

Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought

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## Abstract

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This study addresses the influence of Russian religious thought on the French philosopher and Islamicist Henry Corbin (1903-1978). In the 1930s, Corbin came into contact with religious thinkers of the Russian emigration in Paris, particularly Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), who had an important role in his critical reception of contemporary German philosophy and theology. In 1939, Corbin moved to Istanbul where, parallel to his work on the first critical edition of the writings of the Iranian philosopher Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (1155-1191), he deepened his knowledge of Byzantine theology and translated some of the writings of the Russian theologian Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944). Corbin's post-war writings thus contain important references to Russian thinkers such as Berdyaev, Bulgakov, Aleksey Khomiakov (1804-1860), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891), and Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919). These thinkers had a unique role in Corbin's ecumenical project. He was indeed convinced that Russian Orthodoxy has an important role in mediating between East and West, Christianity and Islam. Until now, there has been no attempt to study the Russian connection in Corbin's thought. The present work explores this influence as reflected in the themes of East and West, Sophiology, Divine humanity, eschatology, angelology, and Orthodox iconography. In the process, it sheds light on the sources of Corbin's philosophical positions, interest in certain themes, and choice of terminology.

## Résumé

Henry Corbin et la pensée religieuse russe

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Cette étude traite de l'influence de la pensée religieuse russe sur le philosophe et islamologue français Henry Corbin (1903-1978). Dans les années 1930, Corbin pris contact avec des penseurs religieux issus de l'émigration russe à Paris ; en particulier, Nicolas Berdiaev (1874-1948), qui eût un rôle important dans sa critique de la philosophie et la théologie allemande contemporaine. En 1939, Corbin s'installa à Istanbul où, parallèlement à son travail d'édition des œuvres du philosophe iranien Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (1155-1191), il approfondit ses connaissances en théologie byzantine et traduisit certains écrits du P. Serge Boulgakov (1871-1944). Nous retrouvons ainsi des références importantes à des penseurs russes tels Berdiaev, Boulgakov, Alexei Khomiakov (1804-1860), Fiodor Dostoïevski (1821-1881), Constantin Léontiev (1831-1891), Vassili Rozanov (1856-1919), dans les écrits d'après-guerre de Corbin. Ces mêmes penseurs eurent un rôle unique dans la vision œcuménique de Corbin. Ce dernier fut en effet convaincu que l'Orthodoxie russe a un rôle médiateur à jouer entre l'Orient et l'Occident, le Christianisme et l'Islam. À ce jour, aucune étude s'intéressant au philosophe n'avait élucidé cette influence. C'est pourquoi, le travail entrepris ici a pour but de combler cette lacune à travers divers thèmes tous traités en tenant compte de cette même influence : l'Orient et l'Occident, la sophiologie, la divino-humanité, l'eschatologie, l'angélologie et l'iconographie orthodoxe. Cette étude met l'accent sur les sources des positions philosophiques de Corbin, sa prédilection pour certains sujets, ainsi que son répertoire lexical.

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## Note on Spelling and Transliteration

Throughout this paper, I have tried to minimise the use of diacritics and italics to the greatest possible extent, except when citing from a source that does use them. In the spelling of Russian and Persian/Arabic names and words, I have not followed any specific system of transliteration, instead choosing spellings that are generally regarded as acceptable versions.

## Introduction: Corbin, Russian Religious Thought and the “Ghetto of Orientalism”

“Ce qui avait été du passé, désormais va descendre de nous”

(Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*).

The present thesis focuses on the French philosopher and scholar of Islamic thought Henry Corbin (1903-1978). In particular, it deals with Corbin’s adaptation of Russian religious thought to his interpretation of Islamic philosophy. Attesting to the importance of Russian religious thought for Corbin are the references in his writings to various figures associated with that intellectual tradition, including Aleksey Khomiakov (1804-1860), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891), Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919), Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865-1941), Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944), Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), Boris Vysheslavtsev (1877-1954), Vasily Vasilievich Zenkovsky (1881-1962), Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), Paul Evdokimov (1901-1970), and others. Despite their many divergences of views, these thinkers shared a certain base of themes and assumptions that define what is commonly referred to as Russian religious thought or philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Many aspects of Corbin’s work are highly evocative of that intellectual tradition. Showing the Russian content of Corbin’s thought therefore contributes to a keener understanding of his philosophical positions, choice of terminology, and interest in certain themes.

Yet until now, no one has studied in a comprehensive and systematic manner the influence of Russian thought on Corbin.<sup>2</sup> This work is the first focused attempt at such an undertaking. Its main goal is to emphasise and

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, trans. R.M. French (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), 172-207.

<sup>2</sup> When they have not been completely overlooked, Russian religious thinkers have only received passing mention in secondary literature on Corbin, perhaps the longest such instance amounting to a few lines regarding Berdyaev in Daryush Shayegan, *Henry Corbin: Penseur de l’Islam Spirituel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011), 22. In a paper presented in December 2010 at an international conference hosted in Istanbul by the Faculty of Theology of Marmara University and jointly sponsored by the Centre for Research on Religion of McGill University, I briefly highlighted Berdyaev and Bulgakov’s respective significance for Corbin. See our “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 upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 348 and 351.



illuminate neglected aspects of Corbin's intellectual debt to Russian thinkers. For example, whereas previous studies have focused on the role of German thinkers in Corbin's intellectual development in the 1930s, this formative decade is here revisited and reconsidered primarily with an eye to highlighting the specific contribution of Russian émigré thinkers to his thought. This brings important nuance to our understanding of Corbin in that period, as well as it helps illuminate some of his later views. Russian religious thought thus emerges in the narrative presented here as a decisive factor in Corbin's intellectual makeup, one that no accurate representation of his thought can afford to overlook.

One clearly realises the importance of such a study when one considers the fact that Corbin's work remains subject to gross and widespread misrepresentations across the academic disciplines of Islamic and Iranian Studies—two disciplines to which he made seminal contributions. It is indeed a curious fact of Corbin's legacy that, generally speaking, the most sympathetic responses to his intellectual project have come from outside these two disciplinary areas. Within those disciplines, however, his work has, with some notable exceptions, been received with much reserve and, in certain cases, opposition bordering on pathological hostility that might fittingly be described as “Corbinophobia,” to use Hermann Landolt's expression.<sup>3</sup>

Corbin's paradoxical legacy can be explained by the fact that he was “a philosopher standing in a field dominated by historians.”<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, he was a pioneering scholar who, upon his death in 1978, left behind some 300 critical editions, translations, books and articles, in which he mainly dealt with Twelver Shi'ism, Ismailism, Sufism, pre-Islamic Iranian religions, and Jewish-Christian prophetology.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, he approached these traditions as a philosopher, that is, he actively engaged with, developed and endorsed the ideas that he studied.<sup>6</sup> He was indeed motivated by the conviction that the Islamic

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Landolt, “Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 3 (1999), 489.

<sup>4</sup> Nile Green, “Between Heidegger and the Hidden Imam: Reflections on Henry Corbin's Approaches to Mystical Islam,” in *Le Monde Turco-Iranien en Question*, eds. Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Alessandro Monsutti and Anna Neubauer (Paris: Karthala, 2008), 250.

<sup>5</sup> A bibliography of Corbin's writings is provided in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 345-360.

<sup>6</sup> Corbin describes his personal approach to the study of Islamic philosophy in his letter to the Russian Orientalist Vladimir Ivanov (1886-1970) on April 25, 1956: “Voyez-vous, je ne suis pas un banquier qui aurais pris pour tâche de payer son dû à l'homme Nâsir-e Khosraw. Je me

philosophical tradition had something interesting to offer to the West, precisely because, as Landolt notes, “having preserved vital elements of the Gnostic tradition, it did not go along with the radical separation between ‘reason and revelation’ that had informed mainstream Western thought since the Renaissance.”<sup>7</sup> The late Charles Adams was therefore no doubt right in pointing out that Corbin had no concern for a comprehensive, systematic, disinterested presentation of historical Islam. His work instead rests on a clear value choice, “one that deems a certain element of the Islamic tradition supremely significant and others not to be worthwhile in the same degree.” Thus Corbin’s approach appears to be motivated by interests that are chiefly philosophical and not historical or scientific.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Corbin openly wished to see Islamic philosophy extracted from what he called the “ghetto of Orientalism.”<sup>9</sup> He viewed his study of the Islamic philosophical tradition as being part of a wider ecumenical project transcending

défends même pour cela d’être un historien. La personne historique de Nâsir-e Khosraw est largement dépassée par l’intérêt philosophique en cause. 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. Faute de cette sympathie, le philosophe égaré risque au contraire de porter l’auteur ou son école au maximum de platitude” (in *Correspondance Corbin-Ivanow: Lettres Échangées Entre Henry Corbin et Vladimir Ivanow de 1947 à 1966*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke [Paris: Peeters, 1999], 126).

<sup>7</sup> Landolt, “Between Philosophy and Orientalism,” 484.

<sup>8</sup> Charles J. Adams, “The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 137. Wouter Hanegraaff similarly remarks that the “ambitions of...Corbin were...*not* limited to the straightforward agenda of ‘filling in the gaps’ of traditional historiography, by calling attention to a series of historical currents that had been neglected by previous scholars.... [He was] after something bigger as well: nothing less than an answer to the question of what is true and of lasting value in...Islam.... In other words, underneath the historiographical project there was a normative one, which valued ‘myth and mysticism’ much higher than mere ‘legalism and doctrine.’ Now, the problem is that such normative judgments may be appropriate for philosophers or theologians, but cannot be supported on the basis of historical evidence. In the sources available to the historian, one simply does not discover anything about the truths or values of...Islam: all one will ever find is a wide variety of conflicting *claims* and *opinions* about such truths and values. One may perhaps regret this fact, but it cannot be avoided: the moment a scholar leaves the position of impartiality or ‘methodological agnosticism’ and starts favouring some of these claims and opinions as more true or valuable than others, he starts practicing what I have been referring to as ‘eclectic historiography’ on the basis of some philosophical or theological *a priori*” (Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 310).

<sup>9</sup> Henry Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohrevard,” in *L’Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet (Paris: L’Herne, 1981), 33. See also James W. Morris, “Religion after Religions? Henry Corbin and the Future of the Study of Religion,” in *Henry Corbin: Philosophies et Sagesse des Religions du Livre*, eds. Moh. Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet and Pierre Lory (Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 29.

geographical, historical, religious and institutional barriers. He indeed affirmed that

a philosopher's campaign must be led simultaneously on many fronts....

The philosopher's investigation should encompass a field wide enough to hold the visionary philosophy of a Jacob Boehme, of an Ibn 'Arabi, of a Swedenborg, etc.... Otherwise *philosophia* no longer has anything to do with *Sophia*.<sup>10</sup>

Adhering to this vision, Corbin rejected all academic compartmentalisation and proclaimed himself to be, above all, "a philosopher pursuing his Quest wherever the Spirit leads him."<sup>11</sup> His creative engagement with the Islamic tradition cannot be adequately understood in isolation from this fundamental ecumenical framework.

As will emerge in the course of this study, Russian religious thinkers had a unique role in the consolidation of Corbin's ecumenical project. He indeed stated that, "in attempting to establish a communication between Shi'ite theosophy and the world of Christian theosophy, certain theosophers of Russian Orthodoxy may be a first step."<sup>12</sup> This idea was informed by a similar view about Russia and Orthodoxy's ecumenical and mediating role held by the German Catholic theosopher Franz von Baader (1765-1841), who was a major influence on Russian thinkers such as Solovyov and Berdyaev.<sup>13</sup> As Berdyaev noted, "Baader had a great deal of sympathy [for] the Orthodox Church, and desired

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<sup>10</sup> Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohrevardî," 23-24. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Corbin are mine.

<sup>11</sup> Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohrevardî," 24.

<sup>12</sup> "Si je cite de nouveau un penseur russe en la personne de Berdiaev, ce n'est pas seulement parce que Berdiaev fut le grand penseur gnostique de l'Orthodoxie russe en notre temps, mais c'est parce que, pour une tentative d'établir une communication entre la théosophie shi'ite et le monde de la théosophie chrétienne, il se peut que certains théosophes de l'Orthodoxie russe soient une première tentative" (Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," in *Face de Dieu, Face de l'Homme: Herméneutique et Soufisme*, by Henry Corbin [Paris: Entrelacs, 2008], 304).

<sup>13</sup> See Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church: Its Thought and Life*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Anchor Book, 1963), 199-200. Corbin's writings contain many references to Baader, e.g., when he notes the "success of the Joachimite idea...in its effective influence on so many philosophers and theologians of History: on philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and on theosophers such as Franz von Baader, Solovyov, Berdyaev, Merezhkovsky" (*En Islam Iranien*, IV [Paris: Gallimard, 1973], 447). Also: "Revelation is a creative act of the Spirit which only the mystics and theosophers have been able to express: a Jacob Boehme, whose thought was so familiar to Berdyaev; a Franz von Baader, whom [Berdyaev] felt to be so close to the idea of theandry in Russian theosophy" (Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 308).

closer contact with it. In Russia he saw a mediator between East and West.”<sup>14</sup>

Corbin was consciously echoing and prolonging this attitude.

Taken in isolation from one another, the scattered references to Russian thinkers in Corbin’s writings do not easily allow us to make sense of their significance. However, read together, those same references appear in a new light that suggests the extent of Corbin’s debt to Russian thought. The failure to see this larger picture might explain why Russian religious thinkers have until now been almost completely overlooked in research on Corbin. This study is a first step toward filling this gap.

In terms of the approach suggested here, Corbin’s own indications regarding the hermeneutical approach to the study of religion can serve us as guidelines. Arguing for the recognition of the factor of “newness” in the history of religions, Corbin writes:

Although we have identified *motifs* “originating in” ancient Iran within the morphological diversity of Post-Islamic Iran (the whole gamut of Shi’ite forms, crypto-Ismaili Sufism, *Isbraqi* philosophy, alchemy, etc.), it is not their mere material presence which gives them their meaning.... What really confers meaning is the historically new *fact*, the founding will which brought possibilities into flower, into being-in-the-present then and there.... [This] founding will...is an irreproachable witness to the significance *in action* of a motif, and leads the possibility of the past back

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<sup>14</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 70. In an important letter to the Minister of Education in Russia, S. S. Uvarov, with the title “The Mission of the Russian Church in View of the Decline of Christianity in the West,” Baader spoke of the decomposition of the Christian West and the role of Russia and the Orthodox Church in the salvation of the West: “If there is one fact that characterizes the present epoch, it is certainly the West’s irresistible movement toward the East. In this great rapprochement, Russia, which possesses both western European and Eastern elements, must necessarily play the part of the intermediary who halts the deadly consequences of the collision. If I am not mistaken, the Russian Church for its part has a similar task to fulfill in the face of the alarming and scandalous decadence of Christianity in the West. In the face of the stagnation of Christianity in the Roman Church and its dissolution in the Protestant Church, the Russian Church to my mind has an intermediary mission—one that is more connected than is usually thought with the country to which it belongs” (cited in Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 71; the full letter can be found in Eugène Susini, *Lettres Inédites de Franz von Baader*, vol. 1 [Paris: Vrin, 1942], 456-461). See further Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 164.

into the present. It is essentially a *hermeneutic*—by *understanding* it, the interpreter implicitly takes on responsibility for what he understands.<sup>15</sup>

One might likewise argue that Russian concepts take on new and independent meaning in Corbin's writings. The presence of Russian "motifs" in his presentation of Islamic philosophy should therefore not be glossed over as an artificial and arbitrary amalgam of disparate philosophical elements. To dismiss Corbin's project as syncretistic would reveal an incapacity to grasp the unifying principle that is the source of the production, appropriation, and joining together of those disparate elements.<sup>16</sup> As he writes:

It is not the ideas that act by themselves, joining together and re-forming through their own dynamics. There is an Event, which is something new. But the positive basis of it is not what is received—it is that which receives, appropriates, understands.... Adding together different types of worldviews or ways of perceiving, merely yields a virtual totality. Their mere juxtaposition would never amount to the *explanation* of how this virtuality becomes an actualisation. On the other hand, when this actuation takes effect through an initiative that incorporates it, the elements thus incorporated can be seen as explainable by means of this actuation.<sup>17</sup>

In the process of incorporation, Corbin no doubt distorted the original intentions of the Russian thinkers. This work is emphatically not suggesting, nor should it be used to suggest, that Corbin's reading of the Russian thinkers was in any way accurate or unproblematic. Having said that, this work does not offer a critical comparison of Corbin and his Russian sources, nor would that be possible within the limits of a thesis. That task would further require competence in the Russian language and familiarity with the original Russian works, neither of which, at the time of preparing and writing this work, I had. However, the existing translations of Russian thinkers, as well as relevant scholarly literature, suffice for the task of outlining the Russian connection in Corbin's thought.

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<sup>15</sup> Corbin, *L'Iran et la Philosophie* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), 63-65. An English translation of this work exists (Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe [Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998]), but cannot be recommended without serious reservations.

<sup>16</sup> Corbin, *L'Iran et la Philosophie*, 60-61.

<sup>17</sup> Corbin, *L'Iran et la Philosophie*, 61-63.

The first chapter outlines the main themes of Russian religious thought that Corbin adapted. Rooted in Orthodox Patristic thought and inspired by the current of German idealism, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Slavophile thinkers such as Aleksey Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevsky conceived the project of a distinctively Russian religious philosophy, founded on an “integral” theory of knowledge combining faith and reason, to counteract the perceived excessive rationalism of Western thought. Taking up the Slavophiles’ original project, Vladimir Solovyov was the first Russian thinker to develop a systematic religious philosophy, one in which the themes of Divine humanity and Sophia were central. A contemporary of Solovyov, Nikolai Fedorov devised an ambitious, if rather eccentric “philosophy of resurrection,” which combined technological futurism with the Christian eschatological hope of the resurrection of the dead, with the aim to overcome death and resurrect dead ancestors. Elements of Slavophilism, Solovyov’s religious philosophy and Fedorov’s eschatologism provided the groundwork for the “religious-philosophical renaissance” at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which thinkers such as Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergius Bulgakov, Pavel Florensky, Vasily Rozanov, Lev Shestov, among others, sought new ways to think about and express traditional religious ideas.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, a number of Russian religious thinkers went into exile, notably in Paris, which became a thriving centre of Russian religious thought in the interwar period. There, Corbin met and collaborated with émigré Russian thinkers throughout the 1930s. As one of the most eminent and active representatives of Russian religious thought in exile, Nikolai Berdyaev was instrumental in the development of Corbin’s thought. His influence is evident notably in Corbin’s criticism of the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) and German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). The Eastern Christian theological perspectives that Corbin discovered through Russian thinkers fuelled his dissatisfaction with the prevalent secularism in Western thought and facilitated his vocational turn to the East at the end of the 1930s.

The second chapter focuses on Corbin’s time in Istanbul (1939-45), where he worked on editing Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi’s writings. Corbin’s approach to Suhrawardi and Islamic mysticism in that period was informed by his simultaneous interest in Eastern Christianity. Contemporary Russian theologians

who championed “romantic Byzantinism” contributed to Corbin’s idea of Byzantium as an archetype of spiritual conciliarity and unity (Russian *sobornost*).

The third chapter deals with Corbin’s adaptation of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov’s theology, notably his doctrine of Sophia. The theory of Sophia facilitated Corbin’s post-war reception of the ideas of the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). It further served as a model for his interpretation of the Shi’ite feminine figure of Fatima and pre-Islamic Iranian religious notions. This led Corbin to the idea a “Shi’ite Sophiology” and a “Mazdean Sophiology,” on the basis of which he built a continuous, unified narrative of Iranian religious consciousness from “Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran.” In a related aspect, Corbin adapted Bulgakov’s angelological views, notably his concepts of “angelological anthropology” and “angelic pedagogy,” to his interpretation of Islamic and Iranian angelological notions. Bulgakov’s Sophiological doctrine of icons further informed Corbin’s explanation of the Shi’ite concept of the Imam in iconographical terms, as well as his original exegesis of Andrei Rublev’s icon of the Trinity.

The fourth chapter explores Russian themes in Corbin’s understanding of “Iranian Islam.” Corbin adapted Berdyaev’s distinction between “historical Christianity” and “eschatological Christianity” to his distinction between a historical, legalistic, exoteric Islam, and an eschatological, spiritual, esoteric Islam. In a related aspect, he revised the notion of Divine humanity (or theandry) to express what he described as the “polarity” denoted by the concept of the Imam. In the process, he noted “convergences” between Berdyaev and Vasily Rozanov’s criticisms of mainstream Christianity and the propositions of Imamology. In another discussion, Aleksey Khomiakov and Konstantin Leontiev’s respective notions of “Iranism” and “Byzantinism” are considered in relation to Corbin’s understanding of Suhrawardi’s “Iranism.”

The tentative and exploratory nature of this work hardly needs to be emphasised. Much work remains to be done before we have a full picture of the Russian connection in Corbin’s thought. This would notably require extensive analysis of unpublished archival sources. While I hope to deal with these sources in the future, the present work cannot pretend to be more than a partial and preliminary survey of the subject.

## Chapter 1: The Russian Connection: New Light on Corbin's Intellectual Makeup

“As intended by God, Russia is the great integral unity of East and West”  
(Berdyayev, *The Philosophy of Inequality*).

The chapter outlines the main Russian themes in Corbin's thought. It further explains the context of his encounter with Russian religious thought, particularly Berdyayev.

The first section looks at the origins of Russian religious thought in Slavophilism, Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Fedorov. Important aspects of this intellectual tradition fed into the Russian “religious-philosophical renaissance” at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and later came to be reflected in Corbin's thought.

The second section outlines the activities of the generation of religious thinkers of the Russian emigration in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, a number of Russian thinkers relocated to Paris, which in the interwar period became a thriving centre of Russian religious thought. Nikolai Berdyayev became one of the most important exponents of Russian religious thought in exile, as well as a leading interlocutor in the dialogue between Russian émigré and French intellectuals. These ecumenical exchanges provided the context in which Corbin discovered Russian thought.

The third section focuses on Berdyayev's role in the development of Corbin's thought in the 1930s. In those years, Corbin was active alongside Russian émigré thinkers in the importation of modern German philosophical trends to France. Berdyayev marked Corbin's critical engagement with the views of the German existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger and the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth. In particular, Berdyayev's Fedorovian critique of Heidegger's notion of “Being-toward-Death” enabled Corbin to transcend the finality of death in Heidegger's philosophy, while his critique of Barth's radical separation between God and man in light of the Orthodox theological notion of deification (*theosis*) contributed to Corbin's dissatisfaction with the Protestant theologian. The Orthodox theological tradition that Corbin discovered in Russian



thought, in conjunction with his study of Suhrawardi and Islamic mysticism, motivated his decisive turn to Eastern thought at the end of the 1930s.

### 1.1. Aspects of Russian Religious Thought: Slavophilism, Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Fedorov

The line of thinking commonly referred to as Russian religious thought or philosophy has its roots in the ideas of nineteenth-century Slavophile thinkers, notably Aleksey Khomiakov (1804-60) and Ivan Kireevsky (1806-56).<sup>18</sup> Taking their cue from German conservative romantics and idealist philosophers, especially F. W. J. Schelling (1775-1854), and at the same time firmly rooted in Orthodox Patristic thought, the Slavophile thinkers were chiefly concerned with defining the identity of Russia and Orthodoxy in relation to Europe and Western Christianity (both Catholicism and Protestantism).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "It can be argued that the Slavophile philosophers were the first thinkers in Russia to philosophize specifically as *Russians* and to generate a self-conscious Russian intellectual tradition, marked by an interrelated complex of concepts and issues—specifically, what is now known as the tradition of Russian religious idealist philosophy" (James P. Scanlan, "The Nineteenth Century Revisited," in *Russian Thought After Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage*, ed. James Scanlan [New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994], 24). "Modern Russian religious thought took root in the days of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, watered by the ideas and metaphors of the earlier Slavophiles, whose study of German idealism had turned toward a recovery of their own ecclesiastic tradition" (Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson, introduction to *Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Judith D. Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson [Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996], 3).

<sup>19</sup> Paul Valliere, "The Modernity of Khomiakov," in *A.S. Khomiakov: Poet, Philosopher, Theologian*, ed. Vladimir Tsurikov (New York: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2004), 131; N.O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International University Press, 1951), 13-14; Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (California: Stanford University Press, 1979), 92-99. "The term *Slavophilism*, originally one of several derogatory names for a casual association of Russian thinkers, refers to an original group of six landowners: Konstantin Aksakov, Aleksei Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, his brother Peter Kireevsky, Aleksander Khoselev, and Yury Samarin.... As the Slavophiles stressed repeatedly, if they were united in a single movement, it was not by any partiality for the Slavic race, but rather by a shared commitment to the religious and universal calling of Russia; they appear to have preferred calling their movement the 'Orthodox-Russian orientation'.... The name *Slavophile* has stuck most firmly to Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, and their closest allies, as the proper name of the first Russian religious-philosophical movement" (Robert Bird, introduction to *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*, trans. and eds. Boris Jakim and Robert Bird [New York: Lindisfarne, 1998], 7). "The Slavophiles were attempting to respond to the dilemma of Russian culture noted by Pëtr Chaadëv in his famous First Philosophical Letter published in 1836: 'We have nothing that is ours on which to base our thinking.... We are, as it were, strangers to ourselves... a culture based wholly on borrowing and imitation.' To remedy this crisis of imitation of the West, the Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky proposed in 1856 a 'new principle in philosophy': 'I believe that German philosophy, in combination with the development that it received in Schelling's last system, could serve us as the most convenient point of departure on our way from borrowed systems to an independent philosophy corresponding to the basic principles of Russian culture,'

In their writings, the Slavophiles criticised the rationalism dominant in Western thought.<sup>20</sup> They argued that rationalism destroys the inner wholeness of the human personality, and that it is the main factor of social disintegration.<sup>21</sup>

Rationalism acts as a disintegrating force, they claimed, because

it transforms reality into an aggregate of isolated fragments bound together only by a network of abstract relationships.... By isolating the knower from reality and setting him up in opposition to it, rationalism casts doubt upon the reality and objective nature of the universe.<sup>22</sup>

While the Slavophiles perceived rationalism to be a “disease of reason,” they did not dispute the value of logical argument and science.<sup>23</sup> Their claim was rather that, left to itself, reason is insufficient to arrive at true knowledge of reality.<sup>24</sup> True understanding, in their view, cannot be content to grasp abstract

where he maintained there were ‘lofty examples of religious thought in the ancient Holy Fathers’” (Kornblatt and Gustafson, introduction to *Russian Religious Thought*, 7). Regarding Schelling’s significance for the Slavophiles, Frederick Copleston notes: “The Slavophile thinkers... certainly attacked Hegel as representing the culmination of western rationalism, but what they wanted was, not so much adoption of Schelling’s philosophy as such, as the development of a specifically Russian line of philosophical thought. It was the late phase of Schelling’s philosophizing which came to attract them, when Schelling was criticizing Hegelianism as a ‘negative philosophy,’ as a logical deduction of abstract concepts allegedly divorced from concrete existing reality. In their view Schelling showed an awareness of historical reality in its varied organic development, an awareness which could serve as a point of departure for the emergence of a recognizably Russian philosophical tradition, in harmony with the Orthodox religious spirit. Schelling’s philosophy of religion, as developed when he was combatting the influence of Hegelianism, may have had relatively little impact on the course of Western European thought, but it seemed to Slavophile thinkers to provide a basis or starting-point for the development of Russian philosophy. In other words, though Hegel and Schelling did appeal to Westernizers and Slavophiles respectively, ‘Hegel’ has to be seen as leading on to left-wing Hegelianism and ‘Schelling’ as a point of departure for the emergence of a Russian philosophical tradition” (Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 10: Russian Philosophy* [London: Continuum, 2003], 25).

