ORIENTALISM IN REVERSE: HENRY CORBIN, IRANIAN PHILOSOPHY, AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE WEST

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the work of the seminal French Orientalist Henry Corbin (1903-1978) on Iranian philosophy and spirituality. As a member of both the European and Iranian academic elites, Corbin challenged traditional methods for the study of religion and constructed a provocative alternative methodology. Contrary to Edward Said’s model of the Orientalist encounter with the “East,” I maintain that Corbin’s construction of the “Iranian religion” undermined traditional “Western” theology, philosophy, and science. In collaboration with Iranian scholars, Corbin contributed to an emergent discourse of reverse orientalism, in which the “West” served as the imperial, cultural, and profane “other” to a sacred and traditional Iran. From the 1950s to 1978, Corbin met and influenced leading Iranian theologians, philosophers, and politicians. Through his connection with this powerful intellectual elite, Corbin institutionalized his alternative methodology and approach to the study of religion in Iranian universities. The origins of his new ontological method of religious study were deeply rooted in both the politics of his French-Protestant revivalism and Heideggerian phenomenological philosophy. Through his major works of Iranian history, Corbin relentlessly criticized “Western” theologians as material reductionists and agnostics. At the same time, he presented Iran as an alternative model of national spirituality for the “West.” This essentialized view of Iranian religion excluded more traditional Irano-Islamic modes of religion that emphasized morality, law, and the authority of the faqih or jurist. By locating the essence of Iranian religion within a gnosticism, and then casting this as eternal, Corbin lent his authority to state-sponsored neognostic Irano-Islamic philosophers, such as Seyyed Hussein Nasr, who undermined contemporary revolutionary Islamic innovators, such as Ali Shari’ati. Corbin’s work on Iran was representative of a French tradition of politically dissident philosopher/Orientalists, including Voltaire and
Comte de Gobineau, who utilized their study of the "Orient" to criticize the French political establishment.
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The late French Orientalist Henry Corbin (1903-1978) made a significant contribution to our understanding of Islamic philosophy, metaphysics, and mysticism. Corbin served as a key interlocutor among Western scholars from a variety of disciplines, but also Iranian philosophers and theologians. Corbin's considerable scholarly contributions continue to generate an intense debate in the field of the history of religions and, more specifically, Islamics and Iranology. Most recently, Steven Wasserstrom criticized Corbin and his two other contemporaneous colleagues in the history of religion, Gershom Scholem and Mircea Eliade, for their attempt to resurrect a more gnostic and individualistic form of religion from the materialistic world of the "fallen" nomothetic God of the Abrahamic religions.1 Within the field of Islamic studies, Corbin was also criticized by the renowned scholars, Hamid Algar and Charles Adams, for his unconvincing phenomenological methodology and essentialized vision of Islamic and Iranian history.2 While Corbin has many detractors, he has been staunchly defended by several Western scholars, including Hermann Landolt, and Iranian scholars Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Daryush Shayegan.3

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This project focuses on the contentious questions of how and why Corbin used Irano-Islamic philosophy and mysticism to critique Western theology, modernity, positivist science, rationalism, and Heideggerian nihilism. I contend that Corbin utilized his unique position as a prominent member of both the European and Iranian academic elite to challenge traditional methods of the history of religions and then sought to institutionalize a provocative alternative methodology.

Corbin’s scholarship can also provide critical insights into the fractious debate surrounding Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and the construction of a religious “other.” In contrast to Said’s model of the “Orientalist encounter” with the “East,” Corbin, in collaboration with Iranian scholars, contributed to an emergent discourse of reverse orientalism, in which the “West” served as the imperial, cultural, and profane “other” to a sacred and traditional Iran. Moreover, Corbin’s work on Iran was representative of the French tradition of dissident philosopher/Orientalists, including Voltaire and Comte de Gobineau, who utilized their unique philosophical perspectives in their respective studies of Iran and the “Orient” to criticize the French political establishment. Although this project focuses on an analysis of Corbin’s major published works of Iranian history, it is necessary to both situate and elucidate these complex works by examining them in the intellectual milieu in which they were produced. Often, in

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5 Mehrzad Boroujerdi defines reverse orientalism as: “a discourse used by oriental intellectuals and political elites to lay claim to, recapture, and finally appropriate their ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ identity. This self-appropriation is almost invariably presented as a counternarrative to Europe’s oriental narrative...First and foremost, orientalism in reverse uncritically embraces orientalism’s assumption of a fundamental ontological difference separating the natures, peoples, and cultures of the Orient and the Occident.” See Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996). 12. The term “reverse orientalism” was originally conceived of by Sadik al-Azm. See Sadik Yalal al-Azm, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse,” *Khamsin* 8 (1981): 5-26.

Corbin’s personal correspondences and lectures, he provided insight into the aforementioned works as well as his spiritual and political beliefs. Critically, the formation of his unique vision of Iranian history, and his alternative methodology to the study of religious history, must also be seen in the context of his French-Protestant background and educational experiences in Paris during the twentieth century inter-World War period.

What differentiated Corbin’s understanding of Islam and Iran from any of his contemporary Orientalists, with the possible exception of his mentor Louis Massignon, was his contention that the evolution of Islamic philosophy did not die with the twelfth-century Moorish philosopher Ibn Rushd or Avveroes. Rather it continued to flourish in greater Iran and Central Asia where philosophers and metaphysicians formed an unbroken chain of theosophy that combined Zoroastrian, neo-Platonic, and Islamic influences. In Corbin’s *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran* [SB], he argued that, following the Arab conquest of the Sasanian Empire and the putative extinction of Zoroastrian theosophy, Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi (b.1153), the “Shaikh al-Ishraq” (Master of Oriental Theosophy), and later Ishraqi philosophers, including Najm al-Kubra and Najim al-Semnani, produced a philosophical renaissance. These scholars reconstituted ancient Zoroastrian angelology combining it with Platonic “Forms” or “Ideas” under a new Islamic metaphysics of Light.7

Equally neglected by Western scholarship, according to Corbin, was the seventeenth century Shi’ite revival of philosophy and Ishraqi metaphysics led by Sadrudin Shirazi (d. 1640), known as Mulla Sadra. Finally, Corbin found traces of this philosophical tradition in the works of the nineteenth century metaphysicians Shaikh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i (d. 1826) and Shaikh Hajj Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmani (d.1871), two important Shaikhi scholars. In effect, Corbin saw a “pregressio harmonica” or harmonic progression in the thought of these Islamic scholars

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7 *SB*, 110. Terms capitalized by Corbin are also capitalized here.
which led him to the assertion that there was an Iranian spiritual essence that transcended different historical contexts.\(^8\)

Historical context was of little value to Corbin, but rather an illusion that could mislead or “veil” scholars from the true nature of religious phenomena. He asserted that Orientalists were so synchronically focused that they could not make the connection between ancient Zoroastrianism and Shi’ite Iranian thought despite the fact that “there are very few cultivated Iranians who are insensitive to this connection.”\(^9\) Ostensibly, what differentiated Corbin from many of his peers was his willingness to think diachronically and transcend what he perceived to be the rigid periodization of Iranian history into the Classical, Medieval, and Modern areas of study. Despite the contentious question of the historical validity of Corbin’s concept of the “Iranian essence,” it is remarkable that Corbin, who began his scholarly inquiry into Iranian Islamic thought as late as the 1940s, was the first major European scholar to consider seriously Shi‘ism as anything other than a minor sect in relation to an “orthodox” or mainstream Sunni tradition in Islam. Most impressively, Corbin demonstrated in his four volume magnum opus, *En Islam iranien*, that a centuries old, fecund, and astonishingly complex Shi’ite tradition of metaphysics had survived into present day Iran. Moreover, for Corbin, Iranian Shi’ite and Sufi gnosis provided a fertile ground for a reconsideration of the Western Christian and philosophical tradition.

The same iconoclastic urge that led Corbin to uncover the connection between ancient and modern Iranian metaphysics generated another revolutionary turn in Orientalist thought—that Iranian metaphysicians could provide critical insight into Christian eschatology and Christology. Corbin’s critical insight was evident in the prologue of *SB* where he both introduced the reader to Ishraqi philosophy and chided contemporary Christian eschatological thought. While the historicization of religion was “foreign” to the Sufis and “Spiritual Masters” of Islam, it was a

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\(^8\) Ibid., 51-52.
\(^9\) Ibid., 52.
key concession made by Christian theologians who attempted to “keep up with the times.” By sacrificing key eschatological concepts, such as the “resurrection of the dead,” to the pessimistic judgement of material historians, these theologians were accelerating the rapid decline and eventual loss of “spiritual meaning” in Christianity. Corbin lamented:

For in truth there has been a great destruction of hopes in the West, and there is no telling where this will end. Its most alarming symptom is the pious agnosticism that is paralyzing excellent minds and inspiring in them a panic terror before everything with the suspect aroma of “gnosis.”

