding of phenomenology, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who taught for many years with Corbin in Tehran, writes: “Corbin...used to translate phenomenology...to the Persian speaking students as *kashf al-mahjub*, literally ‘rendering asunder the veil to reveal the hidden essence,’ and considered his method...to be spiritual hermeneutics as understood in classical Sufi and Shi’ite thought.” See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 26n.19. As cited by Cheetham at <http://henrycorbinproject.blogspot.com/2008/08/on-phenomenology.html>.

have a natural framework, human scenery. Nature, too, is a *Liber mundi*, the hidden meaning of which must be deciphered by *ta'wīl*, just as by means of *ta'wīl* the spiritual meaning of the *Liber revelatus* is unveiled, the true meaning of the Book that “descended from Heaven” and thus the secret of the prophets, that is, that of *hierohistory*.

By its nature, at the heart of a prophetic religion...there is the *phenomenon of the Sacred Book*... This phenomenon preeminently creates a “hermeneutic situation,” the great issue being to know and understand the *true meaning* of the Book.... The way of reading and comprehending to which I refer presupposes, in the strict sense of the word, a *theosophia*, that is, the mental or visionary penetration of an entire hierarchy of spiritual universes that are not discovered by means of syllogisms, because they do not reveal themselves except through a certain mode of cognition, a *hierognosis* that unites the speculative knowledge of traditional information to the most personal interior experience...⁴⁴

Given this radical view of hermeneutics and phenomenology, it is impossible for us to read or interpret the “text” of reality truly without being transformed in the process. For, in the words of Corbin,

[T]he mode of understanding is conditioned by the mode of being of him who understands; correspondingly, the believer’s whole inner ethos

⁴⁴ Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, tr. Leonard Fox (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), pp. 37 and 38. Italics in original.

derives from his mode of understanding. The lived situation is essentially *hermeneutical*, a situation, that is to say, in which the *true meaning* dawns on the believer and confers reality on his existence.⁴⁵

In short, the link to which phenomenology pays attention is the indissoluble link between *modi intelligendi* and *modi essendi*, between modes of understanding and modes of being. The modes of understanding are essentially a function of the modes of being. Any change in the mode of understanding is concomitant to a change in the mode of being. The modes of being are the ontological, existential...conditions of the act of “Understanding,” of *Verstehen*, which is to say of hermeneutics.⁴⁶

Thus, for Corbin, the hermeneutic act of reading and understanding is nothing less than “a liturgical act of transformation.”⁴⁷ If this were not the case, the literal, apparent meaning of the text – be it that of the *Liber revelatus*, the *Liber mundi*, or the *Liber anima* – would lose its significance and justification and become superfluous. This is why Corbin affirms “the simultaneity and the necessity of maintaining the simultaneity of the spiritual sense and the literal appearance, of the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric (*bāṭin*).” For the natural sense or literal appearance forms “the covering, the basis, and the protection of the [Divine Word], the body indispensable to the spirit and the life.”⁴⁸ At

⁴⁵ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohrevardi,” p. 26: “Bref, le lien auquel nous rend attentifs la phénoménologie, c'est le lien indissoluble entre *modi intelligendi* et *modi essendi*, entre modes de comprendre et modes d'être. Les modes de comprendre sont essentiellement en fonction des modes d'être. Tout changement dans le mode de comprendre est concomitant d'un changement dans le mode d'être. Les modes d'être sont les conditions ontologiques, existentielles...du "Comprendre," du *Verstehen*, c'est-à-dire de l'hermeneutique. My translation.

⁴⁷ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 117.

⁴⁸ Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, p. 61.

the same time, if separated from its spiritual meaning or truth, the body of the Word is dead and merely “an absurd husk.”⁴⁹ Thus, for Corbin, the letter or literal appearance of the Book – its body – is as important as the spirit which animates it, since the two exist simultaneously.⁵⁰ And hence it is the task of spiritual hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*) to reveal the hidden significance of the text while preserving its literal meaning.⁵¹

According to Corbin, therefore, hermeneutics “saves the appearance” of the text by “drawing or unveiling the hidden which shows itself beneath this appearance.”⁵² Significantly, this is not a matter of replacing one meaning with another, but rather of perceiving the apparent and the hidden, the literal and the spiritual, the material and the psychic simultaneously, “in a single act of perception.”⁵³ This theosophical revelation is “a reverberation of transcendent lightning in the human, phenomenal realm,”⁵⁴ and as such it constitutes a “symbolic perception” that effects “a transmutation of the immediate data (the sensible and literal data), and renders them transparent”⁵⁵ to the prophetic-poetic meaning of creation’s mysterious beauty. The text—neither the Qu’ran alone, nor, in another context, the Bible—is thereby “raised to incandescence and the hidden

⁴⁹ Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, p. 128; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 359.

⁵⁰ Cf. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, p. 75: “The *bāṭin* [esoteric] cannot subsist without the *ẓāhir* [exoteric] which is its support; the symbolized (*mamthūl*) can only be manifested in the symbol that symbolizes it (*mathal*).” As as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 359, n. 72. While it could be argued that ultimately Corbin affords the esoteric spirit a certain primacy over the exoteric body, his affirmation of their paradoxical simultaneity or co-imbrication would seem to problematize such a reading. For an example of the criticism that Corbin overemphasizes the importance of transcendence/spirit, see Tom Cheetham, *Imaginal Love*, p.29, where he echoes James Hillman: “In my reading, Corbin’s chief fault lies in his relentless flight towards transcendence [i.e., the spirit].” See also Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 348: “As the reference to the resurrection as an imaginal event suggests, Corbin tends to deny the reality of the flesh for the sake of the spirit.”

⁵¹ Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 2, p. 199; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 359.

⁵² Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et Philosophie comparée*, p. 23; as cited in Fakhoury, *ibid*.

⁵³ Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 359.

⁵⁴ William Franke, *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 42.

⁵⁵ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 13.

significance shines through the covering, which becomes transparent,” diaphanous.⁵⁶

Corbin likens this single act of theophanic perception to “the manner of the light which becomes visible only as it takes form and shines through the figure of a stained-glass window.”⁵⁷

And to reiterate, the phenomenal text is perceived as symbol to the extent that the consciousness of the hermeneut or exegete penetrates to its hidden significance and is thus transformed in a single act of perception that reveals or unveils the inner truth—the theophanic nature—of all reality. In this, the symbol is an eloquent but silent key that unlocks the ever mysterious angelic function of being in general and of human being or consciousness in particular.

In this sense, hermeneutics or spiritual exegesis involves the spontaneous flowering of the symbolic nature of the world in the individual soul. Without this spontaneity and sense of grace that transcends but includes all notions of “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” the world would offer only a pallid and shallow doubling of the physical, sensible, and historical context of a given experience, event, or life. With this spontaneity and simultaneity, however, the depths of the world and our own depths are

⁵⁶ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 275. It is to be noted that this transparency or diaphanousness is precisely what distinguishes an icon from an idol. See Henry Corbin, “Theophanies and Mirrors: Idols or Icons?”, tr. Jane A. Pratt and A. K. Donohue, in *Spring: An Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought* (1983), p. 2: “Idolatry consists in immobilizing oneself before an idol because one sees it as opaque, because one is incapable of discerning in it the hidden invitation that it offers to go beyond it. Hence, the opposite of idolatry would not consist in breaking idols, in practicing a fierce iconoclasm aimed against every inner or external Image; it would rather consist in rendering the idol transparent to the light invested in it. In short, it means transmuting the idol into an icon.” This can also be found at <http://henrycorbinproject.blogspot.com/2009/09/theophanies-and-mirrors-idols-or-icons.html>.

It is also to be noted that Corbin’s likening of theophanic perception to “the manner of the light which becomes visible only as it takes form and shines through the figure of a stained-glass window” suggests an answer to the question of why esoteric interpretations of exoteric scriptural texts differ. Like a prism, each esoteric interpretation makes visible a different “color” of the pure white “light” of timeless meaning that shines through the “window” of a given text, without which that particular dimension of meaning would remain completely hidden and hence invisible. In this, it could be argued, Corbin is advancing a variation of the filter thesis.

laid bare, if only for one brief, shining, diaphanous moment. “The spontaneity here,” Corbin writes, “refers to the soul’s transmutation, for it is only then that the soul attains not to a group of figures to be deciphered with the help of a code, but to the configuration and the vision of its most personal symbol, the central symbol of the Self, which is not knowable in any other way, and with which it enters into ‘rapt discourse and dialogue.’”⁵⁸

He continues:

[What is thus] revealed to it is the mystery of its own Self: a Self that overflows its terrestrial and exiled ego, its little empirical and conscious ego, a Self that is its whole being, so near and yet so distant, so much *it* and yet so much another that to meet it is to experience the joy of being two in one. The reciprocity that flowers in the mystery of this divine depth cannot be expressed save by...formulas that look paradoxical, those of Meister Eckhart, for example, declaring: “The look by which I know him is the very look by which He knows me.” It is also the transcendent mystical meaning of the testimony: *talem eum vidi qualem capere potui*—[“I saw him as I was able to receive him.”]—and it is what all speculative mysticism has attempted to say.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 203; italics in original. It is important to recall with Corbin that “[t]he authentic meaning of ‘speculative’ is lost unless we bear in mind its etymological origin: *speculum* = mirror. The intelligence of speculative theology is in its functioning as a mirror which *reflects* God, a mirror in which God is revealed. In the words of Franz von Baader, ‘*Spekulieren heist spiegeln*.’ (‘To speculate is to reflect.’)” See Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*, p. 141.

Hence, for Corbin, hermeneutics involves a “lived situation...in which the *true meaning* dawns on the believer and confers reality upon his existence,”⁶⁰ and all existence. Understanding therefore “is not a theoretical inspection but a *passion* lived and shared with the understood object, a com-passion, a sympathy.”⁶¹ For the divine Word, by whose eternal imperative all created being is an infinitely interpretable text, is essentially the irreducible trace of its action in us, “of the action by which it fulfills its being through our being, and which in us then assumes the aspect of...[its] *significatio passiva*.”⁶² In other words, we discover God only insofar as God occurs and is made real within us, according to what God makes of us, insofar as God is our *passion*, insofar as God describes the divine self to us through ourselves.⁶³

This means that the Word or God is simultaneously interpreter and interpreted; the one who understands and who is understood. For, in the words of Corbin, “It is this divine Subject which is in fact the active Subject of all knowledge of God; it is God himself who is thinking himself through the thought which the enlightened human intellect has of him.”⁶⁴ To realize this is to realize the speculative state or our true Self, insofar as we know ourselves to be a mirror in which divinity is reflected. Corbin:

The mirror is the inner human being, to whom, by whom, and for whom the theophany (*tajalli, zohur*) is produced, and who is the place and form (*mazhar*) which it takes. The speculative state, in its mystical sense, is when the human being has become a mirror in which the *gesta divina*

⁶⁰ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 1.

⁶¹ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 116.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 116-117.

⁶⁴ Corbin, *The Voyage of the Messenger*, p. 141.

[divine events] are accomplished. However, because this mirror is the place of the soul contemplating itself in contemplation, it is also true to say that the mirror is itself the divine Being.⁶⁵

Here we are presented with the paradoxical nature of reality in the form of what Corbin, following the fifteenth-century German mystic, philosopher, and theologian, Nicholas of Cusa, describes as a *coincidentia oppositorum*—in which the truths of two seemingly opposed or dichotomous terms are held to coincide, simultaneously and inseparably:

In revealing Himself to man, the personalized God of the personal theophany reveals man to himself, and in revealing man to himself, He reveals man to Himself and reveals Himself to Himself. In each instance, the eye that sees is simultaneously the eye that is seen. Every theophany (from the minimal degree of mental vision onwards) accomplishes itself simultaneously in these two aspects.⁶⁶

Hence, this inherently theophanic and specifically *theandric* syzygy or co-incidence of divinity and humanity manifests the spiritual meaning of revelation.⁶⁷ And it does so

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

⁶⁶ Corbin, “De Heidegger à Suhrawardi,” p. 35; see also “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” pp. 17-18. Partially my translation. “En se révélant à l’homme, le Dieu personnalisé de la théophanie personnelle révèle l’homme à lui-même, et en révélant l’homme à lui-même il se le révèle à soi-même et se révèle soi-même à soi-même. De part et d’autre l’œil qui regarde est simultanément l’œil regardé. Toute théophanie (dès le degré minimum de la vision mentale) s’accomplit dans la simultanéité de ces deux aspects.” This resonates strongly with the thought of Raimon Panikkar. See especially his *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, tr. Alfred DiLascia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004) and *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*, tr. Joseph Cunneen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006.)

⁶⁷ On the concept of theandry, see Corbin, “Face de Dieu et face de l’homme,” in *Face de Dieu, face de l’homme: Herméneutique et soufisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), pp. 300-313; as cited in Fakhoury,

inasmuch as it expresses the paradoxical union of “the plurality of this world with the divine Unity.”⁶⁸

Consequently, for Corbin, hermeneutics (*ta’wil*) is a way of reading, interpreting, or understanding existence that “engages the entire soul because it brings into play the soul’s most secret sources of energy” as it unveils “the mystery of its eternal being,” which ultimately “must...be uttered without the intervention of language, for language strives to utter it in vain.”⁶⁹ Thus hermeneutics finally appears as “the [apophatic] mainspring of every spirituality, in the measure to which it pre-eminently furnishes the means of going beyond all conformisms, all servitudes to the letter, all opinions accepted ready-made.”⁷⁰ As such, according to Corbin, *ta’wil* is the pre-eminent means of angelomorphosis or deification. Hence, it is the tool best suited to reveal and foster the underlying unity of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (i.e., the *harmonia Abrahamica*), which hold in common this prophetic-poetic practice of spiritual reading or exegesis.⁷¹

“Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 362. See also Klaus Bambauer, “Aspekte der Theoandrie bei Nikolai Berdjajew: Ein Vergleich mit Henry Corbin und Raimon Panikkar,” in *Warheit und Offenbarung: Prolegomena zu einer Kritik der Offenbarung*, by Nikolai Berdjajew (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1998), 94-109. See as well the work of Raimon Panikkar, for example, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973) and *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, ed. with intro. Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Recall too our discussion of this concept in the previous chapter.

⁶⁸ Corbin, “Traditional Knowledge and Spiritual Renaissance,” tr. Kathleen Raine, in *Temenos Academy Review* 1 (1998), p. 32; as cited in Fakhoury, “Henry Corbin’s Hermeneutics of Scripture,” p. 362.

⁶⁹ Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, pp. 28, 240, and 202.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷¹ For this practice in Judaism, see, for example, Barry W. Holtz, “On Reading Jewish Texts,” in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), pp. 16-17: “We tend usually to think of reading as a passive occupation, but for the Jewish textual tradition, it was anything but that. Reading was a passionate and active grappling with God’s living word. It held the challenge of uncovering secret meanings, unheard-of explanations, matters of great weight and significance. An active, indeed interactive [i.e., transformative], reading was their method of approaching the sacred text called Torah and through that reading process of finding something at once new and very old.... Torah called for a living and dynamic response...[and] remains unendingly alive...[because] Torah demands interpretation.” For this practice in Christianity, see, for example, Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, tr. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982). See also Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), for example, pp. 11, 17, and 25-26:

Yet here it is to be noted that Corbin's conception of spiritual hermeneutics or *ta'wīl* has been criticized by other Islamicists. William Chittick, for example, claims that Corbin's exclusively Shi'ite and positive reading of *ta'wīl* led him to misconstrue Ibn 'Arabi's more critical use of the term.

Those who have been introduced to Ibn al-'Arabī through the writings of Henry Corbin have learned that *ta'wīl* is one of the cornerstones of his thought. One cannot object to Corbin for saying that Ibn al-'Arabī interprets the verses of the Koran, but one can object to his choosing the word *ta'wīl* to designate the process, since Ibn al-'Arabī does not use it in the positive sense in which Corbin understands it. Without doubt, Corbin was led to employ the term because of *ta'wīl*'s primary importance in Shi'ite thought. As he remarks, 'It is not possible to utter the word *ta'wīl* without suggesting Shi'ism.' Corbin means to imply that Ibn al-'Arabī leaned toward Shi'ite beliefs, but in fact Corbin is merely expressing his own conviction that anyone as important as Ibn al-'Arabī had to be influenced by Shi'ism. This is not to claim that Ibn al-'Arabī never employs the term *ta'wīl* in a positive sense corresponding roughly to what Corbin had in mind. But such rare passages...invariably speak of *ta'wīl* in

"Reading, as Hugh perceives and interprets it, is an ontologically remedial technique.... The reader is one who has made himself into an exile in order to concentrate his entire attention and desire on wisdom, which... 'illuminates man...so that he may recognize himself'.... The light of which Hugh speaks here brings man to a glow. Approaching wisdom makes the reader radiant. The [ardent] striving that Hugh teaches is a commitment to engage in an activity by which the reader's own 'self' will be kindled and brought to sparkle.... [This enlightenment] for Hugh affects three pairs of eyes: the eyes of the flesh, which discover the material things contained in the sublunary sphere of sensible objects; the eyes of the mind [or soul], which contemplate the self and the world that it mirrors; and, finally, the eyes of the heart [or spirit], which penetrate to the innermost reaches of God in the light of Wisdom, God's Son, hidden, as the ultimate 'book' in the lap of the Father [and simultaneously in the center of the 'self']."

its Koranic context and do not contradict Ibn al-‘Arabī’s generally critical views of *ta’wīl*.⁷²

Other scholars of Islamic studies, like Michel Chodkiewicz, agree with Chittick. Still, however accurate such criticism may be from a strictly scholarly perspective, it arguably misses or obscures a broader point that is important not to lose sight of when trying to sympathetically understand Corbin’s mystical vision of comparative spirituality, and his conception of *ta’wīl* in particular. This broader point is simply that, if our goal is to understand Corbin’s scholarship, first and foremost, we must strive to understand Corbin on his own terms. The words of Tom Cheetham are instructive in this regard:

If we are to gain anything from Corbin’s work, and make sense of comparative spiritual hermeneutics ourselves by learning to adopt, adapt, and put to *use* the tools that he has revealed to us, then we might best begin by trying to understand, on Corbin’s terms, just what it was he thought he was giving us. We would do well to read his work quite closely to disclose the main themes and the details of the “precisely defined schema” in which *ta’wīl* is originally embedded.

He continues:

⁷² William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 199.

Corbin has himself been criticized...for being a champion of one particular version of *ta'wil* itself, which he applied rather broadly, and some would say indiscriminately. William Chittick has pointed out (in agreement with Michel Chodkiewicz) that Corbin's use of the term *ta'wil* is grounded in his familiarity with and passion for Shiite spirituality—Ismaili Shiism in particular—and that this causes Corbin to interpret Ibn 'Arabi, for instance, in ways that are really quite foreign to his thought....

Because of this, Cheetham is of the mind that there is an inevitable and unresolvable tension characteristic of Corbin's oeuvre. As he observes:

There is, I think, always some tension in Corbin's work between the "Lutheran" Protestant critic of orthodoxy and institutional religion, and the enthusiastic proponent of a specifically "Shiite" cosmology wary of transplanting the ideas he champions into new contexts. This is a consequence of his entire ecumenical project and should be seen as an integral part of that crucial and praiseworthy endeavor. His attempt to find unity in the astonishing diversity of the religions of the Book...by focusing on the freedom of the Holy Spirit as the "Angel of Individuation" must be characterized by a fundamental fragmentation and flight from any socially or politically unified center. And one might argue that Corbin's own stance was so fundamentally multivalent that he is hardly in a position to criticize others for pulling [his] spiritual conceptions out of context. He thought of himself as a Protestant Christian, according to

Pierre Lory, who knew him well; he felt he could speak of “we” in referring to the Shiites of Iran, according to S. H. Nasr; and as with his “master” Suhrawardi, the Zoroastrian background of Iranian Islam was an essential part of his spiritual universe. The coherence of the spirituality of such a man indeed must be founded on the very Creative Imagination he so ardently, eloquently, and successfully defended.⁷³

It is important, therefore, to keep this perspective in mind.

The Imaginal World (*mundus imaginalis*)

That being said, and before proceeding to flesh out more fully Corbin’s notion of deification in the next chapter, we do well to elucidate the relationship between his conception of spiritual hermeneutics or *ta’wil* and what he famously referred to as the *mundus imaginalis* or imaginal world. How were these two themes related in Corbin’s thought? In order to begin to answer this question, we need to recall that when Corbin speaks of the imagination it is with the intention of countering the usual, negative sense of the word. Hence, for Corbin, the imagination designates neither fantasy, nor the organ which produces unreal imaginings, nor even that of aesthetic creation. Rather, when Corbin speaks of the imagination, he is referring to “an absolutely basic function, correlated with a universe peculiar to it, a universe endowed with a perfectly ‘objective’ existence and perceived precisely through the Imagination.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Cheetham, *All the World an Icon*, pp. 34-35; emphasis in original. As Kripal has observed in a private communication, “I think all of this becomes obvious and relevant once we cease reading Corbin as a historian or an ethnographer and read him as a modern mystical writer in his own right and with his own vision.” Needless to say, I agree.

⁷⁴ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 3.

Accordingly, for Corbin and the Sufi theosophists that he treats, the world is “objectively” and actually threefold. As he explains, “between the universe that can be apprehended by pure intellectual perception...and the universe perceptible to the senses, there is an intermediate world, the world of Idea-Images, or archetypal figures, of subtile [sic] substances, of ‘immaterial matter.’” This intermediate world is Corbin’s *mundus imaginalis* or imaginal world, and it “is as real and objective, as consistent and subsistent as the intelligible and sensible worlds; it is an intermediate universe [or dimension] ‘where the spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual,’ a world consisting of real matter and real extension, though by comparison to sensible, corruptible matter these are subtile and immaterial.”

As for how this intermediate world or dimension of existence is to be perceived, as suggested above, it is through what Corbin refers to as the active Imagination. “The organ of this universe,” he writes, “is the active Imagination; it is the *place* of theophanic visions, the scene on which visionary events and symbolic histories *appear* in their true reality.”⁷⁵ As such, this Imagination is inherently creative because “it is essentially the *active* Imagination and because its activity defines it essentially as a theophanic Imagination.”⁷⁶ This is the same mediating faculty that Ibn ‘Arabi designates as “Presence” or “imaginative dignity.”⁷⁷ To distinguish and safeguard the meaning of this active Imagination, Presence, or imaginative dignity from the common pejorative view that conflates “imagination” with “illusion,” Corbin coined another neologism and occasionally referred to it as the *Imaginatrix*.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 4; italics in original.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 6; emphasis in original.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 153.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 6, 153.

Thus Corbin maintains that the active Imagination or *Imaginatrix* anticipates, guides, and molds sense perception, which is why “it transmutes sensory data into symbols.” And this is important because, as Corbin memorably and sarcastically puts it, “The Burning Bush is only a brushwood fire if it is merely perceived by the sensory organs.” That is to say, by insisting on the existence of an actual burning bush, naïve literalism/materialism entirely misses the true and deeper significance of the mystical experience being symbolized and communicated by the image of a bush that burns and yet is not consumed. To arrive at this deeper (read: esoteric) level of meaning, something more than sensory perception is required. Hence, Corbin elaborates, “[i]n order that Moses may perceive the Burning Bush and hear the Voice calling him ‘from the right side of the valley’—in short, in order that there may be a theophany—an organ of trans-sensory perception is needed.”⁷⁹

Again, this trans-sensory and hence trans-historical theophanic perception transpires or is accomplished in the *‘ālam al-mithāl*, the *mundus imaginalis* or imaginal world, whose organ is the theophanic/active/creative Imagination. This being the case, Corbin points out that, since the Imagination or *Imaginatrix* is the organ of theophanic perception, it is also the organ of spiritual hermeneutics or *ta’wil* (which he also calls prophetic hermeneutics), for “it is the imagination which is at all times capable of transmuting sensory data into symbols and external events into symbolic histories.”

Thus the affirmation of an esoteric meaning to the text of all created reality presupposes “a prophetic hermeneutics; and this hermeneutics postulates an organ capable of perceiving theophanies, of investing visible figures with a ‘theophanic

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

function.’ This organ is the active Imagination.”⁸⁰ All of which, Corbin goes on to explain, calls for “a prophetic philosophy going hand in hand with an esoterism to which the philosophical oppositions by which we tend to ‘explain’ everything...may well seem absurd.” He continues:

Such a prophetic philosophy moves in the dimension of a pure theophanic historicity, in the inner time of the soul; external events, cosmologies, the histories of the prophets, are perceived as the history of the spiritual man. Thus it obliterates the ‘historical trend’ with which our epoch is obsessed. Prophetic philosophy looks for the meaning of history not in ‘horizons,’ that is, not by orienting itself in the latitudinal sense of a linear development, but vertically, by a longitudinal orientation extending from the celestial pole of the Earth, in the transparency of the heights or depths in which the spiritual individuality experiences the reality of its celestial counterpart, its ‘lordly’ dimension, its ‘second person,’ its ‘Thou.’⁸¹

As to the ultimate source of this prophetic/spiritual/esoteric hermeneutics (*ta’wil*), and its corresponding prophetic philosophy, we must go back to what was said above concerning the polyvalent figure of the Archangel Gabriel. Recall that, according to Corbin, this figure is identified with the Holy Spirit, which is the *intellectus agens*, the Active Intelligence of Islamic medieval theology, and “the divine Face of every being.”⁸² Consequently, Gabriel also personifies the divine spark in us and thus is deemed the

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 80-81.

⁸¹ Ibid., 81.

⁸² Ibid.

Angel of Humanity. Moreover, as such, he is both the Angel of Revelation and the Angel of Knowledge. It is in this metaphysical and theological context, therefore, that Corbin appropriates Jung's terminology of the "active imagination" for his own purposes. In so doing, he seeks to demonstrate that it is the active Imagination that gives us access to the theophanic or imaginal nature of reality, to "the twofold dimension of being,"⁸³ via *ta'wil*.

Hence, because the Creation is essentially the revelation of God or the Divine Being, because the world is thus inherently theophanic Imagination, it consists of theophanies that appear "after the manner of the dawn."⁸⁴ These shimmering but substantial "apparitions" or mirror reflections demand to be interpreted; that is, they demand to be transcended and included in acts of ever more profound understanding. And because of this, we are told,

it is only through the Active Imagination that consciousness, awakened to the true nature of the world as 'apparition,' can transcend its data and thereby render itself capable of new theophanies, that is, of continuous ascent. The initial imaginative operation is to typify [symbolize] the immaterial and spiritual realities in external or sensuous forms, which then become "ciphers" for what they manifest. After that the Imagination

⁸³ Ibid., p. 207. For an instructive comparison of a similar locution used in the context of contemporary religious studies, see Jeffrey J. Kripal *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 428. There he explains his second *gnomon*, "The Human as Two," as follows: "Each human being is two, that is, each person is simultaneously a conscious constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifests only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy, which the religious traditions have historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward into the sky as divine, as 'God' or introjected inward into the human being as nirvana, brahman, or located in some sort of experienced paradoxical state that is neither insider or outside, as in the Chinese Dao or the American paranormal."

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 185.

remains the motive force of the *ta'wīl* which is *the continuous ascent of the soul*.⁸⁵

In short, as Corbin puts it, “because there is Imagination, there is *ta'wīl*; because there is *ta'wīl*, there is symbolism; and because there is symbolism, beings have two dimensions.” He continues:

This apperception reappears in all the pairs of terms that characterize the theosophy of Ibn ‘Arabi: Creator and Creature (*Ḥaqq* and *Khalq*), divinity and humanity (*lāhūt* and *nāsūt*), Lord and vassal (*Rabb* and *‘Abd*). Each pair of terms typifies [or symbolizes] a union for which we have suggested the term *unio sympathetica* [sympathetic union]. The union of the terms of each pair constitutes a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a simultaneity not of contradictories but of complementary opposites, and we have seen above that it is the specific function of the Active Imagination to effect this union which...defines our knowledge of the Godhead.⁸⁶

Corbin goes on to assert that the essential point here is that “the *mysterium coniunctionis* which unites the two terms is a theophanic union (seen from the standpoint of the Creator) or a theopathic union (seen from the standpoint of the creature); in no event is it a ‘hypostatic union’.... The two dimensions refer indeed to the same being, but to the totality of that being...they cannot negate one another, one cannot be confounded with, or substituted for the other.” Curiously, though, the language that Corbin uses to describe

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 209; emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

his “docetic” understanding of this theophanic/theopathic union is almost identical to the terminology used in orthodox Christological discourse to describe what is traditionally meant by the “hypostatic union.” Given his theological background, it is unlikely that Corbin was unaware of this. Thus I would submit that, while his ostensibly heterodox appropriation of this orthodox language can be seen as an attempt to subvert its traditional valence, when viewed from an esoteric or mystical perspective that regards the “hypostatic union” to be a description of the twofold nature of all reality and not just that of a single exalted individual, ultimately the distinction that Corbin draws here is one without a difference.

Be this as it may, as Corbin rightly observes, this two-dimensional structure of reality is founded upon “the notion of an eternal hexeity...which is the archetype of each individual being in the sensible world, his latent individuation in the world of Mystery, which Ibn ‘Arabī also termed the Spirit, that is, the ‘Angel,’ of that being.” Thus, as the Divine Essence perpetually reveals itself to itself, the individuation or awakening of each being to its true identity is “essentified” and burgeons eternally, “beginning in the world of Mystery.” To know one’s eternal hexeity, therefore, “one’s own archetypal essence,” is to know one’s “Angel,” that is to say, “one’s eternal individuality as it results from the revelation of the Divine Being Himself to Himself.” Corbin continues:

In “returning to *his* Lord” a man constitutes the eternal pair of the servant and his *Lord*, who is the Divine Essence not in its generality but individualized in one or another of His Names [i.e., attributes].
Consequently, to deny this individuation that takes place in the world of

Mystery is to deny the archetypal or theophanic dimension specific to each earthly being, to deny one's "Angel".... [And when this happens, when one loses] his bond with his specific Lord-archetype [or Angel] (that is, having lost his knowledge of himself), each ego is exposed to a hypertrophy that can easily degenerate into a spiritual imperialism; this kind of religion no longer aims to unite each man with his own Lord, but solely to impose the "same Lord" upon all. Such "imperialism" is forestalled by the *coincidentia oppositorum* expressed...in innumerable forms, all of which concur in preserving simultaneously the unity and plurality without which the twofold dimension of each being, that is to say, his theophanic function, is inconceivable.⁸⁷

And not only is the theophanic function of being inconceivable in such an instance, so too is any notion of *ta'wīl*, of spiritual hermeneutics, which is the continuous ascent or awakening of the soul to "the mystery of its own Self: a Self that overflows its terrestrial and exiled ego, its little empirical and conscious ego, a Self that is its whole being, so near and yet so distant, so much *it* and yet so much another that to meet it is to experience the joy of being two in one."⁸⁸

This being the case, for Corbin, it is the *coincidentia oppositorum* that provides the foundation for a mystical anthropology that is as imaginal and theophanic as it is hermeneutic. Again, as was noted above, "because there is Imagination, there is *ta'wīl*; because there is *ta'wīl*, there is symbolism; and because there is symbolism, beings have

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 210.

⁸⁸ Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, p. 203; emphasis in original.

two dimensions.”⁸⁹ This succinct statement of the intimate relationship between the imaginal world and spiritual hermeneutics is a condensation of the initial idea of Ibn ‘Arabi’s theosophy and of all related theosophies, which is that “the Creation is essentially a *theophany*,” a manifestation of God, of “the divine imaginative power.”⁹⁰ Accordingly, “our Active Imagination is a moment, an instant, of the Divine Imagination that is the universe, which is itself total theophany. Each of our imaginations is an instant among theophanic instants, and it is in this sense that we call it ‘creative.’”⁹¹

Thus to say that each being exists in a twofold manner or that it has two dimensions, is to say that the Creator-Creature paradox typifies the *coincidentia oppositorum*. It is to say that Creation *is* theophany, a manifestation or epiphany of God’s own being, of the divine Imagination. Correlatively, it is to say that there is within us this same power of Imagination, which is not imagination in the profane sense of “fantasy,” but, as Corbin put it, the Active Imagination or *Imaginatrix*. Here, according to Corbin, we encounter the link between “a recurrent creation, renewed from instant to instant, and an unceasing theophanic Imagination, in other words, the idea of a succession of theophanies (*tajalliyāt*) which brings about the continuous succession of beings.” He continues:

This Imagination is subject to two possibilities, since it can reveal the Hidden only by continuing to veil it. It is a veil; this veil can become so opaque as to imprison us and catch us in the trap of idolatry. But it can also become increasingly transparent, for its sole purpose is to enable the

⁸⁹ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 209.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 182; italics in original.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 214.

mystic to gain knowledge of being as it is, that is to say, the knowledge that delivers, because it is the gnosis of salvation. This occurs when the gnostic understands that the successive forms, their movements and their actions, appear to be separate from the One only when they are veiled by a veil without transparency. Once transparency is achieved, he knows what they are and why they are; why there is union and discrimination between the Hidden and the Manifest; why there is the Lord *and* his vassal, the Worshipper *and* the Worshipped, the Beloved *and* the Lover; why any unilateral affirmation of a unity that confounds them, or of a discrimination that opposes their existences as though they were not of the same essence, is a betrayal of the divine intention and hence of the Sadness which in each being yearns for appeasement in the manifestation of His secret.⁹²

To be clear, when Corbin speaks of the link between a recurrent creation and an unceasing divine Imagination that simultaneously conceals and reveals itself in this same theophanic creation, he is speaking of the twofold intradivine movement that constitutes our two-dimensional being. This double movement, which mirrors the Neoplatonic emanationist scheme of procession (*prohodos*) and return (*epistrophê*), is described by Corbin in terms of “descent” and “ascent.”

If we consider the creature in relation to the Creator, we shall say that the Divine Being *descends* toward concrete individualizations and is

⁹² Ibid., p. 187; emphasis in original.

epiphanized in them; inversely, if we consider these individualizations in their epiphanic function, we shall say that they *rise*, that they ascend toward Him. And their ascending movement never ceases because the divine descent into the various forms never ceases. The ascent is then the Divine Epiphany in these forms, a perpetually recurrent Effusion, a twofold intradivine movement. That is why *the other world already exists in this world*; it exists in every moment, in relation to every being.⁹³

Furthermore, that is why *ta'wil* can be described as a continuous ascent or awakening of the soul to the truth of its eternally actualized “heavenly” Self. As such, it is a perpetual process of paradoxical initiation into “the mode of self-understanding of an existence which undergoes...an *angelomorphosis*—that is to say, the passage from ‘angelicity in *potentia*’ to ‘angelicity in *actu*,’” which is the positive culmination of the Ismaili anthropology that was esteemed so highly by Corbin.⁹⁴ Thus the person who enters ever more consciously into this process of exemplification (i.e., angelomorphosis or deification) “is the person who lives in the world beyond as though this beyond were already his present existence, and who carries all the aspects of this present existence back to something unique. This is the internal metamorphosis, the state of discerning lucidity accomplished by the secret of the *ta'wil*..., and such precisely is the Angel’s...mode of existence.”⁹⁵

⁹³ Ibid., p. 207; italics and emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Henry Corbin, “Cyclical Time in Mazdaism and Ismailism,” in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 164; emphasis in original.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 165, n. 86.

Thus, by transmuting all things into symbols, the theophanic Imagination reveals the entangled, reciprocal, or interpenetrating nature of reality and, hence, the angelic, specular, or theophanic function of being. Consequently, from this perspective, Corbin is able to say that “[p]sychology is indistinguishable from cosmology; the theophanic Imagination joins them into a psycho-cosmology.”⁹⁶ This means that in its psycho-cosmic function the doctrine of the imagination has two aspects: “the one is cosmogonic or theogonic (the ‘theogony’ of the divine Names)” inasmuch as it refers to “a process of increasing illumination, gradually raising the possibilities eternally latent in the original Divine Being to a state of luminescence.”⁹⁷ The second aspect or function is specifically psychological inasmuch as it refers to the soul being one with the metaphysical reality of the Imagination, like a mirror and the images that appear in it. It must be remembered, however, that these two aspects or functions are “inseparable, complementary, and subject to homologation.”⁹⁸

This being the case, knowledge of the *mundus imaginalis* or imaginal world is simultaneously knowledge of the knower and the known, of the Imagination and its mirror Image; and as such, in the last analysis, since “[t]he Creative Imagination is theophanic Imagination, and the Creator is one with the imagining Creature because each Creative Imagination is a theophany, a recurrence of the Creation,”⁹⁹ all knowledge—be it of the psyche, the cosmos, or otherwise—is essentially s/Self-knowledge.

⁹⁶ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 215.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

⁹⁸ Ibid. and pp. 218, 219.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 215.

Hence, according to Corbin, by virtue of the angelic function or theophanic nature of being, “every theophany necessarily has the form of an angelophany,”¹⁰⁰ such that the s/Self-knowledge into which we are progressively initiated via spiritual hermeneutics (*ta’wil*) is an awakening to the truth that *we are the secret of the Godhead*. This is the meaning of that famous sentence repeated by Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufi theosophists: “He who knows himself knows his Lord.” Or, as Corbin explicates it,

Knowing one’s self, to know *one’s* God; knowing one’s Lord, to know one’s self. This Lord is not the impersonal self, nor is it the God of dogmatic definitions, *self*-subsisting without relation to *me*, without being experienced by *me*. He is the he who knows himself through myself, that is, in the knowledge that I have of him, because it is the knowledge that he has of me; it is alone with him alone, in this syzygic unity, that it is possible to say *thou*.¹⁰¹

And this self-knowledge as knowledge “is neither the product of abstraction nor a re-presentation of the object through the intermediary of a form..., but a Knowledge which is identical to the Soul itself, to the personal, existential... subjectivity, and which is therefore essentially life, light, epiphany, awareness of self.” It is what Corbin refers to as “*presential*, unitive, intuitive knowledge, of an essence which is absolutely real in its ontological singularity.” A contemplative wisdom or gnosis by which the soul, “as a being of light,...[b]y making herself present to herself,...also makes the object present to

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 95; italics in original.

her. Her own epiphany to herself is the Presence of this presence.”¹⁰² Consequently, from this “tautegorical”¹⁰³ perspective, it becomes clear that, just as psychology and cosmology are seen by the light of the theophanic Imagination to be mutually implicating, so too epistemology and ontology, anthropology and theology. Corbin therefore proclaims in suitably paradoxical fashion:

There must be no sacrifice of pluralism to monism, nor of unity to plurality; nor of oneness to duality, nor of twoness to unity; nor of the identity nor of the difference of the “thyself” to whom “thou” sayest “Thou.” In my knowledge of the Thyself, may I know myself; in my knowledge of myself, mayest Thou know thyself; and may thy knowledge of Thyself be Thy knowledge of myself...which is also my knowledge of Thyself: oneself being known and recognized by Oneself, and that *each* time, so often as each is before Himself, I before Thee.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 210; italics in original.

¹⁰³ I am following Corbin in the usage of this term. See, for example, Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, tr. Philip Sherrard, with Liadain Sherrard (London/Boston: Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 304-305 (italics in original): “[S]ince the hidden meaning is nothing other than the letter raised or transmuted into symbol, and perceived henceforth on the level of the *imaginal* world, the symbol itself is no longer something behind which hides the thing symbolized. It is, quite simply, the form assumed on this level by the transcendent reality, and this form *is* this reality. Thus, instead of allegory, one could perhaps speak of *tautegory*.” See also *ibid.*, pp. 304-305 and 308. For more on the importance of this term to Corbin, see Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, p. 56: “Tautegory, a central hermeneutic principle shared by Corbin and Scholem, also derived from the esoteric Romantics. ‘Tautegory’ apparently was a neologism derived from Friedrich W. J. von Schelling. Schelling, perhaps as much as any thinker, was an early tutelary spirit for Corbin and Scholem. His notion of ‘tautegory’ may have come to Scholem and Corbin by way of the leading Schellingian exponent of their youth, Ernst Cassirer, whom Scholem heard lecture and Corbin met in person. They took from the Schelling-Cassirer theory of symbolism the crucial replacement of allegory with tautegory: the religious symbol is not to be understood in terms of a system of reference outside the symbol, as in allegory, but rather the symbol carries its own meaning, in reference to itself. This self-referential meaning of the symbol was dubbed *tautegorical*.”

¹⁰⁴ Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, pp. 202-203; italics in original.

As an aside, it is worth noting that here, and throughout his body of work, Corbin affirms what is essentially a nondual vision of reality. In using the term *nondual* I am following Raimon Panikkar, who defines it as “[the] metaphysical expression for the irreducibility of reality to pure unity (monism) or mere duality, which many religions, especially Eastern, elaborate philosophically.”¹⁰⁵ Of course, such nonduality is to be found as well in the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I would therefore contend that, insofar as it informs the notion of angelomorphosis/deification, nonduality is ultimately the key that unlocks what Corbin referred to as the *harmonia Abrahamica*.

In this regard, it is also worth noting the comments of William Chittick, who suggests that Corbin’s zeal for promoting the cause of the multifarious imaginal realm led him to basically overemphasize it at the expense of God’s unity, which is problematic for a variety of reasons. In his *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Chittick writes:

Corbin performed the great service of introducing the Western world to many uniquely Islamic ways of expressing philosophical positions, but it is beyond the capacity of a single individual to bring out everything worthy of consideration. Moreover, in his zeal to revive the honor due to the imaginal realm, Corbin tended to de-emphasize the cornerstone of Islamic teachings, *tawhīd*, the “declaration of God’s Unity.” It is as if Corbin was so entranced by the recovery of the imaginal that he had difficulty seeing beyond it.

¹⁰⁵ Panikkar, *Christophany*, p. 190.

He continues:

From the point of view of the Islamic intellectual tradition, the tendency to become transfixed by the multiple apparitions of the One represents a danger inherent in the current revival of interest in imagination. It is clear, for example, that certain varieties of Jungianism divinize the imaginal world, giving to the soul an autonomous status never granted it by the great traditions. Man's own domain of microcosmic imagination is posited as the Real, since "God" is merely the soul's projection. But this—in the Islamic view—is to fall into the error of associating other gods with God (*shirk*), the opposite of *tawhīd*. We are left with polytheistic multiplicity, and the "gods" are reinstated as real entities possessing insuperable differences.

Corbin never fell into such a position, which would have betrayed the central teaching of the texts with which he was concerned. Nevertheless, if his approach to Islamic thought is to be understood as reflecting the concerns of his sources, it needs to be tempered by more attention to the ultimate Unity lying behind the theophanic façade of created existence.¹⁰⁶

In other words, Chittick suggests that Corbin tended to lose sight of the kind of paradoxical balance that is inherent to the nondual vision that he himself advocated.

Regardless of whether or not one agrees with this criticism, the point that Chittick makes

¹⁰⁶ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. x.

is helpful insofar as it reminds us of the importance and subtlety of Corbin's nondual vision.

I should add that, with respect to my choice to follow Panikkar's usage of the term *nondual* or *nonduality*, I am well aware of the fact that historically the term has been used in many different though related ways. For example, David Loy distinguishes between the following select types of nonduality: the negation of dualistic thinking; the nonplurality of the world; the nondifference of subject and object; the identity of phenomena and Absolute, or the Mahayana equation of *samsara* and *nirvana*, which can also be expressed as "the nonduality of duality and nonduality"; and the possibility of a mystical unity between God and humanity. Loy goes on to note: "As the negative construction of the word in all languages suggests, the meaning of each nonduality can be understood only by reference to the particular duality that is being denied. [E]ach of these negations has both an ontological and a soteriological function; the term is used to criticize our usual dualistic experience (or understanding of experience) as both delusive and unsatisfactory, and the corresponding nondual mode is recommended as both veridical and superior."¹⁰⁷ In light of this, I have chosen to follow Panikkar's usage of the term *nondual* or *nonduality* because it is broad enough to subsume all of the above categories.

I mention all of this because it is in the light of nonduality that our psycho-cosmological and onto-epistemological charge becomes clear. It is, as Corbin says, quoting the philosopher Étienne Souriau, to "make [ourselves] capable of God"¹⁰⁸ – or, perhaps more precisely, to realize our existential capacity for God (*capax Dei*). Put

¹⁰⁷ David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997), pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁸ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 290, n. 10.

differently, because as the image of God's infinite unity we are "the most comprehensive of all created things [that] display the signs and marks of each and every one of the divine names"—because "each human being is potentially a total theophany, a disclosure of God as God"¹⁰⁹—it is our task to realize our potential, to "achieve our eternal individuality by struggling with and for the Angel; and for God—not the Absolute, the *deus absconditus* beyond all knowing, but God as revealed through Creation experienced as the revelation of Divine Being, as a personal theophanic form appearing simultaneously as and to a Person."¹¹⁰

This is the task or calling that gives meaning and direction to our lives: angelomorphosis or deification. It is not a call to be the autonomous individual ego of an "Angelless" soul,¹¹¹ but rather the call to become whole, to be what in truth we always already are, which requires uniting ever more consciously with our celestial twin, our divine double, the other half of our soul, and thereby fulfilling our most profound and personal and essential function, a theophanic function: "to express God, to be the *theophore*, the God-bearer."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ William Chittick, "Imagination as Theophany in Islam," in *Temenos Academy Review* 6 (2003), p. 76. Available at https://www.temenosacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/WILLIAM-C-CHITTICK-Imagination-as-Theophany-in-Islam_Optimized.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out*, p. 96.

¹¹¹ Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, p. 264.

¹¹² Corbin, "Apophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism," tr. Matthew Evans-Cockle. This was a paper that Corbin presented in Tehran on October 20, 1977 during a conference organized by the Iranian Center for the Study of Civilizations that was devoted to answering the question: Does the impact of Western thought allow for the possibility of real dialogue between civilizations? It was posthumously published in the collection of essays entitled *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1981). It can be found in English translation at <https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/bibliography/apophatic-theology-as-antidote-to-nihilism/>. The quotation is from p. 8 of this translation.

Chapter 3: Henry Corbin's "A Theory of Visionary Knowledge" and Deification

*He who knows himself is deified.*¹

Introduction

Having provided a sketch of Corbin's life and work in Chapter 1, and having considered some of the major themes of his spiritual-intellectual vision in Chapter 2, we are now in a position to further elucidate his notion of deification.² To this end, we will be focusing our attention on one of his later and perhaps lesser known works, for reasons that soon will be made clear. Before doing so, however, an additional word or two is needed to both broaden and tighten the context in which this chapter is to be situated.

As we have seen, the hermeneutic ability of the active/creative/theophanic imagination to transmute all things into symbols subverts and transgresses the limits and boundaries that "orthodox dogmatists" of every stripe erect.³ Thus, for example, the distinction between psychology and cosmology is transcended and included in a paradoxical vision that unites them in a psycho-cosmology in which Creator and creature are no longer viewed as opposing terms with an unbridgeable gulf separating them, but rather as complimentary and interpenetrating poles of a participatory divine drama. This vision is rooted in what Corbin refers to as "the paradox of monotheism," which is

¹ This is an inscription that was on the threshold of the Temple of Harran. See Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. Philip Sherrard (London: KPI/Islamic Publications, 1986), p. 134.

² Given the substantial conceptual foundation that has been laid in the previous chapters, this chapter is comparatively brief.

³ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 232.

common to the esoteric teachings of the three great Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and central to his own thought.

The premises of this paradox are precisely those which are “the most irritating to any dogmatism concerned with rational definitions,” and their twofold structure is constant: There is the Absolute, the One, the unoriginated and hidden Source of all origination, beyond all being, the Godhead or “God who is not,” that is, the *Theos agnostos*, the unknowable and indefinable Ultimate Mystery; and there is the revealed God, the *Nous/Logos/Imagination* who thinks, acts, and creates, the *Deus revelatus* who “maintains the divine attributes and is capable of relation,” who manifests only as an infinite display of theophanies. As for knowing the truth of this twofold paradox, we do so, according to Corbin, “not by looking for a compromise favoring one or the other of these notions, but by firmly maintaining the simultaneity of the vision.”⁴

It is to be noted that by firmly maintaining the nonduality or simultaneity of this paradoxical vision, one is upholding a form of what Corbin refers to as theomonism or panentheism, which he explains as follows:

The pair Creator-create (*ḥaqḥ-Khalq*) is repeated at all levels of theophany and at all stages of the “descent of being.” This is neither monism nor pantheism; rather, it can be called theomonism and panentheism.⁵

⁴ Ibid., p. 112. Here it is worth mentioning that Corbin’s notion of “the paradox of monotheism” finds echoes in what Kripal calls God as Two, which has its corollary in his notion of the Human as Two.

⁵ These terms are rooted in Neoplatonism. Consequently, following Randall Studstill, we can say that they contain and echo such central Neoplatonic themes as “its ‘metaphysics of flow’ (Bernard McGinn’s term for the emanation and return of all things in relation to the One), the continuity of God’s creative act, the virtual and higher reality of all things in the mind of God (corresponding to Plato’s realm of the Ideas), intellect as a capacity for direct and intuitive grasping of truth, the natural and inherent divinity of the

Theomonism is no more than the philosophical expression of the interdependence of Creator and created—interdependence, that is, on the level of theophany. This is the secret of the personal divinity (*sirr al-rubūbīya*), of the interdependence, that is, between the lord (*rabb*) and him who chooses him as his lord (*marbūb*), to the extent that one cannot subsist without the other. The deity (*ulūhīya*) is on the level of pure Essence; the *rubūbīya* is the divinity of the personal lord to whom one has recourse, because one answers for him in this world. *Al-Lāh* is the Name designating the divine Essence which is qualified by all its attributes, while the *rabb* or lord is the divine Being personified and particularized by one of this Names and of what Ibn al-‘Arabi calls “the God created in beliefs,” or rather the God who creates himself in these beliefs. This is why knowledge of God is limitless for the gnostic, since the recurrence of Creation and the metamorphoses of the theophanies are the law itself of being.⁶

Essentially, Corbin is here articulating an insight that was succinctly captured in the following poem by Angelus Silesius in the seventeenth century: “I know, but don’t know why/that without me/God cannot live/nor without Him/can I.”⁷ As already mentioned, this shared vision or insight into “the law itself of being” is panentheistic: God exists in

person, the spiritual journey as an inward return to the One (the soul being satisfied with nothing less), and [a paradoxical or nondual] understanding of salvation as indistinct union with the One.” See Randall Studstill, *The Unity of Mystical Traditions: The Transformation of Consciousness in Tibetan and German Mysticism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 176.

⁶ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 294-295.

⁷ *Messenger of the Heart: The Book of Angelus Silesius*, tr. and intro. Frederick Franck (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), p. 131.

all things and all things exist in God; the infinite is in the finite and vice versa.

Accordingly, as Louis Dupré observes, “[t]o an all-inclusive infinite, nothing can be opposed as *other*. *Otherness* consists entirely in the *partial* character of the finite’s expression of the infinite. Hence the creature relates to God as the other relates to what Nicholas of Cusa has called the ‘Non-other.’”⁸ The significance of this vision as it relates to our present purposes will be more fully elucidated below. For now it is sufficient to point out that, insofar as it encapsulates some of the major themes of his *oeuvre*, theomonism or panentheism is an important notion that helps to situate and clarify Corbin’s understanding of deification. Moreover, since it is a term that we will encounter in Wolfson’s work as well, it behooves us to keep this notion of theomonism or panentheism in mind as we proceed.⁹

A Critical Digression

It also behooves us to pause here for a critical observation concerning Corbin’s notion of theomonism in relation to that of Michael Stoeber as found in his *Theo-Monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison*,¹⁰ for I believe it is instructive. Although Stoeber does not refer to Sufism or Jewish mysticism in this work, when viewed in the comparative context of this dissertation, the similarities between his understanding of theomonism and Corbin’s are obvious and not at all surprising given the common theological and philosophical (particularly Neoplatonic) heritage of the three branches of

⁸ Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 327; italics in original.

⁹ For more on panentheism, see John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). See also, *Panentheism across the World’s Traditions*, eds. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Michael Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

the Abrahamic tradition. For example, in the following passage where he reflects on the thought of Meister Eckhart, Stoeber describes his understanding of theomonism as a syncretic and dynamic option in understanding mysticism in both its apophatic/impersonal (*Deus absconditus*) and kataphatic/personal (*Deus revelatus*) expressions.

Eckhart proposes a transformative experience wherein monistic identification with the impersonal essence of a personal Real naturally leads the mystic to mirror the moral activity of a creative deity. He expresses this process vividly in Trinitarian terms, as the Father giving birth to the Son. This immediately entails the Holy Spirit or Love, as well as passionate creative activity and relationship; this birthing in the Divine finds its expression in the social world. I would suggest that this theomonistic experience helps us to understand the monistic accounts given by certain Taoist, Buddhist and Hindu personalist mystics. Clearly we must recognize various degrees of realization of Source-consciousness, as well as the very many forms this consciousness can take in its human actualization. But the phenomenological structure of the transformation involves a monistic identity with an inactive and impersonal Source from which emanates elements essential to a creative and personal Divine in an experience which is literally identification with that potential energy through which arises their essential being as persons. The Source is experienced as static and amoral consciousness-purity, to use a phrase of

Stace and Smart; it is empty of personalist-dualistic forces. That is the most we can say about it—more even than some personalist monists would want to say—which is not much at all. It is mysteriously apophatic. It is a pre-birth state, so to speak, described provocatively by mystics who speak of it as a kind of profound womb-experience. It somehow precedes differentiation and personalism: it is the source of the personal God, people, and creativity.¹¹

Interestingly, as similar as their understanding of theomonism is, Corbin's reading of Eckhart differs from that of Stoeber. According to Corbin, Eckhart overemphasizes the priority given to the apophatic path by the Neoplatonist tradition in the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition, as well as in the Greek world, with the result that the undetermined Absolute becomes that into which "everything must be made to go and be swallowed up (that is nihilism)." While acknowledging that without priority being accorded to the apophatic "one does nothing but pile creatural attributes upon the divinity...so [that] monotheism perishes in its triumph, [and] degenerates into the idolatry that it fiercely wished to avoid," Corbin contends that—*pace* Eckhart—when properly understood apophatic or negative theology is not affirming an Absolute Source into which everything is absorbed or annihilated, but rather "an Absolute from which, on the contrary, one must make everything emerge and which maintains in being all that it makes exist. In short,...the relation between existence and existens [between Being and existent beings], between the undetermined Absolute and the personal God, is not to be characterized by a nihility to be reabsorbed into the Absolute, of a multiplicity of beings

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 32-33.

to be confounded with and lost in the unity of being [i.e., death], but rather by the very positivity of which the Absolute is the principle and source [i.e., birth].” “It is in this sense,” Corbin continues, “that the esoteric theosophies in Islam, and particularly that of Ibn ‘Arabi, have understood the famous hadith, ‘I was a hidden Treasure. I loved to be known. I created the world in order to become known.’ The nihilism that degrades the positive value of the personal God amounts to forbidding the Hidden Treasure (the undetermined Absolute) manifest itself through [a process of] self-determination, to forbidding that being exist in the plurality of existents.”

Adding to the intrigue is the fact that the person from the Christian tradition whom Corbin singles out as a counter-example to Eckhart is Jacob Boehme. For, according to Corbin, unlike Eckhart, Boehme prioritizes the apophatic path in the right way. “[Thus] it is from this very point that we can discern two permanent attitudes – present over the centuries and right up to our days – that are typified respectively in the mystical doctrine of Meister Eckhart (14th century) and in the mystical theosophy of Jacob Boehme (1575-1624). To observe these two exemplary cases is to put ourselves in a position to overcome the pitfalls of nihilism. With the one as with the other, there is, certainly, the profound sense of the mystical Divinity as undetermined Absolute, immobile and unchanging in its eternity. But, from that point on, the two masters diverge. For a Meister Eckhart, the Deitas (*Gotttheit*) transcends the personal God and it is the latter that one must pass beyond, because it is correlative to the human soul of the world, to the creature. The personal God is thus but a step upon the mystical path, because this personal God is affected by limitation and by negativity, by non-being and by becoming. ‘It becomes and un-becomes’ (*Er wird und entwird*). The ‘Eckhartian

soul' thus attempts to liberate itself in order to escape from the very limits of being, from the nihil of finitude, from everything and anything that could fix it in place or time. It needs, therefore, to escape from itself in order to plunge into the abyss of divinity, an *Abgrund* of which, by definition, it could never attain [or sound] the bottom (*Grund*). The conception and attitude of Jacob Boehme are something else entirely. Boehme searches for liberation within the affirmation of the self, in the realization of the true Self of his eternal 'idea.' It is this that is designated by the very concept of '*ayn thâbita*' by Ibn 'Arabi and all those that he inspired in the domain of Islamic theosophy."¹²

What I find so striking and instructive about this comparison and contrast between Corbin and Stoeber's reading of theomorphism or panentheism is that the latter's more positive reading of Eckhart resonates with Corbin's understanding of Boehme, in whom Stoeber also sees an example of theomonic mysticism.¹³ This difference is due not to any substantial divergence in their respective understandings of theomorphism, which as we have seen are very similar. Rather, it is due to the way in which Corbin views Eckhart through a rather narrow lens in favor of Boehme, thereby missing the correspondences in their thought as discerned by Stoeber. Consequently, I think Corbin's reading of Eckhart is a bit overdetermined or lacking in nuance.

"A Theory of Visionary Knowledge"

With that said, I now want to turn to a consideration of the late work of Corbin alluded to above. In 1977, the year before he died, Henry Corbin published a speech that he had given at a colloquium in honor of the 300th anniversary of the visions of the French nun

¹² See Henry Corbin, "Apophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism," tr. Matthew Evans-Cockle, pp. 7 and 7-8.

¹³ See especially Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, pp. 74-75.

and mystic, St. Mary Margaret Alacoque, who promoted devotion to the Sacred of Heart of Jesus in its modern form. Entitled “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” this speech recapitulated a number of the themes that we have shown were central to Corbin’s life work. One such theme that he mentions only in passing is that of the practical goal of Islamic philosophy, which he designates as *ta'alluh*.¹⁴ As William Chittick notes, *ta'alluh* comes from the same root as Allah and means “being like God” or “conforming to God” or “deiformity.”¹⁵ It is therefore, as Corbin states, the Arabic equivalent of the Christian notion of *theosis* or deification.¹⁶ Given this, in what follows, I will closely read Corbin’s mature essay “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge” with a view to elucidating how it relates to the theme of deification, which in one form or another is common to all three Abrahamic faiths. I will argue that, despite its passing mention, deification is central to the theory of visionary knowledge that Corbin explicates in this lecture, and hence by implication to his entire corpus. Where appropriate, I will supplement this text with relevant passages from other works by Corbin and related authors that can help to shed additional light on the theme of deification – a major theme that is of fundamental importance to Islamic theosophy.

Prophetic Philosophy

Thus we start at the beginning. After observing that there is an extensive body of Islamic visionary literature both in Arabic and Persian, Corbin begins his lecture “A Theory of

¹⁴ Henry Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” in *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1998), p. 121; hereafter “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge.” In the actual text, this word is misspelled *ta'ullah*. The correct spelling is *ta'alluh*.

¹⁵ William Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Dīn Kāshānī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 73.

¹⁶ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” p. 121.

Visionary Knowledge” by posing the essential question that he will address, which concerns “how the visionary *fact* itself appears to specific Islamic thinkers, and how they account for it.” In particular, how is it that these Islamic mystics have no doubts about the veracity and objectivity of these experiential facts? Of course, as Corbin is quick to clarify, the term “objectivity” in this context does not have the same meaning as it does in our contemporary physical and social sciences.¹⁷

In order to grasp the kind of objectivity that is being referred to here, it is important to recognize that Islamic prophetology already postulates and describes a theory of gnosis or contemplative knowledge, and hence “any inquiry into Islamic visionary experience must begin with an awareness of this doctrine of knowledge.” For, as Corbin states, inasmuch as it is “the youngest branch of the Abrahamic tradition,” Islam is by its very nature a prophetic religion—one that “inherited the theology of the *Verus Propheta* [True Prophet] professed by the very earliest Judaeo-Christian currents.” This distinctive heritage has had a lasting impact on Islam, an impact that “is amplified in Shiism, where Imamist theory forms a necessary complement to prophetology, and poses problems inherited from Christology.”¹⁸

Awareness of the aforementioned doctrine of gnosis or experiential knowledge is also necessary, according to Corbin, because of “a certain conviction which is characteristic of Islamic philosophers,” especially those of his beloved Iranian Islam. This is the conviction that the Angel of intellect or knowledge and the Angel of revelation are identical; which is to say that the Angel designated by the Qur’an as Gabriel is also the Holy Spirit. This conviction found sophisticated justification in the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 117; emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 117-118.

work of such thinkers as Avicenna and Suhrawardi who drew upon the Greek Neoplatonic theory of knowledge and translated it “in accordance with their prophetic philosophy, thereby enabling it to account for both prophetic revelation and the inspiration of the holy Imams, as well as the knowledge granted to philosophers.” The work of Suhrawardi in the twelfth-century “is significantly marked by this point of view.” Similarly, it is also echoed in a very strong way in “the doctrines and ecstatic confessions” of Suhrawardi’s thirteenth-century near contemporary Ibn ‘Arabi, and others who followed him, like Mullah Sadra Shirazi in the seventeenth century. Corbin goes on to name a number of other important Islamic thinkers who contributed to the theory of visionary knowledge under discussion, the major aspects of which he will consider in the remainder of this brief lecture. For our purposes, though, we will focus on Suhrawardi and Ibn ‘Arabi in particular.¹⁹

Corbin begins with a consideration of the Shiite understanding of the prophetic vocation or mission itself, according to which there are four degrees to the station of *nabi*, or prophet, ranging from the simple non-emissary *nabi* and *mab’uth*, who in one way or another herald an already existing teaching prophecy, up to the emissary prophets, including the *mursal* and the highest degree, *rasul*, who herald a previously non-existent teaching prophecy—in other words, those who are sent “to reveal a new Book and religious Law,” like Abraham, Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed. Moreover, each of these degrees of the prophetic station corresponds to “a mode of visionary knowledge” or state of consciousness that is characteristic of its particular vocation. Thus, Corbin explains,

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

The first two degrees of non-emissary prophethood include the gift of communication with the *Malakut*, the spiritual world [—the suprasensory world of the Soul or Angel-Souls²⁰—] which appears in certain dream states. This might be a vision, or a simple auditory perception, such as a voice, sometimes without any countenance or form of the heavenly source being perceived. In principle, this is also the mode of visionary perception ascribed to the holy Imams of Shiism. As for the emissary *nabi*, both the *mursal* and the *rasul* are distinguished by their ability to have auditory and visual perception of the Angel in the waking state, though this is no doubt more like an intermediate state between sleep and waking.²¹

It is upon this phenomenological foundation, then, that the Shiite and Sufi philosophers of most interest to Corbin constructed “a complex theory of prophetic gnosis” that involves a detailed scrutiny of the conditions of the vision, the organ of visionary perception (i.e., the active Imagination or heart), and the non-spatial “location” or placeless place where the visionary event occurs. This is why Corbin felt that their works should be “the subject of the first chapter” of any phenomenological theory of Islamic visionary knowledge. “And by visionary knowledge,” Corbin writes, “I mean those acts in which human beings are conscious of penetrating into another world, which we are calling the *Malakut* in this case.” Such “penetrations” are of course reported as “visionary facts” in all three Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.²²

²⁰ Henry Corbin, “*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, trans. Leonard Fox (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), p. 8.