<sup>20</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 174.

<sup>21</sup> Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 100. “Logical thinking, when separated from the other cognitive faculties,” Kireevsky declared, “is a natural attribute of the mind that has lost its own wholeness” (cited in Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 101).

<sup>22</sup> Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 101-102.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy: Selected Aspects* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 10.

<sup>24</sup> “Natural reason, or the capacity for abstract thought, is only one of the mental powers and by no means the highest: its one-sided development impoverishes man’s perceptive faculties by weakening his capacity for immediate intuitive understanding of the truth. The cult of reason is responsible for breaking up the psyche into a number of separate and unconnected faculties, each of which lays claim to autonomy. The resulting inner conflict corresponds to the conflict between different kinds of sectional party interests in societies founded on rationalistic principles. Inner divisions remain, even when reason succeeds in dominating the other faculties: the autocratic rule of reason intensifies the disintegration of the psyche, just as rationally conceived social bonds ‘chain men together but do not unite them’ and thus intensify social atomization. ‘The tyranny of reason in the sphere of philosophy, faith, and conscience,’ wrote [Yury] Samarin, ‘has its practical counterpart in the tyranny of the central government in the sphere of social relations’” (Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 100).

notions and relationships, but must attempt to penetrate to the substantial essence of things through a kind of immediate knowledge or intuitive apprehension.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, against the autonomy of reason, the Slavophiles set the ideal of “integrality” or “integral cognition”—characterised in formulas such as “believing reason” or “reasoning faith.”<sup>26</sup> This type of cognition involves an “apprehension by the integral spirit, in which reason is combined with will and feeling and in which there is no rationalist disruption.”<sup>27</sup> The Slavophiles saw the basis for “integrality” in religious faith. Faith, as Kireevsky put it, helped to fuse “the separate psychic powers...into one living unity, thus restoring the essential personality in all its primary indivisibility.”<sup>28</sup> The Slavophiles thinkers further believed that the Russian people, thanks to Orthodoxy, were still capable of attaining this inner integration. The people of Western Europe, on the other hand, had succumbed to the fragmentation of the psychic powers that rationalism entailed, and had consequently lost their capacity for inner concentration and mental wholeness.<sup>29</sup> The Slavophiles thought that Russia’s task in relation to Western Europe is imparting health to it through the spirit of Orthodoxy and Christian principles.<sup>30</sup>

The Slavophiles’ concern for integrality is notably reflected in Khomiakov’s doctrine of the Church. He worked out a conception of the Church as an “organic whole,” an interpretation that he supported with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which describes the Church as “catholic”—“in accordance with everything” or “in accordance with the unity of all.” Khomiakov’s conception of the Church is summed up in the key Russian concept of *sobornost*—an abstract noun that derives from the word *sobor*, which

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<sup>25</sup> Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 101-102; Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Lisa Crone, *Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Thought: The Philosophers and the Freudians* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> “The Slavophiles put forward an integral and organic conception of Russia as a contrast to the dividedness and complexity of Western Europe; they fought against Western rationalism which they regarded as the source of all evils. This rationalism they traced back to Catholic scholasticism. In the West everything is mechanized and rationalized. The perfectly whole life of the spirit is contrasted with rationalistic segmentation. The conflict with Western rationalism was already a mark of the German romantics. F. Schlegel spoke about France and England, which were the West to Germany, in the same way that the Slavophiles spoke about the West, including in it Germany too” (Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 58-59).

<sup>30</sup> Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 47.

can mean gathering, council, or cathedral, implying that the Church is based in the gathering of all her members.<sup>31</sup> *Sobornost* thus indicates “a unity which knows of no external authority over it, but equally knows no individualistic isolation and seclusion.” This conception is contrasted with Catholic authoritarianism and Protestant individualism.<sup>32</sup> In Catholicism Khomiakov finds unity without freedom and in Protestantism freedom without unity.<sup>33</sup> By contrast, *sobornost* is the “free unity of the members of the Church in their common understanding of truth and finding salvation together—a unity based upon their unanimous love for Christ and Divine righteousness.”<sup>34</sup> By re-interpreting the free unity of Christians as a formal union, the Western Church removed itself from the living unity of the Church. On the other hand, the true Church remained the Eastern Orthodox Church, not because of any proud claim to exclusivity, but precisely because she has maintained its *sobornyi* character.<sup>35</sup>

The Slavophiles’ views were a principal source of inspiration for the “religious-philosophical renaissance” in Russia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>36</sup> Khomiakov’s characterisation of Orthodoxy in terms of freedom was particularly important for Berdyaev (who wrote a book on Khomiakov).<sup>37</sup> Corbin later said that it was

thanks to religious thinkers such as Nikolai Berdyaev and Alexis Khomiakov, who were not official theologians, that a certain number of us, who were Westerners, became aware of what is specific to, and yet to come in, Eastern Christianity.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bird, introduction to *On Spiritual Unity*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 180. Khomiakov’s critique of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is discussed in Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 35-38.

<sup>33</sup> Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 35.

<sup>35</sup> Bird, introduction to *On Spiritual Unity*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> James P. Scanlan, “Interpretations and Uses of Slavophilism in Recent Russian Thought,” in *Russian Thought After Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage*, ed. James Scanlan (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 36.

<sup>37</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Lampert (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 165.

<sup>38</sup> “C’est grâce à des penseurs religieux comme Nicolas Berdiaev et Alexis Khomiakov, qui n’étaient pas des théologiens officiels, qu’un certain nombre d’entre nous, Occidentaux, ont pris conscience de ce qu’il y avait de spécifique et encore à venir dans le christianisme oriental” (Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 48).

Corbin shared with the Slavophiles their romantic critique of rationalism and emphasis on faith and intuition as valid modes of cognition.<sup>39</sup> The Slavophiles' adaptation of Orthodox theological notions to the conceptual language of German idealism in some regards parallels and anticipates Corbin's interpretation of Islamic philosophy through conceptual categories derived from modern German thought. In this respect, Corbin, like the Slavophile thinkers, is an intellectual heir of Schelling. From another perspective, the Slavophiles' critique of the perceived legalism and authoritarianism in Roman Catholicism fuelled Corbin's own critique of what he called "official Christianity," as well as of "official Islam." Khomiakov's concept of *sobornost* further shaped Corbin's ecumenical views and in some ways foreshadowed his conception of the *Ecclesia spiritualis*. We will return later to consider how Corbin adapted the Slavophile opposition between Western European rationalism and Russian Orthodox integrality (particularly in Khomiakov's historiosophy) to his interpretation of the theme of "Orient" and "Occident" in Suhrawardi's thought.

Although the Slavophiles outlined the programme of a developed Christian philosophy, and indicated some of the lines of thought that should be pursued, none of them carried out the projected synthesis. It was Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), Russia's first systematic philosopher, who first undertook the task of showing how faith and reason, religious belief and speculative philosophy, are capable of living in harmony and contributing to a unified understanding of the world, human life and history.<sup>40</sup> Like the Slavophiles, Solovyov criticised rationalism for its abstract character. In his view, an adequate philosophy "must be based not only on sense-experience, nor only on perception of the logical relations between abstract concepts, but also on an intellectual intuition of reality."<sup>41</sup> It should therefore "[seek] to combine with the logical perfection of the Western form the fullness of the spiritual intuitions of the East."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Muhsin Mahdi rightly observed that Corbin "was in many ways the last of the German Romantics" ("Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 [1990], 92).

<sup>40</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 97.

One of Solovyov's many contributions to the current of Russian religious thought is the concept of Divine humanity (Russian *Bogochelovechestvo*). In accordance with the Chalcedonian definition of the being of Christ as one person in two natures, the concept of Divine humanity refers to the "mutual penetration, and the union of two natures, the Divine and the human, while the distinction between them and their independence is preserved."<sup>43</sup> One of the fundamental functions of the concept of Divine humanity is that it

enabled [Solovyov] to overcome the dualism of traditional Christian theology between the divine and the temporal without falling into pantheism.... God is both transcendent and immanent, and the mediating principle that allows the world to become transfused by the Divine spirit—the link between God and created matter—is Man. The ultimate purpose of the universe is the synthesis of the temporal and the divine—universal reintegration in a living All-Unity. The whole of nature tended toward Man, and humanity harboured the God-man within its womb. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was the central event not only of the history of mankind but of the entire cosmic process.<sup>44</sup>

The concept of Divine humanity became one of the most characteristic themes of Russian religious thought. Berdyaev's reformulation of this concept marked Corbin's interpretation of the Shi'ite concept of the Imam, as will be discussed in chapter four.

Closely related to the concept of Divine humanity is that of Sophia, or divine Wisdom, which Solovyov identified with the mysterious feminine figure that appeared to him in three mystical visions.<sup>45</sup> In elaborating his views on Sophia, Solovyov drew on a wide variety of sources, including Plato and the Neoplatonists, Leibniz (the monadistic conception of ideas), Schelling, as well as the Jewish mystical writings of the Kabbalah (in which Sophia takes the form of a woman), the works of Jacob Boehme, where she is identified with "eternal virginity," and the writings of Swedenborg, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, and

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<sup>43</sup> Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R.M. French (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 36.

<sup>44</sup> Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 380.

<sup>45</sup> For a detailed presentation of the idea of Sophia in Solovyov, see Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "Who is Solovyov and what is Sophia?" in *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 3-97.

Franz von Baader.<sup>46</sup> These sources are equally important for Corbin, as evidenced by multiple references to them in his writings.

Sophia assumes various roles in Solovyov's writings. She is primarily identified with the divine archetypal ideas. She is ideal humanity—"the ideal and perfect humanity which is eternally comprised in the integral divine being, or Christ," writes Solovyov—whose role it is to bridge or mediate between God and the world.<sup>47</sup> She is also identified with the world soul considered as "the active principle which progressively exemplifies in the created world the eternal all-uniting Idea in the Logos."<sup>48</sup> Finally, Sophia is the fully developed divine-human organism, namely spiritualised humanity, the society of persons united in God-manhood.<sup>49</sup> The doctrine of Sophia became popular in Russian religious and poetic trends at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>50</sup> Chapter three discusses Corbin's adaptation of Russian Sophiology, which he discovered mainly in the writings of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, to his treatment of the Shi'ite feminine figure of Fatima.

A last figure deserving mention in this overview is Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1827-1903), who was, according to Berdyaev, one of the most "characteristically Russian" thinkers.<sup>51</sup> A humble librarian little known during his lifetime, Fedorov "was a man of a single idea; he was entirely in the grip of one notion; that of victory over death, of the return of the dead to life."<sup>52</sup> The "real enemy" of humankind, according to Fedorov, is "the blind, death-dealing power" of nature.<sup>53</sup> He therefore called for a utopian "collective action" in which all efforts would be concentrated on resurrecting the dead, and conquering death itself through the planned transformation of life, the subjugation of nature to man.<sup>54</sup> In fact, as Berdyaev explains, Fedorov regarded the resurrection of the

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<sup>46</sup> Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 381.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 158-159.

<sup>48</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 84.

<sup>49</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> N.O. Lossky described Sophiology as "a doctrine highly characteristic of Russian religious philosophy," and Fr. Pavel Florensky claimed that the idea of Sophia was the determining characteristic of the Russian religious consciousness (Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 81).

<sup>51</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 226.

<sup>52</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 224.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2, trans. George L. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 599.

<sup>54</sup> Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 386.

dead, and renewal of life, “not just [as] an act of God in regard to which man remains passive; it is the work of God-manhood, that is, it is also the work of collective human activity.”<sup>55</sup>

An admirer of Fedorov, Berdyaev for his part confessed to an “active creative eschatologism.” An important characteristic of this outlook is an internalised understanding of eschatology. Indeed, much like Corbin later, Berdyaev did not conceive the end of the world as an objective event predetermined to take place at the end of historical time. The eschatological awareness is not passive, but rather an “active agent in the cessation of the world.”<sup>56</sup> In Berdyaev’s view, eschatological acts can be enacted at each moment. The meaning of eschatology accordingly involves the end of the historical, objectified, material world and the beginning of another, spiritualised world through the transformation of the structure of consciousness.

Unlike Berdyaev, Fedorov envisioned resurrection in materialistic terms, as a literal revivification of the corpses of dead ancestors with the help of technological means. Berdyaev (and, indirectly, Corbin) agrees with Fedorov that death can and should be overcome, yet he does not interpret “restoration to life” in literal, biological terms, but in a spiritualised, internalised sense—something like “a completion of an individual’s potential spiritual personality.”<sup>57</sup> “Only in the spirit,” Berdyaev maintained, “is the victory over death possible, the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>58</sup>

Next to the themes of Divine humanity and Sophia, eschatology is another “specifically Russian” theme that permeates Corbin’s writings. Corbin was indeed fundamentally eschatologically-minded. Like Berdyaev and Fedorov, he perceived his own work as “a campaign against Death.”<sup>59</sup> Fedorov’s

<sup>55</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 225-226. See also Olivier Clément, “Apocalypse et Transfiguration chez les Philosophes Religieux Russes,” in *Apocalypse et Sens de l'Histoire*, eds. Stella Corbin and Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron (Paris: Berg International, 1983), 132-158.

<sup>56</sup> Fabian Linde, *The Spirit of Revolt: Nikolai Berdyaev's Existential Gnosticism* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2010), 210. See also Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Significance of Eschatology in the Thoughts of Nicolas Berdyaev* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

<sup>57</sup> George Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and his Followers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 138.

<sup>58</sup> Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 196.

<sup>59</sup> In her memoir of Henry Corbin’s final days, Stella Corbin wrote: “On the 26<sup>th</sup> of September the doctor authorizes the return to Rue Odéon. Henry, overjoyed, barely sleeps, plans to finish his works, and then, slightly troubled, asks the doctor: ‘But do you think I can finish this book?’



“philosophy of resurrection” thus found echo in Corbin’s interpretation of Iranian spirituality. Indeed, he later wrote: “Iranian religious thought...was the first to formulate, and remained constantly concerned with formulating, what may be called a ‘philosophy of Resurrection.’”<sup>60</sup>

Berdyaev’s eschatological views were of key import to Corbin, who adapted them to his interpretation of Shi’ite eschatology. He claimed that “the metaphysics of Shi’ism is essentially, like that of Berdyaev, an eschatological metaphysics.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, like Berdyaev, Corbin insisted on the personal responsibility and active role of man in the redemption and transfiguration of the world. Translated into Shi’ite terms, this implied that “the parousia of the [Hidden Imam] is not an event that simply occurs one fine day,” but rather an event that necessarily involves the spiritual consciousness and active collaboration of the Shi’ite faithful.<sup>62</sup>

Like Berdyaev, Corbin did not conceive of resurrection in literal terms, but rather as an existential, spiritual experience signifying the liberation of the subject from the confines of objectified, historical consciousness. At the basis of this lay the Fedorovian conviction that death is merely a symptom of the spiritual poverty of humankind, an inherited, but not inevitable evil. Corbin indeed rejected the idea that death is the inevitable end of life. In his view, a soul or consciousness that considers death as the limit of existence cuts itself from the experience of Eternal Life, and therefore condemns itself to death. The choice

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Dr. Gonnot: ‘Oh! I know you. Even if you had 100 years ahead of you, you would ask me the same question. You would have yet another urgent book to finish...and many more besides.’ Corbin replies, ‘That may well be! The thing is, you see, with my books, I am struggling against the same thing as you. Each in our own way, you as doctor, and I as historian of religions, are engaged in the same struggle, we are leading a campaign against Death’” (cited in Tom Cheetham, *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings* [Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2012], 12).

<sup>60</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 13.

<sup>61</sup> Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 49.

<sup>62</sup> “[C]e sont les hommes eux-mêmes qui ont imposé à l’Imâm son occultation; si l’Imâm est caché, c’est que les hommes se sont rendus incapables de le voir. Il ne peut se manifester, puisqu’il ne peut être reconnu. La parousie n’est pas un événement qui puisse survenir un beau jour. C’est quelque chose qui advient de jour en jour dans la conscience des shi’ites fidèles” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 331). “Attendre l’Imâm, cela veut dire que la parousie de l’Imâm dépend proportionnellement de chaque adepte. Cela, parce qu’en définitive...le sens profond de la *ghaybat*, c’est que ce sont les hommes eux-mêmes qui se sont voilé à eux-mêmes l’Imâm, se sont rendus incapables ou indignes de le voir. Nous pourrions dire en transposant: l’historien sacré raconte que Dieu a exilé Adam du paradis, mais le mystique découvre que c’est Adam, l’homme, qui a chassé Dieu du paradis” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 433).

between life and death accordingly befalls on the decision of the soul. As Corbin writes:

Neither life nor death, neither future nor past, are the attributes of things. These are attributes of the soul. It is the soul that confers these attributes to things which it declares present or which it declares past.<sup>63</sup>

Later we will see how Berdyaev's spiritualised Fedorovian eschatologism inspired Corbin's critique of Heidegger's notion of "Being-toward-death."

Corbin further adapted Berdyaev's spiritual notion of resurrection to his hermeneutics of Scripture. Using terms borrowed from the philosophical lexicon of Ismailism, Corbin interpreted resurrection primarily as implying liberation from the prison of the letter, the "exoteric." "Resurrection," he wrote in his essay on "Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis" (1954),

is the application of the *ta'wil*, the spiritual exegesis that carries every exoteric figure back to its transcendent origin...and...the Imam is the key to Resurrection.... [To] experience the religion of Resurrection [*din-e qiyamat*], the religion of the Imam, is to penetrate the hidden sense of the positive religion and at the same time to surpass it.<sup>64</sup>

In a similar sense, Corbin claimed that the 12<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d. c. 1191) "resuscitated" the heroes of ancient Iran through a "spiritual hermeneutics" (*ta'wil*) that re-enacted the heroic deeds as interiorised, "meta-historical" events of the soul on its eschatological journey to the spiritual "Orient." The "heroic epic" thus becomes a "mystical epic." We will return to discuss Corbin's interpretation of Suhrawardi's mystical recitals in chapter four.

The Slavophiles' ideas, Solovyov's religious philosophy, and Fedorov's philosophy of resurrection, fed into the "religious-philosophical renaissance" at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beside thematic and conceptual parallels, there are wider contextual affinities to be noted between Corbin and the Russian thinkers. It is noteworthy, for instance, that, like Corbin, the main representatives of Russian religious thought—including Khomiakov, Solovyov, Fedorov and Berdyaev—did not belong to the traditional religious clergy. Indeed, Corbin and the Russian religious philosophers were engaged in a similar pursuit of thinking

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<sup>63</sup> Corbin, *Philosophie Iranienne et Philosophie Comparée* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1985), 79.

<sup>64</sup> Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, trans. R. Manheim and J. Morris (London: Kegan Paul, 1983), 117-118.

about religion outside traditional and institutionalised frameworks. To this extent, they may be called “modern religious thinkers”—the first evidence of their modernity being that they engaged in theology at all.<sup>65</sup> Paul Valliere claims that the theology of the “Russian school”—which originated with Solovyov, Fedorov, as well as the older Slavophiles—grew out of the need to relate Orthodoxy to a modern society “consisting of relatively autonomous, unharmonized spheres of activity operating outside the tutelage of church or state.” The thinkers of the “Russian school” of Orthodox theology and their inheritors, Valliere argues, grappled with the challenges facing all faith communities in modern times, such as the tension between tradition and freedom, the challenge of modern humanism, the mission of the church to modern society, the status of dogma in modern intellectuality and the significance of religious pluralism.... This engagement reflected an interest in philosophy not just as a specialized academic pursuit but in the most basic sense of the word: the quest for *Sophia*, for wisdom, for insight into the meaning of life.<sup>66</sup>

The same observation may be extended to Corbin who, without being an official theologian, is a unique example of the complex encounter between traditional Islamic theology and modernity. Like the Russian thinkers, Corbin was deeply sensitive to the tension between tradition and modernity. He strove to surmount their antinomy by adapting traditional Islamic teachings to a modern context.<sup>67</sup> In his words:

Authentic tradition generates a perpetual renaissance, and vice versa; this is because tradition cannot be transmitted, in act and in fact, if the one who receives it does not in turn undergo a new birth, a spiritual birth.

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<sup>65</sup> See this point made with regard to Khomiakov in Valliere, “The Modernity of Khomiakov,” 130.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 2-3. Valliere elsewhere designates as “liberal Orthodoxy” the work of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian Orthodox thinkers “who sought a mutually productive synthesis of Orthodox theology and modern thought” (Valliere, “Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization,” in *Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson [Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996], 178).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. “[L]’œuvre de Corbin fut une révélation, non seulement elle traduisait les grands moments privilégiés de la pensée iranienne dans un langage clair et conceptuel, mais, ce faisant, les vieilles idées apparaissaient revêtues d’une robe neuve et éclatante: les séquences s’enchaînaient, des perles rares jaillissaient du fatras d’un monde scolastique verrouillé, l’univers iranien ressuscitait paradoxalement dans le langage clair de Descartes; et, se transmuant en un français élégant, ces idées se modernisaient presque” (Shayegan, *Penseur de l’Islam Spirituel*, 33).

But the spiritual birth is precisely the discovery and assimilation of the spiritual meaning.... Thus each new spiritual birth is itself the emergence of a new meaning to tradition.... This could be called the “hermeneutical expansion” of tradition. *Innovation* breaks tradition. In return, there is no tradition without a perpetual *renovation*, and the idea of renovation, of renascence, is concomitant with the idea of tradition.<sup>68</sup>

What Corbin in this passage calls the “hermeneutical expansion” of tradition describes the nature of his own project. Having said that, while Corbin might be seen as contributing to the continuation and expansion of the Islamic philosophical tradition, the proper context and meaning of his work transcend the horizon of the Islamic tradition in its historical expression. Corbin defines his own context and fulfills his own meaning.

## 1.2. Berdyaev and the Generation of Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris

The course of Berdyaev’s career reflects key stages in the development of Russian religious thought into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Berdyaev played a particularly important role as part of the Russian emigration abroad in helping familiarise Western audiences with Russian religious thought.<sup>69</sup> The following section offers a survey of Russian religious thought in interwar France, with a focus on Berdyaev. This sheds light on the context of Corbin’s encounter with Russian thought.

Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev (1874-1948) was born in the province of Kiev into an aristocratic family with ties to the French nobility and a tradition of

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<sup>68</sup> “[L]a tradition authentique [est] génératrice d’une perpétuelle renaissance, et réciproquement; cela, parce qu’une tradition ne pourrait se transmettre, en acte et en fait, si celui qui la reçoit à son tour ne passait par une nouvelle naissance, une naissance spirituelle. Mais la naissance spirituelle, c’est précisément la découverte et l’assimilation du sens spirituel, ce sens que...nos auteurs distinguent si fermement des circonstances extérieures et impermanentes auxquelles s’attache la *fides historica*. Alors chaque nouvelle naissance spirituelle est elle-même l’éclosion d’un sens nouveau de la tradition; elle en est une rénovation.... [C]’est ce que l’on pourrait appeler l’expansion herméneutique’ de la tradition. L’*innovation* brise la tradition. En revanche, il n’est point de tradition sans une perpétuelle *renovation*, et l’idée de rénovation, de renaissance, est concomitante à l’idée de tradition” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 262).

<sup>69</sup> As Lev Shestov remarks, “it may be said that in the person of Berdyaev Russian philosophical thinking appeared for the first time before the forum of Europe or, perhaps, even of the whole world” (Lev Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation* [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982], 232).

military service. Like many other young members of the intelligentsia, he was carried along by the new wave of social thought and became a Marxist in the late 1890s, albeit in his words “an unorthodox, critical and free-thinking one.”<sup>70</sup>

Between 1901 and 1907, he participated in a St. Petersburg-based movement promoting a “new religious consciousness” that shared mystical leanings in opposition to traditional ascetic Christianity.<sup>71</sup> The movement called for an era of the Holy Spirit (the Christianity of the “Third Testament”), founded on the concept of “holy flesh,” and which would synthesise paganism and Christianity.<sup>72</sup>

In that context was developed, according to Berdyaev, “the basic theme of Russian thought at the beginning of the twentieth century,” namely,

the theme of the divine in the cosmos, of cosmic divine transfiguration, of the energies of the Creator in creation. It is the theme of the divine in man, of the creative vocation of man and the meaning of culture.<sup>73</sup>

Sensing the imminence of violent social upheavals, Berdyaev moved to Moscow, and joined the Religious Philosophical Society composed of like-minded intellectuals who stressed the importance of religious values. This group of ex-Marxists published, in 1909, one of the most important books of the time, entitled *Landmarks* (Russian *Vekhi*), which criticised the predominant materialism and positivism among the intelligentsia.<sup>74</sup> In their emphasis on the “primacy of the spiritual,” rejection of materialistic determinism, and insistence on moral and spiritual regeneration, the contributors to *Vekhi* held positions similar to those advocated in the milieu of the “non-conformists” in France in the 1930s, in which Corbin was involved.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 117; Donald A. Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolai Berdyaev* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 40.

<sup>71</sup> See Ruth Coates, “Religious Renaissance in the Silver Age,” in *A History of Russian Thought*, eds. William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 169–193, esp. 179.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 22.

<sup>73</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 259. See further Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, “Eschatology and Hope in Silver Age Thought,” in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930*, eds. G.M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 285–304.

<sup>74</sup> See Andrzej Walicki, “Milestones and Russian Intellectual History,” *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 62 (2010), 101–107.

<sup>75</sup> Stuart Finkel, “Nikolai Berdiaev and the Philosophical Tasks of the Emigration,” in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930*, eds. G.M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 349. “[I]n order to counterbalance the radical intelligentsia’s preoccupation with revolutionary action (and the liberals’ preoccupation with constitutional and economic reform), the contributors to *Vekhi* insisted on the need for an inner conversion, a real *metanoia*, a change in consciousness. That is to say, whereas the leaders of the intelligentsia talked

In 1916, in the midst of the First World War, Berdyaev published *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, which he regarded as among the most important of his writings and to which he frequently referred throughout his later life.<sup>76</sup> Some of Berdyaev's central ideas conveyed and elucidated in *The Meaning of the Creative Act* appear to be of great import to Corbin's own intellectual project. In this book, Berdyaev expounded one of his most original ideas, namely, man's creative role in the transformation of the world. This concept brought him to an "eschatological metaphysics," which stressed man's creative role through his co-operation with God in bringing about the "end of time."<sup>77</sup> This idea, as already indicated, profoundly marked Corbin's interpretation of Shi'ite metaphysics, which he perceived to be "essentially, like that of Berdyaev, an eschatological metaphysics."<sup>78</sup>

Berdyaev's career was cut short in Russia during the year 1922 when Lenin organised the expulsion of some 160 members of the intelligentsia who were perceived to represent a threat to the Communist establishment. This mass expulsion all but sealed the fate of religious philosophy under the Soviet Regime, forcing the "religious-philosophical renaissance" to undergo an "involuntary relocation abroad."<sup>79</sup> One consequence of this was to allow the influence of Russian religious thinkers to spread across Europe. Thereafter the history of Russian religious thought became closely intertwined with the history of philosophical thought in the West. Corbin stood at the crossroads of this cultural and philosophical confluence between Russia and Western Europe.