In contrast to the laissez-faire pessimism of contemporary “Christianity,” mystical Iranian Islam did not postpone crucial eschatological issues, such as salvation until death. Instead, its proponents understood the need for a personal gnostic journey that would lead to a “resurrection of the soul” before a “resurrection of the body”. For Corbin, Iranian “Light” metaphysicians served and continue to serve as gnostic guides to personal salvation. Most importantly, he asserted that it was Ishraqi philosophers and not Christian theologians who held the hermeneutic key to understanding Christianity. Corbin’s critical assessment of Christianity was centred on the fundamental issue of Christology and the question of “who was Jesus?” To answer this question, Corbin turned towards the fourteenth century Iranian philosopher Semnani:

It is worth our while to listen attentively to this evaluation of Christianity as formulated by a Sufi. Semnani’s critique is made in the name of spiritual experience; everything takes place as though this Sufi master’s aim were to perfect the Christian ta’wil that is, ‘lead it back,’ to open the way at last to its ultimate truth.

On an exoteric level, Semnani maintained the traditional Qur’anic view that Jesus the prophet, although important, represented merely a stage in a long line of prophecy that began with Abraham and continued through to Muhammad. However, on the gnostic plain, Semnani

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10 SB, viii.
11 ML, 127.
contended that the prophets represented ascendant ontological stages or modes of being.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, he envisioned each prophetic stage resplendently shining with its own colour of light. The final stage of prophecy was Muhammad’s and its colour was emerald green. According to Semnani, to comprehend these stages of prophecy and see their colours required an extraordinary understanding of mystical phenomena or \textit{ta’wil}. To reach the Emerald stage required the ultimate form of \textit{ta’wil}, which would, in turn, require an ontological awakening, a change in the soul that would allow one to see, to know, or encounter one’s spiritual essence, one’s Angel. However, before reaching this final prophetic and ontological stage, one had to first ascend to the Black stage, the Jesus of one’s own being. After a long gnostic journey, one reaches this penultimate stage not to be rewarded but confronted with a possibly psycho-spiritually shattering event—the realization of what Corbin called the \textit{Deus absconditus} or the absence of God. In terms of Western philosophy and metaphysics, Corbin saw this Black stage as corresponding to Nietzsche’s famous aphorism concerning the death of the nomothetic God.\textsuperscript{13} Upon the realization of the “spiritual fact” that God is absent or seemingly unknowable, one can succumb to a feeling of profound psychological loss and experience a falling away from the spiritual into the material and the historical. Before further discussing the profoundly iconoclastic implications of Corbin’s assertion that Semnani anticipated Nietzsche’s metaphysical critique, it is necessary to return to Corbin’s critique of Christianity.

For Corbin, Semnani’s “Black light” was not nihilistic but revelatory and fundamental to our gnostic understanding of Christology. Although the inward gnostic journey led to a stage of total darkness, the Jesus of our being, this stage provided a critical counterpoint to the “Light” of

\textsuperscript{12} ML, 124-125.
\textsuperscript{13} Wasserstrom, 226.
Deus revelatus to the material and historical vision of Jesus as a man who died on the cross.\(^\text{14}\)

Corbin asserted that the “Black light” reveals the very secret of being, which can only be as made-to-be; all beings have a twofold face, a face of light and a black face. The luminous face, the face of day, is the only one that the common run of men perceives. Their black face, the one the mystic perceives, is their poverty. The totality of their being is their daylight face and their night face.\(^\text{15}\)

In effect, for Corbin, Christology was misdirected towards a dualistic and ultimately flawed study of Jesus in the material man or body of Jesus and in the form of the spirit or holy ghost as was conceived by the Council of 869.\(^\text{16}\) In short, for Corbin, there is no question of “demonstrating” or trying to answer historically the eschatological questions of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body because there is no material or rational proof.\(^\text{17}\) Corbin went further and saw the value of Christology and Christian eschatology as only revealed through gnostic hermeneutics or the \textit{ta ‘wil} of Semnani which was predicated on the transformation of one’s own soul or organ of perception. This raises the question of the nature and source of Corbin’s hermeneutics.

Critical to understanding the formation of Corbin’s unique hermeneutics is an examination of the French and Northern European intellectual milieu in which he was educated.

Corbin, born on April 14, 1903 in Paris, was the son of Henry Arthur Corbin, a wealthy businessman.\(^\text{18}\) His mother, Eugénie Fournier, died only ten days after his birth. There are few biographical sources concerning Corbin’s childhood and adolescence. He was raised in a minority Protestant \textit{haute-bourgeois} milieu and not the dominant French-Catholic context.

\(^{14}\) Corbin argues further that Semnani drew inspiration for his Christology from the Qur’anic verse “They did not kill him, they did not crucify him, they were taken in by the appearance; God carried him off towards himself (4:156).” \textit{ML}, 128.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 112-113.

\(^{16}\) Jacob Needleman, in “Foreword” to \textit{VM}, xxi.

\(^{17}\) \textit{SP}, viii.

Corbin’s strong Protestant background shaped his political and philosophical views during the 1930s.\(^\text{19}\) In the decade prior to his religious activism, Corbin began his post-secondary education in 1923 at the prestigious l’École pratique des hautes études of the Université de la Sorbonne. While at the École pratique, Corbin enrolled in classes taught by Étienne Gilson (b. 1884), the acclaimed professor of medieval religious history and philosophy.

During the inter-war period, Gilson was largely responsible for leading a French renaissance in the study of medieval Christian philosophy and, in particular, Catholic-Neo-Thomism. In his staunch defence of the metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas, Gilson challenged “modern philosophy” which he believed, since the time of Immanuel Kant and Auguste Comte, had been reduced to a material science.\(^\text{20}\) Upon succeeding his former mentor, Henri Bergson, as chair of medieval philosophy at the Collège de France, Gilson embarked on a program to revive Christian metaphysics in French and international academic institutions.\(^\text{21}\) Although Gilson was a Catholic revivalist, he provided Corbin with a philosophically powerful method of using medieval philosophical sources to critique modern Western civilization. Gilson’s revivalist political activism represented an important source or model that Corbin was to emulate later in Iran.

Gilson’s initial influence involved having Corbin translate and interpret numerous Latin and Greek texts which often included lengthy commentaries on Arab philosophers, such as Avicenna. Corbin’s affinity for Arabic philosophy resulted in Gilson instructing him to pursue his research interests at l’École des langues orientales. In 1925, Corbin studied Arabic, Persian,

\(^{19}\) Richard Stauffer, “Henry Corbin: théologien protestant”, in Henry Corbin, 189.


\(^{21}\) Gilson was both a prolific scholar and tireless administrator. Considered as one of the Académie-française’s “immortels,” he published over 600 articles and books largely centred on medieval Christian philosophy. He also played a crucial role in establishing Christian philosophical studies internationally. In Canada he founded the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto. For more on Gilson’s contribution to French philosophy, see Laurence K. Shook, Etienne Gilson (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984).
Turkish, and Sanskrit. Corbin first studied under the comparative philosopher, Emile Bréhier, who taught a course on Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy. While enrolled at l’École des langues orientales, Corbin received his diploma from l’École pratique des hautes études (1928) for his work on “Stoicism and Augustinianism in the thought of Louis of Leon.” Corbin graduated a year later from l’École des langues orientales with a diploma in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic languages. In April, 1929, Corbin was hired by the Bibliothèque nationale to work on the general catalogue. It was at the Bibliothèque nationale that Corbin began to work closely with the legendary Orientalist Louis Massignon. The magnetic appeal of Massignon as a teacher/mystic was evident when Corbin later wrote of his mentor:

On n’échappait pas à son influence. Son âme de feu, sa pénétration intrépide dans les arcanes de la vie mystique en Islam, où nul n’avait encore pénétré de cette façon, la noblesse de ses indignations devant les lâchetés de ce monde, tout cela marquait inévitablement de son empreinte l’esprit de ses jeunes auditeurs.