²¹ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” p. 119.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Consequently, for Corbin, any Islamic philosophy worthy of the name must include somewhere in its exposition a treatment of “the essential theme” of this visionary wisdom or “prophetic philosophy.” And Suhrawardi has “a lofty, even initiatory place in this lineage of prophetic philosophy.” Known as the *Sheikh al-Ishraq*, or Master of Illumination, his work, according to Corbin, “allows us to speak of an *Irano-Islamic* philosophy in the true sense of the term.”²³

Suhrawardi

Originally from Azerbaijan, Suhrawardi (1154-1191 CE) “provided an original Platonic criticism of the dominant Avicennan Peripateticism of the time in the fields of logic, epistemology, psychology, and metaphysics, while simultaneously elaborating his own epistemological (logic and psychology) and metaphysical (ontology and cosmology) Illuminationist theories.” His new epistemological perspective “led him to critique the Avicennan Peripatetic theory of definition, introduce a theory of ‘presential’ [or immediate] knowledge, elaborate a complex ontology of lights,” and add another world to the conventional one.”²⁴

In addition to “his claim to divine-like inspiration, and his questioning, in light of God's omnipotence, the logical finality of Prophethood,” central to Suhrawardi's comprehensive reconfiguration of epistemology, ontology, and cosmology, was his revival of the ancient Zoroastrian symbolism of Light.²⁵ Indeed, as Corbin states, this revival of the esoteric philosophy of Light taught by the pre-Islamic sages of ancient

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Roxanne Marcotte, “Suhrawardi,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/suhrawardi/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

Persia is “the primary characteristic” of Suhrawardi’s doctrine, which he developed in detail in his *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, translated variously as the *Oriental Philosophy*, the *Philosophy of Illumination*, or *The Book of Eastern Theosophy*. It also may be the primary reason why his unique teaching was deemed heretical and he was put to death at the age of thirty-six in Aleppo, Syria.²⁶

But if the primary characteristic of Suhrawardi’s doctrine was this revival of the ancient Persian symbolism of Light, there was another related characteristic that was of equal importance to his thought. I am referring to the mystical experience of *theosis* (*ta’alluh*) or deification that he saw as being inseparable from philosophical study. For, as Corbin points out, Suhrawardi was convinced that “a philosophy which does not lead to a personal spiritual realization is a vanity and a waste of time; yet mystical experience which is not founded upon sound philosophical training is exposed to all the dangers of going astray which we now call schizophrenia.”²⁷

Together, then, these two characteristics form “a broad sketch” of the Suhrawardian doctrine of *Ishraq*, which denotes the illumination of a rising star in the “Orient” or “East,” where the word “Eastern” (*ishraqi*) becomes a form of knowledge whose best Latin equivalent, we are told, would be *cognitio matutina* or the knowledge that comes with dawn. These “Easterners” were distinguished from the Peripatetics or disciples of Aristotle, with the former being regarded as the “Platonists of Persia,” or

²⁶ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” pp. 120-121.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

*Ishraqiyun-i Iran*²⁸—or, as Corbin puts it elsewhere, the “theosophists of Ishraq or of the Orient of Pure Lights.”²⁹

But, relative to the question of how the fact of the visionary experience itself appears to specific Islamic thinkers, and how they account for it, it is the second of the two characteristics that best enables us to properly grasp the significance of the previously mentioned identification of the agent Intellect of the philosophers with the theosophic figure of “the archangelic pleroma” known to Islamic tradition as Gabriel, Angel of revelation, the Holy Spirit, or *Sophia Aeterna*, Eternal Wisdom. For Suhrawardi, it is the concept of the Word (*Kalima*) or Logos that allows for the recognition of the Angel of intellect/knowledge and the Angel of revelation as being “one and the same figure.”³⁰ Thus, as Corbin puts it,

This identity of the Angel of knowledge and revelation means that the theory of visionary knowledge granted to mystics and prophets turns out to be inseparable from the theory of gnosis postulated by philosophers. The same Angel, the same Holy Spirit, leads both prophet and philosopher to that supreme state of the human soul-intellect known as *‘aql qudsi – intellectus sanctus*.³¹

Hence, this second characteristic aspect of Suhrawardi’s doctrine of *Ishraq* offers “an early indication of the framework in which the theory of visionary knowledge will

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 6.

³⁰ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” pp. 121-122.

³¹ Ibid., p. 122.

find its place.”³² But this is true as well of the first characteristic aspect regarding his “re-connection” with the ancient Persian sages in whose theosophy of Light he found an esoteric doctrine that was practiced by a community of gnostic visionaries and adepts whose lineage, in the words of Gary Lachman, “reach[ed] back into the dim past, and which included the fabled Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, and others. All were informed by the same primal revelation, the *prisca theologia* or ‘primal theology,’” which Suhrawardi felt it was his task to resurrect,³³ and thus all were considered by him to be “the precursors of the *Ishraqiyun*, the ‘Eastern’ philosophers in the metaphysical sense of the word.”³⁴

Seen in this light, as he approaches an answer to his central question, Corbin notes that two new principles now emerge, which are of “major importance” for the subject at hand. The first, he says, is that “the vision which was granted to these great ecstasies of ancient Persia was that of the Light of Glory.” In this, Suhrawardi recognized what he called the *Sakina*, which is the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew *Shekhina*. And like its Hebrew equivalent, this *Sakina* is the indwelling presence of God in the human being – what Corbin refers to as “the descended divine Lights in the temple of the mystic’s soul.” The second principle concerns “a sort of interference pattern” between the *Sakina* and the *Nur Mohammedi* (Light of Muhammed), “whose transmission from prophet to prophet is the Islamic counterpart of the *Verus Propheta* of Judaeo-Christian prophetology.” Thus, Corbin writes, “the Iranian prophetic teaching is integrated with the Semitic, through both

³² Ibid., pp. 122-123.

³³ Gary Lachman, *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2017), p. 92. For a more in-depth treatment of Suhrawardi and his concept of *prisca theologia*, see chapters two and four of Kocku von Stuckrad’s *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010).

³⁴ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” p. 123.

Bible and Qur'an. The importance of these two new principles cannot be overemphasized in our attempts to present a complete picture of the Abrahamic prophetic heritage."³⁵

This is the background from which Suhrawardi's *Ishraqi* doctrine of visionary knowledge—what Corbin calls “hierognosis,” or sacred knowledge—emerges. And it is this background that helps to make sense of Suhrawardi's threefold universe: the material world of sensory perception or *Mulk*; the intermediate world of the Soul or *Malakut*, which is, properly speaking, the world of imaginative perception; and the world of pure archangelic Intelligences or *Jabarut*, which is the highest world of spiritual knowledge. Of these three worlds, which are also three interrelated states of consciousness, it is the middle world of the Soul, or *Malakut*, which “takes on the essential role in the theory of visionary knowledge.” For it is this world or form of perception that transgresses the boundaries of both the physical and spiritual dimensions of existence, and thus it acts as “an intermediary”—a bridge, if you will—between the worlds of our sensory and spiritual perceptions.³⁶ And, as Corbin makes clear, the proper organ of access to this intermediate world between pure matter and pure Spirit is the active Imagination, which the alchemists called “true Imagination,” *Imaginatio vera*, and the “inner firmament,” *astrum in homine*.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 123-124.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 124. See also Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 59.

³⁷ Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, p. 11. The term *astrum in homine* refers to the subtle body and is derived from the sixteenth/seventeenth-century hermetic author Rulandus or Martin Ruland the Younger, who wrote that the imagination is “*Astrum in homine, coeleste sive supracoeleste corpus*” (“Imagination is the star in man, the celestial or supercelestial body”). Antoine Faivre, in his *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, tr. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 109, glosses this term and saying as follows: “The Paracelsian *astrum* meaning more or less ‘quintessence,’ the imagination is thus a concentrated extract of corporeal and spiritual energies. It is often difficult to know whether such a hermetic author meant that the work must necessarily

Suhrawardi gave this intermediate world of visionary knowledge various names. It is the “eighth climate,” we are told, that corresponds to the Suhrawardian term *Na-koja-abad*, or the country of Not-where. This placeless place is no utopia, but a real inner “country,” yet one which “has neither location nor climate in the world perceived by the outer senses.” It is also known as the “confluence of the two seas” (Qur’an, 18:60), where the sea of the senses and that of the intellect or spirit flow into one another. It is still more often known as the *‘alm al-mithal*, which Corbin famously translated as the Latin *mundus imaginalis*, so as to avoid confusing its *imaginal* reality of “subtle bodies” and spiritual perception with the unreality of imaginary fantasies.³⁸

In thus establishing a cosmology and anthropology in which the visionary form of knowledge held a central and even dominant place, Suhrawardi sought “to guarantee the ontological status appropriate to the *mundus imaginalis*” as the hidden ground of life’s spiritual meaning. For, in Corbin’s words, “He fully realized that if this world were to disappear—if we were to lose all trace of it—then prophetic and mystical visionary experiences, as well as any event of Resurrection, would all lose their place. They would literally ‘no longer take place,’ for their place is neither the sensory nor the intellectual world, but that of the intermediary ‘eighth climate,’ the world where the body is spiritualized, and the spiritual is embodied.”³⁹ “This is why,” he continues, “the ontology of the *mundus imaginalis*, as the world of visions and visionary experiences, led the

produce a material result or if it is a question of a purely spiritual realization. However, to impose this either/or alternative would be to falsify the problem, as Jung has pointed out; what is essential is the affirmation, implicit or explicit, of the existence of an intermediary world (*Zwischenreich*) between matter and spirit: this is the sphere of subtle bodies. The *Rosarium Philosophorum* affirms that the Work must be realized ‘according to nature’ (*secundum naturam*) with the ‘true imagination,’ and not with the ‘fantastic.’” See also C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (*The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, vol. 12), 2nd ed., tr. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 277.

³⁸ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” p. 125.

³⁹ Ibid.

Sheikh al-Ishraq to establish a metaphysics of the [active] Imagination.”⁴⁰ To summarize, therefore, this ontology presupposes a metaphysics of the active (as distinct from calculative) Imagination; for “without such a metaphysics, there can be no theory of visionary knowledge.”⁴¹

This metaphysics also found expression in Suhrawardi’s phenomenology of the soul and its “interworld” of “imaginative consciousness”⁴²—with its *sensorium* of “psycho-spiritual senses”⁴³—that he described as “a mirror which reflects both sensory images, and images coming from the perceptions of the *intellectus sanctus*,” the holy intellect or holy spirit. That the soul functions in this way for Suhrawardi is further evidence of what can be referred to as the amphibious nature of the active or noetic Imagination. And, as Corbin points out, Suhrawardi was careful to note the (non)dual nature of both the soul and the Imagination because “the very validity of visionary perceptions and experiences hinges upon awareness of this.”⁴⁴

Hence, we arrive at the answer to the central question of Corbin’s lecture: how does the visionary fact itself appear to specific Islamic thinkers, and how do they account for it? Or, put differently, how is the “hierognosis” of these mystics received, and how do they account for the factual nature of its quality, of its value and meaning? According to Corbin’s reading of Suhrawardi, the answer is found in the ability of the soul to act as a speculum or mirror of the active Imagination that “guarantees not only the ‘objectivity’ of the images formed from sensory perception, but also that of the images manifested in

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 126.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Corbin, “*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” p. 2.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁴ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” p. 126. While the use of the term “(non)dual” is my own, I believe it accurately describes Suhrawardi’s conception of the nature of and relationship between the created soul (imagination) and the divine Imagination, and Corbin’s reading of the same. See my earlier discussions of nonduality.

supersensible [or spiritual] perception.” It is thus their experience of the specular nature of the soul—and by extension the whole of creation—that has inspired Suhrawardi and other like-minded philosophers to formulate a theory of visionary knowledge in terms of “a mystical science of mirror-optics.”⁴⁵ That is, a mystical science of the kind of anamorphosis or transformation produced at the level of the *mundus imaginalis*, the Imaginal World, which, “though located (metaphorically) within our own psyches...and hence to that extent ‘subjective,’ is in reality as ‘objective’ as the outer world known to our senses.”⁴⁶ That the *mundus imaginalis* is thus reflected in the soul, is indeed the soul itself, seeing itself in the mirror of Imagination—that the boundaries between spirit and matter, inside and outside, subject and object are thus simultaneously transgressed and maintained—necessarily has far-reaching consequences for how we view the human person in relationship to the divine, and hence for how we understand the subtle and paradoxical experience of deification (*ta'alluh*). Recall that this is the experience of Suhrawardi’s “true Sage of God, the *theosophos*” whose *intellectus sanctus*, illuminated by the Imagination or Angel/Holy Spirit, “is able to integrate the vision of the prophet and that of the philosopher.”⁴⁷ Given this, Corbin proceeds to briefly consider the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi, “perhaps the greatest theosophist of all time.”⁴⁸ In order to further elucidate the nature of deification and of the *mundus imaginalis*, therefore, it is to Ibn ‘Arabi that we now turn.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 127.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 128; and Gary Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 2015), p. 172.

⁴⁷ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” p. 128.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 130.

Ibn ‘Arabi

As Corbin notes, Muhyeddin Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240 CE), the *Sheikh al-Akbar* or Greatest Master, develops a metaphysics of the Imagination that is “an extension of that of Suhrawardi in more than one regard.” For him, too, “the science of visionary Imagination arises from a mystical science of mirror-optics.”⁴⁹ Thus, as William Chittick observes, “Ibn ‘Arabi stresses that an image brings together two sides and unites them as one; it is both the same as and different from the two. A mirror image is both the mirror and the object that it reflects, or, it is neither the mirror nor the object. A dream is both the soul and what is seen, or, it is neither the soul nor what is seen. By nature images are/are not.”⁵⁰ The ontological and anthropological implications of this relative to deification become clear when we look at Ibn ‘Arabi’s three “worlds of imagination.”

Understood in the broadest sense of the term, “imagination/image designates everything other than God, the entire cosmos inasmuch as it is contingent and evanescent.”⁵¹ This is what Ibn ‘Arabi calls “Nondelimited Imagination” (*al-khayal al-mutlaq*) in Chittick’s translation, or “Absolute Imagination” in Corbin’s. It is the divine, primordial Imagination: God’s all-creative Breath, Sigh, or Cloud of Compassion. The description of this world that Corbin provides in his book on Ibn ‘Arabi is worth quoting at length:

This Cloud, which the Divine Being exhaled and in which He [sic] originally was, *receives* all forms and at the same time *gives* beings their

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ William Chittick, "Ibn Arabi," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), p. 7; URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/ibn-arabi/>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

forms; it is active and passive, receptive and existentiating (*muhaqqiq*); through it is effected the differentiation within the primordial reality of being (*haqiqat al-wujud*) that is the Divine Being as such (*Haqq fi dhatihi*). As such it is the absolute unconditioned Imagination (*khayal mutlaq*). The initial theophanic operation by which the Divine Being reveals Himself, “shows himself” to Himself, by differentiating Himself in his hidden being, that is, by manifesting to Himself the virtualities of His Names with their correlate, the eternal *hexeities* of beings, their prototypes latent in His essence (*a ‘yan thabita*)—this operation is conceived as being the creative Active Imagination, the theophanic Imagination. Primordial Cloud, absolute or theophanic Imagination, existentiating Compassion are equivalent notions, expressing the same original reality: the Divine Being from whom all things are created (*al-Haqq al-makhlūq bihi kull shay’*) – which amounts to saying the “Creator-Creature.” For the Cloud is *the Creator*, since it is the Sigh He exhales and since it is *hidden* in Him; as such the Cloud is the invisible, the “esoteric” (*batin*). And it is the manifested creature (*zahir*). Creator-Creature (*khaliq-makhlūq*): this means that the Divine Being is the Hidden and the Revealed, or also that He is the First (*al-Awwal*) and the Last (*al-Akhir*).⁵²

Thus, as Chittick explains, “Each of the infinite words articulated in the All-Merciful Breath discloses Being in a limited form. Everything without exception is both God's face (*wajh*), revealing certain divine names, and God's veil (*hijab*), concealing other names.

⁵² Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 186.

Inasmuch as a thing exists, it can be nothing but that which is, the Real Being; inasmuch as it does not exist, it must be other than the Real. Each thing, in Ibn ‘Arabi’s most succinct expression, is He/not He (*huwa/la huwa*)—Real/unreal, Being/nonexistence, Face/veil.”⁵³

Understood more narrowly, imagination denotes what Corbin refers to as the *mundus imaginalis* (*‘alam al-mithal*), the intermediate world of “subsistent images...or immaterial bodies, which Suhrawardi calls the cosmic ‘Intermediate Orient’.”⁵⁴ Chittick offers a lucid explanation of this world as well, and in the process clarifies the significance of Ibn ‘Arabi’s reflections on it. “Like most traditions,” he writes, “Islam conceives of the cosmos as a hierarchy of worlds, usually two or three; the Koran contrasts the Unseen (*ghayb*) with the Visible (*shahada*), and these are typically called the world of spirits and the world of bodies, or, in philosophical terms, the intelligible and the sensible realms.” Chittick continues:

The Koran also speaks of “heaven, earth, and everything in between,” and one of Ibn ‘Arabi’s contributions was to bring out the full implications of the in-between realm, which in one respect is unseen, spiritual, and intelligible, and in another respect visible, corporeal, and sensible. This is precisely the *mundus imaginalis*, where spiritual beings are corporealized, as when Gabriel appeared in human form to the Virgin Mary; and where corporeal beings are spiritualized, as when bodily pleasure or pain is experienced in the posthumous realms. The *mundus imaginalis* is a real,

⁵³ Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi,” pp. 7-8.

⁵⁴ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 21.

external realm in the Cosmic Book, more real than the visible, sensible, physical realm, but less real than the invisible, intelligible, spiritual realm. Only its actual existence can account for angelic and demonic apparitions, bodily resurrection, visionary experience, and other nonphysical yet sensory phenomena that philosophers typically explain away. Ibn ‘Arabi’s foregrounding of the in-between realm was one of several factors that prevented Islamic philosophy from falling into the trap of a mind/body dichotomy or a dualistic worldview.⁵⁵

Understood more narrowly still, the third world of imagination denotes the realm of human being. In other words, the third world of imagination “belongs to the microcosmic human book, in which it is identical with the soul or self (*nafs*), which is the meeting place of spirit (*ruh*) and body (*jism*).” For, as Chittick observes, “Human experience is always imaginal or soulish (*nafsani*), which is to say that it is simultaneously spiritual and bodily. Human becoming wavers between spirit and body, light and darkness, wakefulness and sleep, knowledge and ignorance, virtue and vice. Only because the soul dwells in an in-between realm can it choose to strive for transformation and realization. Only as an imaginal reality can it travel ‘up’ toward the luminosity of the spirit or ‘down’ toward the darkness of matter.”⁵⁶

This brings us once more to the concept of deification (*ta’alluh*), of the human becoming divine, which Ibn ‘Arabi’s schematization of the three “worlds of imagination” essentially maps out. Accordingly, this map suggests that deformity is a process of fully

⁵⁵ Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi,” p. 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

actualizing the spiritual, cosmic, and divine potential of the soul. It is to realize the imaginal truth of the soul, to arrive at an ever more profound understanding of the soul's rootedness in the divine Imagination, which it reveals and reflects.

In other words, to be deified is to realize the divine nature of all that is and thus to mirror or embody the truth of the Real, the *coincidentia oppositorum* that is God. For as we have seen the entire universe of worlds is at once God and not-God. As Corbin puts it in his book on Ibn 'Arabi, "The God manifested in forms is at once Himself and other than Himself, for since He is manifested, He is the limited which has no limit, the visible which cannot be seen." Moreover, as Ibn 'Arabi's map suggests, this manifestation "is neither perceptible nor verifiable by the sense faculties; discursive reason rejects it." It is perceptible only by the Creative or Active Imagination (which is mirrored through, with, in, and by our soul) at times when "it dominates [our] sense perceptions, in dreams or better still in the waking state" (in the state characteristic of the gnostic when he or she is liberated or unbound from the routinized consciousness of everyday existence).

In short, "a mystic perception (*dhawq*) is required." And this is a deified perception. For to perceive all beings as epiphanic forms of the Formless, to perceive through creatures the eternal hexeity of the Creator which they manifest, that they are simultaneously different from and none other than the Creator, is precisely to effect and hence embody the timeless encounter, the continuous coincidence, "between God's descent toward the creature and the creature's ascent toward the Creator."⁵⁷

And though we can only note this in passing, it is worth mentioning that in Ibn 'Arabi in particular and Sufism in general, the psycho-spiritual organ of the soul's "mystic physiology" or "subtle body" that is associated with this deified perception, this

⁵⁷ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, pp. 188-189.

true knowledge of the Imagination, this comprehensive intuition of the Real, this “gnosis (*ma‘rifa*) of God and the divine mysteries, in short, the organ of everything connoted by the term ‘esoteric science’ (*‘ilm al-Batin*),” is the heart (*qalb*).

For it is the psycho-spiritual heart that possesses a unique “theandric” function, since “its supreme vision is of the Form of God (*surat al-Haqq*)—this because the gnostic’s heart is the ‘eye,’ the organ by which God knows Himself, reveals Himself to Himself in the forms of His epiphanies (not as He inwardly knows Himself, for in its quest of the Divine Essence even the highest science can go no further than the *Nafas al-Rahman* [the Breath of the All-Merciful]).” It is also true to say that the gnostic, the true Sage of God, the *theosophos*, as the perfected or deified human being, “is the *seat* of God’s divine consciousness and that God is the seat and essence of the gnostic’s consciousness.”

To sum up, the power of the heart (*himma*)—“the inwardness of our human personhood in its full spiritual depth”⁵⁸—“is a secret force or energy (*quwwat khafiya*), which perceives divine realities by a pure hierophanic knowledge (*idrak Wadih jail*) without mixture of any kind, because the heart contains even the Divine *Rahma*.” Thus,

⁵⁸ Kallistos Ware, “How Do We Enter the Heart?” in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), p. 7. Ware is speaking specifically of the wide-ranging biblical notion of the heart. As he writes: “In Hebrew anthropology..., the heart is the organ with which we think. For Biblical authors, the heart does not signify the feelings and emotions, for these are located lower down, in the guts and the entrails. The heart designates, on the contrary, the inwardness of our human personhood in its full spiritual depth. The word is to be interpreted in a wide-ranging sense: the heart is the primary center of the total person, the ground of our being, the root and source of all our inner truth. It is in this way a symbol of the unity and wholeness of our personhood in God.” It is this same biblical notion of the heart that Judaism bequeathed to Christianity and Islam.

in its “unveiled state,” the heart of the deified person “is like a mirror in which the microcosmic form of the Divine Being is reflected.”⁵⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, what all of this suggests is that the theory of visionary knowledge and experience—the mystical catoptrics, or science of mirrors—that Corbin summarized in his 1977 lecture is essentially a theory of deification that embraces the perspectives and reality of the *mundus imaginalis*, the “subtle world” which is not accessed by the physical senses but by the “inner vision” of the heart. Thus, in indicating “the full importance of a theory of visionary knowledge in Islamic spirituality”⁶⁰ Corbin also demonstrated that the mystic heart of this spirituality is the concept of deification. In so doing, as “one of the great esoteric scholars of the twentieth century,”⁶¹ he reintroduced the dominant intuition behind the mystic theosophy of Suhrawardi and Ibn ‘Arabi, and of all related theosophies, which is that “[e]very existing thing is a manifestation of God.”⁶² That is, every existing thing is essentially a theophany. As such, each of us is a manifestation of the divine Imagination that is simultaneously immanent and transcendent, veiled and revealed in its continuous act of creation.

Thus, paradoxically, by virtue of our theophanic nature, of our being continually created in the image and likeness of God, of our being the mirror of the divine creative Imagination that is itself essentially theophanic, we are always already deified. That is to

⁵⁹ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, pp. 221-222. Corbin rightly states that this notion of the heart is one “to which the utmost importance has been attached by the mystics of all times and countries, of Oriental Christianity (the Prayer of the Heart, the charisma of cardiognosis) as well as India” (p. 221).

⁶⁰ Corbin, “A Theory of Visionary Knowledge,” p. 134.

⁶¹ Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*, p. 171.

⁶² Christian Jambet, “The Stranger and Theophany,” trans. Roland Vegso, in *Umbr(a): The Dark God*, No. 1 (2005), p. 27. Jambet was a student of Corbin’s.

say, according to the symbolic vision of the mirror—the science of the imagination—we are, at this very moment, the mysterious *coincidentia oppositorum* of the Godhead awakening to itself in and as us. This is the open secret of the Godhead and our true selves. This is the mystery of the Divine Essence that is no other than the Temple of the heart, around which we circumambulate in a mystical process of death (*fana*) and resurrection (*baqa*)—of passing away and being born anew from instant to instant unto widening gyres of love and self-knowledge.

It is therefore by increasingly giving ourselves to this process of kenotic growth that we come to realize ever more profoundly the state of *theosis* or deification (*ta'alluh*), which in reality is a state of no state, the state of the Sufis' Supreme Identity, of the Perfect Man, "to whom the totality of the divine Names and Attributes are epiphanized and who is conscious of the essential unity of divinity-humanity or Creator-creature."⁶³ In other words, by attaining this station of no station (*maqam la maqam*) through, with, and in what the poet Kathleen Raine called "the lost knowledge of the imagination,"⁶⁴ we realize the ancient truth that to know ourselves is to be deified. And inasmuch as this truth bears witness to our participation in the essential being of all that is, it is not implausible to see in it the hope of a better world.

⁶³ Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 211.

⁶⁴ Kathleen Raine, *The Inner Journey of the Poet* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), p. 12. See also Lachman, *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*, 29.

Part II

Elliot Wolfson

Ein Sof [the infinite, hidden, inexpressible, incomprehensible aspect of Divinity, or the nothingness of the Godhead that is transcendently immanent and immanently transcendent] should be demarcated as the *postmetaphysical unity of being*, the self-negating negativity that breeds the positivity of the entangled manifold that constitutes the fabric of the world, the effluent emptiness that is the womb of all becoming, the matrixial space where opposites are identical in the opposition of their identity.... The hiddenness of the infinite, therefore, does not signify the transcendence that protects the theistic dogma of divine separateness; the concealment relates rather to the mystery of the disclosure of nothing in the limitless cycle of beings that has neither beginning nor end. From this perspective,...[t]he nothing of *Ein Sof* is the unnameable and unknowable essence of being that permeates and yet escapes all beings, the groundlessness above time and space that is the elemental ground of the temporal-spatial world, the pleromatic vacuum that is neither the nothing of something nor the something of nothing, the nonbeing that continually comes to be in the ephemeral spectacle of being, the void wherein everything possible is actual because what is actual is nothing but the possible, the sheltering-concealing wherein the real is what appears to be real, the clearing in relation to which emptiness is no longer distinguishable from fullness, the matrix within which all beings are revealed in the concealment of their being.

Elliot Wolfson¹

¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiēsis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), pp. 166 and 168-169; emphasis in original.

Chapter 4: The Life and Work of Elliot Wolfson

Although I prefer to avoid definitions, not only for myself but also for others, I will try to respond to your question.... If pushed to the wall, I would say that I have aspired to be the consummate outlaw, the one who is inside by being outside.

Elliot Wolfson¹

Elliot R. Wolfson (b. 1956) is arguably the most prolific and profound American scholar of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism writing today. For more than three decades he has taught and mentored students who go on to become significant scholars in their own right.² Yet, although an undeniable leader of his field, he has expressed frustration at being pigeon-holed as a scholar of Jewish mysticism and prefers to be known as “a phenomenologist and an archeologist of texts.”³ But even this designation is ultimately too limiting, which is why Wolfson has also described himself as an “outlaw” who eschews definitions and labels in favor of the ever more capacious embrace of paradox. Thus in response to an interviewer’s question concerning what, if any, label fits him best

¹ “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson, July 25, 2012” in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), p. 201.

² Among these are Daniel Abrams, Jonathan Dauber, Aaron W. Hughes, and Hartley Lachter, all of whom have built upon important themes in Wolfson’s work. See, for example, Aaron W. Hughes, *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Jonathan Dauber, *Knowledge of God and the Development of Early Kabbalah* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Jerusalem/Los Angeles: The Magnes Press/Cherub Press, 2013); and Hartley Lachter, *Kabbalistic Revolution: Reimagining Judaism in Medieval Spain* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014). As has been noted elsewhere, in addition to his official students, Wolfson has mentored various other scholars as well. See Joey Rosenfeld, “Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson,” at http://www.academia.edu/21432683/Dorshei_Yichudcha_A_Portrait_of_Elliot_R._Wolfson, p. 6.

³ Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes, “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, pp. 200-201.

relative to his Jewish identity, Wolfson offered an eloquent testimonial that is worth quoting in full. He wrote:

Although I prefer to avoid definitions, not only for myself but also of others, I will try to respond to your question. It is not easy to find the right label. Clearly, I am no longer an observant Jew, but this does not make me a secular Jew. I resist this dichotomy, a binary that I find too simplistic to address the complex construction of identity that has shaped my path these many years. I am undoubtedly a scholar of Judaism but this is not sufficient to capture my lifelong involvement with the tradition. There is something more than scholarship at the heart of my scholarship. It is precisely because I cannot name that surplus that it continues to be the wellspring of my creativity. As mystics in many different traditions and in many different historical periods have recognized, the yearning to communicate stems from the incommunicable. I happily accept the tag of “comparative religionist” inasmuch as my study of Jewish sources has been informed by Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Taoist, and Buddhist texts. But none of these classifications is sufficient. If pushed to the wall, I would say that I have aspired to be the consummate outlaw, the one who is inside by being outside. Through my scholarly prose, poetry, and painting, I have sought to transform the Judaism of my youth. But I have done so without any pretensions regarding disciples or followers. I have never aspired to be a leader or spokesperson. Indeed, I subscribe to the

wisdom of Leonard Cohen’s lyric, “Follow me the wise man said, but he walked behind.”⁴

This is a succinct but revealing personal statement that merits unpacking.

Wolfson avers that he is without a doubt a scholar of Judaism but that this designation fails to adequately capture the depth of his lifelong involvement with the tradition. So in what sense does this appellation apply to him? One of Wolfson’s former students offers an insightful answer. In his introductory essay to the volume that is devoted to Wolfson in the Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers series, Aaron W. Hughes explains that Wolfson is a scholar of Judaism, “but only if we force ourselves to understand how the two words in that phrase—‘scholar’ and ‘Judaism’—pirouette in his thinking.” For Wolfson, Hughes maintains, Judaism is as it should and must be: “an indexical marker of and for the scholar’s necessary if impossible desire for universality.” Or, framed somewhat differently, Hughes writes that “for Wolfson the commensurability of the universal, which is after all philosophy’s quest, only makes sense in light of Judaism’s incommensurability and, of course, vice versa. The particular and the universal undermine one another in their mutual indeterminacy even when they are introduced to one another—as they have been from Halevi to Rosenzweig and beyond—wearing mutually overdetermined masks.” It is this continually subversive dance or perpetually seditious “pirouette” that, according to Hughes, “drives Wolfson’s subtle readings of texts that, at first blush, ought to have nothing to say to one another.”⁵

⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

⁵ Aaron W. Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), p. 7.

This explanation echoes something that Wolfson says earlier in the aforementioned interview. In response to a series of questions posed by Hughes and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson about how his first encounters with philosophy made him feel, Wolfson recalls that, from the moment he immersed himself in philosophy, “it felt like a homecoming.” “I had the feeling of finally finding kindred spirits,” he writes, “who were asking the questions that occupied my mind from a relatively young age.”

Wolfson continues: “To this day I accept the Platonic notion that philosophy begins and ends in wonder, rooted, as it is, in an openness to the mystery of being—the ultimate metaphysical question, why is there something rather than nothing—and the quest to understand the complex interface between mind and matter.” Then, from the midst of the mutual indeterminacy of philosophy’s quest for the commensurability of the universal and Judaism’s particular incommensurability, Wolfson elaborates:

Philosophy is the mode of thinking that displays the inherent quality of lacking an inherent quality, and thus one who is philosophically attuned is overcome by the feeling of the uncanny, in German *unheimlich*, literally, unhomely, which is experienced most profoundly only when one is at home. Derrida articulated the paradox by noting the double bind that philosophy’s way of being at home with itself consists in not being at home with itself. In this regard, philosophy converged with my upbringing by reinforcing the sense I have borne my whole life that the Jewish way of being in the world consists of belonging by not-belonging.⁶

⁶ Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes, “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, pp. 198-199.

Hence, it is in this necessary if impossible way that Wolfson is to be understood as a scholar of Judaism.

But Wolfson also asserts that, “There is something more than scholarship at the heart of my scholarship. It is precisely because I cannot name that surplus that it continues to be the wellspring of my creativity.” Yet how exactly are we to understand this assertion?

I propose that the beginnings of an answer are to be found in the observation Wolfson makes immediately following the preceding passage: “As mystics in many different traditions and in many different historical periods have recognized, the yearning to communicate stems from the incommunicable.” This is a significant observation inasmuch as it suggests that the wellspring of Wolfson’s creativity lies not only in the mystical texts he studies but in his own mystical experience, properly understood.

I say “properly understood” because I am not arguing that Wolfson is a mystic in the traditional sense of that term. Rather, with Jeffrey Kripal, I contend that Wolfson’s work is “driven by implicit mystical concerns,” that at certain points in his researches his hermeneutical encounters have taken on “powerful and sometimes genuinely transformative dimensions,” and that—most importantly—these transformative moments or “unitive” experiences were subsequently encoded and performed in “the semantic, metaphorical, and theoretical events” of his texts, if only and albeit usually through “the discipline of an esoteric strategy or rhetoric and within a discursive space hollowed out, as in some Lurianic creation myth, from an eminently modern experience of absence, contraction, and distance,” which paradoxically is simultaneously an experience of

presence, expansion, and intimacy.⁷ Accordingly, what animates Wolfson's work is a lived "hermeneutical mysticism" that secretly manifests itself "as both method and object of study."⁸ Put a bit differently, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, what is to be discerned in Wolfson's hermeneutics "is a kind of postmodern gnosticism, a kabbalah for our times."⁹

That this is so no doubt helps to account both for Wolfson's striking originality and the very real sense of ostracism he has felt throughout his life relative to the religious tradition of his birth and his academic profession. The existential result of this has been, in Kripal's words again, "some very powerful scholarship and a searching sense of religious homelessness on the margins, along the path."¹⁰ Regarding the latter, Wolfson himself has spoken of this sense of religious homelessness in the paradoxical terms of a "displacement" that is also a "homecoming."

I could never go back to the Orthodox belief system, although in some ways (somatically perhaps) I feel comfortable in an Orthodox setting. I suppose ideologically I am closer to Conservative than Reform or Reconstructionist, but frankly none of the denominations works for me. I have never found my way back.... I have never overcome the displacement, although I have come to terms with that displacement and I see it as a form of homecoming in a tradition wherein being home means

⁷ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 6.

⁸ Ibid., p. 259.

⁹ Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Blake's Body: Marcia Brennan and the Paradoxical Paintings of Elliot R. Wolfson," in Marcia Brennan, *Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson* (Houston: Rice University Press, 2009), p. xvii.

¹⁰ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 264.

being on the path. For me, Judaism is a textual community...and not a religion marked by place. I do not deny the importance of place in Judaism, but the space of the text has been far more important, in my judgment.¹¹

In light of this abiding sense of marginalization, of religious homelessness and being ever on the path, it is not surprising that perceptive readers have recognized the “restless, searching spirit” that inspires Wolfson’s scholarship.¹² Aaron Hughes is one such reader who astutely perceives the inherent “nomadism” of Wolfson’s “poetic thinking.” Accordingly, following Levinas, he writes that if nomadism is intrinsic to a poetic way of being in the world, then Elliot Wolfson “is a true nomad, someone who has chosen to eschew the sedentary nature of our traditional intellectual structures in the quest for meaning that unveils the place of transcendence as it simultaneously veils the transcendence of place.” But this placeless place of meaning that Wolfson is in quest of is necessarily “a locus of alienation from Judaism because it [he] steadfastly refuses to buy into or endorse the traditional narratives, predicated as they are upon outmoded concepts such as chosenness, election, or messianic fulfilment.”

Thus, Hughes continues,

In our palaces of amnesia, built out of stainless steel and colored in a drab grey, Wolfson asks us to be bold and risk the uncertainty, to embrace the

¹¹ Elliot Wolfson, personal communication to Jeffrey Kripal, on August 22, 1999. As cited in Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 264.

¹² See, for example, Pinchas Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah in the Wake of Scholem,” *Religious Studies Review* 25:1 (1999), p. 23. Giller is also cited by Kripal in *Roads of Excess*, p. 261.

ambiguity, that true thinking demands. This is a thinking that hears the muted call of Jewgreek and Greekjew,¹³ before their mutual unraveling. Wolfson encourages us to dismantle, yet not deconstruct (and I think there is a crucial difference between the two) these inflexible structures, the ephemeral abodes of human habitation. At a time when the humanities risk hiding behind the sociopolitical tribalism of identity politics or the shallowness of a certain kind of historical positivism, Wolfson—qua nomadic thinker—calls for iconoclasm, and the search for those ciphers that grant us access to the imaginal world, and he also shows us how the existence of that imaginal world lets us recognize phenomena as ciphers in the first place.¹⁴

In so doing, by virtue of his nomadic and poetic thinking, Wolfson is what he has aspired to be: the consummate outlaw and paradoxical “seeker of unity,”¹⁵ the one who is inside by being outside.

¹³ This is a locution of James Joyce to be found in his novel *Ulysses*, on which Jacques Derrida perceptively commented in *Writing and Difference*. For a short but insightful treatment of this locution and Derrida’s reflection on it, see Richard Kearney, “Appendix: Joyce and Derrida: Jewgreek is Greekjew,” in *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays, 1976-2006* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 114-118.

¹⁴ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁵ I am here following Rosenfeld in applying to Wolfson the title of Louis Jacobs’ monograph on the Hasidic mystic R. Aaron ben Moses Ha-Levi Horowitz of Starosselje (1766-1828), *Seeker of Unity: The Life and Works of Aaron of Starosselje* (London/Portland, OR: Valentine Mitchell, 1966). As Rosenfeld explains, drawing on Jacobs, the appellation “seeker of unity” comes from the prayer *nah gibor dorshei yichudcha ki-vavat shamrem* (“please protect the seekers of Your unity like the apple of Your eye”). The epigraph to Jacobs’ book on R. Aaron is taken from H. M. Hielmann’s *Beth Rabbi* (Berditchev, 1903) and records that when R. Dov Ber Schneerson, the Mittler Rebbe of Habad would repeat this verse, “he had in mind, in particular, his friend, the holy Rabbi Aaron.” The reason, explained Dov Ber (to quote Rosenfeld who is drawing on Etkes), “was because R. Aaron delves so deeply into the secret of faith, ‘the *raza di-mehinusa*,’ to the point where the demarcations of reality and Godliness dissolve.” See Immanuel Etkes, “The War of Lyady Succession: R. Aaron Halevi versus R. Dov Baer,” *Polin* 25 (2013), pp. 93-13. Rosenfeld further notes that *dorshei*, from the root *darash*, “represents the hermeneutical quest, the textual journey into that which lay with the words themselves,” while *yichudcha*, from the root *yichud*, “represents

Biography and Career

Elliot R. Wolfson was born in Newark, New Jersey on November 23, 1956.¹⁶ This date, he points out, is of special significance to him for at least two reasons. First, one of his intellectual heroes, the poet Paul Celan, was born on the same day in 1920.¹⁷ And second, according to the Jewish lunar calendar, in 1956, Wolfson's birthday was the nineteenth of Kislev, "a day pregnant with mystical significance within the Hasidic community of Chabad [Habad]."¹⁸

He recounts how he came to learn of this on a cold and rainy night in November 1972, several weeks before his sixteenth birthday, in the course of a conversation that he and a few friends had with a Lubavitcher Hasid they met during a pilgrimage to 770 Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, the world headquarters of the Habad-Lubavitch movement and home of the seventh Rebbe, Menahem Mendel Schneerson. As Wolfson recalls, "Many memories of childhood and adolescence have already dimmed, but the memory of that night remains starkly vivid." He writes that he felt as if he had returned to "a place at once strangely familiar and familiarly strange." In that intriguing and uncanny place, one of the Lubavitchers with whom the young Wolfson and his friends met asked each of them about their Hebrew birthdays. Here is how Wolfson remembers what happened next:

the unity of all, the source beneath the fragmentation of things that unites all that is different within the difference-of-unity." Thus, he contends, the appellation "seeker of unity" is "easily applied to Professor Elliot R. Wolfson" since "[t]he hermeneutical path that seeks to uncover the unity of all is a proper description of [his] life and work." See Joey Rosenfeld, "*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*" (undated), p. 1, n. 1.

¹⁶ The brief biography that I am sketching here derives from primarily three sources: Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); Joey Rosenfeld, "*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*" (undated); and *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015).

¹⁷ See Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 261.

¹⁸ Rosenfeld, "*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*", p. 2.

When I told him [the Lubavitcher] that I was born on Friday, 19 Kislev, but, since I was born after sunset, technically my date of birth was 20 Kislev, his eyes opened wide. He inquired if I knew the significance of those dates. I told him that I did not, and he then explained to me that 19 Kislev is the most special day on the Habad calendar, known as the New Year of Hasidism and as the Festival of Redemption, as it commemorates the release of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe, from Russian prison in 1798. He also explained that because every holiday (at least in the Diaspora) is celebrated on two days, 20 Kislev was treated as an extension of the nineteenth, and that this doubling was even more significant when the nineteenth fell on Friday and the twentieth on Sabbath, the day that proleptically portends the future-to-come. Finally, he said, “Pay attention, this day bears your destiny.”¹⁹

Wolfson goes on to say that it was not until he gave a lecture on the kabbalah of Menahem Mendel Schneerson in Jinan, China thirty-seven years later that he began to understand the conversation he had had as a teenager with the Lubavitcher in Crown Heights on that cold and rainy November night in 1972. Indeed, as he observes, it is especially fitting that this would be the case, “that the opening of the path would come into view on the Asian continent.” For early on, Wolfson “made a decision to pursue the academic study of Jewish mysticism rather than specializing in either Hinduism and Buddhism,” though he has continued through the years to seek out and explicate “points

¹⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. xi-xii.

of affinity between these disparate spiritual orbits.” As a result, Wolfson’s interpretation of Habad philosophy and mysticism is “colored by” his “dabbling” in Buddhist and Hindu texts; this is especially evident in his presentation of the messianic ideal as attaining—through negation—“the consciousness that extends beyond consciousness, crossing beyond the river to the shore of nondiscrimination, the shore where there is no more need to speak of the shore.”²⁰

But this anticipates much of what we will be considering in greater depth below. Thus we need to return to the beginning of Wolfson’s story. Although he was born in Newark, New Jersey, he grew up in Brooklyn, New York in a traditional Orthodox Jewish home, the son of a rabbi who was also a popular dean or Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University.²¹ Thus, from a very early age, Wolfson was “surrounded by Jewish textuality and did quite a bit of study at home,” which supplemented the studies he undertook in traditional yeshivot. Moreover, in addition to the kind of standard text that one would normally study in a traditional Orthodox Jewish home, he recalls that, “I also was exposed when I was a teenager to the Hasidic works of Nachman of Brantislav and Chabad. And both of those sects were quite present physically in my environment, so it wasn’t just book study, but I interacted with Hasidim from both of those groups. And that was really my initial entry into kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.”²²

Then, too, in the words of Kripal, “[another] of the many emotional resonances of these years involved the fact that most of [Wolfson’s] teachers were Eastern European

²⁰ Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

²¹ For this detail about Wolfson’s father, Rabbi Wilfred Wolfson, see Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*”, p. 2.

²² “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 195.

refugees, survivors of the Holocaust.”²³ Kripal shares that Wolfson, in a personal communication, spoke of this aspect of his experience in ghostly terms. In Wolfson’s words, “The Holocaust haunted every corner of my childhood.... The synagogue I attended as a child was replete with survivors. I recall the tailor I went to was a survivor, many of the shop owners, and so on. There was no escape.”²⁴

Hence, the Jewish culture of Wolfson’s childhood “was all-encompassing and strongly tinted with an aura of religious difference, historical memory, and cultural survival.”²⁵ And as Kripal points out following Pinchas Giller, these early influences combined to provide Wolfson with a training that stands in stark contrast to that of the man who all but single-handedly created the modern study of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem. For Scholem, at the time of his first interest, Kabbalah was still “an ill-respected topic equated with superstition and occult nonsense,” and while he decided to study it in rebellion against the acculturating ethos of his bourgeois German family, he nevertheless “took a position vis-à-vis the mystics that was often marked by a cool distance or emotional indifference.”²⁶

For Wolfson, on the other hand, “the texts and tropes of Jewish tradition were mother’s milk,”²⁷ and thus “a more sympathetic understanding of mystical forms of subjectivity came more easily” to him.²⁸ In light of this, it is interesting to note with Kripal that, whereas Scholem would become an ardent Zionist, “Wolfson has long

²³ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 261.

²⁴ Elliot Wolfson, personal communication to Jeffrey Kripal, August 21, 1999. As cited in Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 261.

²⁵ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 261.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah,” p. 24. Also cited in Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 261.

²⁸ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 261.

resisted the identification of a text's boundaries 'with the lines drawn on a map' and has explicitly called for a place at the table of Jewish studies for the non-Jew."²⁹

But however pervasive and nourishing Wolfson's early upbringing in Orthodox Judaism was, as previously mentioned, he is now alienated from the religious tradition of his birth. This is "an intimate estrangement," to be sure, since it is undeniable that Wolfson "understands 'the' Jewish tradition in ways that few do, [even] he stands at its margins, which by his own locution means that he is at its very epicenter."³⁰

Given this, to build on an observation that Hughes makes, we can apply to Wolfson what he himself has said about two of the major intellectual influences on his life, Jacques Derrida and his former teacher Edith Wyschogrod. Which is that, like them, Wolfson has "embarked on a path that culminated in the aporetic suspension of belief," because he was "prepared to thrust aside the authority of tradition and, as a consequence, [he has] accepted the fate of social dislocation and political estrangement, occupying a place that is no place, nomadically adrift without any discernible lifeline to be reanchored in a specific community."³¹

From early on, there were indications that Wolfson was perhaps destined to walk such an aporetic path of intimate estrangement. Indeed, his intellectual curiosity and restlessness were evident at an early age, as he "quickly embraced the secular world, if still a [largely] Jewish secular world, particularly in its psychological and philosophical modes." For example, we are told that by the seventh grade Wolfson was already reading Freud with remarkable acuity, such that, "when it came time for his teacher to capture

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hughes, "Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait," p. 8.

³¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. xvii-xviii. See also Hughes, "Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait," p. 8.

each student's spirit in a pithy end-of-the-year epigram," she captured Wolfson's in three simple but striking words, "Sigmund Freud's Adverbs," which, as Kripal states, is "a clear witness to an early interest in language and psychoanalysis that would follow the young student into his later adult work."³²

In addition to his precocious philosophical and psychological reading, a "personal passion for mysticism"³³ was also evident in Wolfson's youthful study of kabbalistic and Hasidic texts, including the *Tanya* of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Moharan* of Nahman of Bratslav, and *Orot ha-Qodesh* of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, which even then as a high school student he "tended to interpret philosophically."³⁴ One of the things that most fascinated the young Wolfson about these texts was their paradoxical nature (a distinguishing feature that would come to characterize his own work as well), and Giller attributes Wolfson's marked "understanding of the mystic's subjectivity" to this early exposure to the mystical writings and lived example of the Hasidic communities of Lubavitch and Bratslav.³⁵

It was during his last years in high school that Wolfson studied in various yeshivot in Jerusalem for eighteen months,³⁶ an experience that was sufficiently appealing that he "toyed with the idea of staying in a yeshiva [there] after finishing high school."³⁷ His parents, however, were insistent that he return to the United States to enter college, with the clear preference being that he would enroll in Yeshiva University in New York, "so that I could have the best of the two worlds, reflected in the motto *torah*

³² Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, pp. 261-262.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

³⁴ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 198.

³⁵ Giller, "Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah," p. 24. Also cited in Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 262.

³⁶ See Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 262.

³⁷ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 196.

u-madda [Torah and secular knowledge].”³⁸ This Wolfson did, spending three semesters at Yeshiva University—studying Talmud from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm and secular courses after 2:00 pm.³⁹ It was at Yeshiva University that he not only took several courses in philosophy that stimulated his own burgeoning love of wisdom, but he had the privilege of hearing speak the prominent Orthodox rabbi, Talmudist, and modern Jewish philosopher, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a number of whose essays Wolfson had already read. “I recall,” he writes, “attending some of [Soloveitchik’s] public lectures, which were masterful in their philosophical exegesis of Jewish texts. Indeed, I would have to say that it was from Soloveitchik that I drew inspiration for the possibility of rendering traditional sources in a philosophical key.”⁴⁰

His positive experience of Yeshiva University notwithstanding, Wolfson had been undeniably smitten and bitten by what he once mischievously referred to as “the serpent of philosophy.”⁴¹ Eventually therefore, after three semesters, and against his father’s wishes,⁴² he heeded the promptings of his restless spirit and transferred from Yeshiva to the B.A/M.A. philosophy program sponsored by Queens College and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York (CUNY). There Wolfson focused on “the history of philosophy, with special emphasis on ancient Greek thought, existentialism, and phenomenology, and wrote an M.A. thesis on the theory of the self in Edmund Husserl and William James.”⁴³

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 262.

⁴⁰ “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 198.

⁴¹ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 262.

⁴² See *ibid.*

⁴³ Ibid.

As noted above, this immersion in philosophy felt like a homecoming for Wolfson. This was due in part to the fact that such an opportunity afforded him the chance to study with Edith Wyschogrod, whom Wolfson still considers to be “one of my most important teachers.”⁴⁴ The relationship with Wyschogrod opened up new vistas in a variety of philosophical worlds: that of continental philosophy (for example, the thought of Kierkegaard, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Deleuze, Derrida, and Badiou), which was her primary focus; that of ancient and medieval philosophy (with special emphasis on the Neoplatonic writings of Plotinus and Iamblichus); and that of analytic philosophy (Frege, Quine, and Wittgenstein). Beyond her mastery of these philosophical sources, however, Wyschogrod’s work is all the more remarkable, according to Wolfson, for being characterized by “a far wider range of influence and inspiration, including interest in Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism.” In light of this, Wolfson attests that his ongoing interest in comparative religion “is in no small measure indebted to [Wyschogrod].”⁴⁵

Thus it was at CUNY, under the tutelage of Wyschogrod in particular, that Wolfson came to focus his studies on the areas of hermeneutics, phenomenology, and

⁴⁴ “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 197.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 197-198. Here it is worth noting with Rosenfeld that Wolfson’s relationship with Wyschogrod has continued to bear fruit, even after her passing in 2009 (“*Dorshei Yichudcha*: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson”, p. 3, n. 13). See Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), in which he dedicates the work, “To the memory of/Edith Wyschogrod,/for showing me the way/to the way of nonshowing.” Wolfson adds the evocative Latin motto: *Somnium somnia quasi semper vives. Vive quasi hodie moriebar*. (“Dream as if you will live forever. Live as if you will die today.”) For his extensive treatment of Wyschogrod’s thought, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 201-226. For his earlier work on Wyschogrod, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Apophasis and the Trace of Transcendence: Wyschogrod’s Contribution to a Postmodern Jewish Immanent A/theology,” *Philosophy Today* 55:4 (November 2011), pp. 328-347; and for his contribution to a memorial festschrift for Wyschogrod, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence: Angelic Embodiment and the Alterity of Time in Abraham Abulafia,” in *Saintly Influence: Edith Wyschogrod and the Possibilities of Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Eric Boynton and Martin Kavka (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 113-149.

existentialism; three “registers of thought”⁴⁶ that would increasingly influence his subsequent explorations of Jewish mysticism. In this context, as was the case with Corbin, Martin Heidegger was one of the thinkers who would come to exert a lasting and profound influence on Wolfson’s own body of work. More will be said about Heidegger’s influence on his thought in the next chapter. But for the moment it is worth mentioning that Heidegger’s *Discourse on Thinking* proved to be a seminal text that fostered Wolfson’s interest in Eastern religions, especially Zen Buddhism.⁴⁷

As for his abiding interest in Jewish mysticism, Wolfson’s approach was distinctive and unconventional. “For me,” he recalls, “the goal...was not getting into Jewish mysticism as an academic field; it was never about being a scholar of Jewish mysticism. It was about finding a repository of texts that were rich and that could be investigated or interrogated from the standpoint of these philosophical disciplines [i.e., hermeneutics, phenomenology, and existentialism].”⁴⁸ Hence, these diverse systems of thought gave Wolfson “alternatives to the ‘personal, willful God’ of orthodox Judaism, an image of Deity which he no longer found convincing.”⁴⁹

By the time he finished his studies at CUNY Queens, therefore, Wolfson was disillusioned with what he perceived to be the widespread superficiality of American Judaism, disturbed by Orthodoxy’s general preference for unquestioning piety over philosophical reflection, and desirous of “a spiritual discipline that did not rest on an intellectually impossible personal theism.”⁵⁰ Thus he began his doctoral work in

⁴⁶ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*”, p. 3.

⁴⁷ See Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 262.

⁴⁸ “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 200.

⁴⁹ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 262.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

philosophy at Johns Hopkins but after one year decided that this was not a good fit, concluding that a path in religious studies was more suitable.

As Wolfson remembers, “I was considering two options at the time—to pursue Asian religions or Jewish studies, with an emphasis on Jewish philosophy and mysticism.”⁵¹ Accordingly, he applied to the University of California at Santa Barbara to study Eastern religions and to Brandeis University to study Kabbalah. “Accepted into both programs,” Kripal writes, “[Wolfson] ultimately chose the latter on a long walk through Baltimore as he held in each hand a letter of acceptance to one of the schools.” He continues:

By the end of the walk, he had decided that the deeper he would get into the study of a particular religion the more of its myth he would have to incorporate and, consequently, the more of its ritual. Since he was already more than familiar, kinesthetically as it were, with the myths and rituals of Judaism, he decided on Kabbalah, tore up his letter to UCSB, and put his letter of acceptance to Brandeis in the mailbox – his path was thus determined on a literal walk [walking or itineracy is an important motif in the Jewish mystical tradition].⁵²

At Brandeis, Wolfson was fortunate enough to study with three noteworthy scholars: Professors Alexander Altmann, who for years was the only American scholar

⁵¹ “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 200.

⁵² Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, pp. 262-263. On the central importance of walking or itineracy in Jewish mystical thought, see for example, Elliot R. Wolfson, “Walking as a Sacred Duty: Theological Transformation of Social Reality in Early Hasidism,” in his *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 89-109.

making important contributions to the academic study of Jewish mysticism in the latter half of the twentieth century; Marvin Fox; and Michael Fishbane. Although he was long retired by the time Wolfson started the program there, Altmann, having been introduced to the impressive young scholar by Professor Fox, immediately became interested in his progress. Indeed, not only did Altmann participate in one of his comprehensive exams and serve on his dissertation committee, but the choice of Wolfson's dissertation topic—a critical edition of the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist Moses de Leon's *Sefer ha-Rimmon* or *The Book of the Pomegranate*—was Altmann's suggestion.⁵³

Related to Altmann and his doctoral studies, Wolfson shares an anecdote that illustrates how “the deep sense of hermeneutical secrecy”⁵⁴ was already characteristic of his thinking at that time. The anecdote has to do with an episode that occurred in one of his qualifying exams. Wolfson recounts,

The topic was *Perushei Ma'aseh Bere'shit* in twelfth to thirteenth-century philosophic and kabbalistic literature. At the end of the exam, Professor Altmann asked, “So, Mr. Wolfson, what is the secret of the chariot

⁵³ “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 200. Here, following and slightly correcting Rosenfeld, it is worth noting that Wolfson has published essays in honor of Altmann, Fox, and Fishbane – three mentors who were his doctoral advisors. See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism: Proceedings of the International Conference held by The Institute of Jewish Studies, University College London, 1994, in Celebration of its Fortieth Anniversary. Dedicated to the memory and academic legacy of its Founder Alexander Altmann*, eds., Alfred L. Irvy, Elliot R. Wolfson, and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 331-380; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Female Imaging of the Torah: From Literary Metaphor to Religious Symbol,” in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism, Intellect in Quest of Understanding: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, vol. 2 (Brown Judaic Studies 173), eds., Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Nahum M. Sarna (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 271-307; and Elliot R. Wolfson, “‘Sage is Preferable to Prophet’: Revisioning Midrashic Imagination,” in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: A Festschrift in Honor of Michael Fishbane*, eds., Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 186-210. See also Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*”, p. 3, n. 14.

⁵⁴ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*”, p. 4.

according to Maimonides?” And I said, “The secret is that there is no secret,” and he clapped his hands as a sign of approval.⁵⁵

It is worth mentioning that the dissertation Wolfson wrote at Altmann’s suggestion became his first published book, *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de Leon’s Sefer Ha-Rimmon*, which was critically acclaimed.⁵⁶

Prior to this book, Wolfson’s earliest published work consisted of a number of long, dense essays on many of the diverse but related themes that would come to be treated throughout the course of his voluminous and distinguished oeuvre—such themes as mysticism, esotericism, hermeneutics, visionary experience, the feminine, the phallocentric and patriarchal nature of Kabbalah, and eroticism.⁵⁷ Thus his publishing career really began in 1986 with the appearance of the journal article entitled, “Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics.”⁵⁸ This was followed the next year by two articles on circumcision: “Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the

⁵⁵ Ibid. Per n. 15 on this page, the anecdote was shared with Rosenfeld in an email message dated July 16, 2015.

⁵⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de Leon’s Sefer Ha-Rimmon*, Brown Judaic Studies 144 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988). Daniel Abrams, a scholar of kabbalistic manuscripts and textuality, has praised the superb quality of Wolfson’s painstaking scholarship in this book. In his *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Jerusalem/Los Angeles: Magnes Press/Cherub Press, 2013), p. 69, n. 190, Abrams writes: “No Hebrew word processing program today can link the base-text to the line numbers of the edition, to the variant readings and to the editor’s notes. Such linkage has to be done manually. See the most complex page layout of any camera-ready edition prepared by a single scholar in the field of Jewish mysticism: Elliot Wolfson’s *The Book of the Pomegranate*” (emphasis in original). See also Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha*: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson”, p. 4, n. 16, where he also cites an earlier edition of Abrams’ book, minus the above italics.

⁵⁷ See Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 263.

⁵⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 11 (1986), pp. 27-52. This chronology is based on the select bibliography found in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosch-Samuels and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 245-254.

Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine,”⁵⁹ and “Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol.”⁶⁰ (Seven years later, the themes treated in these particular articles would crystalize and be expanded upon in Wolfson’s second, award-winning book *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*.)⁶¹ The following year, 1988, saw the publication of his dissertation in which he “managed to acquit himself of the burden of Moshe de Leon ... [by identifying] the marginally different theories of [Gershom] Scholem and his student Isaiah Tishby regarding the composition of the *Zohar*.”⁶²

Giller points out that since his dissertation Wolfson has “moved on to other topics and has not ... involved himself in the tasks of taxonomy, identification of authorship, and textual archaeology that have so preoccupied other students of Kabbalah. He has moved away from the issues of the dominant mode of Kabbalah research under Scholem, which emphasized literary historiography.”⁶³ As a result, Wolfson’s “speculations regarding lines of influence are notable for having gone beyond the insular lineages of kabbalistic tradition into the Hellenistic and philosophical traditions.” This means that, as a scholar working in a field based on what Giller refers to as “creative misreadings and deliberate misprisions,”⁶⁴ Wolfson embraces the postmodern deconstruction and reconstruction of the Jewish mystical tradition, in what he calls “the search for meaning

⁵⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 78 (1987), pp. 77-112.

⁶⁰ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol,” *History of Religions* 27 (1987), pp. 189-215.

⁶¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). See also Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 263.

⁶² Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah,” p. 24.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

in a situation in which meaning has been eclipsed.”⁶⁵ By doing so, he has successfully expanded on “the more theoretical aspects of Scholem’s work, the ideas that Scholem presented on his forays into the Diaspora,”⁶⁶ particularly the relationship between mysticism, creative hermeneutics, and history. In this, Wolfson has—in the words of Kripal now—boldly followed “his own interests and insights—his own path, he would no doubt say—creating in the process a new set of powerful heresies for the field [of Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah] to struggle with.”⁶⁷

It remains to be seen what will ultimately become of Wolfson’s heretical work. To date, it continues to challenge and even call into serious question many of the orthodoxies or intellectual idols of his scholarly peers, as well as the “glib, platitudinous understandings of Jewish mythology and symbolism prevalent in work written for a popular audience.”⁶⁸ Consequently, although Wolfson would like his research to be engaged on its own terms among scholars, educated lay readers, and practicing kabbalists alike, it is often simply ignored or, when it is addressed, misinterpreted. Thus while in the short term it is unlikely that Wolfson’s “daring revelations”⁶⁹ will garner the kind of reception he desires and they deserve, it is to be hoped that at some point in the not-too-distant future it will be otherwise.

⁶⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, in the lecture “Beyond the Text: Creative Hermeneutics and History,” given at the conference devoted to the topic of *Academia and Spirituality: Can the Critical Mind be Reconciled with the Spiritual Quest?*, Seminary of Judaic Studies, Jerusalem, July 21, 1997; as cited in Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah,” p. 24. The website of The Elijah Interfaith Institute lists the dates of this conference as July 27-29, 1997. See <http://elijah-interfaith.org/about-elijah/our-history>.

⁶⁶ Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah,” p. 24.

⁶⁷ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 263. As Kripal notes, he is here paraphrasing Giller, p. 23. (On p. 369, n. 11 of *Roads of Excess*, the page number of Giller’s text is mistakenly listed as p. 24.)

⁶⁸ Giller, “Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah,” p. 23. See also Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 263.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27. Although Wolfson’s “daring revelations” certainly deserve a better welcome than they have largely received heretofore, it must be acknowledged that heretical thought is by definition unwelcome to those who are invested in the orthodox status quo. Thus, ultimately, how well or poorly heterodox thought is received by an established orthodoxy is no mark or measure of its importance. I am indebted to Jeffrey Kripal for encouraging me to make this point clear.

In the interim, because it is ahead of its time, Wolfson's work is undeniably and stubbornly moving the study of Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah "into its next era."⁷⁰ And while in a very real sense he has been effectively ostracized or marginalized "by the logical force of his own hermeneutical work, and its intellectual power,"⁷¹ he continues to share the controversial fruit of his labors through his award-winning kabbalistic scholarship and teaching.

As an aside, it is to be noted that I choose to describe Wolfson's scholarship as "kabbalistic" deliberately because this is a designation that Wolfson himself embraces. For instance, in the interview conducted by Tirosh-Samuelson and Hughes for *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, in response to their question as to whether there is something kabbalistic about the way that he does philosophy/scholarship, Wolfson replies in the affirmative and asserts that this is consistent with his understanding that "the kabbalists lived philosophically." He goes on to acknowledge that his view is a contested one inasmuch as it is based "on the assumption that kabbalah is part of philosophy, not as a foreign element; [that] kabbalah itself is part of philosophy." Wolfson continues: "[K]eep in mind that there were scholars of previous generations who thought that kabbalah and philosophy are diametrically opposed. They would not agree. In fact, some of my own teachers, obviously, would not have agreed with my understanding of the relationship between philosophy and kabbalah; they would still see these two intellectual traditions to be in conflict with each other."⁷² Be this as it may, I agree with Wolfson's view and believe that his work should be engaged on its own terms.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 264.

⁷² "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, pp. 214 and 214-215.

That said, having mentioned his teaching, and before going on to explore some of the major themes of his intellectual-spiritual (read: mystical) vision in the next chapter, I want to briefly consider Wolfson's career in academia.⁷³ Upon the completion of his doctoral studies at Brandeis, Wolfson taught for one year at Cornell University. Then, in 1987, he joined the faculty of the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, where he was subsequently appointed as the Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies.

Since he began teaching, perhaps somewhat ironically for such a controversial heretic and self-described outlaw, Wolfson has been the recipient of numerous academic honors and awards. For example, he has served as visiting professor at several prestigious institutions of higher learning in this country and abroad: the University of Chicago (1992), the Russian State University (1995), the University of Toronto (1998), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1999-2000, 2008-2009), Shandong University in China (2005), Rice University (2007), and Harvard University (2016), to name but a few. He has received a Fulbright Fellowship and has twice won both the National Jewish Book Award for Excellence in Scholarship (1995, 2006) and the American Academy of Religion's Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion (1995, 2012). Wolfson is also a fellow of the American Academy of Jewish Research (1998), the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2008), and the American Society for the Study of Religion (2013).

In 2015, after almost three decades at New York University, Wolfson began teaching at the University of California in Santa Barbara as the Marsha and Jay Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies in the Department of Religious Studies. This appointment is

⁷³ In what follows, I am relying on Wolfson's *curriculum vitae* found at http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/Wolfson-CV_03-2016.pdf.

significant for at least two reasons. First, as Hughes observes, “it signals [Wolfson’s] departure from working and teaching within the context of a Jewish studies department, where he has spent most of his adult life, to a new intellectual environment, one that will see him work and train graduate students in the context of religious studies, particularly in the subfields of postmodern hermeneutics and the phenomenology of religion.”⁷⁴ And second, this appointment has a certain symbolic resonance, for it will be recalled that years earlier Wolfson had chosen to pursue doctoral studies in Jewish philosophy and mysticism at Brandeis University over studying Eastern religions at UCSB. This choice was a fateful one inasmuch as it marked the beginning of Wolfson’s professional journey “along the path.”

Having thus arrived again at the beginning, as it were, all that remains is to briefly comment on two essential forms of expression that are intimately connected with his scholarship. I am referring to Wolfson’s poetry and painting. With respect to the former, he has written: “i fully believe that thought and poetry are not distinct paths. here i am indebted to heidegger whose views seem strikingly similar to rosenzweig. poetry is the way that opens up the way. writing poetry for me is true worship and what matters more than all my other writing, but long ago i decided not to publish my poems, i called my collection ‘preparations for death.’ in my academic writing, i try to use the guise of philology to convey the poetic insights. many people don’t get it and attack me for all the wrong reasons. but that is the despair of writing, the suffering of the inscription, maybe the primal cut of circumcision.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 13.