Berdyaev had a leading role in helping organise the Russian philosophical community abroad. Upon his exile, he lived for two years in Berlin, where he founded a Religious-Philosophical Academy that regrouped exiled Russian intellectuals. Shortly afterward, in 1924, he relocated the Religious-Philosophical Academy to Paris, which by that time had replaced Berlin as the centre of the

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as though realization of the social-political structural changes which they considered desirable would automatically produce a desired change of consciousness, the contributors to *Vekhi* insisted that it was folly to suppose that overthrow of the existing regime would bring about a kind of miraculous transformation of human society for the better. What was needed was that people should set about changing themselves for the better" (Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 32).

<sup>76</sup> Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 46.

<sup>77</sup> Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49.

<sup>79</sup> Finkel, "Nikolai Berdiaev and the Philosophical Tasks of the Emigration," 353.

Russian emigration.<sup>80</sup> Paris became Berdyaev's home until his death in 1948. It was there that he wrote and published his main philosophical works, including *Freedom and the Spirit* (1927), *The Destiny of Man* (1931), *Spirit and Reality* (1937), *The Beginning and the End* (1946), and *The Divine and the Human* (1947).

In Paris, Berdyaev lectured for a short while at the Orthodox Theological Institute of St. Sergius. Founded in 1925, the theological institute had become, after the disappearance of all theological schools in Soviet Russia, "the only Russian institution of higher theological learning anywhere."<sup>81</sup> It welcomed in its ranks the philosophers, theologians and students of the Russian diaspora, becoming a unique pole of exchange, debate and theological renewal of the Church abroad.<sup>82</sup> Due to their willingness to engage with modern problems, revise traditional doctrines and present creative solutions, some of the thinkers grouped around St. Sergius came to represent a "liberal" school of theology within Orthodoxy sometimes referred to as the "Paris School" of Russian theology.<sup>83</sup> The thinkers of the "Paris School" were instrumental in the dissemination of Russian religious and philosophical themes abroad. No doubt the most distinguished among the "Paris School" theologians, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov had a decisive impact on Corbin's thought, notably through his Sophiological doctrine, as will be discussed in chapter three.

Another important pole for the growth and dissemination of Russian religious thought abroad was the monthly review *The Way* (*Put'*), a periodical organ of "Russian religious and philosophical thought," which Berdyaev founded in 1926 and edited until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.<sup>84</sup> The

<sup>80</sup> Michel Alexander Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom: Life and Teachings of Nicolas Berdyaev* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 139.

<sup>81</sup> Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet*, 195. See also Donald Lowrie, *Saint Sergius in Paris: The Orthodox Theological Institute* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954).

<sup>82</sup> Catherine Gousseff, "Une Intelligentsia Chrétienne en Exil: Les Orthodoxes Russes dans la France des Années 20," in *Intellectuels Chrétiens et Esprit des Années 20*, ed. Pierre Colin (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 119.

<sup>83</sup> See Paul Valliere, "La 'Scuola Parigina' di Teologia: Unità o Molteplicità?" in *La Teologia Ortodossa e l'Occidente nel XX Secolo: Storia di un Incontro*, ed. Adriano Dell'Asta (Seriante: La Casa di Matrona, 2005), 41-49.

<sup>84</sup> Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet*, 198; Vallon, *Apostle of Freedom*, 139. See further Antoine Arjakovsky's excellent *La Génération des Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe: La Revue La Voie (Put')*, 1925-1940 (Kiev-Paris: L'Esprit et la Lettre, 2002). Although the readership of *The Way* was largely composed of Russian émigrés, it also included "sympathisers with the culture of Russia, in addition to Christians open to the ecumenical dimension," such as Donald Lowrie, Berdyaev's biographer and missionary associated with the Fédération Universelle des Associations Chrétiennes Étudiantes (FUACE)—which Corbin presided in the early thirties—and the German

purpose of *The Way* was “to provide a place of expression for creative thought on the basis of Orthodoxy,” and it quickly became the main vehicle of expression for religious thinkers of the Russian emigration, as well as one of the most important periodicals of the Orthodox world.<sup>85</sup> That being said, the periodical was representative of no particular ideology, but rather of a number of trends of thought and Russian theologians and philosophers of various views who were engaged in carrying on the cultural tradition of their native country.<sup>86</sup>

Yet despite wide-ranging divergences, the authors of *The Way* were united by their common origins, the experience of exile, and their shared desire to “recover the living tradition of the Church in the context of creative freedom.”<sup>87</sup> In the editorial of the first issue, the editors of *The Way* declared that they consider themselves Orthodox, and placed themselves within “the tradition of Russian creative religious thought” as embodied in Khomiakov, Dostoevsky, Solovyov, Fedorov, and Nesmelov, “all of whom are close and dear to the editors of this journal.”<sup>88</sup> As Arjakovsky notes, for the intellectuals of *The Way*, this tradition of modernist religious thought was characterised by a “desire for political, social and ecclesiastical independence.”<sup>89</sup> The 1925 editorial read as follows:

There may be within Orthodoxy new currents of creativity, renewal and rebirth necessary to confront new challenges. The status of the Orthodox Church in the world has sharply and catastrophically changed, and before [the Orthodox Church] stand new tasks. A new type of Orthodox soul is taking shape, one that is more active and responsible,

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theologian Rudolf Otto, whom Corbin befriended in that period (Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 34).

<sup>85</sup> Gousseff, “Les Orthodoxes Russes dans la France des Années 20,” 120. Marc Raeff describes *The Way* as “the most significant religious journal of Russia Abroad.... The list of contributors...included practically all the prominent scholars and thinkers of Russia Abroad.... [I]t was...a journal of religious, philosophical and social thought on a high level of erudition and intellectual sophistication. It represented what was best in the intellectual life of Russia Abroad” (*Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration (1919-1939)* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], 144-145).

<sup>86</sup> Vallon, *Apostle of Freedom*, 140.

<sup>87</sup> Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 108.

<sup>88</sup> Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 50-51.

<sup>89</sup> Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 68.



more creative, more virile and daring. Russian religious thought contains creative ideas that can contribute to a Christian renaissance.<sup>90</sup>

In their call for a general Christian renaissance, the editors of *The Way* were expressing an aspiration shared by both Russian and non-Russian thinkers in that period. Christian ecumenism was indeed one of the main rallying points for Russian and Western intellectuals. Ecumenism appealed to the Russian religious thinkers because “it had long been a central purpose in the Russian religious-philosophical tradition,” which aspired for an East-West Christian unity.<sup>91</sup> In exile, the Russian thinkers were brought face to face with the painful problem of Christian disunity, which further motivated them to actively participate in ecumenical dialogues with other Christian denominations.<sup>92</sup>

From the moment he moved to Paris, Berdyaev was actively involved in movements looking toward the union of Christian communions into one ecumenical body.<sup>93</sup> In this, he was motivated by the fundamental conviction that it was “Russia’s mission...to become east-west, to unite two worlds.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, in 1926, he organised interconfessional gatherings between Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants under the auspices of the Russian Religious-Philosophical Academy.<sup>95</sup> At these meetings, Orthodoxy provided

a meeting-point between the various sections of a divided Christendom, uninhibited as it is by the weight of historical memories which impede mutual understanding between the various Western Churches.<sup>96</sup>

Next to these interconfessional meetings, Berdyaev held at his Clamart home monthly meetings with a group of French intellectuals where subjects of mysticism and spirituality were the focus of discussion.<sup>97</sup> Among the regular participants were prominent French intellectuals who belonged to Corbin’s social and intellectual milieu, including the writer Charles du Bos, the Christian

<sup>90</sup> Cited in Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 51.

<sup>91</sup> Catherine Baird, “The ‘Third Way’: Russia’s Religious Philosophers in the West, 1917-1996” (PhD diss., McGill University, 1997), 280.

<sup>92</sup> Nicolas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth-Century* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), 258.

<sup>93</sup> Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 84-86.

<sup>94</sup> Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 327. Arjakovsky notes that one of the defining traits of Russian religious thought is a will to achieve a synthesis between the spiritual and cultural heritage of Russia and of the West (*Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 35).

<sup>95</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 258; Vallon, *Apostle of Freedom*, 140.

<sup>96</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 259.

<sup>97</sup> On the “Clamart Tuesdays,” see Baird, “Russia’s Religious Philosophers in the West,” 314-328.

existentialist Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, the leader of the Catholic Personalist movement and founder of the journal *Esprit*, the medievalist Etienne Gilson, and the distinguished scholar of Islamic mysticism Louis Massignon who had a decisive impact on Corbin's career when, in 1929, he handed him a lithographed copy of Suhrawardi's *Hikmat al-Isbraq* brought with him from Iran.<sup>98</sup> These widespread and fluid exchanges between French and Russian intellectuals defined the context in which Corbin discovered Russian religious thought.

The Russian thinkers' profound concern for ecumenism and Christian unity undoubtedly attracted Corbin, who early on expressed an aspiration for intellectual and spiritual rapprochement between East and West. Thus, in an article titled "Regards Vers l'Orient," written when he was only 24, he declared:

Eastern intellectuals ought to know that there are in the West, among the young generation, souls that are entirely sympathetic to them—[souls] that, freeing themselves from all prejudice and all hypocrisy, suffer with them from what they suffer, aspire to hear them and to understand them, call with all their might for a close collaboration.<sup>99</sup>

Corbin's desire to break with French provincialism and sympathy for the East facilitated his reception of Russian thought.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 263. There is no indication that Corbin attended these meetings. However, it is worth noting that the Catholic neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, who was responsible for arranging the French membership at the meetings at Berdyaev's house, was "for various reasons...against Protestant participation" (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 263). As a result, "[b]etween 1930 and 1932...the Clamart Tuesdays were a strictly Orthodox-Catholic circle" (Baird, "Russia's Religious Philosophers in the West," 315). On Berdyaev's contacts in Paris, see Klaus Bambauer, "The Ecumenical Tasks of N. Berdjajew and his Contacts in Paris (I)," accessed on July 24, 2013, [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/bambauer/Berd\\_Ecumenical\\_Contacts.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/bambauer/Berd_Ecumenical_Contacts.html).

<sup>99</sup> "Les intellectuels de l'Orient doivent savoir qu'il y a en Occident, parmi la jeune génération, des âmes qui leur ouvrent toute leur sympathie; qui, s'affranchissant de tous les préjugés et de toutes les hypocrisies, souffrent avec eux de ce qu'ils souffrent, aspirent à les entendre et à les comprendre, appellent de tous leurs vœux une collaboration étroite" (Corbin [Trong-Ni], "Regards Vers l'Orient," *Tribune Indo-Chinoise*, August 15, 1927).

<sup>100</sup> Olivier Clément, *Berdiaev: Un Philosophe Russe en France* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 89. Cf. "L'immédiat après-guerre fut celui d'une remise en cause de la raison occidentale; la guerre avait induit la crise des valeurs occidentales et on entendit de nouveau les 'Appels de l'Orient,' selon le titre d'une enquête qui devint célèbre au début de 1925. Entre 1919 et 1927, une confrontation passionnée mit aux prises l'Orient et l'Occident; 1925 marque l'apogée de ce mouvement, qui poussait l'Europe à mieux connaître l'Asie.... L'actualité de ce débat amena Paul Desjardins à l'inscrire au programme des décades de 1925. Trois types de positions avaient été adoptées jusque là. Une minorité d'auteurs avaient exalté l'Orient régénérateur; des surréalistes à Romain Rolland, en passant par René Guénon, Keyserling et les milieux spiritualistes chrétiens (Chestov [sic], Berdiaev), le thème de l'Orient, domaine par excellence des valeurs humaines, rassemblait souplement des courants de pensée fort dissemblables. Sur une position moyenne se regroupaient les nombreux spécialistes universitaires de l'Orient. Sylvain Lévi, indianiste,

Corbin's enthusiasm for the East made him receptive to the Russian thinkers' idealisation of a sacred, Orthodox "East," in contrast with a decadent and rationalistic "West." The generation of Berdyaev and Bulgakov indeed condemned the predominant secularism and rationalism of Western thought at the same time as they criticised the perceived dogmatism of the Roman Catholic Church, which to them stood as an obstacle to the long-hoped for Reunion of the Churches.<sup>101</sup> This perception was further aggravated with the publication, in 1928, of the encyclical *Mortalium animus*, in which Pope Pius IX condemned the ecumenical movement and prohibited Catholics from participating in any inter-confessional encounter. The Catholic encyclical helped reinforce the hostility of the majority of the Russian émigrés toward Rome (as well as it may have contributed to alienating Corbin from Catholicism). As Arjakovsky notes:

The pontifical condemnation was especially cruel for those in the West who were in quest of universality.... Within the Russian modernist generation, the effect of the pontifical condemnation was to strengthen the identification of the contributors of *The Way* with Eastern Christianity. All the same, according to whether the archetype of the East was Moscow or Constantinople, the attitude towards the West varied. The heirs of the Third Rome, Berdyaev, Fedotov, Bulgakov, put the accent on the possibility, here and now, of bypassing the dogmatic divisions through eschatology. On the other hand, the eschatologism of Karsavin, Florovsky, Ilyin, the apologists of the newborn neo-patristic

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professeur au Collège de France, invitait les Occidentaux à une approche sympathique et intelligente de l'Orient. Il préconisait une politique d'échanges mutuels et adjurait l'Occident de reconnaître dans les civilisations asiatiques un certain nombre de valeurs fondamentales. Il concluait sur une note inquiétante en évoquant la 'déception' (*si*) des indigènes, et la fascination exercée par la Révolution russe. René Grousset, historien, campait sur un terrain identique, en rappelant les trésors de sagesse et les beautés de l'art hindou ainsi que chinois que l'Occident ne devait plus ignorer. Dans leur approche, on le voit, ces spécialistes considéraient la complémentarité des deux mondes. Enfin, une troisième orientation est tracée par les auteurs qui refusent (Massis) ou se tiennent à distance (Valéry) des valeurs de l'Orient. Pour le directeur de la *Revue Universelle*, il s'agit de dénoncer le péril oriental, incarnation de l'irrationalisme; quant à la vogue de l'Orient, Massis voit là essentiellement un phénomène germanique et anti-français. Paul Valéry avec sa 'Crise de l'Esprit' de 1919 avait donné le ton fondamental de l'après-guerre; cependant, les textes qu'il écrivit par la suite voulurent moins insister sur la fragilité européenne que sur la plénitude de son esprit. Rien-de-nouveau-à-l'Est, aurait-il pu conclure; l'Occident n'avait nul besoin de se régénérer par l'Orient" (François Chaubet, *Paul Desjardins et les Décades de Pontigny* [Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1999], 125-126).

<sup>101</sup> Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 70.

movement, was characterized by a return in time to the Byzantine epoch, to the times of an undivided Christianity.<sup>102</sup>

These Russian attitudes fed into Corbin's perception of the East in the 1930s, as we shall briefly see.

### 1.3. Berdyaev's Role in the Development of Corbin's Thought in the 1930s

The 1930s were formative years in the development of Corbin's thought. In the lively intellectual climate of Paris during the 30s, Corbin was actively and simultaneously engaged in a broad spectrum of intellectual pursuits that encompassed Islamic mysticism, contemporary German philosophy, Protestant theology, and Russian religious thought. This extraordinary range of literary and philosophical interests makes the task of charting and elucidating the various "influences" on Corbin's thought during that period a particularly complicated one. Previous scholarship has mostly focused on Corbin's engagement with contemporary German philosophical and theological trends, notably the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and the "dialectical theology" of the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968).<sup>103</sup> Here the focus is on the role of Russian émigré thinkers, particularly Berdyaev, in Corbin's intellectual development in the 30s.

While the fact that Corbin met Berdyaev in that decade is not unknown, there has been little to no attempt at explaining the significance of their encounter in the development of Corbin's thought. This may be partly attributed to the striking absence of any reference to Berdyaev in Corbin's publications in the 30s.<sup>104</sup> Further, in the two principal autobiographical sources concerning that period, Corbin expands on his intellectual engagement with Barth and Heidegger, whereas Berdyaev only receives a cursory acknowledgement.<sup>105</sup> Berdyaev's

<sup>102</sup> Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 188.

<sup>103</sup> The most detailed account of Corbin's intellectual development in the 1930s remains Maria Soster, "Le Développement de la Pensée d'Henry Corbin Pendant les Années Trente" (master's thesis, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2002).

<sup>104</sup> In a 1933 text, Corbin mentions, but without naming them, "[his] Orthodox friends" ("Philosophia Crucis," *Hic et Nunc* 3-4 [July 1933], 86), although this is not necessarily an allusion to Berdyaev.

<sup>105</sup> The two main autobiographical sources for that period are the 1976 interview titled "De Heidegger à Sohrevard," and Corbin's 1978 addendum to this interview, titled "Post-Scriptum Biographique à un Entretien Philosophique" (see Bibliography for full references). It is worth

underrepresentation in those accounts can be explained by the fact that Corbin had already acknowledged his debt to the Russian thinker separately in his inaugural speech as the newly elected president of the Nikolai Berdyaev Association on the occasion of the Berdyaev Colloquium held at the Sorbonne in 1975.<sup>106</sup> On that occasion, Corbin indeed claimed that it was “largely thanks to Berdyaev” that he was able to “face freely as a philosopher the philosophical problems [he] encountered.”<sup>107</sup>

Although he is not mentioned in Corbin’s writings in the 1930s, Berdyaev nevertheless had a major and unique role in the development of Corbin’s thought in that decade. Four interrelated aspects of Berdyaev’s influence are considered here: (1) as a “religious existentialist,” Berdyaev shared family traits with contemporary thinkers such as Karl Barth, Lev Shestov, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, who 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) 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. In this sense, Berdyaev served as a bridge between East and West for Corbin.

In the 1930s, Corbin met and collaborated with thinkers of the Russian emigration who made themselves at home in interwar Paris. Born and schooled in Russia, these émigré Russian intellectuals represented a philosophical culture that functioned as a genuine alternative to a generation of disenfranchised French intellectuals seeking to break with the philosophical rationalism, positivism, and

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noting that “De Heidegger à Sohrevardi” is based on the transcript of a radio interview that Corbin gave for Radio France-Culture on June 2 1976 following Heidegger’s death (May 26 1976). Corbin is interviewed mainly about his role as the first translator of Heidegger into French. The major focus on Heidegger has therefore more to do with the context of that interview than it is an accurate reflection of Heidegger’s overall importance for Corbin.

<sup>106</sup> Corbin is presumably alluding to that speech when he writes: “[J]’ai eu occasion de dire ailleurs ma dette spirituelle [envers Nicolas Berdiaev]” (“Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 43).

<sup>107</sup> “[S]i j’ai su affronter librement en philosophe les problèmes philosophiques qui m’étaient posés, je crois l’avoir dû en grande partie à Berdiaev, comme en témoignent les citations de ses œuvres dans mes livres” (Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” in *Colloque Berdiaev. Sorbonne, 12 Avril 1975*, ed. Jean-Claude Marcadé [Paris: Institut d’Études Slaves, 1978], 49).

optimism that characterised much of the philosophical establishment of the Third Republic.<sup>108</sup> As Ethan Kleinberg writes:

The arrival of figures fleeing Russia in 1917 via Germany infused French intellectual life with scholars raised on Russian literature, exposed to Marxist doctrine, and schooled in modern German philosophy.... These “foreign” intellectuals working on the periphery of the French university system and publishing in French provided concrete answers to the questions the generation of 1933 felt their own philosophical tradition was unable to answer.<sup>109</sup>

Émigré Russian intellectuals thus introduced the French intelligentsia to Russian and German thought simultaneously. “It is curious to observe that it is a Russian who is initiating the French into German philosophy,” noted Berdyaev in his review of Georges Gurvitch’s *Les Tendances Actuelles de la Philosophie Allemande* (1930), a book that was largely responsible for familiarising the French intelligentsia with recent trends of German phenomenology (Husserl, Scheler and Heidegger).<sup>110</sup>

Corbin’s discovery of modern German thought was intimately tied with the intellectual milieu provided by the Russian émigré thinkers. In the 1930s, he was active alongside Russian thinkers, notably Alexandre Koyré (born Koyrenikov, 1892-1964) and Alexandre Kojève (born Kojevnikov, 1902-1968), in the importation of German philosophy and phenomenology to France.<sup>111</sup> The

<sup>108</sup> “[T]he generation of 1933 wanted to move beyond Bergsonian spiritualism, which they considered overly subjective and optimistic, and this created a gap in the French philosophical world. The French neo-Kantians attempted to use recent advances in science to explain the increasingly complex nature of the world, but they too faced the harsh challenge that World War I presented to the French notion of progress. Thus both strains of French philosophy appeared insufficient to the generation of 1933. For them, the starting point of philosophy was the desire to come to grips with the events of World War I in relation to the optimistic view of progress and history embodied by French philosophy and the Third Republic.... To the generation of 1933, the traditional academic system seemed more concerned with perpetuating itself and its republican ideals than with confronting the realities of a changing world. The events of history had debunked the theory of historical progress that had guided the Third Republic from its inception. The answers the generation of 1933 sought lay beyond the familiar territory of French academic philosophy” (Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger’s Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* [New York: Cornell University Press, 2005], 8).

<sup>109</sup> Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 9.

<sup>110</sup> Cited in Clément, *Berdiaev*, 90. Gurvitch had around the same time written an article which partly dealt with Russian religious thought: “La Philosophie Russe du Premier Quart du XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle,” *Le Monde Slave* 8 (Aug. 1926), 254-272.

<sup>111</sup> See Louis Pinto, “(Re)traductions: Phénoménologie et ‘Philosophie Allemande’ dans les Années 1930,” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 145 (2002), 21-33; Bernhard Waldenfels,

journal *Recherches Philosophiques*, founded by Koyré in 1931, helped popularise new currents of thought, notably German phenomenology and existentialism. Thanks to this journal, French intellectuals could read French translations of works by Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger. Corbin collaborated as a reviewer of German theological and philosophical books for that journal. In addition to his efforts at familiarising French audiences with contemporary German existential and phenomenological trends, Koyré's studies of German Lutheran mystics, notably his doctoral thesis on the 17<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Jacob Boehme (1929), were important for Corbin.<sup>112</sup> Koyré's interest in mysticism and Romanticism further led him to explore the German sources of the Slavophile movement in *La Philosophie et le Problème National en Russie au Début du 19<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (1929), a line of research which he pursued in *Études sur l'Histoire de la Pensée Philosophique en Russie* (1950).<sup>113</sup> As for Alexandre Kojève—who, incidentally, was related to Vladimir Kojevnikov, an eminent scholar and personal friend of Nikolai Fedorov—he had written a thesis on Vladimir Solovyov before turning his attention to the study of Hegel and becoming the central agent in the renewal of Hegelian thought in France.<sup>114</sup> In 1935, in collaboration with Corbin, Kojève

*Phänomenologie in Frankreich* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983), 19-39; Christian Yves Dupont, "Reception of Phenomenology in French Philosophy and Religious Thought, 1889-1939" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1997).

<sup>112</sup> Berdyaev wrote a review article on Koyré's work on Boehme which appeared in *Put'* 18 (Sep. 1929), 116-122. An English translation by Fr. Stephen Janos of Berdyaev's article can be found at [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdyaev/berd\\_lib/1929\\_347.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdyaev/berd_lib/1929_347.html), accessed on August 12, 2013. Koyré, in turn, reviewed the French edition of Boehme's *Mysterium Magnum* published in 1945, which included two studies of Boehme by Berdyaev (A. Koyré, review of *Mysterium Magnum*, by Jacob Boehme, in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 133, n. 1/3 [1947], 215-216). On Boehme's significance in Russian thought, see Oliver Smith, "The Russian Boehme," in *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception*, eds. Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei (New York: Routledge, 2014), 196-223.

<sup>113</sup> See Wladimir Katasonov, "Koyré et la Philosophie Russe," in *Alexandre Koyré: L'Avventura Intellettuale*, ed. Carlo Vinti (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1999), 153-159.

<sup>114</sup> Alexandre Kojevnikoff, "La Métaphysique Religieuse de Vladimir Soloviev," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 14, no. 6 (1934), 534-554, and 15, nos. 1-2 (1935), 110-152. "During the 1931-32 academic year, in the Fifth Section (religious sciences) of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Alexandre Koyré gave a course on the religious philosophy of the young Hegel, based on his writings in Jena.... During the summer of 1933, having accepted an invitation to teach in Cairo, Koyré proposed that his young friend Alexandre Kojève replace him at the École Pratique.... From the fall of 1933 until the fall of 1939, Kojève led a celebrated seminar in Paris based on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (at the time untranslated in France) and attended by a small group of devoted intellectuals and avant-garde writers: Henry Corbin (who was later to become a specialist in Shi'ite Islam), Raymond Queneau (who in 1947 published the transcript of Kojève's lectures under the title *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*), George Bataille, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hyppolite, and Jacques Lacan" (Christian Delacampagne, "Heidegger in France," in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006], 250-251).

translated the *The Socialist Idea* of Henri de Man, who professed a voluntarist conception of history and argued that the “determinism, causal mechanism, historicism, rationalism and economic hedonism” of Marxism was inadequate to overthrow capitalism—a critique which, in some respects, echoed that of the contributors to *Vekhi* in Russian, as already indicated.<sup>115</sup>

Koyré and Kojève represent the milieu of fluid interpenetration between German and Russian thought and culture in which Corbin was embedded in the 1930s. While these “non-religious” thinkers of the Russian emigration were important in helping familiarise Corbin with modern German and Russian philosophical trends, their perspective remained agnostic, and as such could, at best, only indirectly address Corbin’s concern for religious truth.<sup>116</sup> Corbin’s intellectual and religious character in those years can be gleaned from the following portrait of him—probably the earliest one written down—by his friend the Pastor Roland de Pury. In a letter to Eric de Montmollin on August 21, 1932, Pury writes:

This Corbin is quite the most erudite man I have ever met. He is baffling. He knows French, German, Italian, Spanish, English, Arabic, and Persian. And enough to read: Sanskrit, Turkish, Dutch, Swedish and Latin. He is immersed in Arabic mysticism and is familiar with every turn of contemporary German philosophy and theology, all the representatives of which he knows personally. But, above all, all knowledge is for him directly linked to his immediate, existential task. That is, he hates history when it is other than a “presentation” of things and men, and he revolts vehemently against so many psychological,

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<sup>115</sup> Steve Bastow, “Third Way Discourse in Inter-War France,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 2 (2001), 173

<sup>116</sup> Alexandre Papadopoulos describes thinkers like Georges Gurvitch, Alexandre Koyré and Alexandre Kojève as “non-religious émigré philosophers” to distinguish them from the religious thinkers of the Russian emigration: “Ces philosophes [Gurvitch, Koyré, Kojève] ont ou bien écrit une partie de leur œuvre en russe ou sur la philosophie russe, ou bien sont restés en prise avec la problématique des idées en Russie” (Alexandre Papadopoulos, *Introduction à la Philosophie Russe: Des Origines à nos Jours* [Paris: Seuil, 1995], 248). Cf. “A cause de l’ouvrage sur Boehme et d’autres publications sur les Spirituels que Jean Baruzi étudiait d’autre part, beaucoup s’imaginaient qu’Alexandre Koyré était lui-même un grand théosophe mystique. Mais ce fut un homme d’une pudeur et d’une discrétion totales concernant ses convictions intimes. Souvent une boutade laissait croire à un agnosticisme, voire à un nihilisme désespéré. En fait, notre ami Koyré a emporté son secret avec lui” (Corbin, “Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 44).



cautious and unreal French methods. Simply said, he is Christian. He is quite a rare and benevolent French type.<sup>117</sup>

This portrait helps explain some of the motives behind Corbin's interest in Russian religious thought. As already indicated, a defining characteristic of Russian religious thought is its willingness to engage with modern issues and challenges while remaining rooted in the Christian faith. Thus, in the interwar period, Berdyaev came to represent a Russian version of "religious existentialism." According to George Pattison, the representatives of "religious existentialism"—which included the likes of Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), Lev Shestov (1866-1938), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Karl Barth (1886-1968), Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973)—were united by "a shared rejection, with varying degrees of hostility, of the ambition of formulating a unitary world-view," with Hegelian dialectic idealism being often the target chosen for their polemics.<sup>118</sup> In this respect, the "religious existentialists" found inspiration in the writings of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, as well as Schelling, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche, all of whom had criticised the systematising and totalising idealism of Hegel.<sup>119</sup> Writing in the era following the First World War, the "religious existentialists" also rejected the optimistic belief in historical progress that underlies *laissez-faire*

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<sup>117</sup> "Ce Corbin est bien l'homme le plus savant que j'aie jamais rencontré. Il est étouffant. Il sait le français, l'allemand, l'italien, l'espagnol, l'anglais, l'arabe et le persan. Et assez pour lire: le sanscrit, le turc, le hollandais, le suédois et le latin. Il est plongé dans la mystique arabe et n'ignore pas un recoin de la philosophie et de la théologie allemande contemporaine, dont il connaît tous les coryphées personnellement. Mais surtout, il n'est rien de tout ce qu'il sait, qui ne soit pour lui en rapport direct avec sa tâche immédiate, rien qui ne soit existentiel, c'est-à-dire qu'il hait l'histoire lorsqu'elle est autre chose qu'une 'présentation' des choses et des hommes, et s'indigne avec enthousiasme contre tant de méthodes françaises psychologiques, précautionneuses et irréelles. Simplement dit, il est chrétien. C'est un type de Français assez rare et bienfaisant" (in Roland de Pury, *Lettres d'Europe: Un Jeune Intellectuel dans l'Entre-Deux-Guerres 1931-1934* [Genève: Labor et Fides, 2010], 188-189).