It also was Massignon who introduced Corbin to a lithographed copy of Suhrawardi’s Hikmat al-Ishraq (“Oriental Wisdom”). He continued to work with Massignon until 1930 when Corbin shifted his focus to Lutheran spirituality. Corbin claimed that his renewed interest in Protestant spirituality came after his contact with Jean Baruzi, the departmental chair of the History of Religions at the Collège de France. Corbin wrote, “c’est lui qui nous révéla la théologie du jeune Luther...puis les grands Spirituels du protestantisme.” In 1930, Corbin made a scholarly pilgrimage to Germany where he met and befriended an array of leading German and European intellectuals, including Rudolf Otto, Karl Löweth, Alexandre Kojevikoff, Bernard

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22 Shayegan, 16.
23 Jambet, “Reperes biographiques,” in Henry Corbin, 16.
25 Corbin, “Post-scriptum biographique,” 40.
26 Corbin, “Post-scriptum biographiques,” 41.
Groethuysen, André Malraux, Ernst Cassirer, Karl Jaspers, Karl Barth, and Georges Dumézil.\(^{27}\)

At the same time, Corbin became the president of the \textit{Fédération française des associations chrétiennes d'étudiants}. After returning a year later from Germany, Corbin, in collaboration with Denis de Rougemont, Ronald de Pury, and Albert-Marie Schmidt, founded and edited the French-Protestant journal \textit{Hic et Nunc}. In the manifesto of its first edition, the editors, drawing on the “neo-orthodox” views of Karl Barth,\(^{28}\) criticized “modern” theologians and philosophers:

\begin{quote}
En face d'une \textit{pensée religieuse}...[qui] trahit sa mission de scandale, et tente lâchement de réduire le divin au « subhumain », le transcendant au temporel...
En face des \textit{morales} du plus débilitants, asservies à la classe, à la race...
En face des \textit{philosophes} qui se moquent des hommes et voient même pas qu'ils n'ont plus de réponses à offrir...
En face d'une \textit{civilisation} de plus en plus soumise à ce Dieu imbécile...\(^{29}\)
\end{quote}

Corbin had thus begun his philosophical critique of Christian theologians who attempted to “reduce” Christianity to the subject of the material world.

During this period, Corbin travelled throughout Northern Europe, including Sweden, where he visited Georges Dumézil and his Iranologist mentor, Professor Henrik S. Nyberg. It was in Sweden, on the edge of Lake Siljian, that Corbin underwent a crucial “mystical experience.” Corbin recounted this experience in his mystical poem where he wrote “tout n'est que révélation”, where he described a vision in which nature (in the forms of an Angel, Earth, and Woman) spoke to him revealing that “Christ est né! Christ est ressuscité!”\(^{30}\) Following this “visionary” experience, Corbin, in 1933, wrote his first work on Suhrawardi entitled “Pour

\(^{27}\) Jambet, 16.

\(^{28}\) Karl Barth is widely considered to be the most significant Protestant theologian since Schleirmacher. Barth's objective was to transcend the schism between Protestantism and Catholicism that stemmed from the Reformation. By returning to a more “orthodox” interpretation of the Reformation, he attempted to shift Christian theology away from the ‘modernists’ preoccupation with the relation of God to humanity. He focused instead on the transcendance of God and railed against the reduction of God into the material, the worldly. For Barth, “God is God” and should remain “that which lies upon the other side.” Quoted in John Webster, \textit{Karl Barth} (New York: Continuum, 2000), 26.

\(^{29}\) Corbin, cited in Stauffer, 187.

l'anthropologie philosophique: un traité persan inédit de Suhrawardî d’Alep.”31 This period of Protestant activism and mysticism was evidently also inspired by his friendships with Baruzi and Barth. However, by the mid-1930s, Corbin turned away from his Protestant activism and returned to his original focus on broader philosophical issues. This shift occurred approximately in 1935 when Corbin returned to Germany to spend a year in residence at the Institut français de Berlin. In Berlin, he met and collaborated with Martin Heidegger on a French translation of the latter’s “Was Ist Metaphysiks?” (1938). Decades later, in a revealing and complex interview, Corbin reflected on how Heidegger’s phenomenological hermeneutics, which intimately tied being with knowing, served as the key to unlocking the true meaning of Ishráqi metaphysical texts.32 He also was asked about the relationship between the two poles of his philosophical thought, German Existenz philosophy and Iranian Ishráqi metaphysics. He replied:

J’eu le privilège et le plaisir de passer quelques moments inoubliables avec Heidegger, à Freiburg, en avril 1934 et en juillet 1936, donc pendant la période ou j’élaborais la traduction du recueil des textes publiés sous le titre Qu’est ce que la métaphysique? Il m’est arrivé avec étonnement que, si je m’étais tourné vers le soufisme, c’est parce que j’aurais été déçu par la philosophie de Heidegger. Cette version est complètement fausse. Mes premières publications sur Sohrawardi datent de 1933 et 1935 (mon diplôme de l’école des langues orientales est de 1929); ma traduction de Heidegger paraît en 1938.33

In contrast, though, Corbin’s friend and colleague, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, subsequently contradicted the above account of Heidegger’s seminal influence on Corbin:

I once asked Corbin, ‘How did you become interested in Suhrawardî?’ Having in mind the fact that no one has rendered greater service to the knowledge of Suhrawardî and later Islamic philosophy in the West than Corbin. He said, ‘For several years, I was studying Martin Heidegger and the German Existenz-

33 Ibid., 23-24.
philosophie and had gone several times to Freiberg to meet Heidegger but his philosophy did not satisfy me.  

These conflicting views require a closer examination of the chronology of Corbin's work on both Heidegger and Suhrawardi. Although Corbin's earliest work on Suhrawardi did precede his published translation of Heidegger, he clearly had read Heidegger's work several years before translating him. Moreover, Corbin's first book on Suhrawardi, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Suhrawardi* (1946), followed his 1939-1945 sojourn in Istanbul where he obtained and possibly viewed for the first time microfilms of Suhrawardi's manuscripts. Corbin might have reconsidered the influence of Heidegger's ontology regarding his interpretation of Suhrawardi primarily because of the catastrophic events of the Second World War and the surfacing of Heidegger's links to the Nazi party. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that Heidegger had a seminal influence on Corbin.

Arguably, in his "What is metaphysics," Heidegger's most controversial discussion centred on the concept of "nihilation" or "nothingness." He explained his key ontological concept of *Da-sein* as "being held out into Nothing." Heidegger asserted that the question of "what is nothing?" can be answered neither by logic and reason nor by a material reduction into history. He further explained that trying to answer the question of what is "nihilation" had profound iconoclastic consequences:

Talking about Nothing...undermines all culture and all faith. Whatever both disregards the fundamental law of thinking and also destroys faith and the will to construct is pure nihilism.

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38 Ibid.
On the one hand, one can interpret the above statement as a pessimistic appraisal of the possibility that science and all existing modes of thought, both secular and religious, can answer the question of nothingness. On the other hand, this statement can be seen as a challenge or a trial for the philosopher which, if successfully overcome, would reveal a different mode of thinking and being. For Richard Wolin, Heidegger’s break with Aristotelian logic and reason marked the turning point from the traditional phenomenology of Heidegger’s mentor Husserl, which was predicated on analytical reasoning and scientific objectivity. Heidegger clearly had created a revolutionary phenomenology. In place of Aristotelian objectivity, Heidegger embraced the pre-Socratic concept of “aletheia” or a truth which both reveals and conceals itself. Utilizing this concept, Heidegger derived his concept of “facticity” or a re-experiencing of the world that transcended the ontological trap of a subject and object. Heidegger’s radical re-conception of phenomenology did little to assuage the ultimate anxiety of Da-sein—nothingness and death. In effect, the question of what lay beyond the darkness of nihilation remained unanswered. For Corbin, Heidegger did not transcend the penultimate stage of the “Black Light.” Nonetheless, Heidegger’s questioning of Western metaphysics marked a turning point and even the “key” to Corbin’s hermeneutical understanding and adoption of Ishraqi metaphysics. Most importantly, Heidegger focused Corbin on the key metaphysical question: if reason and logic cannot penetrate the abyss of nothingness then what mode of thought and being can? Remaining for Corbin, then, was the key theosophical question of how does one depart from the ontological stage of the Jesus of one’s being and arrive at the emerald realm?