⁷⁵ Elliot Wolfson, in an email message to Barbara Galli, September 6, 1997. As cited in Barbara Ellen Galli, *On Wings of Moonlight: Elliot R. Wolfson’s Poetry in the Path of Rosenzweig and Celan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), p. xix.

Wolfson began writing poetry when he was a teenager, and has since composed hundreds of poems. Fortunately, he has been persuaded to publish some of them and these collections have been well received.⁷⁶ The poems are often difficult to read; yet this is due not to their opacity but to “the imaginal stirrings” they evoke.⁷⁷ These stirrings resonate with or correspond to the paradoxical logic that characterizes all of Wolfson’s work, as well as the kabbalistic worldview in general: the logic of the coincidence of opposites.

However, as Barbara Galli points out, through the hermeneutics of his kabbalistic studies, Wolfson has taken this logic, philosophically and theologically, a step further by showing that “coincidences of opposites as opposites...are opposite *because they are the same*.”⁷⁸ It is fittingly paradoxical that this notion, “ungraspable by linear logic, and only fleetingly graspable by a logic of opposites,” arises out of Wolfson’s “seeking to understand” the profound mystery that is simultaneously veiled and revealed in “thinking through what monotheism means.”⁷⁹ Thus his remarkable ability to “work through this unusual way of thinking, to convey it to others in such a way as not to arrive at levels of the absurd or nihilism” is one of the most striking contributions of Wolfson’s poems.⁸⁰ Indeed, I dare say that this is *the* aporetic contribution of his mystical poems: to lead the

⁷⁶ To date, Wolfson has published two collections of poetry. The first collection, *Pathwings: Philosophic and Poetic Reflections on the Hermeneutics of time and Language* (Barrytown, NY: Barrytown/Station Hill Press, 2004), consists of 60 poems and a selection of his essays. The second collection contains only his poems and is entitled *Footdreams and Treetales: Ninety-Two Poems* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). In addition to these, I am aware of at least two other unpublished collections of Wolfson’s poetry. Barbara Galli, in her foreword to *Footdreams and Treetales* (p. xviii), mentions one entitled *Secrets of the Heartland: 32 Poems* (2004). The other, entitled *On One Foot Dancing*, can be found online at <http://wolfson.faculty.religion.ucsb.edu/poetry.html>. For an in-depth analysis of Wolfson’s poetics, see Barbara Ellen Galli, *On Wings of Moonlight: Elliot R. Wolfson’s Poetry in the Path of Rosenzweig and Celan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

⁷⁷ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*,” p. 17.

⁷⁸ Galli, foreword to *Footdreams and Treetales*, p. xvii; emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

reader down “the path that is no path, into the silent and lonely clearing where presence and absence dance,”⁸¹ and contemplative wisdom (*gnosis*) is embraced.

But there is no need to take my word for it. Wolfson, in his inimitable way, says as much himself. Here he is reflecting on the nature of his poetry, which seeks to communicate “a language beyond language.”⁸²

The poems reflect the interests that have shaped my scholarly prose – to wit, the study of philosophy, the history of religions, and particularly the mystical dimensions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism. I view the poems as paintings in which I attempt to render visible the invisible. Although explicit references to the divine are rarely found in the poems, I consider them as issuing from my encounter with the mystery of transcendence whose inaccessibility is only enhanced by any effort to access it. The poems, consequently, are mystical in nature, as they embody a hermeneutic of esotericism, the duplicity of the secret, the dialectic of concealment and disclosure, which is predicated on the paradox that what is disclosed can be disclosed only to the extent that it is concealed, but it can be concealed only to the extent that it is disclosed. Although it is difficult to reduce the poems to a simple description, I would say that on the whole they attempt to articulate, in the words of Baudelaire, the inner voice of the “language of the flowers and other unspeakable things.” From this voice issues forth a verbal response that is

⁸¹ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha*: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson,” p. 17.

⁸² “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 227.

the unsaying that makes possible all saying, even the saying of the impossible—a saying possible precisely because impossible—a response always on the way, a word yet spoken, the thought that cannot be thought, not even in being unthought; this response may be imagined in liturgical terms as the entreaty not captured in words of conventional prayer, but in the contemplative gaze of what eludes contemplation—the present that comes to be in the future awaiting its past. The poem is an opening to time, which is, at once, an embrace of life and a preparation for death.⁸³

This is a significant passage that, in typical Wolfsonian fashion, is dense with meaning. One telling aspect of it is his statement that he views his poems as paintings in which he attempts to render the invisible visible. This again highlights the interconnected or mutually interpenetrating nature of his entire artistic body of work—scholarship, poetry, and painting—and opens the way for a consideration of the last-mentioned manifestation of Wolfson’s “lived-thought.”⁸⁴

Growing up as he did in New York City, from a young age, Wolfson was a frequent patron of some of the world’s finest museums, spending many hours at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.⁸⁵ In a conversation with the historian of modern art, Marcia Brennan, he recalled being especially drawn to the paintings of Rembrandt, the French Impressionists, Van Gogh, Matisse, Chagall, Klee,

⁸³ Elliot R. Wolfson, preface to *Footdreams and Treetales*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

⁸⁴ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*,” p. 17.

⁸⁵ The details concerning Wolfson’s artistic background are taken from Marcia Brennan’s *Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson* (Houston: Rice University Press, 2009), pp. 7-8. These in turn stem from a conversation Wolfson had with her on June 30, 2008.

and Hopper. As he noted then, in his early encounters with these masters, “I connected with the medium well before I started painting.”⁸⁶

Being an artistic autodidact, Wolfson’s first real impulse to paint was felt when he was a graduate student at Brandeis University during the early nineteen eighties.⁸⁷ As a measure of just how strong this impulse was and the significance he attributed to it, Wolfson even sold some of his beloved books in order to buy painting materials. When asked by Brennan about what originally motivated his painting, he responded, “I can’t explain the genealogy of the urge, except to try to translate what I was thinking and feeling into visual form.”⁸⁸ As Brennan goes on to recount, Wolfson “initially produced a few canvases, let them go, and a couple of years later he painted a few additional works, which survive to this day.... Nearly twenty years passed until, during the spring of 2003, a visitor asked him what was lying in storage bags in his office. He recalls that, from that point onward, he felt encouraged to explore painting in a way that he had never done before.”⁸⁹

One of the challenges that Wolfson faced in this deepening exploration of his talent as a visual artist was that of overcoming his natural shyness and real “lived-sense of humility”⁹⁰ enough to share his undeniable gift with others. Highlighting Wolfson’s genuine humility in particular is important since his wide-ranging expertise has both elevated and alienated him in the academy, with the result that accusations of arrogance and presumption have been leveled against him, especially by some of his colleagues in Jerusalem. As Giller has written:

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*,” p. 8.

Few scholars are so brazen as to speak authoritatively about more than one genre or time period. Wolfson seems to have violated the spirit of this social compact. The scope and volume of his writings have been viewed as evidence of a certain presumption, an ambition to rise to eminence without the sanction of Jerusalem. The sharp attack is somewhat poignant in light of the fact that... Wolfson convenes the ideas of many contemporary scholars in an atmosphere of gracious collegiality that is sadly far from the reality. Wolfson is functioning as a scholar in the academic arena, in dialogue with scholars of other religious and academic disciplines, in marked contrast to the more insular discourse world of the Israeli scholars [and some of his other colleagues elsewhere].⁹¹

Admittedly, Wolfson is an inveterate crosser of artificial boundaries, be they of a temporal or scholarly nature. Likewise, he has felt no need to seek the official approval of the Jerusalem school of thought. Nonetheless, the charge of presumption or arrogance is unfounded, given the real humility that is characteristic of the man and his work. Hence, the correctness of Rosenfeld's observation:

Both in his scholarship and personal life, Wolfson exudes a certain lived-sense of humility. The nullification of authorial-sense that allows Wolfson to speak through his sources as his sources speak through him is rooted in the modesty that marks both his life and his scholarship. [T]his modesty is deeply connected to Wolfson's primary treatment of Jewish mysticism. The dialectic of concealment and disclosure, modesty and

⁹¹ Giller, "Elliot Wolfson and the Study of Kabbalah in the Wake of Scholem," p. 27.

expression, reveals the chiasmic sense of concealment as disclosure and disclosure as concealment. To reveal is to occlude that which cannot be disclosed, as concealment is to disclose that which must remain concealed. Wolfson's work, far from being a "presumptuous" or arrogant expression of erudition, operates as a manifestation of modesty, secrecy and concealment that marks the nature of Jewish mysticism.⁹²

Indeed, as has been the case with his poetry, Wolfson has not been "aggressive" in displaying his paintings, though he has done so in a limited way, on occasion allowing them to be featured in various exhibits,⁹³ in large part because of his humility. In addition, he is "torn between the lack of interest in dealing with the art world and knowing that the work of a painting is for it to be seen."⁹⁴

Regarding the particular work of Wolfson's paintings, just as his poetry embodies a desire to explore the limits of language in order to give voice to what lies beyond it, so too are his abstract artworks born of a longing to express what is to be found within the

⁹² Rosenfeld, "Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson," pp. 8-9. For an example of Wolfson's writings on humility, in particular an extensive treatment of the kabbalistic transvaluation of values that centers on modesty and humility as primary guides for how one is to be in the world, see his chapter "Suffering, Humility, and Transgressive Piety" in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 286-316. For a clear statement on the (phallogocentric) conceptual underpinning of the link that has been made in kabbalistic texts between modesty and mystery, such that the existential concealment of the divine can be revealed only to the humble, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 145-178, particularly p. 157. On the kabbalistic connection between eros, secrecy, modesty, and the feminine in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Secrecy, Modesty, and the Feminine: Kabbalistic Traces in the Thought of Levinas," in *The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians*, eds. Kevin Hart and Michael A. Singer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 52-73.

⁹³ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 227. For an in-depth treatment of Wolfson's aesthetics as reflected and refracted through his scholarship and poetry, see Marcia Brennan, *Flowering Light: Kabbalistic Mysticism and the Art of Elliot R. Wolfson* (Houston: Rice University Press, 2009). For a selection of Wolfson's paintings, see his personal webpage at <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/faculty/wolfson/paintings.html>.

⁹⁴ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 227.

luminal darkness of rationality's foreclosure. In this, Wolfson's paintings masterfully depict "the evanescence of color, the fleetingness of forms that get caught in the frame. The *kol* [voice] of Wolfson's poetics and the *ohr* [light] of his aesthetics escort his philosophical hermeneutics into the space of the mystical experience."⁹⁵ Or, as Marcia Brennan puts it in art historical terms, Wolfson's abstract paintings can be seen as "simultaneously encompassing and eliding the categorical frameworks that distinguish the very boundaries between abstraction and representation." She continues in a much more lyrical vein: "With their intricate configurations of emerging and dissolving presences, the paintings can be viewed as conjunctive membranes or translucent screens that simultaneously demarcate and disseminate the material and the ethereal domains, bringing to earth mystical imagery that invokes the shifting veils of a living heaven."⁹⁶

These astute appreciations of the distinctive work of his paintings echo Wolfson's own words that preface the selection that he has curated for his personal webpage. There he writes:

[i have] long been preoccupied with the insights of jewish mystical traditions that approach an imageless god through the mediation of an intensely visual symbolic imaginary. [my] painted canvases communicate a corresponding sense that vision hovers ever on the borders of appearing and disappearing, disclosure and hiddenness. as the imagination seeks to give form to what remains nonetheless formless, the quintessentially

⁹⁵ Rosenfeld, "Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson," p. 17.

⁹⁶ Brennan, *Flowering Light*, p. 12.

human endeavor of hermeneutics is already caught up in the transcending eros of a divine creativity.⁹⁷

Accordingly, for Wolfson, “each venture at the canvas is a leap of faith, a plunge into darkness to see some light.”⁹⁸ And to reiterate, as such each canvas reveals and conceals an important similarity between his texts, poetry, and painting. For they all represent a similar “attempt at crossing boundaries and bringing the formless into form”; they all provide “recourse to another way of seeing” and access to alternative states of consciousness, which, if nurtured, can flower into different ways of being in the world.⁹⁹

This being the case, in order to gain further insight into Wolfson’s mystical vision or alternative way of seeing that “actively promote[s] the dissolution—and creative re-envisioning—of received patterns of meaning,”¹⁰⁰ it is to a consideration of some of the major themes of his thought that we now turn.

⁹⁷ Elliot Wolfson on his paintings at <http://wolfson.faculty.religion.ucsb.edu/paintings.html>.

⁹⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, in correspondence with Marcia Brennan, May 28, 2007. As cited in *Flowering Light*, p. 125.

⁹⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, in conversation with Marcia Brennan, June 30, 2008. As cited in *Flowering Light*, pp. 8 and 9.

¹⁰⁰ Brennan, *Flowering Light*, p. 19.

Chapter 5: The Major Themes of Wolfson's Thought and Vision

Having sketched a portrait of Wolfson's life and work, we are now in a position to consider some of the major themes of his thought pursuant to elucidating his spiritual-intellectual (read: mystical) vision. This will be done by focusing on some of the diverse but related themes that, as we saw in the previous chapter, have become characteristic of his voluminous and distinguished oeuvre – such themes as mysticism, esotericism, hermeneutics, the imagination, visionary experience, the feminine, the phallogentric and patriarchal nature of Kabbalah, and eroticism.

Given the limited scope and purpose of the current project, some of these themes will necessarily be treated at greater length and in more depth than others. Nonetheless, the following reflections will be sufficient to provide a sense of Wolfson's overall mystical vision, particularly as it relates to the notion of deification.

The Way of the Boundary Crosser Revisited

But, as I did in the section on Corbin, before turning our attention to the imagination, hermeneutics, esotericism, and other major themes of Wolfson's thought, it is worth pausing to further consider and so highlight an essential characteristic of his work that has already been mentioned and that reveals his particular genius. I am referring to Wolfson's nomadic ability and willingness to cross intellectual boundaries, and, relatedly, to his rather musical capacity for putting a host of disparate and at times discordant thinkers—often separated by vast stretches of time and space—into harmonious dialogue with one another. In both respects, Wolfson not only resembles but surpasses Corbin – to whom, as we shall see, he is explicitly indebted.

It is this striking ability to perceive and explicate previously unrecognized connections between thinkers who before had seemed unrelated that makes Wolfson's work a polyphonic form of Rosenzweig's *sprachdenken*, or "speech-thinking"¹—a theory of language according to which "speech acts and literary genres disclose the relationship of God and humanity,"² and which for Rosenzweig was a variation on the "narrative" thinking that Schelling had described as "the necessary complement to the philosophy of reason."³

In this way, by artfully orchestrating a diverse array of philosophers, poets, and mystics in a "fuguelike conversation [in which] the voices converge, dissolving into concord, without ever losing their definitive particularity"—by [m]aking the opposites of diverse discourses to coincide"—Wolfson renders kabbalistic ideas "intelligible and useful to the world of critical learning."⁴ Or, put differently, given his equal mastery of and erudition in the fields of continental philosophy and Jewish mysticism (not to mention comparative mysticism), "the often astonishing ease with which Wolfson

¹ See Rosenfeld, "Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson," p. 9. As Rosenfeld notes, Wolfson is very familiar with the thought of Rosenzweig and his notion of *sprachdenken*. Regarding the latter, see Wolfson's introduction to Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, tr. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), pp. xvii-xx. See also Wolfson's foreword to Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, *Better Than Wine: Love, Poetry, and Prayer in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. xi-xii. For an extensive treatment by Wolfson of Rosenzweig's thought, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophysis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 34-89. For an earlier treatment, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Facing the Effaced: Mystical Eschatology and the Idealistic Orientation in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig," in *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 4 (1997), pp. 39-81. See also Elliot R. Wolfson, "Light Does Not Talk But Shines: Apophysis and Vision in Rosenzweig's Theopoetic Temporality," in *New Directions in Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Aaron W. Hughes and Elliot R. Wolfson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 87-148.

² Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, "Martin Heidegger and Franz Rosenzweig on the Limits of Language as Poetry," in *History of European Ideas* 20:4-6 (1995), p. 791.

³ Benjamin Pollock, "Franz Rosenzweig," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/rosenzweig/>.

⁴ Kalman P. Bland, from his back cover endorsement of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

weaves through the intertextual landscapes creates a vortex in which the kabbalists speak through the philosophers as the philosophers speak through the kabbalists.”⁵

Four Catalytic Thinkers

As suggested in the previous chapter, of the many continental philosophers Wolfson engages in conversation, some are more constant presences in his scholarship than others. This being the case, since they will make repeated appearances in what follows, we do well to consider a few of the most significant here, and so in a preliminary fashion situate Wolfson against the backdrop of some of the Western thinkers who have served as important catalysts of his work.

We begin with Martin Heidegger. Just as Corbin’s encounter with Heidegger’s work provided him with the “hermeneutical key” (*clavis hermeneutica*) to the study of Islamic mystical texts, something similar can be said with respect to Wolfson vis-à-vis Heidegger and the study of Jewish mysticism. Although deeply aware of Heidegger’s human failings and Nazi past, Wolfson has a profound appreciation for the value of the German philosopher’s intellectual contribution.⁶ He makes this explicit in many places.

⁵ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha*: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson,” p. 9.

⁶ Wolfson has not shied away from addressing Heidegger’s antisemitism and Nazism. See, for example, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 420, n. 241. On the publication of Heidegger’s “Black Notebooks,” see Aubrey L. Glazer’s interview with Wolfson for *Religion Dispatches* (April 3, 2014), “What does Heidegger’s anti-Semitism mean for Jewish philosophy?” at <http://religiondispatches.org/what-does-heideggers-anti-semitism-mean-for-jewish-philosophy/>. For his most recent and extensive intervention in the debate over Heidegger’s complicity with Nazism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Duplicity of Philosophy’s Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). For an excellent review of this work, see Shaul Magid, “Heidegger and the Holocaust” for *Marginalia* (September 28, 2018), at <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/heidegger-and-the-holocaust/>.

Regarding Wolfson’s engagement with Heidegger, see Aaron W. Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 1-33, and the editors’ interview with Wolfson in the same volume, pp. 221-229. See also Joey Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha*: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson,” pp. 9-10. See also the lengthy footnote in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Eternal Duration and Temporal Compresence: The

For instance, in responding to a question concerning his view of Heidegger, and after acknowledging the dishonorable past of this towering figure of twentieth-century thought, Wolfson writes:

Nonetheless, to my mind, especially in studying the kabbalistic material, I have come to the conclusion that Heidegger is one of the best prisms through which to look at this material and to translate it into another philosophical idiom. Especially the so-called “later Heidegger” is relevant to kabbalah, that is, the writings from the 1930s on when he talks about the event of Being as the self-withholding projection, or the disclosive nature of truth as the concealment of concealment. Heidegger’s discussion of concealment as disclosure is very fruitful and I think in many ways appropriate to the kabbalistic literature. The connection between Heidegger and kabbalah can be made historically if we consider that the German philosopher Schelling exerted deep influence on Heidegger, and Schelling most likely had familiarity with Christian kabbalah. So the affinity between Heidegger and kabbalah is not just pie

Influence of Habad on Joseph B. Solveitchik,” in *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience – Festschrift for Steven T. Katz on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Michael Zank and Ingrid Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 208-212, n. 37.

As Rosenfeld notes, it would be difficult – I daresay impossible – to isolate all of the places where Wolfson engages Heidegger’s thought. However, there are a few more such places worth mentioning here. See, for example, Elliot R. Wolfson, “Undoing (K)not of Apophaticism: A Heideggerian Afterthought,” in *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 227-260; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Heidegger’s Apophaticism: Unsayings the Said and the Silence of the Last God,” in *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy*, eds. Nahum Brown and J. Aaron Simmons (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 185-216; and Elliot R. Wolfson, “Not Yet Now: Speaking of the End and the End of Speaking,” in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 127-193. For what promises to be a brilliant elucidation of the connections between Heidegger and kabbalistic material, see the forthcoming Elliot R. Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiēsis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

in the sky, or a figment of my imagination; it is well grounded and rooted in the texts themselves.⁷

Then, immediately following this, in response to being asked if one needs Heidegger's philosophy to understand kabbalistic texts, Wolfson clarifies that he is not making a general prescription. He writes:

You don't need Heidegger to read kabbalah. One could say about my work that it's idiosyncratic. In response I would say that Heidegger's philosophy helped me illumine the nature of esotericism, insofar as I've used Heideggerian tropes to shed light on the complexities of esotericism. In this respect, my exposition goes beyond the dialectic of concealment and disclosure, which was noted already by Scholem. I could take the explanation further because I understand how Schelling feeds right into Heidegger and why there is no dialectical resolution of concealment and disclosure; every moment of concealment is itself a disclosure of the concealment. But...one does not need Heidegger. In this regard, Heidegger is not unique. No one tool is necessary or sufficient. Nevertheless, this is part of the task of the thinker, to read the texts of the past through new interpretive prisms.⁸

⁷ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson, July 25, 2012" in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 222.

⁸ Ibid.

For it is by reading the texts of the past through new interpretive lenses, and reading the texts of the present through old interpretive prisms, that a reciprocal hermeneutic relationship is established that transcends time and space, such that the strengths and weaknesses of various works are better recognized, with the result that the former are augmented and the latter are overcome. Indeed, as Wolfson has written elsewhere with specific reference to his use of Heidegger's oeuvre to elucidate aspects of kabbalistic hermeneutics and esotericism, "By reading Jewish texts through the lens of Heidegger and reading Heidegger through the lens of Jewish texts, my hope has been to rectify their respective indiscretions."⁹

Thus, though some find such a stance controversial, when it comes to Heidegger, Wolfson unapologetically refuses to throw the baby out with the bathwater, as it were. Consequently, Heidegger's philosophical poetics or poetic philosophy has served and continues to serve as "a speculum through which Wolfson has peered, moving through and beyond the Heideggarian notions of ontology, temporality, language, poetics, eschatology and [the] dialectics of concealment and disclosure"¹⁰ into continually expanding horizons of thought that are ever ancient and ever new.

Emmanuel Levinas is another frequent dialogue partner of Wolfson's. As is the case with all of Wolfson's interlocutors, his approach to the thought of Levinas is a discerning and critical one. Thus his engagement with Levinas often results in "the appreciation of certain Levinasian notions while concurrently moving beyond the limit of

⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, interview with Aubrey L. Glazer, *Religion Dispatches* (April 3, 2014), "What does Heidegger's anti-Semitism mean for Jewish philosophy?" at <http://religiondispatches.org/what-does-heideggers-anti-semitism-mean-for-jewish-philosophy/>, p. 2.

¹⁰ Rosenfeld, "*Dorshei Yichudcha*: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson," p. 9.

his ethical and ontological premises.”¹¹ For example, insofar as he is critical of Levinas’ tendency to dismiss Heidegger’s thought, Wolfson “clears a middle path through which the demarcations separating Levinas and Heidegger are written under erasure.”¹² And it should be noted that this clearing of a middle path is not done in the service of some spurious “intellectual ventriloquism,” of which some critics have accused Wolfson. Rather, in thus crossing the boundaries that conventionally separate the thinkers with whom he engages Wolfson is blazing a trail of exploration in the mirror of their texts and thoughts in an effort to find his own voice and establish his own authority.¹³

Another of Wolfson’s frequent philosophical dialogue partners is Jacques Derrida, who is similarly indebted to Heidegger. Several themes that are characteristic of Derrida’s body of work have come to play an admittedly central role in the ongoing development of Wolfson’s own philosophical hermeneutics.¹⁴ For example, the use that Derrida makes of James Joyce’s provocative term “jewgreek”—which represents “an intriguing deformation of ‘Jew/Greek,’ where the erasure of the slash suggests an inclusive, hybridizing ‘both/and’ rather than an exclusive, purifying ‘either/or,’ and the lack of capitalization conveys the assumption of a certain freedom with respect to

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹² Ibid. For examples of his engagement with Levinas, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 90-153; Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), pp. 32-39, 297-311, n. 62-98; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Secrecy, Modesty, and the Feminine: Kabbalistic Traces in the Thought of Levinas,” in *The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians*, eds. Kevin Hart and Michael A. Singer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 52-73; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 251-252; and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 113, 287, 403 n. 60, and 432 n. 362. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that, while Rosenfeld also cites the first two books, the page and note numbers that he gives are not entirely accurate.

¹³ I am endeavoring to do the same in this study. I am indebted to Jeffrey Kripal for helping me to clarify this point.

¹⁴ See Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson*,” p. 11.

traditions, above all, a freedom to *mix* them”¹⁵—has proven instructive in Wolfson’s “chiasmic dance of exclusion as inclusion and distance as closeness.”¹⁶

Likewise, Derrida’s reflections on the nature of language, writing, absence, presence, and negative theology have had a lasting influence on Wolfson’s thought.¹⁷ In particular, the related Derridean notions of *différance* and the trace—which betoken “a presence that is present through absence as it is absent through presence”—have contributed significantly to the development of Wolfson’s thought concerning such resonant topics in the Jewish mystical tradition as *tzimtzum* (that is, contraction, constriction, or condensation) and secrecy.¹⁸ Then, too, as Rosenfeld observes, in addition to the philosophical themes that overlap in the oeuvres of these two thinkers, “the sociopolitical critiques that Derrida has leveled against Western ontotheology have impacted Wolfson’s approach to the Jewish mystical tradition,” which fact is most

¹⁵ Steven Kanneh, “Derrida, Deconstruction and the Midrash – Lessons from Derrida’s Hybrid Identity: Deconstruction as/and Midrash?” at https://www.academia.edu/2412141/Lessons_from_Derridas_Hybrid_Identity_Deconstruction_and_as_Midrash, pp. 3-4; italics in original. See James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 505. For Derrida’s comments on the phrase in *Ulysses*—“Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet.”—see “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). On Derrida’s relationship to Judaism and his sense of Jewishness, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, trans. Peretz Kidron (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001); and *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, trans. Bettina Bergo and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). For Derrida’s own reflections on his Jewish heritage and the Jewish nature of his thought, see Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Rosenfeld, “*Dorshei Yichudcha*: A Portrait of Elliot R. Wolfson,” p. 11.

¹⁷ See *ibid.* For examples of his reading of Derrida, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophysis and the Overcoming of Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), especially, pp. 154-200; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70:3 (September 2002), pp. 475-514; and Elliot R. Wolfson, “From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 145-178. Again, while Rosenfeld also cites these texts, his pagination for the first work referenced is slightly off.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*

apparent in Wolfson's controversial (to some) claim that this tradition and its texts "operate within a closed, phallogentric system" of thought.¹⁹

The last thinker to be considered who has been an important catalyst of Wolfson's work is Franz Rosenzweig. Although critical of the parochial limits of his thinking and the "quintessentially diasporic" nature of his religious philosophy, Wolfson recognizes Rosenzweig's genius and acknowledges his debt to him. As he writes, "Rosenzweig is not unimportant to me. That's true and particularly with respect to the dialectic of disclosure and concealment rather than the structure of his theopoetics."

What is more, Wolfson goes on to reflect that, in a way, though he did not understand it at the time he was writing but only much later, his book *Through a Speculum That Shines* "could be read as a commentary on Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, which ends with an affirmation of a vision of redemption that exceeds the dialogical language of revelation."²⁰

After noting that Rosenzweig "picked up on things about kabbalah here and there, so that his own work had kabbalistic elements in it, even though he didn't really immerse himself in the study of kabbalah,"²¹ Wolfson continues:

¹⁹ Ibid. The role of gender in Jewish mysticism has been a central theme in Wolfson's work from the beginning. See, for example, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Elliot R. Wolfson, "Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Revelation of Secrets in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), pp. 113-154. This is but a small sample of the multitude of texts that could be cited.

²⁰ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 225.

²¹ Ibid.

I could explain my own interest in Rosenzweig because there's a profundity to his thinking which I find intellectually attractive. I also think he has a great affinity with kabbalah, on the one side, and Schelling and Heidegger, on the other side, that make it possible for me to resonate with him. Hegel was Rosenzweig's most important conversation partner, but Schelling too is extremely important: Schelling's whole notion of myth [or "narrative"] philosophy is critical to our understanding of what Rosenzweig was up to in his thought. So, for me personally, Rosenzweig is a very deep thinker who in his own way has tried to translate his experience of Judaism into an idiom that musically vibrates.²²

An Intellectual Map

Having thus in a preliminary fashion situated Wolfson against the backdrop of some of the Western thinkers who have served as important catalysts of his work, one thing remains to be done before proceeding to a consideration of some of the major themes of his mystical vision. Specifically, we need to further reflect upon the nature of Wolfson's scholarship, which manifests his restless, searching, and unorthodox spirit in a number of characteristic and interrelated ways. The following therefore is a sketch of what I believe are the ten most important of these overlapping characteristics. This sketch or outline is meant to serve as a sort of map to Wolfson's thought that will help to elucidate his particular understanding of deification, which will be explored in a later chapter.

²² Ibid., p. 226.

First, Wolfson's scholarship is hermeneutical.²³ Rather than being exclusively or even primarily concerned with philology, history, or theology (though he employs all of these tools expertly), his work is devoted to what he calls "the search for meaning in a situation in which meaning has been eclipsed."²⁴ Thus Wolfson's scholarship (which even his critics acknowledge is exemplary) is essentially subversive inasmuch as he employs his magisterial knowledge of kabbalistic sources, hermeneutics, phenomenology, philology, history, anthropology, sociology, theology, biblical studies, literary criticism, gender theory, psychology and psychoanalysis, poetics, neuroscience, quantum physics, mathematics, and comparative religion to deconstruct the deconstructionists in order to reconstruct and articulate the profound possibilities for meaning that are to be found in "an understanding of the mystic's subjectivity."²⁵

Second, as suggested above, Wolfson's scholarship is marked by an astonishing erudition that makes his work difficult to master. He thus makes significant demands of his readers. But it is worth mentioning that these demands are not solely related to Wolfson's erudition. As will be seen below, there are a number of other factors that contribute to the difficulty of his work.

Third, as Wolfson explicitly says in a number of his works, his scholarship, while historical, is decidedly anti-historicist. That is to say, he refuses to regard historical development as the most important or even most basic aspect of human existence. In this he is no respecter of "the historical law of unrepeatability, the 'non-interchangeable

²³ See Steven M. Wasserstrom's essay "Melancholy *Jouissance* and the Study of Kabbalah: A Review Essay of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*," *AJS Review* 32:2 (2008), pp. 389.

²⁴ In the lecture "Beyond the Text: Creative Hermeneutics and History," *Conference: Academe and Spirituality: Can the Critical Mind be Reconciled with the Spiritual Quest?* at the Seminary of Judaic Studies, Jerusalem, July 21, 1997; as cited by Giller, "Elliot Wolfson," p. 24.

²⁵ Giller, "Elliot Wolfson," p. 24.

sequence of events”²⁶ to which many historians are beholden. It is this freedom from the biases of historicism that allows Wolfson to range comparatively across temporal and cultural boundaries.

Fourth, Wolfson’s scholarship is unabashedly paradoxical.²⁷ Following his kabbalistic masters, he often has recourse to the inversion of genitives (e.g., “the veiling of disclosure and the disclosure of veiling”) and employs nondualistic or “not-this-not-that” locutions that can make the heads of his readers spin. However, while the frequent use of paradox undoubtedly contributes to the difficulty of his work, this is not an obfuscating move on Wolfson’s part. Rather, he is performing “a central insight into the poetics of the texts he interprets,” and re-inscribing it in his own texts in order to “arrest the reader who might try to read the text as though the academic register required no interrogation of language itself.”²⁸ Alternatively put, Wolfson never simply *says* what he means in his texts; rather, his texts are meant to *do* something to the reader that surpasses what could be accomplished through more conventional ways of reading.²⁹ Thus, like the mystical texts he studies, there is a crucial performative aspect to Wolfson’s work that to be properly understood demands the reader’s full and active participation.

Fifth, Wolfson’s scholarship is intentionally esoteric.³⁰ That is, he writes about esotericism in a way that simultaneously reveals and conceals the “open secret” of his text that is carefully built upon a multitude of other texts, the mystical depths of which he endeavors to plumb and communicate. Thus, by speaking through and beyond the

²⁶ Wasserstrom, “Melancholy *Jouissance*,” p. 390.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 391.

²⁸ Robert Gibbs, “Conjunction, Translation, Transliteration,” *Modern Theology* 23:2 (April 2007), p. 282.

²⁹ This is the same insight behind Kripal’s notion of “mystical hermeneutics” or “hermeneutical mysticism.” Again, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

³⁰ See Wasserstrom, “Melancholy *Jouissance*,” p. 390.

language of his sources, there is a rhetorical double-mirroring effect at the heart of Wolfson's writing that heightens the peculiar demands made on the reader even as it invites them to walk through the textual looking glass that he has carefully constructed.

Sixth, Wolfson's scholarship is linguocentric, "centered on a certain experience of language."³¹ This experience is born of his understanding of Kabbalah as a mysticism of language, one that is rooted in an apophatic hermeneutic where an infinite number of renderings or interpretations of sacred Scripture "spiral around its essential meaning, which can never be [fully] translated."³² This paradoxical dance of indeterminacy places the reader within an imaginal or symbolic universe that calls upon their own experience to co-create an interpretation that is appropriate to their moment, in relation to their particular community of inquiry, even as it is relativized by a distinctively linguistic sense of time that is radically reversible. Viewed through the lens of this characteristic linguocentrism, then, the interpretive indeterminacy at the heart of Wolfson's apophatic hermeneutic is seen to be a strength rather than a weakness, "akin to the usefulness of the principle of indeterminacy in quantum physics."³³

Seventh, Wolfson's scholarship is admittedly contemplative and poetical.³⁴ For in his work he seeks to transcribe and so make available to the reader a mystical experience

³¹ Ibid.

³² Neil Douglas-Klotz, "Ordinary and Extra-ordinary Ways of Knowing in Islamic Mysticism," *Ways of Knowing: Science and Mysticism Today*, ed. Chris Clarke (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2005), p. 187.

³³ Ibid. Here it is to be noted that Jeffrey Kripal treats briefly but substantively of Wolfson's understanding of the hermeneutic and quantum nature of reality as this relates to the interpretation of dreams and visions in the latter's work, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011). See Elizabeth G. Krohn and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Changed in a Flash: One Woman's Near-Death Experience and Why a Scholar Thinks It Empowers Us All* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2018), pp. 205-207.

³⁴ See Wasserstrom, "Melancholy *Jouissance*," p. 391.

of language, which in its imaginal or symbolic nature is always already shattering the horizon of the immanent as it opens onto the transcendent.

Eighth, while profoundly respectful of the Jewish mystical tradition, Wolfson's scholarship is incisively critical of it as well, especially with regards to its endemic patriarchy, "unrelenting phallocentrism and concurrent misogyny."³⁵

Ninth, contrary to those critics who see in the scope and volume of his writings "evidence of a certain presumption, an ambition to rise to eminence without the sanction of Jerusalem,"³⁶ as it were, Wolfson's scholarship is comparative and capacious in its transdisciplinarity. Thus one can find in his work "a place where many streams flow into each other, or even collide,"³⁷ but always in a mutually enriching way.

Tenth, and finally, Wolfson's work is characterized by a pronounced sensitivity to the paradox of alterity; that is, to the ontological problem of identity and difference as it relates to the *coincidencia oppositorum*. In his own words: "If I were to isolate a current running through [my] different studies, it would be the search to resolve the ontological problem of identity and difference, a philosophic matter that has demanded much attention in various contemporary intellectual currents, to wit, literary criticism, gender studies, post-colonial theory, social anthropology, just to name a few examples. Indeed, it is possible to say, with no exaggeration intended, that there has been a quest at the heart of my work to understand the other, to heed and discern the alterity of alterity.... What has inspired the quest for me has been the discernment on the part of the kabbalists that the ultimate [poiesis of] being-becoming becoming being—[the] nameless one known through the ineffable name, *yhwh*—transcends oppositional binaries, for, in the one that

³⁵ Gibbs, "Conjunction," p. 281.

³⁶ Giller, "Elliot Wolfson," p. 27.

³⁷ Gibbs, "Conjunction," p. 280.

is beyond the difference of being one or the other, light is dark, black is white, night is day, male is female, Adam is Edom.”³⁸

These, then, are ten of the most important and distinctive characteristics of Wolfson’s scholarship. Although this summary leaves out several other notable qualities, it suffices to show the extraordinarily rich and multifaceted nature of Wolfson’s work. As will become clear in the next chapter, it is these characteristics and this same sophistication that inform his specular understanding of the dialectic of deification, which is captured in such paradoxical or “mirroring” statements as the following: “to attribute human form to God is to attribute divine form to humans.”³⁹ And: “If we are to adopt the language of the secrets of the divine being presented in the guise of the secrets of the soul, then we must equally posit that the secrets of the soul are presented in the guise of the secrets of the divine.”⁴⁰ For, as the dialectic of deification attests, the divine and human are essentially two mirrors that reflect one another through, with, and in the difference of their identity.⁴¹

Some Major Themes and Texts

With this in mind, then, and by way of adding topographical detail to our map as it were, we can proceed with a consideration of some of the major themes of Wolfson’s thought. Because his thinking is complex and his oeuvre is vast, in what follows I will be relying

³⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. xvi.

³⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 69. See also Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 102.

⁴⁰ Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), p. 426 n159.

⁴¹ See *ibid.*

in part on the intellectual portrait of Wolfson that Aaron Hughes has drawn.⁴² For Hughes has done a masterful job of both elucidating “the nuances of Wolfson’s complex thinking without misrepresenting it through essentialist or reductive readings” and illuminating some of the key motifs of his vast body of work.⁴³

The themes he has chosen to highlight from a selection of Wolfson’s most prominent books are constellated under the following headings: The Palace of the Imagination (*Through a Speculum That Shines*); Hermeneutics and Temporality (*Language, Eros, Being*); Secrecy and Comparison (*Open Secret*); Dreams, Oneiropoiesis, and the Chiasmic Structure of Reality (*A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*); and The Gift (*Giving Beyond the Gift*). Thus our focus will be on the same leitmotifs and texts as we further explore Wolfson’s commitment to “reimagining thinking as a poetic activity, which daringly demands that the thinker imagine the imageless.”⁴⁴

Because of the complexity and vastness of Wolfson’s poetic thinking our exploration of these major themes of his intellectual-spiritual (read: mystical) vision will be undertaken in the course of this and the subsequent chapter. In this chapter, the books *Through a Speculum That Shines* and *Language, Eros, Being* will be considered. In the next chapter, the books *Open Secret*, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, and *Giving Beyond the Gift* will be considered, with later chapters being devoted to a fuller explication of *Open Secret*.

⁴² Aaron W. Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” in *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 1-33. This section will be focusing particularly on pp. 13-30.

⁴³ Aubrey L. Glazer, “Thinking Through the Future of Jewish Philosophy Now: Contemporary Jewish Philosophers,” *Religious Studies Review* 43:4 (December 2017), p. 364.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

In the Shining Mirror of the Imagination

It is safe to say that the theme of the imagination is foundational to Wolfson's thought. Indeed, according to Hughes, "Imagination forms the bedrock of all Wolfson's work. It functions as his point of departure and place of return, permitting him to read together texts that, on the surface, seem to have nothing to say to one another, and it is the faculty that offers him the creative wherewithal to carry such readings out boldly and fully." Furthermore, he notes, while the imagination is an artistic, mystical, and philosophical faculty that reflects the paradoxical complexity of being, "Wolfson articulates its transcendence and phenomenologically reveals its labyrinthine contours that can only be imagined from within its own imaginative structures." Thus, for Wolfson, the imagination is the site wherein we come to realize that one does not or cannot use language to arrive at a transcendent meaning that is somehow divorced from or alien to language itself, "because meaning is in the very language, in the play of its words, conjuring up the symbolic imagery that permits us to encounter an imageless reality."⁴⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that in what follows we will see this insight running through Wolfson's oeuvre like a golden thread.

As previously mentioned, after the publication of his dissertation, Wolfson's first book-length monograph was entitled *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (1994). This work is, in the words of Hughes, "a revolutionary study that examines the visionary impulse and the simultaneous prohibition (e.g., Deut. 4:16-19) against iconic representation of the divine within Jewish mysticism and, by extension, within monotheism generally."⁴⁶ Indeed, this paradoxical

⁴⁵ Aaron W. Hughes, "Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait," p. 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

tension is “endemic to the monotheistic enterprise” as such, a fact that Wolfson will return to explore at greater length and from an even more radical perspective in his *Giving Beyond the Gift* (2014).⁴⁷ But how does he deal with it in *Through a Speculum that Shines*?

Whereas Gershom Scholem and other scholars in his wake attempted to make sense of this tension by reifying the differences that supposedly obtain between the visual culture of the Greeks and the auditory culture of the Hebrews, Wolfson rejects such a simple dichotomy. Instead, he prefers to acknowledge the much more complex and deep-rooted interrelationship of these civilizations. For, according to Wolfson, cultures or civilizations of every time and place are inextricably bound together and entangled with one another to greater or lesser degrees. Thus the histories and destinies of the Greeks and Jews, for example, become “virtually impossible to unravel,” which is why Wolfson insists, over the objection of his critics, on reading premodern Jewish mystical texts and postmodern philosophical ones together and in the light of each other.⁴⁸

Another distinctive way that Wolfson seeks to understand the paradoxical tension that is endemic to Jewish mysticism in particular and monotheism in general is by focusing not on the pictorial images of God that served either a decorative or symbolic function (not a liturgical one) in synagogues or on illuminated manuscripts of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but rather, as he puts it, on “the problem of figuration or representation of God in mental images”; a problem that was frequently discussed in philosophical and theological texts in the form of “exegetical comments or scholastic debates concerning the proper interpretation of visions of the divine recorded in biblical

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

prophecy.”⁴⁹ For it is precisely this problem that informed the mystical traditions of all three Abrahamic traditions, as—again, in the words of Wolfson—“the mystic visionary wrestled with the conflict of experiencing an almost tangible object of his or her vision, on the one hand, and with the stated normative belief that God in his true nature is incorporeal and hence invisible, on the other.”⁵⁰ Hughes clearly states the significance of this, which is that these mental images “do not exist apart from the structures of an individual’s consciousness.”⁵¹ This means that the philosophical issues that drive Wolfson’s analysis are “primarily phenomenological (i.e., what are the structures of consciousness that permit the individual to experience the world from his or her own point of view) and ontological (i.e., what is the nature of the image that makes this possible).”⁵²

The key for Wolfson, following Corbin, is the imagination—or, to be more precise, the symbolic imagination. Thus his approach, though contextualist, is also universalist inasmuch as it assumes “a phenomenology of mystical experience that is to be located in the symbolic imagination, that is, the divine element of the soul that enables one to gain access to the realm of incorporeality by transferring or transmuting sensory data and/or rational concepts into symbols. In that regard the primary function of the imagination may viewed as hermeneutical.” Wolfson continues:

Through the images within the heart, the locus of the imagination, the divine, whose pure essence is incompatible with all form, is nevertheless

⁴⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁵¹ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 14.

⁵² *Ibid.*

manifest in a form belonging to the “Imaginative Presence,” to borrow a technical term employed by Henry Corbin in his description of the thirteenth-century Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi. The paradox that the *deus absconditus* appears to human beings in multiple forms, including, most significantly, that of the anthropos, is the enduring legacy of the prophetic tradition that has informed and challenged Judaism [and Christianity and Islam] throughout the ages. Moreover, the role of the imaginal, to employ Corbin’s terminology once again, serving as a symbolic intermediary allowing for the imaging of the imageless God, is a tradition that has its roots in the biblical and rabbinic texts, although it is developed and articulated most fully in the medieval mystical literature.”⁵³

Accordingly, for Wolfson, the imagination is “the vehicle for the contemplative ascent to the spiritual realm and the ultimate conjunction of the individual and the intelligible forms, the reunion or reunification of the soul and its spiritual root [read: deification].”⁵⁴

Given this, as Hughes notes, *Through a Speculum That Shines* is not a simple historical study that is merely concerned with dates, places, and influences. On the contrary, Wolfson’s concerns are much more profound, as is evidenced by the hermeneutic belief that animates his work, which is that “by digging into the soil of a specific cultural matrix one may uncover roots that lead to others.”⁵⁵ It is this conviction—that “the deeper one digs into one path, the greater the chance one will find

⁵³ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁵⁵ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. xiii.

the way to other paths”⁵⁶—that is behind Wolfson’s embrace of a universalism that is nonetheless rooted in the particularism or singularity of each tradition. Thus, by using this comparative hermeneutic, Wolfson—in the words of Hughes now—“seeks to show how medieval Jewish (and by extension, other monotheistic) philosophers and mystics, in addition to contemporary Continental philosophers, given all their diverse linguistic and cultural expressions, nevertheless shared a common epistemic heritage that pivots around, but is not subsumed by binaries such as veiling/unveiling, revelation/concealment, and appearance/disappearance.”⁵⁷

This does not mean that Wolfson is suggesting that the various philosophical and religious traditions that he studies are all saying the same thing, but rather that, by virtue of the consciousness we share, these traditions possess certain common discourses that are the fruit of endeavoring to come to terms with sameness and difference. Hence, contrary to what some of his critics contend, Wolfson is not intent on pointing out such features in “a simplistic or reductive fashion.” Indeed, this could not be further from the truth. For, as Hughes observes, the reality is that “through investigation into semantic registers of original texts (in their original languages), Wolfson, as a textual archaeologist, seeks out subterranean and untrammelled paths between a variety of traditions.”⁵⁸

In *Through a Speculum That Shines*, therefore, Wolfson explores what he refers to as “the problem of iconic visualization of the divine in Jewish mystical sources from the Hekhalot compositions to the *Zohar*.” In so doing, he seeks to bridge “the

⁵⁶ “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, pp. 196-197.

⁵⁷ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” pp. 14-15. In this regard, Wolfson’s hermeneutic is both similar to and different from Corbin’s. Indeed, as will become increasingly clear, in many respects, Wolfson’s approach transcends and includes Corbin’s.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

methodological gap of the phenomenological and historical approaches by studying the phenomenology of visionary experience in different historical settings,”⁵⁹ thereby showing how facing the text through study and contemplation affords the kabbalist or mystic “the opportunity not only to see the face of God but to become that very face” in the visual, hermeneutical, and imaginal confrontation with the paradoxical truth that they are what God is.⁶⁰

Thus Wolfson emphasizes the necessity of analyzing “the warp and woof of any given religious experience in light of its lived historical context, at least as it may be reconstructed within the margins of textuality.” However, the contextualist orientation that Wolfson adopts “does not... presume that Jewish mysticism in its various manifestations is first and foremost a historical phenomenon.” On the contrary, he argues that Jewish mysticism, like the mystical traditions in other world religions, “is a religious *mentalité* that has expressed itself in distinctive ways in different periods of Jewish history.”⁶¹ Wolfson goes on to further elucidate the precise nature of his paradoxical, both-and approach in a way that is reminiscent of Corbin’s (as well as Eliade’s, and perhaps to a lesser extent Scholem’s) own methodological rebellion against the academic status quo. Wolfson writes:

To recognize the religious character of mysticism is not to deny its historicity. The methodological issue at stake, however, is a historicist reductionism that would claim that authentic scholarship must be subservient to an empiricist notion of history: what is historical is

⁵⁹ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 393.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 392.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 393.

something novel. Without denying the novelty of human history, one must seriously weigh the appropriateness of this methodology when examining mystical literature. It is much more germane to isolate through phenomenological sophistication the myths, symbols, and deep structures that have informed the life experiences of Jewish mystics through ages. My approach, too, reflects an appreciation of the historical aspects of Jewish mysticism, but I would categorically reject the reduction of this polymorphous phenomenon to a time-bound historical construction. By doing so, one is tempted to identify Jewish mysticism as an event (or series of events) that can be charted on some chronological and geographical grid. The superficial mapping of Jewish mysticism lures one into losing sight of the common motifs and images that recur in different literary settings. These structural components are far more significant in determining the parameters of Jewish mysticism than in locating specific historical novelties. Sensitivity to historical conditions and developments is an integral part of the phenomenological enterprise, but it is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness to regard Jewish mysticism [and mysticism in general] as a historical truth that can be uncovered or reconstructed solely and exclusively on the basis of the historicist approach.⁶²

What Wolfson is here describing is a third way or intermediate position that he has staked out between the relativizing contextualists and the absolutizing perennialists. “One can avoid the extremes,” he writes, “of relativism or nominalism (hyper-

⁶² Ibid.

Kantianism) and absolutism or essentialism (the doctrine of unanimity) by positing an intermediate position that seeks to determine the common structures underlying the manifold appearances of the phenomenon.”⁶³ He continues, and draws the important conclusion: “By determining those structures we can appreciate the unique status of mystical [experience] in different cultural and religious contexts. Within the diversity of manifestations of mystical [experience] in different cultural and religious contexts there must be some unity of resemblance, for without such unity through diversity the expression becomes meaningless, referring to everything and nothing.”⁶⁴

Such, then, is the theoretical principal behind the methodological middle way that Wolfson calls his “modified contextualism,” which simultaneously is a modified universalism. He thus summarizes his paradoxical or nondual position as follows:

The modified contextualism that I am advocating in light of a structural assumption regarding the nature of mystical experience—or more specifically, mystical vision—implies neither that all mystical experiences are the same and the description of those experiences vary in accord with the different cultural-religious settings, nor that all mystical experience can be divided into “types” that cut across cultural boundaries and differ only in terms of the language used to describe them. To reiterate my epistemological assumption..., the interpretative framework of a mystic’s particular religion shapes his or her experience at the phenomenal level and not merely in the description or narrative account of the experience.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 54.

⁶⁴ Ibid. This is precisely Kripal’s position as well.

*This does not, however, logically preclude the possibility of underlying patterns of experience or deep structures that may be illuminated through a comparative study of various mystical traditions.*⁶⁵

Perhaps not surprisingly, this seemingly commonsensical approach that “permits access into the ahistorical imaginal world about which [Wolfson] writes so articulately in the historical mystics that he studies,” has proven to be controversial and a cause of misunderstanding his work in kabbalah.⁶⁶

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of factors and personal characteristics that lend themselves to the controversy and misunderstanding surrounding Wolfson’s work and his methodological middle way. For instance, he is a careful and close reader of texts whose remarkable expertise and acute sensitivity to linguistic expression cannot be denied; he possesses “a masterful knowledge of the manuscript tradition that grants him access to a wealth of unpublished material”; he is “a voracious reader of scholarship from numerous disciplines”; and he puts these skills “in the service of an interpretive framework that eschews a strict historicism that simply or neatly confines the past to its immediate contexts”⁶⁷—all of which combine to afford Wolfson a radical openness and freedom that some of his colleagues find not only disconcerting but threatening.

There is, however, one more important aspect of Wolfson’s heretical work that bears a closer look in this regard, particularly as it relates to *Through a Speculum That Shines*. Specifically, I am referring to Wolfson’s reading of Kabbalah’s “mystical eroticism,” which for him is, in the words of Jeffrey Kripal, “an ontological force that is

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 54-55; emphasis mine.

⁶⁶ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

at once religiously profound, aesthetically beautiful, sexually ambiguous, and morally troubling—*awe-ful* in the original sense of that term.”⁶⁸

Wolfson’s reading has been influenced by a number of French feminist thinkers, most notably the philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray and the French-Israeli philosopher, psychoanalyst, writer, and painter Bracha Ettinger. Thus Wolfson contends not only that “[t]he phenomenon of a hermeneutical mysticism and its connection to visionary experience are...well-documented characteristics of the kabbalistic traditions,”⁶⁹ but that this hermeneutical mysticism was also “an erotic mysticism, that the exegetical process was sexualized and gendered (and rather complexly so) down to its ontological core, and that seeing itself was an essentially phallic act.”⁷⁰ This means that, in Wolfson’s feminist-influenced technical terminology, kabbalistic mysticism, especially in its later medieval forms, was characterized and even defined by a particular brand of “phallogocentric occularcentrism.”⁷¹ Moreover, this phallogocentric occularcentrism of the Jewish mystics “both emerges from and is indicative of [the] larger rabbinic phallogomorphic culture, that is, a culture in which the phallus is regarded as the ultimate marker of gender identity.”⁷² Hence, Wolfson argues, the mystical eroticism associated with this tradition places the (erect) phallus at the center of the visual encounter,⁷³ thereby betraying the homoerotic nature of Judaism’s esoteric hermeneutics.

Not surprisingly, such a reading of the Jewish mystical tradition has ruffled some feathers. Yet Wolfson’s perspicacious exegesis of his kabbalistic sources should not be

⁶⁸ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 264; italics in original.

⁶⁹ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 284.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. xii. See also Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 284.

⁷² Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 16.

⁷³ See *ibid.*

that shocking or surprising; for, as Hughes points out, “kabbalistic texts were, after all, written by and for males, and as a result they necessarily portray sexuality from a male perspective.” This means that, in terms of the kabbalistic imagery of the ten sefirot, the male kabbalists “identified with and were fascinated by the ninth sefirah [*Yesod*], which signifies the divine phallus. This homoerotic impulse subsequently denigrated the feminine (both earthly and cosmic), which functions as little more than an instrument, a speculum through which the mystic visualizes the phallus.” Furthermore, this means that the act of reading and studying the Torah, an act that can only be performed by circumcised males, “thus becomes an attempt to remove the veils that cover the divine phallus.”⁷⁴

This does not mean, however, that the Jewish mystics engaged in visionary experiences were all somehow homosexuals in the modern sense. No doubt, as Hughes observes, statistically speaking, some probably were. But this is not Wolfson’s point, which in reality is much more subtle and esoteric. For what he is arguing is that “the homoerotic bonding of males theosophically symbolizes and even actualizes the union of male and female in the Godhead.”⁷⁵ It may be a difficult point to accept, but it is also one that should, in the words of Hughes, “silence those who want to see in the *Shekhinah* an unequivocal adulation of the feminine side of God, an early prototype for Jewish feminism.”⁷⁶

Whether or not one agrees with Wolfson’s reading of the Jewish mystical tradition, three things become abundantly clear to anyone who has taken the time and made the effort to study his written corpus with an open mind and heart. First, as Kripal

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 17. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, p. 371, n. 155.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

astutely observes, Wolfson's hermeneutic, far from being an anachronistic projection of the modern back onto the medieval, is in fact "mining the medieval for the veins of the modern, using the medieval, as it were, to render more explicit and exoteric what could be for us moderns only implicit and esoteric." He continues: "Here the genuine revelations of a hermeneutical method arise from a profound structural or cognitive sympathy between two apparently foreign systems of thought—the kabbalistic and psychoanalytic, the medieval and the modern, the mystical and theoretical. We are back, once again, to hermeneutics as a hidden or camouflaged mystical practice."⁷⁷

Second, it cannot be denied that Wolfson's thesis regarding the kabbalists' phallogocentric occularcentrism "emerges from within an astonishing display of exegetical skill and scholarship." Indeed, again in the words of Kripal, Wolfson's prose "often reads remarkably like the kabbalistic texts themselves, moving effortlessly, as in a free association session, from scriptural citation to mystical gloss to contemporary critical theory and back to scripture again." Kripal elaborates:

Granted, we always have an opening theoretical discussion of the relevant scholarly literature and a historical treatment of the specific theme in biblical, rabbinic, and early kabbalistic writers, and we are constantly reminded through cultural anthropology and historical-critical methods of the contexts and associations through which a particular passage should be read, but from there on out, usually until the end of the essay or monograph, we inevitably find ourselves convincingly lost in a complex web of meanings, associations, insights, and images, most of them charged

⁷⁷ Kripal, *Roads of Excess*, p. 273.

with sexual connotations. It is as if we are caught in the very texture of Kabbalah, thinking, reading, imagining our way through a modern Zohar with Wolfson.⁷⁸

Third and finally, in light of the foregoing, it is also worth noting with Hughes that Wolfson's foundational text, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, "makes an important contribution to introducing the study of Jewish mysticism into the realm of religious studies." As we have seen, Wolfson has not only read deeply and widely in this larger field, but this particular book (like his subsequent work) "has articulated and thus contributed to our understanding of the tensions inherent to monotheism." Consequently, as mentioned, *Through a Speculum That Shines* garnered the attention of a much larger audience than more traditional technical studies of Jewish mysticism had prior to its publication, and it won an Award of Excellence from the American Academy of Religion.⁷⁹

The Language, Eros, and Being of Hermeneutics and Temporality

In 2005, Wolfson published a landmark tome that built on the foundation he had laid with *Through a Speculum That Shines*. The winner of the National Jewish Book Award for scholarship, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* is in part a forceful response to his critics who persistently accuse him of reading medieval texts anachronistically in the light of twentieth-century philosophical thought. It is also a grateful acknowledgement of his debt to Gershom Scholem, who essentially created the

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 274.

⁷⁹ Hughes, "Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait," p. 17.

academic study of Jewish mysticism. This debt is twofold, relating to both the gender bias and poetics of kabbalah. Before examining how Wolfson addresses the charge of anachronism, I want to unpack the twofold nature of his debt to Scholem.

In his seminal work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, which was originally published in 1941, Scholem declared that both historically and metaphysically Jewish mysticism “is a masculine doctrine, made for men and by men. The long history of Jewish mysticism shows no trace of feminine influence. There have been no women Kabbalists,” in contradistinction to the Christian and Islamic mystical traditions, which can boast such female mystics as Teresa of Avila and Rabia, respectively. According to Scholem, “[t]his exclusive masculinity for which Kabbalism has paid a high price, appears...to be connected with an inherent tendency to lay stress on the demonic nature of woman and the feminine element of the cosmos.”⁸⁰

In response to this oft-cited remark of Scholem’s, Wolfson simultaneously affirms and refines its basic accuracy. “I would express matters in a slightly different way,” he writes, “but there is little question that the male domination of kabbalists is due to the ontologically subservient role attributed to women.” He continues:

There is an essential homology between the structure of the myth of divine unity predicated on the transcendence of sexual opposites, on the one hand, and the hierarchical constitution of social relationships, on the other. That is, just as in the former case the female is subordinated to the male, so too in the latter. To be sure, male kabbalists have recognized that the

⁸⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941/1995), p. 37. See also Kalman Bland’s review of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being* in the *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 31:2 (November 2007), pp. 391-393.

woman plays an important role as the vehicle that facilitates procreation, and thus there is always a need for the feminine. Moreover, we can even say that theurgic efficacy is accorded the Jewish woman in the act of domestic intercourse, a role that is predicated on the symbolic correlation of the female below and the divine feminine. Notwithstanding the legitimacy of this claim, the role assigned to the woman is reflective of an androcentric bias, her worth determined exclusively from the vantage point of the man. In the final analysis, the female was considered part of the male, a reversal of what empirical evidence would suggest.⁸¹

Thus, summarizing the arguments he has made with “unsurpassed erudition and philosophic sophistication”⁸² in almost four hundred pages of text and over two hundred pages of notes, Wolfson concludes,

In spite of the noteworthy expansion of the boundaries of the mythopoetic imagination on the part of the kabbalists, attested in the explicit characterizations of the divine as male and female, there is no textual or conceptual basis to argue that they were able to overcome the androcentric bias of medieval rabbinic culture according to which man, and not woman, was upheld as the more perfect ideal of human existence, both somatically and psychically.... Based on this principle, which is substantiated by a

⁸¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 388.

⁸² Kalman P. Bland, review of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being* in *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 31:2 (November 2007), p. 391.

plethora of sources that I have studied carefully and critically in the course of more than two decades, it should become apparent to the nonpartisan reader that the positive attributes associated with *Shekhinah* entail her masculinization...[and hence the overcoming of] the sexual dimorphism characteristic of a state of exile[, which is redemption or] the reconstitution of the androgynous male, the unseeing of *Shekhinah* in the guise of an autonomous feminine imaginary, the speculum that is the other, an eschatological vision of the occluded, seeing of nothing-to-be-seen, the covenant of peace, the prismatic bow enveloped in the cloud, unveiling of the veil in veiling the unveiled.... We are thus justified in concluding that the role assigned the feminine in the imaginal envisioning of the divine enhances rather than diminishes the androcentric nature of kabbalistic symbolism, falling far short of what we would consider a genuine celebration of the female.⁸³

These conclusions are meant to be as bracing as they are familiar. For, as Wolfson states, in great measure, *Language, Eros, Being*, like the entirety of his scholarly project that began with his entrance to graduate school in 1980, “has been impelled by a keen sense that kabbalah—not to speak of the spiritual comportment of Judaism more generally—is in need of mending that cannot be attained by way of apologetic thinking or obfuscation shaped by winds of political correctness.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 373-374, and 385.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 372. It must be noted that what Wolfson says here about kabbalah and Judaism more generally being in need of “mending” is true of every mystical and religious tradition. That he has not shied away

Accordingly, in a manner that recalls, refines, and extends Scholem's seminal critique of Jewish mysticism's inherent androcentric gender bias, Wolfson maintains that the necessary repair, "if it is to be more than the proverbial bandage on a fracture," must come not through forgetfulness or willful blindness but from a radical remembering. Thus, he writes, "I have sought to remember in this way, to take hold of the root and thereby uproot, to re/collect something of what has been disseminated. Admittedly, the focus is on one tradition, with occasional venturing into other traditions for comparative purposes, but this study, as all my work, is informed by the sincere belief that delving deeply into the ground of one tradition opens paths to explore others."⁸⁵

Such, then, is the first aspect of Wolfson's twofold debt to Scholem. The second aspect is given beautiful expression in the preface to *Language, Eros, Being*. There Wolfson poignantly quotes the concluding remarks that Gershom Scholem made in 1977 upon receiving the Bialik Prize. In these remarks, Scholem notes that "the tremendous poetic potential within Kabbalah," despite its "promise of great discoveries," has hardly been examined and that this is due in large part to the fact that "the tools have not yet been created for understanding the lyric plane within [the] language of the Kabbalists and the Hasidim." He therefore concludes his remarks by expressing "the wish that we may look forward to someone who will remove the dust hiding the true face of such books as *Sefer ha-Temunah*, *Berit Menuhah*, or *Hemdat Yamim*, to reveal the poetic depths in their imagery and that of many similar books."⁸⁶

from taking up this fraught but necessary task of repair evinces what Jeffrey Kripal has referred to as the "activist" element of Wolfson's scholarship (personal communication).

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 372-373.

⁸⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. xi.

Concerning these remarks, Wolfson reflects that when he happened upon the study of Jewish mysticism decades ago he could not have known how portentous Scholem's words would prove to be for him. As he writes, at that time, "I could not have had any idea that the words of Scholem would serve as the guideword on my path, an evocation at the beginning, challenging and leading me on the way to crafting a poetics of kabbalah." In acknowledging this, Wolfson is explicitly "accepting the responsibility of relating" his work to Scholem and thereby expressing his "gratitude of the highest order for a scholar, the thanking of thinking in the footsteps of the other."⁸⁷ He is also providing the reader with a key to understanding not only *Language, Eros, Being* but his entire oeuvre as well. For when Wolfson describes himself as being on a mystical and scholarly journey to "crafting a poetics of kabbalah" he is affirming that his commitment to poetics pervades his scholarship in general and this book in particular.

Beyond this, in *Language, Eros, Being*, Wolfson goes further than Scholem by powerfully demonstrating that "a critically informed theory of poetics is the necessary precondition for the scholarly analysis of kabbalistic lore."⁸⁸ Indeed, with the help of such medieval authorities as Abraham Abulafia and Moses Maimonides, and such modern philosophers as Martin Heidegger, Henry Corbin, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Wolfson articulates "a fully developed, phenomenologically inflected 'linguistic turn' in intellectual history."⁸⁹ This "linguistic turn" is inherently paradoxical insofar as it is rooted in what Wolfson rightly describes as "an apophatic orientation well attested in philosophical and theological treatises composed by practitioners of the three monotheistic religions," an orientation that is related to and operates on the assumption

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Bland, review of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 391-392.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 392.

that “human cognition is intractably dependent on the imaginative faculty [because] one cannot access the divine...in and of itself, since it has no image.”⁹⁰ Consequently, as Bland observes, for Wolfson, this anti-positivist, premodern epistemological premise that informs and critically anchors Romanticism, “the linchpin of hermeneutical theory,” is essential “both for the kabbalists themselves and the modern scholars seeking to interpret them.”⁹¹

This means that Wolfson’s critically informed poetics has a “major affinity” to the kabbalah insofar as he understands its poetic language and poetic language in general as “a form of speech that unsays what it says in the act of saying the unsaid.” Here, as he attests, Wolfson is following the poet Paul Celan “who spoke of the poem as coming into being through intercourse with that language that remains invisible.”⁹² But he is also following Heidegger, who held that language is the house of being: that being manifests through and dwells in the perpetual making and unmaking—the inherent *poesis*—of language. Thus, according to Wolfson, all of our experience of being—every aspect of our sensual experience of life—“is enframed in some primordially of language” that transcends and includes rationality, at least as this has been traditionally understood in the limited and limiting terms of Aristotle. In this, our being in the world is always and everywhere profoundly linked to language, and language in some way not only points to but constitutes the paradoxical mystery that we are. Hence, Wolfson avers (echoing Heidegger), fundamentally, “language is the opening through which being—always beyond language—reveals and conceals itself.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 236.