<sup>118</sup> George Pattison, *Anxious Angels: A Retrospective View of Religious Existentialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>119</sup> On these forerunners of "religious existentialism," see Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 8-91. See further G. Pattison, "Fear and Trembling and the Paradox of Christian Existentialism," in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, eds. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 212. Fuad Nucho summarises Berdyaev's critique of Hegel as follows: "Berdyaev allocates a substantial amount of blame for man's predicament in history to Hegel who considered all history as sacred.... Like Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky before him, Berdyaev protested against Hegel's idea of a universal Spirit revealing itself in history. Hegel wanted to sacrifice man and his human existence on the altar of his philosophy of history. To history, Hegel subordinated not only man but also God, who, in his view, is the creation of history itself" (Fuad Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity* [New York: Anchor Books, 1966], 68-69).

policies and capitalism, while expressing their concern for the “integrity of the human person.”<sup>120</sup> They shared the view that

if religion is to become a live option for post-Enlightenment humanity, it cannot be presented in the direct form of traditional teaching.... On its own ground, the ground of reason and of fact, the Enlightenment will always prevail, but the exploration of new understandings and new methods of communication rescues the religious existentialists’ endeavour from mere negativity, opening a realm of possibilities that is far from exhausted.<sup>121</sup>

Meanwhile, a certain religious renaissance comparable to that which had flowered in pre-revolutionary Russia was also occurring in interwar France. A number of French intellectuals reached a similar point of disenchantment with Positivism, and were working toward a renewed understanding of spiritual and religious principles.<sup>122</sup> In this climate, Corbin found a major source of inspiration in the aforementioned promoters of “religious existentialism.”<sup>123</sup> Later Corbin said that

Nicolas Berdyaev and Gabriel Marcel are two names that the generation of the men who turned thirty between the two World Wars are keen not to separate, at least those whose philosophical vocation was engaged in

<sup>120</sup> Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 6-7. “Modernity is, in fact, a crucial element in any account of existentialism. On the one hand, existentialism itself is a profoundly modernist movement, embracing the modernist protest against submission to the authority of the social, religious and intellectual status quo. On the other hand, the existentialists (and the religious existentialists in particular) cast suspicious eyes on the modernists’ intellectual faith in scientific rationality, their moral faith in the principle of autonomy and their political faith in the pursuit of utopia. Existentialism is thus neither simply ‘modernist’ nor simply ‘anti-modernist.’ Rather, it is a movement from within modernity against modernity and involves a peculiar heightening of the self-critical tendency in modernity itself” (Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 24).

<sup>122</sup> Catherine Baird, “Russia’s Religious Philosophers in the West,” 287.

<sup>123</sup> In a letter to Lev Shestov on July 17, 1931, Corbin wrote: “Grâce à vous, j’ai pu encore accentuer cette décision intérieure, qui, acceptant la solitude, tragique peut-être, y trouve la force de surgir au-dessus des plaines bien gardées de tout rationalisme: paradoxe foncier, volonté de miracle. Il est bon de trouver un guide dans ces régions de brumes et de flammes. Plus que jamais d’ailleurs je suis orienté dans cette direction spirituelle. Débordant le cadre d’un travail sur un mystique persan, c’est l’essence même de la pensée mystique qu’il me faudrait affronter. Avec Seb. Franck et Weigel, c’est jusqu’à Böhme, Blake, Swedenborg, que je suis allé. Il me faut revenir et approfondir tout cela en contenant une fougue de jeunesse, et continuer de me nourrir de Kierkegaard, de Barth, etc. Ah ! Que de choses à vous dire et à vous demander, cher Monsieur... N’aurons-nous pas en français un écho de votre leçon sur Kierkegaard et Dostoïevski?” (cited in Nathalie Baranoff-Chestov, *Vie de Léon Chestov. II: Les Dernières Années, 1928-1938*, trans. Blanche Bronstein-Vinaver [Paris: La Différence, 1993], 87-88). We owe this reference to the kindness of Prof. Michael Finkenthal. See also Finkenthal, *Lev Shestov: Existentialist Philosopher and Religious Thinker* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 92.

the sort of problems which the mention of those two names suffice to evoke. The moments were privileged and unforgettable whenever we found Nicolas Berdyaev and Gabriel Marcel gathered as partners in a discussion charged with teachings for the young men that we were.<sup>124</sup>

In fact, in the 1930s, Berdyaev developed close ties with the “non-conformist” movements of the young French intelligentsia.<sup>125</sup> He notably became one of the principal inspirations for the Catholic Personalist journal *Esprit*, founded by Emmanuel Mounier, who like many Frenchmen considered Berdyaev to be “the voice of the Orthodox world” (a perception Berdyaev actually sought to dispel).<sup>126</sup> With the appearance of “Truth and Falsehood of Communism” in

<sup>124</sup> Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 47. Corbin is presumably referring to the Friday meetings at Marcel’s house, beginning in 1935, where he and Berdyaev were regular visitors (Joël Bouëssée, *Du Côté de Chez Gabriel Marcel: Récits* [Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 2003], 21 and 216). Corbin elsewhere also evokes these meetings: “La phénoménologie était aussi le plus souvent au centre des entretiens qui occupaient de longues soirées chez Gabriel Marcel. Il y avait là les philosophes Le Senne, Louis Lavelle, aussi agréable à entendre que pénible à lire, et puis, comme autour de Koyré, maints collègues israélites ayant fui l’Allemagne. ‘Jaspers et Heidegger’: autre sujet de confrontation dont les imprévus amenaient la même fréquente exclamation. ‘Cela me semble très grave... C’est très grave,’ entendions-nous répéter le cher Gabriel Marcel sur les hautes notes pointues de la gamme. Et ces gravités accumulées pesaient de plus en plus lourd sur nos cogitations” (“Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 44). In his autobiography, Berdyaev recalled the philosophical gatherings at Marcel’s home as “the only kind of meetings likely to have a permanent value. They were attended not only by the French but [also] by Germans, Russians and Spaniards, both young and old, whose contribution had a decisive influence on the work of the group. It was probably the only place in France where problems of phenomenology and existentialist philosophy were seriously studied. The names of Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, Jaspers, and many other foreign thinkers were constantly to be heard” (*Dream and Reality*, 275).

<sup>125</sup> In his autobiography, Berdyaev writes: “In the years preceding the catastrophe of the second world-war there were a number of important movements among the younger generation in France which, in contradistinction from most of the other youth movements in Europe, were born of a genuine search for truth.... I felt confident when meeting these young people, not only because I knew they had thought deeply but because their minds had lived, too” (*Dream and Reality*, 275). Berdyaev’s intimate acquaintance with the problems and aspirations of the generation of young French intellectuals can be gleaned from a 1933 article first published in *Put’*, and which subsequently appeared in English under the title “Young France and Social Justice” (*Dublin Review* 94 [Jan. 1935]: 37-46). In its demand for a social revolution founded on a spiritual basis, the young generation of modern France, Berdyaev writes in that article, “somewhat recalls the youth of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century” (38). What motivates and unites the dissatisfaction of this generation? Both left wing and right wing groups are unanimous in their protest against “the contemporary parliamentary regime, the corruption of politicians and ministers, against the scepticism and free-thinking of the liberal and radical bourgeoisie” (38). Even when these groups are at a variance, they all “repudiate materialism, scepticism, godlessness; all are in quest of spiritual and religious foundations upon which to build up the new social order” (42). Because of their “anti-bourgeoisism, anti-capitalism, anti-liberalism,” many of these groups share Fascist or Communist sympathies. However, according to Berdyaev, “[t]he most interesting young groups...are in quest of new ways. Though definitely anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist, these groups also differ from Communism and Fascism by being anti-totalitarian, and resolutely decided to safeguard the freedom of the spirit and the dignity of human personality” (39-40).

<sup>126</sup> “Il semble même, si l’on en croit une note d’E. Mounier du 8 décembre 1930, que l’idée de la revue et du mouvement *Esprit* ait pris corps ce même jour à l’occasion d’une réunion dans la

the first issue of *Esprit* in 1932, then in 1933, with his article “Russian Christianity and the Modern World,” Berdyaev familiarised the French audience with the Russian eschatological tradition from Dostoevsky to Fedorov. In addition to his contributions to *Esprit*, four anthologies of his articles were published in French between 1932-1934, in addition to the publication of the French editions of *Freedom and the Spirit* in 1933, and *The Destiny of Man* in 1935, through which his philosophical views became known to the French public.<sup>127</sup>

The journal *Hic et Nunc* emerged from the same “non-conformist” milieu as *Esprit*.<sup>128</sup> Founded in 1931 with the collaboration of Corbin, Denis de Rougemont, Roland de Pury, Albert-Marie Schmidt and Roger Jézéquiél, *Hic et Nunc* was a short-lived journal for Protestant theological renewal inspired by the “dialectical theology” of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth.<sup>129</sup> As Bernard Reymond indicates, the carriers of the Barthian wave were “great readers of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, but also of Nicolas Berdyaev.” In reading the articles of these young Barthians “one becomes convinced that they discovered Barth at the same time as these other thinkers.”<sup>130</sup> Indeed, one of the first publishers of Berdyaev’s

maison de Berdjæev à Clamart” (Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l’Émigration Russe*, 373-374). See further Catherine Baird, “Religious Communism? Nicolai Berdyaev’s Contribution to *Esprit*’s Interpretation of Communism,” *Canadian Journal of History* 30, no. 1 (1995), 29-47.

<sup>127</sup> Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l’Émigration Russe*, 374-375 and 380.

<sup>128</sup> “Cette revue [*Hic et Nunc*] est née, en effet, dans le prolongement, ou presque, de la revue *Esprit*. Elle est l’une des manifestations de tout ce qui, d’une manière ou d’une autre, s’est reconnu dans le manifeste personnaliste, en particulier dans cette phrase: ‘Nous ne sommes ni individualistes, ni collectivistes, nous sommes *personnalistes*’...le terme étant d’ailleurs assez polyvalent pour servir de carrefour à des tendances qui ne se recouvraient pas exactement.

Selon Denis de Rougemont, Emmanuel Mounier aurait été assez fâché de l’apparition de *Hic et Nunc*. Mounier désirait en effet faire d’*Esprit* une revue dans laquelle les chrétiens personnalistes des diverses confessions pourraient se sentir chez eux. Dès le début, des protestants ont ainsi fait partie de sa rédaction. Mais de Rougemont et ses amis avaient le sentiment que ce regroupement sous la bannière d’*Esprit* restait une initiative encore très catholique, sous-tendue peut-être par un désir plus ou moins conscient de récupération des non-catholiques. Sur ce point l’attitude de Mounier a certainement manqué de clarté. Aussi Rougemont (qui était un peu le meneur de l’entreprise), Corbin, Jézéquiél, Pury et Schmidt conçurent-ils l’idée d’éditer leur propre revue protestante” (Bernard Reymond, *Théologien ou Prophète? Les Francophones et Karl Barth avant 1945* [Lausanne: L’Âge d’Homme, 1985], 63).

<sup>129</sup> See Arnaud Baubérot, “La Revue *Hic et Nunc*: Les Jeunes-Turcs du Protestantisme et l’*Esprit* des Années Trente,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 149 (2003), 569-589.

<sup>130</sup> Bernard Reymond, *Les Francophones et Karl Barth avant 1945*, 26. Commenting on Berdyaev’s book *The New Middle Ages*, Pury wrote to a friend in 1931: “[J]e ne crois pas avoir lu de considérations sur la société et l’histoire qui partent d’un point de vue aussi uniquement et vraiment spirituel. Il ne s’agit que de la Vérité.... [T]out y est vrai, tout vous pénètre peu à peu et s’impose avec certitude. Quoi qu’il regarde, le royaume de Dieu seul est pris en considération. Il y a d’ailleurs des pages sur l’humanisme et la démocratie, sur l’homme sans Dieu qui cesse d’être homme, qui sont à tel point ce que j’aurais voulu dire, que c’en est dépitant” (Roland de Pury to Eric de Montmollin, August 10, 1931, in Pury, *Lettres d’Europe*, 80-81).

works in French was the publisher “Je Sers”, whose literary director beginning in 1931 was Denis de Rougemont, co-founder of *Hic et Nunc* and close friend of Corbin. The same firm was simultaneously publishing Karl Barth, Kierkegaard, Ortega y Gasset, Heidegger, and was responsible for printing the issues of *Hic et Nunc*.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, as Catherine Baird remarks, Barth “had developed concurrently many themes which corresponded to those promoted by the Russian religious philosophers.” A proponent of Christian action and “authentic” Christian belief, Barth “saw the need for a revitalization of Christian principles in order to combat the rising appeal of ideologies.”<sup>132</sup> In this respect, the Protestant theologian was part, alongside the Russian religious thinkers, of the general “phenomenon of Christian or spiritual resistance against materialist ideologies, economic technocracies, and atomizing politics which prevailed during the *entre-deux-guerres* years.”<sup>133</sup>

Despite the shared commitment to a Christian spiritual resistance to the secular philosophies of their age, and the common link to the existentialist lineage of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, there were many important divergences between Berdyaev and Barth. In fact, Berdyaev advanced a lengthy critique of Barth’s theology in an article titled “The Crisis of Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy,” which appeared in German in 1929 in the journal *Orient und Occident*, founded by Fritz Lieb.<sup>134</sup> This article foreshadowed Corbin’s subsequent critique of Barth. Here only the most salient points of Berdyaev’s critique are outlined.

<sup>131</sup> John Hellman, *The Communitarian Third Way: Alexandre Marc’s Ordre Nouveau, 1930-2000* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 32.

<sup>132</sup> Baird, “Russia’s Religious Philosophers in the West,” 368. Cf. “Il faut...souligner que l’analyse et la dénonciation des États totalitaires ne se font pas essentiellement au nom de la démocratie ou des principes de [1789]: les barthiens parlent au nom de leur foi et ils refusent, à la différence d’autres protestants, comme par exemple ceux du mouvement du Christianisme Social, d’identifier le christianisme avec un système politique quel qu’il soit” (Rémi Fabre, “Les Étudiants Protestants Face aux Totalitarismes dans les Années Trente,” *Revue d’Histoire de l’Église de France* 73, no. 191 [1987], 282-283).

<sup>133</sup> Baird, “Russia’s Religious Philosophers in the West,” 365.

<sup>134</sup> A mutual friend of Corbin and Berdyaev, Fritz Lieb was a Swiss theologian who went into exile in France following the Nazi *Machtergreifung* in 1933. Corbin later gave this memorable account of Lieb: “Among Karl Barth’s colleagues was Fritz Lieb, a touching figure in his mystical love for Orthodox Russia, a love so unlimited that he seemed to have never realised that Holy Orthodox Russia had for the moment...went back up to the sky.... Our link was our mutual friendship with Nicolas Berdyaev.... I am citing Fritz Lieb as a representative case: he was at once an adept of Karl Barth and a lover of [Valentin] Weigel, Paracelsus, and the Sophiology of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. More than once I asked him: ‘How do you reconcile this with that, my dear Lieb?’ ‘Oh, it’s difficult, it’s difficult,’ he would answer me. And he had tears in his eyes” (“Post-

In the first instance, Berdyaev recognises in Barthianism “the most important and serious phenomenon in Protestantism, reflecting its inner shock and crisis.”<sup>135</sup> He praises Barth and his followers for breaking with the cultural idealism characterising 19<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant liberal thought, and for desiring a return to the sources of divine revelation. In its critique of religion as a cultural phenomenon Barthian thought converges with Russian religious thought, Berdyaev notes.<sup>136</sup> Under Kierkegaard’s influence, the Barthian current regards faith as something resistant to any incorporation by reason—as a *dementia* or a paradox. Yet, one consequence of this position, according to Berdyaev, is a depreciation of culture, history, and human life, such that, “only God remains; the human person, however, and human behaviour must disappear.”<sup>137</sup> In his

Scriptum Biographique,” 43). Cf. “Among the friends I made during my exile in the West I must also mention the Swiss theologian and leading socialist Lieb, of whom I think with great affection. He had a first love to which he remained for ever faithful—Russia and the Russians. He liked to be called Fyodor Ivanovich, although his real first name was Fritz! This, a certain tendency to dishevelment, and an enormous Russian library were the only Russian things about him. He had a heart of gold and a nature entirely free of conventions. I greatly valued his friendship, as well as his immense erudition and intellectual keenness. He lived on, and was torn by, the horns of a somewhat unusual dilemma: Barthianism and Russian religious ideas, for which he developed a touching attachment. I do not think I ever had such a loyal friend among non-Russians” (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 276-277). See further Erich Bryner, “Berdjajew und die Schweiz,” *Stimme der Orthodoxie* 3 (1996), 47-49, and Klaus Bambauer, “Die Zeitschrift ‘Orient und Occident,’” accessed on January 9, 2013, <http://www.borisogleb.de/orient.html>.

<sup>135</sup> “Der Barthianismus oder die sogenannte dialektische Theologie ist die bedeutsamste und ernsteste Erscheinung innerhalb des Protestantismus, in der sich dessen innere Erschütterung und die sich in ihm vollziehende Krisis widerspiegelt” (Berdyaev, “Die Krisis des Protestantismus und die Russische Orthodoxie,” *Orient und Occident* 1 [1929], 11). A summary of Berdyaev’s critique of Barth can be found in Théodore Strotmann, “Karl Barth et l’Orient Chrétien,” *Irénikon* 42, no. 1 (1969), 33-52, esp. 36-43.

<sup>136</sup> “Der Barthianismus stellt einer Auffassung der Religion als Kulturercheinung schroff ein Verständnis der Religion als Krisis der Kultur entgegen. Hierin berührt er sich mit dem russisch-religiösen Gedanken, der das Problem der Kulturkrisis immer sehr scharf formuliert und die Kultur als Lüge, als ein Scheinleben, von dem die Gotteswahrheit verdeckt wird, entlarvt hat” (Berdyaev, “Die Krisis des Protestantismus,” 12).

<sup>137</sup> “K. Barth und seine Nachfolger zeichnet eine lebhaft empfundene der allgemeinen Sündhaftigkeit aus, ein Gefühl, das dem 19. Jahrhundert in weitem Sinne verlustig gegangen war. Und die Sünde wird in erster Linie als Verletzung des göttlichen Gesetzes verstanden. Der Glaube ist Negierung der Vernunft, eine *dementia*, eine Paradoxie. Hier zeigt sich besonders der Einfluß Kierkegaards. Glauben kann man nur an Gott. So erfolgt hier eine Entwertung der Kultur, der Geschichte, des sozialen Lebens, auf das so ganz ausschließlich das Bewußtsein des europäischen Menschen gerichtet war.... Nur Gott bleibt übrig, der Mensch aber und das menschliche Verhalten müssen verschwinden. Das Müdesein am Menschen ist das Grundmotiv der ganzen Strömung” (Berdyaev, “Die Krisis des Protestantismus,” 12). Paraphrasing Berdyaev’s critique of Barth, Spinka writes: “Barth’s crisis theology reflects the same antihumanist orientation which one finds in so much of the postwar culture. The world and man are bereft of all divine elements and are regarded as incapable of turning toward God. The Fall had utterly defaced the divine image in man. God had thus become ‘wholly other’.... [S]ince God is wholly transcendent, not at all immanent, the world is literally left Godless. Here the extremes meet: atheistic secularism and the most impassioned modern theism agree. Berdyaev concludes, ‘This is a

commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Barth argued that God is "wholly other," totally unlike humankind—that there is an "infinite qualitative difference" between God and man. Barth thereby separates man and God.<sup>138</sup> Berdyaev consequently criticises Barth for lacking an understanding of the essence of Christian mysticism, which, he asserts, is based on the deification (Greek *theosis*) of the human person in the divine light: "In [genuine Christian mysticism]," according to Berdyaev, "there is a unification of the human person with God without the two natures becoming mixed, without the disappearance of the human person."<sup>139</sup>

According to Berdyaev, the concrete facts of the life of Jesus (i.e. the historical Jesus) have for Barth and his school no importance, such that "they deprive history of its religious meaning." This could be seen as a consequence of biblical criticism, which has "upset the integrity of their faith."<sup>140</sup> However, separating the Christ of revelation from the Christ of history is in the final analysis to renounce the Incarnation. This would imply that Christ has never entered history, but rather that he has remained outside and above mankind. By positing a radical dualism between history and metahistory, history remains a neutral domain, loses its religious significance and is left to secularisation.<sup>141</sup> Berdyaev consequently accuses Barth of rationalism and of thereby negating the

passionate reaction against humanism in Christianity which has resulted in a degradation, or even a denial, of man" (Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 78-79).

<sup>138</sup> Cf. Paul Evdokimov, "Principes de l'Herméneutique Orthodoxe: 1. L'Orthodoxie devant l'Interprétation de Karl Barth," *Contacts* 38 (1986), 296-297.

<sup>139</sup> "Die falsche Mystik führt zu der Negierung der menschlichen Persönlichkeit, der menschlichen Freiheit, zur Verneinung der Liebe als des mystischen Höhenwegs, sie gleitet monistisch, pantheistisch ab. Der Pantheismus ist nicht echte Mystik, für den Pantheismus ist eine theosis unmöglich, weil ja alles von vornherein göttlich ist, für den Pantheismus gibt es keinen pneumatischen Weg. In der echten christlichen Mystik bleibt die Persönlichkeit unangetastet. In ihr wird die Vereinigung des Menschen mit Gott erreicht ohne Vermischung der Naturen, ohne daß der Mensch verschwindet" (Berdyaev, "Die Krisis des Protestantismus," 14).

<sup>140</sup> "Die historischen Tatsachen sind ihnen nicht wichtig.... Es wird hier klar, daß diese Leute durch die Bibelkritik hindurchgegangen sind, und daß bei ihnen die Integrität des Glaubens verletzt ist" (Berdyaev, "Die Krisis des Protestantismus," 14).

<sup>141</sup> Strotmann, "Karl Barth et l'Orient Chrétien," 38. Cf. "[C]e qu'on a appelé le 'christomonisme' de Barth, manifeste... un sens insuffisant de l'Histoire. C'est qu'il place le point de départ non pas dans l'Incarnation historique mais dans l'éternité de la voie intradivine.... La création apparaît dépouillée de sa propre valeur et de son autonomie légitime au point qu'on se demande s'il se passe encore quelque chose dans l'Histoire puisque tout est déjà accompli dans l'éternité. Ce qui se passe entre Dieu et l'homme n'est qu'une explication de ce qui s'est déjà passé en Dieu.... L'Incarnation ne se produit pas dans l'Histoire à proprement parler, mais ce qui s'est passé dans l'éternité nous est seulement communiqué et prêché. Malgré la grandeur indiscutable de cette vision, quand l'Histoire est regardée de l'éternité, il ne se passe rien de nouveau dans le temps et l'homme risque de perdre sa réalité et de se décourager" (Evdokimov, "L'Orthodoxie devant l'Interprétation de Karl Barth," 301).

Incarnation.<sup>142</sup> In contrast with Barth, Berdyaev posits that “the coming of Christ has a cosmic, objective character, and involves a change in the world and in humanity, by which the transcendent gulf between Creator and creature is overcome.”<sup>143</sup> Barthianism, with its anti-cosmic character in the name of God’s transcendence, is the result of the secularisation of the European consciousness and therefore of the weakening of Christian consciousness. By contrast, Berdyaev holds that Eastern Christianity has remained more “cosmic” and thereby more faithful to the Christian notion of the Incarnation, of God becoming man.<sup>144</sup>

Berdyaev’s critique of Barth from an Orthodox point of view no doubt marked Corbin, who later said that it was thanks to thinkers such as Berdyaev and Khomiakov that he became aware of “what is specific to, and yet to come in, Eastern Christianity.”<sup>145</sup> In particular, the Orthodox theological notion of *theosis*, which Berdyaev advanced in his critique of Barth, was important for Corbin in that it allowed him to transcend the radical dualism between God and man in Barth. Indeed, Corbin later said that it was Berdyaev who revealed to him the idea that “the divine mystery and the human mystery [are] one and the same

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<sup>142</sup> “Die völlige Trennung der Metahistorie und der Historie ist nicht eine Paradoxie, sondern Rationalismus.... Die Vernunft verträgt sich in gleicher Weise mit dem Monismus und dem Dualismus, will aber ein Drittes, das vom Monismus und Dualismus verschieden ist, nämlich die christliche Offenbarung, nicht anerkennen. Das Auseinanderreißen von Metahistorie und Historie, von dem Christus der Offenbarung und dem Jesus der Geschichte, ist letzten Endes Leugnung der Fleischwerdung. Das bedeutet, daß Christus nicht in die Geschichte eingegangen ist, sondern außerhalb derselben und über derselben stand. Die Geschichte bleibt da neutral, ist der Säkularisierung unterworfen und wird ohne Abzug den Gewalten der historischen Kritik preisgegeben.... Der Barthianismus ist die Folge eines langen Prozesses der Entgottung der Welt und des Menschen. Er ist ein Protest gegen die Resultate dieser Entgottung, aber er gesteht selber diese Entgottung zu” (Berdyaev, “Die Krisis des Protestantismus,” 15).