If Heidegger can be seen as representing the master of Occidental philosophy for Corbin, then Suhrawardi was his Shaikh al-Ishraq or “Master of the Oriental Theosophy.” Most

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40 Ibid., 218.
importantly, Corbin drew two crucial themes concerning Iranian theosophical history from
Suhrawardi’s metaphysics (*Hikmat al-Ishraq*). First, he adopted Suhrawardi’s metaphysical
notion of ‘*alam al-mithal* or the “imaginal world” and, second, Corbin derived the concept of the
“Iranian Soul” or spiritual essence from Suhrawardi and other Ishraqi metaphysicians. Corbin
applied both of these concepts to his interpretation of Irano-Islamic metaphysical thought. Corbin
understood the ‘*alam al-mithal* as

the world of the Image, *mundus imaginalis*: a world as
ontologically real as the world of the senses and the world of the
intellect, a world that requires a faculty of perception belonging
to it, a faculty that is a cognitive function, a noetic value, as fully
real as the faculties of sensory perception or intellectual
intuition. This faculty is the imaginative power, the one we must
avoid confusing with the imagination that modern man identifies
with ‘fantasy’ and that, according to him, produces only the
‘imaginary’.41

Most theoretically profound for Corbin was his assertion that the symbolic events occurring in the
“imaginal world,” such as those found in Suhrawardi’s visionary tale, *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, were
“ontologically real.” Corbin’s ontological truth claim is even more provocative when one
considers that Suhrawardi often substituted the term *Na-koja-abad* or the “country of Nowhere”
for ‘*alam al-mithal*. Despite the literal translation in English of *Na-koja-abad* as a “Nowhere” or
a Utopia, Corbin vehemently argued that it was not a dreamscape or fantasy, but real.42 In effect,
he saw *Na-koja-abad* as a departure from the geographical space or the material world that
“veils” or shields spiritual phenomena.43 Corbin elucidated this mental process of “re-situation”
with the famous Sufi metaphor of the almond: “leave the external or natural appearances that
enclose the hidden internal realities, as the almond is hidden beneath the shell.”44 According to
Corbin, when one understands that Suhrawardi’s visionary tales take place neither in the sensory

41 Henry Corbin, “Mundus Imaginalis ou l’imaginaire et l’imaginal,” *Cahiers internationaux du
42 VM, 125.
44 Ibid.
world nor the “Ideal” Platonic world, but in the imaginal realm, one can begin to map the “topography of visionary experiences” without the fear of descending into a “utopian madness.” However, in order to arrive at the conclusion that the ‘alam al-mithal was “real,” Corbin had to invent a new philosophical methodology, an “imaginal-hermeneutics.” Ontologically, imaginal-hermeneutics required Corbin to transform himself through his “active” imagination in order to live or observe the psycho-spiritual event. According to Charles Adams, by pronouncing Suhrawardi’s visions ontologically real, Corbin had abandoned any pretence of being a traditional scholar of the phenomenology of religion. Anticipating an inevitable Orientalist critique, Corbin took refuge in a Heideggerian critique of Cartesian reason: “we must begin to destroy the ‘agnostic reflex’ in Western man, because he has consented to the divorce between thought and being.” Corbin elaborated further about the limitations of “modern science” which, although capable of astounding analysis of the “physical universe” was blind to the inter-world of the imaginal. Most provocatively, Corbin asserted that “we are no longer participants in a traditional culture,” but instead live in a “scientific civilization” which has extended its control over us to such an extent that even traditional sacred “images” have been lost. Essentially, according to Corbin, one must confront one’s “paralyzing agnostic reflex,” and break through the “consciousness and its object of thought and being.” After the defeat of agnosticism, he declared that “phenomenology is now an ontology.” Similar to Heidegger’s turning away from Husserlian phenomenology, Corbin’s belief in a mundus imaginalis marked an abandoning of his philosophical roots and the construction of a new ontology.

46 Adams, 142.
47 Corbin, “Mundus Imaginalis,” 16.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 17.
The second theme that Corbin derived from Suhrawardi’s metaphysics was the notion of an eternal national “soul.” Following his initial exploration of the continuity between Ishraqui philosophers and their putative renaissance in Zoroastrian thought, Corbin expanded his historical scope to include the seventeenth century Isfahani and nineteenth century Shaikhi schools of metaphysics. The historical continuities that he uncovered led him to pronounce the existence of *l’âme iranienne*:

> Sur cette terre d’Iran le pays “couleur du ciel”...il me faudrait laisser dire par les hautes montagnes de l’Iran comment elles conservent la présence latente des théophanies dispensées à Zarathoustrâ – la vision des Archanges de lumière qui domine la philosophie iranienne d’Avicenne et Sohrawardi à leurs continuateurs...travers les récurrences de ses visions, de Zarathoustra à Sohrawardi son réssurecteur, de Mâni aux gnostiques de l’Islam shīite, *l’âme iranienne* avait toujours été à la trace de celle que son antique cosmogonie nomme la Fravarti...à la limite d’un Orient céleste que typifie la « montagne du Seigneur », la montagne qui, à l’est, émerge des eaux d’un lac mystique.  

Corbin first introduced the historical concept of an “Iranian soul” in his *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran.* In the prologue, he dedicated his work not to Orientalism but to the “honnête homme”; the open minded person of whom the scholar should be beholden and who was allegedly “doomed, owing to contemporary conditions, to disappear.” Critical to his concept of a “national soul” was the diachronic process of a *progressio harmonica* or harmonic continuity. In explaining this concept, Corbin drew upon the musical metaphor of an organ that can issue a fundamental note that can be manipulated by a series of organ stops (by way of the pedal) to allow for additional overtones (via the organ’s pipes) until the seemingly cacophonous sound reaches a crescendo and then returns to the fundamental note. In effect, the “fundamental note” in his organ metaphor signifies the spiritual

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50 Henry Corbin, “De l’Iran à Eranos,” in *Henry Corbin,* 162.
51 SB, x.
52 Ibid., 51.
essence of Iran while the “overtones” are symbolically formed by the “visionary recitations” of various Iranian prophets, theologians, philosophers, and poets. Crucially, the Iranian “spiritual essence” was eternal and putatively born before recorded history. This essence transcended what most conventional historians perceived as chronological or “positive” time. Although Corbin claimed to have eschewed historical chronology, he began his narrative of spiritual Iran with the Mazdean angelology recorded during the ancient Pahlavi period. In his interpretation of the Mazdean cosmology found in the *Avesta*, Corbin drew heavily from his mentor of pre-Islamic Iranian history, H.S. Nyberg.53 While Corbin studied Sanskrit at the l’Ecole des langues orientales, it would appear from his repeated use of Nyberg’s German translations of the *Avesta*, that Corbin required some assistance with Avestan.54 Without acknowledging his dependency on the work of other Orientalists, Corbin bemoaned the lack of collaboration between scholars of pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Iran. He somewhat flippantly added that most “cultivated Iranians” could see the connection between the Mazdean angelology and Islamic Iranian thought.55 Ostensibly, Orientalism was too constricted by historical periodization to perceive the historical transcendence of “spiritual facts.”

Corbin argued that Orientalists ignored the “spiritual fact” that “believers” envisioned Mazdean and Islamic phenomena within a framework of meta-history.56 Moreover, Suhrawardi himself claimed the agenda of reviving the ancient sages of Persia through his philosophy of Light.57 Yet, Corbin took the example of Suhrawardi’s putative agenda and ascribed to it the entire tradition of “speculative theosophy of Islamic Iran.”58 It is important to recognize that Corbin did not envision this unbroken chain of theosophists as sharing the same or even

53 Jambet, 16.
54 For Corbin’s use of Nyberg’s translations and commentary on the *Avesta* (note also Corbin’s use of Darmesteter as well) see SB, notes 271-292.
55 Ibid., 52.
56 Ibid., 60.
57 VM, 121.
58 SB, 56.
apparently similar cosmology. What Corbin was alluding to was their common belief in a metaphysics that posited the existence of a realm between the physical and spiritual, the *mundus imaginalis*. Most scholars of Irano-Islamic history acknowledge the important Shi‘ite tradition of mystical speculation or ‘Irfan concerning the nature of the hidden Imam who exists in the present, but not in the geographical space and chronological time of our physical world. Nonetheless, while in a general sense one could argue that speculative metaphysics existed in what may be seen as a geographic entity of Iran, is it historically probable that a metaphysical tradition remained “essentially” the same since the time of Mazdean metaphysicians to the present? In other words, where does the issue of historical context appear in Corbin’s concept of the “Soul of Iran?”