⁹¹ Bland, review of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 392.

⁹² “Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson,” *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 227.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.

In light of this, the fundamental truth of Wolfson's critically informed poetics again becomes clear. What is this fundamental truth? In his own words, it is the paradox that "interpretation not only reveals the truth it also re-veils, or re-conceals the truth."

Indeed, he continues:

That, to me, is the paradox at the heart of everything, be it religion, philosophy, art, or life. To see truth without a veil is to see that there is no seeing of truth but through the veil of truth. In many of my works I have articulated this insight. In the absence of imagination there is no form, not even the form of the formless, and without form there is no vision and hence no knowledge. Alternatively expressed, there is only the semblance of truth unveiled in the veil of untruth. If the secret is imagined to be a truth that is completely disrobed—that is, a truth divested of all appearance—then the secret is nothing to see. By contrast, the truth that is truly apparent is disclosed in and through the garment of its concealment.⁹⁴

Thus, to reiterate, this is the paradoxical insight that is at the heart of Wolfson's poetics.

Timeswerve/Hermeneutic Reversibility

Having considered the twofold nature of Wolfson's debt to Scholem, it now behooves us to examine how he addresses those critics who claim that his reading of medieval kabbalistic thinkers through a modern and/or postmodern lens is inherently anachronistic

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 217.

and thus erroneous.⁹⁵ As was the case with the preface, in the prologue to *Language, Eros, Being*, Wolfson provides “a theoretical justification that illumines much of his scholarly activity.”⁹⁶ Drawing upon insights from such disciplines as physics, philosophy, and literature to argue on explicitly unhistorical grounds that “my telling of time cannot be disentangled from my time of telling,” Wolfson offers phenomenological justification for his project of thinking *chronos* “in the poeticized manner of being open to being that is open, cracking the time line at its seam, as it were, to expand the horizon beyond the limit of limitlessness that perforce limits the limitlessness of limit.”⁹⁷

At the epicenter of this justification is a notion of hermeneutic and temporal reversibility that is rooted in a perspective from which the continuous flow of phenomenal time is seen to exemplify an interdependence of individual “now” points of entangled spacetime that loop back on themselves in curvilinear fashion, and hence it follows that “the trajectory of the curve, ‘the *path* of a moving point,’ which is ‘spread out over both space and time,’ makes possible the return to the point of departure and departure from the point of arrival, a closed loop figuratively depicting the object/subject becoming its own past.”⁹⁸

This perspective is captured in what Wolfson refers to as the “timesverve”:

Time reversal, therefore, does not theoretically, imply a mechanical retracing of previous moments but circumambulating the curve, going

⁹⁵ Because Wolfson’s explication of what Jeffrey Kripal refers to as his “gnosis of the timesverve” (see Krohn and Kripal, *Changed in a Flash*, p. 314n52) is crucial to understanding his position vis-à-vis his critics, it warrants a full subsection in this context.

⁹⁶ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 19.

⁹⁷ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. xvi.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvii. In this passage, Wolfson is quoting from the work of the German mathematician Hermann Weyl (1885-1955).

back to the future and arriving at the past. Alternatively expressed, to posit the legitimate possibility of time reversal rests on the presumption regarding the relativity of simultaneity, which in turn renders the distinction between past, present, and future, as Einstein put it when receiving news of the death of his friend Michele Besso, “a stubbornly persistent illusion.”⁹⁹

To be clear, this is a radical move on Wolfson’s part that effectively pulls the conceptual rug out from under the feet of his historical positivist critics who falsely accuse him of anachronism. For, as he subsequently puts it, “The critique of time as absolute simultaneity sets into sharp relief a genetic fallacy of historical positivism and opens the way to brood over the reversibility of the temporal flow; the past may not, after all, extend monodirectionally into the present, which was its future, but rather may swerve its way curvilinearly, future awaiting its past, past becoming its future.” Wolfson continues: “We could, then, think of time’s motion as comprising two movements—procession and return—following exactly the same pattern of development in different directions.” Then, he pointedly asks, “Would the relativization of knowledge implied by the historicist premise not have to be adjusted, or the very least defended, by a more careful taxonomy if one were to accept (not just on poetic grounds but scientifically) that the way forward is the way back; the way back, the way forward?”¹⁰⁰

Indeed it would. For, according to this paradoxical Wolfsonian perspective, in the eloquent words of Aaron Hughes, “[t]he succession of time means that the ‘now’ is both

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. xx.

past and future and, thus, not now, thereby imploding any neat or traditional notion of succession. Time, linearly, but especially when conceived of circularly or curvilinearly, returns us to the place we have never been; a return in which we find ourselves, simultaneously again and anew, within the palace of the imagination, the place where the simulacrum of reality transforms reality into a simulacrum.”¹⁰¹

But here a couple of things must be noted. First, in order to prevent potential misinterpretation on the part of his readers, Wolfson clearly and “unequivocally” states that the reversibility of time that he wishes to affirm “is not a reiteration of the myth of cosmic reversal articulated by Plato, a version of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same predicated on the assumption that as the cosmos rotates in one direction due to the agency of the transcendent cause, it stores up the energy to revolve in the opposite direction of its own accord, a notion that can be properly criticized on the grounds that it denies the indeterminacy of future eventualities.”¹⁰² In contrast, Wolfson’s understanding of temporal reversibility is in some respects reminiscent of Alfred North Whitehead’s treatment of time. Accordingly, Wolfson writes, for him, reversibility “entails the presentational immediacy of a temporal atomicity, the novel recurrence and spontaneous reenactment of a moment that has never been, and consequently the past is no more determinate of the future than the future is of the past, both living on and through the indeterminate present.”¹⁰³

Likewise, Wolfson clearly articulates how his phenomenological perspective on time is both similar to and different from that of Henry Corbin. He points out that the link he discerns between the curvature of time and the symbolic imagination “does not

¹⁰¹ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 20.

¹⁰² Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. xvii-xviii.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

depend, as it does in the case of Corbin's phenomenology of the *mundus imaginalis*, on discarding 'causal historical filiation' in favor of the 'continuity of "hierophanic time,"' 'a discontinuous, qualitative, pure, psychic time' that is distinguished categorically from 'quantitative physical time...measured according to homogenous, uniform units of time and chronology regulated by the movements of the stars.'" Wolfson elaborates: "I agree with Corbin that a deeper temporal experience entails an intensity that measures time 'in which the past remains present to the future, in which the future is already present to the past, just as the notes of a musical phrase, though played successively, nevertheless persist all together in the present and thus form a phrase.' Yet I cannot accept the binary opposition he draws (in part indebted to Eliade's dichotomy of the sacred/eternal and profane/historical) by ascribing cyclical time to a 'transhistoric truth' and linear time to 'material historic truth.'" Wolfson's argument, by contrast, "rests on taking seriously an alternative understanding of time as a reversible swerve, a scientific perspective that conflicts with the commonsensical view of time's irreversible linearity."¹⁰⁴

But, as suggested by his choice of subtitle and the preface, the heart of *Language, Eros, Being*—L, E, B = *leb/v* = the Hebrew word for heart, the seat of the imaginative faculty—"is poetics and how, once again, the imagination functions as the sine qua non of human cognition."¹⁰⁵ For Wolfson, like Heidegger, Derrida, and the kabbalists before him, poetic language "is that which manifests the silence, thereby giving concealment its disclosure, and the formless its form."¹⁰⁶ Indeed, in the words of Heidegger, "Art, as the pointing that allows the appearance of what is invisible, is the highest kind of showing.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Hughes, "Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait," p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

The ground and the summit of such showing again unfold themselves in saying as poetic song.”¹⁰⁷

In addition to elucidating this theme, as he did in *Through a Speculum That Shines*, Wolfson further explores the essential tension of kabbalistic texts that centers on “the erotically configured visionary imagination.”¹⁰⁸ In so doing, he demonstrates that in order to properly assess the erotic symbolism found in classical kabbalistic sources, which he contends are inherently phallogocentric, it is necessary to assimilate more fully his discussion of “symbol as the primary means through which the form of divine embodiment inheres in human imagination.” For the kabbalists by and large “presume that images produced by the imagination are symbolic representations through which the invisible becomes visible and the inaudible audible.” Accordingly,

The imaginal figuration of God in human consciousness is always embodied, and consequently the content of the symbol is experienced (and not merely described postexperientially) in terms of the body. The symbol is a fusion of “opposite equals” (in Whitman’s telling phrase) held together in the sensible experience of transcendence that the symbol elicits. The experience of transcendence irrupts ecstatically at the limit of the temporal horizon and is thus accessible only through a web of symbolic deflections; by nature, therefore, the symbol reveals and conceals concurrently. What is envisioned in mystical enlightenment is experienced and interpreted in symbols drawn from our shared

¹⁰⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 186; as cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 418, n. 206.

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 20.

phenomenological sensibilities, but what we experience in the everyday world alludes semiotically to the imaginal world of poetic prisms.¹⁰⁹

Thus for the kabbalists, for the poets and poetic philosophers, for Wolfson, indeed for all those who have ears to hear and eyes to see within and beyond our everyday world of experience, “the symbolic dreamscape of the imaginal realm and the phenomenological nature of the mundane world are brought together—fragilely, ephemerally—through the power of language and the poetic imagination that recognizes the encounter.”¹¹⁰ It is an encounter that discloses the symbolic nature of reality, or what Corbin referred to as “the angelic function of being.” But here Wolfson again goes beyond Corbin by employing the work of Heidegger, especially the later Heidegger (which Corbin all but ignored), to plumb the depths of being’s symbolic significance and thereby further uncover the truth of its dual function, which is to simultaneously reveal and conceal.

A consequence of this dual revealing/concealing function is that, in Wolfson’s words, “truth doubles itself as the enclosed opening of open enclosure.” He elaborates: “On the one hand, disclosure of concealment is what makes the showing of truth possible, for if concealment would not be concealed, nothing would be revealed. On the other hand, for truth to show itself, concealment must be disclosed in the doubling of its concealedness. Hermeneutically, in the re/covery of what has been un/covered, untruth belongs inextricably to truth.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 127.

¹¹⁰ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 21.

¹¹¹ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 19.

To be clear, in speaking of untruth neither Wolfson nor Heidegger are referring to what is commonly understood by the term “lie” or “falsehood.”¹¹² Rather, it is a term of art they use to point out that the truthfulness of truth, which, for Heidegger, is best captured in the etymology of the Greek *aletheia*, is determined by “the belonging-together of concealed and unconcealed,” of hiddenness and revelation.¹¹³ This belonging-together (*Zueinandergehören*) remains concealed until it is called forth or revealed by language’s poetic saying of the unsaid. As such, it discloses the paradoxical logic that is at the heart of Wolfson’s and Heidegger’s shared linguistic apophaticism, or kataphatic apophaticism, which holds that “what is disclosed is revealed from what is hidden, and what is hidden from what is disclosed.”¹¹⁴

This means that, for both thinkers, “hiddenness is never merely negative, but is the soil out of which revelation grows. Something is promised in language, a promise which is as the unspoken, the pregnant darkness out of which the light of revelation shines.”¹¹⁵ Thus it is precisely this simultaneous or nondual belonging-together that Wolfson seeks to reveal/conceal in his poetic prose. In this he is essentially, indeed tautegorically, “articulat[ing] the inadequacy of words...with words written to articulate the inadequacy of words.”¹¹⁶ And, I would argue, it is this inherent “tautophatic”¹¹⁷

¹¹² Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 21.

¹¹³ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 19.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Thomas A.F. Kelly, *Language and Transcendence: A Study in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Karl-Otto Apel* (Verlag: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 113. He is here referring to Heidegger. As cited in Duane Williams, “Between the Apophatic and Cataphatic: Heidegger’s Tautophatic Mystical Linguistics,” in *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence*, eds. Louise Nelstrop and Simon D. Podmore (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 142.

¹¹⁶ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 20.

¹¹⁷ Duane Williams, “Between the Apophatic and Cataphatic: Heidegger’s Tautophatic Mystical Linguistics,” in *Christian Mysticism and Incarnational Theology: Between Transcendence and Immanence*, eds. Louise Nelstrop and Simon D. Podmore (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

paradox of language that Wolfson “seeks to mine [in order] to find the silence from which language arises.”¹¹⁸

Radical Comparativism

Another characteristic feature of *Language, Eros, Being* that builds upon and clarifies his earlier studies (e.g., *Through a Speculum That Shines*) is its pronounced comparative dimension with other religions, specifically the Abrahamic traditions and Buddhism.¹¹⁹

To reiterate, the motive force behind Wolfson’s comparative approach is, as he clearly states in the preface to his *Open Secret* (2009), the “hermeneutic belief that by digging into the soil of a specific cultural matrix one may uncover roots that lead to others.”¹²⁰

This hermeneutic is what has enabled Wolfson through the years to, as he puts it, “seek points of affinity between...disparate spiritual orbits.”¹²¹

Indeed, it is this comparative insight that enables him, for example, to discern how, in consonance with the teachings of mystic visionaries in various traditions, “kabbalists assent to the view that the primary task of the imaginative faculty is to depict imaginally what is without image, to embody that which is not a body, to give form to the formless,” since “[t]he imagination is...in Henry Corbin’s telling phrase, the ‘psychospiritual’ faculty, usually identified in medieval sources as the heart, the

¹¹⁸ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 21.

¹¹⁹ As with his notion of the “timeswerve/hermeneutic reversibility,” an appreciation of Wolfson’s radical comparativism is crucial to understanding his spiritual-intellectual (i.e., mystical) vision. I have therefore devoted another subsection to it in this context.

¹²⁰ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. xiii.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. xii. This hermeneutic is also what makes Wolfson’s intellectual-spiritual vision a “comparative mystics,” to borrow Jeffrey Kripal’s designation. Building on the work of Michel de Certeau and Michael B. Smith, de Certeau’s translator, Kripal defines *comparative mystics* as “a discourse that undermines the doctrinal claims of individual religions by setting them beside the claims of other religions. The purpose of such a comparative mystics is to expose all doctrinal claims as historically and culturally relative expressions of a deeper mystery or ontological ground...that nevertheless requires these relative expressions for its self-revelation.” See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 94.

‘intermediate plane’ of the ‘Imaginative Presence,’ the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the hidden and manifest.”¹²² Moreover, as will be shown briefly in the next chapter and more fully in those that follow, it is also this same comparative hermeneutic insight that enables Wolfson to demonstrate how the understanding of emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism illumines the Habad-Lubavitch notion of what he refers to as “apophatic embodiment,”¹²³ a term that, as Hughes rightly observes, “alludes to the fact that, framed somewhat differently, the unseen can only be seen through the seen.”¹²⁴

¹²² Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. xii.

¹²³ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 66-129.

¹²⁴ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 22.

Chapter 6: The Major Themes of Wolfson's Thought and Vision (cont.)

The last chapter ended with a brief consideration of the radical comparativism of Wolfson's thought as found in his award-winning book *Language, Eros, Being*. This chapter begins with an initial consideration of his work *Open Secret*, which (among other things) will further our exploration of the pronounced comparative dimension of Wolfson's mystical vision.

The Open Secret of Secrecy and Comparison

From the beginning of his scholarly career, Wolfson has been interested in the dialectical relationship that obtains between secrecy and openness, concealment and revelation. Indeed, it is with remarkable dedication and insight that he continues to explore this theme that is rooted in the esoteric principle that "the profoundest mystery is the mystery that is not acclaimed as a mystery, [it is] the occlusion that occludes itself by seeming to have nothing to occlude." As a result of his repeatedly plumbing the depths of this esoteric principle, Wolfson maintains that "something of the secret reverberates in the divulsion of the secret. Put simply, there can be no lifting of a final veil, no defrocking of truth to an ultimate nudity, for in the eventuality of such an absolute exposure, there would truly be nothing to expose. Put even more simply, the most secretive of secrets is the open secret, the secret that is so fully disclosed that it appears not to be a secret."¹

¹ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 64.

Thus, paradoxically, “[t]here can be no secrecy because we need to know the secret, the open secret, before we can ascend/assent to it.”²

In his *Open Secret* (2009), Wolfson further explores the paradox of secrecy and openness by exploring some of the main contours of the thought of Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), the seventh, and presumably last, Rebbe or master of the Hasidic dynasty known as Habad-Lubavitch,³ with particular emphasis on “the manner in which he used secrecy to dissimulate the dissimulation and thereby (re)cover truths uncovered.” As Wolfson notes, to walk this path, “inevitably leads to the need to lay bare Schneerson’s messianic agenda, which is intricately tied to his understanding of the breaking of the seal of esotericism in the dissemination of Hasidic wisdom.”⁴

After observing that the position of the previous Habad masters as regards the dissemination of the secrets in messianic times, the revelation of the new Torah, is “paired by Schneerson with the Maimonidean opinion that knowledge of God will fill the land and all the nations shall come to listen to the Messiah, yielding the claim that the mysteries will be expounded publicly, presumably even before non-Jews,”⁵ Wolfson goes on to describe Schneerson’s messianic agenda in suitably paradoxical terms:

² Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 23.

³ A word on the spelling of *Habad*: As Netanel Miles-Yépez notes in his foreword to Gregory Blann’s *When Oceans Merge: The Contemporary Sufi and Hasidic Teachings of Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi* (Rhinebeck, NY: Adam Kadmon Books/Monkfish Publishing, 2019), p. xv: “*Habad* is an acrostic for *Hokhmah, Binah, Da’at* (Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge), a triad of concepts at the heart of the Habad school or lineage of Hasidism. The guttural letter Het in Hebrew may be transliterated by an H or Ch. Today, the organizational offshoot of the Lubavitch branch of that lineage has generally chosen to use the spelling, Chabad. However, since the particular school or lineage of Hasidism known as Habad is larger and more diverse than this organizational offshoot called Chabad, Reb Zalman [Schachter-Shalomi], and many scholars, have believed it helpful to distinguish the larger lineage and teachings from the more limited organizational identity so well known today.” I am thus choosing to use the spelling that denotes this more expansive understanding of the Habad lineage and teachings.

⁴ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Not only is the broadcasting of the esoteric seen as a propadeutic to accelerate the redemption, but redemption is depicted as the wholesale dispersion of the mysteries of the Torah, an overt breaking of the seal of esotericism. But it is precisely with respect to the explicit claims about the disclosure of secrets that the scholar must be wary of being swayed by a literalist approach that would take the seventh Rebbe at his word. There is no suggestion of willful deceit on the part of Schneerson, of an intention to falsify, but there is an appeal to the wisdom of the tradition pertaining to the hermeneutic duplicity of secrecy: the secret will no longer be secret if and when the secret will be exposed to have been nothing more than the secret that there is a secret. To discover the secret that there is no secret is the ultimate secret that one can neither divulge without withholding nor withhold without divulging.⁶

To shed light on the root of the root of this paradox that is at the heart of Jewish mystical thought, Wolfson identifies the doctrine of *hitkallelut* or “integration”⁷ as being crucial to its proper understanding. For this doctrine gives expression to the fundamental paradox of Habad cosmology, which is “the *mysterium coniunctionis* of the Infinite being incarnate in the finite, the (non)being beyond nature materializing within the non(being) of nature.”⁸ Moreover, Wolfson points out that this same idea “provides the ontological

⁶ Ibid., pp. 247-248.

⁷ Ibid., p. 77. This is how Wolfson translates the Hebrew word *hitkallelut* when citing a passage from Schneerson’s discourse delivered on 7 Sivan 5717 (June 6, 1957), the second day of Pentecost. The passage begins with this opening sentence: “The integration [*hitkallelut*] of the two opposites is by means of the disclosure of the supreme light that is above the two of them.”

⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

basis for moral action—in line with the older kabbalistic tradition, Habad thinking does not separate ontology and ethics—as the good is determined on the grounds that the very possibility of there being something rather than nothing is due to the paradoxical identity of transcendence and immanence.”⁹

He then makes an important distinction by way of clarification. Instead of speaking in terms of ontology, Wolfson suggests, it is better and more appropriate to speak of meontology, meaning being-not; a conception that transcends all binaries, including that which conventionally obtains between duality and nonduality.¹⁰ “But,” he writes, “perhaps we should speak of meontological in place of ontological, as the basis for the ethical demand to be nothing is the nihility that is the ultimate void of being..., that is, the nothing that is not in relation to anything but to its own nothingness, the nothing that is not even and therefore more than nothing.”¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See also Eugene Matanky, “*Nigun Shamil: The Soul Endlessly Yearning for What It Has Always Never Been*,” in which he draws upon the work of Elliot Wolfson and his understanding of meontology (p. 13). https://www.academia.edu/10011516/Nigun_Shamil_The_Soul_Endlessly_Yearning_for_What_It_Has_Always_Never_Been. For more on Wolfson’s treatment of the meontological conception of the Infinite found in kabbalistic texts, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nihilating Nonground and the Temporal Sway of Becoming,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17:3, pp. 31-45, and p. 39: “These texts shed light on the difficulty of thinking of *Ein Sof* in Neoplatonic terms as the *hyperousios*, at least if the latter is understood à la Derrida’s explanation as the presence that presents itself as nonpresent. If the infinite is truly neither something nor nothing, then it is outside the either/or structure that informs the ontological economy of negative theology; it is, in short, the chiasm that resists both the reification of nothing as something and of something as nothing. To speak of this nothingness as the absence of presence is an inadequate as it is to speak of it as the presence of absence; it is technically beyond both affirmation and negation. It is possible to read the kabbalistic texts in a way that would put into question the distinction that Derrida made between the apophysis of the *via negativa*, which still presumes that divine transcendence is the essence about which nothing can be said, and the denegation of deconstruction, which posits that in the absence of any transcendent essence what is unavowable is simply the fact that there is nothing to be avowed. To the extent that the kabbalistic symbol of *Ein Sof* names the infinite that is beyond the negation of the affirmative and the affirmation of the negative, it may, in fact, be closer to what Derrida is claiming as his own view regarding that which is neither something that is nothing nor nothing that is something. For the kabbalist as well, infinity both is what it is not and is not what it is because it neither is what it is not nor is not what it is.” For Wolfson’s discussion of meontology in Habad thought specifically, see *Open Secret*, pp. 66-129.

¹¹ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 75.

Implicit in this formulation is an ecstatic notion of what we, following Wolfson, might call the dissolution of egocentric consciousness. Accordingly, “one can become the actual nothing through effacement of self,” through attaining a “nondual mindfulness” that embodies the pleromatic void of being: the fontal unbounded wholeness that encompasses all opposites in its infinite embrace. This spiritual awakening “is dependent on the prophetic potential to be realized” in the essential inessentiality of all that is (not), “the infinite will wherein opposites coincide.”¹² Thus to become what one always already is is to realize that the coincidence of opposites is, as Wolfson puts it in commenting on a representative discourse of the seventh Rebbe, “the mystery that is referred to as the ‘supernal wonder’ (*pele ha-elyon*), or what we may call the *mystery of mysteries*, as it is the mystery that encapsulates the paradoxical characteristic of all mystery, although essential to the nature of mystery is an indeterminacy that renders its imprint constantly different, a *genuine repetition that erupts from an originary transformation*, to appropriate the language of Heidegger, always having already been the retrieval of what is yet to come.” Wolfson continues:

To avail myself of another Heideggarian turn of phrase, the integration of opposites is not ‘the coalescence and obliteration of distinctions,’ but rather ‘the belonging together of what is foreign’ (*Zusammengehören des Fremden*). The supreme expression of this belonging together—the conundrum that is the origin, the *pele* that is the *alef*—is the manifestation of the infinite light beyond the nature in the timespace continuum of material nature, the mystery of incarnation that is the secret of the

¹² Ibid., p. 76.

garment. The unmasking of this secret—the absurdity of the measurable world serving as the abode of the immeasurable essence—consists precisely of an aporetic withholding, a not-wanting-to-be-transparent, lest the lucidity obscure the concealing of the concealment that uncovers the nonbeing of being in the recovery of the being of nonbeing.¹³

As in his other work, to further illumine the mystery of incarnation that is the paradoxical secret of the garment, Wolfson avails himself of the mystical and philosophical texts from other religious traditions, particularly the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. From the outset, he writes that the interpretation of Habad philosophy that he offers in *Open Secret* is indelibly colored by his “dabbling in Buddhist texts, including the presentation of the messianic ideal as attaining—through negation—the consciousness that extends beyond consciousness, crossing beyond the river to the shore of nondiscrimination, the shore where there is no more need to speak of the shore.”¹⁴

More specifically, to comprehend the Habad perspective, Wolfson attests that he has found it beneficial to adopt “a form of logic akin to what in the Mahayana tradition is referred to as *madhyamaka*, the middle way, a logic that...posits the identity of opposites in the opposition of their identity.”¹⁵ He elaborates:

¹³ Ibid., pp. 77-78; emphasis in original. In a personal communication in response to this passage, Jeffrey Kripal makes an important observation. He writes: “Such language, so classically Wolfsonian, raises for me the limits of the reader and the possibility that Elliot cannot be understood except by those who have been graced with these sorts of experiences, which he never reveals, of course. In short, the scholarship itself possesses an esoteric structure and so fends off the uninitiated.” Needless to say, I could not agree more.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. xiii.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

Translated in a more technical vein, the logic to which I refer is based on the tetralemmic scheme: S is P; –P; both P and –P; neither P nor –P. The middle of the four-cornered logic, which some scholars consider to be the core of Buddhist philosophy, should not be conceived of as a meridian point situated equidistantly between extremes, the venerated golden mean between excess and privation in the Western philosophical tradition, but as *the indeterminate space that contains both and neither of the extremes, the absent presence that is present as absent, the lull between affirmation and negation, identity and nonidentity, the void that cannot be avoided. In this middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle, purportedly contradictory properties are attributed and not attributed to the (non) substance at the same time and in the same relation.*¹⁶

Like Hughes before me, I have italicized this part of the above cited passage because it gets to the heart of Wolfson's work.¹⁷ Indeed, in all of its manifestations, Wolfson's thought is an attempt to arrive at this "indeterminate space that contains both and neither of the extremes, the absent presence that is present as absent, the lull between affirmation and negation, identity and nonidentity, the void that cannot be avoided."¹⁸

Here it behooves us to highlight an important quality of Wolfson's comparative approach. As Hughes notes, for Wolfson, comparison is not facile. "It is based," he writes, "neither on simplistic notions of influence nor chronistic renderings. It is, on the

¹⁶ Ibid.; my italics.

¹⁷ See Hughes, "Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait," p. 24.

¹⁸ It is, of course, this nondual or indeterminate space that grounds and makes possible not only Wolfson's radical comparativism in particular but the comparative act in general. My thanks to Jeffrey Kripal for helping me to clarify this point.

contrary, based on the notion that, despite semantic and conceptual discrepancies, there are real *philosophical* reasons for applying concepts from Buddhist logic to, say, modern texts associated with Chabad.” Hughes goes on to note that, while in earlier studies Wolfson had used modern continental philosophers to illumine medieval texts, in *Open Secret* “he reverses this process and uses medieval Buddhist (and Hindu and Muslim) texts to send light on modern Jewish texts.”¹⁹

Accordingly, with respect to the postmessianic messianism of Menahem Mendel Schneerson, Wolfson contends that the notion of messianic liberation that he espoused entails being released from all conceptual limitations, including the concept that one needs to be liberated. He writes:

The ultimate legacy of the seventh Rebbe’s messianic aspiration, the encrypted message he wished to bequeath to future generations, lies in proffering an understanding of salvation as the expanded consciousness of and reabsorption in the inestimable essence, whose essence it is to resist essentialization, the moment of eternity for which we await in its fully temporalized sense, the advent of the absolute (non)event. True liberation, on this score, would consist of being liberated from the need to be liberated.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 300.

Awakening to the Dream of Reality in the Reality of the Dream

More recently, Wolfson again returns to the beginning of his spiritual-intellectual quest by deepening and expanding his understanding of the imagination via an exploration of, as he puts it, “the allusive and elusive place dreaming occupies in the panorama of human experience.” In *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (2011), Wolfson once again draws on a variety of contemporary academic disciplines, as well as a host of fascinating comparisons with the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism, in order to illustrate that “the dream state and waking reality are on an equal phenomenal footing; that the sensory world is the dream from which one must awaken by waking to the dream in which one is merely dreaming that one is awake.” By thus “interpreting the dream within the dream,” he articulates how “a productive paradox emerges to reveal the wakeful character of the dream and the dreamful character of wakefulness.”²¹

In typical fashion, in endeavoring to “think the matter of the dream from inside the contours of the dream,”²² Wolfson leaves no stone unturned in his passionate quest for understanding. “To elucidate the oneiric phenomenon,” he writes, “I have applied theoretical models from psychoanalysis, phenomenology, literary theory, and neuroscience to a vast array of biblical, rabbinic, philosophical, and kabbalistic texts.”²³ This is so because, in his judgment, like the imaginative faculty of which it is a product, “no one morphology of the dream phenomenon is either sufficient or comprehensive.”²⁴

²¹ Elliot R. Wolfson, cover interview on his book *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination*, for *Rorotoko (Cutting-Edge Intellectual Interviews)*, December 18, 2011 at http://rorotoko.com/interview/20111219_wolfson_elliott_on_dream_interpreted_within_a_dream, p. 1.

²² Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), p. 15.

²³ Wolfson, interview for *Rorotoko*, p. 1.

²⁴ Ibid.

Consequently, identifying himself as what Robert Moss describes as a “dream archeologist,” what Wolfson proposes instead is “a linguistic archeology of the dream, a philosophically inflected excavation of a psychobiological phenomenon that celebrates the contingent and ambiguous as signifiers of truth that is conceived of as proportionate to, but not prescribed by nature. [In this] the dream provides an interpretive algorithm to assess the relationship of word to being that conforms neither to the familiar paradigm of idealism nor to that of realism.”²⁵

Accordingly, for Wolfson, the allusive and elusive place of that dreaming occupies in the panorama of human experience²⁶ can be explained by the fact that “the dream distinctively marks an imaginal excessiveness that expresses itself in each occurrence as foreseeable, but unprecedented”; that the dream, “both whimsical and inexorable,” bears and is characterized by “a mythologic...that extends beyond itself in the indeterminate determining of the bounds of its unbinding.”²⁷ Thus, we might say, the dream incarnates the kenotic or self-emptying language of oneiropoiesis which is “uniquely suited to express the intensiveness of our spatiotemporal distension in the world, the genuine iteration that fosters the perpetuation of self in the eventfulness of its ongoing extinction.”²⁸ As such, the dream is to be classified as “the experience of transcendence under the sign of the imaginary.” However, as Wolfson is quick to point out, this classification in no way requires one to posit “a supernatural world in order to flee from the cognitive implications of naturalistic approaches to the human predicament.” Rather, the transcendence associated with the dream “is intertwined with

²⁵ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 19.

²⁶ See note 134 above, as well as Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 13.

²⁷ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the configuration of the world, the immanentizing transcendence that enframes the visual field of human experience.”²⁹

Therefore two themes that are characteristic of Wolfson’s entire oeuvre converge in a new and instructive way in his book on dreams: namely, the role of the imagination in human knowing and the hermeneutics of esotericism. From the midst of this confluence, Wolfson argues that “the time of dreaming is to be ascertained from the dreaming of time, but the dreaming of time can be calibrated only in the time of dreaming.”³⁰ Moreover, in endeavoring to elucidate this “uroboric state that puts into question the bivalent logic of a linear reason”³¹—by attempting to square, as it were, this open circle that spirals or revolves “irreversibly and unpredictably in the steadfastness of its irresolution”³²—Wolfson sheds light on the important fact that “dreaming is a genre of maximal imaginability revealed in the image concealing its character as image.”³³

On this score, the dream strikingly fosters “the appearance of the inapparent, disclosing thereby the limit delimited and yet breached by the imagination in unveiling the image whence it is disclosed that the substance of the dream can be phenomenally present only in being absent.”³⁴ In this, Wolfson writes, “the truth of the dream... consists veritably of its being false”; that is, “the dream exemplifies the paradox of the oxymoron *fictional truth*, a truth whose authenticity can be gauged only from the standpoint of its artificiality.”³⁵ In a sort of Platonic reversal, therefore, “we can speak of the dream as the *semblance of the simulacrum* par excellence, wherein truth is not

²⁹ Wolfson, interview for *Rorotoko*, p. 1.

³⁰ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³³ Wolfson, interview for *Rorotoko*, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 16; italics in original.

opposed epistemically to error, since the appearance of truthfulness cannot be determined independently of the truthfulness of appearance.”³⁶ In other words, to again use Wolfson’s locution, the dream is “the phantasm that allows us to see the chimerical nature of the phantasm, the speculum through which we perceive the speculum as that through which we perceive the speculum. In piercing through this prism, we discern the invariable and unsettling truth that the image is true to the degree that it is false and false to the degree that it is true.”³⁷

Hence, for Wolfson, the dream is a paradoxical and speculative “masterpiece”³⁸ from which much is to be learned by those in the humanities and the sciences alike. This is why he expresses the hope that *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream* will be read by “a wider audience than just specialists in Jewish mysticism,” since he engages so many different disciplines and thinkers in this book, including scientists.³⁹

Thus, for example, Wolfson does not ignore the findings about dreams in neuroanatomy; on the contrary, he argues that his main insight that “the dream exemplifies the paradox of the oxymoron *fictional truth*, a truth whose authenticity can be gauged only from the standpoint of its artificiality”⁴⁰ is in accord with the scientific perspective. He explains how and why this is so in a striking paragraph that, though lengthy, is worth quoting in full. After declaring that he will stand with those in the humanities who “detect in the dream a mythopoetic propensity that cannot be subsumed under the stamp of scientific explanation, no matter how broadly the criterion of empirical data is conceived,” Wolfson affirms that in saying this he is in no way denying

³⁶ Ibid.; italics in original.

³⁷ Wolfson, interview for *Rorotoko*, p. 2.

³⁸ I am here borrowing this word from Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 26.

³⁹ Wolfson, interview for *Rorotoko*, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 16; italics in original.

that “the contents of the dream can be explained as neural correlates of consciousness.”⁴¹

He elaborates in typical nondual or paradoxical fashion:

On the contrary, in my way of thinking, the cerebral activity of dreaming should be considered exemplary of the increased aptitude for abstraction and ratiocination that developed in the hominid brain as a consequence of the multimodal sensory integration. Through a process of evolutionary selection, this augmented apperception, enhanced intelligence, and the ensuing refinement of the nervous system formed what has legitimately been called the *numinous mind*, a degree of mentation typified above all by the symbolic cognition that has endowed us with myriad incompatible traits, including the proclivity to imagine the unimaginable. The emblematic language of dreaming, likely to have originated as a mechanism of social organization aimed at the preservation of the species, becomes a pivotal feature that distinguishes apelike mentality from humanlike consciousness. The hominization of primates eventuated in increasingly complex biopsychological adaptations that bestowed on humans the mental capacity to have eidetic dreams. Hence, the challenge in this book to the reduction of mindfulness to biochemical structures and electromagnetic fields emerges from the findings of neuroscience itself. The penchant to think the unthinkable should be granted as much integrity as other acts of human imagination conventionally judged to be nonpathological. The dream, it is safe to conjecture, is a “normal” psychic

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 20.

state—however we are to chart the parameters of normalcy—through which we gain access to the paranormal, a term that does not imply a realm outside the universe, but its edge (a theoretical, rather than a topographical taxonomy, since it is unintelligible to continue to suppose that there is a cosmic perimeter) that is apprehended apophatically through the imaginary confabulation of the margin at the center. On this score, dreams may be considered semiotic signposts that delineate the limit; like poems, they point the way to the parting of the way.⁴²

Accordingly, Wolfson also expresses the hope that there may be neuroscientists who take an interest in *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream* and that it will thus “provide a bridge between the humanities and the sciences.”⁴³

With this volume, therefore, and “in the dreamscape of its vision,” Wolfson seeks to carve out a space that will allow philosophers, scholars of religion, and scientists “to examine the religious claims of the believer that neither revert to simplistic claims of theism or atheism, idealism or materialism, and transcendence or immanence.”⁴⁴ This is because, as Hughes (echoing Wolfson) rightly states, “the dream makes possible the impossible by its very act of being possible.”⁴⁵ In Wolfson’s own words:

The invisible, accordingly, is not an excess of the real, the limitless positivity of the possible impossibility positioned outside the symbolic,

⁴² Ibid., pp. 20-21; emphasis in original.

⁴³ Wolfson, interview for *Rorotoko*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 26.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

but rather the signifier of lack, the delimited negativity of the impossible possibility inherent in the symbolic. The real, if we continue to avail ourselves of this nomenclature, is sustained by the multitude of appearances it maintains by disrupting them repeatedly, rendering them visible in their invisibility and invisible in their visibility, without, however, professing the existence of a noumenal core that persists as the same beneath the semblance of the phenomenal – no face behind the mask that is not itself a mask.⁴⁶

Framed somewhat differently, Hughes observes that, in *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, Wolfson essentially “asks us to understand the divine world through the structure of the dream without either appealing to or summoning a supernatural or metaphysical transcendence.” “Rather than take the dream for granted,” Hughes continues, “[Wolfson] celebrates its creativity while he simultaneously shows its significance for thinking about transcendence, immanence, and experience.”⁴⁷ This celebratory demonstration reaches its apogee at the end of the text where Wolfson is “at his most intellectually playful”⁴⁸ as he weaves together the diverse and temporally unconnected writings of Moses de León, Shankara, Rumi, and Nagarjuna in order to comparatively show how the spiritual insights of these particular mystics universally hold the dream up as “the locus of enlightened consciousness; it is the speculum through

⁴⁶ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 41.

⁴⁷ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

which we grasp that the world is like a dream, that there is no way to access truth in this world except through the dissimilitude of the image.”⁴⁹

As Wolfson writes, in the final analysis, “what the dream divulges is that the phenomenal world is the dream from which one must awaken by waking to the dream that one is merely dreaming that one is awake. The oneiric, therefore, symbolizes not only exile, but redemption; indeed, one might say the dream signifies both at once to the degree that through the dream, one ascertains the wakeful character of the dream and the dreamful character of wakefulness.”⁵⁰ In light of this, he concludes *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream* in typical poetic fashion. After citing his own poem entitled “b/e” (there is a dream / that dreams itself / before the dream begins – / a dream dreamt / in the dreamless dream / of a dream that no longer dreams / the dream dreamt in the dream), which, as he notes, conveys the difficulty of distinguishing sharply between dream and reality, Wolfson writes:

In the dreamless dream, the dream before the dream, one dreams the dream that is dreamt as the dream one no longer dreams. By interpreting that dream, the dream within the dream, we edge ever closer to waking from the dream that we are dreaming that we are waking from the dream.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 267.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 274. The poem is from Wolfson’s collection *Footdreams and Treetales: 92 Poems* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 66. In this volume the title of the poem is rendered “be,” whereas in *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream* Wolfson cites it as “b/e.” See *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 472, n. 240. I have chosen to follow the latter usage, which is his most recent rendering.

This paradoxical vision is admittedly difficult to understand in its complex simplicity. But, again, that is the point. For in articulating his vision in this way that is meant to give expression to the Möbius strip-like nature of reality, Wolfson intends to arrest our normal mode of thinking and thereby open us to the truth that is closer to us than we are to ourselves; that is, indeed, who and what we always already are. It is the truth of this poetic vision that Wolfson catches a glimmer of in the following stanza from Allen Ginsberg's 1963 poem "The Change: *Kyoto-Tokyo Express*":

In this dream I am the dreamer
and the Dreamed I am
that I Am Ah but I have
always known⁵²

Wolfson goes on to explicate this stanza in a way that I think helps to clarify his concluding lines above. "Just as self-autonomy breaks down," he writes, "in the appreciation that in the dream there is no difference between the one who dreams and what is dreamt," so in the case of reality writ large (the All that is Nothing and the Nothing that is All), "there is no substance of being that can be distinguished from the process of becoming." Significantly, Wolfson also notes that it was through "a Buddhist-inflected exegesis" that Ginsberg "was able to recover the zoharic understanding implied in translating *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as *ana ma'n da-ana*, 'I am what I am,' that is to say,

⁵² Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1997* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 336. As cited in Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 273. In Wolfson's citation (p. 471 n. 235), the span of years of this volume of Ginsberg's collected poems is mistakenly given as 1947-1977. I have corrected this typographical error.

there is no [I] (divine or human) that can be severed from the eternal oscillation of temporal fluctuation.” What this means, then, in terms of the dream and its relationship to reality is that we are delivered from the impulse to separate the two “by surrendering to the awareness that what we think of as reality in contrast to the dream is naught but a dream of there being reality apart from the dream.”⁵³ Thus just as being and becoming, divinity and humanity, negation and affirmation, and all of the other opposites that in our conventional way of thinking seemingly contradict each other are in truth radically coincident, interpenetrating, and entangled, so too with our notions of dreaming and reality.

By way of summary, then, we can say that, according to Wolfson, the oneiric imagination provides us with a privileged means by which to discern the nature of reality, as it is “the mental faculty that combines opposites” and thus points to the mystery wherein “opposites are identical in their opposition.” Thus the *coincidencia oppositorum*, the mystery of mysteries, can be realized through the speculum of the dream in which “the schism between sleep and wakefulness, exile and redemption, is itself transcended in the luminal darkness where the disparity between dark and light is no longer operative.”⁵⁴

The Gift of Giving Beyond the Gift

In *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (2014), Wolfson offers what he describes as “a philosophical examination of the themes of apophasis, transcendence, and immanence in a number of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers.”

⁵³ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, pp. 273-274.

⁵⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, “A Dream within a Dream: The Prism of Imagination in Jewish Mysticism,” p. 29. This was a lecture that Wolfson gave in Moscow, Russia on April 7, 2013 for the Eshkolot Project. The full text of the lecture can be found at <http://eshkolot.ru/en/event/38727>.

However, as he is quick to note, the implications of this remarkably dense, incisive, and erudite book “go well beyond the specificity of this cultural formation.” Indeed, consistent with all of his work, in this study Wolfson “delve[s] deeply into one tradition out of the conviction that the particular is indexical of what we are still compelled to call the universal.” But again, as he has done many times before, Wolfson is quick to clarify that his being convinced that the particular is indexical of the universal does not mean that he subscribes to a power-laden, totalizing, substantialist ideology that categorically exalts the latter over the former and so is incapable of accounting for either the real depth of the world or its diversity. On the contrary, his is the paradoxical stance of upholding the value of both the universal and particular at one and the same time, of viewing them as being inextricably entangled with one another in—to borrow Christian terminology—a perichoretic or circumincessional relationship. (Perichoresis [from the Greek περιχώρησις, which denotes a “circular dance”] is a term of art in Christian mystical theology that refers to or attempts to describe the paradoxical/nondual intradivine relationship of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and, hence, the ultimate nature of reality. Circumincession [from the Latin *circumincessio*] is a Latinate term for the same concept.)

Consequently, although he maintains the importance of and need for some notion of the universal (for lack of a better word) while simultaneously being mindful of and in some measure beholden to the postmodern critique of foundationalism, Wolfson nevertheless asserts that “there is no crypto-transcendentalism at work here, no appeal to what Lyotard called *les grand récits*, the ‘great stories’ or ‘metanarratives,’ no recourse

to an essentializing or totalizing truth, no positing an infinite transcendence or metaphysical absolute” that is unambiguously and dogmatically defined.⁵⁵ He continues:

Although inviolably committed to the truth that there is no inviolable truth, I nonetheless acknowledge the inherently contradictory and subversive repercussions of the relativist position: if meaning is always to be determined from context, in line with the historicizing hermeneutic that prevails in academic discourse, then the veracity of this assertion and the methodological presumption that ensues therefrom cannot be sufficiently generalized to justify the argument of contextualization. Simply put,

⁵⁵ Here I want suggest that while Wolfson eschews the theomania that results from succumbing to the temptation to posit the essentializing or totalizing truth of an infinite transcendence or metaphysical absolute that is unambiguously and dogmatically defined, he is open to the poetic possibility of a paradoxical or nondual metaphysical absolute that is mysterious and indefinable in its essentially nonessential transcendent immanence and tempiternity. (The latter term, “tempiternity,” is a neologism coined by Raimon Panikkar that refers to the nondual relationship of time and eternity. As such, it implies the mutual indwelling or interpenetration of the temporal and eternal, the immanent and transcendent. See, for example, Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, edited with introduction by Scott Eastham [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993].)

Also, it is to be noted that the true but partial postmodern contextualist critique of power-laden, hyper-rational, or ideological and hence inadequate “metanarratives” is being built upon by contemporary thinkers to arrive at a more robust, nuanced, and hence adequate notion of *metanarrative* and/or *metatheory*. See, for example, Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 316:

Although this project has been rooted in its own kind of demythologizing, my allegiance is to neither side. Instead, I aim to repudiate the full extension of both. Indeed, my point is that the extreme of both modes transform into their opposite. By invoking the language of myth, it might seem that I have become a partisan of disenchantment, but my point is the reverse: that we can never fully escape myth. Criticism may imply demythologization, but we merely exchange one tale for another, albeit hopefully, a better one. By challenging this narrative, I have been aiming to take up modernity and postmodernity together and exit both. This will not be an exodus into a mythless future. Contra Lyotard, I see no end to metanarratives. But I also see no reason to flee from them. Reason is historical. Thought is narrative.

See also *Metatheory for the Twenty-First Century: Critical realism and integral theory in dialogue*, edited by Roy Bhaskar, Sean Esbjörn-Hargens, Nicholas Hedlund, and Mervyn Hartwig (London/New York: Routledge, 2016). It could be argued that Wolfson, by challenging the status quo narrative in his own unique way, has been aiming to take up premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity in an effort to exit all three into a brighter and more life-giving future. In light of this, it would be instructive to compare and contrast Wolfson’s project with that of Josephson-Storm and others vis-à-vis the contemporary transvaluation of the role of metanarrative and/or metatheory. But that is a project for another day.

without the ability to step out of context, we could not cultivate the cognitive apparatus necessary to detect the parameters of any context. Every statement avowing the relativity of truth can be true only if it is false.⁵⁶

Thus, as we have seen, Wolfson's upholding of the universal is by no means meant to efface the particular. On the contrary, as he reiterates, the universal that he envisions "is one continuously shaped by the particular, the *universal singularity*, to borrow the language of Alain Badiou, and in that sense, the concrete is what is most abstract, the contingent the most unconditional, the exception the most inclusive." In other words, according to Wolfson's view, the universal and particular participate in one another in a reciprocal and mutually nourishing way that simultaneously renders the universal singular and the singular universal. Operative in such an integral, participatory, or nondual vision is the by now familiar tetralemmic or paradoxical logic that is informed by the middle way (*madhyamaka*) of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition – A is A; A is not-A; A is both A and not-A; A is neither A nor non-A. Accordingly, Wolfson writes, "the path of my thinking leads to the dialectical overcoming of the dialectical resolution of these binary oppositions, and thus I resist (à la Hegel) both the [simplistic or one-sided] universalization of the particular and the [simplistic or one-sided] particularization of the universal. Closer to the cadence of our experience, in my opinion, is the recognition that the determinacy of the universal is always in the process of being determined by the indeterminacy that is the particular and that the indeterminacy of the particular is always

⁵⁶ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. xiii.

in the process of being determined by the determinacy that is the universal.” He elaborates:

Following this line of reasoning, and in consonance with a relational rather than a substantialist notion of self, I assume that in the domain of intersubjectivity, too, we must say that one is veritably the singularity of oneself insofar as one is otherwise than oneself, that the exteriority of the interior—the homelessness that alights the way back home in the foreboding night of our solitude—is gauged by the interiority of the exterior, that individuality consists of embracing an alterity that is, at least qua potential, universalizable: the difference between us is what invariably makes us the same and therefore categorically not subject to the categorical.⁵⁷

This, then, is the view that informs Wolfson’s inquiry in *Giving Beyond the Gift*—an inquiry that “is impelled by the belief that a theolatrous impulse lingers in the very heart of monotheism, even when the latter is explicated in the apophatic idiom of philosophical theology, a trend that has become quite fashionable in the academy these last few decades.”⁵⁸ Moreover, it is this theolatrous impulse—this tendency to make an idol of our conceptions of God or the divine—that is behind the theomania Wolfson is intent on overcoming.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. xiv.

But what exactly is meant by the term theomania? For Wolfson, it does not denote “a delusional state wherein one believes oneself to be God but rather a relentless and maddening obsession for transcendence, even if the latter is construed as a negative presence, that is, a presence that is present only as the absence of presence.”⁵⁹ Hence, he deploys the term in the sense that is implied by the passage from Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* that serves as the first epigraph of *Giving Beyond the Gift*: “Even as the egomaniac does not live anything directly, whether it be a perception or an affection, but reflects on his perceiving or affectionate I and thus misses the truth of the process, thus the theomaniac...will not let the gift take full effect but reflects instead on that which gives, and misses both.” As for what Buber is getting at here, I agree with Lissa McCullough who maintains that in this passage he more or less means to convey that “just as an egomaniac undergoes a certain distortion in his apperception and experiencing as a consequence of his distorted relationship with himself, so similarly the theomaniac who reflects on God, isolating him as ‘the Giver’ rather than letting the gift take its full effect, loses as a consequence of this distortion both the Giver and the gift; that is, both God known in and through immediate giving as such *and* the divine gift qua fully actual receiving and giving reciprocity.”⁶⁰

In light of this, we can say that to overcome this kind of theomania is to arrive at a completely transformed notion of divinity and humanity, creator and creation. It is to recognize, in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, that

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. xxiv.

⁶⁰ Lissa McCullough, “Irenic Ironie Unsayable: A Correlation of Franke and Wolfson,” in *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy*, eds. Nahum Brown and J. Aaron Simmons (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 226; emphasis in original.

Nothing is given any longer, except that alone which is still given.... It is the gift offered by the unique God, but if this gift is still given from one side...it cannot be reduced to that [one-sided or isolated] state: it is more properly giving, it is the very act of gift and in this act the singular history according to which the human being—and with it all “creatures”—is a partner more than a simple recipient of divine action (for to receive the gift is part of the gift itself) is engaged.... Creation forms, then, a nodal point in a “deconstruction of monotheism,” insofar as such a deconstruction proceeds from monotheism itself, and perhaps is its most active resource. The unique God, whose unicity is the correlate of the creating act, cannot precede its creation any more than it can subsist above it or apart from it in some way. It merges with it: merging with it, it withdraws in it, and withdrawing there it empties itself there, emptying itself it is nothing other than the opening of the void. Only the opening is divine, but the divine is nothing more than the opening.⁶¹

Therefore, according to Wolfson and following Nancy, to overcome theomania is to realize and so embody the iconoclastic and paradoxical truth that ‘God’ or ‘the divine’ is perhaps best understood as “the withdrawal that fosters the engendering of the nothing that is the substrate of being, the nihility that makes creation possible.”⁶²

⁶¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, translated and with an introduction by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 70. As cited in Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xvii.

⁶² Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xvii. As Wolfson notes, Jean-Luc Nancy is explicitly echoing the Lurianic doctrine of *tzimtzum* (contraction/constriction/condensation/withdrawal), which, I would add, is homologous to the Christian doctrine of *kenosis* or self-emptying. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, p. 70: “the ‘nothing’ of creation is the one that opens in God when God

What Wolfson is essentially grappling with in *Giving Beyond the Gift*, then, is “the extent to which the discernment that the final iconoclastic achievement of monotheism calls for destroying the idol of the very God personified as the deity that must be worshipped without being idolized.”⁶³ He finds in the words of Henri Atlan a deft expression of this paradox: “the ultimate idol is the personal God of theology...the only discourse about God that is not idolatrous is necessarily an atheistic discourse. Alternatively, whatever the discourse, the only God who is not an idol is a God who is not a God.”⁶⁴ And here begins what McCullough describes as “the resounding irony without stop or limit that reveals Wolfson’s constructive endeavor in this work” and “the burning question” that silently pervades it: Who is the God who is not a God?⁶⁵ Or, as Wolfson puts it toward the end of *Giving Beyond the Gift*: “[I]s it possible to think of God as other than other?”⁶⁶

To answer this question, which captures “the philosophical dilemma that proponents of postmodern theologies need to confront,”⁶⁷ Wolfson engages a number of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers—namely, Herman Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas—and argues that, while all of them were “keenly aware of the pitfalls of scriptural theism and the penchant of the human imagination to conjure false representations of transcendence,” they each in their own way and to differing degrees nevertheless “gave in to the temptation of personifying transcendence,

withdraws in it...in the act of creating. God annihilates itself [*s’anéantit*] as a ‘self’ or as a distinct being in order to ‘withdraw’ in its act – which makes the opening of the world.” As cited in Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. 263, n. 25.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Henri Atlan, *The Sparks of Randomness*, vol. 2: *The Atheism of Scripture*, translated by Lenn. J. Schramm (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 346-347. As cited in Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, pp. xvii; 264, n. 27.

⁶⁵ McCullough, “Irenic Irony Unsavable,” p. 230.

⁶⁶ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. 259.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

even as they tried either to circumvent or to restrain it by apophatically purging the kataphatic descriptions of the deity.”⁶⁸ By contrast, according to Wolfson, Jacques Derrida and Edith Wyschogrod, the other two Jewish thinkers whom he treats at length in *Giving Beyond the Gift*, were able to resist this temptation and so carry the project of denegation one step further. This is because, as was mentioned earlier in another context, despite their many differences, “they both embarked on a path that culminated in the aporetic suspension of belief...[they] were prepared to thrust aside the authority of tradition, and, as a consequence, they accepted the fate of social dislocation and political estrangement, occupying a place that is no place, nomadically adrift without any discernible lifeline to be reanchored in a specific liturgical community.”⁶⁹

And it is here that we begin to get a sense of how Wolfson figures it is in fact possible to think of God as other than other. Or, framed differently, it is here that we catch a glimpse of what, according to Wolfson, is left of God when we divest ourselves of all images of God. For, as he points out, Derrida and Wyschogrod well understood that “the removal of all images of God, if maintained unfailingly, seriously compromises the viability of devotional piety. To deplete God of the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic embellishments decisively curtails the imagination’s ability to concoct the deity in personalist terms.”⁷⁰

In light of this, to borrow language from the Buddhist tradition, I would suggest that if we are to retain the use of theological terms, they should be viewed as more or less skillful means (*upaya*) by which we endeavor to make sense of life. Wolfson makes a similar point, but he avails himself of the formulation of Carl Raschke and recommends

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. xvii.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. xvii-xviii.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. xviii.

that all theological terms should be regarded as “pure *semiotic formalisms*” since, in a manner comparable to mathematical postulates or scientific models, “religious concepts form an ensemble of signs that contribute to the structuring of a virtual as opposed to an actual reality.” Accordingly, Wolfson contends that the experience of a theistic God “can be delineated as a ‘particular *event horizon*,’ which is perceived as ‘eminently real,’ but it can never materialize with the sensual concreteness of observable data.” “Indeed,” he continues, “the horizon established by this eventuality—as vividly as it may present itself to human imagination—is best depicted as a territory that is peculiarly not a territory, a territory beyond all territorialization, the margin to which we are propelled by attunement to the surpassing of language through language.” But to be clear, lest there be any misunderstanding, Wolfson hastens to emphasize that “the metalinguistic nonphenomenon of which I speak does not imply the positing of an ineffable alterity but rather the denial thereof.”⁷¹

Wolfson’s use of the phrase *metalinguistic nonphenomenon* to describe ‘God’ or ‘the divine’ as other than other is both striking and illustrative. For it suggests that theology, insofar as it attempts to map this territory beyond all territorialization, is first and foremost, in the words of Michael Fishbane, a “construct of thought and imagination....[and hence] a symbolic form which takes our experiences in the natural world and reshapes them, so that their special qualities and depths may be brought to mind...[and we may be oriented] to a twofold dimension: to the numinous qualities of

⁷¹ Ibid. Wolfson is here drawing on Carl Raschke’s *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), pp. 6-8 (emphasis in original). As cited in Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xviii.

unsayable origin inhering in every moment of existence.”⁷² But, as Wolfson astutely observes, by this same measure, we can say “that the variation in our understanding of reality serves as a barometer to gauge the changing perceptions on the nature of godliness and even more pertinently the manner in which we imagine what cannot be imagined.” This being so, in order to overcome theomania or “the metaphorical representation of transcendence, to get beyond the double bind of the anthropomorphic configuration of the Divine and the theomorphic configuration of the human,...[we] need to subjugate the theistic personification of God and the corresponding egoistic depiction of self, a task that demands a sweeping and uncompromising purification of the idea of the infinite from all predication.” Therefore, Wolfson contends, what is necessary, but by no means easy to attain, “is the termination of all modes of representation, even the representation of the nonrepresentable, a heeding of silence that exceeds the atheological as much as it exceeds the theological.”⁷³ Or, in what amounts to the same thing, we must attend to the symbolic and paradoxical process by which “words beget words in an endlessly extending chain of signifiers” that is not strictly defined at either termini, “an endless succession of metonymic replacements and metaphoric substitutions”⁷⁴ for a “metalinguistic nonphenomenon” that is an unbounded wholeness inhering in every moment of existence: an unsayable and originary silence that is not other than the pleromatic emptiness of (non)being.

Thus the phrase “metalinguistic nonphenomenon” can be seen to contain Wolfson’s argument *in nuce*: “all propositional utterances about God, even apophatic

⁷² Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 32, 33, and 34.

⁷³ Elliot R. Wolfson, “*Sacred Attunement: Toward Silence*,” a review of Michael Fishbane’s *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*, in *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Summer 2011), p. 132.

⁷⁴ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xviii.

statements of what God is not, are not only ambiguous and hyperbolic but, literally speaking, fictitious as they attempt to describe linguistically the indescribable and to delimit conceptually the illimitable.”⁷⁵ And to reiterate, what this suggests is that all religion, including monotheism, to the extent that it seeks to describe linguistically the indescribable, is ultimately dependent upon idolatry, which, as Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal have observed, can be formulated in the following general rule: “any nonabsolute value that is made absolute and demands to be the center of dedicated life is idolatry.” They go on to note that, according to the internal logic of this formulation, and given our human limitations, nothing that we can know or posit of God can be taken as absolute or ultimate. This means that what must “stand in opposition to idolatry” is not some notion of God or ultimate reality that is absolutely and dogmatically defined for all time but, rather, the freedom from such rigidly circumscribed notions and the willingness to perpetually venture forth into the conceptual horizon, as it were, where imaginative “extension reaches its extreme limit”⁷⁶ and silence reigns. Thus, commenting on this observation of Margalit and Halbertal, Wolfson writes: “To define the opposition to idolatry as the denial of ultimates implies that one can entertain no thought about God that is not an idolatrous representation. The freedom of absolutes thus relativizes any and every theological pronouncement.”⁷⁷ It is in this sense, then, that the undercurrent of *Giving Beyond the Gift* “is the recognition of the codependency of religion and idolatry.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, translated by Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 246. As cited in Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xix.

⁷⁷ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xix.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. xviii.

As Wolfson notes, to overcome this inherent problem, many postmodern theologians, such as Jean-Luc Marion, Peter Rollins, and Thomas Altizer, have “attempt[ed] to harness the apophatic tradition of Western Neoplatonism together with Derridean deconstruction in order to construct a viable postmodern negative theology, a religion without religion.”⁷⁹ Yet, in Wolfson’s eyes, these efforts, as laudable and necessary as they may be, are not nearly radical enough. For, as he writes,

Not only are many of these philosophies of transcendence guilty of a turn to theology that defies the phenomenological presuppositions of an immanent phenomenality,...but they fall short on their own terms inasmuch as they persist in employing metaphorical language that personalizes transcendence and thereby runs the risk of undermining the irreducible alterity and invisibility attributed to the transcendent other. It is reasonable to argue that we must marshal the best metaphors in an effort to imagine what technically cannot be imagined, but such efforts ensnare the human mind in representing the unrepresentable and imaging the imageless by the production of images that, literally speaking, are false, and in so doing, the very allure of the alleged transcendence is severely compromised.⁸⁰

As a way out of this dilemma, Wolfson proposes a subversive alternative that is truly radical inasmuch as it gets to the very roots of the problem. “Rather than expanding

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 227.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

the analogical imagination in envisioning transcendence—a spatial image of a horizon rooted in an outdated cosmology—the spiritual ultimatum of the hour, the epochal duty,” he asserts, “is to overcome it, to rid monotheism not only of the psychological tug to personify the impersonal but also of what Corbin called the ‘pious illusion of negative theology’ and the pitfall of ‘metaphysical idolatry.’”⁸¹ In this context, he continues, the counsel of Paul Ricoeur “still seems relevant and may well serve as guidance for the future: ‘In our time we have not finished doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning.’”⁸² Therefore, from Wolfson’s perspective, “what is desirable is a purging of all theological constructs that are idols of misrepresentation”⁸³ and, hence, in the words of David L. Miller, a “radicalized poetics in the face of nothingness, i.e., the no-thingness of ultimate reality.”⁸⁴ That is, it is time to adopt a “postmonotheistic”⁸⁵ theopoetics, “an even deeper

⁸¹ According to Corbin, the “pious illusion of negative theology” refers to the way in which the Neoplatonic tradition of the three Abrahamic faiths or Religions of the Book in particular, and the Hellenic world in general, would tend to give priority to the apophatic or negative path to such an extent that they would completely subordinate the kataphatic or affirmative path to it, with the result that the former posited or “instat[ed] an Absolute into which everything must be made to go and be swallowed up (that is nihilism),” including the personal creator God and the personal human creature. Conversely, according to Corbin, the kataphatic or affirmative path—when unchecked by the apophatic path—is prone to “piling creatural attributes upon divinity” in such a way that “monotheism perishes in its triumph [and] degenerates into the idolatry that it fiercely wished to avoid.” See Henry Corbin, “Apophatic Theology as the Antidote to Nihilism,” translated by Matthew Evans-Cockle (<https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/bibliography/apophatic-theology-as-antidote-to-nihilism/>), and *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969/1997), pp. 268-269.

⁸² Ibid., p. 228. Wolfson is here quoting from Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, translated by Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 268-269 (see also idem, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: Éditions de L’Herne, 2003), pp. 24-27) and Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, translated by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 27. As cited in Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. 436, n. 5 and 6.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 231.

⁸⁴ David L. Miller, “The Brokenness of Beauty and the ‘Beauty’ of Brokenness: Toward a Postmodern Theopoetics,” Drew Tipple-Vosburgh Lecture, October 2009. As cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), p. 30. On p. 293, n. 41 of this work, Wolfson thanks Virginia Burrus for sending him a copy of Miller’s

apophasis, an apophasis of the apophasis, a bearing of silence that is not only the negation of affirmation, or even the negation that is negated, but the negation that is neither a *non privativum* [non-absence] nor a *non negativum* [non-negative].”⁸⁶

Here it is to be noted that I am borrowing the key term “postmonotheism” from Shaul Magid, who uses it to describe the new metaphysics that is characteristic of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s Paradigm Shift or Axial Age version of Judaism known as Jewish Renewal. In his essay, “Between Paradigm Shift Judaism and Neo-Hasidism: The New Metaphysics of Jewish Renewal,” Magid defines “postmonotheism”⁸⁷ as a metaphysical and theological construct that is based on the premise that the divine, the cosmos, and humanity are always and already “inextricably intertwined.”⁸⁸ By virtue of this triune entanglement, the channels are opened for a divine-cosmic-human intimacy that sees all of reality as a reflection of God and, hence, all being as “both alive *and* divine, intricately connected to the corporeal, and multiple (encompassing all deities and all humans).”⁸⁹ Thus this postmonotheistic vision naturally yields “the recognition that you and I are nothing but different and developing dimensions of God, informing God about God.”⁹⁰

It is also worth noting that what Magid calls Schachter-Shalomi’s postmonotheism bears a striking resemblance to Raimon Panikkar’s “cosmotheandric” vision. In his *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, Panikkar defines the cosmotheandric principle or intuition as follows:

lecture. There is, however, a typographical error that refers to Miller’s presentation as the Drew Tripple-Vosburgh Lecture.

⁸⁵ See Shaul Magid, “Between Paradigm Shift Judaism and Neo-Hasidism: The New Metaphysics of Jewish Renewal” *Tikkun* 30:1 (Winter 2015), pp. 11-15.

⁸⁶ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. 231.

⁸⁷ Magid, “Between Paradigm Shift Judaism and Neo-Hasidism,” p. 15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61; emphasis in original.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The cosmotheandric principle could be formulated by saying that the divine, the human and the earthly—however we may prefer to call them—are three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real, i.e., any reality inasmuch as it is real.... What this intuition emphasizes is that the three dimensions of reality are neither three modes of a monolithic undifferentiated reality, nor three elements of a pluralistic system. There is rather one, though intrinsically threefold, relation which manifests the ultimate constitution of reality. Everything that exists, any real being, presents this triune constitution expressed in three dimensions. I am not *only* saying that everything is directly or indirectly related to everything else: the radical relativity or *pratītyasamutpāda* of the buddhist tradition. I am also stressing that this relationship is not only constitutive of the whole, but that it flashes forth, ever new and vital, in every spark of the real.⁹¹

It is in this cosmotheandric or postmonotheistic light, then, that Wolfson's radical call for an even deeper apophasis, a more profound bearing of the silence of the mystery of being, is best understood.