<sup>143</sup> “Die Erscheinung Christi trägt einen objektiven kosmischen Charakter, und mit ihr verbindet sich eine Veränderung in der Welt und in der Menschheit, durch die der transzendente Abgrund zwischen Schöpfer und Geschöpf überwunden wird” (Berdyaev, “Die Krisis des Protestantismus,” 16). Cf. “Le Christ ne viole pas la nature humaine, il la reçoit comme un don, une offrande libre de l’humanité. Bien que la venue du Christ soit décidée dans l’éternité, elle est un événement sur la terre qui bouleverse la nature cosmique et humaine car le monde est créé en vue de l’Incarnation et celle-ci est plus que le salut seul, elle est le degré ultime de la communion entre Dieu et l’homme” (Evdokimov, “L’Orthodoxie devant l’Interprétation de Karl Barth,” 304-305).

<sup>144</sup> “Die Entgottung der kreatürlichen Welt, ihr Außergottsein widerspricht der eigentlichen Idee der Fleischwerdung und Menschwerdung Gottes, dem eigentlichen Wesen der christlichen Offenbarung. Diese Entgottung, für die der Barthianismus mit seinem extremen Antikosmismus so völlig eintritt, ist das Resultat einer Säkularisierung des europäischen Bewußtseins, d. h. der Schwächung des Christentums in diesem Bewußtsein. Das östliche Christentum und speziell das russische blieb mehr kosmisch und damit der kirchlichen Idee der Fleischwerdung Gottes treuer” (Berdyaev, “Die Krisis des Protestantismus,” 16).

<sup>145</sup> Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 48.



mystery.”<sup>146</sup> This Christological theme marked Corbin’s interpretation of the Shi’ite notion of the Imam, as will be shown in chapter four. The next chapter will further explore the significance of the notion of *theosis* for Corbin.

In a related aspect, Corbin’s later concept of the *mundus imaginalis* is tied to some of the issues raised by Berdyaev in his critique of Barth, notably the issue of how the divine (which Barth conceives as “wholly Other”) can manifest to humankind (which is closely linked to the question of the relation between history and metahistory). At the same time, however, part of Berdyaev’s critique of Barth could also be addressed to Corbin, especially the charge of divorcing history and metahistory. In this connection, Corbin later indeed rejects the Christian concept of the Incarnation (which, as we have seen, Berdyaev affirms as an objective and cosmic event) in favour of a spiritualist (Docetist) conception, according to which Christ as Angel or Holy Spirit manifests in individually-adapted “theophanic visions.” To be sure, Corbin’s rejection of the Incarnation places him at direct odds with the tradition of Russian religious thought, including Berdyaev, who explicitly denounces Docetism in his book *Freedom and the Spirit*. This apparent discrepancy, however, is complicated by the fact that Corbin’s critique of the Incarnation was actually inspired by some of Berdyaev’s insights. This thorny issue will be further addressed in chapter four.

From another angle, Barth’s perceived parochialism and dogmatism, noted by Berdyaev, could not satisfy Corbin’s quest for universality and ecumenism.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, Corbin, like Berdyaev, professed an ecumenical vision embracing gnostics of all times and places, crossing the official boundaries of established religious confessions. This ecumenical perspective enabled him to raise the possibility of a “general theology of religions.” However, as Corbin later noted,

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<sup>146</sup> “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” (Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 49).

<sup>147</sup> “Die Menschen einer Krisis sind niemals Leute einer unmittelbaren orthodoxen Gläubigkeit. K. Barth selber, der Initiator und Begründer der Richtung, schwächt in seiner Dogmatik den paradoxen Charakter seiner Gedanken ab, der im ‘Römerbrief’ so sehr scharf hervortrat, er will bereits ein System bauen, er wird zum Scholastiker. Seine Dogmatik ist in erster Linie durch ihre Annäherung an die Orthodoxie und den Katholizismus, an eine für den Protestanten maximale Anerkennung der kirchlichen Dogmen interessant. Aber der Eschatologismus der Barthschen Auffassung des Christentums drängt sich hier schon nicht mehr so stark auf, es herrscht eine größere Ruhe, die Krisis ist scheinbar überstanden” (Berdyaev, “Die Krisis des Protestantismus,” 12-13).

Karl Barth's theology professed the greatest contempt for any science and history of religions.... By deliberately opting for a total ignorance of the *res religiosa*, the Barthian dialectical theology proved impotent to think through any "general theology of religions," which has become increasingly urgent in our age.<sup>148</sup>

Particularly disappointing for Corbin was Barth's dismissal of Suhrawardi as just another instance of "natural theology," or knowledge of God acquired by mere human endeavour, apart from revelation.<sup>149</sup>

In contrast to Barth, Berdyaev regarded himself not as a theologian, but as a Christian theosopher, in the sense in which Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, Jacob Boehme, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, Franz von Baader and Vladimir Solovyov were Christian theosophers.<sup>150</sup> He asserted that the *homo mysticus* prevailed in him over the *homo religiosus*. That is, for him the intuitive, inner, personal revelation of the divine took precedence over the historical revelation as found in the Scriptures.<sup>151</sup> In this regard, Berdyaev shared a profound affinity with Corbin. Indeed, Corbin could have easily penned many passages found in Berdyaev, such as this one:

I believe in the existence of a universal mystical experience and a universal spirituality which cannot be described in terms of confessional differences.... There is more depth and insight in the gnostic and "esoteric" type of mysticism than in that which has received the official sanction of the Church and is not suspected of heterodoxy.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 45.

<sup>149</sup> "[I]l est impossible de ne pas constater l'écart entre le commentaire du *Römerbrief*, aux étincelles prophétiques, et la lourde, la colossale *Dogmatique* que composa le Karl Barth de la maturité. Une nouvelle 'dogmatique'? Non vraiment, ce n'est pas cela que nous avons attendu et espéré.... J'avais communiqué à Karl Barth ma première publication d'orientaliste: l'édition et la traduction du *Bruissement des ailes de Gabriel* de Sohrawardî. Il le lut et m'en parla plus tard avec un bon sourire bienveillant, prononçant les mots de 'théologie naturelle.' Cela n'allait pas plus loin. J'étais consterné" (Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 45).

<sup>150</sup> Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Olivier Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), xix.

<sup>151</sup> Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 105.

<sup>152</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 83. Cf. "There are greater affinities between the mystics of various religions than between the religions themselves. The depths of spirituality may manifest a greater community than objectified religions" (Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, trans. George Reavy [San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009], 134).

Given Berdyaev's ecumenism, Corbin later said: "I am convinced that Berdyaev would have seen in Suhrawardi a spiritual hero according to his own heart."<sup>153</sup>

Berdyaev also foreshadowed Corbin's critique of Heidegger. As already indicated, Corbin was active alongside Russian émigré thinkers throughout the 30s in the importation of German phenomenological trends to France. In 1938 appeared Corbin's translation of a collection of essays by Heidegger under the title *Qu'est-ce que la Métaphysique?* Partly because of this famous publication, and partly because Heidegger was the focus of an important late interview with Corbin, much emphasis has been placed on Heidegger's importance for Corbin.<sup>154</sup> To be sure, Heidegger played a major role in Corbin's philosophical development. Corbin notably credited Heidegger for having given him the *clavis hermeneutica* to understand the Islamic philosophers.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, however, Corbin indicated that there were "hermeneutical levels" that Heidegger "had not foreseen," in particular, "the celestial hierarchies of the great Neoplatonist Proclus, as well as those of Jewish gnosis, Valentinian gnosis, Islamic gnosis." Corbin further resolutely rejected the human finitude expressed in Heidegger's notions of "Being-toward-death" (German *Sein-zum-Tode*) and "Freedom-toward-death" (*Freiheit-zum-Tode*).<sup>156</sup>

Berdyaev anticipated and inspired Corbin's critique of Heidegger. As already pointed out, in the interwar period, Berdyaev articulated a sort of "religious existentialism." In Berdyaev's view, "existential philosophy marks a transition from the interpretation of knowledge as objectification, to understanding it as *participation*, union with the subject matter and entering into cooperation with it."<sup>157</sup> In this regard, Berdyaev shared affinities with other

<sup>153</sup> Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49. In a letter addressed to Corbin dated March 13 (probably from 1936), Berdyaev thanks him for sending him his publication of Suhrawardi's "The Rustling of the Wings of Gabriel" ("Suhrawardi d'Alep: Le Bruissement de l'Aile de Gabriel, Traité Philosophique et Mystique" published in *Journal Asiatique*, Jul.-Sep. 1935) and invites him to his house (Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 271, folder 44).

<sup>154</sup> See note 105.

<sup>155</sup> Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohrawardī," 30.

<sup>156</sup> Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohrawardī," 32.

<sup>157</sup> Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 61. Cf. "I regard my type of philosophy as 'existentialist,' even though one should qualify this by pointing out that true existentialist philosophy is represented by St. Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rather than by Heidegger, Jaspers or Sartre.... I am an existentialist because I believe in the priority of the subject over the object, in the identity of the knowing subject and the existing subject; I am, furthermore, an existentialist because I see the life of man and of the world torn by contraries, which must be

contemporary thinkers, including Heidegger, who affirmed the primacy of the existential subject over the objectified world. At the same time, Berdyaev also radically differed from the existentialists of his day. He pointed out that in their system “the integral image of man disappears.”<sup>158</sup> In Heidegger’s view, for instance, human existence is chiefly characterised by anxiety and care. “Worry turns out to be more significant than the man who worries. Man is constructed out of worries, just as human existence is built up from death.”<sup>159</sup> Berdyaev notably objected to the finitude of human existence expressed in Heidegger’s concept of “Being-toward-death.” He writes: “I cannot be reconciled to death and the tragic finality of human existence; and my whole being resists the notion, naturalized by Heidegger, of death as the ultimate reality.”<sup>160</sup> It is not death as such that Berdyaev objects to, but rather the idea that death is the ultimate limit of life. While he agrees that “man’s dignity is revealed in his fearlessness before death, in his free acceptance of death in this world,” he stresses that this should only be “for the sake of a final victory over death, for struggle against death’s triumph.”<sup>161</sup> Against the modern secular tendency to recognise the triumph of death as the last word in life, Berdyaev points to “the very Russian thought of [Nikolai] Fedorov, the great fighter against death,” who affirmed “not only the idea of resurrection, but actual raising from the dead.”<sup>162</sup>

Corbin’s critique of Heidegger’s view of death as the ultimate reality echoes Berdyaev’s concerns. In a late interview titled “From Heidegger to Suhrawardi,” Corbin discusses the “fundamental difference” which resulted in his passage from Heidegger to Suhrawardi. He mainly objects to Heidegger’s notions of “Being-toward-death” and “Freedom-toward-death,” stating:

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faced and maintained in their tension, and which no intellectual system of a closed and complete totality, no immanentism or optimism can resolve. I have always desired that philosophy should be not *about* something or somebody but should be that very something or somebody, in other words, that it should be the revelation of the original nature and character of the subject itself” (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 93). On Berdyaev’s existentialism, see Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 93-112, and Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 170-193.

<sup>158</sup> Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 78.

<sup>159</sup> Cited in Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 78. Cf. Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R.M. French (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 41-42.

<sup>160</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 323.

<sup>161</sup> Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 27.

<sup>162</sup> Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, 27-28. Berdyaev’s critique of Heidegger is discussed in John R. Lup, Jr. “Eschatology in a Secular Age: An Examination of the Use of Eschatology in the Philosophies of Heidegger, Berdyaev and Blumenberg” (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 2013), 180-182.

People comfort themselves by repeating: “Death is a part of life.” This is not true, unless we understand life only in a biological sense. But biological life itself derives from another life that is its source and independent from it, to wit, essential Life. So long as the decision-taken is “Freedom-toward-death,” death presents itself as a closure, not as an exit. Then we can never leave the world. To be *free for beyond death* is the anticipation and the making of the future as the *exitus*, a *way out* of this world towards other worlds. But it is the living, not the dead, who leave this world.<sup>163</sup>

At the core of Corbin’s rejection of the necessity and finality of death is the belief in the eschatological victory over death championed by Fedorov and Berdyaev. However, Corbin mentions neither of these Russian thinkers in his critique of Heidegger. Instead, he points to the Iranian Shi’ite gnostic thinker Mulla Sadra (1572-1640) and the Andalusian Sufi philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240). “The presence that [these two thinkers] discover in this world,” Corbin writes, “the ‘phenomenon of the world’ experienced by them is not a presence whose finality is death, not a ‘Being-toward-death,’ but a ‘*being for beyond death*,’ we can say *Sein zum Jenseits des Todes*.”<sup>164</sup> In referring to two Islamic thinkers in this context, Corbin wishes to highlight the relevance of the Irano-Islamic philosophical tradition for modern philosophical debates. However, it was Berdyaev who originally inspired Corbin his eschatological attitude, thereby providing him the stimulus and premise for his critique of Heidegger. As already indicated, Corbin later said that “the metaphysics of Shi’ism is essentially, like that of Berdyaev, an eschatological metaphysics.”<sup>165</sup> It would be more accurate to

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<sup>163</sup> “Les gens se tranquilisent en répétant: ‘la mort fait partie de la vie.’ Ce n’est pas vrai, à moins de n’entendre la vie qu’au sens biologique. Mais la vie biologique dérive elle-même d’une autre vie qui en est la source et en est indépendante, et qui est la Vie essentielle. Tant que la décision-résolue reste simplement ‘libre-pour-la-mort,’ la mort se présente comme une clôture, non pas comme un *exitus*. Alors on ne sortira jamais de ce monde. Être *libre pour au-delà* de la mort, c’est la pressentir et la faire advenir comme un *exitus*, une *sortie* de ce monde vers d’autres monde. Mais ce sont les vivants, non pas les morts, qui sortent de ce monde” (Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohravardî,” 32).

<sup>164</sup> “Chez un Mollâ Sadrâ, chez un Ibn ‘Arabi, la présence telle qu’ils l’éprouvent en ce monde, telle donc que la leur dévoile ‘le phénomène du monde’ vécu par eux, n’est pas une Présence dont la finalité est la mort, un être-pour-la-mort, mais un ‘être *pour au-delà-de-la-mort*,’ disons: *Sein zum Jenseits des Todes*” (Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohravardî,” 31).

<sup>165</sup> Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 49.

say that Berdyaev gave Corbin the key for his eschatological interpretation of Shi'ism.

Further, as has been noted, Corbin was dissatisfied with the perceived “limits” in Heidegger’s thought, which remained closed to the spiritual realities and levels recognised in Neoplatonism and Gnosticism.<sup>166</sup> By contrast, Corbin saw in Berdyaev a “modern gnostic.”<sup>167</sup> In a recent study, Fabian Linde argued that Berdyaev’s existential thought transgresses the limits of secular existentialism by operating with myths and symbols borrowed from the Christian theosophical tradition. This places Berdyaev at odds with the secular variety of existentialism. Further, whereas Heidegger’s “fundamental ontology” propounds a dualism without transcendence, Berdyaev “postulates a dualism which champions very emphatically transcendence as the ultimate eschatological goal.” In this can be seen the most profound discrepancy between Berdyaev’s existential philosophy and that of Heidegger and Sartre.<sup>168</sup> Linde thus describes Berdyaev as a proponent of “existential gnosticism.”<sup>169</sup> The gnostic aspect of Berdyaev’s philosophy involves

a form of knowledge that is *religious*, since it has God as one of its knowledge objects and also presupposes faith; *non-rational* or *transrational*, since it transcends the rational cognitive faculty, and is *non-conceptual* and is *mythopoeic* in expression; *revelatory*, since it is not “natural” and involves the disclosure of a higher reality. Furthermore, it is *participatory*, as it is not separable from the knower himself, but is in this sense rather *concrete* and *experiential*. It concerns the triangle God-world-man.<sup>170</sup>

This view of gnosis can also be attributed to Corbin, whose own perspective might be described as “existential gnosticism” in an Islamic key. The clearest example of this outlook is perhaps to be found in his first major work, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (1954).

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<sup>166</sup> Corbin, “De Heidegger à Sohrevardi,” 32-37.

<sup>167</sup> Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 50.

<sup>168</sup> Linde, *Berdiaev’s Existential Gnosticism*, 45.

<sup>169</sup> Linde’s definition of “existential gnosticism” draws on the work of Hans Jonas (1903-1993), who gave an existential reading of ancient Gnostic thought in his book *The Gnostic Book* (1958). As Linde writes: “Jonasian Gnosticism is the ancient Gnostic phenomenon interpreted from an existentialist philosophical viewpoint using a phenomenological method” (*Berdiaev’s Existential Gnosticism*, 9).

<sup>170</sup> Linde, *Berdiaev’s Existential Gnosticism*, 187.

Corbin later said that it was thanks to religious thinkers such as Berdyaev and Khomiakov that he became aware of the theological perspectives and possibilities afforded by Eastern Christianity.<sup>171</sup> The Eastern Christian theological tradition, mediated by the Russian thinkers, was indeed pivotal for Corbin. It notably facilitated his break with the secularised thought of the West, at the same time as it initiated him to an “Eastern” way of thinking, alongside Islamic thought. However, modern Western thought remained worlds apart from traditional Islamic philosophy. The Russian religious thinkers had a unique role in that they mediated between East and West, modernity and tradition. Rooted in the Orthodox theological tradition, they actively engaged with modern philosophical issues. In Corbin’s journey from Heidegger to Suhrawardi, from Germany to Iran, from the Christian West to the Islamic East, Russian thinkers revealed to him the “median and intermediary” spiritual universe of the Christian East, represented by the “emblematic” city of Byzantium, to which we now turn.

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<sup>171</sup> Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 48.

## Chapter 2: Becoming an Ishraqi: Reading Suhrawardi Through Byzantine Christianity

“Mais Istanbul, c’était Byzance, Constantinople”

(Corbin, “Post-Scriptum Biographique à un Entretien Philosophique”).

On a “dramatic evening” in the spring of 1939, on the eve of the Second World War, Corbin visited Berdyaev, where, in the company of Fritz Lieb, the three were partners in an “eschatological conversation.”<sup>172</sup> Few months later, Corbin was commissioned by the Bibliothèque Nationale to catalogue and photograph manuscripts in Istanbul, in what initially was to be a three-month engagement.<sup>173</sup> Stranded there for the remainder of the war, he immersed himself in the study of Suhrawardi and worked on the first critical edition of Suhrawardi’s writings.

Little about Corbin’s six years in Istanbul is known other than what he himself later revealed in the following summary account:

In the course of these years...I learned the inestimable virtues of Silence, which initiates call the “discipline of the arcane” (*ketman* in Persian). One of the virtues of Silence was to put myself in solitary confinement with my invisible shaykh, Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi, who died a martyr in 1191, at the age of 36, the very age I was at that time. Day and night, I translated from the Arabic, taking as guides only the commentators and continuators of Suhrawardi, and consequently avoiding every external influence of any philosophical or theological school or current of our day. At the end of those years of retreat, I had become an *Ishraqi*.<sup>174</sup>

By indicating that he avoided “every external influence of any philosophical or theological school or current of [his] day” while immersed in the study of

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<sup>172</sup> Corbin, “Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 43. According to Jambet, Corbin’s last meeting with Berdyaev was in April 1939 (“Repères Biographiques,” in *L’Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 17).

<sup>173</sup> Julien Cain, the then-director of the Bibliothèque Nationale who commissioned Corbin to go to Istanbul, was part of Berdyaev’s social circle (Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l’Émigration Russe*, 380). His wife, Lucienne Daniel-Mayer Cain, translated three books by Berdyaev into French (*L’Esprit de Dostoïevski* [1929], *Les Sources et le Sens du Communisme Russe* [1938], *Le Sens de la Création* [1955]), and authored a study on him (*Berdiaev en Russie, Précédé de La Russie est Sortie des Ombres* [1962]).

<sup>174</sup> Corbin, “Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 46.



Suhrawardi, Corbin no doubt wanted to emphasise the unique and personal character of his relation to his “invisible shaykh.” However, from closer scrutiny it is evident that, far from being cut off from external influences, Corbin was, parallel to his work on Suhrawardi, actively interested in Eastern Christian theology and contemporary trends of Russian religious thought.<sup>175</sup> Indeed, as the chapter shows, inasmuch as Islam and Eastern Christianity belonged to one and the same “East,” Corbin’s interest in one was inseparable from his interest in the other.

The previous chapter highlighted the Slavophile distinction between, on the one hand, an excessively rationalistic and spiritually bankrupt “West,” associated with both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, and on the other hand, a spiritually integral and conciliar “East,” associated with Orthodoxy. Corbin adapted important features of this conception. However, his conception of the “East” was additionally informed by his study of the non-Christian East, to wit, the Islam world. Thus Corbin’s view of the “East” encompassed both the Christian and Islamic Easts. In this perspective, Russian notions of the “East” and Eastern Christian spirituality came to be reflected in Corbin’s treatment of Islamic thought, as we shall briefly see.

Corbin’s interest in Eastern Christianity was serious enough that, at some point between 1937 and 1939, he undertook studies in Aramaic and Syriac under André Dupont-Sommer at the Fourth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études.<sup>176</sup> Corbin’s interest in the Christian East was encouraged by his belief that Eastern Christian theology, which Russian religious thinkers helped him discover, shared certain affinities with Islamic mysticism. Thus, in a later account, he recalled how, before leaving to Istanbul,

[he] talked to [Berdyayev] about what [he] was hoping to discover in theological regions yet unexplored [in the East]. I was only anticipating what I would later find there.... But I let [Berdyayev] catch a glimpse of what I was anticipating and hoping for, and he was one of the very few

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<sup>175</sup> Paraphrasing the testimony of Stella Corbin, Shayegan indicates that “even in Istanbul...where he was totally isolated from the rest of the world, immersed as he was in Suhrawardi’s work, [Corbin] continued to translate [Heidegger’s] *Sein und Zeit*, as well as he took advantage of his presence in Constantinople to deepen his knowledge of Russian and Greek Orthodox theology, and it was then that he undertook a translation of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov” (Shayegan, *Penseur de l’Islam Spirituel*, 24).

<sup>176</sup> “Repères Biographiques,” in *L’Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 17.

to anticipate its meaning and scope.... I am convinced that Berdyaev would have seen in [Suhrawardī] a spiritual hero according to his own heart.<sup>177</sup>

It was no doubt with that same conviction that, in a letter to Berdyaev on March 7, 1939, Corbin wrote: “It seems to me that at present the voice of Greco-Russian Orthodoxy so urgently needs to be heard.”<sup>178</sup>

Later that year, Corbin reviewed the autobiography of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century schismatic Russian Archpriest Avvakum, who led the Old Believers sect, a group that splintered from the Russian Orthodox Church. In his review, Corbin expressed reservations about the schismatic Archpriest, defending instead the reforms that sought to bring the Russian rite into harmony with the Greek Byzantine rite. He further affirmed the “imprescriptible mission” of Orthodoxy (from which, he noted, “there is much to learn”), while cautioning Western Christians against age-old sectarian attitudes, stating that, “to *understand* Orthodoxy one must do away with certain categories, confusions or distinctions, assimilating dissimilar situations” (as he would later caution with regard to Shi’ism).<sup>179</sup>

<sup>177</sup> “Je vis Berdiaev pour la dernière fois, à Clamart, quelque mois avant que la seconde guerre mondiale n’éclatât. Je devais alors partir pour une longue mission en Orient, et j’évoquais avec lui ce que j’espérais découvrir dans des régions théologiques encore inexplorées. Je ne faisais encore que pressentir ce que je devais y trouver.... Mais ce que je pressentais et espérais, je lui fis entrevoir, et il fut un des très rares à en pressentir lui-même le sens et la portée.... Je suis persuadé que Berdiaev eût vu en [Sohrawardī] un héros spirituel selon son cœur” (Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 48-49).

<sup>178</sup> Cited in Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l’Émigration Russe*, 552.

<sup>179</sup> The following passage from Corbin’s review reflects some of his views on Orthodoxy and therefore deserves to be cited at length: “[E]n toute franchise, il faut le demander: l’œuvre du patriarche Nikon, celui qui mérita d’être appelé le ‘Chrysostome russe,’ doit-elle donc être flétrie, sinon dans son intention du moins dans son acte, à cause des héros du Raskol? Chose admirable, c’est du côté des Réformateurs que cette fois était l’Orthodoxie. Une Eglise chrétienne, une Eglise qui reçut sa mission de Byzance, ne put, n’aurait pu être elle-même, sans laisser ouvertes les possibilités de la *pensée* théologique (ce qui d’ailleurs n’est point condamné à signifier ‘évolution,’ déploiement ‘historique’ du dogme, etc.) L’obstination du Raskol gagne l’admiration réservée à qui témoigne jusqu’à la mort, mais il est à craindre que la ‘démocratisation’ de la langue théologique dont on le félicite, ne soit pas d’abord, et cela aussi bien ailleurs qu’en Russie, le *signe* d’un ‘obscurantisme’ édifiant qu’il faut bien traiter finalement d’agnosticisme. Il est à craindre que dans certains jugements, ne s’exprime aussi quelque chose d’autre: une position latine traditionnelle vis-à-vis l’Orthodoxie gréco-russe. Nul doute qu’en ce moment celle-ci n’éveille un réel intérêt, mais devant tant d’activités déployées, celui à qui elle s’offre dans sa valeur positive, avec sa mission imprescriptible, se demandera: s’agit-il donc d’un procès historique à gagner? S’agit-il d’un ‘schisme’ dû seulement à la malice des hommes ou au malheur du temps? Est-on donc si sûr de représenter soi-même l’Unité pour accuser de schisme? Ce ne sont pas l’extension spatiale, l’obéissance canonique, qui définissent le *kath’olon*. Pour *comprendre* l’Orthodoxie, il faut déposer certaines catégories, confusions ou distinctions, assimilant des situations dissemblables (pour ne rien dire de la confusion répétée dans l’accusation de ‘césaropapisme’). Il y a beaucoup à

It is interesting to note that Corbin, who almost never missed an occasion to express his dislike of all religious orthodoxy, sided in this review with the religious mainstream, by defending the reforms that sought to bring the Russian Old Believers into the fold of the Byzantine Orthodox Church headquartered in Constantinople. His judgment on this matter was most likely inspired by the views of the Russian exponent of the so-called “neo-patristic synthesis,” Fr. Georges Florovsky (1893-1979), with whom Corbin appears to have been briefly in touch in 1939.<sup>180</sup> A professor of patristics at the St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris since 1925, Florovsky denounced foreign influences (Catholic, Protestant, Philosophical) on Orthodox theology, while simultaneously defending “a spiritual return to, and renewal in, the Byzantine heritage” founded on the Greek patristic tradition (a standpoint Brandon Gallaher labels “romantic Byzantinism”).<sup>181</sup> This “Christian Hellenism” is further defined by its emphasis on what Florovsky called “catholic” or “*sobornyi* consciousness,” which points to

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apprendre; beaucoup de textes d'accès difficile dont il faut souhaiter la prochaine élaboration méthodique. Et celui-là comprend qui se sait pauvre, et reçoit tout de son objet” (review of *La Vie de l'Archiprêtre Avvakum Écrite par Lui-Même*, trans. Pierre Pascal [Paris: Gallimard, 1939], in *Hermès* 3 [Nov. 1939], 123). Interestingly, in the same issue of *Hermès*, Corbin reviewed his own work, *Subrahwardi d'Alep (d. 1191), Fondateur de la Doctrine Illuminative* (1939), signing his text as “S. Cyrille,” no doubt in allusion to Saint Cyril, the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine Greek philosopher who with his brother Methodius translated Scripture and the liturgy into the Slavic tongue and devoted their lives to preaching Christianity to the Slavic nations, earning them the title of “the Apostles to the Slavs.” “Their mission made possible the conversion of many Slavic nations, who from Byzantium accepted not only the Orthodox faith itself but also Byzantine Christian civilization” (John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982], 7).