In effect, Corbin avoids the issue of historical context by reintroducing Suhrawardi’s concept of ‘*alam al-mithal* on a meta-historical scale. In describing the cosmological topography of the Mazdean paradise of Yima, Corbin interjected both a critique of historicization and his theory of a *mundus imaginalis*:

Is it by meditation or by a campaign of archaeological excavations that we can hope to discover the traces of this Paradise of archetypes, of this celestial Earth...Yima’s Paradise cannot be marked on the surface of our maps...What is called for here...is...the transparency which allows the archetype-Image to appear, in the only place where this is possible, in *medio mundi.*

In the above passage, Corbin’s use of the term “archaeological excavations” was an attempt to satirize the efforts of Orientalists and archaeologists to locate the *Eran Vej*, the land where Zarathustra had his visions and began to proselytize. Corbin’s concern was ontological not geographic; he viewed *Eran Vej* purely as a self-referential space. Most critically, Corbin viewed any attempt to introduce historicization into religious history as fruitless and, worse still, a desacrilization. Yet, by pointing to the inability of scholars to prove or unanimously agree in

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59 SB, 24.
principle upon a location for the *Eran Vej*, Corbin caricatured historians of Iranian religious history. However, Corbin ignored the critical historical context of a social and politically active Islam in Iran. Most critically, he did not address the Islamic issues of ethics, jurisprudence, and the *shariah* or law in his concept of the essence of Iranian Islam?

Hamid Algar criticized Corbin's concept of the "Soul" of Iran because it omitted legalistic forms of Iranian Islam. Algar claimed that Corbin ignored this key theme because Corbin believed that legalistic forms of Islam were the products of "Arab Islam." Corbin's aversion to the disciplinary category of "Arab history" can be seen in his problematizing of the term "Arab." Moreover, Charles Adams pointed to the exclusion of Sunni Islam, particularly in Corbin's discussion of Sufism. Ostensibly, Corbin's understanding of the "Soul" of Iran reflected the Iranian folk belief that Shahr-Banu, the daughter of the last Sasanid Shah, Yazdgard III, was betrothed to Husayn ibn Ali, the third Imam. Despite the presence of centuries of Sunnism in Iran, Corbin posited that the only significant transition in Iranian religion was from Mazdeanism to Shi'ism. For Steven Wasserstrom, Corbin's Iranian "spiritual nationalism" was representative of a form of Aryanism. More contentiously, Wasserstrom claimed that Corbin's Aryanization of Islam was consciously complicit in a wider Iranian state sponsored socio-political program of Aryanism. Wasserstrom wrote that "Corbin's self-described 'spiritual' Iran served the Shah's 'imperial' Iran, a Cold War ally who stabilized extraction of petroleum for a billionaire American [Paul Mellon], who in turn, from his profits, subsidized that "spiritual" self-image."

Corbin's supposedly apolitical and non-Arab view of Iranian Islam was well received by the

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60 Algar, 88-89.
61 See Corbin's critique of the misapplication of the term Arab in Iranian history in VM, 43-48. In particular, note his cataloguing of Iranian accomplishments that have falsely been attributed to Arabs.
63 SB, xvii.
64 Wasserstrom, 133.
65 Paul Mellon was the primary financial benefactor for the Bollingen Foundation which published several of Corbin works in English.
66 Wasserstrom, 153.
Pahlavi Shah who stated that: “the spiritual [world] seeks to maintain good traditions of the mind, the spirit, the morals, the religion and the ethos and civilization of the Aryans.”

While these criticisms of Corbin are plausible, Wasserstrom’s application of the term Aryanism to the scholarship of Corbin appears problematic. Corbin may have supported the view of an eternal Iranian civilization with strong “Aryan” roots, yet it is doubtful that he conceived of the term Aryan as having the same racial-supremacist connotation as Comte Arthur de Gobineau or Houston Stewart Chamberlain. In other words, Corbin’s exclusion of Arab-Semitic contributions to Iranian spirituality was not part of a wider anti-semitic world view, but rather more convincingly explained by his pro-Zoroastrian-Shi’ite form of Iranian nationalism. Nonetheless, Corbin’s symbolic focus on the eternal “Aryan” ancestry of Iran complemented state propaganda which claimed that the monarchy was a 2500 year old institution beginning with the Aryan king Cyrus the Great.

A more historically profound critique of Corbin’s scholarship came from John Walbridge, who asserted that Corbin’s pro-Zoroastrian bias led to a misleading interpretation of Suhrawardi’s metaphysics. Walbridge asserted that “Corbin’s stress on the supposedly Iranian nature of Suhrawardi’s thought led him and his followers, I believe, to lay too much stress on the symbolic elements of his thought and too little on his ‘Peripatetic’ texts.” Walbridge understood Suhrawardi’s interest in ancient Iran as “exotic,” “derivative,” and not revivalist.

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68 In fact, Wasserstrom never defines “Aryanism,” a term which has multiple linguistic, racial, and historical definitions. In the context of French Orientalism, Ernest Seillière was the first to discuss the European tradition of an “aryanisme historique.” He defined Aryanism as “une philosophie de l’histoire qui attribut les acquisitions morales et matérielles de l’humanité à l’influence à peu près exclusive de la race aryenne,” see Ernest Seillière, Le comte de Gobineau et l’aryanisme historique (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1903), i.
71 Ibid.
By removing Suhrawardi from his immediate historical context, specifically his intellectual milieu, and placing him within a broader meta-historical context, Corbin negated the possibility that Suhrawardi was a secondary figure within a larger and more traditional philosophical movement. Similarly, Algar argued that Corbin exaggerated the significance of Suhrawardi; “the position of Suhrawardi and his school in the intellectual and spiritual history of Islam is marginal.” Nonetheless, it is evident that Suhrawardi continued centuries later to influence Islamic philosophers, in particular, Mulla Sadra. Still, by both emphasizing Suhrawardi’s “Mazdean revivalism” and de-emphasizing more Peripatetic schools of Islamic philosophy, Corbin’s view of Iranian history appears highly selective and possibly politicized. For both Wasserstrom and Algar, Corbin’s neglect of Arab influences on the formation of Iranian Islam must be seen in the context of his Aryan bias which “transferred the dichotomy (Aryan=Iranian/Semitic=Arab) from the biological to the spiritual plane.” However, these critics have not considered Corbin’s assertion that the Arab mystic, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), was essential to the development of mystical Shi’ism in Iran. While Corbin appeared to neglect the influence of “Arab-Sunnism” in Iran, he did explicitly recognize the influence of certain Arab scholarship on Iranian Sufism and Shi’ism. Arguably, therefore, Corbin’s bias for an inward and mystical Shi’ite Islam does not necessarily constitute a racially exclusive conception of Islam.

However, the question remains why Corbin portrayed Iranian Islam as both apolitical and quietist during the 1960s and 1970s? Ostensibly, it should have been apparent to Corbin that Shi’ite Islam had an established tradition of political activism and was becoming increasingly

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72 Algar, 88.
73 Algar, 89. This quote from Algar was cited, approvingly by Wasserstrom.
political during this period. According to a close friend, the archetypal psychologist, James Hillman, Corbin was aware of the growing politicization of Islam. Hillman commented:

Corbin said to me one time, “What is wrong with the Islamic world is that it has destroyed its images, and without these images that are so rich and so full of tradition, they are going crazy because they have no containers for their extraordinary imaginative power.” His work with mystic philosophical texts, the texts that reestablish the imaginal world, can be seen as political action of the first order: it was meeting terrorism, fanaticism, nihilism right at its roots in the psyche. 75

Ironically, Wasserstrom’s analysis of Corbin paralleled recent debates concerning Heidegger and Mircea Eliade; who were both associated with totalitarian regimes. 76 Although Wasserstrom’s provocative analysis of Corbin placed a new emphasis on the politics of Corbin’s Orientalism, it is questionable whether Corbin can be convincingly viewed as facilitating Western imperialism. Corbin’s close association with the powerful American oil benefactor, Paul Mellon, did not prevent him from strongly criticizing Western political, economic, and cultural imperialism. Rather, Corbin’s extensive collaboration with Iranian intellectual elites reinforced an anti-Western discourse. In other words, the question of Corbin’s socio-political impact on Iran is complex and often contradictory. An examination of Corbin’s experiences in Iran is, therefore, essential to addressing this question.