Thus, Wolfson contends, although contemporary apophatic theologies have been beneficial in forging a new synthesis of philosophy and religion, they nevertheless need to be supplanted by “a more far-reaching apophasis, an apophasis of the apophasis, based

⁹¹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, edited and with an introduction by Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 60; emphasis in original.

on the acceptance of an absolute nothingness—to be distinguished from the nothingness of an absolute—that does not signify the unknowable One but the manifold that is the pleromatic abyss at being’s core, the negation devoid of the negation of its negation, a triple negativity, the emptiness of the fullness that is the fullness of the emptiness emptied of the emptiness of its emptiness.”⁹² It is through, with, and in the inscrutable kenotic mystery of this fontal “pleromatic abyss,” this not-God that is the *coincidentia oppositorum* wherein every opposite always already contains its own other,⁹³ that we come to realize and so embody the paradox that “the world both manifests and hides the divine [or numinous core of reality], not sequentially but concurrently, that is, the divine is manifest in the world by being hidden and hidden by being manifest.”⁹⁴

On this score, all of the conventional dichotomies that have traditionally governed how we think (and so given rise to theomania) collapse in the radical openness of the paradoxical middle—the middle that has been excluded by the logic of the excluded middle—the *metaxy* or chiasmic space of the in-between that cannot be circumscribed, that simultaneously transcends and includes every opposite in its generative embrace. Likewise, on this score, Wolfson notes that “the much-celebrated metaphor of the gift would give way to the more neutral and less theologically charged notion of an irreducible and unconditional givenness in which the distinction between giver and given collapses.” Recognition of this irreducible and unconditional givenness would enable us “to allow the apparent to appear as given without presuming a causal agency that would turn that given into a gift.”⁹⁵ That is, freed from the conceptual ties that bind us, it would

⁹² Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xxvii.

⁹³ See *ibid.*, p. xxvi.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xix-xx.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

enable us to receive the improbable grace of life for what it is in its most elemental phenomenological sense: an intentionally nonintentional act of giving beyond the gift, an act that is characterized by what Wolfson describes elsewhere as “the quality of givenness that involves—by the being of its logic and the logic of its being—the reciprocity of the given and the giving.”⁹⁶ In this, the apophatic gesture culminates in “the unsaying of the unsaying and...the true possibility of the gift consists in recognizing that there is no possibility of a gift, just the possibility of the unconditional giving of the abyss in which both giving and receiving are no longer discernible.”⁹⁷

Thus we can say that the paradoxical logic and the constructive emphasis of Wolfson’s book is encapsulated in the two phrases that comprise the last subheading of its final chapter: *the gift ungiven* and *giving beyond the giver and the given*. He begins this concluding section with the observation that “[t]he mythopoeic power of imagining the force of life as a gift and the lingering psychological need to render transcendence metaphorically are not difficult to understand.” But, from a strictly philosophical perspective, “the eventfulness of giving is far more neutral than what the image of the gift would suggest.”⁹⁸ Accordingly, Wolfson writes, “What gives just gives, not as a gift but as an inevitable consequence of there being something rather than nothing, the fundamental datum of existence that remains inexplicable in spite of the most imaginative efforts on the part of philosophers and physicists to explain it.” He continues:

Moving beyond the binary logic implied in what Heidegger considered to be the ultimate question of Western metaphysics, we would say that the

⁹⁶ Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 32.

⁹⁷ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. 230.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

something that is given is the very nothing that gives, and hence that something is nothing to the extent that nothing is something. In the giving, there is giving—nothing more, nothing less. Just as the rose blooms because it blooms, so the giving gives, not as gift but as giving, without will, intention, or design. Both object and subject, the given and the giver, are subsumed in the giving, which is indistinguishable from the givenness.⁹⁹

In this “ungifting of the gift,” we detect that “there is no gift to receive but the gift of discerning that there is no gift other than the giving that gives with no will to give and no desire to be given.”¹⁰⁰ That is to say, in following the paradoxical or nondual logic of apophasis to its conclusion, we awaken to the unconditional promise of an infinite giving that mysteriously transcends and includes the need to posit some form of transcendence. In the words of Wolfson:

The logic of apophasis, if permitted to run its course without the intervention of preexisting beliefs, would surpass the metaphysical dyad of presence and absence in the atheological unmasking of the mask and the consequent transcending of the need to posit some form of transcendence that is not ultimately a facet of immanence, a something more that is not in fact merely another expression of the totality of what there is, provided we understand that totality as the network of indefinite and ever-evolving

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 260.

patterns of interconnectivity rather than a fixed system of predictable and quantifiable data. Within that network it makes no sense to speak of an infinite other extrinsic to and incarnate in finite others; alterity is the intrinsic corollary of the diffusion of the same, the otherness at the horizon of phenomenality marked always by the sense of there being more, and therefore fewer, lived experiences that manifest the interrelatedness and interdependence of the phenomena that together constitute the multiverse.¹⁰¹

According to Wolfson's "constructive kenotic atheology,"¹⁰² then, to let the logic of apophasis run its course without the intervention of preexisting beliefs is to unmask our tenacious clinging to the need to posit some form of a transcendent God that is other than the "pleromatic abyss at being's core,"¹⁰³ the numinous *coincidentia oppositorum* that is the boundless divine desire to be "expansively self-surpassing...in the infinite generosity that gives absolutely beyond regard for the [limit] constituted by [the] need to be recognized or praised as the Giver of infinite giving."¹⁰⁴ This is the not-God, the radical nondual reality of all-that-is, that, as Virginia Burrus writes, "may be closer to *one* than to *two*, or even *three*—because it is closest of all to *nothing*."¹⁰⁵

In conclusion, therefore, from this consideration of some of the major themes of his voluminous and distinguished oeuvre, it is clear that Wolfson's spiritual-intellectual

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. xxii.

¹⁰² McCullough, "Irenic Irony Unsaying," p. 231.

¹⁰³ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xxvii.

¹⁰⁴ McCullough, "Irenic Irony Unsaying," p. 231.

¹⁰⁵ Virginia Burrus, "Seeing God in Bodies: Wolfson, Rosenzweig, Augustine," in *Reading the Church Fathers*, edited by Scot Douglas and Morwenna Ludlow (London/New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2011), p. 54; italics in original.

vision is as vast as it is sophisticated. As a result, because his mystical vision “spans many idioms and exists on many disciplinary registers,” Wolfson’s contributions are likewise many. Hughes eloquently describes some of the more signal contributions of this poetic thinker:

He has, for one thing, opened up the study of kabbalah to issues of relevance to the academic study of religion, including, but not limited to, gender analysis and poetics. In so doing, he has contributed, in ways few others have, Jewish material to larger analytical frameworks supplied by philosophy, religious studies, and comparative literature within the larger context of the humanities [(to say nothing of the sciences)]. And, in terms of philosophy, Wolfson has used kabbalistic texts to think about and contribute to larger conversations such as the phenomenology of the imagination, the dialectic relationship between immanence and transcendence, the limits of temporality, and, most recently, the notion of the gift. In all of his many contributions, Wolfson’s thinking comes full circle—ending whence it began, beginning where it ends—the place where language, being, and time dance in the imagination’s silhouette.¹⁰⁶

It is thus in the luminal darkness of Wolfson’s mystical vision that we now take a further step along the spiral path beyond the path to consider one more related theme—the theme of *theosis* or deification.

¹⁰⁶ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 30.

Chapter 7: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics Revisited

From one abyss to the next our journey remains
that of the book.... Only the void answers the void;
God's only reference is God.

Edmond Jabès¹

As the above title suggests, this chapter revisits the subject of kabbalistic hermeneutics. Because it is so central to Wolfson's spiritual-intellectual vision and hence his understanding of deification, this topic warrants our taking an even closer look at it. In doing so, over the course of this and the subsequent chapter, we will re-vision *theosis* through the lens of kabbalistic hermeneutics in order to elucidate Wolfson's notion of deification and demonstrate its significance to his mystical thought.

Kabbalistic Hermeneutics

In *Language, Eros, Being*, Wolfson offers some observations regarding hermeneutical assumptions that undergird the imaginal and temporal wisdom of kabbalah, a wisdom that in many respects corresponds to or mirrors his interdisciplinary understanding of the timeswerve that was mentioned in the previous chapter. As will be shown, this same wisdom informs the understanding of deification that is to be found in *Open Secret*, which is why it behooves us to consider it here in greater depth. This more in-depth exploration will be done with a view to suggesting how Wolfson's thought can contribute to a revised understanding of deification and its poetics, and thereby assist in the

¹ Edmond Jabès, *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, with an introduction by Richard Stamelman (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), p. 201.

doctrine's recovery. But first, a word or two needs to be said about the term "kabbalah," about what it is and is not.

Genealogical Mis/givings²

"Kabbalah," which literally means "tradition" or "reception" is, in the words of Wolfson, "the generic term used by pious practitioners and critical scholars to denote the various currents of esoteric lore and mystical praxis that have been cultivated by elite rabbinic circles from the High Middle Ages to the present."³ The kabbalah, however, "is not monolithic in nature; on the contrary, it can be described most appropriately as a collage of disparate doctrines and practices."⁴

This last point is worth emphasizing, for it suggests that, as Wolfson notes, the semantic range of the term "kabbalah" necessarily encompasses "practice and theory, in Western philosophical jargon, or, in rabbinic locution, *ma'aseh* and *talmud*, a way of doing and a way of thinking." Because of this, he states, "I do not accept the conceptual split between the practical and theoretical, and thus when I speak of a theosophic structure, the performative gesture is implied, and conversely, when I speak of a performative gesture, the theosophic structure is implied." To do anything less would be to legitimate the aforementioned split that he maintains is antithetical to the very nature of the Jewish esoteric tradition known as kabbalah. Wolfson puts it well when he says, "Indeed, the redemptive nature of kabbalistic esotericism ensues from the inextricable

² Unless otherwise noted, I will be using Wolfson's own section headings.

³ Elliot R. Wolfson, "Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics in Kabbalistic Anthropology," *Exemplaria* 12.1 (2000), p. 129.

⁴ Ibid.

reciprocity of doing and knowing: mystical knowledge is a corollary of contemplative practice, contemplative practice a corollary of mystical knowledge.”⁵

Given that the very nature of kabbalah is constituted by this inextricable reciprocity or mutually interpenetrating *perichoresis* of doing and thinking, of contemplative practice and mystical knowledge, it is a multifaceted historical phenomenon that is difficult to classify. Moreover, this fluid nonduality at the heart of kabbalah not only makes it difficult to determine an adequate taxonomy, but it makes it almost impossible to give a clearly delimited account of its origins. Consequently, Wolfson writes, “it must be acknowledged that [the term] ‘kabbalah’...is multivalent and perhaps even—at the root—unstable, indeterminate, rootless.”

This conclusion is lent even more credence when one takes into account “the hermeneutical duplicity of secrecy” that marks kabbalah as an esoteric or mystical tradition. For, to borrow Wolfson’s locution, this duplicity demands that “to be a secret, the secret cannot be disclosed as the secret it purports to be, but if the secret is not disclosed as the secret it secretly cannot be, it cannot be the secret it exposes itself not to be.” Thus, given both the ideational and practical intricacies of kabbalah and its inherent “double bind of secrecy,” Wolfson proposes a morphological approach to explaining the origins of this tradition. For in his estimation morphology is best able to accommodate kabbalah’s essential multidimensionality and indeterminacy, since in its approach to the study of textual origins it likens verbal forms to “branches one pursues in search of the

⁵ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 1.

root, though coming to root does not mean one comes to rock bottom but rather to a ground that sways.”⁶

For this reason Wolfson advocates replacing the modernist notion of a singular origin with the postmodern Foucauldian idea of genealogy, “a tracing of lineage that recognizes ruptures and divergences in the process of extending the line, an orientation that disturbs what was considered stable, fragmenting what was thought unified, picturing heterogeneity in what was imagined hegemonic.” In this, genealogy is “a pursuit of beginnings without assuming an origin to be found; there is *no/thing* in the beginning but a commingling of events that will be interpreted anew repeatedly in variable historical and cultural contexts, a sequence of enfolding resisting the attempt to unfold the beginning, a complex image of simplicity.”⁷

Having this paradoxical goal in mind, then, we can say with Wolfson that kabbalah, as “a major current of Jewish esotericism – in the accepted but questionable taxonomy of contemporary scholarship, ‘theosophic’ in contrast to ‘ecstatic’ kabbalah – is focused principally on the imaginary envisioning of ten luminous emanations that reveal the light that must remain hidden if it is to be revealed.”⁸

⁶ Ibid., p. 2. It must be noted that, while Wolfson’s approach may have certain resonances with the morphological approach associated with Mircea Eliade and/or Henry Corbin, it nevertheless differs in significant ways. For example, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, Wolfson is very clear in stating that he cannot accept the binary opposition that Corbin draws between a “transhistorical truth” that is ascribed to cyclical time and a “material historic truth” that is ascribed to linear time (a distinction that is in part indebted to Eliade’s dichotomy of the sacred/eternal and profane/historical) because his own notion of time as a reversible curve is based on a scientific perspective that conflicts with any view of time’s supposed irreversible linearity – be it morphological, commonsensical, or otherwise (see *Language, Eros, Being*, p. xviii). As he writes elsewhere in this same work, reiterating the distinctiveness of his hybrid scientific-morphological approach, “My path of thinking... goes forth from discerning shared structures of thought in different historical junctures, a phenomenon I explain not by appeal to transhistorical archetypes (à la Jung, Eliade, or Corbin) but on the basis of a scientifically defensible conception of time as a reversible swerve” (p. 49).

⁷ Ibid., p. 3; italics in original.

⁸ Ibid.

These emanations have been designated by a variety of terms over the centuries, but the one that became most emblematic and hence common in its usage was *sefirot*, whose semantic range is broad enough to embrace the primary convergence of the symbolism of light and the symbolism of language that is “one of the most important themes that has shaped the ecstatic element of theosophic kabbalah.”⁹ This broad semantic range stems from the term’s inherent polyvalency. For, as Wolfson has observed, the word *sefirot* derives from the root *sfr*, which can be vocalized as *sefer*, “book,” but it is associated as well with the word *sappir*, “sapphire.” Additionally, the root *sfr* can be vocalized as *safar*, “to count.” Not surprisingly, therefore, “[n]o single English word can adequately account for the richness of the range of semantic meaning linked to the term *sefirot*, which denotes concurrently the sense of luminosity (*sappir*), speech (*sefer*), and enumeration (*sefar*).” Wolfson continues, “At the heart of the mystical experience that informs the worldview of the kabbalists is the concurrence of these three fields of discourse: The potencies of the divine are experienced as the translucent letters that are enumerated within the book written by God. But just as the letters by means of which the book is inscribed are made visible only in the absence of any word proper, so the light can be seen over and only against the background of darkness.”¹⁰

This being the case, as Wolfson points out, *sefirot* is an idiom that was initially employed in the first section of “an older, multilayered anthology of cosmological speculation” known as the “Book of Formation” or *Sefer Yesirah*. He continues:

⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Hermeneutics of Light in Medieval Kabbalah” in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 111-112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

In the course of generations, allegedly new and more intricate images have been deployed by kabbalists in the poetic envisioning, but these have been in great measure based on principles already at work in earlier sources, albeit reticently, such as the idea that each of the *sefirot* reflects all the others, or the even more arcane notion that there is a decade of potencies either above or within the first of the *sefirot* that parallel the ten regular gradations, a philosophical idea imaged mythically as the primal human form perched above a second human form, perhaps the symbolic locus of the secret of the androgyne.¹¹

Regardless of the evolving intricacy or complexity of kabbalistic theosophy, “the *sefirot* remained structurally at the core of the contemplative visualization that characterizes the way of wisdom, the life experience, transmitted by masters of tradition.”¹² Significantly, Wolfson also notes that, despite the semantic range of the term *sefirot* that has been used to connote everything from the divine essence to beams of light to primal ideas or utterances to pious-ethical attributes, there are what Scholem identified as the two main “symbolic structures” by which the process of the “manifestation of God, his stepping outside” of himself was understood, the “symbolism of light and the symbolism of language.”¹³

¹¹ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 3. For more on how each of the ten *sefirot* can reflect all of the others as holographic “monads,” see Paul Marshall’s revised monadology in *The Shape of the Soul: What Mystical Experience Tells Us about Ourselves and Reality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). My thanks to Jeffrey Kripal for bringing this book to my attention.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gershom Scholem, “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala,” *Diogenes* 80 (1972), p. 165. See idem *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 35-36; idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 449. As cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 4, n. 16. This essay was originally delivered as a lecture at the Eranos conference in 1970 and published in *Judaica*, III, pp. 7-71, with the title “Der Name Gottes und

This is a significant point, for, as Wolfson says, “Scholem’s observation that *sefirot* are viewed primarily under the symbolic guise of light and language is a generalization that has stood the test of time and is still a credible explanatory paradigm.” Thus, according to this paradigm,

In the kabbalist’s imaginal representation of the infinite “stepping out” of its boundlessness, an image that pushes against the limit of understanding, emanation of light coincides with revelation of name. Consequently, as we shall uncover on this path of recovery, seeing and hearing are intertwined in mystical envisioning—to behold the invisible is to heed the ineffable.¹⁴

***Ars Poetica* and the Symbolic Imagination**

To further unpack the foregoing as it relates to kabbalistic hermeneutics, we do well to consider that behind this insight of the traditional kabbalists is an expansive understanding of the poetic nature of language and the symbolic essence of reality that was born of their lived experience of transformation. Hence, with respect to the former, Wolfson rightly discerns a resonance between the kabbalistic notion of poetry and the one that emerged from eighteenth-century German aesthetics which (*pace* Aristotle) conceived of poetry as “a mode of viewing the world that is transformative rather than

die Sprachtheorie der Kabala.” See David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, second edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 193n46.

¹⁴ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 4.

imitative.”¹⁵ Such a resonance is not surprising given that kabbalah influenced the German philosophical tradition via Schelling.¹⁶ The correspondence is nonetheless significant, in part for the way in which its refracted light helps to illumine how the kabbalists’ poetic, linguistic, and symbolic view of reality enabled them to experience what Wolfson calls “the musicality of lyrical time” through which the ontological cipher of language “gives verbal utterance to the unfolding of an ineffable present wherein past is recollected as future and future anticipated as past.”¹⁷

Wolfson’s treatment of kabbalistic poetics, therefore, seeks to honor and thereby reflect this richly paradoxical and dynamically imbricated vision of reality. “In my attempt to engage the poetics of kabbalistic lore,” he writes, “I embrace the expansive understanding of language as poetic gesture that goes beyond representation and communication [to include existential transformation].” He continues his nuanced reflection:

I do not think it anachronistic to say that kabbalists were aware of the plight of human consciousness that has been documented in a particularly poignant way by modern philosophers pondering nature from a post-Kantian constructivist perspective: All knowledge is mediated, and hence nothing can be known without the intermediary of a sign; there is no

¹⁵ Ibid. Eighteenth-century German aesthetics is associated with such intellectual luminaries as Gottfried Leibnitz (1646-1716), Christian Wolff (1679-1754), Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781), Johann Herder (1744-1803), and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). As a school of thought, therefore, it is the immediate predecessor to what would later become known as German Romanticism. See Paul Guyer, “18th Century German Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta at <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=aesthetics-18th-german>.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. xvi, n. 2 and p. 100, n. 367.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

escape from the snare of metaphoricity, as it were, for even what is presumed, either on a commonsensical or a scientific basis, to be a direct, immediate experience is, upon reflection [and subsequent articulation], a complex lattice of semiotic signs informing the mind having the experience. To be sure, kabbalists, like poets, posit an indissoluble link between words and things, an “ontocentricity of language,”¹⁸ and hence we cannot ascribe to them the view, expressed in the linguistic model of Ferdinand de Saussure, that the bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary. On the contrary, as any number of scholars have duly noted, it is axiomatic for kabbalists to assume that language, and particularly Hebrew, presumed to be the language of creation, is essential; cosmology cannot be separated from semiotics, as the cosmological event is decipherable as a sign that must be interpreted. Nevertheless, the matter is complicated by the fact that kabbalists must (following the reason of their own mythologic) assume that the things to which words refer, the signified of the signifier, are themselves signs, since the ineffability of ultimate reality can never be known except through the prism of language. If we are to suppose a genuine confluence of the ontic and linguistic, then there would be no way out of the further assumption that what is real is a sign that points beyond itself to another sign in an *infinite semiosis*, a seemingly endless play of representation.¹⁹

¹⁸ Albert A. Johnstone’s *Rationalized Epistemology: Taking Solipsism Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 175. As cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 5, n. 31.

¹⁹ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 5-6; italics in original. Wolfson is here echoing Robert S. Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University

This in turn is particularly relevant for understanding the kabbalistic perspective on the symbolic nature of reality. According to Wolfson, the “basic mode of apprehension” for the kabbalist-poet is the symbol which is “the form of appearance that gives shape to the reality it mirrors.” Following in the footsteps of Ernst Cassirer, “which in a significant way lead back to Schelling,” Wolfson explains that in saying this he is maintaining that for traditional kabbalists “the symbol is a ‘structural form’ that articulates experience but in such a manner that casts doubt upon the virtue of differentiating truth from appearance.”²⁰ Indeed, relative to understanding the kabbalistic notion of symbol and its significance to their imaginal hermeneutics, he asserts that “It serves no end to suppose that the symbolic form points to an external world set in opposition to internal consciousness any more than it does to suppose the opposite to be so, nor is there any compelling reason to associate myth with the former and symbol with the latter. On the contrary, the symbol signifies linguistically what is experienced imaginally as myth,”²¹ even as it necessarily and perpetually harbors what Cassirer referred to as “the curse of mediacy: it is bound to obscure what it seeks to reveal.”²² Accordingly, Wolfson says, “in the mind of kabbalists all things in the universe are viewed symbolically as images of the sefirotic potencies, but the latter are themselves symbolic screens upon and through which the boundless and indeterminate light is projected and refracted, a light that cannot be delimited as light without ceasing to be the

Press, 1994), pp. 67-115. See p. 6, n. 33. It is also worth noting that there are resonant echoes of Wolfson’s reading of kabbalistic hermeneutics to be found in Jeffrey J. Kripal’s latest book *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2019), particularly the chapter entitled “Symbols in Between,” pp. 133-165.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

²² Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), p. 7. As cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 6, n.35.

light that is to be delimited, a light that comprehends darkness not as its antimony, nor as a reflection of the same, but as the identically different that is differently identical.”²³

Linguistic Veiling/Revisioning Imagelessness

Before proceeding further, an additional word or two needs to be said about how the symbolic ontolinguocentrism of the kabbalists functions. As Wolfson observes, the approach of kabbalists resonates with the Hermetic theory of correspondence expressed in the “Emerald Tablet,” the *Tabula Smaragdina*, of the legendary Hermes Trimegistus: “I speak not fictitious things, but that which is certain and true. What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.”²⁴ This gnomic utterance, along with the merging of Hermetic theurgy and Neoplatonism, exerted an especially important influence on the evolution of medieval Christian, Jewish, and Islamic mysticism.

The point that is particularly germane for our present study is how the kabbalists derived from the Hermetic theory of correspondence their “formulation of cosmic isotropy in the guise of the doctrine of signatures.” That is to say, in the light of their understanding of the symbolic nature of reality, the kabbalists saw the entire cosmos as “a semantic field wherein everything is a sign pointing beyond itself to an interior reality that is itself a sign pointing to what can only (im)properly be termed insignificant, that is, unknowable, unnameable, beyond the reach of conceptual and/or verbal signification.”²⁵

²³ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 7.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

To further illustrate the significance of this cosmic-divine-human isotropy, Wolfson turns to Jacob Böhme (1575-1624), “the German cobbler-theosophist” whose work influenced the likes of Schelling, Hegel, and others, and who “expressed the occult wisdom in language even more germane to kabbalistic tradition.”²⁶ From Böhme’s *Signature of All Things*:

Therefore the greatest understanding lies in the signature, wherein man...may not only learn to know himself, but therein also he may learn to know the essence of all essences; for by the external form of all creatures, by their instigation, inclination and desire, also by their sound, voice, and speech which they utter, the hidden spirit is known; for nature has given to everything its language according to its essence and form.²⁷

In response to this kabbalistically resonant passage, which calls to mind Spinoza’s metaphysical formula *deus sive natura*, Wolfson observes that, from the vantage point it affords us, we can with the kabbalists “speak hyperliterally of the cosmos as the book of [divine] nature, that is, nature is the palimpsest on which the erasure of the ineffable [divinity] is erased in the inscripted traces of what appears, apparently, as real.”²⁸

Additionally, closer to our own time and with specific reference to kabbalah, Wolfson draws upon an insight of Gershom Scholem who articulated well the ontological implication of the kabbalists’ symbolic approach to reality. In the words of Scholem,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jacob Böhme, *The Signature of All Things and Other Writings* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke, 1969), p. 12. As cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 8, n. 49.

²⁸ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 8.

“nature, Kabbalistically seen, is nothing but a shadow of the divine name.” Actually, as Wolfson elaborates, it would be more precise to say that even the name YHWH, the Tetragrammaton, “is shadow, not light, or, in language more endemic to kabbalists, a garment, since it too reveals the one true reality by concealing it.” Wolfson continues, further explicating Scholem:

Utilizing the metaphor of Goethe, *der Gottheit lebendiges Kleid*, “the living garment of the deity,” to explain the theosophic conception cultivated by the circle in Gerona but which we can liberally apply to many kabbalistic authors, Scholem notes that the sefirotic garments “are not of the kind that could be removed from the deity; they are the forms of its manifestation.” These emanations, moreover, represent “the name or names of God.... Creation can subsist only to the extent that the name of God is engraved in it.”²⁹

Wolfson adduces a zoharic passage from the *Idra Zuta* stratum to illustrate how in the Jewish esoteric and mystical tradition known as kabbalah “the sefirotic emanations are depicted as the multiple lights that collectively are the name of God, revealing the infinite radiance that cannot be revealed.”³⁰ Since it helps to further elucidate kabbalistic hermeneutics (and by extension Wolfson’s own poetics), the passage is worth duplicating here.

²⁹ Ibid. See notes 50 and 51 on this page. Wolfson is here quoting from David Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah” in *Gershom Scholem*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1987), p. 113, and Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 448.

³⁰ Ibid.

Thus I have seen sparks that glisten from the supernal spark, hidden of the hidden.... and in the light of each and every gradation is revealed what is revealed, and all the lights are united...and one is not separated from the other. Each and every light of all the sparks, which are called arrayments of the king and crowns of the king, radiates and is united with the innermost light that is within and is not separated from without, and thus everything rises to one gradation and everything is crowned in one matter, and one is not separated from the other, he and his name are one. The light that is revealed is called the garment of the king, the innermost light that is within is the concealed light, and within it dwells the one that is not separate and is not revealed, and all of these sparks and all of these lights radiate from the holy ancient One, concealed of all concealed, the supernal spark. When all the lights that have emanated are contemplated, nothing is found but the supernal spark that is hidden and not revealed.³¹

Thus we see that the name, which comprises the variously symbolized sefirotic gradations that “reveal the hidden light of the infinite,” is configured in the kabbalistic imagination in “potentially manifold semiotic deflections and ocular displacements,” although, as Wolfson notes following Tishby, the principal form by which the ineffable name of God is imaged is an Anthropos, “the primal Adam in whose image the lower Adam was created.”³² In the words of the Zohar, “It has been taught: ‘When all the holy crowns of the king are arrayed in their arrayments, they are called *adam*, the image that

³¹ *Zohar* 3:291b (*Idra Zuta*). As cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 9, n. 53.

³² Wolfson, *Language*, p. 9, n. 54. Wolfson is here echoing Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 295-298.

contains everything.”³³ By way of further explication, Wolfson again avails himself of an apposite passage from the work of Scholem who, in another essay, described this paradoxical dialectic of the kabbalists “in terms that inevitably call to mind the notion of an inaccessible primordial language, the *Ursprache*, proffered by [his friend] Walter Benjamin”³⁴:

One could say that all of creation is only a language, a symbolic expression of that level which cannot be apprehended by thought, and that this level serves as a basis for every structure which is subject to apprehension through thought. The entire world is thus a symbolic body, within whose concrete reality there is reflected a divine secret.³⁵

To say, then, that the entire world is a “symbolic body” reflecting the “divine secret” implies—in the words of Wolfson now—“that nature is a mirror of (dis)semblance, a veil unveiling the unveiling of the veil veiling the (un)veiling of the veil.”³⁶

The fundamental symbolic orientation of kabbalah, therefore, can be expressed as “this doubling of vision – what appears is always image, but image can be seen only as image” of a Neoplatonic “excess of being beyond affirmation and negation...[that is] the

³³ *Zohar* 3:139b (*Idra Rabba*). As cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 9, n. 55. This recalls the title of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s first book, a collection of poems he wrote in Yiddish that was published in 1933 and entitled *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, translated by Morton M. Leifman and with an introduction by Edward K. Kaplan (New York: Continuum, 2007).

³⁴ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 9.

³⁵ Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, edited with and introduction by Avraham Shapira, translated by Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia, PA and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1997), p. 140. As cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 9, n. 57.

³⁶ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 9.

source whence all beings arise and whither they shall return, this being-that-is-more-than-being, the otherwise-than-being, is being nonetheless, ‘being-no,’ we might say, as opposed to ‘no-being,’ the manifest (un)seen in the splintering of the four-letter name through the filter of ten *sefirot*.³⁷ In this all of reality is inherently symbolic and specular, manifesting and reflecting in a (non)dual way the fontal source of being that is ultimately unsayable and invisible.

Thus, according to Wolfson, from the kabbalistic standpoint, “the process of emanation is envisioned concurrently as vocalization of the name that is ineffable and manifestation of the image that is invisible.” Moreover, inasmuch as the name is held to comprise the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, “semiotic folds of boundless light-energy, as it were, the substance – as much wave as particle – of everything that exists in all realms of being,” we can say that kabbalists viewed the arrayment of the multi-dimensional divine image as “the unfolding of language and the flowering of light; to put on a garment is to render visible the invisible, to inscript erasure, to don the nameless in the book that is entirely the name.” Wolfson continues:

This book is the *meqor hayyim* (*fons vitae*), the fount whence the life force incessantly issues forth. Emanation of the divine potencies is thus imagined simultaneously through three different prisms: radiation of light, flowing of water, calling forth the name. The three images figuratively convey the sense that the emanative process is the weaving of a veil through which the veil of weaving is unveiled, a theme that reverberates

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 9-10. A resonant comparison can be made between this symbolic ontology and Jeffrey Kripal’s *gnomon on the Human as Two*. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

with contemporary notions of poiesis as setting foot on an initiatory path, that is, a path that winds its way to the inception that is yet to come.³⁸

As Wolfson notes, this last idea of an inception that is yet to come is particularly prominent in the thinking poetics of Heidegger's later work, but it also finds affirmation in "other influential philosophical reflections of the twentieth century," such as Franz Rosenzweig's new thinking and Hans-Georg Gadamer's critical hermeneutics.³⁹

Hence, with this in mind, we can summarize the foregoing functional analysis of the kabbalists' symbolic ontolinguocentrism by saying that—in Wolfson's Heideggerian locution—"if language is the veil through which the veil must be unveiled, then the unveiling itself is a form of veiling that will be veiled in the unveiling." It paradoxically follows from this "ontic coincidence of the optic and verbal" that the hermeneutical position adopted in zoharic and other kabbalistic literature is that "there is no naked truth to be disrobed, for truth that is truly naked—divested of all appearance—is mere simulation that cannot be seen. Apparent truth, truly apparent, is disclosed through the concealment of its disclosure."⁴⁰ In other words, there is no truth without untruth, no revelation that is not simultaneously concealment. At the mystic heart of reality is the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Inscripting the Invisible/Envisioning the Ineffable

Before proceeding further, given the radically paradoxical and synesthetic nature of what has been said thus far, we do well to assess and clarify where we are at in our current

³⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

explorations. Plainly stated, in following Wolfson's study of the foundational themes and/or main symbolic structures of kabbalistic hermeneutics, a study that in great measure is informed by the poetic thinking of Heidegger, we find ourselves in a position to better appreciate not only the hermeneutics of the kabbalists but their mystical poetics as well. Yet what exactly do I mean by mystical poetics? A brief word or two by way of explanation is in order.

As Arthur Versluis points out, whether one likes it or not, the word "mysticism" (and hence "mystical") has a long history; it is, generally speaking, the accepted term of study in the academy, though admittedly not without controversy; and whatever debates or confusion may surround this term does not invalidate it, but rather calls for a more precise and serviceable definition that is true to its roots. Etymologically the word *mysticism* "derives from the Greek *mystikos* (μυστικός), meaning secret or esoteric path of the mysteries, and [this in turn] derives from *mystes* (μύστης), meaning an initiate into the mysteries, or more literally, one who has seen directly for himself or herself into the mysteries." This usage was eventually adopted and adapted by the early Christian tradition, which employed it to explicate its understanding of the four levels or senses of scripture that were designated as the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogic layers. Significantly, the person who first proposed this particular fourfold hermeneutic was the fourth/fifth-century monk John Cassian. According to Cassian's paradigm (a model that, like most of his teaching, quietly bore the unmistakable influence of his controversial monastic preceptor Evagrius of Pontus), the deepest and unspeakable level of the text was the anagogic or mystical sense, which is the layer that refers to the direct experience of contemplation (*theoria*), which is the intuitive knowledge (*gnosis*) or vivid awareness of

“the Real within all that is real,...of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being,”
of our always already being one with “the transcendent and inexpressible God.”⁴¹

Therefore, given both its ancient roots and the various meanings it has accumulated over millennia, we do well to follow Versluis in understanding “mysticism” and its adjectival form “mystical” (coined by the anonymous sixth-century Christian monk known as Pseudo-Dionysius) to refer more broadly to “religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object.”⁴²

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 3, 2.

⁴² Arthur Versluis, *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), p. 3. While I am in fundamental agreement with Versluis’ argument that “‘mysticism’ as a descriptor becomes intellectually incoherent if we don’t recognize and acknowledge its Platonic history and context” (p. 1), and while I find his definition of mysticism to be both congenial and useful, there is at least one point on which we disagree. Specifically, I am referring to his notion of nonduality and/or nondualism, as found in *Platonic Mysticism*. Admittedly, this is a term that would not have been used prior to the nineteenth century, when more often than not it was employed as a synonym for “monism,” which appears to be how Versluis understands it. This is evident in the penultimate chapter of *Platonic Mysticism* that is devoted to the topic of transcendence. For there, in making the argument for a “tradition of Platonic mysticism that runs from Plato and Plotinus through Neoplatonism into Christianity via Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, and Meister Eckhart” (p. 106), Versluis contends that “[i]t is important to recognize that the tradition of Platonic mysticism is not dualistic, as it is often claimed to be” (p. 107). To demonstrate how and why this is the case, he turns to Plotinus’ description of the contemplative process as found in *Enneads* 6.9.3.10-13: “when the soul wishes to see [the One] by itself, it is just by being with it that it sees, and by being one with it that it is one, and it is not capable of thinking that it possesses what it seeks, because it is not other than that which is being known.” For, according to Versluis, this passage clearly indicates that in the tradition of Platonic mysticism “the soul is said to recognize in intellection the ground of truth that is not other than itself” (p. 107). In this tradition, therefore, the process of contemplation (*theoria*) or mystical knowing (*gnosis*) is one in which “the observing awareness, by observing attentively, is through that very process become transparent and thus is transmuted from discursive awareness to a nondiscursive awareness” (p. 108). Versluis recognizes that such an understanding resonates with certain mystical traditions of the East, in particular those of Hinduism and Buddhism, though he maintains that the Platonic tradition “is closer to Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism [than Hinduism because it] does not privilege a separate ‘witness’ consciousness” (p. 107). But he goes on to claim that the tradition of Platonic mysticism is nonetheless distinct insofar as its understanding of contemplation or the contemplative process “is not dualistic, nor is it nondualistic – it cannot be adequately captured in linguistic conceptual terms, but only can be referred to, because it is clearly in Plotinus’s work a process that one must experience for oneself” (p. 108). And it is precisely here that our paths diverge. For while Versluis seems to equate nonduality with monism as opposed to dualism and suggests the possibility of an unnamed third term (“transduality” perhaps?) for the Platonist tradition’s understanding of an experience that can only be pointed to inasmuch as it is ineffable or beyond all words and concepts, I, as previously stated (following Panikkar), regard nonduality to be a description of precisely that experience. Thus, for me, nonduality is a key term that transcends and includes monism and dualism. It signifies that which is simultaneously neither this nor that and both this and that – the *coincidentia oppositorum*. As such, it not only describes the ineffable experience to which Versluis refers, but it bespeaks or points to the mysterious and paradoxical nature of reality – “the ground of truth” – that is neither one nor many but radically pluralistic and hence both one and many. For, in the

Moreover, it is to be noted with Versluis that defining mysticism/mystical as referring to “the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object” has numerous advantages.

First, it makes clear that mysticism is a type of cognition. Second, it recognizes that this kind of cognition is beyond instrumentalizing rationality that infers what is true; it is, rather, direct cognition of a “transcendent reality,” without thereby limiting what that term means except to say that it is “beyond the division of subject and object.” Hence, third, while precise, this definition is also broad enough to include both apophatic and visionary [kataphatic] mysticism. The transcendence of subject and object can be understood as taking place on a continuum. The heart of this transcendence is known as *via negativa*, or apophatic experience, meaning the fundamental or primordial reality beyond any conceptual and sensory representation. But the same definition also holds for visionary experiences that take place hierophanically, in an inner dimension where the observing subject is not separate from the revealing object, but rather where the divine “other” reveals itself to “me.”⁴³

words of Panikkar: “Reality is neither monistic nor dualistic, but advaitic [nondual or a-dual], trinitarian, and vital, that is, pluralistic (although) without separation” (*Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype* [New York: Seabury Press, 1982], p. 56). Hence, contra Versluis, when he asserts in *Platonic Mysticism* that “there is a kind of awareness that is accessible to us as human beings, which ... transcends subject and object” (p. 115) and is transparent to the “primordial ground” of being that is transcendently immanent in all phenomena, I understand this nondualistically.

⁴³ Ibid.

But if that is what I mean by the word “mystical,” how do I define “poetics”? To what does it refer? By poetics I mean something more than poetry as such, though poetry is definitely a necessary part of it. Here “poetics” refers to a particular kind of creativity, specifically, the exploration of language. And, as Aziz Esmail observes, “[t]he kind of language which lends itself to exploration is the language of symbol and metaphor.” This is the language of speculation, of the metaphysical and postmetaphysical level of discourse, where “there is no statement which is not at the same time a question.” It demonstrates “a way of thinking and speaking in which metaphor, symbol, and analogy are of the essence; which challenges the imagination, feeling, and reason, and thus engenders creativity.” Such language is “semantically pregnant” and has “a way of radiating outwards—laterally, above, and into the depths.” It is what we might call “existentially expressive language” inasmuch as it is in this language that we articulate our experience of our essential being, however this might be understood. In this it is “a language which does not seek to control or manipulate being, but to express, simply, its depth and plenitude.”⁴⁴ In the simplest terms, poetics refers to the spiritual dimension of life (i.e., the intrinsic, nondual, hidden wholeness of being), and to its continuous symbolic creativity as expressed in the always unfolding dance of thought, word, and image.

Accordingly, then, from our present vantage point, we can see that in the intricate symbolic world of medieval kabbalah there is attested—in the words of Wolfson now—“a nexus of language, imagination, and world-making that is indicative of a poetic orientation to being in the world... an ontic sensibility whereby things of the world are

⁴⁴ Aziz Esmail, *The Poetics of Religious Experience: The Islamic Context* (London/New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 9, 10, 11, 12, and 72.

envisioned as word-images infused with the vibrancy of verbal visualization.” He continues:

For the kabbalist, as the poet, language, the multivalent vocalizations of the unspeakable name, informs us about the duplicitous nature of truth as the concealed disclosure of the disclosed concealment, the plenitude diminished in its overflowing, the absence brimful in its withholding; all that exists is a symbolic in/articulation of the ineffable name, the word that is not a sign but a showing that manifests the façade of reality in its inexhaustible linguistic potentiality.... The affirmation of language as inherently symbolic implies that language inevitably exceeds its own boundary; the mystic, as poet, grasps that truth of speech as a saying of what cannot be spoken but in speaking the unspoken.⁴⁵

We can also see with Wolfson that, for the kabbalist, “divine autogenesis reflects this process, envisioned as the word breaking out in the outbreaking of silence.” Consistent with this vision of reality, the emanation of the *sefirot*, by which the nameless is adorned in the raiment of the name, is “experienced in the withdrawal/bestowing, a pattern that well suits the nature of language, epitomized by the poetic, as speaking the inaudible, inscribing the invisible.” As Wolfson goes on to note, in the Jewish mystical tradition the boldest application of this dialectic—“not to be construed in the Hegelian sense as the identity of identity and nonidentity but rather in postmodern logic, whereby

⁴⁵ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 26.

identity and nonidentity are identical precisely because they are not identical”⁴⁶—is to be found in the kabbalah of Isaac Luria that began to circulate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in various versions, though the mythologoumenon of divine withdrawal/bestowing is much older and “traceable to different strata of zoharic literature.”⁴⁷

This dialectic and the cathartic mythologoumenon informing it is the basis of the Lurianic concept of *tsimtsum* (also rendered *simsum*) which is related to the notion of divine suffering. The teaching of *tsimtsum* is thus an emblematic disclosure of a fundamental principle of kabbalistic poetics and contemplation. Wolfson elaborates:

The myth of catharsis underlying the notion of *simsum*, the contraction of the infinite into itself to create a space, an opening, the clearing in which God will be present by being absent, relates to the topos of divine suffering. The manifestation of what is hidden, the creation of an other for that which has no other since it comprehends everything within itself, is a rupture of the primal, nondifferentiated one, the articulation of the name by which the nameless is to be called. The process of delimitation can be viewed in textual terms as the constriction of the limitless within the boundaries of Torah, which is identified symbolically with the ineffable name. The Lurianic teaching discloses a basic tenet of the poesis of kabbalistic contemplation at play at a much earlier historical moment: the primary linguistic gesture on the part of the kabbalist—reading the word

⁴⁶ Ibid. The postmodern logic, as Wolfson formulates it in this chapter, resonates with the Madhyamika philosophy of Nagarjuna (c. 150 – c. 250 CE). See especially p. 403, n.61 and p. 422, n. 249 of *Language*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

that is inscripted—liberates God from his originary suffering in scripting the word that is spoken, the showing of the saying of the nameless name, a feat that marks the ontological limit where being is nothing in the nothing of being and nothing being in the being of nothing, the “insubstantial Substance of all things, who transcends all substance,” the ontic perimeter of the semiotic horizon.⁴⁸

This paradoxical insight, of course, is rooted in “a continuous tradition of Platonic mysticism according to which there is an ineffable and indescribable transcendent ground beyond all phenomena, and further, that all phenomena ceaselessly emerge theophanically out of this ground.”⁴⁹ Consequently, and unsurprisingly, as we have seen, it has corollaries in the mystical traditions of Christianity and Islam. As but one further example from the former tradition, John Scotus Eriugena, the ninth-century Irish philosopher and theologian who translated and commented on Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*, anticipates Luria when he says that “the Divine Goodness which is called ‘Nothing’ for the reason that, beyond all things that are and that are not, it is found in no essence, descends from the negation of all essences into the affirmation of the essence of the whole universe,” “from formlessness into innumerable forms and species.”⁵⁰ In other words, God or the divine Nothing is beyond all being and essence and yet the very being and essence of all things, the formlessness that continually empties

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 26-27. The expression “insubstantial Substance of all things, who transcends all substance” is derived from Nicholas of Cusa’s explication of the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, as found in his *De Venatione Sapientiae* (*The Hunt for Wisdom*), 30. Cusa’s rendering is, as Wolfson says, a perfect description of the medieval kabbalistic conception of Ein Sof. See p. 423, n. 253 of *Language, Eros, Being*.

⁴⁹ Versluis, *Platonic Mysticism*, p. 109.

⁵⁰ See John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987) [681A], p. 308. As cited in Versluis, *Platonic Mysticism*, p. 109.

itself (*kenosis*) into every form. In this, for both Eriugena and Luria, God is what Wolfson refers to above as “the ontic perimeter of the semiotic horizon.”

Additionally, in the light of this poetically contemplative and contemplatively poetic insight, we can more clearly see that the mystical intuition of the divine as the paradoxical coincidence of opposites makes an ineluctable epistemological demand, the value of which was touched upon in the preceding analysis of Wolfson’s notion of the timeswerve. Because this epistemic demand is of ontophenomenological⁵¹ import as well, and because it will have increasing significance to our further explorations as they relate to both kabbalistic hermeneutics and *theosis*, it behooves us to attend to Wolfson’s lucid explication of the same in this particular context.

To savor the mystical intuition of the divine as the coincidence of being and nothing—what may be considered for the kabbalist, as his counterpart in medieval Islamic and Christian mystical speculation, the primary ontological binary that comprises other binary constructions, the binary of binaries, we might say—one must reclaim the middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle, for it is only by positioning oneself in that middle between extremes that one can appreciate the identity of opposites in the opposition of their identity: that a thing is not only both itself and its opposite, but neither itself nor its opposite. Even nondiscrimination must

⁵¹ In using the word “ontophenomenological” I am trying to suggest that the epistemic demand of Wolfson’s contemplatively poetic and poetically contemplative insight into the paradoxicality of the *coincidentia oppositorum* is not just some ephemeral idea that is of no consequence. On the contrary, it is immensely consequential, for if taken seriously it makes very real demands on one’s life and, hence, can change not only how one experiences or perceives reality (phenomenology) but also how one is in the world (ontology), which of course implies ethics. In short, epistemology, phenomenology, and ontology are all connected when viewed from the mystical perspective of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

not be treated as the antinomy of discrimination; true insight into the oneness of everything requires that one transcend all distinctions, even the distinction of distinctiveness and indistinctiveness, unconditional unity and conditional multiplicity. From a phenomenological standpoint, the path of the inclusive middle engendered by the ontological coincidence of opposites is discerned experientially in knowing that the invisible (the use of the definite article is unfortunate as it has the potential of conveying a sense of being qua substance; what is marked semiotically as “invisible” can be seen only as not seen if it is not seen as seen) is rendered visible by the cloaking of invisibility, the secret exposed in the obfuscation of secrecy. In kabbalistic lore, there is symmetry between emanation and esoteric hermeneutics: the one as the other entails a process of uncovering preexistent roots by laying bare the complex simplicity of the simple complexity of Ein Sof.⁵²

A couple of pages later, Wolfson expands upon this explication with the help of Henry Corbin in a manner that is instructive. Turning to Corbin’s classic work *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (1969), in which the scholar of Islamic thought uses slightly different terminology to reiterate the same perspective, Wolfson notes with Corbin that “each creature has a twofold dimension: the Creator-creature typifies the

⁵² *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 27. Given the significant role that Neoplatonism plays in our discussion, it is worth mentioning that in note 254 on this page Wolfson invites us to consider the remark of Plotinus in *Enneads* VI.I.9: “And some are what they are called by the same form, but others opposed by opposed forms: for the double comes to one thing and the half to another simultaneously, and largeness comes to one thing at the same time as smallness to the other. Or both are in each thing, both likeness and unlikeness and, in a general sense, sameness and otherness” (p. 423).

coincidentia oppositorum. From the first this *coincidentia* is present to Creation, because Creation is not *ex nihilo* but a theophany [—it is *ex deo*, as it were; a *creatio* that is also *emanatio*]. As such, it is Imagination.”⁵³ Wolfson then explicates this quote:

⁵³ Ibid., p. 29. This and the subsequent quote are from Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 215. See p. 424, n. 273 of *Language, Eros, Being*.

Here a word or two of explanation relative to my understanding of the *ex nihilo* and *ex deo* (in)distinction are in order. As Ray L. Hart states in his book *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), “[t]he notion of *creatio ex nihilo* arose in western monotheisms to ‘protect’ God the Creator from a coeval power, while leaving unthought (save in esoteric theologies and pieties on the margins of heterodoxy) the standing of the *nihil*” (p. 2). This being the case, like Corbin, I believe that the traditional monotheistic interpretation of this notion is fundamentally lacking and wrong. Thus, with reference to my interpolation in the above quote, it is important to recall our earlier consideration of panentheism/theomonism and its relation to the difference between the hidden or unrevealed Godhead (*deus absconditus*) and the revealed God (*deus revelatus*). For with this in mind it becomes clear that my addition to this quote from Corbin is meant to highlight the Neoplatonic pedigree of his theophanic insight that refuses the conceptual closure of the three Abrahamic faiths’ orthodox doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. It is also meant to suggest my preference for what Hart refers to as “the most intriguing heterodox alternative” to this fundamental doctrine of classical monotheism, an essential alternative that insists on subverting the *ex nihilo* by endeavoring to think what remains unthought beyond the “premature closures” of orthodoxy (pp. 4, 120). In the Christian tradition, this is the alternative line of transmission of the esoteric mystics that extends from Evagrius of Pontus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and John Scotus Eriugena to Meister Eckhart, Jan van Ruusbroec, and Nicholas of Cusa through Jacob Boehme to William Blake and “the so-called Romantic philosophers of identity and difference” (p. 120), Goethe, Hegel, and Schelling, to Corbin and beyond. This is the lineage that posits, in Hart’s words, “the coherence of the inner differentiation of the divine and that of the created” (p. 4). It thus centers on the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) as being constitutive of reality as a whole, “construing the divine life of the Creator as a process of dynamic differentiation (antithesis) and perduring synthesis within a unitary Spirit, a process nowhere palpable and realized, therefore manifest, except in created existence itself. It is not merely that one understands internal differentiation of the Creator from the standpoint in the internal differentiation of creature, but that the former is only manifestly ‘accomplished’ in the latter” (p. 4). This is the lineage in which Hart situates himself and his own reforming heterodox thought-experiment, the intent of which, he says, “is to think...the contrary of the [traditional orthodox] emendation (*creatio ex nihilo et non se Deo*) [creation from nothing and not from God] by substituting for it a further refining and intentionally defining [in the sense of *de-finition* as “the rendering determinate of what is initially indeterminate”] emendation: *creatio ex nihilo, idem est, ex Deitate ipsa*, or God creates from nothing, that is, from the very Godhead itself.” He adds significantly: “This claim builds on another rigorous distinction – that between Godhead [*deus absconditus*] and God [*deus revelatus*] – in which Godhead comprises the eternally indeterminate potencies of both Being and Nothingness, from which arise all that determinately *is* and *is not*” (pp. 185 and 120; emphasis in original). This is significant because, as with our previous discussion of panentheism/theomonism, such a claim maintains that God creates from the potentiality – the pleromatic indeterminateness or nothing – that is internal to the Godhead or godself. Thus, from this perspective, “conceiving or envisioning the eternal self-generation of God the determinate Creator from the abysmal indeterminacies of Godhead” (p. 2) is foundational for thinking beyond traditional ontotheology; that is, for thinking a radical postmonotheistic trinitarianism or nondualism in terms of ontogenesis and meontogenesis.

The world of differentiation is a coincidence of opposites, exemplifying the temporal contingency of created beings and the eternal necessity of the uncreated being. God is the one infinite being that contains all finite beings, and hence each of the finite beings must be considered a part of the one infinite being, but none of these finite beings, either alone or collectively, manifests the full power of the one infinite being. As Corbin summed up the matter, the “Creative Imagination is a theophanic imagination, and the Creator is one with the imagining Creature because each Creative Imagination is a theophany, a recurrence of the Creation. Psychology is indistinguishable from cosmology; the theophanic Imagination joins them into a psycho-cosmology.” Within the spectrum of the imaginal topography, God, world, and mind converge so that revelation, creation, and redemption are three prisms through which the mystical paradox of seeing all things in the one and the one in all things is apprehended.⁵⁴

Again, note that Corbin formulates this fundamental axiom of Islamic esotericism in the language of the Christian Neoplatonist Nicholas of Cusa, “a thinker from a later date and a different cultural context...[whose] intricate speculations, as much poetic as philosophic,” test the limits of language in an attempt to articulate “the paradox of the compresence of infinite finitude and finite infinity in the vision that transcends the polarity of subject and object.”⁵⁵ This is not surprising since, as we have seen, the

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

orchards of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic *gnosis* (i.e., contemplative or mystical knowledge) were watered by the same river of Neoplatonism as they cross-pollinated one another. That they should all bear the paradoxical fruit of nondual wisdom—"the dialectic metalogic that underlies metaphysical panenhenism (based on the Greek *pan en hen*, all-in-one), the mystical insight that the one contains all things and yet remains distinct"⁵⁶—is thus to be expected. Consequently, it makes perfect sense that Wolfson would avail himself of Cusa's thought to elucidate the panenhenic orientation that he ascribes to the medieval kabbalists who, like Cusa, concluded "that God both is and is not identical with the world, identical precisely because different, different precisely because identical."⁵⁷

Another term that maps onto or expresses the dialectic metalogic of this mutual panenhenic orientation is a fecund neologism that Wolfson in a later work gratefully appropriates from Catherine Keller to describe the Habad cosmology, which can be said to espouse an *apophatic panentheism*: "the one is affirmed in everything to the extent that everything is negated in relation to the One, but the One is negated in relation to everything to the extent that everything is affirmed in the One."⁵⁸ As Wolfson explains,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 31. At this point in the text, in endnote 289, Wolfson observes that William T. Stace, in his *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. 212, refers to the "proposition that the world is both identical with, and different from, God" as the "pantheistic paradox." In response, Wolfson says, "I do not see any substantial difference between this view and the one I have articulated, but for semantic reasons I have preferred 'panenhenic' to 'pantheistic'." For further elaboration, he then refers the reader to see n. 325 on page 428, where he responds to Scholem's use of the term "pantheism" in *Major Trends*, pp. 221-224, when discussing passages from zoharic and related kabbalistic literature that affirm – in Wolfson's words – "the unbroken chain of being." Wolfson continues, "In the main I am in agreement with Scholem's analysis, but I have used the word 'panenhenism' instead of 'pantheism' to avoid the theological quagmire traditionally associated with the latter term. I readily admit, however, that 'panenhenism' may not fare any better." Here I want to affirm my agreement with Wolfson and state my preference for his later use of the term "apophatic panentheism." See below.

⁵⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 90. Wolfson is borrowing this neologism from Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 219. See p. 338, n. 146 of *Open Secret*. It is worthwhile to compare Wolfson's understanding of metaphysical

the supposedly incongruous *apophatic panentheism* is “the more effective nomenclature to capture the acosmic naturalism of Habad in all its subtleties and ramifications” because this term “implies that the world is not thought to be an illusion vis-à-vis the hidden essence [that is no-essence] as much as it is conceived to be a veil through which the illusion can be apprehended and thereby unveiled for the illusion it appears to be, an unveiling in which the hidden essentiality is (un)veiled.”⁵⁹ He continues:

Nature, accordingly, is not denied real existence, as if it was the “veil of Maya,” but rather it is the veil that reveals the unveiling of the veil. The one who acquires this gnosis perceives that the world is suffused with divine reality, that there is, paraphrasing the zoharic locution favored by many Hasidic masters, no place devoid of the divine. It follows that enlightened consciousness, which is a prolepsis of redemption, consists not in thinking that spirituality can overcome materiality, that the infinite essence is a noumenal negation of the phenomenal, but in the realization that the distinction between the two collapses in the identity of their difference.⁶⁰

Wolfson’s notion of apophatic panentheism will play an increasingly prominent role in the remainder of our explorations, and so I will refrain from further elaborating on

panenhenism/apophatic panentheism with Reiner Schurmann’s postmetaphysical, Heideggarian reading of Plotinus’ “negative henology.” See Reiner Schurmann, “The One: Substance or Function?” in *Neoplatonism and Nature: Studies in Plotinus’ Enneads*, ed. Michael F. Wagner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 157-178.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

it here. What is most significant for our immediate purposes is to emphasize that the poetics of kabbalah revolves around the paradoxical or nondual logic of apophatic panentheism. That is to say, the operative principle of singular coherence for the kabbalists is nonduality, by whatever name.⁶¹

To appreciate the full force of this claim, and before proceeding to a consideration of the assumptions about time that underlie their hermeneutics, it is necessary to recapitulate some of the main elements of the kabbalists' epistemology and ontology sketched above. Thus, to cite Wolfson again:

For the kabbalist, the inherent identity of God, human (which denotes more particularly the male Jew), and world precludes the possibility of affirming a realism that accords with Aristotelian epistemology. I am unaware of any kabbalist who would contest the assumption that there is a single essence shared by all three, whence follow the corollaries that knowledge of God is equivalent to self-knowledge, and self-knowledge to knowledge of the cosmos. The consubstantiality of self and God in kabbalistic literature—concomitantly the basis for the ecstatic experience of conjunction (*devequt*) and the theurgic efficacy accorded ritual action integral to the theosophic speculation promulgated by kabbalists—is coupled with the correspondence of the macrocosm and microcosm, the

⁶¹ I am aware that there are those who may disagree with me on this score. Is panentheism really the same as nonduality? Or, put in a less categorical way, can one legitimately claim that these terms are homeomorphic equivalents? If I understand correctly the paradoxical notion of apophatic panentheism that Wolfson borrows from Keller, then, yes. Panentheism = nondualism = “not this, not that” (*neti neti*)/both this and that. Granted, it may not be as clear or simple as I suggest. But that is kind of the point. Nothing is as clear or simple as we think – until it is (not).

depiction of the world as a “large human” (*adam gadol*) and the human as a “small world” (*olam qatan*). God, world, and human are intertwined in a reciprocal mirroring, and hence the kabbalistic perspective may be termed “cosmotheandric,” an adjective that conveys the ultimate indistinguishability of the three correlative elements, the triadic signpost, as it were, God-human-world. To comprehend this properly, one must bear in mind that for kabbalists, the mirror is a medium that renders appearance real and reality apparent, and hence the likeness between image and what is imaged is a matter of ontic resemblance and not simply optic reflexivity.⁶²

Therefore, if we presume with the kabbalists that “a thing is known only by something of a kindred nature, it must follow that to know God, the self must be of the same substance as God, and to know the world, the self must be of the same substance as the world.” In the ultimate metaphysical sense, then, “there is no possibility of a nondivine reality, and thus it is implausible to speak of a mental idea as an image of an independently existing essence, let alone to envisage the spoken word as a copy of this image and the written word as a copy of the copy.”⁶³

Here we have one of the most significant differences between kabbalists whose epistemology and ontology were not constrained by the rules of Aristotelian logic and those whose perspective was beholden to its dictates. For these latter, Wolfson observes,

⁶² Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 32-33. As Wolfson notes, the term “cosmotheandric” is borrowed from Raimon Panikkar. See Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, edited and with an introduction by Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

“spoken words are [merely] symbols of mental experience, and written words are [merely] symbols of spoken words.” This is because, for such logicians, “human reason ascertains knowledge by abstracting an essence from the sense data stored and combined in the imagination; the name assigned to the entity, which issues from the mouth, is an image of the idea, and the name that is written is a graphic image of the verbal image,”⁶⁴ nothing more. Of course, as we have seen, this view is countered by the cosmotheandric vision of the kabbalists who attest that the mirroring of God-human-world, the correspondence of heaven and earth (the Hermetic notion of “as above, so below”), is not a matter of mere mimetic reflection and rational abstraction but rather an affirmation of ontological participation and hence the existential “reciprocal reciprocity that bridges the imaginal and real, the metaphorical and literal, a doubling of the double that yields the structure of the fourfold.”⁶⁵ According to this participatory paradigm and its fourfold structure, then, mystical union (*devequt*) is the ground and goal of human being, the realization of which reveals the paradoxical or “super natural”⁶⁶ presence of God in all things.

Thus, as Wolfson cautions, the use of the mirror metaphor “should not mislead one into thinking in binary terms; on the contrary, in kabbalistic discourse, to speak of *x*

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 32. This obviously means that the kabbalistic understanding of reality is irreconcilable with the contemporary “flatland” academic consensus about the relationship between epistemology, ontology, and language that is informed by Aristotelian logic.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁶ This is Jeffrey Kripal’s locution. I am here using it as he intends, which is to say as a provocative invitation “[t]o venture outside the present houses of faith without forgetting those family homes or leaving the spirit behind. To embrace science in a new way, by promoting a more generous vision of the full human experience of reality that can embrace and ponder ‘more stuff,’ especially the wild, fantastic stuff... And, above all, to understand, *really* understand that we are already and always have been living in a supernatural world, that we ourselves are highly evolved prisms or mediums of this super nature coming into consciousness, and that many of the things that we are constantly told are impossible are in fact not only possible but also the whispered secrets of what we are, where we are, and why we are here.” See Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2016), p. 2; emphasis in original.

mirroring *y* means that *x* and *y* are [ultimately] of the same substance and hence ontically indistinguishable.”⁶⁷ “To put the matter in technical scholastic terminology,” he continues, “the cosmology proffered by kabbalists is concurrently [or paradoxically] exemplarist and analogical” insofar as it affirms simultaneously that the Creator and creation are and are not one. In the words of the kabbalist Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, one of the main disciples of Isaac the Blind, whom Wolfson quotes to illustrate his point: “It is known that the emanation [*ha-ašilut*] of the two worlds [i.e., the upper world or *olam ha-ba*, the world to come, and the lower world or *olam ha-zeh*, this world] was as one, and they are in the pattern of one another [*zeh dugmat zeh*], one corresponding to the other [*zeh le ‘umat zeh*].”⁶⁸ This means that, transposed back into a Neoplatonic register, there is no distinction to be made between emanation and creation—“the sign itself is the signified, creating a seemingly endless mirror-play of nonrepresentational representation, the mirror mirroring the mirrored mirroring the mirror.”⁶⁹ In this regard, as Wolfson states, Scholem was correct to assert that in zoharic kabbalah theogony and cosmogony “represent not two different acts of creation, but two aspects of the same. On every plane...creation mirrors the inner movement of the divine life.... Everywhere there is the same rhythm, the same motion of the waves.”⁷⁰

Hence, kabbalists attest “that this mirroring, the correspondence between upper and lower, is not a matter of mimetic reflection but rather an affirmation of metaphysical

⁶⁷ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 33. At this point in the text, in a lengthy endnote, Wolfson rightly points out that the idea he is attributing to kabbalists is made on numerous occasions by Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa in their respective writings. See p. 426, n. 310 for a sampling of passages by these authors that support Wolfson’s claim.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Per Wolfson’s citation, the quote of Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona is from *Kitvei Ramban*, 2: 511. See p. 427n.311.

⁶⁹ Ibid., and p. 35.

⁷⁰ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), p. 223; as cited in Wolfson, *Language*, p. 35. This passage also recalls the work of Raimon Panikkar, especially his final book *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

panenhenism [read: apophatic panentheism or nonduality], which is predicated on ontological participation in the ceaseless flux of the many issuing from and returning to the infinite spring of the one.”⁷¹ Or, put more simply, according to the paradoxical isomorphism espoused by kabbalists, “In seeing God, one sees oneself, for in seeing oneself, one sees God.”⁷² Again, we are emphasizing this fact because it is of great import to our subsequent explorations. With this in mind, then, having clarified the nature of their poetics, let us proceed to a consideration of the temporal assumptions that underlie the kabbalists’ approach to hermeneutics.

Linear Circularity and Kabbalistic Temporality

Thus far we have with Wolfson reflected on some of the fundamental themes that characterize kabbalistic hermeneutics in terms of epistemology, ontology, and poetics. In this section we want to consider the notion of time as it relates to kabbalistic hermeneutics, and more specifically Wolfson’s understanding of the same.⁷³ Because he has written rather extensively on the subject, I cannot hope to do justice to Wolfson’s sophisticated kabbalistic musings on time within the scope of this chapter.⁷⁴ However, I will focus briefly on one crucial aspect of his thinking, that which pertains to the linear circularity of kabbalistic temporality.

⁷¹ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 35.

⁷² Ibid., p. 39. In addition to the writings of Eckhart and Cusa, this paradoxical isomorphism is to be found in the Christian mystical tradition from its earliest beginnings. Thus, for example, the works of Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE), Evagrius of Pontus (345-399 CE), Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (late 5th-early 6th century CE), and John Scotus Eriugena (815-877 CE) herald the more fully developed insights of their heirs Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Cusa, and others.