<sup>180</sup> “J’ai pris un contact très intéressant avec le P. Florovsky. On va tâcher de faire quelque chose” (Henry Corbin to Fritz Lieb, June 25, 1939, Lieb Papers, Basel University Library, University of Basel, NL 43: Aa 260, 1-9). In the same letter, Corbin made an urgent request for Lieb to send him the two volumes of *Östliches Christentum*—an anthology of primary sources and documents on Eastern Christianity edited by Hans Philipp Ehrenberg in collaboration with Nicolai von Bubnov (München: C.H. Beck, 1923-1925)—as well as some issues of Lieb’s journal *Orient und Occident*—“[c]ela, pour la cause commune.” In another letter to Lieb on April 25, 1940, Corbin writes: “J’ai écrit au P. Florovsky au mois de décembre, mais aucune réponse” (Henry Corbin to Fritz Lieb, April 25, 1940, Lieb Papers, Basel University Library, University of Basel, NL 43: Aa 260, 1-9). Corbin’s papers include the offprint of a widely influential paper by Fr. Florovsky titled “Westliche Einflüsse in der Russischen Theologie [Western Influences in Russian Theology]” given in 1936 at the First Pan-Orthodox Congress of Theologians in Athens (Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5<sup>ème</sup> Section], box 227). On this important essay by Fr. Florovsky, see Brandon Gallaher, “‘Waiting for the Barbarians’: Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011), 664-665. On the distinction between the “patristic neo-synthesis,” represented by Fr. Georges Florovsky, and the “Paris School” of Russian theology, represented by Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, see Stamatios Gerogiorgakis, “Modern and Traditional Tendencies in the Religious Thought of the Russian and Greek Diaspora from the 1920s to the 1960s,” *Religion, State and Society* 40, no. 3-4 (2012), 336-348 (I owe this reference to the kindness of Professor Todd Lawson).

<sup>181</sup> Gallaher “The Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky,” 659.

the idea of the Church as a “living tradition” characterised by “a divine-human unity which above all reflects the unity of the Trinity in whom many become one.”<sup>182</sup> Florovsky asserted Eastern Orthodoxy as the common tradition of the undivided Church, while rejecting Western Christianity and post-Great Schism Western theology as having lost their “catholic consciousness.”<sup>183</sup>

This characterisation of Eastern/Byzantine Orthodoxy as instilled with a “*sobornyi* consciousness,” or a vision of spiritual unity and conciliarity, must have captivated the ecumenically-minded Corbin at the time of his departure to Istanbul, former Constantinople.<sup>184</sup> Geographically and culturally poised between East and West, Europe and Asia, Constantinople, the “second Rome” and seat of Byzantine Christianity for over a millennium, eminently symbolised the conciliar or “*sobornyi*” character of Byzantine Orthodoxy.<sup>185</sup> The former Church of Hagia Sophia, which until 1453 had served as the seat of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, particularly impressed Corbin, for whom “the Temple of Saint-Sophia was...an exemplification of the archetype of the [temple of the Holy Grail] anticipated by many seekers of gnosis.”<sup>186</sup> Later Corbin described Hagia Sophia as the symbolic place of the initiation of esoteric Christianity into esoteric

<sup>182</sup> Gallaher “The Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky,” 669. “The idea of the Church as *sobornost*’—completeness, integrality, conciliarity and unity in diversity—and the notion (even the phrase) of ‘living tradition’ is largely adapted from the Slavophiles, most especially, Aleksei Khomiakov” (Gallaher, “The Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky,” 669).

<sup>183</sup> Gallaher “The Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky,” 663 and 679.

<sup>184</sup> In a letter to Joseph Baruzi on December 27, 1939, sent from Istanbul, Corbin says: “Le christianisme grec avait tant rempli nos dernières conversations, mon cher Ami, que c’est surtout à travers Byzance, vous le devinez, que nous errons et méditons” (in *L’Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 308).

<sup>185</sup> “Constantinople, the ‘New Rome,’ also called Byzantium—the name of the ancient city on the Bosphorus chosen by Constantine as the location of the new capital—survived as its capital until 1453. For over a millennium, it was the recognised center of Orthodox Christianity for much of Eastern Europe and the Middle East” (Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy*, 13). After the fall of Constantinople, Moscow came to be known as the “third Rome,” the seat of the true Christian church. This theme of Moscow as “third Rome” shaped the self-understanding of Russian culture concerning the “messianic role” of Russia as leader and protector of Orthodox Christianity in the world (Philip T. Grier, “The Russian Idea and the West,” in *Russia and Western Civilization: Cultural and Historical Encounters*, ed. Russell Bova [Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003], 29-30). See further John Meyendorff, “Was There Ever a ‘Third Rome’? Remarks on the Byzantine Legacy in Russia,” in *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow: Historical and Theological Studies* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 131-147.

<sup>186</sup> “De même que le Temple de Salomon était le centre de Jérusalem, le temple de Sainte-Sophie était le centre de la seconde Rome. Au cours des années précédentes le savant américain Whitmore avait consacré tous ses efforts à la restauration des mosaïques. Visiter Sainte-Sophie en compagnie de Whitmore était à la fois un privilège, une aventure et un pèlerinage.... Le Temple de Sainte-Sophie fut pour moi le temple du Graal, du moins une exemplification de son archétype pressenti par maints chercheurs en gnose” (Corbin, “Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 46).

Islam (see chapter three). Thus Corbin adapted the conception of Byzantium as a symbol of spiritual unity to his own ecumenical vision, which further encompassed the non-Christian, Islamic East. In this process, he expanded, as it were, the boundaries of Byzantine “catholicity” (*sobornost*) beyond the traditional borders of the historical Church to also accommodate the Islamic East, or at least a certain type of Islam, one that, as we shall briefly see, he presented as sharing essential affinities with the Eastern Christian theological tradition. This notion of Byzantium as a symbol of spiritual unity never lost its appeal for Corbin, as he later referred to it to express his ecumenical vision of a “*Harmonia Abrahamica*” uniting Jewish, Christian and Islamic “spirituals.” “Could the mystical Byzantium be the icon of the celestial Jerusalem if it did not assemble all the spirituals among *Ahl al-Kitab* [the People of the Book]?” he wrote in 1971.<sup>187</sup>

The mediating position of the Christian East enabled Corbin to transcend the official, categorical division between Christianity and Islam, as that between two monolithic entities. Much more defining and fundamental to Corbin’s thought is the distinction between “East” and “West.” As a way of debunking the official division between Christianity and Islam as one between two static, antithetical entities, Corbin insisted, especially in his later writings, on the similarities and continuity between early gnostic and Jewish-Christian sects that flourished in the East, and Islam, particularly Shi’ism.<sup>188</sup> In this reading, the Christian and Muslim Easts share a unique heritage that distinguishes them from the Christian and Muslim Wests (the chiefly Sunnite Maghreb, or Islamic West, is passed over in almost total silence in Corbin’s writings). In this connection, Landolt is right in observing that Corbin’s work was partly a reaction to a certain “Eurocentric” attitude among students of the Islamic philosophical tradition, which assumed that after the transmission of the Greek philosophical tradition through its last major exponent in 12<sup>th</sup>-century Spain with Averroes into Latin Christendom, and al-Ghazali’s attack against Avicenna in the East, whatever the

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<sup>187</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, xx. In the already cited letter to Joseph Baruzi dated December 27, 1939, Corbin further wrote: “Constantinople est une ville mystique, un terme où l’on récapitule toute sa vie. Si j’associe le Temple de la Sainte Sagesse avec le Temple du Graal, peut-être me saisissez-vous d’un coup” (in *L’Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 309).

<sup>188</sup> See Corbin, “L’Évangile de Barnabé et la Prophétologie Islamique,” in *La Foi Prophétique et le Sacré*, eds. Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron and Stella Corbin (Paris: Berg International, 1976), 169-212, and “Theologoumena Iranica,” *Studia Iranica* 5 (1976), 225-235.

Muslim East continued to produce could be ignored or dismissed as “Oriental syncretism.”<sup>189</sup>

In light of the foregoing, it is not surprising to find in Corbin’s papers manuscript notes, written at the turn of the 1940s, concerning Lev Karsavin (1882-1952), one of the most prominent representatives of Eurasianism (a Russian post-revolutionary ideological movement in which Fr. Florovsky had also been involved in the 1920s).<sup>190</sup> As a “spiritual concept,” Eurasia appealed to Corbin in that it provided a framework for his interpretation of Eastern Christianity and Islam as belonging to a common cultural sphere.<sup>191</sup> Interestingly, Corbin’s papers from the same period include a manuscript bearing the suggestive title “Moscow and Isfahan”.<sup>192</sup> However, one must be cautious not to draw from these hints hasty or wishful conclusions about Corbin’s presumed political ideology. His apparent interest in Eurasian theorists notwithstanding, Corbin never concerned himself with geopolitics in his writings. On the contrary, as we shall later see, he took particular care to subtract his conception of the “spiritual Orient,” from all ethnic, national, political and geographical associations, as well as he insistently opposed in his writings any confusion between the spiritual and temporal, the sacred and secular dimensions. His point of view indeed remained primarily “geosophical” (to use his expression), that is, he viewed “East” and “West” not as two geographical and historical concepts, but as two metaphysical categories, two spiritual possibilities that all people—of any period and any place—carry within themselves.

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<sup>189</sup> Landolt, “Between Philosophy and Orientalism,” 484.

<sup>190</sup> Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études (5ème Section), box 45. On the place of Eurasianism in the Russian intellectual tradition, see Sławomir Mazurek, “Eurasianism: Historiosophy and Ideology,” *Studies in East European Thought* 54, no. 1-2 (Mar., 2002), 105-123. See further Françoise Lesourd, “Karsavin and the Eurasian Movement,” in *Russia Between East and West: Scholarly Debates on Eurasianism*, ed. Dmitry Shlapentokh (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 61-94.

<sup>191</sup> Corbin’s enthusiasm for the “spiritual concept” of Eurasia is evinced by his following remarks on a book by Paul Masson-Oursel in 1951: “[I]l faut attacher spécialement du prix à l’ouvrage de P. Masson-Oursel [*La Philosophie en Orient*]. Par son souci de marquer et d’affermir les connexions, les lignes de force sous-tendant la trame du concept spirituel d’Euraxie [sic], de l’Irlande au Japon, P. Masson-Oursel illustre le programme esquissé antérieurement dans sa *Philosophie comparée* [1923], programme si dense de promesses qu’il encouragea plus d’un jeune philosophe à l’époque à tenter l’aventure de l’orientalisme” (*L’Iran et la Philosophie*, 73-74). An interpretation of Corbin as a “Eurasianist thinker” is offered in Glauco Giuliano, *Nitartha: Saggi per un Pensiero Eurasiatico* (Trento: La Finestra, 2004).

<sup>192</sup> Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études (5ème Section), box 45.

Corbin's conception of Islamic mysticism around the time of his move to Istanbul was shaped by his simultaneous study of the Eastern Christian theological tradition. As previously indicated, it was mainly through Russian religious thinkers such as Berdyaev and Khomiakov that Corbin "became aware of what is specific to, and yet to come in, Eastern Christianity."<sup>193</sup> According to Berdyaev,

the essential difference between the Christian East and the Christian West is revealed in their different types of spirituality.... The Christian mystics of the East are...permeated to a far greater extent by Neo-Platonism than the Christian mystics of the West. For them everything descends from on high. There is no gulf between the Creator and the creature such as exists in the Catholic and Protestant West. Theosis bridges this gulf. The sensible world is symbolical of the spiritual world (St. Maximus the Confessor). Through the Divine image the creature participates in the Divine qualities. Man's ideal nature is revealed in Christ.... In the East the human element is permeated by the Divine.<sup>194</sup>

These and similar representations of the "East" by Berdyaev fed into Corbin's conception of Eastern Christian spirituality and indirectly influenced his interpretation of Islamic mysticism.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 48.

<sup>194</sup> Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 139-140.

<sup>195</sup> Berdyaev's writings contain numerous similar passages distinguishing between Eastern Christian and Western Christian characteristics, e.g.: "The writings of the Eastern Fathers are always very clearly distinguished from those of the Western Fathers. In the East the Platonic tradition remained strong, it was more mystical, its interests were more ontological and speculative. Dogma especially owed its elaboration to the Doctors of the Eastern Church. It was in the East that all the Gnostics and heretics appeared, and this fact witnesses to the intense interest with which gnosis and questions of a dogmatic and religious-metaphysical nature were regarded.... In Eastern Christianity the fundamental question has been the transfiguration of the nature of the world and of man; in a word, of 'theosis.' This is linked up with the much more cosmic character of Orthodoxy, and with its more particular interest in the Second Coming of Christ and the Resurrection.... The spiritual development of the East cannot be thought of in terms of Aristotelianism. For Eastern religious thought the natural is rooted and grounded in the supernatural; the divine energy comes into the world and makes it divine. The empirical world is rooted in the world of ideas and the world of ideas rests upon God. That is why there is a heavenly cosmos, a heavenly humanity, and a heavenly Church, a world of intelligible essences, a world of ideas uniting the Creator and creation, God and the world.... Orthodoxy has preserved the eschatological view of the Kingdom of God better than Catholicism; the Church is not yet the Kingdom of God so far as Orthodoxy is concerned, for the Kingdom will only be set up at the end of time and is connected with the Second Coming of Christ. That is why we find at the very heart of Orthodoxy these three things: faith in the Resurrection, the festival of Easter, and a real expectation of the transfiguration of the world. The Catholic Church is less concerned with the

An illustration of this can be found in the introduction to his publication of two mystical treatises by Suhrawardi in the journal *Hermès* in 1939. In the last section of his introduction, Corbin remarks that Illuminationist motifs, such as those of “illumination” and “God as primordial Light,” were not unknown “well before Islam...in those same countries where Islamic culture allowed their elaboration in the Arabic language.” “Christian mystics of Syrian convents (from an Isaac the Syrian to a Bar-Hebraeus) and itinerant Sufis,” he observes, “have common masters,” reaching back to the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the “Book of the Hierotheos,” ascribed to the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Syriac mystic Stephen bar Sudaili. “Eastern Christianity,” he declares,

has never lost the authentic presence [of the spirituality represented by this lineage]; all of Byzantine Orthodoxy, and what either directly or indirectly owed and still owes to it the feeling of the theophanic mystery, remains in this *parousia*. As a consequence, inquiry into the meaning of mysticism in Islam could nowhere be more urgent.<sup>196</sup>

Corbin notes important affinities between Islamic and Eastern Christian theological themes. He points out that Islamic mysticism “cannot be simply reduced to vague techniques or to ‘pantheistic’ speculations,” but instead, “as the lineage of Hallaj, Ghazali and Suhrawardi shows us,” it reveals “the contrast between the monotheistic affirmation and the Trinitarian mystery made manifest

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Coming of Christ in power and glory than it is with the power and glory of Christ in the Church apart from the transfiguration of the world” (Berdyayev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 349-354).

<sup>196</sup> “Mystiques chrétiens des couvents de Syrie (d’un Isaac le Syrien à un Bar-Hebraeus) et soufis itinérants relèvent de maîtres communs, jusqu’aux écrits du pseudo-Denys Aréopagite [sic] et au ‘Livre de Hiérophée’ en langue syriaque. Et jamais le christianisme oriental n’en perdit l’authentique présence; toute l’orthodoxie byzantine, et ce qui de près ou de loin, lui dut et lui doit encore le sentiment du mystère théophanique, se maintient en cette *parousie*. Dès lors, il n’est point de lieu où puisse se faire plus pressante l’interrogation sur le sens de la mystique en Islam” (“Deux Épîtres Mystiques de Suhrawardi d’Alep [ob. 1191],” *Hermès* 3 [Nov. 1939], 19-20).



in the ultimate possibility left for man.”<sup>197</sup> Corbin here seems to be suggesting some sort of connection between the ecstatic utterances of Muslim mystics and the Christian Trinitarian conception of the divine. Further, referring to a scene in one of Suhrawardī’s mystical tales, he compares the mount where the *Sakīna* manifests to Junayd, to the Mount Tabor where Christ is said to have appeared to his disciples in a transfiguring Light.<sup>198</sup> In this regard, Corbin later noted a parallel between the meaning of the notion of *ta’allob* in Suhrawardī and the idea of *theosis* in Byzantine mystical theology.<sup>199</sup>

In the Orthodox theological tradition, the Transfiguration of Christ has been intimately linked with decisive debates concerning the possibility of deification (*theosis*), the attainment of likeness of God.<sup>200</sup> While the ideal of deification ceased to have a central importance in Western theology from about

<sup>197</sup> “Ne se réduisant pas, comme nous le montre la lignée de Hallāj, Ghazālī, Suhrawardī, à de vagues techniques ou à des spéculations ‘panthéistes,’ c’est le contraste de l’affirmation unitaire et du mystère trinitaire qui se manifeste dans l’ultime possibilité laissée à l’homme” (“Deux Épîtres Mystiques de Suhrawardī d’Alep,” 20). In the annotated bibliography of *Suhrawardī d’Alep* (ob. 1191), *Fondateur de la Doctrine Illuminative (ishraqī)* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1939), Corbin notes: “Il me paraît important de signaler dès maintenant ici une constatation qui illustre les rapports entre mystiques de l’Islam et mystiques chrétiens syriaques, en ce domaine de l’expérience illuminative. Certes, notions et lexique remontent à des origines communes et lointaines, mais il y a plus. Wensinck s’était déjà attaché à montrer les concordances (et les emprunts) entre l’œuvre d’al-Ghazālī (ob. 1111) et celle du grand docteur jacobite Bar-Hebraeus (ob. 1286). Or, les allusions auxquelles recourt Suhrawardī dans le prologue de son Épître pour décrire le *Simorgh* mystique, sont précisément reprises, et jusqu’à la concordance littérale, par Bar-Hebraeus dans le prologue du *Book of the Dove* (trad. Wensinck, Leyden, 1919, pp. 3-4). Il ne s’y agit plus évidemment du *Simorgh*, ni même de la colombe mortelle, messagère de Noé, mais du symbole mystique de l’Esprit-Saint” (45-46).

<sup>198</sup> “Deux Épîtres Mystiques de Suhrawardī d’Alep,” 20. Cf. “Lorsque Sohrawardī parle de *ta’allob* (*theosis*), cela ne se passe pas en ce monde mais dans le *‘alam al-mithāl*, au sommet de la montagne psycho-cosmique (comme la Transfiguration au sommet du mont Thabor)” (Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme* [Paris: L’Herne, 1981], 125). The references to the Transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels are Math. 17:1-9; Mk. 9:2-9; and Lk. 9:28-36.

<sup>199</sup> “Il convient alors d’approfondir techniquement le sens des termes dont fait usage Sohrawardī, quand il parle de *ta’allob* comme désignant l’état spirituel du *bakīm mota’allib*. Ce mot *ta’allob*...connote le double sens de déification, théomorphose, et d’adoration, service de dévotion à l’égard de la divinité. On pourrait remarquer que sous son premier aspect il correspond à la *theosis*, terme en usage chez les mystiques byzantins à la même époque que Sohrawardī” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II [Paris: Gallimard, 1971], 41).

<sup>200</sup> The most famous patristic assertion of the doctrine of deification is that of St. Athanasius toward the end of *De Incarnatione*: “He [the Word of God] became human that we might become God; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from humans that we might inherit incorruption” (cited in Andrew Louth, “The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008] 34). As Louth suggests, “deification is the fulfillment of creation, not just the rectification of the Fall. One way of putting this is to think in terms of an arch stretching from creation to deification, representing what is and remains God’s intention: the creation of the cosmos that, through humankind, is destined to share in the divine life, to be deified” (Louth, “The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology,” 34-35).

the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it never lost its primacy in Eastern Orthodox theology.<sup>201</sup> In Russian religious thought, the theme of deification was associated with the concept of Divine humanity.<sup>202</sup> For Berdyaev, the idea of *theosis* prevents the “annihilation” of the human personality, which is “made in the image of God and the Divine Trinity.”<sup>203</sup>

By affirming the possibility of union with God, and thus of bridging the gap between the Creator and the creature, the concept of *theosis* appealed to Corbin as a way out of the secularised and agnostic modes of thinking prevalent in the West.<sup>204</sup> Parallel to the Slavophile notion of “integral cognition,” which combined faith and reason to counteract Western rationalism, the patristic notion of *theosis* affirmed intuitive, mystical illumination, and communion with the divine, in contrast to the perceived hypertrophy of reason in Latin scholasticism.

Thus Corbin evoked the Orthodox monastic island of Mount Athos as

the place where the ‘Taboric Light’ was desired and contemplated; where, against all scholastic objections, against all the objections of even a Christian rationalism, was elaborated the mystical motif [of *theosis*, deification] that Greek Orthodoxy stamped with the mark of its imprescriptible mission. It was not a coincidence that the human

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<sup>201</sup> Louth, “The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology,” 33.

<sup>202</sup> Boris Jakim, “Sergius Bulgakov: Russian Theosis,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 250-251.

<sup>203</sup> According to Berdyaev, the spirituality implied in the idea of *theosis* is “based on the union of man and God, on Divine humanity, through which man may be deified without surrendering his human nature to Divine nature. Deification implies a distinction between God and man, a dialogical and dramatic relationship between them. If man were already Divine, or if he were entirely sinful and separated from God by an absolute gulf, then such deification could not take place. This deification or theosis, which is a fundamental feature of Eastern Christian mysticism, is neither a monistic identity with God nor a humiliation of man and the created world. Theosis makes man Divine, while at the same time preserving his human nature. Thus, instead of the human personality being annihilated, it is made in the image of God and the Divine Trinity. The personality can be thus preserved only in and through Christ” (Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 134).

<sup>204</sup> Cf. “[T]he claim is often made by Orthodox theologians that deification is distinctive to Orthodox theology, and by other Christians, Protestant and Catholic, that it is in the doctrine of theosis that Western Christians will find what they are most in need of from the Orthodox tradition” (Louth, “The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology,” 32).

expression of the Trinitarian divine reality was linked to this crucial debate of mystical doctrine.<sup>205</sup>

Here Corbin certainly had in mind the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas, although he is not mentioned in this text.<sup>206</sup> In fact, while in Istanbul, Corbin translated excerpts from Gregory Palamas' *Triads*, a polemical work directed against the positions of Barlaam the Calabrian in his controversy with the hesychast monks.<sup>207</sup> In this work, Palamas intended to formulate an objective theological foundation justifying his brothers, the hesychast monks on Mount Athos, in the pursuit of their avowed goal, the deification or *theosis* of man in Christ.<sup>208</sup> Indeed, for Palamas, "the entire Greek patristic tradition can be seen as an affirmation of the goal of *theosis*."<sup>209</sup>

Palamas' theology, which Russian émigré theologians rediscovered in the 1940s, became a central point of reference in the consolidation of a unique Orthodox theological identity apart from Roman Catholic and Protestant influences.<sup>210</sup> Palamas' influence is notably evident in the theology of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, some of whose writings Corbin also translated (from the Russian)

<sup>205</sup> "Sur une autre montagne, on a vécu de la vision de cette [Lumière transfigurante]. La Montagne de l'Athos figure le lieu où la 'lumière du Thabor' a été désirée et contemplée; où, contre toutes les objections scolastiques, contre toutes les attaques d'un rationalisme même chrétien, a été élaboré le motif mystique que l'Orthodoxie grecque a frappé de la marque de sa vocation imprescriptible. Ce ne fut pas un hasard que l'expression humaine de la réalité divine trinitaire se trouvât liée à ce débat si grave de doctrine mystique" ("Deux Épîtres Mystiques de Suhrawardi d'Alep," 20-21).

<sup>206</sup> "Synods in Constantinople upheld the hesychast claim to be able to see the uncreated light of the Godhead and endorsed the theological rationale for this, presented by Saint Gregory Palamas, with his distinction between the essence and energies of God, according to which God is unknowable in his essence but genuinely knowable in his energies, in which God is himself known and not merely something about God. Preeminent among these divine energies is the uncreated light of the Godhead, the light in which Christ was transfigured before his disciples on Mount Tabor, for which reason the uncreated light came to be called the light of Tabor, or the 'Taboric light' (Andrew Louth, "Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 88).

<sup>207</sup> Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études (5ème Section), box 10.

<sup>208</sup> Hesychasm is an Eastern Orthodox monastic tradition of prayer "based on the repetition of the Jesus prayer ('Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner'), under the direction of a spiritual father, which leads to a conscious experience of the presence of God, often in the form of a vision of light" (Louth, "Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium," 89).

<sup>209</sup> Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy*, 176. On Palamas' "Defense of the Holy Hesychasts," see Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy*, 167-194.

<sup>210</sup> See this point made in Daniel P. Payne, *The Revival of Political Hesychasm in Contemporary Orthodox Thought: The Political Hesychasm of John Romanides and Christos Yannaras* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

while in Istanbul.<sup>211</sup> Bulgakov's Sophiology had a major impact on Corbin, which the next chapter will explore. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Istanbul, which is where Corbin studied the works of Suhrawardi between 1939-45, was also the place where, just a decade before him, Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993), a Romanian Orthodox priest and theologian, went to study the works of Gregory Palamas.<sup>212</sup> This fact no doubt bolstered Corbin's intuitions on the existence of essential, "metahistorical" affinities between Orthodox spirituality and Islamic spirituality, as well as on the ecumenical significance of Byzantium for relations between East and West, Christianity and Islam.

Corbin further pointed to theological themes common to Eastern Christianity and Islam. "The meaning of the divine attributes, the possibility of a sensible vision of the essentially Non-Sensible," he writes, "all this also captivated the theologians of Islam, neighbours of the Syrian theologians." Considering the cases of Suhrawardi and Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922)—the latter martyred for claiming that he and God had become one and the same—Corbin is led to ask: "How can mystical union occur, unless it presupposes the hypostatic union of the divine nature and the human nature? How can it occur without a God who is at once 'Same' and 'Other'?" "It is important," he answers, "that it was in Byzantium, and in the Greek language, that the debate was settled. We cannot

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<sup>211</sup> Corbin's papers include manuscripts of chapters from Bulgakov's *The Burning Bush* (originally published in 1927), *Jacob's Ladder: On Angels* (1929), and *The Icon and its Veneration* (1931) in French translation (Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 10). Shayegan notes that Corbin was competent in the Russian language (*Penseur de l'Islam Spirituel*, 390 n. 21), although it is not clear how or when he had learned it. It is also uncertain whether Corbin had met Bulgakov in Paris. However, in a letter to Fritz Lieb on April, 29, 1939, Corbin mentions having visited Bulgakov's house on Rue de Crimée. At that time, however, Bulgakov happened to be at the medical clinic. "Profitant de quelques loisirs je suis passé Rue de Crimée où j'ai été reçu par l'aimable Hiéromoine Paul. Il paraît que le P. Boulgakov est dans un état assez satisfaisant. Il a déjà pu absorber quelque nourriture et doit rentrer dans une dizaine de jours de la clinique" (Lieb Papers, Basel University Library, University of Basel, NL 43: Aa 260, 1-9).