In 1946, the French government appointed Corbin as the director of the Département d’iranologie within the newly created Institut franco-iranien de Téhéran. 77 This Institut was under the control of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, following the defeat of the fascist

77 Nasr, 277.
Vichy government, formed part of a larger diplomatic mission to renew France’s traditional and substantial cultural influence in Iran. Unlike Russia and England, whose historical involvement in Iran was consistently imperial, France had, since the nineteenth century, played a pivotal role in developing cultural and elite academic institutions.\(^7^8\) Shortly after establishing the Department of Iranian Studies, Corbin began the publication of the *Bibliotheque iranienne*, which published, often for the first time, works of Islamic philosophy and Sufism.\(^7^9\) Both the development of the *Institut* in Tehran and the *Bibliotheque* series bore the imprint of Gilson’s project of medievalist studies in France.\(^8^0\) Yet, unlike Gilson, Corbin did not have a massive collection of catalogued manuscripts in Iran available in the *Bibliotheque nationale*. For twenty-five years, Corbin exhaustively collected and catalogued unedited Persian and Arabic manuscripts that were published in over twenty volumes of the *Bibliotheque iranienne*.\(^8^1\) At the *Institut* Corbin, worked with a team of pioneer French Iranologists, such as Gilbert Lazard and Jean Aubin, as well as leading Persian scholars, including Muhammad Mo’in, Sayyed Jalal al-Din Ashtiani, Muhammad Mokri, and Sayyed Hossein Nasr. Corbin remained director of the *Institut*, until 1975. Both the breadth and longevity of Corbin’s project of establishing Iranian Studies was remarkable. Yet, it is the nature of Corbin’s academic accomplishments in Iran and the evolving political milieu in which they occurred that remained the subject of intense criticism.

While directing the *Institut* in Tehran, Corbin focused solely on the philosophical and mystical elements of Islam. He effectively continued to harbour a bias against any legalistic interpretation of Islam.\(^8^2\) The *Institut* also excluded the social sciences which were later developed at a separate institution, the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique*, in the

\(^{78}\) For more on the French influence on Iranian education, see Monica Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2001).

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 277.

\(^{80}\) Shayegan, 24.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 25.

1960s. It was not until the early 1970s, when Corbin’s influence on the Institut waned, that a new generation of French scholars, including Christophe Balay, Jean-Pierre Digard, Bernard Hourcade, and Yann Richard, expanded the focus on the social sciences. Outside of the Institute, Corbin also had a teaching position in the departments of the history of theology and Islamic philosophy at the University of Tehran (1973-1978). Very importantly, Corbin was appointed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr to teach a graduate course on the history of religion and philosophy.

Beyond his academic sphere of influence, Corbin played a fundamental role in shaping Irano-Islamic philosophy through his relationship with the pre-eminent Islamic philosopher, Allemah Muhammad Sayyid Husayn Tabataba’i. Based in Qum, Tabataba’i led a small but powerful group of Shi‘ite philosophers known as the Mahfel. In the early 1960s, the Mahfel began to publish an influential series entitled Maktab-e Tashayo. Prior to the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Mahfel articulated a popular “traditionalist” Islamic response to modernization, dialectical materialism, and secularism. Within the Mahfel, Tabataba’i played a dominant role using the Maktab-e Tashayo to publicize both his interpretation of Shi‘ism and his Sadrian philosophical critique of modernity. Of the three volumes of the Maktab-e Tashayo, the entire second volume of this work was devoted completely to Tabataba’i’s history of Shi’ism. This work, which continues to be widely read in Iran, was based on Tabataba’i’s philosophical meetings with Corbin.

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83 Ibid.  
87 Tabataba’i’s best known work from this period was his Usul-i falsafah wa rawish-i ri’alizm (The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism) which was widely read as a seminal philosophical challenge to Marxism and dialectical materialism. Yann Richard, Shi’ite Islam, trans., Antonia Nevill (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 66.  
88 Mirsepassi, 89.
From 1958 to 1978, Corbin and Tabataba’i met in Tehran for a bi-weekly discussion group that included Tabataba’i’s former students Murtaza Mutahhari and Seyyed Hossein Nasr; other Iranian academics, including Isa Sepahbodi and Daryush Shayegan; politicians, such as Houshang Besharat, who was a diplomat in the foreign ministry; and benefactors, such as Zolmajd Tabataba’i, who was a celebrated lawyer. Two of Allemah Tabataba’i’s former students from this group became extremely powerful scholars in Iran. In the 1970s, Mutahhari became a leading Islamic activist, ideologue, and intimate of Khomeini. After the Islamic Revolution, Mutahhari was appointed by Khomeini as chair of the Revolutionary Council, which held considerable political power. Prior to his assassination on May 1, 1979, Mutahhari was viewed as Khomeini’s “right-hand man.” While Mutahhari served briefly as a powerful ideologue under Khomeini, Nasr was the pre-eminent Islamic ideologue under the Shah’s regime. In effect, through Corbin’s personal affiliation with the three leading “traditional” Islamic figures—Tabataba’i, Mutahhari, and Nasr—Corbin very likely commanded greater political influence than in his position as director of the Institut in Tehran.

In Tabataba’i, Corbin found an Islamic thinker who, similar to Gilson, used medieval philosophy to engage modern philosophy. Born in Tabriz in 1903, Tabataba’i received an early Islamic education from his family that had, for fourteen generations, produced prominent Shi’ite thinkers. In his twenties, Tabataba’i moved to Najaf where he received both an education in usul al-fiqh or jurisprudence and ‘ilm-i huzuri or gnosis. In 1934, Tabataba’i returned to Tabriz where he remained until the Soviet Union’s invasion and occupation of Iran forced him to flee to Qum. The Soviet occupation of his homeland engrained a deep suspicion of Marxism and Communism that would be reflected in his subsequent writings. After a decade of teaching in

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89 Shayegan, 27.
91 Ibid., 24.
Qum, Tabataba'i began a campaign to revive traditional Islamic philosophical studies. What contributed to Tabataba'i's popularity in Qum was his use of traditional Sadrian and Ishraqi philosophy to combat the growing influence of Marxist-Socialism among lay-clergy. Most importantly, both Corbin and Tabataba'i saw Ishraqi ta'wil as the key to metaphysical hermeneutics. Not surprisingly, ta'wil was the topic of discussion in the first meeting between Corbin and Tabataba'i. According to Daryush Shayegan, Corbin and Tabataba'i had the following exchange:

Corbin: C'est parce que l'Occident a perdu le sens du ta'wil... que nous n'arrivons plus à pénétrer les arcanes des Saintes Écritures et que nous démythologisons la dimension sacrée du monde.
Tabataba'i: Peut-on... parler de ces choses-là sans tenir compte du ta'wil...? Il ne peut y avoir de vraie spiritualité sans ta'wil.

In the above passage, Corbin employed the terminology of Mircea Eliade to identify the Occident as “demythologizing the sacred.” Corbin introduced this dichotomy of a profane West and a sacred East to Tabataba'i and his influential circle of philosophers. Moreover, Corbin also introduced them to the Eranos comparative framework of studying the history of religions and philosophy. According to Nasr, the format of the meetings between Tabataba'i and Corbin usually began by Corbin posing a philosophical issue or question that had been discussed in the prior year at Eranos. Concerning the larger historical importance of these gatherings, Nasr wrote “no intellectual exchange had taken place on such a high philosophical level between the West and the Islamic World since the Middle Ages.” Moreover, he asserted that the effect of

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93 Shayegan, 28.
95 Nasr, 44.
96 Ibid.
Nasr’s program to institutionalize comparative religious and philosophical studies was overtly political. Nasr believed he was appointed as president of Aryamehr because of his outspoken “criticism of the blind emulation of Western scientism and the desire for the wholesale adoption of Western technology prevalent in Iran at that time.” Nasr’s critique of the technocratic West and his program to create a modern gnostic Islam directly reflected the views of both Corbin and Tabataba’i. Moreover, the influence of Corbin can clearly be seen in the published work of Nasr on Iranian philosophy. Nasr, in his writings on Suhrawardi, wrote:

The intellectual life of Islam and that of Christianity—the two sister civilizations—in the Middle Ages can be compared together in large extent through the role of Aristotelian philosophy played in them. Peripatetic science and philosophy entered the Western world through translations of Arabic in the seventh/thirteenth century and eventually became dominant to such an extent as to replace the Augustinian and Platonic wisdom of the earlier period only to be thrown out itself by the humanistic rationalism of the Renaissance. In Islam the attack of Sufis and theologians upon the rationalistic aspect of Aristotelian philosophy weakened its hold at the very time when that philosophy was gaining strength in the Christian West and was replaced in the Muslim world by two elements, the doctrinal Sufism of Muhyi al-Din ibn Arabi and the Hikmat al-Ishraq or illuminative wisdom of Shaikh al-Ishraq Shihab al-Din Yahya ibn Habash ibn Amirak Suhrawardi, both of which aimed at an effective realization of the “truth” and replaced the rationalism of Peripatetic philosophy by intellectual intuition (dhauq).