⁷³ See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Retroactive Not Yet: Linear Circularity and Kabbalistic Temporality” in *Time and Eternity in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Brian Ogren (Boston: Brill, 2015), pp. 15-50.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Pathways: Philosophic and Poetic Reflections on the Hermeneutics of Time and Language* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 2004) and *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musing on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

In a later essay entitled “Zoharic Literature and Midrashic Temporality,” Wolfson examines how “[t]he conception of time that informed the midrashic mindset reaches a crescendo in the homilies that were eventually included in what may be called the zoharic literature.”⁷⁵ He does so by building on the argument that he made elsewhere (particularly in *Language, Eros, Being* and subsequently more elaborately in *Alef, Mem, Tau*), which is that the zoharic kabbalists took the sense of time that they found in rabbinic commentaries on scripture (*midrashim*) from late antiquity and the Middle Ages and reworked it according to their own lights and for their own purposes. According to Wolfson, these kabbalists found “a concept of temporality endemic to the midrashic imagination” that effectively reverses the conventional linear paradigm of causality by making the possibility of the future dependent on “the past [that] is appropriated and thereby determined by the present, even as the present is appropriated and thereby determined by the past.” This distinctively midrashic conception of time according to which the future depends on a reciprocally determinative past and present in turn naturally informed how the zoharic kabbalists understood their practice of exegesis. “Applying this hermeneutically,” Wolfson writes, “we can similarly speak of the text delineated by the interpretation that is delineated by the text. Within this circle of reciprocity – a circle that is open at both termini – the timeline of exegesis, which allows for the creative recasting of biblical law and narrative in accord with the impressional exigencies of the moment, can be drawn.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Elliot Wolfson, “Zoharic Literature and Midrashic Temporality” in *Midrash Unbound: Transformations and Innovations*, eds. Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 328.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 327-328.

Wolfson goes on to note that the kabbalistic reworking of the earlier rabbinic material and its distinctive linear circularity or circular linearity is enhanced by two assumptions: “first...the belief that the Torah is the body or image of the divine, and second, the pseudepigraphic attribution of the zoharic dicta to the ancient sages.” As he points out, the combination of these tenets “extended the twofold nature of time operative in the rabbinic sources to a quaternary conception.” This quaternary conception, he explains, corresponds to the four identities that are operative and so mold the interpretation of the scriptural narrative and, hence, the zoharic homilies themselves. Wolfson designates these four identities as: (1) the divine emanations, (2) the biblical personae, (3) the rabbinic figures, and (4) the unnamed kabbalists. Moreover, he explains, “These four can be grouped under two types of temporality: the first, which stands by itself, comprises the genus of eternal time, the unfolding of the infinite darkness in the innumerable folds of light that constitute the eternality of time and the temporality of eternity; and the remaining three, which constitute the genus of temporal time, the time of temporality measured by human technology and recorded as the annals of historical epochs.” Wolfson continues:

The movement through these four gradations is presented at times as an exegetical journey of a linear sort, passing hierarchically from the mundane to the divine, the lower to the upper, the corporeal to the spiritual. The journey, however, is anything but linear. For the kabbalists, the line (*kav*) must always be considered in conjunction with the circle (*igul*), the two dominant geometric prisms through which the constellation

of the divine pleroma, and indeed the whole concatenation of being, is construed in the human imagination. Rather than viewing the linear and circular as antinomical, the kabbalistic mindset requires the paradoxical identification of the two, epitomized, for instance, in Abraham Abulafia's arresting image of the 'circular ladder' (*sulam agol*), to which he also refers as the 'spherical ladder' (*hasulam hakaduri*). Time and space are arranged in the same dual pattern. Focusing on the former, I would conjecture that to be attuned to the linear circularity of the timeswerve is to traverse the commonplace threefold demarcation of the temporal: the past is the present as future, the present, the future as past, and the future, the past as present.⁷⁷

Thus, as Wolfson states, the compresence of the three tenses of time—"a notion derived by kabbalists from a longstanding understanding of what is implied by the Tetragrammaton, that God is, was, and shall be concurrently"—renders simultaneity and sequentiality coterminous: "what is experienced as sequential from one vantage point is in fact simultaneous from another." In this regard, he continues with the help of Paul Celan, "the conception of time enunciated by the voices preserved in the Zohar is quintessentially poetic, since the poem entails, as Paul Celan has eloquently articulated it, the 'mystery of encounter,' which takes place in the 'one unique, momentary present' –

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 329-330. Here it is worth noting that Wolfson's notion of the linear circularity of the timeswerve and kabbalistic temporality resonates in some striking ways with Eric Wargo's reflections on the "glass block universe" and time. See Eric Wargo, *Time Loops: Precognition, Retrocausation, and the Unconscious* (San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books, 2018).

the ‘here and now’ that transforms ‘its already-no-longer into its always-still.’” Wolfson again:

This corresponds exactly to the enigmatic locution in one zoharic passage, *milin hadetin atikin*, ‘new ancient words,’ that is the words of Torah that are concomitantly novel and ancient. Analogously, according to a second passage, the disciples of the school of Rav – probably a cipher for the Spanish kabbalists – are described as ‘renewing the ancient words every day, and the Shekhinah dwells upon them and listens to their words.’ In zoharic kabbalah, moreover, textual interpretation is similarly akin to Celan’s depiction of poetry as ‘language-become-shape’ – to express it in terminology germane to Jewish esotericism, the *shiur komah* of the divine body, the name that is the Torah – a process of poiesis that is perpetually ‘underway’, a verbal gesticulation that ‘wants to head toward some other,’ to let ‘the most essential aspect of the other speak,’ albeit in the ‘immediacy and nearness’ of ‘its time.’ Its time – the momentary present, ‘already-no-longer’ but ‘always-still,’ indeed, always-still precisely because already no-longer.⁷⁸

This poetic sense of time—that resonates with quantum theory’s notion of temporal reversibility as analyzed by Wolfson in the prologue to *Language, Eros, Being*—“has far-reaching implications for how we construe the proximity and distance of the present to the past and to the future, a determination that is crucial to appraise the hermeneutical

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 330-331.

presuppositions of what can be called the midrashic condition,” a condition that crescendos in the zoharic literature.⁷⁹ Accordingly, rather than viewing the temporal “as a sequence of punctual nodules strung together in a linear fashion like beads of a necklace, or as a succession of discrete points rotating in a circular manner,” it is better to consider time “as a swerve—the linear circle or circular line—that necessitates the constant accommodation of the recollected past to the bestowal of the future and of the anticipated future to the yielding of the past.” As such, Wolfson says, “[i]n the givenness of the indivisible and nonrepresentable present, every reverberation is a recurrence of what has never transpired.” In light of this our perception of time is transformed. As Wolfson puts it, “From the perspective of the egological narrative that shapes our perception of the normal lifespan, the duration of time is experienced as a river that flows from birth to death, but from a perspective that is not so constricted, time may be better imagined as a whirlpool, a vortex in which remembrance is as much of the future as expectation is of the past.”⁸⁰

Thus at “the intersection of time and hermeneutics, or, more specifically, the discontinuity and reiteration that characterize the assumptions about time underlying the [kabbalistic] approach to the scriptural text that is the subject of interpretation,” past and future are bridged “in the irreducible present that is constituted transcendently within the immanence of consciousness.”⁸¹ This means that, phenomenologically speaking, “past and future have no temporal density apart from the noematic lived experience of the

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 326.

⁸⁰ Ibid. This recalls Alan Watts who often used the metaphor of the whirlpool to radically underscore the fluid nature of the self and its continuous interpenetrating exchanges with the world. For instance, in *Does It Matter?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 22, he wrote: “Man as an organism is to the world outside like a whirlpool is to a river: man and world are a single natural process.”

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 325-326.

present, but the latter lacks any ideational content except through the noetic synthesis of the intentional acts of retention and protention, which point respectively to the past and future crisscrossing in the moment, the primordially perceptual present that cannot be represented as presence inasmuch as it always exceeds what can be presented, the now, we might say, that is perpetually not-now.”⁸² Wolfson continues, drawing upon Heidegger to further elucidate the nature of kabbalistic temporality. “As Heidegger succinctly expressed the archaic poetic wisdom, ‘time goes...in that it passes away. The passing of time is, of course, a coming, but a coming which goes, in passing away. What comes in time never comes to stay, but to go.’” That is to say, time does not move in a straight line, proceeding from the past to the future, but rather it passes through and within us – and we it – in endless spirals. Accordingly, in the words of Wolfson now, the temporal comportment “is occasioned by the repetition of the indeterminate and the indeterminacy of the repetitious colluding in the living instant, the *tempus discretum*, the cut that binds one synchronically to the diachronic opening of time, the rhythmic discontinuity of the continuous present, the non-coincidental coincidence, the blink of the eye that is both repetitive and diremptive.”⁸³

Thus it is this conception of time and its indeterminacy or linear circularity that is central to kabbalistic hermeneutics. As such, it mirrors “the circularity of the interpretive enterprise” as practiced by the kabbalists “and the reversibility of the timeline implied

⁸² Ibid., p. 326.

⁸³ Ibid. As noted on this page, the Heidegger passage is taken from *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray, with an introduction by J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 96. Also, regarding the expression “rhythmic discontinuity,” Wolfson notes that it is borrowed from Eftichis Pirovolakis, *Reading Derrida and Ricoeur: Improbable Encounters between Deconstruction and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 43-81. He also says the following which is worth quoting here: “While many of the insights expressed in this essay [i.e., “Zoharic Literature and Midrashic Temporality”] repeat what I have written about time and hermeneutics in several previously published studies, the formulation here has benefitted from the analysis offered by Pirovolakis.”

thereby.”⁸⁴ That is to say, for the kabbalists, insofar as the nature of our spatiotemporal being is imaginal, symbolic, linguistic, and thus something to be read, “the actual occasion, the eventfulness of becoming, can be specularized ontically or hermeneutically.”⁸⁵ Hence, the existential task of reading that may be elicited from zoharic texts is, as Wolfson argues in *Language, Eros, Being*, a gesture of meandering in the “imaginal time-space” wherein one finds “oneself in the middle, along the path, betwixt and between, conceiving the imagined as real and the real as imagined.”⁸⁶ For this reason, the homiletical language of the zoharic kabbalists “may be likened poetically to a mirror of temporal spaces and spatial intervals in and through which the image of the imageless is refracted.”⁸⁷

Put differently, it is in the mirror of the kabbalists’ homiletical language that we can see how an infinite number of renderings or interpretations of Torah (read: reality) “spiral around its essential meaning, which can never be [fully] translated.”⁸⁸ This paradoxical dance of indeterminacy places the reader within an imaginal or symbolic universe that calls upon their own experience to co-create an interpretation that is appropriate to their moment, in relation to their particular community of inquiry, even as it is relativized by a distinctively linguistic sense of time that is radically reversible.

Indeed, as the above discussion of their curvilinear and exegetical notion of time suggests, for the kabbalists of the *Zohar*, reality is inherently symbolic or theophanic so that every word and image, every aspect of creation, is a symbol that participates in and

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 343.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 332.

⁸⁶ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 37.

⁸⁷ Wolfson, “Zoharic Literature and Midrashic Temporality,” p. 332.

⁸⁸ Neil Douglas-Klotz, “Ordinary and Extra-ordinary Ways of Knowing in Islamic Mysticism,” *Ways of Knowing: Science and Mysticism Today*, ed. Chris Clarke (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2005), p. 187.

points to the unfathomable fullness of the void—the inexplicable and uncontrollable spiritual element or fractalic dimension of divinity that is the mysterious source and heart of existence.⁸⁹ Accordingly, every symbol is a finite sign and manifestation of the infinite and as such is a holographic mirror that reflects the unbounded wholeness of Ein Sof or the Godhead, which is the “implied spider”⁹⁰ that weaves the recursive web of meaning.

Thus to be attuned to this linear circularity of the zoharic kabbalists’ hermeneutic, which for Wolfson “constitutes the measure of space, time, and imagination,” is “to experience the traversing of temporal identities, the past is the present as future, the present, the future as past, the future, past as present. In this mesh of mirroring, there is no sense of immutable identity and consequently no fixed boundary, no cast-iron fence, that justifies the rigid distinctions between mythic and symbolic,” imagined and real, space and time.⁹¹ Seen in this light, then, the “pansemioticism”⁹² or interpretive indeterminacy at the heart of the kabbalists’ notion of an endlessly spiraling temporality is seen to be a strength rather than a weakness, “akin to the usefulness of the principle of indeterminacy in quantum physics.”⁹³

⁸⁹ For more on the multidimensional nature of reality see Ioan P. Couliano, *Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991); Leon Marvel, *The Physics of Transfigured Light: The Imaginal Realm and the Hermetic Foundations of Science* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2016); and John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2013).

⁹⁰ See Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, updated edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁹¹ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 38.

⁹² Ibid, p. 37. As noted on this page, Wolfson is borrowing this term from Umberto Eco’s *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 25.

⁹³ Douglas-Klotz, “Ordinary and Extra-ordinary Ways of Knowing,” p. 187.

Kabbalistic Hermeneutics as Mystical Hermeneutics

Before I turn to a consideration of *theosis* that is informed by the foregoing, I want to make an additional observation that makes explicit something that is implicit in the above discussion about how the semantic range of the term “kabbalah” necessarily encompasses practice and theory. It is that any attempt to understand the multidimensional and nondual nature of kabbalah must take into account the fact that it is inherently experiential. That is to say, the exegetical material of kabbalah “is both framed through the lens of experience and acts as a spur to mystical experience.”⁹⁴

Wolfson is particularly eloquent on this point and so warrants citing in full. In the following passage he is writing with specific reference to the *Zohar* and about the visionary experience of light. But, insofar as the *Zohar* is “the major sourcebook of theosophic kabbalistic symbolism,”⁹⁵ his point stands more generally for kabbalah, and for the Jewish – and Christian – mystic for whom hermeneutics is necessarily intertwined with all forms of mystical experience.⁹⁶ As Wolfson writes:

Any attempt to understand the religious texture of the *Zohar* must take into account the fact that the theosophical ruminations are not merely speculative devices for expressing the knowable aspect of God, but are practical means for achieving a state of ecstasy through which the mystic is assimilated into the splendor of the Godhead. The texts themselves – at

⁹⁴ B. Les Lancaster, “The Hard Problem Revisited: From Cognitive Neuroscience to Kabbalah and Back Again,” in *Neuroscience, Consciousness and Spirituality*, eds. Harald Walach, Stefan Schmidt, and Wayne B. Jonas (New York: Springer, 2011), p. 232.

⁹⁵ Wolfson, “Ontology, Alterity, and Ethics,” p. 130.

⁹⁶ See Lancaster, “The Hard Problem Revisited,” p. 232, n. 3.

the compositional level – reflect the mystic’s experiences of the divine pleroma and the integration of his soul with its ontological source.

What is more, when understood in this way, the zoharic texts not only reflect and facilitate the mystic author’s own ecstatic experiences of ontological union with the Godhead, but they serve as a catalyst for the mystical experiences of others who are properly attuned to the esoteric depths of the kabbalist’s words. In this, like other mystical texts, the *Zohar* is a hermeneutic and revelatory work that is profoundly transformative – one might even say psychoactive. Hence, Wolfson continues:

Behind the multifaceted symbols and interpretations of biblical verses in the *Zohar* is a fraternity of mystics ecstatically transformed by contemplation of the divine light refracted in nature, the soul, and the Torah. There is indeed genuine ecstatic experience underlying the hermeneutical posture of the *Zohar*. For the zoharic authorship, therefore, there is a basic convergence of the interpretative and revelatory modes; the act of scriptural interpretation is itself an occasion for contemplative study and mystical meditation. The midrashic condition of the *Zohar* is thus inscribed within the circle of experience and interpretation: the vision that generated the text may be re/visioned through interpretive study. This has important ramifications for understanding the textual and phenomenological parameters of visionary experience in Jewish mystical sources. Study itself was viewed as a mode of “visual meditation” – a

technique known in medieval Christian mysticism as well – in which there is an imaginative recreation of the prophetic vision within the mystic's own consciousness. In the zoharic corpus, the two modes, revelation and interpretation, are identified and blended together. This convergence is due to the fact that the underlying theosophic structure provides a shared phenomenological basis. In the hermeneutic relation that the mystic has to the text he is once again seeing God as God was seen in the historic event of revelation. In short, from the vantage point of the *Zohar*, visionary experience is a vehicle for hermeneutics as hermeneutics is a vehicle for visionary experience.⁹⁷

Thus, for the kabbalists, “[t]he gap between revelation and interpretation is fully closed, inasmuch as interpreting Scripture is itself a revelatory [or mystical] experience.”⁹⁸ It is therefore the case that “the sense of immediacy experienced within the mediation [of exegesis] constitutes the hallmark of mystical vision, which, in turn, helps to inform the tradition that gave it context and shape.”⁹⁹ Hence “a dialectical

⁹⁷ Wolfson, “Hermeneutics of Light in Medieval Kabbalah,” pp. 112-113. It must be noted that Wolfson makes a related point in *Through a Speculum That Shines* that stands in contrast to those scholars (e.g., David Halperin) who distinguish sharply between an “exegetical mysticism” and an “experiential mysticism.” “The issue of hiding the book of Ezekiel is set in different literary settings and thus is given various reasons in talmudic literature, but in this particular context [of B. Hagigah 13a] it is clear that it is related to the potential danger from exegesis of the chariot vision. This narrative thus lends support to my general claim that the restriction on study may have been related to a fear that exegesis provides the occasion for ecstatic experiences that may be harmful or even lethal [both to the individual and to the community]. The heavenly ascent related in the Hekhalot compositions represents one type of ecstatic experience that may have resulted from exposition of the biblical text.” (p. 122). From this it can also be seen that Wolfson's view stands in contrast to that of scholars who claim that mysticism is an inherently conservative and orthodox phenomenon. To paraphrase St. Augustine, while mysticism may be ever ancient, it is also ever new, and thus it is always pushing the boundaries of what at any given point in history is considered a religion's traditional orthodoxy.

⁹⁸ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

relationship ensues between past visions recorded in literary texts and the present visionary experience, making the new experience, in effect, the reenvisioning of an original event.”¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, vision or revelation is ultimately a hermeneutical event, for “insofar as the visionary experience is hermeneutically related to the text, it may be said that the way of seeing is simultaneously a way of reading.”¹⁰¹ In that regard, as Wolfson says quoting Michael Lieb, “one can speak of a ‘visionary hermeneutics that is both self-perpetuating and self-authorizing.... [F]or in the act of reenvisioning, that is, in writing the vision anew, the hermeneut is able to claim an interpretive authority tantamount to that which promulgated the visionary experience at its most primal level.”¹⁰² Here again Wolfson describes what Jeffrey Kripal refers to as “a kind of infinite textuality or hermeneutical loop that issues from the nexus of scripture, mystical experience, and visionary event”;¹⁰³ one that demonstrates how “the shaping of the text by the experience, which is itself informed by previous textual tradition, in fact precludes any dichotomization of revelation and interpretation.”¹⁰⁴

If in the kabbalistic context, then, it is true that there is no “experience” to isolate apart from the texts, it is equally true and just as important, indeed perhaps more important, that “neither are there any texts to isolate apart from the kabbalists’ experience.”¹⁰⁵ As the above passage attests, Wolfson is very clear on this point: behind all the elaborate theosophical, allegorical, and symbolic strategies of kabbalistic hermeneutics are actual mystical experiences through, with, and in which the mystic is

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 53-54.

¹⁰³ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 283.

¹⁰⁴ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁵ Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, p. 283.

ecstatically “assimilated into the splendor of the Godhead.” Indeed, this is a point that Wolfson has been making in one way or another from the very beginning of his scholarly career. For example, in *Through a Speculum That Shines* and with reference to the interpretation of apocalyptic and *merkavah*, or “chariot,” texts he writes: “Study should not be reduced to mere exegesis devoid of any experiential component; on the contrary, one must assume that the visions and revelatory experiences recorded in the apocalypses are not simply literary forms but reflect actual experiences deriving from divine inspiration.... That a similar claim can be made about the chariot mystical texts should be self-evident.”¹⁰⁶

Hence, as Wolfson observes, ultimately kabbalistic hermeneutics is, in the words of Idel, “an experiential study of Torah,” or as Bruns, building on Idel, expresses it, a “hermeneutics of experience rather than of exegesis.” Indeed, Wolfson writes, “Bruns’s description of the ‘mystical hermeneutics’ of al-Ghazzali as an appropriation of an ‘archive of interpretation’ that surrounds a text seems to me to be perfectly apt for describing the hermeneutical principle that underlies much of the kabbalistic literature. The understanding of a text is not mediated by one’s tradition; rather, one’s understanding of tradition is mediated by one’s experience of the text.”¹⁰⁷ Wolfson goes on to observe that this understanding of mystical hermeneutics as a “hermeneutics of experience” is equally applicable to both theosophical and ecstatic kabbalah. Furthermore, as I will soon contend, it is also applicable to understanding the doctrine of *theosis* or deification.

¹⁰⁶ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 124.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 330. For the use of the term “mystical hermeneutics,” see also Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*, pp. 5-9

Chapter 8: Elliot Wolfson's *Open Secret* and Deification

When Kabbalah came, it made of God a human; when Hasidism came,
it made of the human a God.

– Rashbatz¹

Introduction

At first glance, it might appear that the theme of *theosis* or deification does not play a prominent role in the work of Elliot Wolfson. A cursory survey of his oeuvre would yield maybe a handful of instances where he explicitly treats of this particular theme. For instance, in his monograph *Abraham Abulafia – Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy* (2000), in examining Abulafia's doctrine of the *sefirot*, although he does not use the precise term, Wolfson nevertheless clearly touches upon his subject's understanding of deification or becoming divine. He writes:

The unity of the *sefirot*...corresponds to a state of mystical union by means of which the individual receives the intellectual overflow from the supernal *sefirot* or separate intellects through the Active Intellect, personified either as the angel of the Lord who bears the Tetragrammaton or as the Torah. There is a perfect homology between the *sefirot* above

¹ R. Shmuel Betzalel Sheftel, known as Rashbatz (c. 1829-1905), served as the childhood tutor of the sixth Habad-Lubavitch Rebbe, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950). This quotation is the first epigraph to Shaul Magid's essay "The Divine/Human Messiah and Religious Deviance: Rethinking Chabad Messianism," in *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism*, edited by Michael L. Morgan and Steven Weitzman (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 316-351. As Magid notes on p. 336, this epigraph "was communicated orally to Zalman Schacter-Shalomi in the name of Rashbatz, a teacher in adolescence of Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe and father-in-law of Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Cited in Schacter-Shalomi, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), 133."

and the internalization of the *sefirot* experienced as psychic states on the mystical path. The homologous relation is facilitated by the fact that through his intellect a person can be conjoined to, in fact united with, the Active Intellect and thereby gain knowledge of the ten *sefirot*. In the state of conjunction (*devequt*), there is a virtual ontic identification of the mystic and God through the agency of the Active Intellect. This identification implies not only that the human becomes divine but also that the divine becomes human.²

As will be seen more fully below, one place where Wolfson does actually use the term *theosis*, deification, or divinization is in his *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (2005).³ This occurs in the context of a discussion

² Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia – Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), pp. 147-148.

³ To reiterate, the terms *theosis*, deification, and divinization are synonymous. “Theosis” (from *theos*, the Greek word for “god”), literally “making divine,” was coined by the fourth-century Christian theologian Gregory Nazianzus and was subsequently used by other Christian thinkers, such as Pseudo-Dionysius, to refer to union with God and the process of realizing or attaining this state. “Deification” (from *deus*, the Latin word for “god”) and “divinization” (from the Latin *divinus*, meaning “divine”) are both Latinate translations of the Greek *theosis*. Throughout this dissertation, following Litwa, I have employed “deification” as an umbrella term that includes the others. See M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), p. 2.

Moreover, I regard deification or union with God to be a phenomenon that entails both becoming aware of its ever present reality and the progressive transformation or incarnation of divinity in humanity. Ines Angeli Murzaku, speaking specifically of Eastern Orthodox Christian monasticism’s quest for holiness, understands *theosis* or deification in similar terms. She writes: “[T]he destination of humankind’s pilgrimage from the moment of its creation to the end of its history is simply union with God – *theosis*. However, does *theosis* entail our becoming aware of something that already exists, or is it the result of progressive transformation of the divine in human beings? The answer to both questions is quite affirmative. Each human being possesses an initial deformity, by which his/her nature conforms to God. Nevertheless, this is only an important starting point; it is what initiates one’s spiritual-transformative journey. This is a gratuitous gift from God which does not depend on the individual; and more importantly this gift to be appropriately activated, or brought to maturation, demands openness, and dependency on God and close cooperation with other *homo sapiens*. The ‘image’ created by God (Gen 1:26) refers only to the initial impulse of conformity between humankind and God. However, a successful and mature *theosis* requires a transformative [journey] and a discovery process [whereby one enters ever more deeply into the] mystery of... union with God[.] This is the divine life of the Spirit. In *theosis*, ‘it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2:20).” See Ines Angeli Murzaku, “Introduction: ’εμοί Ὡς τὸ ζῆν

of Pseudo-Dionysius' understanding of the Plotinian ideal of mystical union (*henosis*), which "in Dionysius...should be rendered more precisely as divinization (*theosis*). The way that one rises to this state is by unknowing (*agnosia*), that is, by stripping the mind of all positive knowledge related to sense data and rational concepts, one is unified with the 'intellectual light' (φῶς νοητὸν)..., which transcends all being and knowledge."⁴

A more recent instance where Wolfson explicitly treats of deification in a more sustained manner is his essay entitled "*Theosis*, Vision, and the Astral Body in Medieval German Pietism and the Spanish Kabbalah." This was originally given as a paper at the "Imagining Astrology" conference, which took place at the University of Bristol on July 10-11, 2010. In it, Wolfson explores the notion of the astral/subtle body in the works of the Rhineland Jewish Pietists and the Spanish Kabbalists of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, focusing specifically on "contemplative practices in the two streams of medieval Jewish esotericism that involved ascetic renunciation of the body as a means to cultivate a vision of the celestial image, culminating in the angelification and divinization of the human."⁵ After revisiting the work of Abraham Abulafia in the course of his exploration, Wolfson writes: "Mystical gnosis of the name, which is achieved as a result

Χριστός ["For me to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21)]: Eastern Monasticism's Quest for Holiness," in *Monastic Tradition in Eastern Christianity and the Outside World: A Call for Dialogue*, ed. Ines Angeli Murzaku (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), p. 2.

Although the language used above is explicitly Christian, it is important to emphasize the universal nature of deification or union with God, which essentially is an existential call to realize our full human potential – or holiness by any other name. As the Christian monk Thomas Keating once put it, "The potential for human wholeness – or in other frames of reference, liberation, self-transcendence, enlightenment, salvation, transforming union, moksha, nirvana, fana – is present in every human person." Thomas Keating, "Guidelines for Interreligious Understanding," in *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way*, ed. Susan Walker (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 127-129. The quoted guideline appears on p. 128.

⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 218.

⁵ Elliot R. Wolfson, "*Theosis*, Vision, and the Astral Body in Medieval German Pietism and the Spanish Kabbalah," in *Sky and Symbol: The Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Conference of the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, 4-5 June 2011*, edited by Nicholas Campion and Liz Greene (Ceredigion, Wales: Sophia Centre Press, 2013), p. 119.

of the technique of letter-combination, entails a state of intellectual conjunction [*devequt*, i.e., mystical union/*theosis*] that Abulafia also designates by the rabbinic notion of eschatological felicity, the ‘life of the world to come’ (*hayyei ha-olam ha-ba*).”

Importantly, the kabbalist’s understanding of this notion differed from that of the rabbis. As Wolfson observes: “Although the latter retains something of its original connotation in Abulafia’s scheme, he was far more interested in utilizing the phrase to denote an interior state of spiritual transformation occasioned by the triumph of intellect over imagination, spirit over body, an orientation that is attested as well in other medieval Jewish philosophical exegetes, poets, and kabbalists.” He continues:

Abulafia does not go so far as to negate entirely the nationalistic aspects of the messianic ideal, but it is clear from his writings that his messianism is primarily psychic in nature. Tactilely, the ecstatic experiences the illumination as being anointed with oil, and thus the one who is illumined is not only capable of being redeemed proleptically prior to the historical advent of the messiah, but such an individual noetically attains the rank of the messianic figure. The anointment also denotes the priestly status of the illuminate; indeed, in the unitive state, the ecstatic assumes the role of high priest, the position accorded Metatron in the celestial Temple, the angelic viceregent summoned by Abulafia as the object of conjunction.

Finally, Wolfson states:

We may conclude, therefore, that the phenomenon of anointment comprises three distinct, though inseparable, aspects of the pneumatic metamorphosis [i.e., deification] – messianic, priestly, and angelic. For Abulafia, moreover, the matter of reception is critical to his understanding of the prophetic-messianic experience, as the enlightened mind, the soul unfettered from the chains of corporeality, receives the surfeit of the holy spirit, which is identified as the Active Intellect, the angelic Metatron, and as the wheel of letters that is the idealized Torah scroll. The experience of *unio mystica* [or deification], therefore, may be viewed phenomenologically in four ways: to cleave to the name [i.e., the Tetragrammaton], to be conjoined with the intellect [i.e., the Active Intellect], to be transformed into the demiurgical angel [i.e., Metatron], and to be incorporated within the textual embodiment of the word of God [i.e., the Torah].⁶

Thus, to reiterate, at first glance, it might appear that the theme of deification does not play a very prominent role in the work of Elliot Wolfson. However, a closer look reveals that deification is in fact a significant theme in his oeuvre. Indeed, even though he never explicitly uses the term in this particular text, I contend that Wolfson's most sustained, comprehensive, and significant treatment of deification is his magisterial book *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (2009). My reasons for this contention will be made clear below. But before we can proceed with a further consideration of *Open Secret* and its reading of deification,

⁶ Ibid., pp. 141-142.

we need to finish what was started in the previous chapter, namely, our re-visioning of *theosis* through the lens of Wolfson's *Language, Eros, Being* and the understanding of kabbalistic hermeneutics contained therein.

Theosis Re/visioned

We saw in the preceding chapter that the theosophical, allegorical, and symbolic ruminations of the kabbalists as exemplified in the *Zohar* are to be regarded as “practical means for achieving a state of ecstasy, that is, an experience of immediacy with God that may eventuate in union or communion.”⁷ We also saw that the zoharic texts themselves, at the compositional level, “reflect the mystic’s experience of the divine pleroma and the reintegration of his soul with its ontic source,” which means that there is indeed “genuine ecstatic experience underlying the hermeneutical posture”⁸ of not only the *Zohar* in particular but of kabbalists in general.

Additionally, we saw that because of this kabbalistic hermeneutics is a mystical hermeneutics or a hermeneutics of mystical experience and, hence, a mystical poetics. As such, it is my contention that the mystical hermeneutics of the kabbalists was and is a hermeneutics and poetics of *theosis* or deification. For, as I am defining it here, deification is essentially the process and goal of being progressively ushered into an experiential knowledge (*gnosis*) of God’s infinitely paradoxical and dynamic presence.

That is to say, in terms of a comparative mystical theology, it is a transformation or transfiguration of consciousness by which one comes to increasingly realize their

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Wolfson, “Hermeneutics of Light in Medieval Kabbalah,” pp. 112-113. See also Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 330, where he uses this same locution.

nondual unity with the “mystery out of which everything arises,”⁹ and thereby experience – in a Christian register – “the renewal of all things” (*apokatastasis panton*) such that one can be said to view reality from the divine perspective or *sub specie aeternitatis*, as it were.¹⁰ It is, in the Arabic terminology with which we are already familiar, an experience of *ta'alluh*, of “conforming to God.” Or, similarly, in the words of Joseph Weiss, who is paraphrasing the eighteenth-century Hasidic master, R. Yechiel Michel Rabinowitz, the Maggid of Zlotchow, it is to realize “the mystery of self-extinction [*bittul*] leading to deification as the fruit of communion with God [*devequt*]”; it is to realize the essential oneness of humanity and divinity: the human and divine “are no longer distinct entities within the mystical experience but they are of one and the same substance: water and water, wood and wood.”¹¹ It is, in short, to become God or godlike, which, as David Litwa observes, is what *theosis* or deification means, in its most basic sense.¹² Thus, according to what some may regard as my creative misreading of the tradition, deification

⁹ Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, “Introduction: The Participatory Turn in Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies,” in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, eds. Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 18. On p. 64, n. 88, the authors explain what they mean by the word “mystery,” which they italicize: “Our use of the term *mystery* does not entail any kind of essentialist reification of an ontologically given ground of being, as expressions such as ‘the sacred,’ ‘the divine,’ or ‘the eternal’ often conveyed in classic scholarship in religion. It is also unrelated to Rudolf Otto’s account of the human experience of the divine as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. In contrast, we deliberately use this conceptually vague, open-ended, and ambiguous term to refer to the nondetermined creative energy or source of reality, the cosmos, life, and consciousness. Thus understood, the term *mystery* obstructs claims or insinuations of dogmatic certainty and associated religious exclusivisms; more positively, it invites an attitude of intellectual and existential humility and receptivity to the Great Unknown that is the fountain of our being.”

¹⁰ Here my experiential understanding of deification in terms of mystical union and *apokatastasis* is reflective of my reading of the early desert monastic tradition of Christianity, in particular the work of Evagrius of Pontus (345-399 CE). See, for example, his Letter 64, which is also known as “The Great Letter” and “The Letter to Melania,” at http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/11_Letters/00a_start.htm.

¹¹ Joseph Weiss, *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, edited by David Goldstein with a new introduction by Joseph Dan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 88. The passage that Weiss is paraphrasing (pp. 88-89) is taken from Yechiel Michel’s *Yosher Divrei Emeth* (Munkács, 1905). Interestingly, the language that R. Yechiel uses to describe the experience of deification resonates strongly with some of the language found in the abovementioned Letter of Evagrius of Pontus.

¹² M. David Litwa, “Becoming Gods: Deification and the Supernatural,” in *Religion: Super Religion* (New York: Macmillan Research USA, 2016), p. 89.

is the contemplative ideal of kabbalah. Of course, as we have seen, it is also the contemplative ideal and practical goal of the Christian and Islamic mystical traditions as well.

Seeing No-Thing: In/Sight Blinding Vision

Mindful of the preceding, then, and on the way to re/visioning deification, in this section I want to briefly consider with Wolfson the phenomenological and ontological contours of the contemplative ideal of *theosis* from a kabbalistic perspective. As he says, to properly appreciate how these two poles are inseparably interwoven in kabbalistic theosophy (“What is conceived of metaphysically as the ultimate nature of being, that is, light, coincides with what is experienced in the mystical experience of illumination.”¹³), it would be beneficial to frame the discussion in terms of “certain assumptions in Neoplatonic literature and especially in Plotinus, who exerted in one way or another a profound influence on medieval philosophy and mystical accounts of psychic conjunction in the three monotheistic faiths.”¹⁴ The limitations of space prevent me from adequately treating here the Plotinian worldview, let alone the influence of Philo on Plotinus¹⁵ and subsequent developments in post-Plotinian Neoplatonic thought, particularly those that evolved in medieval Christian and Islamic centers of speculative learning.¹⁶ I will therefore simply attempt to summarize Wolfson’s own summary of Plotinus’ thought as it relates to contemplation and, hence, the contemplative ideal of deification.

¹³ Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, p. 270.

¹⁴ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 212.

¹⁵ For an excellent treatment of Philo’s influence on Plotinus, see Adam Afterman “From Philo to Plotinus: The Emergence of Mystical Union,” *The Journal of Religion* 93:2 (April 2013), pp. 177-196.

¹⁶ See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 212.

The first thing to note is the logic underlying Plotinus' notion of contemplation. "According to Plotinus," Wolfson observes, "for the human mind to contemplate the first principle, the unknowable, nameless One, a tenet traceable to Plato's description of the Good as that which is 'beyond being,' it must become like the One." And it is possible for the intellect or *nous* (which designation encompasses both mind and heart) to become like the One because it always already is so. This ontological assumption "rests on the ancient Hellenic wisdom espoused in the adage of Anaxagoras that things of similar nature are attracted to one another, or, in the related formulation of Empedocles, wisdom consists of 'like by like,' since it is 'either identical with or closely akin to perception.'" Even more pertinent for understanding Plotinus in this regard is "his utilization of the Aristotelian formula, which is based on the aforementioned pre-Socratic principle, that the knower must be like the thing that is known."¹⁷

Wolfson proceeds to focus on one particular passage from a relatively early treatise in the Plotinian corpus, the one listed first in chronological order by his student Porphyry, "in which Plotinus sets out to explain the 'inner sight' by which one can apprehend the true form of the 'inconceivable beauty,' a way of seeing that is awakened when the eyes are shut." Wolfson continues his prefatory gloss: "If the mind is sufficiently purified of corporeal matters – a theme reiterated by many a visionary mystic, as Blake, for instance, put it in his epic poem *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Great Albion*, 'What is Above is Within, for every-thing in Eternity is translucent' – it will see the 'true light' that cannot be measured by metric dimensions; in the speculum of inner vision, the mind's eye sees what is without within and what is within without, and hence

¹⁷ Ibid.

spectator and spectacle can no longer be differentiated.”¹⁸ Thus Plotinus in *Enneads* I.6.9: “For one must come to the sight with a seeing power made akin to and like what is seen. No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first of all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty.”¹⁹

Wolfson points out that, in the continuation of the passage, Plotinus distinguishes the vision of the Intellect, “the place of forms or ideas, which are characterized as the intelligible beauty,” and the vision of the God, the “primary beauty” of the One, the origin that is beyond the “screen” of intelligible beauty. He goes on to elucidate: “If, however, the One is utterly unique, it can be like no other thing; in its absolute simplicity, the One can have no form or substance, and hence the only way to become ‘like’ the One is to be assimilated into the One.” However, to be assimilated into what is “beyond being” – a designation, as Wolfson following Plotinus reminds us, that makes no positive statement about the One but only implies that it is “not this,” that is, it is not a particular something and thus cannot be compared to anything – to be assimilated to this the mind or *nous* must, in the words of Wolfson, “transcend the specificity of its own being by disposing the filters of intellection.” Thus “[a]n iconoclastic breaking of all form occasions contemplative envisioning of the formless.”²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid. This is reminiscent of the thought of Evagrius of Pontus (345-399 CE), especially as it is to be found in his gnostic trilogy: *Praktikos*, *Gnostikos*, and *Kephalaia Gnostika*.

¹⁹ As cited in Wolfson, *ibid.*, pp. 212-213. Relative to this passage Wolfson notes that a similar sentiment is expressed in the *Gospel of Philip* 61:21-25, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2-7, vol. 1, p. 163: In the *pleroma*, in contrast to this world, when one sees something, one becomes that which one sees even to the point of becoming the Father. By way of clarification, and to make explicit something that is implicit in Wolfson’s note, I would just add the following point. In terms of realized eschatology, the *pleroma* or *eschaton* can be experienced or known even in this world since it is – to paraphrase Paul Tillich – ever present as the depth dimension of ultimate meaning that is paradoxically already but not yet fully realized here and now. As will be seen below, this is a theme that Wolfson treats at length elsewhere.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 213.

With respect to this apophatic process by which the doors of perception are cleansed and one comes to see the Infinite source of everything (to paraphrase Blake), there are, for Plotinus, three basic stages that correspond to the three fundamental principles or hypostases of his metaphysics: the One (or equivalently the Good), the Intellect, and the Soul. As Wolfson writes, this correspondence “is predicated on the correlation of being and experience, the phenomenological and ontological, a critical feature of medieval kabbalah, as I have argued elsewhere: what is real is real as experienced and what is experienced is experienced as real.” Accordingly, the ascent of the mind or *nous* to the unbounded wholeness of the One can be seen as “a progressive attempt to apprehend beauty,” to rise from the discursive or rational knowledge appropriate for the sensible world of form, that is, “reasoning from premise to conclusion and transitioning from one object of thought to another,” to an inner intuitive vision of intellect and the world of ideal forms “wherein the distinction between subject and object is transcended,” and finally, via assimilation or realized union, “seeing the formless, the Good that is the source of ultimate beauty, radiant darkness beyond intellect and description.”²¹

Importantly, as Wolfson notes, Plotinus conceives of the mind’s ascent to the One as being “in accord with a major impulse in the Platonic understanding of the philosophical life, as a way to attain knowledge of self, ‘to face death before we die.’”²² But contained herein is a fundamental paradox, for, again in the words of Wolfson, “the higher one ascends on the ladder of self-knowledge, climbing from the multiplicity of the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. Wolfson is quoting from Peter Kingsley’s *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness: Golden Sufi Center, 1999), p. 6. Of course, parallel formulations are to be found in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism.

sensible to the complexity of the intelligible and beyond to the simplicity of the One, the more one loses awareness of self, the more one gains knowledge of self; at the summit of knowledge – the intellect contemplating naught but the intellect, a mirror turned inward to mirror the mirror turned outward, the mirror mirroring the mirror mirrored in the mirror – is what Dionysius the Areopagite referred to as the source of all being, which is ‘before be-ing’ and hence neither is nor is not, known ‘through unknowing’ (*agnosia*).’’²³

The path of contemplation is thus “a process of purification, emptying the mind of images, concepts, and words, but in the final stage, the return of the ‘alone’ to the ‘Alone,’ the purging culminates in vision, albeit a seeing where the difference between seer and seen is no longer viable; the eye that sees is the eye that is seen as the eye that sees the eye that is seen.’’²⁴

Hence, according to Plotinus, or more precisely Wolfson’s reading of him, in the contemplative or meditative state – “a noetic circle in which boundaries of thinking, thinker, and thought can no longer be discriminated” – the conventional awareness of the egoic self is suspended as “the mind stretches beyond the limits of mindfulness to be absorbed in the mindless but fully conscious source of all being.” Wolfson continues: “Intellect is the most perfect image of the One, but even that image must be transcended if one is to see the imageless light about which one cannot speak adequately.” Thus, concerning the One, it is paradoxically both everything and nothing. As Wolfson puts it, of the One “we must say that it is all things ‘by and in itself,’ since it contains all things in itself and they exist only by participation in it, but it is also none of them, since its

²³ Ibid., pp. 213-214.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 214. This locution recalls Meister Eckhart, who famously said, “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me: my eye and God’s eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing and one love.” In *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O’C Walshe, with foreword by Bernard McGinn (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009), p. 298.

being is in no way dependent on them.” Consequently, and consistent with his apophatic *henosis*, Plotinus insists that when we speak or think about the One “we must dispense with every name.”²⁵

Paradoxically, then, that which is contemplatively known to be the transcendently immanent and ineffable source of every word, concept, and name – that which is simultaneously beyond all and in all – is only experienced in the silence of unknowing, in the luminous darkness wherein the conventional division between subject and object is transcended and what is seen and experienced is nothing that can be adequately described or known. Or, as Wolfson puts it, “that which is known and named to be truly itself and nothing else cannot be known or named – as knowing and naming entail relating a thing to other things – but only experienced in the vision of that which is invisible, a seeing that sees nothing, not even not-seeing, the mind’s eye gazing in the darkness of seeing light wherein nothing is seen and nobody sees.”²⁶ Thus not-seeing “is previewed by abandoning all concepts and images, a seeing through the glass darkly. From this vantage point, apophasis and mystical envisioning go hand in hand.”²⁷

Inscripting Ineffability/Enfolding Scroll

As already mentioned, the Neoplatonic orientation outlined above greatly informed the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and thereby “transformed their respective theological sensibilities” that were largely based on the canonical texts of the Hebrew bible. In light of this, and in terminology used by historians of religion, we can say with Wolfson that “the mystical element in the three monotheisms ensues from the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 214-215.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 215.

juxtaposition of the kataphatic and apophatic, that is, a mysticism predicated on the possibility of envisioning the shape of God in conjunction with a mysticism that steadfastly denies the possibility of ascribing any form to the being beyond all configuration, indeed the being to whom we cannot even ascribe the attribute of being without denying the nature of that (non)being.”²⁸

Additionally, we have seen how from this confluence of philosophical and theological streams there arose a sophisticated language mysticism that was (and is) rooted in a profound understanding of the symbolic and paradoxical nature of reality. Again, Wolfson speaks to this with admirable clarity. “In mystical accounts gesticulated within the hermeneutical matrix of scriptural religious belief,” he writes, “the most important way the visionary and unitive experiences are mediated is through study of canonical texts. The experiences themselves may surpass the limits of language, but it is only through language that those limits are surpassed.” Because of this, “[t]he apophatic tendency to submerge all forms of sentient imaging in the formlessness of pure consciousness cannot be completely severed from the kataphatic insistence on the possibility of being in the presence of the divine.” The juxtaposition of the kataphatic and apophatic that is characteristic of the mystical element in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, therefore, “has fostered the awareness on the part of the ones initiated in the secret gnosis that mystical utterance is an unsaying, which is not the same as the silence of not-speaking, but rather that which remains ineffable in being spoken, that which remains unknown in being known, that which remains unseen in being seen.”²⁹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

In this context, Wolfson mentions two important Christian mystical theologians whose work exerted a profound influence on the mystical speculations of later Jewish and Islamic mystics: Gregory of Nyssa (335-394 CE) and Dionysius the Areopagite (5th- 6th century CE). Of these two, I want to focus on what Wolfson says about the latter since it was Dionysius' – or, more precisely, Pseudo-Dionysius' – intricate philosophical interweaving of affirmative and negative theology, kataphaticism and apophaticism, that really established a model that was subsequently employed by a plethora of mystical exegetes in all three monotheistic traditions. As Wolfson states, Dionysius juxtaposed these “distinct orientations to the texture of religious experience” in a way that combined “the rigor of logical analysis and the passion of poetic sensibility” to such a remarkable degree that his expression of the paradox at the heart of reality was reiterated in one form or another by mystics in the Abrahamic faiths for centuries to come: “God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing” (*Divine Names* 872A).

In more conventional terms, God is both transcendent and immanent, “the cause of everything” but not identical to any one thing, “since it transcends all things in a manner beyond being” (593C). Indeed, insofar as there can be nothing outside God, God is “all things in all things,” and thus it must be the case that God is known in all things. Yet God is “no thing among things” (872A), for the one that is infinite or boundless cannot be completely contained or comprehended in what is finite or bound. Hence, to paraphrase Wolfson, God is known to be both “all in all” and yet beyond all knowing.³⁰

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 217-218. Per Wolfson's notes in this section, the works cited are from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, foreword, notes, and translation collaboration by Paul Rorem, preface by Rene Roques, introduction by Jaroslav Pelikan, Jean Leclercq, and Karlfried Froehlich (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987).

Thus it is in this unknowing that God, the ultimate reality that transcends and includes all being in its unbounded wholeness, is most truly known. In his *Mystical Theology*, to provide an example of someone who embodied this contemplative ideal, Dionysius follows Gregory of Nyssa in describing Moses as having plunged

into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing (1001A).³¹

To paraphrase Wolfson, then, we can say that, for Dionysius, the pinnacle of contemplative gnosis is a form of a-gnosticism that is attained in the last of the three stages of the mystical path: purgation, illumination, and union (*henosis*). Of course, as Wolfson rightly observes, while the ideal of union or assimilation to God is appropriated from Plotinus, “in Dionysius it should be rendered more precisely as divinization (*theosis*).”³²

As we have seen, the way that one rises to this state is by unknowing (*agnosia*), that is, “by stripping the mind of all positive knowledge related to sense data and rational

³¹ Ibid., p. 218.

³² Ibid. To provide some additional historical context and clarification, in the Christian tradition, the idea of union with, assimilation to, or participation in divinity would be subsumed under the words for “divinization” or “deification”: either the term *theopoiesis*, first used by Justin Martyr in the second century, or the term *theosis* that became the standard word for the concept after it was introduced by Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century. See Jacob H. Sherman, *Partakers of the Divine: Contemplation and the Practice of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 14.

concepts, one is unified with the ‘intellectual light’ (*Divine Names* 700D), which transcends all being and knowledge.” Thus, “the mandate of the contemplative life is to move beyond all images to the imageless.”³³ Or, in a more kabbalistic register, it is to realize that the name, the Tetragrammaton, the ultimate signifier of what cannot be signified, “can be viewed as the absolute language, a ‘mystical language of unsaying,’³⁴ lingering betwixt affirmation and negation, apophasis and kataphasis, speaking-away and speaking-with, a language that serves as the index of its own inability to be indexed, the computation of indeterminacy.”³⁵ Wolfson continues:

If truth is truly beyond language, then silence alone is appropriate to truth, but silence is realized not in not-speaking but in unsaying, which is a saying nonetheless. If, however, not-speaking is the articulation of truth, then nothing is spoken, but if nothing is spoken, nothing is unspoken. To express the point more prosaically, images of negation are not the same as negation of images, for if the latter were faithfully heeded, the former would truly not be, as there would be nothing of which to (un)speak and hence there would be no data for either study, critical or devotional. Mystical claims of ineffability – to utter unutterable truths – utilize images that are negative but no less imagistic than the affirmative images they negate.³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ As Wolfson notes, he is borrowing this “richly ambiguous locution” from Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁵ Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 219.

³⁶ Ibid.

Unsayings the Name/Naming the Unsaid

Although the prior statement may at first sound confusing or nonsensical, it is perfectly consistent with the paradoxical logic at the heart of kabbalistic hermeneutics that, as was previously mentioned, is both analogical and exemplarist in nature. In other words, it is perfectly consistent with the parabolic logic of the phenomenological and ontotheological schema of the traditional kabbalah that is informed by two ostensibly conflicting claims: “On the one hand, it is repeatedly emphasized that all language about God or the world of emanation is analogical, since God is inherently incomparable to all other things, but on the other hand, it is presumed that an uninterrupted continuity permeates and connects all levels of existence from top to bottom, and thus there is a basic similarity of all things to the divine.”³⁷ Thus, as Wolfson maintains, in a sense, “these two claims can be correlated with the description of the One in Plotinus (briefly mentioned above) as transcendent to and immanent in all things, a distinction that derives from Plato’s account of the One in the *Parmenides*.” He goes on:

If there is no rupture in the “chain of being,” to use Lovejoy’s memorable phrase – and as far as I can discern, no kabbalist from the late Middle Ages would tolerate such a rupture – why should analogy be the only

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 220-221. As Wolfson notes here, drawing on the work of William Chittick and others, “A similar affirmation of ostensible clashing views is found in the Sufi antinomy of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, the former declaring the incomparability of the one true entity (*wujūd*), the essence of whose existence is necessary, vis-à-vis all other things, which are considered contingent, and the latter declaring the similarity between God and all things” (p. 527).

Also, in the context of this discussion of the ostensible clash between the analogical and exemplarist (or creationist and emanationist) views of reality, it is important to reiterate something that was said in a preceding chapter since it bears on what is to follow. One of the things that I think is so distinctively brilliant and challenging about Wolfson’s work is that he is endeavoring to articulate an updated and explicitly comparative nondual kabbalistic meontology that transcends and includes the Judeo-Christian-Islamic thought tradition(s) of the “West.”

means available to us to fashion theological discourse? To speak analogically is to use words equivocally as a bridge joining two incongruent things rendered the same by being different. Kabbalists [as well as Neoplatonic Christian mystics] would have surely assented to the view expressed by Ibn ‘Arabi that one must concurrently affirm the transcendence of true reality vis-à-vis all beings and the immanence of that reality in all beings, the perspective...that Corbin calls “theomonism” in contrast to monotheism, that is, the esoteric belief that the oneness of being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) is manifest through the multiplicity of epiphanies (*tajalliyāt*) that constitute the different names of the ineffable, unnameable truth (*al-haqq*) beyond all discrimination.³⁸

The quintessential paradox at the heart of kabbalistic phenomenology and ontotheology, therefore, “can be expressed semiotically in the recognition that signifier discloses the nature of signified, and signified, the nature of signifier, precisely because the two are indifferently identical by being identically indifferent.”³⁹

Open Secret Revisited

With this ideational background we can better approach the nexus between negative theology and the mystical ideal of union or conjunction (*devequt*) in kabbalah,⁴⁰ which is to say, *theosis* or deification. To this end, instead of continuing to focus on Wolfson’s explication of the thought of medieval kabbalists, I want to leap ahead on the temporal

³⁸ Ibid., p. 221. Wolfson is here alluding to Corbin’s *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: Éditions de l’Herre, 1981).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 218.

curve, as it were, to further consider his treatment of the thought of a modern kabbalist, namely, Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), the seventh rebbe of the Habad-Lubavitch dynasty of Hasidism. More specifically, I want to examine Wolfson's reconstruction of Schneerson's messianic message by revisiting his book *Open Secret* and by engaging in a close reading of two later retrospective essays that he wrote concerning it. Again, this will be done with a view to re/visioning the doctrine of deification for our own day.

As already mentioned, in 2009 Wolfson published his work *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson*. Against the author's protests, the book was marketed by the publisher as "a Jewish book" whose primary target audience was the Jewish community in general and the Habad community in particular. As Wolfson recalled in a 2014 interview, this decision of the publisher "was deeply insulting to me personally," for it went "against the grain of the book" and completely undermined his original intention for it, which was to have it reach a much broader audience.⁴¹ This is why in the preface to *Open Secret*, after averring that this book retells his own "intellectual portrait of Jewish esotericism from a different angle" and confirms his comparative hermeneutic belief that "by digging into the soil of a specific cultural matrix one may uncover roots that lead to others," he aligns this work with Rosenzweig's assessment of *The Star of Redemption*. "It is my hope, though by now not my expectation," Wolfson writes, "that the readership of this book will not be limited to Jewish scholars or even scholars of Judaica." He continues:

⁴¹ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 240.

In line with Rosenzweig's assessment of *The Star of Redemption*, I am willing to describe [*Open Secret*] as a "Jewish book," if it is understood that this locution does not imply that it deals exclusively with "Jewish things," but rather that it enfolds and exceeds the principle that the particular, in all of its unpredictability, sheds light on the a universal that must repeatedly articulate its universality from the vantage point of the particular. And, as Rosenzweig expressed his own aspiration, if others will be responsive to the "Jewish words," they have the potential of renewing the world.⁴²

Thus, Wolfson asserts in the same interview, this aspiration "encapsulates all of my efforts."⁴³

In light of this, he is understandably disappointed that *Open Secret* has not garnered much attention beyond the Jewish community in general and the Habad community in particular, for it addresses a wide array of topics that should be of interest to a variety of contemporary philosophers and theologians who are not Jewish scholars or even scholars of Judaica. As Wolfson himself observes, "The book has all kinds of conversations about the nature of apophatic embodiment, the question of particularity and universality, language and materiality, concealment and disclosure, and even a discussion of the posthuman [read: deificatory] overcoming of theism and egoism, although I do not use that precise term." He goes on to state:

⁴² Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. xiii.

⁴³ "Interview with Elliot R. Wolfson," *Elliot R. Wolfson: Poetic Thinking*, p. 240.

All of these issues emerge from the Chabad sources themselves that I show seek to go beyond theism, thereby undoing their own messianism from within. I don't think Chabad practitioners are anywhere close to being able to enact this dimension of the messianic teaching, but what I say could be of interest to contemporary philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion and John Caputo, who are writing about a-theology. But it requires on their part a willingness to enter the complexity of Jewish texts. There's something more profound here. It will require on their part a willingness to tolerate a certain style of Jewish textual interpretation towards the service of something greater than its own particularity.⁴⁴

With the foregoing in mind, then, and to recapitulate the main points of what was said in the previous chapter about this book, in *Open Secret*, Wolfson further explores the paradox of secrecy and openness by exploring some of the main contours of the thought of Menahem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), the seventh, and presumably last, Rebbe or master of the Hasidic dynasty known as Habad-Lubavitch, with particular emphasis on “the manner in which he used secrecy to dissimulate the dissimulation and thereby (re)cover truths uncovered.” As Wolfson notes, to walk this path, “inevitably leads to the need to lay bare Schneerson's messianic agenda, which is intricately tied to his understanding of the breaking of the seal of esotericism in the dissemination of Hasidic wisdom.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 240-241.

⁴⁵ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 16.

After observing that the position of the previous Habad masters as regards the dissemination of the secrets in messianic times, the revelation of the new Torah, is “paired by Schneerson with the Maimonidean opinion that knowledge of God will fill the land and all the nations shall come to listen to the Messiah, yielding the claim that the mysteries will be expounded publicly, presumably even before non-Jews,”⁴⁶ Wolfson goes on to describe Schneerson’s messianic agenda in suitably paradoxical terms:

Not only is the broadcasting of the esoteric seen as a propaedeutic to accelerate the redemption, but redemption is depicted as the wholesale dispersion of the mysteries of the Torah, an overt breaking of the seal of esotericism. But it is precisely with respect to the explicit claims about the disclosure of secrets that the scholar must be wary of being swayed by a literalist approach that would take the seventh Rebbe at his word. There is no suggestion of willful deceit on the part of Schneerson, of an intention to falsify, but there is an appeal to the wisdom of the tradition pertaining to the hermeneutic duplicity of secrecy: the secret will no longer be secret if and when the secret will be exposed to have been nothing more than the secret that there is a secret. To discover the secret that there is no secret is the ultimate secret that one can neither divulge without withholding nor withhold without divulging.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 247.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 247-248.

In order to shed light on the root of the root of this paradox of the open secret (i.e., the secret that there is no secret) at the heart of Jewish mystical thought, Wolfson identifies the doctrine of *hitkallelut* or integration as being crucial to its proper understanding. For this doctrine gives expression to the fundamental paradox of Habad cosmology, which is “the *mysterium coniunctionis* of the Infinite being incarnate in the finite, the (non)being beyond nature materializing within the non(being) of nature.”⁴⁸ Moreover, Wolfson points out that this same idea “provides the ontological basis for moral action – in line with the older kabbalistic tradition, Habad thinking does not separate ontology and ethics – as the good is determined on the grounds that the very possibility of there being something rather than nothing is due to the paradoxical identity of transcendence and immanence.”⁴⁹ He then makes an important distinction by way of clarification. Instead of speaking in terms of ontology, Wolfson suggests, it is better and more appropriate to speak of meontology, meaning being-not; a conception that transcends all binaries, including that which conventionally obtains between duality and nonduality.⁵⁰ “But,” he writes, “perhaps we should speak of meontological in place of

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See also Eugene Matanky, “*Nigun Shamil: The Soul Endlessly Yearning for What It Has Always Never Been*,” in which he draws upon the work of Elliot Wolfson and his understanding of meontology (p. 13). https://www.academia.edu/10011516/Nigun_Shamil_The_Soul_Endlessly_Yearning_for_What_It_Has_Always_Never_Been. For more on Wolfson’s treatment of the meontological conception of the Infinite found in kabbalistic texts, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nihilating Nonground and the Temporal Sway of Becoming: Kabbalistically Envisioning Nothing Beyond Nothing,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17:3, pp. 31-45, and p. 39: “These texts shed light on the difficulty of thinking of *Ein Sof* in Neoplatonic terms as the *hyperousios*, at least if the latter is understood *à la* Derrida’s explanation as the presence that presents itself as nonpresent. If the infinite is truly neither something nor nothing, then it is outside the either/or structure that informs the ontological economy of negative theology; it is, in short, the chiasm that resists both the reification of nothing as something and of something as nothing. To speak of this nothingness as the absence of presence is as inadequate as it is to speak of it as the presence of absence; it is technically beyond both affirmation and negation. It is possible to read the kabbalistic texts in a way that would put into question the distinction that Derrida made between the apophysis of the *via negativa*, which still presumes that divine transcendence is the essence about which nothing can be said, and the denegation of deconstruction, which posits that in the absence of any transcendent essence what is unavowable is simply the fact that there is nothing to be avowed. To the extent that the kabbalistic symbol of *Ein Sof*

ontological, as the basis for the ethical demand to be nothing is the nihility that is the ultimate void of being ..., that is, the nothing that is not in relation to anything but to its own nothingness, the nothing that is not even and therefore more than nothing.”⁵¹

As mentioned before, implicit in this formulation is an ecstatic notion of what we, following Wolfson, might call the dissolution of egocentric consciousness. Accordingly, “one can become the actual nothing through effacement of self,” through attaining a “nondual mindfulness” that embodies the pleromatic void of being: the fontal unbounded wholeness that encompasses all opposites in its infinite embrace. This spiritual awakening “is dependent on the prophetic potential to be realized” in the essential inessentiality of all that is (not), “the infinite will wherein opposites coincide.”⁵² Thus to become what one always already is is to realize that the coincidence of opposites is, as Wolfson puts it in commenting on a representative discourse of the seventh Rebbe, “the mystery that is referred to as the ‘supernal wonder’ (*pele ha-elyon*), or what we may call the *mystery of mysteries*, as it is the mystery that encapsulates the paradoxical characteristic of all mystery, although essential to the nature of mystery is an indeterminacy that renders its imprint constantly different, a *genuine repetition that erupts from an originary transformation*, to appropriate the language of Heidegger, always having already been the retrieval of what is yet to come.” Wolfson continues:

names the infinite that is beyond the negation of the affirmative and the affirmation of the negative, it may, in fact, be closer to what Derrida is claiming as his own view regarding that which is neither something that is nothing nor nothing that is something. For the kabbalist as well, infinity both is what it is not and is not what it is because it neither is what it is not nor is not what it is.” For Wolfson’s discussion of meontology in Habad thought specifically, see *Open Secret*, pp. 66-129.

⁵¹ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 75.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

To avail myself of another Heideggerian turn of phrase, the integration of opposites is not ‘the coalescence and obliteration of distinctions,’ but rather ‘the belonging together of what is foreign’ (*Zusammengehören des Fremden*). The supreme expression of this belonging together – the conundrum that is the origin, the *pele* that is the *alef* – is the manifestation of the infinite light beyond the nature in the timespace continuum of material nature, the mystery of incarnation that is the secret of the garment. The unmasking of this secret – the absurdity of the measurable world serving as the abode of the immeasurable essence – consists precisely of an aporetic withholding, a not-wanting-to-be-transparent, lest the lucidity obscure the concealing of the concealment that uncovers the nonbeing of being in the recovery of the being of nonbeing.⁵³

As in his other work, to further illumine the mystery of incarnation that is the paradoxical secret of the garment, Wolfson here avails himself of the mystical and philosophical texts from other religious traditions, particularly the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. From the outset, he writes that the interpretation of Habad philosophy that he offers in *Open Secret* is indelibly colored by his “dabbling in Buddhist texts, including the presentation of the messianic ideal as attaining – through negation – the consciousness that extends beyond consciousness, crossing beyond the river to the shore of nondiscrimination, the shore where there is no more need to speak of the shore.”⁵⁴ More specifically, to comprehend the Habad perspective, Wolfson attests that he has

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 77-78; emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. xiii.

found it beneficial to adopt “a form of logic akin to what in the Mahayana tradition is referred to as *madhyamaka*, the middle way, a logic that...posits the identity of opposites in the opposition of their identity.”⁵⁵ He elaborates:

Translated in a more technical vein, the logic to which I refer is based on the tetralemmic scheme: S is P; –P; both P and –P; neither P nor –P. The middle of the four-cornered logic, which some scholars consider to be the core of Buddhist philosophy, should not be conceived of as a meridian point situated equidistantly between extremes, the venerated golden mean between excess and privation in the Western philosophical tradition, but as *the indeterminate space that contains both and neither of the extremes, the absent presence that is present as absent, the lull between affirmation and negation, identity and nonidentity, the void that cannot be avoided. In this middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle, purportedly contradictory properties are attributed and not attributed to the (non) substance at the same time and in the same relation.*⁵⁶

Again, like Hughes before me, I have italicized this part of the above cited passage because it gets to the heart of Wolfson’s work.⁵⁷ Indeed, in all of its manifestations, Wolfson’s thought is an attempt to arrive at this “indeterminate space that contains both and neither of the extremes, the absent presence that is present as absent, the lull between affirmation and negation, identity and nonidentity, the void that cannot be avoided.”

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵⁶ Ibid.; my italics.

⁵⁷ See Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 24.

It is, in other words, an attempt to comparatively plumb the depths of the pleromatic abyss at the heart of being that is pointed to by the kabbalistic symbol of *Ein Sof*, which “names the infinite that is beyond the negation of the affirmative and the affirmation of the negative” insofar as, for the kabbalists, “infinity both is what it is not and is not what it is because it neither is what it is not nor is not what it is.” As such, according to Wolfson’s profoundly comparative reading, the kabbalistic symbol of *Ein Sof* as the “nihilating nonground” of being and becoming is not only closer to Buddhist thought than some might like to think, but it also “may, in fact, be closer to what Derrida is claiming as his own view regarding that which is neither something that is nothing nor nothing that is something.”⁵⁸ What is more, as will be seen in our non-conclusion, Wolfson’s updated and comparative kabbalistic meontology yields a profoundly paradoxical mystical anthropology of the human being as *homo abyssus*⁵⁹ – as a dynamic exemplar and co-creator of the meaning of being in relation to humanity, the world, and the mysterious pleromatic abyss that is the transcendently immanent nonground of reality (i.e., “divinity” by any other name).