<sup>212</sup> Corbin's papers contain manuscripts of excerpts from Dumitru Stăniloae's *Life and Teachings of Gregory Palamas* (originally published in Romanian in 1938) in French translation (Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 10).

overestimate the anthropological importance of the decision, its consequences for the structure of the human community.”<sup>213</sup>

As this passage indicates, Byzantine/Eastern Christian theological themes contributed to the way in which Corbin approached Islamic mysticism. For example, the question about the “possibility of a sensible vision of the essentially Non-Sensible”—which in this context specifically refers to the theological debate about the experience of light in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century hesychast controversy—anticipates and underlies Corbin’s concept of the *mundus imaginalis*. Ontologically situated between the sensory world and the intelligible world, Corbin’s “imaginal world” is a spiritual dimension where all spiritual visions “take place” and “have their place.”<sup>214</sup> Its function therefore is precisely to enable and justify the “sensible vision of the essentially Non-Sensible” implied by the experience of light in the Byzantine mystical tradition. The Byzantine experience of light thus facilitated, and contributed to, Corbin’s conceptualisation of the *mundus imaginalis*, which he elsewhere indeed describes as “[the] world of the body of sovereign light emerging from a gold-framed Byzantine mosaic.”<sup>215</sup> Given Corbin’s affinity for the Byzantine aesthetic, it is no coincidence that his concept of the *mundus imaginalis* has found echo in the writings of contemporary Orthodox theologians.<sup>216</sup> We will return to discuss the connection between the *mundus imaginalis* and Orthodox iconography in the chapter three.

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<sup>213</sup> “La signification des attributs divins; la possibilité d’une vision sensible de l’essentiellement Non-sensible, tout cela aussi a absorbé les théologiens de l’Islam, voisins des théologiens syriens. Que la destinée d’un Hallāj et celle d’un Suhrawardī présentent un dénouement si tragique, l’ultime possibilité du martyre, il reste ceci: comment l’union mystique doit-elle advenir, à moins qu’elle ne soit devancée par l’union hypostatique de nature divine et nature humaine? Comment adviendrait-elle sans un Dieu à la fois Même et Autre?”

Et il importait que ce fut à Byzance, et en langue grecque, que le débat fût tranché. On ne saurait surestimer l’importance anthropologique de la décision, ses conséquences pour la structure de la communauté humaine” (“Deux Épitres Mystiques de Suhrawardi d’Alep,” 21).

<sup>214</sup> “The existence of this intermediate world, *mundus imaginalis*...appears metaphysically necessary; the cognitive function of the Imagination is ordered to it; it is a world whose ontological level is above the world of the senses and below the pure intelligible world; it is more immaterial than the former and less material than the latter.... Upon it depends...both the validity of visionary accounts that perceive and relate ‘events in Heaven’ and the validity of dreams, symbolic rituals, the reality of places formed by intense meditation, the reality of inspired imaginative visions, cosmogonies and theogonies, and thus, in the first place, the truth of the *spiritual sense* perceived in the imaginative data of prophetic revelations” (Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, trans. Leonard Fox [West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995], 11).

<sup>215</sup> Corbin, “La Rencontre avec l’Ange,” preface to *L’Ange Roman dans la Pensée et dans l’Art*, by Aurélia Stapert (Paris: Berg International, 1975), 18.

<sup>216</sup> See, e.g., Andrei Pleșu, *Actualité des Anges*, trans. Laure Hinckel (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 2005).

In the above-cited passage, Corbin also raises the question of how mystical union can take place unless it presupposes the hypostatic union of the divine nature and the human nature, and a God who is at once “Same” and “Other.” These essentially Christological themes underlie Corbin’s interpretation of Islamic theories concerning the relation of the divine and the human, notably the Shi’ite concept of the Imam. Corbin indeed indicated that “Imamology” in Shi’ite theology assumes the same function as Christology in Christian theology.<sup>217</sup> To be sure, as already noted, Corbin later criticised the doctrine of the hypostatic union of the two natures of Jesus Christ—which was adopted as orthodox doctrine at the Council of Chalcedon in 451—favouring instead a Docetist conception of Christ (and, by analogy, of the Shi’ite Imam) as a “theophanic vision.” In this regard, Corbin’s views were, to a certain extent, inspired and reinforced by Muslim polemics against Christian doctrines (notably the Muslim rejection of the doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity). At the same time, however, Corbin’s critique of official Christianity was, in many important respects, profoundly inspired by the criticism of “historical Christianity” made by some Russian religious thinkers, notably Berdyaev, as will be later shown.<sup>218</sup> In a

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<sup>217</sup> “L’imâmologie assume en théologie shî’ite la fonction de la christologie en théologie chrétienne. C’est pourquoi l’on peut dire qu’il est radicalement impossible d’aller au fond des implications du dialogue islamo-chrétien, si l’on ignore le shî’isme; c’est lui, par excellence, qui pose le problème théologique du dialogue.... [L]’impression grandissante que l’on recueille au fur et à mesure que l’on pénètre la littérature foisonnante du shî’isme, c’est que l’imâmologie aurait été difficilement concevable et élaborable sans le prototype même de la christologie” (Corbin, “De l’Histoire des Religions comme Problème Théologique,” *Le Monde Non-Chrétien* 51-52 [1960], 146 and 148). “Quel rapport y a-t-il entre cette personne divine de l’Imâm (son *lâhût*) au niveau des mondes suprasensibles, donc son ésotérique, et l’apparence purement exotérique qu’ils avaient contemplée jusque-là dans l’humanité terrestre et historique de l’Imâm? Cette question du rapport entre le *lâhût* et le *nâsût* de l’Imâm correspond, terme pour terme, au rapport, en christologie, entre le Logos Christos éternellement préexistant et l’homme de chair Jésus de Nazareth, brièvement apparu entre deux dates de l’histoire” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 174). However, “si haut que la théosophie shî’ite exalte le rang de l’Imâm-Logos, elle reste toujours dans les limites qu’observa ailleurs la christologie d’Arius: le Logos est la première et la plus haute des créatures” (*En Islam Iranien*, IV, 175).

<sup>218</sup> Cf. “[L]es Nestoriens ne purent s’accommoder du dogme formulé par les Conciles de Nicée et de Chalcédoine.... Les Nestoriens pressentaient le danger qu’impliquait le concept d’une union hypostatique, modelé au terme d’une pénible élaboration philosophique. Ce danger, c’était que l’instabilité de ce concept n’ouvre la voie au triomphe du *monophysisme*. Comme pour leur donner raison, il est un aveu du grand philosophe de l’Orthodoxie, Nicolas Berdiaev, que je retiendrai ici. J’ai entendu plusieurs fois, jadis, Nicolas Berdiaev déclarer que tout le christianisme oriental avait été en fait, malgré l’autorité des Conciles, monophysite, ce qui veut dire que pratiquement, dans sa conception christologique, la nature divine avait en quelque sorte absorbé, volatilisé la nature humaine. C’était là même dénoncer l’instabilité du concept de l’union hypostatique, et par là même dénoncer la raison pour laquelle la ferveur orientale n’avait pu s’en accommoder” (Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme*, 125).

related aspect, Corbin saw essential affinities between the Russian concept of Divine humanity and the Shi'ite concept of the Imam. His interpretation of the Shi'ite concept of the Imam as being simultaneously the face that God shows to man and the face that man shows to God reflects Berdyaev's insight that "the divine mystery and the human mystery [are] one and the same mystery."<sup>219</sup> These issues will be explored at greater length in chapter four.

The perceived affinities between Byzantine mysticism and Islamic mysticism further contributed to Corbin's distinction between a "spiritual Islam" and a law-based Islam as somehow two distinct, incompatible currents. This is suggested in his letter to Joseph Baruzi on December 27, 1939, in which he writes that

Sufism is a much larger phenomenon than Islam (this is my "nuance" of opinion with our dear Massignon...). Islam cannot even encompass [Sufism], and therein lies the whole origin of the drama and the martyrs. This becomes abundantly clear when it is considered in the light of contemporary Byzantine mysticism. I will gradually get to it, but Suhrawardi is an enormous chunk.<sup>220</sup>

Corbin's view that Sufism is somehow incompatible with mainstream Islam was augmented by his focus on two martyred figures—al-Hallaj and Suhrawardi—condemned by the legal experts and the shari'a-minded scholars. In fact, across his writings, Corbin typically favoured figures and currents of thought that were on the margins of mainstream Islam. This reinforced his perception of an essential antagonism between the mystical and legal elements of Islam. Needless to say, this perceived dichotomy is a consequence of Corbin's own preconceptions rather than an accurate reflection of the historical Islamic experience, in which Sufism and the shari'a more often than not complement one another. In fact, Corbin's separation between a "spiritual Islam" and a "legalistic Islam" may be likened to the distinction made by the Slavophiles and their successors

<sup>219</sup> Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49.

<sup>220</sup> "Dans le Cahier d'*Hermès*, qui doit être paru, l'avez-vous vu? je n'ai rien reçu ici – dont j'avais assumé la responsabilité, j'ai écrit un peu mon testament sur ces choses.... Je crois que le soufisme est un phénomène beaucoup plus large que l'Islam (c'est ma 'nuance' d'opinion avec notre cher Massignon que nous attendons prochainement ici). L'Islam ne peut même pas l'encadrer, et toute l'origine du drame – et des martyres – est là. Cela s'éclaire d'un jour extraordinaire, si on le met à la lumière de la mystique byzantine contemporaine. J'y arriverai petit à petit, mais Sohrawardî est un morceau énorme" (in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 309).

between Christianity based on freedom (associated with Eastern Orthodoxy) and Christianity in which authoritarianism and legalism predominate (associated with Roman Catholicism).

Corbin himself suggests this parallel in his adaptation of Dostoevsky's famous chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*, "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," in which a returning Jesus Christ is arrested by the Spanish Inquisition (representing the Roman Catholic Church) and charged with heresy. Dostoevsky's "Legend" had a powerful symbolic value in Russian religious thought and was commented on by several Russian thinkers.<sup>221</sup> Corbin's adaptation of "The Legend" is inspired by Berdyaev's interpretation, in which Dostoevsky's tale reveals the struggle of two principles in the world—of Christ and of Anti-Christ, of freedom and of compulsion.<sup>222</sup> As Berdyaev comments: "To the Roman idea which is founded upon compulsion [Dostoevsky] opposes the Russian Idea, which is founded upon freedom of the spirit."<sup>223</sup> The Grand Inquisitor is a personification of the "principle of compulsion," that is, "the dangerous idea that Christ's redeeming work can be consummated only after humanity has been coerced into submission to a single ecclesiastical authority."<sup>224</sup> Christ, on the other, is the image of the spirit of freedom, at the basis of which is Dostoevsky's high regard for the independence and dignity of the human personality.<sup>225</sup>

Corbin adapts this opposition between the principles of spiritual freedom and legalistic compulsion, suggested in Dostoevsky's "Legend," in distinguishing between "spiritual Islam" and "legalistic Islam." He thus compares the Shi'ite figure of the Imam to Dostoevsky's Christ, and identifies the Muslim legal-

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<sup>221</sup> See *La Légende du Grand Inquisiteur de Dostoïevski*, trans. and ed. Luba Jurgenson (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2004), which includes the commentaries of Konstantin Leontiev, Vladimir Solovyov, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, Nicolas Berdyaev, Vasily Rozanov, and Semyon Frank.

<sup>222</sup> The significance of Dostoevsky's "Legend" for Berdyaev is discussed in Nucho, *The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity*, 27-31.

<sup>223</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 170.

<sup>224</sup> Nucho, *The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity*, 29.

<sup>225</sup> Nucho, *The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity*, 31.



scholars or *fuqaha* with the figure of the Grand Inquisitor.<sup>226</sup> Corbin indeed opposes, on the one hand, the “traits of the interior man who brings out, always and everywhere, the spiritual hermeneutics of the Holy Book, the common traits of prophetic esotericism,” to, on the other hand, “the common traits, always and everywhere, of their opponents, whether they be called Doctors of the Law, *fuqaha*, or they be those whom Dostoevsky typified in the figure of the Grand Inquisitor.”<sup>227</sup> The figure of the Grand Inquisitor, he states elsewhere, “has a great number of uniforms.”<sup>228</sup> Indeed, in Corbin’s view, “the Shi’ite Spiritual and the Sufi find themselves with respect to official Islam in a relation analogous to that in which the Spirituals of Christianity find themselves with respect to the Great Church.”<sup>229</sup>

In a letter to Denis de Rougemont on April 20, 1940, responding to an offer to collaborate on a volume on Orthodoxy, or instead to edit a volume on Islam for a newly-founded collection, Corbin wrote: “[T]aking part in the volume on Orthodoxy...suits me so much better than a book on Islam, since in the latter I mainly know heresies.”<sup>230</sup> Unfortunately, the projected volume never saw the light, although there is evidence that Corbin was indeed working on such a book

<sup>226</sup> “Une tradition remontant au V<sup>e</sup> Imâm, Mohammad al-Bâqir, nous montre le dernier Imâm, le Résurrecteur, se dirigeant vers la ville de Koufa. Alors voici que sort de la ville à sa rencontre un cortège de plusieurs milliers d’homme. Il n’y a là que des gens très bien: des lecteurs professionnels du Qorân, des docteurs de la Loi, etc., bref tout ce que la piété officielle a pu constituer socialement en dévots autoritaires. Et tous s’adressent à l’Imâm pour le récuser: ‘O fils de Fâtima! Retourne d’où tu viens. Nous n’avons pas besoin de toi. Nous n’avons pas besoin d’un fils de Fâtima.’

Lorsque je lus ce texte pour la première fois, il me sembla avoir lu déjà ailleurs certaines paroles résonnant en écho lointain. C’est ainsi que je fus reconduit jusqu’au refus que le Grand Inquisiteur, dans un célèbre roman de Dostoïevsky, oppose au Christ revenu à Séville, la nuit où il le tient prisonnier: ‘Pourquoi es-Tu revenu nous déranger?... As-tu le droit de nous révéler un seul des mystères du monde d’où Tu viens?... Avais-tu oublié que la quiétude et la mort même sont préférables pour l’homme à la liberté de discerner le bien et le mal?... Va et ne reviens plus, plus jamais.’

Entre l’accueil fait au retour de l’Imâm et l’accueil fait au retour du Christ, il y avait une ressemblance frappante. Je fis part du rapprochement à un shaykh que je savais profond et discret. En réponse, le shaykh me rappela d’abord les textes où il est dit que le XII<sup>e</sup> Imâm non seulement passe par une occultation comparable à celle de Joseph vendu par ses frères, mais que de tous les humains il est celui qui ressemble le plus au Christ, parce qu’il doit revenir comme reviendra le Christ” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 441-442).

<sup>227</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 27.

<sup>228</sup> Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme*, 201.

<sup>229</sup> Corbin, “De l’Histoire des Religions comme Problème Théologique,” 148.

<sup>230</sup> “L’an dernier, je n’osais pas encore prendre part au volume sur l’Orthodoxie. Maintenant je n’hésite plus; ça me va tellement mieux qu’un livre sur l’Islam; puisque dans celui-ci je connais surtout les hérésies” (cited in Denis de Rougemont, “Hérétiques de Toutes les Religions,” in *L’Hérétique: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 302).

in that period.<sup>231</sup> Further evidence of Corbin's interest in Byzantium can be found in his two only publications while in Istanbul. In his 1941 introduction to the book by Lutfi'l Maqtul, he situates this 15<sup>th</sup>-century Ottoman scholar "at the crossroads of the Greek-Byzantine, Persian, Arabic and Turkish spiritual universes."<sup>232</sup> And in his 1943 introduction to the correspondence between the Andalusian Sufi philosopher Ibn Sab'in and the Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, Corbin deplores the "custom in the West since the time of Frederick II" to ignore, in research on medieval Arabic and Latin theology, "what can be learned...from Byzantium and Byzantology."<sup>233</sup> In fact, Corbin's later writings contain occasional comparisons between Byzantine and Islamic philosophers, e.g., the historically improbable, but revealing comparison between Suhrawardi and Gemistus Pletho (1355-1452), whose project to combine the teachings of Plato and Zoroaster, in Corbin's view, was "foreshadowed" by Suhrawardi.<sup>234</sup>

It becomes clear that Corbin's claim that he avoided every external influence while working on Suhrawardi in Istanbul cannot be admitted without serious qualifications. His study of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov and Byzantine theology during that period was indeed pivotal, as revealed in his writings after the war.

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<sup>231</sup> Corbin's papers contain evidence that he was preparing a book dealing with Byzantine Orthodoxy. In a box titled "1940 Istanbul Orthodoxie Byzance (Projet de Livre)," one finds manuscripts with titles such as "Moscou et Ispahan" and "Pour l'Idée de Byzance," as well as a folder labeled "Lettre d'un Chrétien d'Occident à son Ami Orthodoxe," containing a manuscript titled "Présence de l'Orthodoxie pour l'Occident" (Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 45). These documents, which remain unexplored, are of the highest importance for reconstructing Corbin's thought. I hope to deal with that material in a future work.

<sup>232</sup> Corbin, introduction to *La Duplication de l'Autel*, by Molla Lufti'l Maqtul (Paris: De Boccard, 1940), 33.

<sup>233</sup> Corbin, foreword to *Correspondance Philosophique avec l'Empereur Frédéric II de Hohenstaufen*, by Ibn Sab'in (Paris: De Boccard, 1943), xviii.

<sup>234</sup> Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 160. Cf. Michel Balivet, *Byzantins et Ottomans: Relations, Interaction, Succession* (Istanbul: Isis, 1999), 17-18.

### Chapter 3: Arriving at the Shi'ite Sophia: Corbin's Bulgakovian "Turn"

"Un *isbrâqî* est spontanément un sophiologue"

(Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique à un Entretien Philosophique").

Corbin's move to Iran in 1945 marked the beginning of a prolific period lasting three decades, during which he produced his landmark works on Islamic thought. Sophiology emerges as an important and central theme in Corbin's writings from that period. It was mainly in the writings of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, some of which he translated while in Istanbul, that Corbin discovered the Russian Sophiological speculation. The influence of Bulgakov is notably evident in the Sophiological interpretation of Carl Gustav Jung's *Answer to Job* that Corbin gave in 1953 in an important review article titled "The Eternal Sophia." Around the same time, Corbin drew on the theory of Sophia in articulating a "Shi'ite Sophiology" and a "Mazdean Sophiology." The perceived recurrence of the theme of Sophia in Iranian religious history indeed allowed Corbin to offer a unified and progressive narrative of spirituality "from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran." In a related aspect, Corbin adapted Bulgakov's concepts of "angelological anthropology" and "angelic pedagogy" to his interpretation of Islamic and Iranian angelological notions. Bulgakov's doctrine of icons was also of import to Corbin. This is reflected in his interpretation of the Shi'ite concept of the Imam in iconographical terms, and in his ecumenical interpretation of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity.

#### 3.1. "The Eternal Sophia" and Jungianism in Corbin's Thought

In September 1945, Corbin moved from Istanbul directly to Tehran to "meet Suhrawardi in his own homeland," as he put it. There, he became the director of the Department of Iranology of the newly founded Franco-Iranian Institute, and initiated the series of publications entitled *Bibliothèque Iranienne*, which made available many major texts of Sufism. From that time on until his death, Corbin spent almost every fall semester in Teheran, teaching at the University of Teheran, while also lecturing, from 1949, at the yearly Eranos

conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, and teaching, from 1954, as a successor to Louis Massignon at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris.<sup>235</sup>

Eranos had a unique significance for Corbin. It allowed him, as he put it, “[to reveal and express] in complete freedom...an original way of thinking, outside of all dogmatism and all academicism.”<sup>236</sup> Nearly all of his major works—including *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (originally published in 1954), *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (1958), *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (1960), and the monumental four-volume *En Islam Iranien* (1971-1973)—were based on lectures delivered at Eranos. These works indeed reflect the freedom from conventional disciplinary limits afforded by Eranos. While Corbin was by all accounts a scrupulous scholar—as his many editions of Arabic and Persian works fully attest—it is important to bear in mind the context of Eranos in which took shape and were delivered his interpretations of Islamic thought.<sup>237</sup>

Among the many encounters Corbin made at Eranos, perhaps none has attracted more attention and controversy than his meeting with the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). Partly because of his association with Jung and some of his followers, and partly because of the favourable references to the Swiss psychologist in some of his writings, Corbin has attracted considerable attention in some Jungian circles, particularly among the followers of James Hillman, the founder of “archetypal psychology,” who credits Jung and Corbin as primary influences. The particular attention Corbin has received from these quarters, while it has no doubt contributed to the growth of his fame—particularly in North America—has at the same time, through indiscriminate association of his name and some of his ideas with those of Jung, tended to misrepresent his intellectual context and misconstrue his project.

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<sup>235</sup> Landolt, “Between Philosophy and Orientalism,” 486; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Henry Corbin: The Life and Works of the Occidental Exile in Quest of the Orient of Light,” in *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, by S.H. Nasr (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 277.

<sup>236</sup> Corbin, “The Time of Eranos,” in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, trans. Ralph Manheim, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), xx.

<sup>237</sup> On Eranos, see now Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth-Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013). See also Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 295-313.

To be sure, Corbin's writings, particularly those published between 1949 and 1960, contain many references to Jung, and draw on certain aspects of his thought. Tom Cheetham is no doubt right in pointing out that

Jung's ideas helped to crystallize many concepts that were perhaps not quite fully conscious in Corbin's mind, but which only needed a small impact to take on their final, and characteristically Corbinian, character.... Yet... Jung's ideas [did not alter] the direction of Corbin's thought in any significant way. It is perhaps more accurate to see Jung as providing confirmation and support for, as well as defining contrast with, ideas that Corbin had already developed, or that were nascent in his mind, and which he continued to pursue long after the initial thrill was gone.<sup>238</sup>

Indeed, with Jung's death in 1961, references to the Swiss psychoanalyst all but ceased in Corbin's writings, and he later stated: "I was friends with Jung, but never a 'Jungian' myself. I specify this, because for many superficial or naïve readers, it is enough to make several references to an author for them to turn you into one of his disciples."<sup>239</sup>

Disproportionate emphasis on Jung has further overshadowed other, more significant sources for Corbin, particularly Russian religious thought. The complex relation between Jung and Corbin, and the reception of Corbin's ideas in Jungian milieus, are beside the present purpose.<sup>240</sup> Here I wish only to draw attention to some of the ways in which Russian religious thought, Bulgakov's Sophiology in particular, influenced Corbin's reception of Jung. Corbin was immersed in Russian religious thought for over two decades prior to his encounter with Jung and the beginning of his participation at Eranos, even

<sup>238</sup> Tom Cheetham, *All the World an Icon*, 137.

<sup>239</sup> "Que dire de ces entretiens [avec Jung] sur lesquels je ne voudrais laisser planer aucune ambiguïté? J'étais un métaphysicien, non pas un psychologue, Jung était un psychologue non pas un métaphysicien, quoiqu'il ait souvent côtoyé la métaphysique. Nos formations et nos visées respectives étaient toutes différentes.... Oserai-je dire que l'enseignement et la conversation de Jung pouvaient apporter à tout métaphysicien, à tout théologien, un don inappréciable, à condition de s'en séparer au moment où il le fallait? Je pense au précepte d'André Gide: 'Maintenant, Nathanaël, jette mon livre....' Jung se défendait avec force et humour d'être 'jungien.' Moi-même je fus ami avec Jung, je ne fus jamais un 'jungien.' Je le précise, car pour maints lecteurs superficiels ou naïfs, il suffit que vous vous référiez plusieurs fois à un auteur, pour qu'ils fassent de vous un de ses adeptes" (Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 48).

<sup>240</sup> Tom Cheetham offers a nuanced comparison of Jung and Corbin in *All the World an Icon*, 130-189.

though the full extent of this Russian influence did not become manifest until well after Jung had come into the picture. How did the Russian content in Corbin's thought facilitate his intellectual engagement with Jung?

Here it suffices to focus on one aspect of the Russian connection in Corbin's interpretation of Jung, to wit, Sophiology. Corbin himself brings this connection to light in his review article of Jung's book *Answer to Job* (published in 1952).<sup>241</sup> This article, titled "The Eternal Sophia" (1953), was important in consolidating the nascent relation between Corbin and Jung. Upon reading it, Jung expressed in a letter to Corbin his "extraordinary joy" at "the not only extremely rare, but even rather unique experience of being completely understood."<sup>242</sup>

In his review, Corbin interprets Jung's work as a "phenomenology of the sophianic consciousness or religion."<sup>243</sup> Jung's book, he claims, "resonates like a strange reminder of those religious themes with which, some twenty years ago, a few young philosopher-theologians in quest of new insights which they could claim for their own were concerned." There was, on the one hand, Kierkegaard, who drew young Protestant philosophers towards "the adventurous search for truth through subjectivity." Next to Kierkegaard,

there was the voice of Father Sergius Bulgakov, harbinger of Sophia and sophianic thought, who, with Nicolas Berdiaev, was rediscovering the secrets of a neglected tradition for all those who were linked in one way or another to Russian Orthodoxy. Those who will have heard this voice will no doubt be the most receptive to Jung's "sophianic" book, which will at least not become for them a cause for scandal.<sup>244</sup>

Given this perceived affinity between Jung's book and Russian Sophiology, Corbin in his review presents Jung as "an interpreter of Sophia and Sophiology."<sup>245</sup>

Thus, while aware of their respective differences, Corbin detects a "symphonic relation" between "Fr Bulgakov's Sophiology and what can also be

<sup>241</sup> Corbin, "La Sophia Éternelle," *Revue de Culture Européenne* 5 (1953), 11-44.

<sup>242</sup> Letter from C.G. Jung to Corbin, May 4, 1953, in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 328.

<sup>243</sup> Corbin, postface to *Réponse à Job*, by C. G. Jung (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1964), 249.

<sup>244</sup> Corbin, "La Sophia Éternelle," 16. On Jung's significance for Russian religious thinkers, see Crone, *Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Renewal*.

<sup>245</sup> Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 48.

called Jung's Sophiology."<sup>246</sup> This already points to what might be described as the ecumenical function of Sophiology in Corbin. Sophiology indeed offers a framework for Corbin's grand-scale ecumenical vision. Thus, in his 1964 postface to the French translation of Jung's *Answer to Job*, he envisions a "future work, in which Jung's Sophiology would take its place in an overall phenomenology of the sophianic consciousness." Such a work, he remarks, would explore the connections between

the Jungian Sophiology and the figure of Sophia in the Spirituals of Protestantism (Jacob Boehme and his lineage...), in the Sophiological school of Russian Orthodoxy (Sergius Bulgakov, Berdyaev), and finally in the spiritual universe of ancient Iran.

While such a work "remains on the agenda," Corbin meanwhile refers to his book *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, where the interested reader "can...familiarise himself with the idea of Sophia as it presented itself to the vision of ancient Zoroastrian Iran as well as of Islamic Persia, that is, to Islamic gnosticism under its specifically Shi'ite form."<sup>247</sup>

In adapting the idea of Sophia to the Jungian and Islamic contexts, Corbin no doubt transformed the meaning of this notion as it is found in Bulgakov. From another perspective, however, Sophiology served a similar function for both Corbin and the Russian thinkers. As Valliere argues, Sophia, in the works of the Russian Sophiologists, is "best seen as a conceptual representation of the dialogue between the Orthodox theological tradition and modern liberal civilization."<sup>248</sup> Thus, for Bulgakov, Sophiology was a "method

<sup>246</sup> Corbin, "La Sophia Éternelle," 38. "Of course there are differences.... The Russian Orthodox theologian's thought evolves within traditional Christian dogma whilst Jung's unfolds with total confessional freedom. Sophiology is an interpretation of the world, a theological *Weltanschauung* within Christianity itself. It became one stream of theological thought within the Orthodox Church...represented...by a long tradition (from Soloviev to Fr Florensky). The way it poses the problem of the relation between God and the world, between God and man, and its affinity with the ideas of Meister Eckhart, Boehme, Schelling and Baader, doubtless make it, of all Christian theological schools today, the one most likely to understand Jung's Sophiological message" (Corbin, "La Sophia Éternelle," 38). In a recent comparative study of Jung and Berdyaev, Georg Nicolaus acknowledges Corbin as "the first one to notice a deep resonance between the Russian personalist thinkers and Jung with reference to what he calls Jung's 'sophiology'" (*C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person* [New York: Routledge, 2011], 7). According to Nicolaus, the "symphonic relation" of Jung's sophiology to Bulgakov's sophiology "applies...possibly even more to Berdyaev's thought" (7). Nicolaus identifies many affinities between Jung and Berdyaev that can also be extended to Corbin.