Elsewhere, Nasr’s critical view of historical-philosophical relations between East and West led him to comment on the urgency of the “modern crises” that existed in both civilizations. He wrote, in Islam and the Plight of Modern Man, that the post-Renaissance Occident was a “failed experiment” and warned of its corruptive influence. Moreover, he cautioned “Orientals” that

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103 Ibid., 38.
“the attitude of the East towards the West should be to view it as a case study to learn from rather than as a model to emulate blindly.”

Beyond Nasr, the wider discursive effect of Corbin’s Heideggerian critique of the West and idealization of Iranian Islam was reflected in the Iranian discourse on Gharbzadegi or West-Intoxication. In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of Gharbzadegi, popularized by the leftist-lay intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad, inspired a widespread Iranian reaction to the perceived Westernization of culture and society. For Ahmad, Gharbzadegi not only involved the blind emulation of the West, but an equally troubling political passivity towards increasing Western economic imperialism in Iran. He characterized the conflict between traditional Iran and the technocratic West as an apocalyptic struggle. Using fiery rhetoric, Ahmad extolled his countryman to resist imperialism and reverse the power imbalance between East and West. He wrote “we have ended up becoming the sweeper of the circus ring” while the West is the “ringmaster” of “a circus of pornography, stultification, and arrogance in order to sponge oil.” Although Ahmad can be seen as the progenitor of a popular and vehemently anti-Western discourse on Gharbzadegi, the theoretical concept was first proposed by Ahmad Fardid, a professor of German philosophy at the University of Tehran.

Hired in the 1960s as part of Nasr’s program of comparative philosophy, Fardid initially published few of his own works preferring instead to translate into Farsi the works of Western scholars, including Corbin’s Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi. In contrast to Ahmad, Fardid understood the value of the philosophical dialogue between East and West, and, in particular, the usefulness of employing Heideggerian philosophical and historical analysis. Similar to Heidegger, Fardid first constructed his philosophical term in Greek, perhaps to lend philosophical and linguistic authority. He created a compound Greek word dysiplexia

106 Ibid.
107 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Gharbzadegi, cited in Farzin Vahdat, God and Juggernaut: Iran’s Intellectual Encounter with Modernity (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 116.
which joined *dysis* (the West) and *plexia* (something that entrances or afflicts),\(^{108}\) and translated it into Persian as *Gharbzadegi* or "West-toxication". Most importantly, Fardid's definition of *Gharbzadegi* was based on Heidegger's metaphysical critique of the dominance of formal logic in Western epistemologies.\(^{109}\) Heidegger argued that, following Plato and Aristotle, *being* was separated from and dominated by their conception of *logos* or formal logic (Platonic concept of *idea* or the Aristotelian *ousia*).\(^{110}\) While Fardid drew on Heidegger's critique of Western philosophy, he also idealized traditional Iranian philosophy ostensibly drawing on the work of Corbin and Nasr. Fardid's argument particularly mirrored Corbin, not only because it used Heidegger, but because it was predicated on the notion that Iranian philosophy had not yet succumbed to the Western logical fallacy of a separation between man as omniscient observer and the external world as an object of study. For Fardid, the East never experienced a separation of binaries, such as thinking/being and subject/object.\(^{111}\) This historical argument reflected Nasr and Corbin's assertion that European post-Enlightenment positivism did not displace the Iranian tradition of Ishraqi metaphysics. While Fardid most likely did not intend his construct of *Gharbzadegi* to be used in the Ahmad's vitriolic anti-Western discourse, Fardid, nonetheless, provided the theoretical catalyst for a critique of pro-Western technocrats in Iran. In other words, Fardid's critique went beyond Nasr and Corbin's attack on abstractions, such as modernization, because Fardid directly attacked the growing class of Iranian technocrats for being "intoxicated" with the West. Following Fardid and Ahmad, scholars who advocated "Western" models of modernization, including democratic reforms, could be labelled as *Gharbzadegi*.


\(^{109}\) Ibid.


\(^{111}\) Gheissari, cited in Vahdat, 114.
Fardid’s critique of “Western sickness” likely would not have been possible without both
the institutional support he received from Nasr and Fardid’s reliance on the philosophical
authority of Heidegger and Corbin. Within Muhammad Reza Shah’s authoritarian state, political
dissidents were either jailed without trial or simply assassinated. It appears that Fardid survived
because of Nasr’s protection and by not explicitly criticizing the state. Instead, the state targeted
leftist-lay intellectuals, such as Ali Shari’ati.\textsuperscript{112} During the 1950s, Shari’ati was part of a wider
secularization and modernization movement. As late as 1957, Shari’ati was a strong supporter of
the secularist-socialist National Front party of Muhammad Mosaddeq that had briefly formed a
government before the 1953 CIA backed coup that returned the monarchy. Following his arrest
in 1957, Shari’ati left Iran to study at the Sorbonne where he received a doctorate in sociology.
When he returned to Iran in the late 1960s, Shari’ati realigned himself with a growing number of
lay-clergy who were frustrated by the elitist and conservative religious hierarchy in Qum. In
1967, he was appointed as a lecturer at the newly created Husainiyeh Ershad (religious centre) in
Tehran.\textsuperscript{113} At the Husainiyeh, Shari’ati became increasingly popular for his overt criticism of the
Shah and the religious establishment for their “elitism” and “backwardness.” After hearing one
of Shari’ati’s lectures, in which he both compared the Shah to the historical figure of Yazid\textsuperscript{114} and
lambasted the jurists in Qum, Nasr and Mutahhari promptly resigned from the Husseyniyah.\textsuperscript{115}
As a populist revolutionary with strong Marxist-socialist influences, Shari’ati threatened Nasr’s
program to generate a modern gnostic Islam.

In contrast to Shari’ati’s populism and support for the lay-clergy, Nasr’s program of
reviving Islamic philosophy was elitist and pro-Shah targeting the Heideggerian ‘evils’ of

\textsuperscript{112} For more on Shari’ati, see Ali Rahnema, An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Sharia’ti
\textsuperscript{113} Sharough, 127.
\textsuperscript{114} Yazid is by far the most hated historical figure in Shi’ite Islam. After his army defeated the forces of
Imam Hussayn at the battle of Karbala (A.D. 680), Yazid sanctioned the brutal slaying of the Imam
Hussayn and the enslavement of his family.
\textsuperscript{115} Nasr, “An Intellectual Autobiography,” 34.
technology and modernization. As a colleague and key supporter of Nasr, Corbin was equally interested in reviving metaphysics in Iran and Europe. Corbin also shared Nasr’s view that the West, since the reduction of religion into material history, was suffering from a grave metaphysical illness. Using similar metaphorical language to Nasr’s, Corbin, in his *En Islam iranien*, lamented:

Il lui faudra enfin faire face aux conséquences de l’impact occidental sur une civilisation traditionnelle [Iran], conséquences dont les premières victimes sont ses propres amis shi’ites ... Peut-être si l’Occident a sécrété le poison, est-il celui qui est en mesure de sécrérer l’antidote.\(^\text{116}\)

Corbin’s pessimistic diagnosis of Western civilization, based on a Heideggerian critique of modernity and science, would later resurface in the writings of Fardid, Nasr, and in the political debate surrounding *Gharbzadegi*.\(^\text{117}\) What made Corbin an essential asset to Nasr, and other proponents of *Gharbzadegi*-theory, was Corbin’s insistence that Ishraqi philosophers held the metaphysical solution to avoiding the existential sickness that had infected the “West.” In the process of producing an essentialized view of the West as corrupt, materialist, technologically driven, and spiritually bankrupt, Corbin idealized the “Soul of Iran.” At the same time, Corbin utilized his authority on Ishraqi philosophy, then largely unknown to the West, to resurrect and defend an eschatological and mystical Christianity from both a materialist and philosophical critique. By assisting Nasr’s philosophical revival of an esoteric Islam in Iran, Corbin indirectly furthered his efforts to protect the “mystical” or “sacred” traditions of Europe. For Nasr, the wider discursive effect of Corbin’s critique of the West and adoption of Ishraqian metaphysics was to facilitate a