Here, having mentioned it several times already, it behooves us to once again highlight an important quality of Wolfson’s comparative approach. As Hughes notes, for Wolfson, comparison is not facile. “It is based,” he writes, “neither on simplistic notions of influence nor chronistic renderings. It is, on the contrary, based on the notion that, despite semantic and conceptual discrepancies, there are real *philosophical* reasons for applying concepts from Buddhist logic to, say, modern texts associated with Chabad.”

⁵⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nihilating Nonground and the Temporal Sway of Becoming: Kabbalistically Envisioning Nothing Beyond Nothing,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17:3, p. 39.

⁵⁹ See Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, translated by D. C. Schindler (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018).

Hughes goes on to note that, while in earlier studies Wolfson had used modern continental philosophers to illumine medieval texts, in *Open Secret* “he reverses this process and uses medieval Buddhist (and Hindu and Muslim) texts to send light on modern Jewish texts.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, with respect to the postmessianic messianism of Menahem Mendel Schneerson, Wolfson contends that the notion of messianic liberation that he espoused entails being released from all conceptual limitations, including the concept that one needs to be liberated. He writes:

The ultimate legacy of the seventh Rebbe’s messianic aspiration, the encrypted message he wished to bequeath to future generations, lies in proffering an understanding of salvation as the expanded consciousness of and reabsorption in the inestimable essence, whose essence it is to resist essentialization, the moment of eternity for which we await in its fully temporalized sense, the advent of the absolute (non)event. True liberation, on this score, would consist of being liberated from the need to be liberated.⁶¹

In other words, on this score, true liberation would consist in an abiding awareness of “the light that is beyond the order of concatenation in which darkness has been transposed into light, the supernal delight...of the world-to-come” that is always already the case, “a state of equanimity marked by the surpassing of binary opposition,

⁶⁰ Hughes, “Elliot R. Wolfson: An Intellectual Portrait,” p. 24.

⁶¹ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 300.

including especially the obfuscation of the barrier separating Jew and non-Jew.”⁶² In this, true liberation would be the realization that the resolution of all paradox is the coming of the Messiah, the final and yet ever unfolding transformation of consciousness itself. As the Baal Shem Tov taught, “The coming of the Messiah does not depend upon anything supernatural, but rather upon human growth and self-transformation.... The world will only be transformed...when people realize that the Messiah is not someone wholly other than themselves.”⁶³

When viewed from this perspective, then, Schneerson’s postmessianic messianism revolves around and constitutes a kabbalistic *coincidentia oppositorum* according to which all apparent opposites, such as the human and the divine, always already exist in a state of “dynamic and ever-changing interconnectivity.”⁶⁴ Thus, Wolfson argues, for Schneerson, “the image of the personal Messiah may have been utilized rhetorically to liberate one from the belief in the personal Messiah.”⁶⁵ In this, the import of Schneerson’s messianic teaching was to reveal the concealed truth that “there is no Messiah for whom we must wait” because “the Messiah is already here and all that is necessary is for people to open their eyes in order to greet him”⁶⁶ in and as themselves.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Burt Jacobson, “The Glorious Presence: An Interpretation of the Teachings of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov,” 2nd draft (1978), p. 14. As cited in Lawrence Kushner, *The River of Light: Jewish Mystical Awareness* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), p. 72.

⁶⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling Menahem Mendel Schneerson’s Messianic Secret,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 26 (2012), p. 52. Again, this is strongly reminiscent of and consistent with the Christian theological notion of *perichoresis* (Latin: *circumincessio*), which mystics in this tradition have historically used to describe the trinitarian or nondual life of the Godhead and, hence, the ultimate nature of reality.

⁶⁵ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 273.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 276.

Or, put in a register that echoes the Baal Shem Tov, there is no Messiah – and we are it.⁶⁷

All that remains is for us to realize the radical truth of this open secret.

Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror

Perhaps not surprisingly, this reading of Schneerson's messianic message has proven to be controversial and as a result Wolfson himself has felt compelled to revisit *Open Secret* in order to defend his interpretation against critics who contend that he is wrong.

Wolfson first defended his reading of Schneerson's messianic speculations in a retrospective essay that he wrote two years after the publication of *Open Secret* entitled "Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,"⁶⁸ in which he basically seeks to steer the scholarly and popular conversation away from the ongoing debate about whether or not Schneerson identified himself as the Messiah to what he contends is the central question concerning the nature of the messianism Schneerson propagated, which question the ongoing debate has served only to obscure.⁶⁹

Wolfson begins by reminding his readers that a key to determining the nature of the messianism propagated by Schneerson is to be found in the fact that he was "heir to a long-standing esoteric tradition, according to which things are not always as they seem to be, nor do they always seem to be what they are."⁷⁰ This means that the principle of secrecy plays a prominent and enduring role in shaping the content and form of his

⁶⁷ See also Robert N. Levine, *There is No Messiah – and You're It: The Stunning Transformation of Judaism's Most Provocative Idea* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003).

⁶⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, "Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 35:2 (November 2011), pp. 401-418. Significantly, the epigraph Wolfson chose for this essay is a couplet from *The Gateless Gate*, a thirteenth-century collection of Chan (Zen) koans compiled by the Chinese Zen master Wumen Huikai (Japanese: Mumon Ekai), that reads: "Ships cannot remain / where the water is too shallow."

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 401.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 402.

teaching. As Wolfson explains, “Even though he was overtly dedicated to the distribution of esoteric matters in the service of inculcating the concrete life of true piety, Schneerson remains beholden to the hermeneutic of dissimulation attested in much earlier [kabbalistic] sources: The mystery is a phenomenon that conceals itself in the very act of revealing, for if that were not so, it would not be a mystery that was revealed.”⁷¹ Or, put differently, “the most secretive of secrets is the open secret, the secret that is so fully disclosed that it appears not to be a secret.”⁷² Thus for Schneerson, as for many masters of Jewish esoteric wisdom, “the ploy of secrecy is especially operative in the realm of messianic speculation.”⁷³

It is in maintaining the inherent paradoxical duplicity of Schneerson’s messianism that Wolfson’s approach “diverges most conspicuously from the work of others.” For by doing so he is asserting that to take Schneerson’s references to the personal Messiah literally is to miss the deeper, hidden meaning of his words. To quote Wolfson: “Schneerson’s employing the standard ways of the personal Messiah – a point that I not only do not repudiate, but which I document painstakingly by referring to many of his overt pronouncements to this effect – does not mean that strict allegiance to literal interpretation without heeding its symbolic correlate is the most felicitous path to understand the intent of his words.” Rather than repeating Schneerson’s messianic dicta verbatim, then, Wolfson consistently seeks to “gaze beneath the curtain of the explicit to determine the latent meaning underlying the copious references to an actual Messiah by contextualizing them in his speculations on cosmology and temporality.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 64.

⁷³ Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 402.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

A crucial element of that contextualization is Wolfson's attempt to "frame the question of messianic belief philosophically by establishing the contours of reality according to the Habad masters." He believes this attempt is amply justified on the grounds that, for Schneerson, "the decoding of the meaning of events that transpire in the temporal-spatial arena is to be envisaged through the speculum of theosophic symbolism." Wolfson goes on to argue that, because of this, the best method to study the thought of Schneerson is one that is not based on the dichotomization of the imaginal and real. He writes:

Borrowing the language of Joseph Mali, I would argue that the method best suited to study Schneerson is *mythistory*, that is, a historiography that recognizes the essential role that myth plays in the historical construction of personal and communal identities. To ascertain this phenomenon, one must eschew the standard opposition of myth and history, the imaginal and the tangible. Mali's hybrid term, "ideareal history," is an entirely apt depiction of Schneerson's orientation, that is, what is real in history is what is perceived ideationally to be real – not in an idealist sense that would reduce the material to the ideal, but in a postidealism wherein the transfigured materiality is construed mytho-poetically as the true nature of reality. This is the significance of Schneerson's teaching that in the messianic state we will detect that the soul is sustained by the body, as well as his prediction that "it will be discerned openly that nature is divinity," a cosmological perspective that I have dubbed *acosmic*

naturalism or *apophatic panentheism*, that is, the perception of the nothingness incarnate in the multiple forms of existence that constitute the world.⁷⁵

As previously mentioned, “[v]iewing terrestrial events as symbolic of the dynamic potencies in the divine pleroma is a basic tenet of the kabbalistic mindset from the Middle Ages.” Indeed, as Wolfson observes using the words of Henry Corbin, the “conviction that to everything that is apparent, literal, external, exoteric (*zāhir*) there corresponds something hidden, spiritual, internal, esoteric (*bātin*) is...the central postulate of esotericism and of esoteric hermeneutics (*ta’wīl*).”⁷⁶ Given this, it is, as Wolfson says, “preposterous to think that the seventh rebbe did not subscribe to this way of construing the concrete facts of history.” Why, he goes on to ask, should we entertain the possibility that Schneerson “would have affirmed a notion of facticity stripped of the sheath of metaphoricization,” a notion that would have been antithetical to the traditional kabbalistic perception of reality? Of course, we should not, because to make such a distinction in the case of Schneerson is as pointless as it is erroneous. Consequently, for Wolfson, “the coincidence of the symbolic and the factual” is the conceptual basis for his argument that the seventh rebbe’s rhetoric of the personal Messiah “serves as a signpost to lead one to a state of unification in which all individuation – including the individuated sense of the redeemer – is overcome.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 402–403; italics in original.

⁷⁶ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 78; as cited in Wolfson, “Open Secret,” p. 403.

⁷⁷ Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 403.

The coincidence of which Wolfson speaks “is indicated idiomatically by the term *mammash* in the Habad lexicon.” As he notes, while conventional interpretations ostensibly distinguish between *mammash* and *mashal*, the former connoting the actual and the latter the figurative, “a more profound reading of the sources intimates that it is precisely this locution that signifies the convergence of the two, an exegetical point that mirrors the ontological homology between the upper and lower worlds.”⁷⁸ To illustrate this, Wolfson cites one very important example from the first part of *Tanya*, which was written in 1797 by Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Habad Hasidism: “Thus verily by way of parable [*mammash derekh mashal*] is the obliteration of the existence of the world and its fullness [*bittul ha-olam u-melo’o bi-mesi’ut*] vis-à-vis its source, which is the light of the infinite, blessed be he.”⁷⁹

Wolfson goes on to explain the significance of this passage to his argument. “This text,” he writes, “in which the phrase is embedded exhibits the larger point that is vital to comprehending the Habad perspective and my interpretation thereof: There is no *mammash* that is not a *mashal*, and hence something is thought to be actually real when it is understood that the factual is figurative and the figurative actual.” He elaborates with reference to another passage in *Tanya*:

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 403-404.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 404. Per his citation, the passage is from Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Amarim: Tanya* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 1984), part 1, chap. 33, 42a. Of this passage, Wolfson notes the following: “What is expressed here is the key cosmological doctrine of Habad: The material universe is nullified in relation to the light of infinity (Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 66-129). Most significantly, this insight is marked by the paradoxical expression *mammash derekh mashal*, “verily by way of parable,” which conveys that mystical gnosis implicates one in discerning that the dematerialization of the world is literally true to the extent that it is figuratively so, since, obviously, the world continues to exist and is not actually abolished by the contemplative gesture of nullification.”

Commenting on Yosef Yishaq's explication of the statement in *Tanya* that the soul "is verily a portion of the divine from above" (*heleq eloha mi-ma 'al mammash*), Menahem Mendel noted that the word *mammash* has two connotations, that which is literally so without exaggeration and that which is concretely real. On closer examination, it becomes clear that these are two sides of one coin: The semantic literalness conveyed by the word *mammash* is connected to the sense of ontic tangibility, but the latter is determined by the symbolic domain to which actual events are correlated. The soul, therefore, is literally divine, since it is of the same substance as God; this suggests, however, that the symbolic is, in fact, more concrete than the literal, or that the literal is actual to the extent that it instantiates the symbolic. Even the language *heleq eloha mi-ma 'al*, which is drawn from Job 31:2, needs to be deconstructed according to the Habad interpretation: If the soul is consubstantial with the infinite, it cannot be designated literally a "part of God," because the infinite is incomposite. The force of *mammash*, which is added to the verse, rhetorically performs the reversal that allows one to see that the literal is the figurative and the figurative literal, that substantiality is composed of what is deemed insubstantial from the empirical standpoint. I would apply this same criterion to the use of the term *mammash* in conjunction with the Messiah. Thus, explicating in a talk [what it means to] desire that the Messiah should "come without delay in actuality [*tekhef u-mi-yad mammash*]," Schneerson noted that the word *mammash* implies that it

should occur “in the manner of actuality [*be-ofen shel mammashut*], in the corporeality and materiality of the world,” and as a result the corporeal will become a “vessel” for the “most supreme spirituality,” the divine essence. So even here we see that the sense conveyed by actuality is a transfiguration of the physical.⁸⁰

Accordingly, in the philosophy of Habad that is based on and infused with kabbalistic hermeneutics, there is no objectivity that is not subject to the symbolic and paradoxical nature of reality. Granted, as Wolfson states, “[o]ne can, and indeed must, distinguish between the *mashal* and the *nimshal*, the sign and the signified.” But, “just as in a dream truth is inescapably entwined with deception – the dream is the deceit that dissimulates as truth, as opposed to the deceit that covers truth – so it is not possible for there to be a signified that is not enmeshed in a web of signification.” Thus the “innate metaphoricity of existence” ensures the convergence of the literal and the figurative: “What is literally true is the figuration of that which has no figure, and thus human beings do not have the ability to grasp the actual divested of the metaphorical veneer.” This, Wolfson points out, even applies to the messianic promise that is linked exegetically to Isaiah 30:20 and 40:5. For, consistent with the kabbalistic way of perceiving reality, the “disclosure of the infinite light without garment” (*gilluy asmut or ein sof beli levush*) – in Wolfson’s words – “amounts to seeing that there is no seeing but through a garment, perceiving the metaphysical as it is manifest in the pretense of the physical, the paradox of the boundless and the bounded being identified as one and the same (*zaynen beli gevul un gevul eyn zakh*), the mystery referred to by the rabbinic depiction of the world as the

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 404-405.

place for the divine habitation, *dirah ba-tahtonim*, the spectral immanence of the invisible transcendence.”⁸¹

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 405–406. Relative to this and the following citation, it is again worth noting the striking resonance between Buddhism and Schneerson’s thought that Wolfson has astutely discerned. The correspondence with Mahayana Buddhism and the Madhyamaka tradition of Nagarjuna has already been mentioned. In this regard, the following lines from the *Heart Sutra of the Wisdom Beyond All Wisdom*, which is a condensed exposition on the Mahayana teaching of nonduality or the coincidence of opposites, are illustrative. “Here, Sariputra, form is Emptiness, Emptiness form, / Form is not separated from the Emptiness, Emptiness / not separated from the form, / All that expresses form is Emptiness, / all that is Emptiness has form. / So it is also with feeling and thinking, motivation / and sensing [i.e., consciousness].” See Ton Lathouwers, *More Than Anyone Can Do: Zen Talks*, trans. Mical Goldfarb Sikkema (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2013), p. 201.

Another Buddhist tradition with which Schneerson’s thought resonates is the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition of Mahamudra. As Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche has observed, “Mahamudra is a contemplative Buddhist tradition known for its simplicity.... The meaning of Mahamudra is found in its name. *Maha* means ‘great’ and *mudra* means ‘symbol’ or ‘seal.’ The Great Symbol referred to is the wisdom of emptiness, which is the very nature of our mind and of all phenomena – any object or idea the mind can observe or become aware of. Because it covers the totality of our experience, the Great Symbol is known as the all-encompassing reality from which there is no escape or exception.” See Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, “How to Do Mahamudra Meditation,” *Lion’s Roar* (March 29, 2017) at <https://www.lionsroar.com/how-to-meditate-dzogchen-ponlop-rinpoche-on-mahamudra/>. Accordingly, everything that exists, by virtue of its being (i.e., of its participation in the primordial fullness of emptiness), “is its own symbol” (Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Illusion’s Game: The Life and Teaching of Naropa*, ed. Sherab Chodzin [Boston: Shambhala, 1994], p. 116). The *Mahāmudrātilaka-tantra* (The Essence of Nondual Awareness Tantra) puts it succinctly: “As regards the *mahamudra*, / *Ma* stands for the formless primordial awareness, / *Ha* signifies its creative play as form, / *Mudra* symbolizes the nondual union of the two” (adapted from Takpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahāmudrā: The Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, translated and annotated by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2001], p. 93).

In this context, the following description of Mahamudra by Robert A. F. Thurman helps to further illuminate the resonance between the Vajrayana conception of nonduality and Schneerson’s radically paradoxical messianism (i.e., his notion of “messianic consciousness” or deification). “The Sanskrit *mahāmudrā* (Tibetan, *phyag rgya chen po*) literally means ‘great seal’ or ‘great gesture’ or, somewhat more esoterically, ‘great consort,’ or, most esoterically, ‘great embrace.’ Mahamudra is a description of the most profound, ultimate, absolute reality that is otherwise called *nirvana*, *emptiness-compassion-womb*, *bliss-void-indivisible*, *clear-light relativity*, *Buddhahood*, *truth realm*, *reality body*, *nonduality*. Mahāmudrā conveys in its own context the Buddha’s foundational discovery that reality, when it is mentally and viscerally, intellectually and experientially known as it truly is, is perfect freedom, infinite life, omniscient love and compassion, bliss. All paths of study, reasoning, ethics, and meditative practice taught by Buddha intend to provide us – beings who unrealistically take this bliss-freedom-indivisible reality as a realm of conflict, isolation, and fear – with appropriate paths to become more realistic and thereby discover the all-pervasive freedom and happiness that is really ours. The path of mahāmudrā...is given the name of the ultimate goal, *great embrace*, because it proceeds directly to the tender reality of blessed release; in all aspects of space and time, it perceives our existence as nondually and blissfully embraced in absolute freedom. Our extraordinary happiness automatically overflows as glorious love and compassion for all other beings, who are seen swimming with us in the ocean of luminosity.” See Robert A. F. Thurman’s foreword to Daniel P. Brown’s *Pointing Out the Great Way: The Stages of Meditation in the Mahamudra Tradition* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), p. xiii.

Now here one might ask: If Wolfson’s nondual or “Buddhist” reading of Schneerson is correct, why should not one simply be a Buddhist instead of a Jew? My initial response is to suggest that such a question misses the point. For among the freedoms that Wolfson’s nondual, post-monotheistic, post-subjective, post-messianic, and indeed post-Habad meontological reading of Schneerson’s messianism

Instead of viewing the world as illusionary, therefore, it should be seen as what it is: allusive. For “[t]he corporeal points to the spiritual in a way analogous to the hermeneutical claim that the esoteric meaning of the Torah is accessible only through the guise of the exoteric meaning, the light of infinity deflected through the façade of the letters, which constitute the true nature of materiality.” Thus, to be illumined messianically, “entails seeing the veil unveiled as the veil, apprehending that the veil and the face behind the veil are the same in virtue of their difference.”⁸²

Revealing and Re/veiling Menahem Mendel Schneerson’s Messianic Secret

A year after the publication of “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” Wolfson again defended his reading of the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe’s messianic message in a much

affords is the freedom to not be defined by any label. It is the freedom to embody the radical openness of the “great embrace,” the unbounded wholeness of the always already hidden yet revealed mystery that is the ever-dynamic and interconnective nonground of reality. Thus the question is not why someone should change their religious or philosophical affiliation to become a Buddhist when they recognize this nonground as the beating heart of another tradition. On the contrary, the question is why should not one embrace the radical openness of this groundless ground that allows one the freedom to affirm truth wherever it is found while remaining Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or whatever?

Here I am reminded of the response that the twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner gave to a question that a reporter challengingly asked him towards the end of his life. Taking umbrage at Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian,” his interlocutor asked him how he would feel if a Buddhist told him that he was really just an anonymous Buddhist. Without missing a beat, Rahner smiled and gently said, “Why, I would be honored, of course!”

⁸² Ibid., p. 406 (see also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 130-60, 113, 122, 127, and 212). About this interpretation, Wolfson says the following: “Predictably, this interpretation of the rebbe’s thought has met with resistance and the charge that it is not the sense that the texts literally transmit. I do not, however, subscribe to the view that one can access the ‘plain meaning’ without any interpretive layer, as if there were a naked truth that can be uncovered through textual exegesis. This is not to say that I think an interpreter can say whatever he or she wishes to say, or that I consider all readings equally valid. Philological proficiency is, I insist, a legitimate tool to decipher the literal sense of the text. The latter, however, is not ascertained by recovering an originary meaning, a fixed reference point, but rather through the continuous discovery engendered by the ongoing dispersal of meaning; the text, on this accord, varies with each new reading. The position I have taken is the middle ground between pure philology and constructive philosophical hermeneutics: The text is not simply what the reader says, nor is the reader merely reflecting what the text says. Interpretation arises from the confrontation of text and reader, which results in the concomitant bestowal and elicitation of meaning” (p. 406).

Wolfson then turns to Heidegger’s *What Is Called Thinking?* and his notion of the “unthought” to clarify and support his position. After quoting Heidegger as saying “The unthought is the greatest gift that thinking can bestow,” Wolfson writes: “The unthought is not something that can be thought once and for all, but the potential of the text to yield new meaning unremittingly in the curvature of time. The more original the thinking – the deeper it wells forth from the origin that stays hidden with every disclosure – the more fecund will be the attempts to articulate what remains unthought” (p. 407).

longer essay entitled “Revealing and Re/veiling Menahem Mendel Schneerson’s Messianic Secret.”⁸³ As it further elucidates several key points in Wolfson’s interpretation, a brief examination of this essay will help to shed additional light on the notion of deification.

Wolfson begins by observing that initially, when he began to read through the transcripts of Schneerson’s talks, discourses, and letters, he did not intend to focus on the question of messianism. However, it soon became clear that he “could not write about this figure and dodge the topic,” for it was simply “too pervasive, enveloping every aspect of his being” and thinking.⁸⁴ Indeed, Wolfson writes, the documentary evidence “overwhelmingly demonstrates” that from the time it was decided that Menahem Mendel would succeed his father-in-law, Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, as the spiritual head of the Habad-Lubavitch movement, he was motivated by “the latter’s apocalyptic [or messianic] sensibility.”⁸⁵

According to Wolfson, this motivation broadly manifested itself in two ways. “Not only did Schneerson affirm the messianic fervor of this father-in-law, [but] he saw his project essentially as bringing to fruition the seeds of redemption sown by him.” This means that the mission of the seventh Rebbe was “completely dedicated to promulgating the form of worship apposite to the messianic era, the worship of repentance (*avodat ha-teshuvah*), which is linked to the pietistic ideal of self-sacrifice (*mesirat nefesh*), a mode of worship that occupies a higher level than the normative worship of the law and the commandments (*avodah de-torah u-miṣwot*), insofar as it is beyond all measure and

⁸³ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling Menahem Mendel Schneerson’s Messianic Secret,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 26 (2012), pp. 25-96.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

limitation.” Wolfson continues: “Based on the rabbinic dictum that repentance [or returning to the divine] has the power to transpose acts of guilt into acts of merit, Schneerson was wont to emphasize that this worship transmutes evil into good and transforms curse into blessing, and thus it exemplifies the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the paradoxical logic pertinent to the messianic state of being.”⁸⁶

Consistent with the counter-critique that he levelled in “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” Wolfson goes on to lament that too much scholarly and popular attention has been devoted to debating whether or not Schneerson identified himself as the Messiah. This is lamentable because, in Wolfson’s considered opinion, it completely misses what is of primary importance. As he explains, “While this interest [in whether or not the Rebbe identified himself as the Messiah] is surely understandable, both doctrinally and anthropologically, in my judgment, it obscures the central question concerning the nature of the messianism he propagated.” Wolfson grants that this judgment and the line of inquiry based upon it might initially seem to his critics to be gratuitous or unwarranted for two reasons.

First, with regards to whether or not he actually promoted orthodox belief in an individual Messiah who would be the instrument of collective redemption, Schneerson’s writings, discourses, and actions “are replete with references to a personal Messiah, and since there is no evidence that he ever deviated from the strictures of rabbinic orthodoxy, there should be no reason to cast doubt on his explicit assertions.”

Second, with respect to whether or not Schneerson actually claimed to be the Messiah, insofar as “it can be justifiably argued that he went to greater lengths than his predecessor...to accomplish the diffusion of the inwardness of the Torah” – i.e., insofar

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

as he was intent on explicitly advancing the distinctive Habad commitment “to divulging mystical secrets (*penimiyyut ha-torah*), the spreading of the wellsprings outward (*hafaṣat ma ‘yanot huṣah*) to broadcast the mysteries that impart knowledge of divinity mandatory for proper worship,” to “break[ing] the code of esotericism upheld (in theory if not unfailingly in practice) by kabbalists through the centuries” – a *prima facie* case can be made that Schneerson believed himself to be the long awaited Messiah.⁸⁷

However, as Wolfson points out, upon closer inspection, the historical picture is more complex and convoluted than his pious critics allow or would like to believe. “One should never forget,” he writes, “that Schneerson was heir to a long-standing esoteric tradition, according to which things are not always as they seem to be, nor do they always seem to be what they are. The role of secrecy in his teaching endures both in content and in form.” Thus, Wolfson contends, even though it is true that Schneerson “was overtly dedicated to the distribution of esoteric matters in the service of inculcating the concrete life of piety,” it is also nonetheless true that he necessarily “remains beholden to the hermeneutic of dissimulation attested in much earlier sources: the mystery is a phenomenon that conceals itself in the very act of revealing, for if that were not so, it would not be a mystery that was revealed.” This being the case, Wolfson makes his point and the distinctiveness of his position clear.

We can speak, therefore, of an inherent duplicity: to disseminate the secret, it must be withheld. For Schneerson, as for many masters of Jewish esoteric wisdom, the ploy of secrecy is especially operative in the realm of messianic speculation. This is the spot where my approach

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

diverges most conspicuously from the work of others: Schneerson's employing the standard ways of referring to the personal Messiah – a point that I not only do not repudiate, in spite of the assertion of some of my detractors, but which I document painstakingly by referring to many of his overt pronouncements to this effect – does not necessarily mean that strict allegiance to a literal interpretation without heeding its symbolic correlate is the most felicitous path to understand the intent of his words.⁸⁸

Given the nuance and sophistication of the stance he has adopted, it is, as Wolfson readily admits, predictable that he would meet with resistance. Yet the fact that such resistance is predictable does not mean that it is valid or accurate. For, in Wolfson's words, "the charge that Schneerson devoted much effort to describing every aspect of the expected Messiah does not challenge the core of my thesis nor does it justify the allegations that I have introduced an interpretation that is not found in the sources and that my exposition does not take into account the 'general' and 'integrated' system of Schneerson's thought."⁸⁹ To explain why this is so, and in order to further elucidate his approach, Wolfson proceeds to expand upon his hermeneutical assumptions as well as his understanding of systematicity.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 29-30. As Wolfson notes, he is here responding to the comments of Alon Dahan, "Review of Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*," H-Judaic, February 2011 <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28655/reviews/30771/dahan-wolfson-open-secret-postmessianic-messianism-and-mystical>.

Hermeneutical Assumptions: Inceptual Thinking/Retrieving the Traces of the Unthought

Regarding his hermeneutical assumptions, Wolfson begins by stating that he “do[es] not subscribe to the view that one can access the ‘plain meaning’ [of a text] without any interpretive layer, as if there were a naked truth that can be uncovered through textual exegesis.” Yet at the same time he does not think that “an interpreter can say whatever he or she wishes to say,” nor does he “consider all readings equally valid.” This is why he insists that philological proficiency is “a legitimate tool to decipher the literal sense of a text.” But the meaning of a text transcends and includes its literal sense; consequently, philological proficiency takes one only so far – it is necessary but not sufficient to determine a given text’s meaning. Something more is needed. For, as Wolfson observes, textual meaning is not ascertained by recovering “a fixed reference-point, but rather through the continuous discovery engendered by the ongoing dispersal of meaning; the text, on this accord, varies with each new reading.” Thus the position that Wolfson has consistently taken over the course of his decades-long scholarly career “is to stake the middle ground between pure philology and constructive philosophical hermeneutics.” For the truth of the matter is that the text “is not simply what the reader says, nor is the reader merely reflecting what the text says. Interpretation arises from the confrontation of text and reader, which results in the concomitant bestowal and elicitation of meaning. The complex and subtle relationship of the two requires the recognition of mutuality and reciprocity that precludes complete identification or diametric opposition.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 30. See also Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 115. As noted above, Wolfson has repeated this argument in “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 406. He also instructively treats of the polysemic nature of the text from a kabbalistic perspective in his essay, “Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and Discontinuity in Kabbalistic

This, then, is the hermeneutical path that Wolfson also follows in *Open Secret*, where he likewise offers “a model at variance with the naïve representationalism based on the presumption that the plain meaning can be rendered completely transparent.” But

Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6:18 (Winter 2007), pp. 149-150. There, in the course of his critical evaluation of Moshe Idel’s scholarly methodology, Wolfson raises the possibility that “affirming set patterns of thought and a unified system of symbols that link together kabbalists from different historical periods does not inevitably incriminate the scholar in a methodological reductionism.” He next proposes that it is in fact feasible to conceive of traditional (and more contemporary) kabbalists espousing a polychromatic essentialism that is essentially nonessential, which would justify a hermeneutical method that itself embraces a polychromatism that is essentially nonessential. Then, with specific reference to Jacques Derrida’s notion of deconstruction, Wolfson continues: “Moving beyond a binary logic, which is still operative in the postmodern dichotomy (in part traceable to the legacy of Derridean deconstruction) of truth and dissimulation, I would surmise that the polysemic nature of the text that may be elicited from kabbalistic sources (from the medieval period to the present) is not dependent on the rejection of laying claim to an inherent and original intent that is recoverable through proper philological attunement. The notion of the infinity of the text engenders a proliferation of interpretations unfolding in time, an idea that, *prima facie*, would seem to accord with Derrida’s idea of dissemination, the rejection of one unequivocal meaning in favor of the belief in an ongoing dispersal of meanings; the text, on this accord, changes with each new reading. But there is a critical difference: the unfolding of the text’s potentially infinite meaning would not be imaginable to a kabbalist if he did not presume that all of the interpretations were enfolded in the originary text to which a discrete, albeit aporetic, signifier is assigned, that is, the ineffable name YHVH, the name that declaims in its (non)utterance the nameless that is spoken when unspoken and unspoken when spoken. The name, then, is a transcendental signifier, a sign that points to that to which no sign can point, the essence whose essence it is to have no essence, the signifier without signified, the veil that is veiled in the veil of its own veiling. The originary text is a palimpsest from its inceptual inscripting/erasure – the multiple readings etched on its surface constitute the writing-over, the spectrality of the invisible emerging from beneath the layers of the visible, the disclosure of truth in the concealment of image through the concealment of truth in the disclosure of image. For the kabbalist exegete, the infinite, which is circumscribed in the text, is the theme that cannot be thematized, though it ceaselessly thematizes itself through concealing its concealment, disappearing in the advent of its coming-to-view, the no-showing that is the spectacle of mystical vision. Although a credible case can be made that the kabbalistic and postmodern hermeneutic share the view that there is no core intentionality to the text, the two tactics of reading differ on the question of the possibility of demarcating a ‘lived domain beyond all textual instances’ [Derrida]. Kabbalistic hermeneutics (at least in its classical formulation) rests on an ontological assumption that contemporary readers would find objectionable: there is a presence that exceeds the text, a presence, to be sure, that is always nonpresence, present as absent, and hence it can never be represented, but it is a presence nonetheless, the secret manifest in the nonmanifestation of the secret, the nothing about which one can speak in contrast to there being nothing about which to speak, the unsaying of apophasis as opposed to the dissimulation of denegation. In my estimation, the medieval kabbalists (as heirs to the Neoplatonic legacy) affirmed a logic that frees itself from the traditional philosophical opposition between presence and absence, an opposition that even Derrida was not able to discard completely in his deconstructing of Western metaphysics. The absence implied in the kabbalistic infinite would be deemed on Derridean terms to be a ‘negative mode of presence.’ Thinking from the standpoint of the discourse of apophasis, however, it is possible, indeed desirable, to affirm the absence of presence in the presence of absence. In the apophatic logic [read: nondual logic] there is no dichotomy, no chasm separating absence and presence that needs to be bridged; in the infinite, total absence and total presence are the same in virtue of being different, and, hence, absence is the only way for the presence to be present in the excess of lack that lacks all but the lack of excess. To interpret the kabbalah as if it were advocating a total collapse of divinity into the fold of the text, thereby effacing the transcendence of the beyond-being, the form of the formless, is an evocative reading, one to which I myself have occasionally succumbed, but it does not mean that it is the most responsible either historically or philologically.”

it cannot be emphasized enough that this does not mean that Wolfson's interpretations of Schneerson's thought are not rooted in careful reading of primary sources. In the words of Wolfson: "That I believe that the hermeneutical task presumes that the meaning contained within texts is constantly refashioned by acts of interpretation does not justify the allegation that my exegesis has no 'explicit trace' in the writings of Schneerson."⁹¹ As a matter of fact, the complete opposite is true. For, as Wolfson maintains, "a more nuanced understanding of the notion of the trace would turn this argument on its head: the explanations I offer are precisely the traces that one can track in the transcriptions of Schneerson's teachings." Indeed, this is entirely consistent with the approach that Wolfson took in *Language, Eros, Being*, where, following Derrida, he argued that traces left in a text allude to "the surplus of meaning, the gifting of indeterminacy that fosters seemingly endless determinations. Inability to comprehend a text once-and-for-all is what endows it with future resonance."⁹²

Alternatively expressed, the trace in the text does not portend a vestige of an original intent of the author whose presence determines once-and-for-all the meaning of the text that can be retrieved by the reader; it is rather the marking of the erasure of the hegemony of any such intent and presence. Because of this the textual trace is inherently paradoxical and creative, serving a function that is at once deconstructive and constructive. Accordingly, in the words of Wolfson again, "The trace in the text cannot be simply [or naively] retraced, since it is always a trace of [an originary] trace that proceeds not from pure presence, which the exegete allegedly can reclaim philologically,

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 31. Here again Wolfson is responding to Dahan.

⁹² Ibid. The quoted passage is from *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 91.

but from the withdrawal of presence, the disjointing of meaning at the beginning that beckons the reader to think what is yet to be thought in the text.”⁹³

Wolfson is here echoing the Heideggerian notion of the “unthought” (*Ungedachte*), which, according to Heidegger, is “the greatest gift thinking can bestow”⁹⁴ inasmuch as it calls us to be attentive to what is unique and inexhaustible in each thinker. Wolfson’s position therefore can be clarified further by this notion which, as he puts it, “is not something that can be thought once and for all, but [rather is] the truth that pervades all thought, the potential of the text to yield new meaning unremittingly in the curvature of time.” Hence, “[t]he more original the thinking – the deeper it wells forth from the origin that stays hidden with every disclosure – the more fecund will be the attempts to articulate what remains unthought.”⁹⁵

Given this, Wolfson asserts that what he set out to do in *Open Secret* was precisely “to think the unthought in Schneerson’s thinking, to extract through exhaustive labor the unforeseeable, to lay bare the bequest that opens the traditions of the past to a novel iteration in the future, an iteration that, like the moment of time in which it is inflected, is always the same because always different.” And it must be remembered that, above and beyond the requisite exhaustive labor, “[t]hinking the unthought is realized only through a deep receptivity to what can be thought.”⁹⁶ This, as Wolfson points out, is

⁹³ Ibid., p. 32.

⁹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, translated by Fred W. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray, with an introduction by J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 76. As cited in Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 33.

⁹⁵ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 33.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

the intent of Heidegger's ostensibly tautological statement, "What is *un*-thought is there in each case only as the *un-thought*."⁹⁷

But what is the nature of this deep receptivity that Heidegger, and Wolfson after him, deems necessary? Here, following Wolfson, it is worth citing a passage of Kenneth Maly's that nicely summarizes Heidegger's perspective on what thinking the unthought entails:

Thinking's task is to gather thought, to bring it together, in such a way that the unthought emerges as issue. But the disclosure of the unthought to thinking does not unfold for thinking in order to be transcended or abolished, to be taken up into thought. Rather, when heeded, the unthought as issue manifests its own refusal to yield itself up to thought; and thus it shows its essential character as insisting on continual astonishment. It is the interplay between this withholding and manifesting of the unthought that is the issue for thinking. It is the issue of disclosure and hiddenness: ἀ-λήθεια [*a-lētheia*].⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, p. 76; italics in original. For the sake of clarity, here it must be noted that Wolfson's use of Heidegger as a congenial prism through which to examine the thought of Schneerson and translate it into another philosophical idiom does not require that the rebbe would have been explicitly aware of Heidegger's notion of the "unthought" or, for that matter, of the other striking correspondences that Wolfson's intrepid comparison between Heidegger and kabbalah reveals. Rather, as will be stated below, what Wolfson has demonstrated in *Open Secret* and elsewhere is that Heidegger and Habad share a similar understanding of the inextricable relationship between hiddenness and disclosure – a similar understanding that, as one might expect, is expressed in different terminological registers.

⁹⁸ Kenneth Maly, "Man and Disclosure," in *Heraclitean Fragments: A Companion Volume to the Heidegger/Fink Seminar on Heraclitus*, eds. John Sallis and Kenneth Maly (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 48. As cited in Wolfson, "Revealing and Re/veiling," p. 36.

Thus, thinking the unthought entails grappling with the mysterious interplay of disclosure and hiddenness, of unconcealment and concealment, in a word: *alētheia*, which in Greek literally means un-concealment (*a-lethe*) or the state of being unhidden.

Alētheia is a key term in Heidegger's lexicon that he uses in two related but distinguishable senses which are suggested by his choice of typography. As John Caputo observes, according to Heidegger, in the first or phenomenal sense, *alētheia* refers to the phenomenality of being and means "the unconcealment which adheres to the presence of what is present, the self-showing being...prior to its reduction to an object of assertion, or, later on, to an object for a thinking subject." In the second and more radical or primordial sense, *a-lētheia* means "the opening up of the unconcealed, the very granting of the presence of the present,...the emergence of the field of presence itself from a radical, intractable concealment,...that granting which bestows presence in its phenomenality, that opening which, always out of sight, is that *within which* every [instance] of presence takes place" and the truth of being unfolds. Or, put more simply, *alētheia* is presence while *a-lētheia* is that which grants presence and truth. Hence, in the case of the latter, "[t]he disruptive hyphen names the open-ing of the open."⁹⁹ When understood in this double sense, then, *alētheia* denotes the continual unfolding of the truth of being in the space of the unthought, which bestows the gift of presence in its phenomenality. In this, the unthought is the opening of the unconcealed that is simultaneously hidden and revealed in its very opening. Therefore, according to Heidegger, this radical openness and mysterious interplay between the concealment and unconcealment of the unthought is the paramount issue for thinking.

⁹⁹ John D. Caputo, "Demythologizing Heidegger: 'Alētheia' and the History of Being," *The Review of Metaphysics* 41:3 (1988), pp. 528 (emphasis in original) and 531. See Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 39 and 71; as cited by Caputo.

Significantly, as Wolfson has demonstrated in *Open Secret* and elsewhere, “A similar conjuncture [or belonging-together] of disclosure and hiddenness, related hermeneutically to the task of bringing to light the truth of being as the unconcealment (*alētheia*) that is the concealment of concealing – the bewilderment of the unthought that at once incites and inhibits thinking – is at play in Ḥabad, although, as we might expect, expressed in different terminological registers.” Wolfson continues:

Just as Heidegger taught that being is the showing that is at the same time a covering, so the seven Ḥabad masters – each in their own distinctive voice – emphasized that all that is revealed in the concatenation of worlds (*hishtalshehut ha-olamot*), which collectively constitute the domain of nature (*teva*), is a concealment of the concealment that is the essence (*ašmut*) of the light of infinity (*or ein sof*). Moreover, as I argued in *Open Secret*, the Ḥabad hermeneutic “champions a temporal configuration that is circular in its linearity and linear in its circularity. What is brought forth each moment is a renewal of what has been, albeit always from a different vantage point.” I suggested, moreover, that Schneerson’s own approach can be adduced from his elucidation of the new interpretations of Torah originating in the supernal Torah, the infinite thought or wisdom, which emanates from the “essential hiddenness” that transcends the triadic division of time.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 36-39. The quote is from *Open Secret*, p. 23. See also *ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

Thus, according to Wolfson, for Schneerson, in a way that is analogous to Heidegger's notion of "inceptual thinking" (*anfängliche Denken*), "exegetical repetition is not the mechanical return of the same, but the creative reclamation of difference, the constant verbalization of a truth spoken as what is yet to be spoken."¹⁰¹ In this the study of Torah is regarded as "a form of disciplined spontaneity that ideally instigates innovative replication, the saying again of what has never been said, an exegetical exploit that always occurs 'in one moment' (*be-sha'ta hada*). Bringing forth ancient-new words (*millin hadetin attiqin*), in the zoharic locution, is the vehicle through which one merits to see the new Torah that is to emerge, for, according to a talmudic tradition, the Messiah is one of three things (together with a scorpion and a lost object) that comes serendipitously, when a person is unaware, literally, when one's mind is distracted (*be-hessaḥ ha-da'at*)."¹⁰²

Importantly, Wolfson notes that the theme of disciplined spontaneity – or the understanding that "through real effort (*yegi'ah*) one can come to spontaneous discovery (*meṣi'ah*)" – and Schneerson's carrying on the program of his father-in-law to vigorously promote and hasten the coming of the Messiah by every means possible does not contradict the traditional notion of the Messiah who comes unawares, that is, only when one's mind is distracted. For, on the contrary, according to Wolfson, "the true distraction of the mind consists of the concerted efforts to bring the Messiah, for the Messiah cannot be brought – or, to express the matter in an idiom more faithful to my interpretation of Schneerson, his presently absent presence cannot be discerned as present – except when one attains nondual, metacognitive consciousness – the mindful state of mindlessness –

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 41. See also *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 41-42. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 64, 160-171, 190-193, 247-248, 275, 316 n. 21, 326 n. 177, 364 n. 48, 370-371 n. 144.

the ecstatic actualization (*hitpa'ahut*) that is connected to *yehidah*, the facet of the soul in virtue of which the individual is reintegrated into the infinite essence.”¹⁰³ And, as we have seen, it is precisely this nondual, metacognitive consciousness that is constitutive of deification.

Systematicity: Grounded in the Groundless Ground of Apophatic Incarnation

Having thus clarified and expanded upon Wolfson’s hermeneutical assumptions, what about his understanding of systematicity? What does he have to say about it? To address this issue, he again avails himself of Heidegger’s paradoxical thought relative to the unsystematic, but not chaotic or arbitrary, “immeasurability of inceptual thinking.”¹⁰⁴ “Technically speaking,” Wolfson writes, “the thought proffered by Schneerson can also be described as unsystematic but not arbitrary, impressionistic but not chaotic, inasmuch as the ultimate measure of the truth about which he speaks, the infinite essence, is essentially immeasurable and indeterminate.” He continues:

The terminology *ašmut* may have its roots in the metaphysical jargon of medieval philosophical literature, but the way that it functions in Schneerson and his predecessors resists any ontotheological intent, that is, the essence cannot be essentialized, not even as the no-thing of the Neoplatonic apophatic tradition, since the nothing of infinity cannot be

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 42-43. Not surprisingly, this view finds echoes in the Pauline notion that the Messiah “will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

¹⁰⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), § 28, p. 45. As cited in Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” pp. 43-44.

constricted by images of negation or absence, images that presuppose the positivity and presence they ostensibly negate.¹⁰⁵

Accordingly, Wolfson states, the essence, in Heideggarian parlance, is “the ‘fullness of “time” [*Reife der ‘Zeit’]*’ that is ‘pregnant with the originary “not” [*ursprünglichen ‘Nicht’]*,’ the ‘abyss’ (*Ab-grund*) of the ‘primordial ground’ (*Ur-grund*) that is the ‘unessential ground’ (*Un-grund*).”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 44. In highlighting how Schneerson and his predecessors use the terminology of *asmut* in a way that resists and counters the Neoplatonic apophatic tradition, Wolfson is again drawing attention to the meontological character of Habad’s kabbalistic thought. Per p. 59 n. 138 above, for more on Wolfson’s treatment of the meontological conception of the Infinite found in kabbalistic texts, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Nihilating Nonground and the Temporal Sway of Becoming,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17:3, pp. 31-45, and p. 39. As I will argue below, Wolfson’s penetrating insight into the meontological nature of Schneerson’s messianic secret has significant ramifications for the reconceptualization of deification inasmuch as it suggests a non-creationist and non-emanationist vision of reality.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 44-45. Wolfson is here quoting from Heidegger, *Contributions*, § 146, p. 189 and § 242, p. 265. It must be noted that on p. 45 n. 72, Wolfson writes: “My English rendering of the critical German terms (*Ab-grund*, *Ur-grund*, and *Un-grund*) departs from the translation of Emad and Maly. Heidegger’s threefold characterization seems indebted to Schelling’s views on the *Abgrund* and the *Ungrund*. See Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, pp. 34-46. For a comparison of Schelling’s depiction of the *Ungrund* as the absolute indifference and the Habad depiction of the infinite, see Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 101-102, 343 n. 198.”

It must also be noted that in clarifying and expanding upon his hermeneutical assumptions and understanding of systemicity, Wolfson is here again implicitly refuting his critics who persist in accusing him of holding views that he does not in fact hold. As he put it in an earlier essay, “By identifying a principal hermeneutic of the esoteric in kabbalistic thought along these [poetic] lines does not mean that I am of the view that kabbalists have uniformly affirmed a monolithic perspective on this question [of hermeneutics] or that I subscribe to an essentialist [ontotheological] stance. The essence I have identified, contrary to the erroneous and misleading charges that have been leveled against me, precludes an essentialism, since the essence of the secret essentiality is to have no essence that could be divulged except as the essence that is hidden. If the secret is delineated as a means to comprehend the incomprehensible, a point I have emphasized time and again, then by definition there cannot be a singular decoding of the secret; heterogeneity is part and parcel of the homogeneity. Moreover, I have readily acknowledged that there is a spectrum of classical kabbalistic literature extending from the conservative pole to one that is innovative. However, as I have also argued, this contrast, if treated antinomically, is not a reliable portrayal of the complex hermeneutical interplay that informed the orientation of the kabbalists. Some kabbalists privileged the rhetoric of conservatism to the rhetoric of innovation, but even these kabbalists would have maintained that the extension of the tradition is itself part of the perpetuation of tradition, just as the perpetuation of the tradition is part of its extension. In the domain of esotericism, it is especially naïve to interpret pronouncements of authorial intent literally – whether they mask originality as replication or tender replication as originality – and not to see them as an integral part of the dissimulation of secrecy. Not only is there a double sense of the secret... [as] a deeply hidden matter whose transmission is confined to a small élite, but there is duplicity inherent to the very structure of secrecy to which the master of the secret is equally beholden: the secret is concealed in the unconcealment of its concealment, even, indeed

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especially, for the one to whom it is revealed.... Intrinsic to the secret is its inability to be exposed but as the secret that cannot be exposed – the more it is exposed, the more it remains hidden” (Elliot R. Wolfson, “Building a Sanctuary of the Heart: The Kabbalistic-Pietistic Teachings of Itamar Schwartz,” in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss [Beer-Sheva, Israel: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2011], p. 147-149.

In this context, it is also worth mentioning that on pp. 147-148 n. 24, Wolfson puts a finer point on his rebuttal and its justification by writing in part: “This misrepresentation of my work has been promoted chiefly by Moshe Idel in several of his writings.... Idel’s seemingly persistent need to criticize my scholarly vision on this basis fails to understand the dialectical nuances of my thinking. I have repeatedly stressed that it is precisely the preservation of tradition that facilitates innovation; novelty and repetition, in my opinion, are not polar opposites. Uniformity does not preclude multivocality; on the contrary, the former engenders the latter, and hence my delineation of essential structures does not mean I subscribe to an essentialism of a monochromatic, pansymbolic, harmonistic, or homogenous nature – these are some of the different pejorative expressions used by Idel to characterize my scholarship – that would level out differences. [Rather, it means that I subscribe to an] open system and a polychromatic essentialism [that I have elsewhere compared] to Rosenzweig’s notion of system and hermeneutic of diremptive temporality. Another useful analogue is the cosmological conception offered by process thinkers according to which we can still speak of a coherent world where all things are interrelated even though no underlying unifying principle is affirmed that would minimize the multiplicity of existence.”

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In his judgment, therefore, these esoteric depictions “can be applied to the ultimate reality identified by the Ḥabad masters as *ašmut or ein sof*, ‘the essence of the infinite light.’”¹⁰⁷ Wolfson elaborates:

The Heideggerian *Ereignis* as the appropriating event of language, the showing-saying of the unsayable through which the beings of the world are manifest in the occlusion of their being...provides a template to sketch the Ḥabad notion of the unnameable and unknowable essence that permeates and yet escapes all beings, the groundlessness above time and space that is the elemental ground of the temporal-spatial worlds, the pleromatic vacuum that is neither something nor nothing but the not-being that continually comes to be in the ephemeral shadow-play of becoming, the void wherein everything possible is actual because what is actual is nothing but the possible, the “sheltering-concealing” (*Verbergung*) wherein the real is what appears to be real, the clearing in relation to which being is no longer distinguishable from nothing, the matrix within which all beings are revealed and concealed in the nihilation (*Nichtung*) of their being.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, Wolfson observes, akin to the inceptual or contemplative thinking that Heidegger endeavors to model in his *Contributions*, Schneerson’s path progresses in a systematically unsystematic manner, moving not from one point to another, but, rather,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 45-46. As Wolfson notes, a similar analysis of the infinite in kabbalistic lore can be found in his *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 96-97, and *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream*, p. 247.

“much like a musical fugue, the different aspects are joined together compositionally into a polyphonic whole in which each ‘jointure’ (*Fuge*) intones the same sequence from a contrapuntal perspective.”¹⁰⁹ For this reason Wolfson is not averse to applying the term “system” to Schneerson’s thought, as long as it is understood in this Heideggerian sense of a structure that is “informed by the ‘rigor of jointure.’” Accordingly, in this view of systematicity, the coherence of the parts “does not imply absorption of difference in an all-encompassing and disembodied identity. The perception of totality that the structure might yield is a unity embodied in the multiplicity of existence at large, a one that is constantly being configured by the manifold. Meaning, accordingly, is not predetermined by the sense of the whole conferring essential characteristics on specific components, but rather by the striving on the part of all individual entities qua individual for reciprocity and interrelatedness; the viability of systematicity, therefore, is contingent on affirming a unity relentlessly in the making, an aggregate that is always subject to modification, a *universal singularity*” that is manifesting in ways both ever ancient and ever new.¹¹⁰

Applying this notion of universal singularity, “which could be embellished...by recent developments in contemporary physics and mathematics,” Wolfson goes on to say that “in Ḥabad the sense of the general systematicity is linked to the infinite light compressed in the density of the point that is neither differentiable nor nondifferentiable,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 48. This description can also be applied to Wolfson’s own path of poetic thinking.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 49-50. As Wolfson notes, he is borrowing the term “universal singularity” from Alan Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, ed. Peter Engelman, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 26-48. It is also worth mentioning that, on p. 49 n. 86, Wolfson notes the following: “An interesting expression of this idea can be found in Naḥman of Bratslav, *Liqqutei MoHaRaN*, Benei-Beraq 1972, 2:2, 4a-b. Naḥman explains that the incredulity that cannot be grasped by the human intellect (*sekhel ha-enoshi*) is not that the ‘simple unity’ (*aḥdut ha-pashut*) is the source of the fluctuating events (*pe ‘ulot mishtanot*), but that ‘the aspect of the fluctuating events produces the aspect of the simple unity’ (*behinat pe ‘ulot mishtanot na ‘aseh behinat aḥdut ha-pashut*). The conceptual point is illustrated by the example of the six weekdays and the Sabbath. As might be expected, Naḥman privileges the unity of Sabbath over the multiplicity of the weekdays, but he is to be given credit for affirming that the former is in some sense constructed from the latter.”

the point wherein simplicity is complexity and complexity simplicity, the *yod* that stands metonymically for the name YHVH, the ‘essential expansiveness of the essence, which comprises everything’ (*merhav ha-ašmi shel ha-ašmut she-hu kolel ha-kol*).” When viewed from this perspective, Wolfson continues, “there is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, for the infinite expanse is consolidated in an infinitesimal point that is above length, width, height, and depth, and thus the ‘essential expansiveness’ is identified as the ‘supreme constriction.’ The way to the (non)essence of the light of infinity is through the splintering of its rays into an indefinite multiplicity.”¹¹¹ This means that to properly apprehend the general or universal requires “constant revisioning of the particular through the agency of interpretation.”¹¹² Instructively, Wolfson points out that the example Schneerson uses to exemplify this paradoxical principle is that of “the teacher who bequeaths knowledge to the student by restraining his ideas, an act of limitation that, paradoxically, leads to the augmentation of details. In so doing, the teacher gains new depths of understanding, and thus there is an inversion of roles, for the student, in some respect, is instructing the teacher.”¹¹³ This being the case, the pedagogical relationship mimics or reflects the divine activity that is the continual process of creation, which in *Open Secret* Wolfson referred to as *apophatic incarnation*, the “constant renewal (*hithaddeshut*) of something from nothing to produce the generation (*hithawwut*) of something that is nothing, the same other that returns always as what has never been but as already other to the same.”¹¹⁴ As we have seen, and as Wolfson reiterates, this notion

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp. 52-53. Per Wolfson’s note, the interior quote concerning the “essential expansiveness” is from Menahem Mendel Schneerson’s *Torat Menahem: Hitwawa ‘aduyyot* 5718, vol. 3, Brooklyn 2002, p. 272.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 53-54.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹⁴ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 92-93. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 54.

of apophatic incarnation is “the nucleus of Schneerson’s messianic teaching,”¹¹⁵ which is to say, his understanding of deification. Thus to quote again from *Open Secret*:

To be messianically attuned is to perceive that the revelation of godliness in the cosmos is the highest disclosure, indeed the showing of the unshowing, the essence without form or figure. The façade of worldhood – or what is called nature (*teva*), which includes the physical and the metaphysical – provides the ontic condition that makes possible the epistemic awareness that all that exists is naught but a veil by which the infinite light beyond nature (*or ein sof lema ‘lah min ha-teva*) is manifest by being hidden. When viewed from this angle, the phenomenal world can be considered theophanic, it reveals the divine, but it can do so only by concealing it, since what it reveals is the concealed.¹¹⁶

Mamash and the Symbolic Nature of the Real

At this point in “Revealing and Re/veiling,” having expanded upon his hermeneutical assumptions and understanding of systematicity in order to clarify and defend his reading of Schneerson’s teaching about the Messiah/deification, which he has properly situated in the context of the Rebbe’s speculations on cosmology and temporality, Wolfson notes that another crucial element of that contextualization is his attempt to frame and

¹¹⁵ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 55.

¹¹⁶ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 98. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” pp. 55-56.

determine the latent meaning of Schneerson's messianic secret by establishing the import of the matter of "actuality" (*mammash*) in Habad sources.¹¹⁷

For Schneerson, he believes with good reason, "the decoding of the meaning of events that occur in the temporal-spatial arena is to be envisaged through the speculum of theosophic symbolism." That is to say, like the traditional kabbalists before him, Schneerson perceived this world to be "a mirror image of the sefirotic pleroma, which, in turn, is a mirror image of the Infinite that is beyond image," with the result that mundane matters here below cannot be properly understood without reference to their symbolic double above.¹¹⁸

Because of this, Wolfson borrows the language of Joseph Mali and argues that "the method best suited to study Schneerson is *mythistory*, that is, a historiography that recognizes the essential role that myth plays in the historical construction of personal and communal identities."¹¹⁹ To arrive at such a recognition requires that one abandon the standard opposition of myth and history so as to adopt a notion of what Mali – following James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* (who was riffing on the thought of Giambattista Vico) – refers to as an "ideareal history," that is, "a history in which the ideal becomes real because what people believe is what they actually live."¹²⁰ This notion of "ideareal" history, Wolfson avers, is an entirely suitable description of Schneerson's orientation: "what is real in history is what is perceived ideationally to be real – not in an idealist sense that would reduce the material to the ideal, but in a postidealism wherein the

¹¹⁷ Wolfson, "Revealing and Re/veiling," p. 56.

¹¹⁸ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 29. This passage is quoted more fully in a subsequent footnote.

¹¹⁹ Wolfson, "Revealing and Re/veiling," pp. 56-57; italics in original. Wolfson is here drawing on Joseph Mali's *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹²⁰ Joseph Mali's *Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 293.

transfigured materiality is construed mythopoeically as the true nature of reality.”¹²¹ Or in the sense of what Shaul Magid has referred to as the postmonotheistic vision of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, wherein the whole of reality is held to be essentially divine and we are recognized to be “nothing but different and developing dimensions of God, informing God about God.”¹²²

Indeed, according to Wolfson, this is the “ideareal” implication of Schneerson’s teaching that in the messianic state – in the nondual, metacognitive consciousness that is constitutive of deification – it will be, in Schneerson’s words, “discerned openly that nature is divinity,”¹²³ a cosmological perspective that, as we have seen, in *Open Secret* Wolfson described synonymously as *acosmic naturalism* or *apophatic panentheism/incarnation*, that is, “the perception of the nothingness disincarnate in the incarnation of the light of the infinite in the multiple forms of existence that constitute the world.”¹²⁴

Of course, Wolfson is right to point out that viewing historical events through the speculum of theosophic symbolism, as being “symbolic of the dynamic potencies in the divine pleroma,” is a basic tenet of the kabbalistic mindset from the Middle Ages. Indeed, as we saw in the first part of this dissertation, and as Wolfson himself attests, Henry Corbin suggested that the “conviction that to everything that is apparent, literal,

¹²¹ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 57. For a fuller explication of the hybrid term “ideareal,” see Mali, *Mythistory*, pp. 284-293. As also cited in Wolfson, *ibid*.

¹²² Shaul Magid, “Between Paradigm Shift Judaism and Neo-Hasidism: The New Metaphysics of Jewish Renewal” *Tikkun* 30:1 (Winter 2015), p. 61. See also chapter 6, pp. 31-32, of this dissertation.

¹²³ Schneerson, *Torat Menahem: Sefer ha-Ma’amarim Meluqat*, vol. 2, p. 100. As cited in Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 57. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 150. As he notes there, by way of contrasting the Habad view with Spinoza’s maxim “God or Nature” (*Deus sive Natura*), “the discernment that nature is divinity is based on preserving the identity of their nonidentity in the nonidentity of their identity... Ontologically, God is not reduced to nature nor nature to God; the one is the other in virtue of the one not being (an)other. Epistemologically, the cogitation of the extended can be imagined only from the standpoint of the externalization of the cogitated.”

¹²⁴ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 57. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 87-103.

external, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) there corresponds something hidden, spiritual, internal, esoteric (*bātin*) is...the central postulate of esoterism and of esoteric hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*).”¹²⁵ In light of this, Wolfson contends that “it is preposterous to think that the seventh Rebbe did not subscribe to this way of construing the concrete facts of history.” Consequently, he continues,

Why should we entertain the possibility that he would have affirmed a notion of facticity stripped of the sheath of metaphoricization?

Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians may be inclined to make this assumption, but in doing so, they run the risk of misconstruing the life and thought of this man. Conversely, to assume that the metaphorical factor is relevant in the scholar’s attempt to unravel the knots of Schneerson’s messianic understanding does not seem to me to be unreasonable or farfetched. In any event, the coincidence of the symbolic and the factual is the conceptual basis for my argument that the rhetoric of the personal Messiah serves as a signpost to lead one to a state of unification in which all individuation – including the individuated sense of the redeemer – is undermined.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969/1998), p. 78. On p. 57 of “Revealing and Re/veiling,” Wolfson cites the first edition of this text that is entitled simply *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*. The pagination is the same.

¹²⁶ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” pp. 57-58. Wolfson is here echoing what he wrote on p. 29 of *Open Secret*: “I am not oblivious to the fact that thousands of individuals affiliated with Lubavitch have no knowledge of or interest in the intricacies of the esoteric doctrines strewn about their Rebbe’s sermons, discourses, and epistles. The fact remains, nonetheless, that these doctrines were the bone and breath of his being. There is no conceptual ground to distinguish in Schneerson’s mind between social reality and its imaginal counterpart. On the contrary, given the impact on his way of thinking of the traditional kabbalistic perception of the physical world as a mirror image of the sefirotic pleroma, which, in turn, is a

In other words, the coincidence of seeming opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) is the conceptual basis for Wolfson's reading of Schneerson's "postmessianic" doctrine of deification.

Here we come back to the import of the matter of *mammash* or "actuality." For the coincidence of which Wolfson speaks is indicated idiomatically by this word in the Ḥabad lexicon which designates "that a specific term is to be understood in its kabbalistic signification."¹²⁷ But what does this mean? Wolfson explains that, following an exegetical strategy attested in older kabbalistic sources, including zoharic homilies, "the term denotes the hyperliteral [and paradoxical] confluence of the literal (*peshat*) and the symbolic (*sod*)."¹²⁸ Granted, as Wolfson acknowledges, "there are passages in Ḥabad literature where the terms *mashal* and *mammash* are ostensibly distinguished, the former connotes the symbolic or the figurative and the latter the literal or the actual." But this does not diminish the fact that "a more profound reading of the sources intimates that it is precisely the expression *mammash* that demarcates the convergence of the two, an

mirror image of the Infinite that is beyond image, why should one assume that for him mundane matters could be understood without their symbolic double? Why should one entertain the possibility that he would have affirmed a notion of facticity stripped of the sheath of metaphoricization? Under the influence of the modern discipline of anthropology, there has been a tendency on the part of some scholars of religion to distinguish elite and popular forms of pious devotion. It is surely reasonable to think of the social phenomenon of Ḥabad in these terms, but, from the standpoint of the seventh Rebbe, this is a pointless distinction. What one might consider popular religion – exemplified by the activities of members of his sect – is infused in his mind, his rhetoric, and his actions with mystical significance. Indeed, the performative effectiveness of his teaching was the ability to create a meditational space with his spoken words – even if they were not understood by the majority of his audience – and to relate the most convoluted kabbalistic matters to the basic acts and beliefs that define Jewish orthopraxy. In Schneerson's worldview, the meaning of events that transpire in history is to be ascertained through the prism of theosophic symbolism."

¹²⁷ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. 80.

¹²⁸ Wolfson, "Revealing and Re/veiling," p. 58.

exegetical point that mirrors the ontological homology between the upper and lower worlds,”¹²⁹ that is, the divine and human.

That this is so gets to the larger point that Wolfson attests is vital to comprehending the Habad perspective and his interpretation thereof. As he puts it, “there is no *mammash* that is not a *mashal*, and hence something is thought to be actually real when it is understood that the factual is figurative and the figurative factual.”¹³⁰ In other words, a deeper reading of the Habad literature reveals that what is claimed to be literally so without exaggeration and that which is concretely real are in reality (*mammash*!) two sides of one coin. Accordingly, Wolfson writes, “the semantic literalness suggested by the word *mammash* is connected to the sense of ontic tangibility, but the latter is determined by the symbolic domain to which actual events are correlated.” Put differently, *mammash* suggests that “the symbolic is, in fact, more tangible than the literal, or that the literal is actual to the extent that it concretizes the symbolic.” On this reading, therefore, if the logic of the Habad interpretation is taken to its subversive and paradoxical conclusion, the human being (and not just the Jew) is “literally divine,” since the soul is “of the same substance as God.” However, as Wolfson points out, “if the soul is consubstantial with the infinite, it cannot be designated literally a ‘part of God,’ because the infinite is incomposite. The force of *mammash* [thus] rhetorically performs the reversal that allows one to see that the literal is the figurative and the figurative literal, that substantiality is composed of what is deemed insubstantial from the empirical standpoint.” In this, “actuality consists of a transfiguration of the physical,” which

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

criterion Wolfson applies to Schneerson's use of the term *mammash* in conjunction with the Messiah.¹³¹

Hence, in Habad philosophy, "there is no objectivity that is not subject to symbolic confabulation." For, as Wolfson states, there is to life an "innate metaphoricity" that makes existence dreamlike – not illusory, but allusive insofar as it points beyond itself to an infinite and primordial truth that it mirrors and with which it is inextricably entwined. This insight into the innate metaphoricity of existence "derives from the depiction of Torah as the primordial parable (*meshal ha-qadmoni*), a mythopoeic trope that communicates the belief that the infinite light is materialized in the cloak of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which are contained in the name YHVH, the mystical essence of the Torah." Therefore, all that exists in the various worlds and their multiple dimensions is a coincidence of seeming opposites, "a manifestation of the light that is above all worlds, a manifestation that is simultaneously a masking – a point emphasized by the wordplay between *ha-olam* and *he'lem*, that is, the world is the concealment of the infinite because the infinite is revealed therein by being concealed."¹³² Thus, Wolfson continues,

Insofar as the Torah, the primordial [*kedumah*] parable or the parable of the primordial, is the image of that which has no image, it points to the convergence of the literal and the figurative: what is literally true is the figuration of that which has no figure, and thus human beings do not have the ability to grasp the actual divested of the metaphorical veneer. Even

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹³² Ibid., p. 61. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 26-27, 52, 58-65, 93, 103-114, 128-129, 132, 215, and 218. In addition to noting these correspondences, Wolfson also explicates some additional interesting analogies to Heidegger's thought that have been touched upon elsewhere.

the messianic promise – linked exegetically to Isaiah 30:20 and 40:5 – of the “disclosure of the essence of the infinite light without any garment” amounts to seeing that there is no seeing but through a garment, perceiving the metaphysical as it is manifest in the pretense of the physical, the paradox of the boundless and the bounded being identified as one and the same (*zaynen beli gevul un gevul eyn zakh*), the mystery referred to by the rabbinic depiction of the world as the place for the divine habitation (*dirah ba-tahtonim*), the spectral immanence of the invisible transcendence. Rather than viewing the world as illusionary, it should be seen as allusive: the corporeal points to the spiritual in a way analogous to the hermeneutical claim that the esoteric meaning of the scriptural text is accessible only through the guise of the exoteric meaning, the light of infinity deflected through the casein of the letters, which constitute the true nature of materiality. To be illumined messianically, therefore, entails seeing the veil unveiled as the veil, apprehending that the veil and the face behind the veil are the same in virtue of their difference.¹³³

Alternatively put, to be so illumined is to embrace what Stanley Romaine Hopper referred to as “the way of transfiguration”¹³⁴ that opens us to being fully in the world and

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 61-63. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 25-26, 75, 113, 115, 116-118, 122, 127, 129, 130-160, 175, 176, 178, 196, 212, 213, 274, and 319 n. 53. Per his notes on pp. 62 and 63 of “Revealing and Re/veiling,” Wolfson is here drawing primarily on Schneerson’s *Torat Menaḥem: Sefer ha-Ma’amarim Meluqat*, vol. 3, p. 333; *Liqqutei Siḥot* (Brooklyn 1999), 39:383 and 2:452; and *Torat Menaḥem: Hitwva’aduyyot 5717*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn 2001), p. 113.

