



EN ISLAM IRANIEN, ASPECTS SPIRITUELS ET PHILOSOPHIQUES

EN ISLAM IRANIEN, ASPECTS SPIRITUELS ET PHILOSOPHIQUES (4 vols., Paris, 1971-73), the magnum opus of Henry Corbin (q.v.), consisting of essays summarizing most of the major themes that defined his scholarly career and revealing his intellectual grasp of Persian philosophical thought. The four volumes are devoted respectively to the four distinct but parallel itineraries by which he believed himself to have found the way to the heart of Persian spirituality: Volume I to different aspects of Twelver Shi'ism, the phenomenon of the holy book, and the cycle of prophethood and *walāyat* (sainthood); Volume II to Šehāb-al-Dīn Sohrawardī and the Persian platonists; Volume III to theories of love and mystical lovers in the work of Rūzbehān Baqlī and the connections between Shi'ism and Sufism apparent in the works of Ḥaydar Āmolī, Šā'en-al-Dīn Torka Ešbahānī, and 'Alā-al-Dīn Semnānī; and Volume IV to the school of Isfahan, including Mīr Dāmād, Mollā Šadrā, and Qāzī Sa'īd Qomī, as well as the Shaikhi school, the twelfth imam, and chivalry in general, along with a general index (see below).

Summary of the work. The respective itineraries extend from the cycle of prophethood to the cycle of initiation, from the metamorphosis of essences to the theosophy of presence, from doctrinal exposition to visionary narrative, and from human love to divine love. None has priority over the others; rather



than succeeding one another in a process of historical development, they exist simultaneously and are entirely interchangeable: “[T]o pass from one dimension to another requires the perception of a consistent structure, of an isomorphism, in the same way that a melody can be produced at different pitches: Each time the melodic elements are different, but the structure is the same; it is the same melody, the same musical figure, the same gestalt” (*En Islam iranien* IV, p. 208). Four modes of expression correspond to these four itineraries: the prophetic mode (prophetic philosophy), the ontological mode, the narrative mode, and the erotic-mystical mode, identifiable also as faith, intellect, imagination, and the feelings of the heart. The inner guide on each journey is always appropriate to the mode of expression: the imam of the Shi’ite believer, the active intelligence of the philosopher, the angel of the visionary, the beloved of the lover. These four guides are the multiple avatars of a single archetype, and each thus determines not only the nature and mode of knowledge but also a genuine anthropological type and a specific mode of unveiling. For example, at the level of prophetic philosophy the inner guide is the archangel Gabriel for the prophet and the imam for the Shi’ite mystic, represented as anthropological types by the Prophet Moḥammad (the seal of the prophets) and his eschatological counterpart, the Twelfth Imam (the seal of the initiation cycle). The modes of knowledge corresponding to these two prophetic functions are revelation (*waḥy*) and the handing down of the Word (*tanzīl*) for the law-giving prophet, on one hand, and inspiration (*elhām*) and return of the Word to its source (*ta’wīl*) for the imam, on the other.

The inner guide in the philosophical mode is the active intelligence, and its identification with the angel of prophetic revelation is a capital fact of spiritual Islam. Without it there would have been no “prophetic philosophy” and no possible link between religion and the mysticism of love, philosophy, or the visionary narratives of the poets. Instead, there would have been a schism between faith and knowledge, between theology and philosophy; such a schism actually occurred in Western thought but was avoided in Persia, in Corbin’s view, thanks to the synthesis created by Sohrawardī. By incorporating the wisdom of the ancient Persians Sohrawardī provided the creative locus for an encounter between Persianism and Hellenism in the tradition of the *ešrāq* (illuminationists). Platonic ideals were clothed in the robes of the Persian archangels; Bahman (q.v.), the angel Gabriel, and the active intelligence became equivalent concepts. The anthropological type associated with this mode is Zoroaster/Plato, an identification made by Sohrawardī, but the transition from the metaphysics of essences to the philosophy of presence



postulated by Mollā Ṣadrā is the apotheosis of a philosophy approaching pure gnosis. The philosopher is thus assimilated to the pilgrim seeking God (*sālek*) and must achieve a synthesis of the two modes: His internal asceticism must never be devoid of philosophical meditation and the reverse. The metaphysics of essences professed by Fārābī (q.v.; d. 339/950) and Avicenna left the relationship between mystic and philosopher ambiguous; it fell to Mollā Ṣadrā to substitute for the primacy of being the idea of *esteḥzār* (to make present). As being is susceptible to intensification and weakening, the result is a perspective in which the intensifications of being encompass all degrees of existence. The metaphysics of existence terminates in a metaphysics of presence, which is also witnessing: “[T]he more intense the degree of presence, the more intense is the act of existing and therefore the more this existence consists of existing, the act of being, for what is beyond death” (*En Islam iranien* IV, p. 80).

According to Corbin, Sohrawardī went farther, however, picking up the torch of “eastern philosophy” from Avicenna (q.v. v). He introduced an entire cycle of narratives in which the return (*ta’wīl*) to hieratic figures drawn from the Avesta and the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī (d. 411/1020) made possible “the transition from the heroic epic to the mystical epic.” That is why the inner guide in the narrative mode of the mystical tales appears sometimes as the fabulous bird of Persian mythology (Sīmorǧ), sometimes as an ageless youth, and sometimes as the Mazdean angel Bahman. Their anthropological paradigm is Kay Kōsrow, guardian of the holy grail (*jām-e jam*) and perfect sage (theosophist, *ḥakīm-e mota’alleh*), the wise ruler characterized by both cosmic vision and epic deeds, one of the great ethical ideals of Persia in all periods.

In the erotic-mystical mode the gnostic function of guide for the mystical pilgrim is again assumed by the angel, this time in the guise of the beloved, Sophia. The anthropological type is Majnūn, the perfect lover and the mirror of God, who so thoroughly internalized his beloved Laylā that he could see nothing else but her. The beloved is a sort of image by which the world appears to him as if transfigured in the glow of beauty, from which it attains its mode of knowing, amphibology (Rūzbehān: *eltebās*); it is a chimera that simultaneously is and is not, a double meaning that unveils and veils at the same time. Words are shining paradoxes, for in the same way that divine beauty appears transfigured by the mirror of the lover’s heart, so the inexpressible or ineffable appears in the garb of paradoxes, all the more



disconcerting because they are “inspired,” that is, they issue from the very mystery of being.

Critical commentaries. Corbin has been particularly admired for his reassessment of Islamic philosophy, his emphasis on the Persian role in the development of Islamic thought, and his recognition that this development continued long after the Middle Ages. He has been criticized, however, for exaggerating the Persian substratum, treating Shi‘ism as pure esoterism, and failing to recognize its important legal and political aspects, even treating peripheral figures as central to its development (Algar).

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