\(^{117}\) For a consideration of the wider impact of Corbin’s dissemination of Heidegger throughout the Muslim world, see Mona Abaza, “A Note on Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Affinities and Differences,” *Muslim World* 90 (2000): 91-107. Abaza noted that, following Corbin, Heidegger increasingly become the methodology of choice for comparative religious studies throughout the intellectual Muslim world. She provided further examples of Corbin-influenced studies including a recently published thesis by Alparslan Acikgenc which compared the metaphysics of Mulla Sadra and Heidegger.
revival of interest in Islamic philosophy in Iran itself while turning the attention of Persians to the non-rationalistic and non-positivistic currents of Western philosophy. Since among modernized Orientals, including my countrymen, there is often an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West...Corbin served an important function as an antidote to this illness and was a major aid to me in Iran in my attempt to revive Islamic philosophy on the one hand and to expand the horizons of the students of philosophy in understanding Western philosophy on the other.\textsuperscript{118}

While Corbin’s influence on the development of an anti-Western discourse in Iran was considerable, the question remains concerning the impact of Corbin’s work on Iran within the context of French politics and European orientalism.

In 1954, Corbin succeeded his mentor Louis Massignon as chair of the department of Religious Sciences at l’École pratique des hautes études effectively making Corbin the leading French academic authority on the history of religious.\textsuperscript{119} Beyond academia, Corbin’s research and written works were funded by the Bollingen Foundation which also published and distributed his books. Beginning in 1949, Corbin became a key participant at the Eranos conferences where he befriended leading Western and Eastern intellectuals, such as C.G. Jung, Karl Kérenyi, Mircea Eliade, Adolph Portmann, Gerhard van der Leeuw, D.T. Suzuki, Ernst Benz, Gilbert Durand, James Hillman, Gershom Scholem, and T. Izutsu. Corbin, with the support of the Bollingen Foundation and the Eranos conferences, reached a world-wide audience and was part of an influential network of historians of religion. In addition, as an intimate acquaintance of Nasr and the Shah, Corbin was invaluable to the French “cultural” mission in Iran. As possibly the most politically powerful Orientalist in Europe, Corbin should have fit Edward Said’s model of the “Orientalist encounter.” However, Corbin used his position of power to campaign tirelessly against Western positivist science, theology, and dialectical materialism. Given Corbin’s outspoken criticism of the West and idealization of Iran as a model of spirituality, it is not

\textsuperscript{119} Shayegan, 28.
surprising that he was not discussed in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. However, the question remains for historians of how to situate Henry Corbin within the larger context of the European “encounter with the Orient.”
CONCLUSION

First, it is critical to differentiate the French tradition of Orientalism on Iran from the Orientalist traditions of other European imperial powers, such as Great Britain and Russia/Soviet Union. Although modern French academic Orientalism on Iran was not directly connected to an imperial project in Iran, it was nonetheless highly political. Unlike Great Britain and Russia, the early philological work of Orientalists, such as Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805), attracted a wider audience than just colonial officials and academic Orientalists. Anquetil-Duperron's project of collecting, cataloguing, and translating ancient Avestan texts generated widespread interest in India, ancient Iran, and the religion of Zoroastrianism. Moreover, his work influenced French debates on religion and secularism. Voltaire (1694-1778), in his *Le Monde comme il va*, was the first French philosopher to use Iranian history as a weapon in the post-enlightenment debates between philosophers and the Catholic Church. Voltaire believed that discoveries in Zoroastrianism, which he contended was older than Judaism, would undermine the claims of theologians that Christianity was scripturally “unique” and unmatched by other

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religions. In the nineteenth century, with new discoveries in comparative philology and the natural sciences, Iranian history was used in French debates on race and nationalism. Comte Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), a French philosopher and diplomat in Iran, wrote, in his multivolume *l'Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, about the influence of the Aryan race on the development of Iranian civilization. In his later work, *Histoire des Perses*, Gobineau argued that Cyrus the Great was a model “Aryan monarch” and glorified the feudal system of ancient Iran. As an Aryanist and disillusioned Bourbon monarchist, Gobineau paired his historical narrative on ancient Iran with a commentary on the state of political and racial degeneracy in modern Europe and, in particular, France. Both Gobineau’s Aryanism and his critique of Western civilization, which relied heavily on Iranian history, would later influence the German tradition of Aryanism and Nazi ideology. In effect, the Orientalist works of both Gobineau and Voltaire represented a major intercession in French debates on race and religion.

In considering the French tradition of Orientalist work on Iran, one cannot ignore the role that dissident philosophers played in providing a critique of French politics and society. However, unlike any other European Orientalist, Corbin played a fundamental role in the formation of the Iranian discourse of Gharbzadegi. This Iranian response to European imperialism was described by Boroujerdi as reverse orientalism. Contrary to Said’s model of the Orientalist encounter, Corbin played an essential role in developing an Iranian discourse of reverse Orientalism that was fundamentally critical of European imperialism, Orientalism, post-enlightenment Western philosophy, and theology. Corbin’s monolithic view of a technocratic

122 J. Duchesne-Guillemin, 151.
123 Schwab, 432.
and profane West was paired with an equally static view of Iran as a spiritual essence that had remained sacred, traditional, and authentic. In contrast to other European critics of the West, Corbin institutionalized his dissident Orientalist philosophy in both Iranian and French elite academic institutions. Outside of the academic sphere, Corbin worked with traditional Iranian scholars, such as Nasr, Tabataba'i, and Mutahhari, who were politically linked either to the Shah or powerful ayatollahs, to cultivate a new generation of philosopher-activists who shared his alternative theosophical perspective.

Corbin contradicted the view that Orientalists consistently represented the Occident as civilizationally superior to the Orient. Corbin portrayed contemporary Iran as a model of national spiritualism for the world and lauded its continued preservation of a sacred philosophical tradition that had all but disappeared in the West. He preferred an Ishraqi Christology over traditional Christian eschatology and berated the growing agnosticism in Western theology. Corbin argued that Ishraqi gnosticism was superior to extant Christian theology in that it provided protection from the dominant metaphysical critiques of Nietzsche and Heidegger. As Wasserstrom suggested, Ishraqi gnosticism allowed Corbin to resurrect the Abrahamian and neo-Platonic Western theosophical tradition. From the metaphysics of Suhrawardi, Corbin developed an ontology, the mundus imaginalis, that was intended as an “answer” to the philosophical malaise that emerged from the German Existenz philosophy. In the process, Corbin exposed himself to a sustained critique from other Orientalists who posited that his scholarship idealized certain gnostic metaphysical traditions in Irano-Islamic civilization. Given Corbin’s exclusion of Suhrawardi’s more rational or Peripatetic works, it would seem that Corbin scholarship was not without flaws.

It is possible to trace the origins of Corbin’s theosophy of a mundus imaginalis and his interpretation of Suhrawardi to both his early theological activism and educational experiences under the Christian revivalists Gilson and Baruzzi. Corbin’s project of institutionalizing a selective form of Iranian studies in both France and Iran paralleled Gilson’s attempt to preserve
Christian metaphysics by reviving academic interest in St. Thomas Aquinas and Medievalist philosophical studies. In contrast to Gilson, Corbin developed an alternative methodology for the study of the history of religions that would resist a materialist reduction. This methodology was premised on the ontological concept of ta'wil which he derived from Suhrawardi. In order to utilize ta’wil, it was necessary to have a mystical experience. This mystical experience was central to understanding Corbin’s rejection of the dominant existentialist ontology, his embracing of Ishraqi metaphysics, and the formation of his own ontology.

Corbin’s combination of Protestant-mysticism, Heideggerian phenomenology, and Ishraqi metaphysics produced a unique theosophical orientalism. This theosophy, through Corbin’s academic and political activism, influenced a generation of contemporary French and Iranian scholars and activists. Corbin’s activist approach to Orientalist scholarship followed and expanded the French tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century dissident philosophers, most importantly, Voltaire and Gobineau, who utilized their work on the Orient to engage in a profound critique of their respective French societies. In light of Corbin’s lasting influence, particularly in Iran, it is necessary to reconsider the complexities and contradictions found in the Orientalist’s encounter with the “East.”
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