¹³⁴ Stanley Romaine Hopper, “The Spiritual Implications of Modern Poetry,” in *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoiesis*, eds. R. Melvin Keiser and Tony Stoneburner (Louisville: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1992), p. 35. See also Keiser’s introduction to this volume, “Coming to Presence: The Artistry of Theopoiesis,” p. 1.

the presence of mystery by shattering our conceptual systems and expanding our vision of reality.

Redemption: Ascent to the Depths of the Heart and Messianic Consciousness

With the foregoing in mind, then, what is the understanding of redemption that Wolfson proffered in *Open Secret*? To borrow a resonant locution from the spiritual diary of a twentieth-century Christian monk and mystic, Henri Le Saux, the redemption Wolfson describes in *Open Secret* is paradoxically an “ascent to the depth of the heart.”¹³⁵ Or, as Wolfson attests, the core of his reconstruction is based on Schneerson’s view – which can be traced back to an oft-cited and highly influential passage from the fourth section in the *Iggeret ha-Qodesh* of Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1813), the founder of the Ḥabad school of Hasidism – “that messianism involves a spiritual transformation that results from the contemplation of the divine through an opening of the ‘interiority of the heart’ (*penimit ha-lev*), which is described further as the ‘inner point of the heart’ (*nequddat penimiyyut ha-lev*) or the ‘depth of the heart’ (*umqa de-libba*), the ‘illumination of the supernal wisdom [*he’arat hokhmah elyonah*] that is above understanding [*binah*] and knowledge [*da’at*],’ the ‘aspect of the spark of divinity [*nişoş elohut*] in each...soul.”¹³⁶

This is consistent with Schneerson’s persistent emphasis on “the spiritual task of the Messiah to reveal the ‘depth of the inwardness of the Torah,’ the disclosure of the

¹³⁵ See *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart: The Spiritual Diary (1948-1973) of Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom H. Le Saux)*, edited with an introduction and notes by Raimon Panikkar, translation by David Fleming and James Stuart (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998).

¹³⁶ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 63. As cited in Wolfson’s text, the last interior quotation reads in full: ‘the aspect of the spark of divinity [*nişoş elohut*] in each Jewish soul.’ However, consistent with my more inclusive creative (mis)reading of the Ḥabad tradition, I have chosen to emphasize the universal promise of this phrase via an ellipsis.

‘essential will’ (*has-raṣon ha-aṣmi*) that occasions an act of self-sacrifice (*mesirat nefesh*), the nullification of the inner self (*biṭṭul penimi*).”¹³⁷ The coming of the Messiah, therefore, essentially demands a purificatory – or, in a Christian theological register, self-emptying (*kenotic*) – ascent to the depth of the heart by which one comes to embody the supernal wisdom and truth “that God alone is the vitality of one’s life.”¹³⁸ Furthermore, as Wolfson observes, “This is the import of the aforementioned rabbinic idea that the Messiah comes when one is unaware, that is, the Messiah corresponds to ‘this love that is from the depth of the heart, verily from the inner point,’ the facet of the soul that is above knowledge. The coming of the Messiah is thus indicative of the ‘disclosure of the aspect of the universal inner point [*gilluy beḥinat nequddah penimit ha-kelalit*] and the exit of the *Shekhinah* from exile and captivity.’”¹³⁹

In a nutshell, therefore, according to Wolfson, this is the seventh Rebbe’s messianic message. It was and is an existential or experiential message that is meant to, in Wolfson’s words, “liberate the point of the interiority of the heart from the lowest depth (*omeq taḥat*) to the supreme height (*omeq rom*), from the state of constriction (*meṣar*) to the state of expansiveness (*merḥav*), or, as it is often referred to, the ‘essential expansiveness’ (*merḥav aṣmi*), a transition that occurs, like the act of repentance, ‘in one moment and in one second’ (*be-shā ‘ta ḥada u-ve-rig ‘a ḥada*), a temporal delineation that is ‘not dependent on time’ (*eino taluy bi-zeman*), a movement as swift ‘as a blink of the eye’ (*ke-heref ayin*) and therefore ‘above time and place’ (*lema ‘alah mi-zeman u-*

¹³⁷ Ibid. Per Wolfson’s notes, the interior quotations and corresponding parenthetical Hebrew transliterations are taken from Schneerson, *Reshimot*, sec. 9, 1:257; sec. 7, 1:190; and sec. 154, 4:454.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

¹³⁹ Ibid. Per Wolfson’s note, the interior quotations are from Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Amarim: Tanya*, pt. 4, sec. 4, 105a-b. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 51.

maqom).” The once and future redemption that is messianic consciousness “is thus demarcated as the ‘inheritance without bounds’ (*naḥalah beli meṣarim*).”¹⁴⁰

Therefore, to paraphrase the author of *Open Secret*, while exhorting the imminent coming of a personal Messiah plays an undeniably prominent role in Schneerson’s teaching (an obvious point with which Wolfson never quarreled), this was meant to foster the transmission of messianic consciousness. Or, in Wolfson’s own words, and according to his symbolic reading of “the overall hermeneutical scheme that informed Schneerson’s speculations on cosmology and temporality,”¹⁴¹ the messianic exhortations of the seventh Rebbe were meant to serve his various audiences “as the channel to assist in the psychic conversion from the extreme of abjection to the extreme of elation.”¹⁴²

Messianic Consciousness and Deification

The above discussion of the understanding of redemption that we find in Wolfson’s reading of Schneerson’s “postmessianic messianism” enables us to further discern the intimate relationship between messianic consciousness and deification. Indeed, when read together in light of the symbolic meaning of the Messiah that Wolfson has proposed in *Open Secret* and the two retrospective essays considered above (a meaning that “can be traced seamlessly from Shneur Zalman of Liadi to Menahem Mendel Schneerson”¹⁴³), messianic consciousness and deification are seen to be identical in their difference. Moreover, in light of the foregoing, we can see that there has begun to emerge a verbal picture of the phenomenology of this paradoxical mystical experience, one that invites

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 64-65. For the sources of the interior quotes, see nn. 137-143 on these pages for Wolfson’s extensive citations.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁴² Ibid., pp. 65-66.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 77.

closer inspection and promises to afford further insight into the nature of its “givenness”¹⁴⁴ and, hence, our own.

This being the case, and given the richness and complexity of Wolfson’s interpretation, it behooves us to ask: How exactly are messianic consciousness and deification identical in their difference (or different in their identity), and how do we experience them/it? We can begin to answer this question by noting that the core of Wolfson’s reconstruction is based on Schneerson’s persistent teaching that the critical dimension that links the redemption of the individual and the collective stems from a transpersonal state of consciousness that gives rise to authentic worship, “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), as it were. As Wolfson puts it, this is “a state of consciousness that is above knowledge, even above the interiority of the heart, and hence the worship, which brings about both types of redemption, is illustrative of a postrational or metacognitive gnosis.”¹⁴⁵ About the mode of worship appropriate to this conversion or *metanoia*,¹⁴⁶ Wolfson points out that in Habad literature it is “referred to as ‘skipping’ (*dillug*), the leap of consciousness that terminates in the ‘disclosure of essence’ (*gilluy ha-asmut*).”¹⁴⁷ “Perhaps,” he adds, “it would be more accurate to speak of *nonessence*, insofar as

¹⁴⁴ See Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 2-6.

¹⁴⁵ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 67. See also Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 412.

¹⁴⁶ A word of great significance in the Christian lexicon, *metanoia* (μετάνοια) derives from the ancient Greek words “meta” (μετά: meaning beyond or after) and “noeo” (νοεω: meaning perception, understanding, or mind), and can take on different meanings, depending on its context. In the context of Christianity’s contemplative, mystical, or esoteric tradition, *metanoia* is best defined as an alchemical transformation or transmutation of consciousness that is beyond the rational mind – a postrational *gnosis*, if you will, that returns one to the original state of union with God that is always already the case. This is the mystical sense in which *metanoia* can be understood to mean “conversion” or “repentance,” very similar to the kabbalistic notion of *teshuvah* that “entails the act of ‘restoring the soul to its source and root,’ an integration into the Infinite in which the dichotomies that are basic to the nomian standpoint of the Torah are overcome” (Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 181). Unfortunately, this radical meaning of *metanoia* has been largely ignored by the institutional church in favor of an interpretation that corresponds to its fundamental concern with upholding the inherently violent and warped doctrine of the atonement.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 66. See also Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 411.

essence, the light of infinity (*or ein sof*), denotes the event of presence that is always in excess of being present – and the consequent emancipation of self through the expiration of self. The heart is opened through the leap to the limitlessness of the (non)essence by delimiting itself and contracting to a point,¹⁴⁸ which is an act of self-emptying or letting go of self (*kenosis*) that “mimics the primal act of kenosis, the contraction of infinity [*tsimtsum*] that provokes the dissemination of light and the consequent manifestation of the nonmanifest in the realm of historical contingency.”¹⁴⁹

Hence, the Messiah represents “the contemplative attainment of a mental state that exceeds all limits and supersedes all differentiation.”¹⁵⁰ Put another way, redemption is the realization of nonduality.¹⁵¹ It is the “pneumatic enlightenment” that is itself “an acute form of messianic activism and not a deferment,”¹⁵² inasmuch as the changes in the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.; italics in original. See also Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 411.

¹⁴⁹ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Achronic Time, Messianic Expectation, and the Secret of the Leap in Habad,” in *Habad Hasidism: History, Thought, Image*, eds. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Press, 2016), p. 86.

¹⁵⁰ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 68. See also Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 412.

¹⁵¹ In this, nonduality is the “open secret” of reality. As in the Zohar and elsewhere, it is the deepest “secret of wisdom” (Zohar II:2a) that, in the words of Jay Michaelson, “despite appearances, all things, and all of us, are like ripples on a single pond, motes of a single sunbeam, the letters of a single word. The true reality of our existence is *Ein Sof*, infinite, and thus the sense of separate self that we all have – the notion that ‘you’ and ‘I’ are individuals with souls separate from the rest of the universe – is not ultimately true. The [sense of a separate or autonomous] self is a phenomenon, an illusion, a mirage.” Michaelson continues:

This view is called “nonduality” (“not-two”), and *it is found at the summit of nearly every mystical tradition in the world*. Nonduality does not mean we do not exist – but it does mean we don’t exist as we think we do. According to the nondual view, the phenomena, boundaries, and formations which constitute our world are fleeting, and empty of separate existence. For a moment, they appear, as patterns of gravity and momentum and force, like letters of the alphabet, momentarily arrayed into words – and then a moment later they are gone. In relative terms, things are exactly as they seem. But ultimately, everything is one – or, in theistic language, everything is God (*Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism* [Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2009], pp. 1-2); my emphasis.

¹⁵² Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 69. See also, Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 412.

historical plane to which it gives rise are not “supernatural events” but “external enactments of an internal transformation” of consciousness.¹⁵³

Conclusion

Thus let me conclude by saying that, according to Wolfson, Schneerson understands the actual coming of redemption or the personal Messiah in history symbolically as “a spiritual alteration in consciousness” that is related to the revelation of the innermost truth of the heart and, hence, “the eradication of the illusion that the self is ontically separate from the divine.”¹⁵⁴ In this “state of incorporation in the (non)essence, there is a ‘nullification of opposition,’ for opposites coincide in the indifferent oneness of infinity.”¹⁵⁵ The very point of the Messiah or redemption in Habad Hasidism, therefore, is to cultivate this nondual, nonegocentric consciousness. In other words, messianic consciousness “is about overcoming the individuated sense of self (*kelot ha-nefesh*) as an entity separate from the divine.”¹⁵⁶ It is about perceiving and helping others to perceive “the oneness embodied in the plurality of beings, a one that is constantly being configured by the manifold of creation”¹⁵⁷ – that “there is nothing that is real but the infinite emptiness that is the womb of all potential becoming.”¹⁵⁸ It is about dismantling

¹⁵³ Wolfson, “Open Secret in the Rearview Mirror,” p. 412.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 413-414. To be clear about what his emphasis on the symbolic nature of Schneerson’s understanding of redemption is meant to convey, Wolfson writes: “I do not allege that the symbolic cancels the factual, but I do maintain that the import of the latter is determined by the former” (p. 413). See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” pp. 75 and 70.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 414. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 75.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 415. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 77.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 416. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 83, where the locution is rendered a bit differently: “The seventh Rebbe viewed himself as the medium to fulfill the messianic objective of his predecessor by augmenting the circulation of this very message, to assist others in perceiving the oneness embodied in the plurality of beings, a unity determined by the indeterminacy of the indefinite specification and invariant variation that is the property of the *nihil* of creation.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 415. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” pp. 82-83.

the wall, removing “the mental obstacles that hinder one from discerning that ‘the reality of the world is divinity’ (*mesi ’ut ha-olam hu elohut*), that ‘the world and divinity are entirely one’ (*she-olam we-elohut hu kola had*),”¹⁵⁹ that this is always already the case.

It is about recognizing and increasingly realizing that messianic hope “hinges on the paradox of preparing for the onset of what has transpired, the *purely present future*, the future that is already present as the present that is always future, the *tomorrow that is now precisely because it is now tomorrow*”; that “this *now* is an occasion that can never take place, a (non)event that defies temporal location...because it presently is what has already been”;¹⁶⁰ that “[t]he futurity of waiting for the Messiah to appear is not a matter of chronoscopic time at all, but a mental state whereby and wherein one realizes that what is to come intermittently is already present perpetually”; that “[a]ll one needs to do is open the door, provided that one has heard the knock, or perhaps more profoundly, one will hear the knock only when one realizes that there is no door but the one we have built in our minds.”¹⁶¹ In short, messianic consciousness is about deification; indeed, it *is* deification: “the impossible possible, that which is possible because it is impossible.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 416. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 94.

¹⁶⁰ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 277. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 84, where he cites this same passage.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 417-418; italics in original (see also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” pp. 95-96, and *Open Secret*, p. 286). Again, this is an excellent expression of the contemplative, mystical, or gnostic truth that the early Christian desert monastics sought to communicate in their notion of “the renewal of all things” (*apokatastasis panton*), which is the truth of deification (see above). As Wolfson notes here, it is of interest to consider the following exchange between Jesus and his disciples according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, logion 51, “His disciples said to him, ‘When will the dead rest, and when will the new world come?’ He said to them, ‘What you look for has come, but you have not perceived it’” (April D. DeConick, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation with a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel* [London: T&T Clark, 2006], 182). See *ibid.*, logion 113: “His disciples said to him, ‘When will the Kingdom come?’ ‘It will not come by waiting. It will not be said ‘Look! Here it is!’ or ‘Look! There it is!’ Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out over the earth, but people do not see it’” (295).

¹⁶² Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 87.

In/conclusion: Toward a Twenty-first Century Mystical Anthropology

Where's my home? Where I and you can't stay.
Where's the end to where I must go?
Where no end is. Where should I go?
Beyond God, into a desert.

Angelus Silesius¹

We began our exploration with the first of two fundamental questions: What is *theosis* or deification? With the help of Henry Corbin and Elliot Wolfson, we have arrived at a cross-cultural and comparative answer to this question that is rooted in the notion of the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) or nonduality.²

¹ Angelus Silesius, *Becoming God: 108 Epigrams from The Cherubic Pilgrim by Angelus Silesius*, translated by Andrew Harvey (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2019), p. 107.

² Again, to be clear, following Raimon Panikkar, and consistent with Wolfson's usage, I understand the term "nonduality" and/or "nondual" to be a metaphysical expression for the irreducibility of reality to either pure unity (monism) or mere duality (dualism), which many religions have elaborated philosophically. We see this, for example, in Hinduism's notion of *advaita* or not-twoness and Christianity's trinitarian notion of the *perichoresis* or mutual indwelling of the real. As such, according to Panikkar, nonduality denotes the unity-in-diversity or the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) that mediates between, or transcends and includes, unity and duality. It is the paradoxical relationship between the two that simultaneously denies and affirms them both. Because of this, and because nonduality or the notion of "not-twoness" has too often been simplistically and erroneously equated with or reduced to pure monism, Panikkar's interreligious understanding of nonduality (his nondual trinitarianism or trinitarian nondualism) explicitly affirms the paradoxical co-relationality that is at the heart of the cross-cultural nondual insight. Thus, when properly understood, nonduality connotes that "Reality is neither monistic nor dualistic, but advaitic, trinitarian, and vital, that is, pluralistic (although) without separation" (Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype* [New York: Seabury Press, 1982], p. 56). In other words, "Everything is related to everything but without monistic identity and dualistic separation" (Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010], p. 404). This makes no sense rationally, but that is because the cross-cultural nondual intuition is pointing to a mystical reality that is outside the rational order, that transcends and includes rationality. Which is to say that the notion of nonduality simultaneously affirms and denies that "reality is one" and "reality is two" precisely because it discovers that the real or Being is not reducible to rationality; that there is at the heart of existence a great secret that "is impenetrable to rational consciousness" (Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, p. 218) alone.

For this reason, as I noted in the last chapter, nonduality is the "open secret" of reality. As in the Zohar and elsewhere, it is the deepest "secret of wisdom" (Zohar II:2a) that, in the words of Jay Michaelson, "despite appearances, all things, and all of us, are like ripples on a single pond, motes of a single sunbeam, the letters of a single word. The true reality of our existence is *Ein Sof*, infinite, and thus the sense of separate self that we all have – the notion that 'you' and 'I' are individuals with souls separate from the rest of the universe – is not ultimately true. The [sense of a separate or autonomous] self is a phenomenon, an illusion, a mirage." Michaelson continues:

Accordingly, we have seen that deification or “messianic consciousness” is an experience of mystical union – a paradoxical transformation of consciousness – through, with, and in which we openly discern that “nature is divinity”³ and we know ourselves to be “nothing but different and developing dimensions of God, informing God about God.”⁴ Consequently, we are now in a position to bring this dissertation to an indeterminate

This view is called “nonduality” (“not-two”), and *it is found at the summit of nearly every mystical tradition in the world*. Nonduality does not mean we do not exist – but it does mean we don’t exist as we think we do. According to the nondual view, the phenomena, boundaries, and formations which constitute our world are fleeting, and empty of separate existence. For a moment, they appear, as patterns of gravity and momentum and force, like letters of the alphabet, momentarily arrayed into words – and then a moment later they are gone. In relative terms, things are exactly as they seem. But ultimately, everything is one – or, in theistic language, everything is God (*Everything is God: The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism* [Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2009], pp. 1-2); my emphasis.

And, again, as we have seen, it is precisely the open secret of nonduality that is at the heart of Corbin’s understanding of panentheism or theomonism and Wolfson’s notion of apophatic pantheism, both of which find a vivid corollary in Panikkar’s nondual trinitarianism. Accordingly, in their own unique ways, all three thinkers subscribe to a form of nondual ontology (and epistemology/anthropology) that posits a transcendently immanent source as the paradoxical ground of reality. This ever mysterious and dynamic nondual source is, in the words of Rowan Williams, “inexhaustibly generative and *always* generative, from which arises form and determination, ‘being’ in the sense of what can be concretely perceived and engaged with.” This form itself “is never exhausted, never limited by this or that specific realization, but is constantly being realized in the flux of active life that equally springs out from the source of all.” Thus, between form and life there is unceasing interaction, and the nondual groundless ground of all that is “does not and cannot exhaust itself simply in producing shape and structure; it also produces that which dissolves and re-forms all structures in endless and undetermined movement, in such a way that form itself is not absolutized but always turned back toward the primal reality of the source” of which it is a real symbol or incarnation. Consequently, as we have seen, according to such a nondual ontology, this means that while unity and diversity matter absolutely neither one can be absolutized apart from the other since they are ontologically inseparable and complementary: unity-in-diversity. Hence, to say that ultimately everything is one – or, in theistic language, everything is God – is to say that the nondual source of reality is always already “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28), that it paradoxically transcends and includes all that is. And, as Williams states, this means that “[t]he variety of the world’s forms as experienced by human minds does not conceal an absolute oneness to which perceptible difference is completely irrelevant. If there is a unifying structure, it does not exist and cannot be seen independently of the actual movement and development of differentiation, the story of life-forms growing and changing” (Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998], pp. 3 and 4; emphasis in original. This is a perceptive essay on Panikkar’s thought.).

³ Schneerson, *Torat Menaḥem: Sefer ha-Ma’amarim Meluqaṭ*, vol. 2, p. 100. As cited in Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 57. Again, see also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 150, where, by way of contrasting the Habad view with Spinoza’s maxim “God or Nature” (*Deus sive Natura*), he notes that “the discernment that nature is divinity is based on preserving the identity of their nonidentity in the nonidentity of their identity... Ontologically, God is not reduced to nature nor nature to God; the one is the other in virtue of the one not being (an)other. Epistemologically, the cogitation of the extended can be imagined only from the standpoint of the externalization of the cogitated.”

⁴ Shaul Magid, “Between Paradigm Shift Judaism and Neo-Hasidism: The New Metaphysics of Jewish Renewal” *Tikkun* 30:1 (Winter 2015), p. 61. See also chapter 6, pp. 31-32, of this dissertation.

close by addressing the second question with which it is primarily concerned: What are some of the anthropological lessons to be learned from our exploration of the notion of deification? To answer this question, we turn once again to the work of Wolfson, whose insights are the most significant and relevant to our inquiry.

As Wolfson observes in reflecting on the postmessianic secret of Menahem Mendel Schneerson, which is the open secret of deification, a corollary to the metaconscious abrogation or death of the egoistic self on the anthropological-psychological plane “is the surmounting of the theistic portrayal of the infinite in anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms.”⁵ After noting how the Habad-Lubavitch masters describe the premessianic epoch or experience as being one in which the human being is “obligated to confabulate the divine in the image of a human” – which obligation is the basis for “the scriptural-rabbinic monotheism as well as the intricate theopoetic constellations of the imaginal body of God in kabbalistic theosophy, and especially the *parşufim* [faces] enunciated in the Idrot sections of the zoharic anthology and developed further in Lurianic kabbalah” – Wolfson goes on to point out that “the final station – not chronologically but conceptually – on the mystical path is to venture beyond these representations to the aspect of the not-human, the anthropos beyond dimensions associated with the Messiah, whose root is in the essence of the infinite light, the pneumatic level of *yehidah*, which is above the aspect of the human.”⁶ He continues, elucidating the paradoxical phenomenology of this station:

⁵ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” pp. 77-78.

⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

The quietistic divestiture [and revelation] of self by which the human becomes divine corresponds to the ridding of the imagination of images that configure the divine as human. The configuration of the disfigured gives way to the disfiguration of the configured. Messianic enlightenment [read: deification] leads to an atheological showing, the appearance of the inapparent, which is to say, not simply the surfacing of something previously imperceptible, but rather the appearance of nonappearance as such, the inherently inapparent that resides in and facilitates the appearing of all things apparent, the unconcealment of the concealment that has been concealed as the unconcealment in the (dis)semblance of the array of images that inform traditional theistic beliefs and practices.⁷

Put differently, the atheological showing of our divine-humanity is, in the words of Timothy Morton, a revelation of “the weird presence of nothingness” which is the “queer proximity of the uncanny within one’s experience.”⁸ And the unconcealment of this deifying truth – of the inherently inapparent abyss, the uncanny meontic nothingness or queer emptiness that is the inessential essence of all existence (divinity by any other name) – is the groundless ground in which is rooted the growing awareness that we can only ever be an unfathomable mystery to ourselves; that we are actually more than we can ever hope to imagine.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 78-80.

⁸ Marcus Boon, Eric Cazdyn, and Timothy Morton, *Nothing: Three Inquiries in Buddhism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 18. The title of the chapter authored by Morton is “Buddhaphobia: Nothingness and the Fear of Things.”

Thus, to paraphrase both Wolfson and the fifteenth-century German philosopher, theologian, and mystic proponent of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, Nicholas of Cusa, to discern that God is not-human is to discern that the human is not-God and, paradoxically, that the human and God are *non aliud* or not-other. Hence, Wolfson writes, in discerning this mutual or reciprocal nonduality, “one undoes the double bind of anthropomorphism and theomorphism.”⁹

Indeed, according to Wolfson, the undoing of this theomaniacal knot is the intent behind the repeated kabbalistic emphasis on the ideal visualization of the essence without any garment: “to see with no veil is to see that there is no seeing without a veil, but it is precisely through this (not)seeing that there is nothing to be seen that the mind lets go of the fanciful urge to posit a face beyond the veil.”¹⁰ Ultimately, therefore, “what one sees is the nothing that is the veil of being.”¹¹ That is to say, one realizes that the finite world is the concomitant concealment and disclosure of infinity.¹² Accordingly, redemption or messianic consciousness or deification is characterized “as the collapse of antinomies, conveyed in the Ḥabad lexicon as *zeh le’ummat zeh*, ‘this corresponding to this.’”¹³ Hence, as has been argued, the unconcealment of this truth – the disclosure of this correspondence – the revelation of the infinite light through, with, in, and as the finite world of discrete multiplicity – “is what signals the days of the Messiah.”¹⁴

In other words, to experience redemption, to live in “the days of the Messiah,” to be deified, to realize mystical union, is to know with a metacognitive *gnosis* the open

⁹ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 80. I would add that in discerning the nondual interpenetration of divinity, humanity, and the world one also undoes the knot of theomania that Wolfson advocates overcoming in *Giving Beyond the Gift*.

¹⁰ Ibid. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 245.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 109-114. See also Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 81 n. 206.

¹³ Ibid., p. 246.

¹⁴ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 82. See also Wolfson, *Open Secret*, pp. 123 and 126.

secret that there is naught but divinity, that “God alone is the vitality of one’s life.”¹⁵ It is to perceive with the eye of spirit or nondual consciousness that the multiple forms of spatiotemporal reality are in essence consubstantial with and hence revelations of God. It is to know directly and to embody the paradoxical truth that the veil as veil simultaneously conceals and reveals the divine nature of reality.

The intimate connection, therefore, that the Habad masters posit between the contemplative ideal of mystical union (*devequt*)/messianic consciousness/deification and nullification or annihilation (*bittul*) reveals a paradoxical or nondual notion of divine and human selfhood. In the experience of *unio mystica*/deification/messianic enlightenment that is the obliteration of all particularity, including the particularity of the obliteration of particularity, that is the annihilation of annihilation or the apophysis of apophysis, the difference between human and divine, finite and infinite, time and eternity collapses, not, however, through the demolition of the world’s particularity, the sublation of human finitude, and “the annulment of time in the face of a timeless infinity,” but rather through “an opening that allows one to see the world as the manifestation of the [indeterminate] essence that is concealed, a revealing of the veil as veil.”¹⁶

Thus, again paradoxically, the annihilation of existence is the detection of the inherent divinity of existence. To experience the annihilation of divine and human selfhood in the deifying light¹⁷ of mystical union therefore is to perceive “the oneness

¹⁵ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 64.

¹⁶ Wolfson, *Open Secret*, p. 126.

¹⁷ I am here alluding to the following passage from *The Rule of St. Benedict*, which is the one instance in this document where Benedict of Nursia explicitly uses a Latin term associated with the doctrine of deification: “Open our eyes to the deifying light [*apertis oculis nostris ad deificum lumen*] and attune our ears to hear the divine voice [*attonitis auribus audiamus, divina...vox*] that admonishes us, daily crying out: *Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts* [Ps 95:7-8]. And again, *You who have ears to hear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches* [Rv 2:7].” See Timothy Fry et al., *The Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), pp. 80 and 158. As Luke Dysinger notes, the translation of

embodied in the plurality of beings, a unity determined by the indeterminacy of the indefinite specification and invariant variation that is the property of the *nihil* of creation.”¹⁸

Of course, as Wolfson states in *Giving Beyond the Gift*, this *nihil* is nothing less than “the unnameable and unknowable essence that permeates and yet escapes all beings, or, translated in Heideggerian terms, the groundlessness above time and space that is the elemental ground of the temporal-spatial world, the pleromatic vacuum that is neither something nor nothing but the not-being that continually comes to be in the ephemeral shadow play of being, the void wherein everything possible is actual because what is actual is nothing but the possible, the sheltering-concealing wherein the real is what appears to be real, the clearing in relation to which being is no longer distinguishable from nothing, the matrix within which all beings are revealed and concealed in the nihilation of their being.”¹⁹ Therefore, the continual annihilation and creation (or death and resurrection) of existence is the moment by moment revelation of the divine matrix that always already contains, permeates, and manifests as the universe. And to detect this is to step outside of our everyday familiarity with life; it is to perceive the extraordinary true nature of the ordinary – what Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei refers to as “the

deificum lumen in this passage as “deifying light,” although accepted by some scholars and commentators, is debated. However, with Dysinger, I believe that the translation “deifying light,” which at least hints at a doctrine of *theosis*, is in fact defensible and – I would argue – to be preferred. For, as Dysinger observes, “The use of *deificus* in the sense of ‘deifying,’ rather than simply ‘divine,’ occurs in Latin texts employed by both Benedict and the [anonymous author of the Rule of the] Master, most notably in the first Latin version of the *Life of Anthony* where it is used numerous times in the sense of ‘rendering God-like.’” See Luke Dysinger, “Beholding Christ in the Other and in the Self: Deification in Benedict of Nursia and Gregory the Great,” in *Deification in the Latin Patristic Tradition*, ed. Jared Ortiz (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), pp. 256 and 257.

¹⁸ Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 83.

¹⁹ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. 197.

ecstatic quotidian,”²⁰ which encompasses paradoxical moments of simultaneous negation and affirmation associated with experiences of the fullness of the “void.”

In this, as Wolfson notes, Habad’s wisdom is reminiscent of that found in various other mystical traditions. An example that he cites is the saying of the Tang dynasty Chan master Qingyuan Weixin: “Before I studied Chan for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers as rivers. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it’s just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers.”²¹

Although Wolfson does not cite it, another example that comes to mind is the penetrating insight of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who in a commentarial sermon on the beginning of the Gospel of John (which itself is a commentary on the beginning of the Book of Genesis) unequivocally states, “God’s being is my life. If my life is God’s being, then God’s existence must be my existence and God’s is-ness is my is-ness, neither less nor more.” Eckhart knows that his bold assertion of humanity’s nondual identity with God (i.e., deification) may strike many of his hearers as provocative, so he inquires further into the paradoxical nature of this identity by asking: “Who are they who are thus equal [to God]?” Eckhart answers by commenting, “Those who are equal to nothing, they alone are equal to God.” Why? Because, he states, “The divine being is nothing.”²² Thus, according to Eckhart, God or “the divine being” is

²⁰ Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), p. 20.

²¹ See Wolfson, “Revealing and Re/veiling,” p. 83 n. 210. As Wolfson states, the quoted text is cited in Daniel S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 227.

²² Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. and trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), Sermon 6, p. 187.

“equal to nothing,” as is the soul. Daniel Barber elucidates well the significance of this assertion:

If God, like the soul, is equal to nothing, then nothing can no longer function within the conceptual division [or as a conceptual divider] between God and all other things. Nothing is “separated from” all distinction, including God’s. The connection of “equality to nothing” with “equality to God” thus precludes the assumption that we must see all other beings as nothing *in relation to* the being of God. It is not a matter of opposition between God and the becoming nothing of all other beings, for God too is equal to nothing. Equality to nothing is the soul’s condition for equality to God because equality to nothing likewise conditions God [i.e., if God is nothing then the soul is too by virtue of its being always already in God non-dualistically]; equality to nothing is not what brings the soul toward God, it is what the soul and God already have *in common*. The upshot of all this is that nothingness ceases to be that which must be “crossed” in order to reach God. Nothingness, as Eckhart articulates it, is not what separates us from God, it is what identifies us with God.²³

²³ Daniel Colucciello Barber, “Commentarial Nothingness,” in *Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary*, vol. 7: The Mystical Text, eds. Nicola Masciandaro and Eugene Thacker (Brooklyn, NY: The City University of New York, 2013), p. 51; italics in the original. As Barber goes on to note, Eckhart’s paradoxical notion of nondual or indistinct union between God and all other beings has significant theological implications. For, he writes, “what is said of Christ, if it is of any help at all, must be said of us in the same sense that it is said of Christ. It does not suffice to imagine oneself as affiliated to Christ in an extrinsic manner... What Christ brings is not something that can be applied to us from outside; Christ is not exterior to the self. In fact, Christ does not bring us anything at all, for to imagine such a scenario would be to imagine that Christ arrives for our gain, that Christ gives us something that we did not already have.”

Barber continues: “... So what, then, does Christ bring? Nothing. But if Christ does not bring us anything, then why should he be seen as having any significance? Eckhart has anticipated this question,

Barber thus shows that Eckhart's insight into "the ecstatic quotidian" is also an insight into the true nature of reality and hence our own identity: we are always already ontologically rooted in "the divine being" that is "equal to nothing" and therefore, like the rest of creation, we are in our deepest nondual essence divine.

What all of this suggests is that Wolfson's comparative reading of the wisdom of Habad yields a mystical anthropology that is not only postmessianic but post-subjective as well. That is to say, if we adopt the view briefly mentioned above, whereby, through perceiving the ecstatic or immanently self-transcending nature of quotidian reality, the whole is known to be – in Wolfson's words – "configured by the ever-evolving manifold of the components," the relationship of the self and the other is radically re-visioned in that the identity of the individual is revealed to be inherently communal. However, as Wolfson is quick to clarify, the latter communal nature of the self "is itself construed most authentically by the solitude of the individual."²⁴

This paradoxical notion, of course, is entirely consistent with the cross-cultural, nondual vision of reality that Wolfson has been intent on articulating. Which is important to keep in mind because, as we have seen, the nondual dynamic of which

which he phrases as follows: 'Since in this nature I have everything that Christ according to his humanity can attain, how is it that we exalt and honor Christ as our Lord and our God' [Sermon 5b]? He answers by redefining – quite substantively – the meaning of Christ's exaltation. Christ is not the mediator between an already distinguished God and humanity, he is instead a messenger who proclaims to humanity, and against humanity's divisive denials, that humanity and God are One... So why, once again, is Christ exalted? It is not because of what he brought but because of what he refused to divide, namely the equality with God that we already possessed. ["The blessedness he brought us was our own" (Sermon 5b).] What he brought us, then, was nothing" (pp. 61-62). But this nothing (or Nothing) is the very ground and essence of the human being as image of God; it is the ultimate "I" that cannot be known in its infinite knowability. Thus, in viewing the human self and all of creation from the divine perspective, Eckhart's apophatic account of Christ advocates a "knowing beyond the mind by knowing nothing" (Pseudo-Dionysius) that unsays and indeed obliterates the divisive denials upon which a rigid Christian orthodoxy is based. In this, Eckhart's radically paradoxical vision of reality opens the tradition to ever more expansive experiential horizons.

²⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mysticism and the Quest for Universal Subjectivity – Post-Subjective Subjectivity and the Contemplative Ideal in Habad," in *Jewish Spirituality and Social Transformation: Hasidism and Society*, ed. Philip Wexler (New York: Herder and Herder/Crossroad Publishing, 2019), p. 40

Wolfson speaks “is not to be envisioned in Hegelian terms as the dialectical sublation of the antinomical relation between the universal and particular, but rather in Heideggarian terms as the belonging-together of opposites in the sameness of their difference.”²⁵

Hence, in the mirror of Habad’s esoteric teaching that “the incomposite oneness of the inessential being of the essential nonbeing [i.e., *Ein Sof* or the Godhead] is comprehended through the multifaceted compossibility of becoming” – that the one “is ascertained not by the dissolution of difference in the boundlessness of indifference, but by the unlimited differentiation of that indifference in the world of plurality” – that infinity “is a one that is not one, the void-multiple, the multiple of multiples, wherein every part can be read as a metonymy for the whole as long as it is understood that the whole is a metonymy for the part”²⁶ – in the mirror of this teaching is the reflection of a post-subjective (or perhaps “trans-subjective” would be a better locution) subject who is fundamentally a meontological openness and relationality, a Whitmanesque coincidence of opposites that contains multitudes, like the universal source in which it is contained and of which it is an expression.

The mystical anthropology thus reflected is rooted in what Adam Afterman describes as “a fundamental ontological connection, an organic isomorphic extension, between the human individual and the Godhead.”²⁷ Alternatively put, to adapt the title of one of Wolfson’s books, “the luminal darkness” of divinity is simultaneously the infinite

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 43-44. This teaching strongly resonates with the trinitarian thought of such Christian mystics as Meister Eckhart, Jan Ruusbroec, Nicholas of Cusa, Jacob Boehme, and more recently, Raimon Panikkar and Catherine Keller.

²⁷ Adam Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson, ‘Self’ Workshop, Tel Aviv University, March 28, 2017,” p. 2, at https://www.academia.edu/37636398/Adam_Afterman_Response_to_Elliot_R._Wolfson_paper_presented_at_an_Interdisciplinary_Workshop_at_Tel_Aviv_University_Contextualizing_the_Self_Creating_and_Recreating_the_First_Person_Tel_Aviv_Israel_March_28_2017.

meontological root of God's self and the self of humanity. This view of the divine-human self is best encapsulated in Wolfson's own words, contained in the paper that he gave at an interdisciplinary workshop at Tel Aviv University in 2017 devoted to, per its title, "Contextualizing the Self: Creating and Recreating the First Person." There he wrote:

The nothingness of infinity to which the kabbalists allude is not a substance subject to the antinomy of existence and nonexistence, but rather the dynamic *event* of the immanent transcendence that is the transcendent immanence; that is, the event wherein transcendence and immanence are juxtaposed in the sameness of their difference prior to the division into transcendence and immanence dictated by the dyadic logic of traditional ontotheology.²⁸

This means that the meontic self, both divine and human, is ultimately beyond or outside the conventional metaphysical structure of traditional forms of theology, be they positive or negative.²⁹ Why? Because the traditional forms of theology are limited by the conventional dyadic logic of a metaphysical discourse that, in order to avoid any hint of pantheism, separates being/existence from nothingness/nonexistence so as to safeguard the infinite transcendence of a creator deity from the finite immanence of creation, identifying the former with the perfection of being (*ens realissimum*) and the latter with the imperfection of nothingness (*nihil*).

²⁸ Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Divine Self in Kabbalah," p. 16. As cited in Afterman, "Response to Elliot Wolfson," p. 3. The video of Wolfson's presentation can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHzRwf-SyEI>

²⁹ See Afterman, "Response to Elliot Wolfson," p. 3.

But, as Afterman observes, Wolfson offers an alternative discourse regarding the relationship between being and nothingness. As we have seen, his nondual third way of reading the kabbalistic notion of the Godhead (i.e., the divine self) yields a view of nothingness and being that refuses to abide by what Thomas Aquinas referred to as the “sacred principle of non-contradiction.” According to this view, the divine life – and hence the inner life of reality – is a mutual fecundation or coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*). Because of this, as the world’s mystical literatures attest, a dynamic interrelationship exists between unity and diversity, oneness and multiplicity, Godhead and God, nothingness and being, *ayin* and *yesh*, *nirvana* and *samsara*, emptiness and form. Indeed, this radical dynamism at the heart of reality that paradoxically is neither this nor that and both this and that at the same time is the groundless ground that “permits the very plurality and incommensurability of the world.”³⁰ It is what makes nothingness not the negation of being but its absence, in the sense of the space that makes existence possible. It is the womb that is prior to the birth of being, the emptiness or fullness of the void that surrounds and nurtures existence, the absence that only makes sense together with the presence of whose absence it is. There is not the one without the other; we may be able to distinguish between them, but they are not separable.³¹ They are, like the Godhead itself, nondual.

At this point, it should be unnecessary to repeat that this weird, mysterious, uncanny, paradoxical, dynamic, Möbius-strip-like aspect of the divine belongs to the whole of reality, so that it can be discovered everywhere and in everything. Again, in

³⁰ Beverly J. Lanzetta, “The Mystical Basis of Panikkar’s Thought,” in *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar*, ed. Joseph Prabhu (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 91.

³¹ See Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 314.

line with Wolfson's alternative kabbalistic discourse, this is possible because the whole of reality is inherently symbolic of its nondual source, of the *khora* or empty "placeless place from which everything that is derives,"³² which is a meontic nothing – "a nothing that is not absolutely nothing at all, but rather a shifty, misty 'something' that cannot be posited metaphysically as a thing,"³³ that is, as a separate entity that is statically itself in some ideal realm.

It is in this nondual sense, therefore, that ultimately being is nothing but a symbol of the divine – a finite manifestation of the infinite meontic womb of all that is. As such, the domain of the relative reflects and participates in an absolute source that, as Wolfson says in *Giving Beyond the Gift*, "does not signify an unknowable One but rather the manifold that is the pleromatic abyss at being's core, the negation devoid of the negation of its negation, a triple negativity, the emptiness of the fullness that is the fullness of the emptiness emptied of the emptiness of its emptiness."³⁴

Or, put differently, every being is what it is precisely because it is itself a symbolic manifestation of the fullness of the void, of that "unique [nondual] radicality inhering in all beings that brings it about that every being be what it is."³⁵ This pervasive and transcendently immanent radicality that continually empties itself out to manifest as the whole of reality that reflects its constitutive paradoxicality is the only dimension of divinity of which we can speak since it is who we most truly are. To discover this is to

³² Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 193.

³³ Timothy Morton, "The Oedipal Logic of Ecological Awareness," *Environmental Humanities* 1:1 (November 2012), p. 17. As Morton notes, this notion of the meontic nothing is derived from Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 188.

³⁴ Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift*, p. xxvii. Afterman also quotes Wolfson to this effect on pp. 3-4 of his "Response," but the citation is different.

³⁵ Raimundo (Raimon) Panikkar, *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 140.

discover that the self of God is not-other (*non aliud*) than my own deepest self and that of all “others.” It is to experience the ego melting into the self-emptying fullness of the creative abyss at being’s core, as “the illusion of mortal separation is revealed,”³⁶ and one is drawn to abide in the dwelling place of the paradoxical union that one always already is. But, to be clear, it is not a question of discovering “a Being that ‘dwells,’ as a more or less welcome guest or stranger, in the furthest depths of each being.”³⁷ No, the discovery in question is that every being is what it is precisely because it reflects and participates in the nondual relationality that is constitutive of being as such. This ultimate and primordial unity-in-diversity, this Heraclitean groundless ground of all that is (i.e., the divine), is the “something” that is “nothing” and the “nothing” that is “something” that “is intimate to each thing, and yet at the same time...transcendent, inasmuch as no thing really exhausts it, nor indeed all things together.”³⁸

In this conception, therefore, to speak of the divine or human self in terms of “something” or “nothing” is equally mistaken, since by virtue of its inherent nonduality the self is both because it is neither.³⁹ That is, in both cases (divine and human), the self’s being is being-not, its essence is non-essence. It is, in Wolfson’s words, a “being to which neither being nor nonbeing can be attributed, the being that is neither substantially existent nor totally nonexistent.”⁴⁰

According to this mystical anthropology, then, since humanity is ontologically rooted in the paradoxical abyss of the Godhead, the radical transformation or integration

³⁶ Beverly Lanzetta, *Path of the Heart: A Spiritual Guide to Divine Union* (San Diego: Blue Sapphire Books, 2015), p. 95.

³⁷ Panikkar, *The Silence of God*, p. 140.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” p. 4.

⁴⁰ Wolfson, “The Divine Self in Kabbalah,” p. 3. As cited in Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” p. 4.

associated with mystical union/*devequt*/deification/messianic consciousness involves the realization of our preexistent unity with the divine – that our core self is always already one with Ultimate Reality, the Divine Matrix. As such, in the language of Bracha Ettinger, we are inherently a “matrixial” subject,⁴¹ whose inessential essence is the ever concealed and manifest infinite Godhead. Consequently, as Afterman avers, our existence “is also to be understood as beyond being and non-being and as con-non-substantial with the Godhead itself.”⁴² Thus, like the Godhead, our self is at once incomprehensible and infinitely knowable.

Wolfson therefore provides us with what might be properly referred to as a “post-Habad” mystical anthropology, by which is meant that it “incorporates Habad themes and methodology, specifically the meontological conception of infinity found in Habad literature, while not being confined to classical Habad limitations.”⁴³ In light of this, we do well to ask how the transformation or transfiguration of mystical union – i.e., *devequt*, deification, or messianic consciousness – is to be understood experientially within such an anthropological context. Put differently, to paraphrase Afterman, if the self of divinity and the human self both are ultimately “nothingness,” then how is deification actually experienced? What does union with the meontological infinite mean phenomenologically?

⁴¹ See Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, edited and with an afterword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁴² Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” p. 4.

⁴³ Eugene Matanky, “Zalman Schachter-Shalomi: Dreaming Beyond Gender Essentialism,” pp. 2-3, at https://www.academia.edu/28501856/Zalman_Schachter_Shalomi_Dreaming_Beyond_Gender_Essentialism. “Post-Habad” is a term that Eugene Matanky uses to describe the thought of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. It is my contention that this term can be applied to Wolfson’s work as well insofar as it “incorporates Habad themes and methodology, specifically the meontological conception of infinity found in Habad literature, while not being confined to classical Habad limitations.”

As we have seen, the answer to this question is to be found in the timeless dance of linear circularity that is the reciprocal movement of *ayin* (nothing) and *yesh* (something) within the pleromatic abyss of *Ein Sof*, whereby the *yesh* is understood in Heideggerian terms as the “same other,” an original repetition of that which has always already been. And, as Afterman observes, in this transformed consciousness, “the *yesh* is reconfigured as the ultimate revelation (the ‘name’) of the ultimate concealment.”⁴⁴ However, as Wolfson has repeatedly argued, due to the “theophanic” (Corbin) nature of this concealment, “what is disclosed is the concealment [for] the concealment cannot be disclosed as concealment unless it is concealed.”⁴⁵

Thus phenomenologically speaking, the messianic consciousness of deification or mystical union (*devequt*) is simultaneously a (non)experience of cleaving to the nameless through, with, and in the name that we are. This is the esoteric sense of what it means to worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24); indeed, I would suggest that this is also the deepest meaning of the title that Abraham Joshua Heschel chose for the first book he ever published, a collection of poetry entitled *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*.⁴⁶ As Wolfson puts it, to experience the fullness of the void in the ultimate union of deification “is to cleave to the nameless; the only way to achieve that end, however, is through the union or realization of the human as the name which is a ladder” that can never be entirely disposed of because “the name is not only the means by which one ascends to the nameless; it is the investiture by which the nameless is declaimed and

⁴⁴ Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” pp. 4-5.

⁴⁵ Wolfson, “The Divine Self in Kabbalah,” p. 8. As cited in Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” p. 5.

⁴⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, translated from the Yiddish by Morton M. Leifman (New York: Continuum, 2004).

thereby remains inexpressible.”⁴⁷ It is, in other words, the finite garment that simultaneously conceals and reveals the nameless infinite. Just so, the human conceals and reveals the divine. As the “ladder” upon which divinity “ascends and descends” (Gen 28:12), we express the inexpressible. Our life is a seamless garment, continuous with the infinite.⁴⁸ We are the ineffable name of God.

According to Wolfson’s postmessianic, post-subjective, and post-Habad mystical anthropology, then, the phenomenological meaning of our constitutive oneness with the Godhead, the meontological infinite, the pleromatic abyss, the ultimate reality, the divine matrix, the unbounded wholeness, the absolute nothingness (call it what you will) is experienced in the timeless moment of deification, of union with the all-in-all, which is to paradoxically “transcend the binary model of union and communion (or name and nothingness)”⁴⁹ and to realize that our inessential essence, our core identity, our truest self is always already one with “God.” This is the process of deification, which is a transformation of consciousness, a becoming increasingly aware of one’s primordial identity with the divine and hence the ever mysterious and paradoxical nature of the self: “how the subject of thought and language finds itself always already constituted in relation to a term that conditions all thought and language while ever eluding their full or final capture in the presence of any experience.”⁵⁰ Put differently, this is the mystical process whereby I come to see myself not as a self-transparent master of the world but as an incomprehensible and hence infinitely knowable image of an incomprehensible and

⁴⁷ Wolfson, “The Divine Self in Kabbalah,” p. 5. As cited in Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” p. 5.

⁴⁸ See Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Prayer,” *Review of Religion* 9:2 (January 1945), p. 163, at <https://opensiddur.org/miscellanea/pedagogy/prayer-by-abraham-joshua-heschel-1945/>.

⁴⁹ Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” p. 6.

⁵⁰ Thomas A. Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 1.

infinitely knowable Mystery that becomes visible – as invisible – through, with, in, and as a world that is thoroughly “theophanic.”⁵¹

Note that when viewed in the comparative light of Wolfson’s imaginal gleanings from kabbalistic literature, deification or mystical union is seen to be an ongoing process of growth or evolution via the transformation of consciousness. It is not a state or stage of final enlightenment but an experience that continually unfolds and deepens as we do. As such, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, it is an unceasing journey of exploration, the paradoxical end of which is to arrive at the home we never left and to know the place for the first time.⁵²

In this, the path beyond the path that is mystical union or deification or messianic consciousness is as much epistemological as ontological. That is to say, to “become God” in this life means that, in the words of Miles Krassen, “our mode of being has to be rooted in a direct and intuitive Gnosis of Reality as Totality – the All that really is One; and other than which there IS no Other.”⁵³ Hence, what Zvi Ish-Shalom observes about his own Kedumah teaching is equally applicable to the infinitely mysterious and paradoxical process of deification: “on [this] path we go through an epistemological transformation to recognize what was, is, and always will be our deepest nature. You can say that it is a process whereby our epistemology is synced up with our ontology, and we

⁵¹ See Thomas A. Carlson, “Locating the Mystical Subject,” in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, eds. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, with an introduction by Jean-Luc Marion and an afterword by David Tracy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 207.

⁵² See T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” V.

⁵³ Miles Krassen, *Vanishing Path: How to Be While There Is Still Time*, ed. Aubrey L. Glazer (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2019), p. 210.

discover that ‘the end is embedded in the beginning and the beginning in the end’ [*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:7].”⁵⁴

This paradoxical journey of becoming what we are – of growing into God, as it were – is thus the process of returning (*teshuvah*) to “our original primordial nature, the nonconceptual source that is always already present in the here and now of our ordinary experience.”⁵⁵ It is the process of entering ever more fully into “the depths of the present moment, which effectively takes us to the end of time and to the always beginning timeless and dimensionless”⁵⁶ generative ground that is concomitantly hidden and revealed in and as all that is. As such, it is the journey of freedom that calls us to immerse ourselves in the divine nothingness, the vertiginous placeless place of mystical apperception where all is engendered from “the unification or incorporation in the indifferent oneness of the infinite, the nihilating nonground where nothing and something are conjoined, the space of utter annihilation in relation to which everything is affirmed in its negation and negated in its affirmation.”⁵⁷ It is to embrace the sublime and explosive secret that is hidden and revealed in the language of mystic and poet alike – the open secret that we are most deeply and truly the name of the unnameable and unknowable essence beyond essence “that permeates and yet escapes all beings, the groundlessness above time and space that is the elemental ground of the temporal-spatial world, the pleromatic vacuum that is neither something nor nothing, but the not-being that continually comes to be in the ephemeral shadow-play of being, the void wherein

⁵⁴ Zvi Ish-Shalom, “Mystical Reflections on the Primordial Torah,” *English Language Notes: Critical and Comparative Mysticism*, special issue editor, Nan Goodman, 56:1 (April 2018), p. 72.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵⁶ Zvi Ish-Shalom, “Original Face: Face(t)s of Totality Coming and Going,” in Miles Krassen, *Vanishing Path*, p. 216.

⁵⁷ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Afterword: To Pray After Praying/To Dance With No Feet,” in Aubrey L. Glazer, *Mystical Vertigo: Contemporary Kabbalistic Hebrew Poetry Dancing Over the Divide* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), p. 270.

everything possible is actual because what is actual is nothing but the possible, the sheltering-concealing wherein the real is what appears to be real, the clearing in relation to which being is no longer distinguishable from nothing, the matrix within which all beings are revealed and concealed in the nihilation of their being.”⁵⁸

Epistemically, this journey of freedom, this participatory and evolutionary ascent to the depth of the nondual heart of being, which correlates with the principle of totality or *Ein Sof*, is the realization of the truth that transcends and includes everything and nothing at all.⁵⁹ It is the non-binary perception that guides one contemplatively on the vanishing path that leads to the luminal darkness of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the place and no-place of mystical vertigo, “where limitlessness and limitedness intersect and collude in the identity of their (in)difference, where nothing becomes something and something nothing,”⁶⁰ where multiple and even contradictory truths interpenetrate and coexist in a spiraling round dance of creative mutuality. This awareness is the ever ancient and ever new dream of mystical union or deification or messianic consciousness.

Thus, when we view reality through this lens, all the forms of manifestation – both hidden and revealed – are seen to be the subtle facets of our own being. Or, as Ish-Shalom puts it, we come to see that, like a Torah scroll, “the human being is constituted by layers of conceptual narratives that can be deconstructed through contemplative inquiry, ultimately exposing the blank parchment that constitutes the primordial ground of our being,” that is, “the timeless...source of wisdom upon which new letters, words, narratives, and teachings are inscribed.”⁶¹ Indeed, according to this view, it cannot be

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Zvi Ish-Shalom, “Original Face,” p. 217.

⁶⁰ Wolfson, “Afterword: To Pray After Praying/To Dance With No Feet,” p. 271.

⁶¹ Ish-Shalom, “Original Face,” p. 216.

otherwise. For, as Afterman states in concluding his response to Wolfson, building on a quote from the latter:

[J]ust as “The self that is attributed to God by kabbalists is a screen through which one beholds the selfless invisible Godhead that effaces any and every anthropomorphic and anthropopathic personification, even the representation of the nonrepresentable” so too is the human self, the human name – a [unique] consciousness, a veil, through which union can be realized. However, not as a “final” state, not as a singular moment of absolute illumination or annihilation, but rather as a perpetual dynamism and therefore [it] is never fully realized, for the moment it is realized it begins again, but anew, the running and returning of *ratso va-shov*, which is itself the state of union, a union beyond union.⁶²

Of course, much more could be said to elaborate on this tantalizingly paradoxical point, and several additional passages from Corbin’s and Wolfson’s oeuvres could be adduced to this end (especially the latter’s).⁶³ However, we have already covered a considerable amount of ground in our exploration of their work (Wolfson’s in particular) and so must bring this study to a close, even as the open horizon of deification still

⁶² Afterman, “Response to Elliot Wolfson,” p. 6. Per Afterman, the quote is from p. 17 of Wolfson’s paper “The Divine Self in Kabbalah.”

⁶³ This is to say nothing of the wealth of resources to be found in the mystical literature of the Christian tradition that would support the point. A further exploration of how representative figures from this tradition conceived of deification is therefore a desideratum. Two works that do so explicitly in terms of nonduality are James Charlton’s *Non-Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne: A Theopoetic Reflection* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) and, by an “anonymous monk of the West,” *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism*, trans. Alvin Moore, Jr. and Marie Hansen (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004).

beckons. Therefore, what can be said in a summary fashion concerning our exploration of the poetics of deification? Alternatively, what are some of the conclusions that can be drawn from our ongoing investigation into the nondual and thereby deified nature of the mystic or apophatic subject?

Perhaps the best way to begin to answer this question is by foregrounding the importance of paradox since it is at the very heart of the mystical poetics of deification and the imaginal vision of reality that has been sketched in these pages. By definition, of course, paradox (or nonduality by any other name) is chaotic and disorienting in its relentless overturning of expectations and refusal to conform to rules. Instead of moving forward step by step in logical fashion, paradox proceeds intuitively by leaps and bounds. It recognizes the creative tension of opposites that are held simultaneously and thus upholds what is often regarded as contradictory and unbelievable, absurd and compelling, impossible but true.⁶⁴ In this, paradox both reflects and is constitutive of the imagination, the best definition of which is still that given by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his discussion of the ideal poet:

He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (*laxis effertur habenis*) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of

⁶⁴ See Miriam Therese Winter, *Paradoxology: Spirituality in a Quantum Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), pp. 8 and 16.

sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order...⁶⁵

Not surprisingly, Coleridge's poetic definition of the imagination echoes and recalls Corbin's paradoxical advocacy for a nondual ontology: "There must be no sacrifice of pluralism to monism, nor of unity to plurality; nor of oneness to duality, nor of twoness to unity."⁶⁶ This advocacy, of course, was born of his own reflection on the imaginal nature of reality as being inherently dialetheic and hence the locus of true contradictions that transgress the conceptual limits of ordinary thinking – that is, a thinking governed by the principle of non-contradiction and the logic of the excluded middle.⁶⁷ Moreover, inasmuch as it reflects the deepest nature of reality, it is also unsurprising that, for Corbin, paradox or nonduality is ultimately the key that unlocks

⁶⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, chap. 14, in *The Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald A. Stauffer, Modern Library College Editions (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 269. As cited in Leonora Leet, *The Kabbalah of the Soul: The Transformative Psychology and Practices of Jewish Mysticism* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2003), p. 162.

⁶⁶ Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, p. 202.

⁶⁷ In describing Corbin's vision of reality in terms of dialetheism or the view that true contradictions exist, I am availing myself of the work of Graham Priest. See in particular his book *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), especially pp. 3-4, where he provides a brief definition of dialtheism and a summary of his method. In this regard, I am following Wolfson who has also found Priest's notion of dialetheism to be useful in expressing the paradoxical logic of nonduality. See, for example, most recently Elliot R. Wolfson, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiēsis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), p. 48n10, where he acknowledges his debt to Priest: "My embrace of a logic of dialetheism to articulate thinking the unthinkable at the limits of thought and saying the unsayable at the limits of speech is indebted to the analysis of Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*." Wolfson then goes on to quote at length from the same pages that I have cited above.

what he referred to as the *harmonia Abrahamica* or the essential harmony of the Abrahamic faiths.⁶⁸

Thus, as has been argued in this study, to be increasingly attuned to the true nature of reality and the dialetheic heart of this essential harmony of the Abrahamic religions is to enter ever more profoundly into the transformation of consciousness that is deification, which in the mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the culmination of human and cosmic perfection. Indeed, as Leonora Leet has observed, throughout the history of these traditions (to say nothing of others such as Daoism, Kashmir Shaivism, Vajrayana Buddhism, or alchemy), “humanity has been understood to play a pivotal role in the perfection of the cosmos, transforming its original emanations of ever more materialized individuality into such purification of identity as can finally unite the finite with the infinite in the full realization of [divinity].”⁶⁹ That is, according to these mystical traditions, the microcosm of humanity is the imaginal body in which divinity or ultimate reality clothes itself, giving form to the formless.

Hence the existential vocation of humanity is to make deification real. It is, in Kripal’s words, to become “an author of the impossible...who knows that the Human is Two *and* One.”⁷⁰ That is to say, it is to realize our inherent oneness with the divine, “not losing [our] identity but expanding it so that [our] own perceptions become those of the

⁶⁸ In referring to the three monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam together as the “Abrahamic faiths” or “Abrahamic religions,” I am following Louis Massignon and Henry Corbin. I recognize, however, that the usefulness and appropriateness of this terminology has been questioned by some contemporary scholars. See, for example, Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶⁹ Leonora Leet, *The Kabbalah of the Soul: The Transformative Psychology and Practices of Jewish Mysticism* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2003), p. 1.

⁷⁰ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 270; emphasis in original.

whole and are experienced as such.”⁷¹ In this deification is actualizing our capacity for holiness, which is living in such a way that “the integration and embodiment of the divine-human...is woven into the fabric of daily life.”⁷² It is thus “the vital shift in consciousness needed to embrace the blessedness of creation, and to assist in the building of a more holy and peaceful Earth community.”⁷³ Or, put differently, deification is that transformational shift in consciousness which is rooted in and reflective of our transhistorical existence⁷⁴ as *homo mysticus*⁷⁵ that enables us to ever more fully share in the mysterious unfolding of life.

In/conclusion, therefore, this comparative study of deification has yielded a paradoxical or nondual mystical anthropology of the apophatic subject. As we have seen, this subject is our true self, the self of divinity that is closer to us than we are to ourselves: *interior intimo meo*, “more inward than my innermost self,” in the words of Augustine. To know this self is to know that divinity is the open secret of all that is, the

⁷¹ Leet, *The Kabbalah of the Soul*, p. 302.

⁷² Beverly Lanzetta, *The Monk Within: Embracing a Sacred Way of Life* (Sebastopol, CA: Blue Sapphire Books, 2018), p. 91.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 91-92.

⁷⁴ Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, edited with introduction by Scott Eastham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 132-133. Panikkar equates transhistorical existence with the cosmotheandric vocation and mystical awareness. “The cosmotheandric vocation is also a calling to the inner discovery of a lifestyle that is not exclusively historical. You do not postpone everything for the future, you do not become entangled in the world of means (always the irresistible temptation of technology). May I call this transhistorical consciousness, the mystical awareness? It is a consciousness which supersedes time – or rather which reaches the fullness of time, since the three times are simultaneously experienced. Then the whole universe holds together, then I am the contemporary of Christ as well as of Plato, the end of the world has already come, or rather is constantly coming...along with its beginning. Then my individuality touches everything and everybody and yet I *am* all the more: *aham brahman*.... And this is the paradox: I am all the more myself, my self, the more my ego has disappeared. I am then everybody and everything – but from a unique angle, so to speak” (emphasis in original).

⁷⁵ See Erich Neumann, “Mystical Man,” in *The Mystic Vision: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 375-415. See also José Faur, *Homo Mysticus: A Guide to Maimonides’s Guide for the Perplexed* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999). Faur takes the title of his book from Neumann’s essay. An equivalent term to *homo mysticus* would be *homo abyssus*. For a different but in some respects similar usage of this term, see Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Washington, D.C.: Humanum Academic Press, 2018).

true nature of all manifestation. It is to embrace the ongoing radical transformation of consciousness by which we discover the abiding enchantment of the world, and so come to realize that we are always already one with the love that moves the sun and other stars.⁷⁶ In this, to awaken to who we most truly are is to learn ever more profoundly the lesson Wolfson discerns in the poetry of Lissa Wolsak: that to experience oneself as one thing, all things, and no thing is “to stay on the path, to sojourn resolutely in the disclosure of the withdrawal, to wait interminably for what draws near incessantly, to traverse the immeasurable distance of the abiding-expanse, the horizon of being, the ‘place where the / curvature becomes infinite,’ where ‘fire is swung as / ipseity and light,’ and the ‘wrapped spark’ of love issues incandescently from the ‘depth of mercy.’”⁷⁷ This then is the mystical adventure, the poetic dream of deification: the wayless way, the path beyond the path, by which we reimagine the sacred and ourselves.

⁷⁶ See Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 33.145 at <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/paradiso/paradiso-33/>.

⁷⁷ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Dreaming the Dream of the Poem: Flattened Curves of Infinitivity,” in *The Poetic Front*, vol. 4 (2011), pp. 9-10. His quotations are from Lissa Wolsak’s *Squeezed Light: Collected Poems 1994-2005* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 2010), pp. 181, 193, and 196.

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