<sup>247</sup> Corbin, postface to *Réponse à Job*, by C. G. Jung, 251-252.

<sup>248</sup> Paul Valliere, "Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization," 176.

that enables dogmatic theology to generate fresh constructions.... [T]here can be no final 'system' of sophiology, since new content is at all times being produced by the world-process."<sup>249</sup> Similarly, Sophiology offered Corbin a language and basis for an integrated representation of diverse theological and philosophical notions. In particular, it allowed him to link modern and traditional theological representations. Thus, the Shi'ite "Sophiology," along with the Russian Orthodox, the Jungian, the Mazdean and other ones, are subsumed as different moments in an "overall phenomenology of sophianic consciousness." In this sense, Sophia, in Corbin's writings, was a factor of ecumenism.<sup>250</sup>

### 3.2. Aspects of Sergius Bulgakov's Doctrine of Sophia

Born in 1871, Bulgakov studied law, and became a professor of political economy at the universities of Kiev and then Moscow. Like Berdyaev, he had for some time been a "Legal Marxist." His publication of *From Marxism to Idealism* (1903) marked his conversion to belief in absolute values, and he soon passed into religious faith. Together with Berdyaev, he became one of the most prominent leaders of that section of the Russian intelligentsia that sought social change on the basis of a spiritual revolution. Following his exile from Russia in 1922, he visited Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, which marked his Sophiological interpretation of the world. From 1925 until his death in 1944 he lived in Paris, where he was professor of dogmatic theology at the Orthodox Theological Institute, which he helped found.<sup>251</sup>

As well as being a prolific theologian, Bulgakov was also a priest in the Orthodox Church, and as such was an official representative of Orthodoxy. In this respect, Bulgakov was different from Berdyaev who, despite his adherence to the Orthodox Church, never spoke in the name of any official body, considering

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<sup>249</sup> Paul Valliere, "Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization," 190.

<sup>250</sup> On the ecumenical implications of Bulgakov's Sophiology, see Brandon [Anastassy] Gallaher [Galahar], "Bulgakov's Ecumenical Thought," *Sobornost* 24, no. 1 (2002), 24-55, esp. 33-34. See further Antoine Arjakovsky, "The Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov and Contemporary Western Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1-2 (2005), 219-235.

<sup>251</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 91. For a biographical overview of Bulgakov, see Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2, 890-893.



himself to be first and foremost a “free thinker.”<sup>252</sup> Bulgakov’s thought by contrast was theological, that is, based on biblical references and specifically informed by Christian doctrine. However, Bulgakov’s theology was also profoundly influenced by German idealism.<sup>253</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is Bulgakov’s most controversial teaching, his theory of Sophia, that most appealed to Corbin.<sup>254</sup> Berdyaev distinguishes two basic trends within Russian religious thought: the “primarily religious-anthropological” and the “primarily religious-cosmological” currents. At the heart of the first trend, which he himself represents, Berdyaev identifies the problem of man, the problem of freedom and evil, the problem of creativity and the problem of history.<sup>255</sup> Bulgakov, on the other hand, may be associated with the second current, which is principally concerned with the problem of the cosmos, the sophianic aspect of the creature, the problem of Mariology and angelology.<sup>256</sup> Although far from absolute, this distinction is useful to illustrate Berdyaev and Bulgakov’s respective contributions to Corbin.

<sup>252</sup> Of his role at the interconfessional meetings in Paris, Berdyaev wrote: “My embarrassment was due to my own ambiguous position: I was unable to speak in the name of any official body. I could express only my own individual convictions, without claiming to represent anything or anybody except myself. But when these inter-confessional meetings began our non-Orthodox friends regarded my position as distinctly Orthodox, or even as the voice of Orthodoxy itself. This misunderstanding, which kept on recurring on other occasions, was rather disturbing, and I did my best to dispel it” (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 259-260).

<sup>253</sup> See Jonathan R. Seiling, “From Antinomy to Sophiology: Modern Russian Religious Consciousness and Sergei N. Bulgakov’s Critical Appropriation of German Idealism” (PhD diss., University of St. Michael’s College, 2008).

<sup>254</sup> “Bulgakov’s defence of a Sophiological interpretation of Christian dogmas called forth a polemic against him, and later a harsh censure for heresy on the part of Metropolitan Sergius of Moscow, who, however, had in his possession only long excerpts from Bulgakov’s book, which had been made by his opponents and sent by them to Moscow. Metropolitan Eulogius, the Rector of the Theological Institute, found it necessary to appoint a special committee to investigate the question of Fr. Bulgakov’s ‘heresy.’ The report of the committee was generally favourable to Bulgakov, and he was permitted to continue his teaching at the Theological Institute” (Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, II, 893).

<sup>255</sup> As Georgy Fedotov writes: “Berdiaev’s life intuition is characterized by an acute sense of evil prevailing in the world. Through this intuition he carries on the tradition of Dostoevsky (Ivan Karamazov), but also that of the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia.... The struggle with evil and a chivalric-revolutionary attitude towards the world make Berdiaev stand out in relation to many thinkers of the Russian Orthodox revival. Not a humble or aesthetic affirmation of the world as a Divine all-unity (which is the basis of Russian ‘Sophianism’), but a struggle with the world in the image of fallen nature, society and man, makes up the life nerve of his work” (cited in Linde, *Berdiaev’s Existential Gnosticism*, 120).

<sup>256</sup> Berdyaev, “Concerning Sophiology,” review of *Jacob’s Ladder*, by Sergius Bulgakov, *Put’* 16 (May 1929), 95-99. An English translation of that text by Fr. Stephen Janos is available at [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdyaev/berd\\_lib/1929\\_343.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdyaev/berd_lib/1929_343.html), accessed on May 20, 2013.

In his classic *History of Russian Philosophy* (which Corbin cites), Zenkovsky distinguishes three themes the inner combination of which makes up the “nucleus” of every Sophiology: (1) the theme of *Naturphilosophie*, a conception of the world as a “living whole,” with the related problem of the “world-soul” and the ideal “basis” of the world; (2) the theme of anthropology, which is concerned with the relation between man and the mystery of the human spirit to nature and the Absolute; and finally (3) the theme of the “divine” aspect of the world.<sup>257</sup> These themes are present in various degrees in the writings of practically every Russian religious thinker. As the principal source for Corbin’s ideas on Sophia, Bulgakov’s contribution is unique and deserves special consideration.

Bulgakov’s theory of Sophia has received much attention over the years and continues to be the subject of some controversy among Orthodox theologians. Not even a summary of it can be attempted here.<sup>258</sup> Our aim is merely to highlight some aspects of Bulgakov’s doctrine of Sophia that became important for Corbin. As previously indicated, the Russian Sophiological tradition goes back to Vladimir Solovyov, who was the first to identify the Wisdom of God, personified and referred to as “she” in the sapiential books of the Old Testament, with the “Eternal Feminine.” While Bulgakov pays tribute to Solovyov as “the first Russian sophiologist,” he objects to what he regards as Solovyov’s syncretism, and the way in which Solovyov draws on ancient gnostic sources and on the writings of Western theosophers such as Boehme. Instead, Bulgakov wishes to develop Sophiology in conformity with Orthodox doctrine, and he credits Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), a Russian Orthodox theologian, with having placed the theme of Sophiology in a strictly Orthodox setting.<sup>259</sup>

The starting point for Bulgakov’s Sophiological speculation is the relation between God and the world, or “what is practically the same thing, between *God* and *man*.”<sup>260</sup> In general, Bulgakov tells us, there has been a tendency to confront human beings with a choice, “God *or* the world, God *or* man.” This polarisation

<sup>257</sup> Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, II, 840-841.

<sup>258</sup> A critical discussion of Bulgakov’s Sophiology is offered in Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, II, 897-916.

<sup>259</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 91. See also Kornblatt and Gustafson, introduction to *Russian Religious Thought*, 17. On Fr. Florensky, see Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

<sup>260</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God: A Brief Summary of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick John Thompson et al. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1937), 30.

is metaphysically represented in two extreme positions: monism, in which the distinction between God and the world collapses, and dualism, in which an unbridgeable chasm is postulated between the transcendent God, “wholly Other,” and finite beings.<sup>261</sup> Bulgakov, as later Corbin, was particularly concerned with the implications of the dualistic viewpoint. As he saw things, the wider the gap between God and the world, the less space one has to admit the presence of the divine in our lives. A logical consequence of this dualism is the removal of icons and sacraments from our worship, leaving us with a “hidden atheism” of an inaccessible, transcendent *Deus Absconditus*. According to Bulgakov, this dualism between God and the world prevailed in Catholic theology for centuries and was held to be self-evident in the Protestant world.<sup>262</sup>

Bulgakov’s theory of Sophia is an attempt to counteract secularisation and maintain the integrity between God and the world by affirming “a certain ontological *continuity* between the Creator and the creatures.”<sup>263</sup> He saw the landmark of Orthodoxy, inherited from and defined by the Church Fathers, “in its profound awareness that God and his creation constitute one single reality.”<sup>264</sup> Drawing on Gregory Palamas’ distinction between God’s “essence” and “energies,” Bulgakov asserts that God as Absolute is entirely transcendent to the world, but as the Creator he makes himself relative to it.<sup>265</sup> The distinction between God in himself and in creation is therefore grounded in creatural limitation rather than in the divine nature as such.<sup>266</sup> To bridge the two worlds of the Absolute and the relative, Bulgakov postulates the need for Sophia to account for

that boundary, the very concept of which lies *between* God and the world, the Creator and creation, being neither the one nor the other, but

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<sup>261</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 92.

<sup>262</sup> Nikolai Sakharov, “Essential Bulgakov: His Ideas about Sophia, the Trinity, and Christ,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011), 172.

<sup>263</sup> John Meyendorff, “Creation in the History of Orthodox Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1983), 32.

<sup>264</sup> Sakharov, “Essential Bulgakov,” 172.

<sup>265</sup> “Bulgakov himself saw his teaching as a theologoumenon, which attempts to take forward St Gregory Palamas’ teaching about the uncreated energies. These energies ensure the divine immanence in relation to the world, they sustain the world, permeate it, give life to it. So Bulgakov saw the Palamite teaching as an incomplete Sophiology” (Sakharov, “Essential Bulgakov,” 174). See further Joost van Rossum, “Palamisme et Sophiologie,” *Contacts* 60, no. 22 (2008), 133-145 (I owe this reference to the kindness of Dr. Brandon Gallaher).

<sup>266</sup> Robert Slesinski, “Bulgakov on Sophia,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 59, no. 3/4 (2007), 136.

something entirely separate, simultaneously uniting and dividing the one from the other.<sup>267</sup>

This function of Sophia is analogous to that of the *mundus imaginalis* in Corbin, as we shall see.

In Bulgakov's doctrine, Sophia is the Idea of creation, eternally pre-existing in God. In relation to the world, Sophia unites in herself the ideal forms of all created beings. With respect to the Godhead, Sophia is *Deus revelatus* in relation to *Deus absconditus*.<sup>268</sup> As such, she acts as the intermediary between the transcendent God and the created world. As an entelechy of the world, she is the soul of the world and as "*natura naturans* in relation to *natura naturata*."<sup>269</sup> Thus Sophia appears to be many things, and to serve many functions, at once. The polyvalence of the concept no doubt facilitated Corbin's adaptation of it to the Islamic context.

### 3.3. "Fatima-Sophia," or the Shi'ite Sophia

Corbin was concerned with the same fundamental theological dilemma that was the point of departure for Bulgakov's Sophiology. This may be gleaned from a brief text titled "The Combat for the World Soul, or the Urgency of Sophiology" that he wrote shortly before his death in 1978. In that text, Corbin stresses the importance of the concept of divine Sophia in mediating between apophatic (or negative) theology and kataphatic (or positive) theology. He writes:

If the only categories we have are those of the creator God and of the creature, we cannot surmount their dualism. The meaning of the doctrine of Sophia...is to introduce this middle term that unites the Creator and the creature. It enables understanding the mystery of Creation as a tragedy simultaneously human and divine.... The mystery of the creative Act becomes amplified into a mystery of the divine

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<sup>267</sup> Cited in Slesinski, "Bulgakov on Sophia," 137.

<sup>268</sup> Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), 33.

<sup>269</sup> Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 92.

Presence to this world. The idea of this Presence is precisely that of the divine Sophia. In its absence, God retires definitely from the world.<sup>270</sup>

While Bulgakov tried to develop Sophiology in accordance with a strictly Orthodox line of thought, Corbin used Sophiology as a paradigm for his interpretation of Islamic theological concepts. For example, in a text titled “Sufism and Sophia” (1955), Corbin recognises in the Shī’ite cult of Fatima “the traits of the celestial Sophia, a subject of meditation in all schools of gnosticism.” In “the feminine figure of Fatima,” he identifies “the starting point of a Sophiology” that has yet to be formulated.<sup>271</sup> The same “Eternal-Feminine of the divine Essence” represented in the figure of Fatima, according to Corbin, is manifest in “symbols bearing different names.”<sup>272</sup> Thus, in *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (1961), he writes:

When we again find Suhrawardī using the very name Isfandārmuz, the Angel of the Earth and the Sophia of Mazdaism, we have no difficulty in recognizing her features, since even the characteristic name of her function has been carried over from the Mazdean liturgy into the Islamic, Neoplatonic context of Suhrawardī. But it may happen that her name is no longer pronounced, that a Figure with an entirely different name appears in an entirely different context, and that nevertheless we can still identify the same features, the same *Gestalt*.... It is the feminine Archangel of a *supracelestial* Earth, assuming the rank and privilege of the divine Sophia, that it is suggested we may perceive, on the level of the world of the *lāhūt*, the eternal reality of the dazzling Fātima, daughter of the Prophet, as she is meditated in Shī’ite gnosis.<sup>273</sup>

Through a “harmonic perception,” Corbin is “led to the idea of a Shī’ite Sophiology, by which we shall perceive afresh something that Mazdean

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<sup>270</sup> Henry Corbin, “Suggestions pour la Session 1979: Le Combat pour l’Âme du Monde, ou Urgence de la Sophiologie,” in *Le Combat pour l’Âme du Monde: Urgence de la Sophiologie* (Paris: Berg International, 1980), 11-12. Corbin adds that further research on the notion of Sophia would need to consider “the sophianic concept in Russian Orthodoxy: the Sophiology of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, with what distinguishes it from Vladimir Solovyov’s poetic Sophianism and Jacob Boehme’s Sophiology” (12).

<sup>271</sup> Corbin, *L’Iran et la Philosophie*, 233-234.

<sup>272</sup> Corbin, *L’Iran et la Philosophie*, 234. She is, for instance, exemplified in the Fravarti of Zoroastrianism as “the feminine entity who is at once [the] archetype and angelic guide [of each faithful believer], his transcendental, heavenly Self” (Corbin, *L’Iran et la Philosophie*, 235).

<sup>273</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 56-57.

Sophiology already perceived in the person of the Angel of the Earth.”<sup>274</sup> The perceived recurrence of the theme of Sophia in the history of Iranian religious consciousness allows Corbin to bridge pre-Islamic Iran and post-Islamic Iran.<sup>275</sup> Sophiology indeed functions as a leitmotif and unifying thread that ensures the very continuity of Iranian spirituality across different periods. From the Mazdean context to the Islamic, Neoplatonic context of Suhrawardi and the Shi’ite context of Safavid Iran, the figure of Sophia, appearing under different guises and names, is the central protagonist in the Iranian spiritual narrative recounted by Corbin.<sup>276</sup> Thus, in Corbin’s reading, Sophiology to some extent defines the essence of Iranian spirituality. This matter will be further addressed in the next chapter when we consider Corbin’s concept of “Iranism.”

Corbin draws on the terminology of Russian Sophiology to give expression to his “Shi’ite Sophiology.” In keeping with his interpretation of Fatima as the Shi’ite Sophia, which he designates with the compound noun “Fatima-Sophia,” he borrows the adverb “sophianity” (Russian *sofīnosī*) from

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<sup>274</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 68 and 59.

<sup>275</sup> Corbin, postface to *Réponse à Job*, by C. G. Jung, 252.

<sup>276</sup> Cf. “Obviously, the passage from one manifestation of Sophianity to another does not involve the material filiation of any historic causality because here plainly both manifestations are acts of the Malakūt which occur in the *imaginal* world. We prefer to speak here of the epochs of a spiritual world rather than of constants or of recurring factors of the Iranian consciousness. Now the succession of the epochs of a spiritual world does not consist of a history which one can perceive and demonstrate in the way in which documents permit us to speak of the campaigns of Julius Caesar or of Napoleon. The epochs of the spiritual world are totally different from the epochs of the exterior world of geology or of sociopolitical history. The epochs of a spiritual world make up a history *sui generis*, which is in its very essence *imaginal* history. We are dealing here with a ‘history’ of the same nature as that which is witnessed when our Shi’ite philosophers identify their Twelfth Imam now with the Saoshyant or Zoroastrian eschatological Saviour, now with the Paraclete announced in St. John’s Gospel.... To describe the link between the two ages [i.e. Mazdean Iran and Shi’ite Iran] respectively of Sophianity and of Celestial Earth, we have had recourse here to a musical terminology, and we turn to the sound effect produced on the organ by the playing of the *progressio harmonica* (Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, xvi-xvii). Corbin further explains: “Whoever is somewhat familiar with the organ knows what are referred to as ‘stops.’ Thanks to these stops, each note can cause several pipes of different lengths to ‘speak’ simultaneously; thus, besides the fundamental note, a number of harmonic overtones can be heard. Among the contrivances that regulate them, the *progressio harmonica* designates a combination of stops which allows more and more overtones to be heard as one ascends toward the upper register, until at a certain pitch the fundamental note also resounds simultaneously.... [T]his phenomenon seems to us the parallel most helpful in understanding the subtitle of this book: ‘From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran.’ As a result of the connection which was effected between the old Mazdean Iran and Shi’ite Iran...something like a *progressio harmonica* takes place. The higher we ‘ascend,’ the more harmonics we hear. Finally, the fundamental...will become audible again. The analogy suggested may at last enable us to understand certain features of the spiritual history of Iran” (Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 51).

Bulgakov to “faithfully [translate]” the Arabic term “fātimīya.”<sup>277</sup> In a section of his review of Jung’s *Answer to Job* devoted to Bulgakov’s Sophiology, Corbin explains:

By its *sophianity*, the world has become the mirror of the divine world, or *creaturely Sophia*. Transcending this duality of the divine Sophia (eternal form and created form) is to divinize the created, to bestow upon it the divine life, to lead the created Sophia back to the eternal Sophia. This is the *theanthropic process* [the process of humanity’s divinisation].<sup>278</sup>

This helps explain Corbin’s interpretation of the “eternal person of Fātima-Sophia” as the source of a “cosmic Sophianity.... She is Sophia, which is to say divine wisdom and power, embracing all the universes.”<sup>279</sup> “Through [the person of Fātima-Sophia],” he again writes,

creation, from the beginning, is Sophianic in nature, and through her the Imāms are invested with the Sophianity that they transmit to their adepts, because she is its *soul*. From this pleromatic height we can distinguish the fundamental sound emerging from the depths: namely, that which Mazdean Sophiology formulated in the idea of *spendar mafikih*, the Sophianity with which Spenta Armaiti, the feminine Angel of the Earth invested the faithful believer.<sup>280</sup>

As a religious leitmotif from Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran, Sophia defines Corbin’s idea of the Iranian spiritual universe. In this respect, it is worth observing that both Sophia and Iran, in Corbin’s view, represent a certain “mediating” function, a “between-two-ness.” As already indicated, Sophia embodies the notion of mediation *par excellence* insofar as she is the intermediary between the divine and the human, God and the world. Corbin likewise saw the Iranian spiritual universe as an “intermediate world” between the Arabic and

<sup>277</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 68. “[T]he eternal person of Fātima-Sophia constitutes the *Sophianity* of the pleroma of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones, and...by the cosmogonic virtue of this pleroma, the *Sophianity* becomes the Presence in our world. Our authors coined a term to express this: *fātimīya*, an abstract noun which literally translated gives something like ‘fātimianité’ but which the term Sophianity expresses more directly still once we have recognised in the eternal mediating person of Fātima the Resplendent, Her who is elsewhere known as Sophia” (Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, xv).

<sup>278</sup> Corbin, “La Sophie Éternelle,” 39.

<sup>279</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 64-65.

<sup>280</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 68.

Indian spiritual worlds.<sup>281</sup> This view was reinforced by the fact that it was in Iran that Corbin discovered the “median and intermediary” power of the Imagination, with which is associated the *mundus imaginalis*.<sup>282</sup> The general importance of mediation for Corbin adds another layer of significance to his view of the intermediary function of “Russian Orthodox theosophers” already indicated.

The feminine quality of Sophia is one of her essential aspects. Indeed, for Corbin, just as for Bulgakov, “the eternal feminine,” “femininity,” and Sophia are almost interchangeable.<sup>283</sup> Corbin’s attraction to the feminine figuration of the divine is illustrated in his work *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (1958). In a chapter titled “Sophiology and *Devotio Sympathetica*,” Corbin interprets the prologue of Ibn Arabi’s *Diwan* as the “*Sophianic Poem* of a Fedele d’Amore.” Similar to his identification of the Shi’ite Fatima with Sophia, Corbin here associates the beautiful Nizam, who is the subject of Ibn Arabi’s poem, with “Wisdom or divine Sophia.”<sup>284</sup> There is an interesting parallel here with Vladimir Solovyov, who in a poem titled “Three Meetings,” evoked his three visionary experiences of a “beautiful lady” whom he identified with the divine Wisdom.

In Corbin’s reading, Ibn Arabi’s “encounter with the mystic Sophia” prefigures “the goal to which the dialectic of love will lead us: the idea of the feminine being (of which Sophia is the archetype) as the theophany par excellence, which, however, is perceptible only through the sympathy between the celestial and the terrestrial.”<sup>285</sup> Corbin’s Sophiological interpretation of Ibn

<sup>281</sup> “To affirm the properly Iranian spiritual universe is to state the need for the existence, in the realm of the spirit, of an *intermediary world* between what the properly Arabic spiritual world and what the spiritual universe of India represent there” (Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. W. R. Trask [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960], 13).

<sup>282</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, viii-ix.

<sup>283</sup> “Fātima-Sophia is in fact the Soul: the Soul of creation, the Soul of each creature, that is, the constitutive part of the human being that appears essentially to the imaginative consciousness in the form of a feminine being, *Anima*. She is the eternally feminine in man, and that is why she is the archetype of the heavenly Earth” (Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, 66). On Bulgakov’s “exaltation of the feminine,” see Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, “The Nature and Function of Sophia in Sergei Bulgakov’s Prerevolutionary Thought,” in *Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 168.

<sup>284</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 141.

<sup>285</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 145. Cf. “Mystic love is the religion of Beauty, because Beauty is the secret of theophanies and because as such it is the power which transfigures.... But the organ of the theophanic perception, that is, of the perception through which the encounter between Heaven and Earth in the mid-zone, the *‘alam al mithāl* takes places, is the active Imagination. It is the active Imagination which invests the earthly Beloved with his ‘theophanic function;’ it is essentially a theophanic Imagination and, as such, a creative Imagination, because Creation is



‘Arabi helped him associate the Andalusian Sufi with the Iranian spiritual universe. This further reveals the ecumenical function of Sophiology for Corbin.

Needless to say, in interpreting Islamic themes through the lens of Sophiology Corbin was not concerned with a philologically and historically accurate presentation of Islam. Quite the reverse, Sophiology enabled Corbin precisely to transcend historical boundaries and cultural contingencies. At the heart of his Sophiological project is the ecumenical desire to bring together the theosophical traditions of East and West. Corbin is aware that there are no historical relations between the Russian Sophiologists and the Islamic “Sophiologists.” His view that Russian Orthodox and Islamic theosophers share a kinship with respect to their cult to the divine feminine, whether she is called Sophia or Fatima, is not a view based on verifiable historical evidence, but one based on the intuitive perception of a common ideal essence. In Corbin’s view, the Russian Sophia and the Shi’ite Fatima are indeed different exemplifications of the same idea. Spiritual contemporaneity justifies historical anachronism. As he explains:

Investigations aimed at a religious typology are obliged to transgress such frontiers as are imposed by the very nature of their subject matter on the historical sciences, because the types which a philosophical anthropology will be looking for are distributed on either side of the historical frontiers. The lines of cleavage corresponding to such a typology do not by any means coincide with historical frontiers; they cut across the formations officially and denominationally defined by history.<sup>286</sup>

Corbin could therefore declare: “An Ishraqi is spontaneously a sophiologist.”<sup>287</sup>

### 3.4. Bulgakov as a Source for Corbin’s Angelology

As the principle of mediation *par excellence*, Sophia underlies Corbin’s concept of the *mundus imaginalis* (Arabic *‘alam al-mithal*), the “mediating and

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itself theophany and theophanic Imagination. From this idea of Creation as theophany...arises the idea of a sophiology, the figure of *Sophia aeterna* (the Eternal Womanly) as she appears in the theosophy of Ibn ‘Arabi” (Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 98).

<sup>286</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 89.

<sup>287</sup> Corbin, “Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 46.

intermediary world” bridging the intellectual and material worlds. In “Towards a Chart of the Imaginal” (1978), Corbin writes:

Between the intellectual and the sensible, or expressed more precisely still, between the transcendent and hidden Deity, the *Deitas abscondita*, and the world of man...[there is] an intermediary...which represents the Dwelling, the Divine Presence, for our world. This Dwelling is Wisdom itself, Sophia.... [I]t is the idea of Theophany which is dominant, making itself evident by its own nature and of necessity between the intellectual and the sensible, and what is denoted as Sophia, as the “Soul of the World,” is at the same time the *imaginal* locus and the organ of this Theophany. It is at once the necessary mediatrix, the *Deus revelatus*, between pure Divinity, for ever concealed, beyond our reach, and man’s world. This is what we have in another place called the “paradox of monotheism.”<sup>288</sup>

Parallel to the concept the *mundus imaginalis*, Corbin’s closely related concept of the angel likewise assures the mediation between the divine and the human. Thus, in his essay titled “The Necessity of Angelology” (1977), Corbin voiced essentially the same concerns that, a year later, he expressed in “The Urgency of Sophiology,” which we already cited. Angelology and the concept of the *mundus imaginalis* are indeed but two aspects of the same ontology founded on the notion of Sophia. The *mundus imaginalis* defines the cosmological aspect of Corbin’s doctrine of Sophia, whereas angelology expresses the anthropological implications of the same idea.

In his book *Jacob’s Ladder* (originally published in 1929), Bulgakov had already outlined the essential connection between angelology and Sophiology. This work was an important source for Corbin, who adapted some of Bulgakov’s views to his interpretation of Islamic angelology.<sup>289</sup> Here we can only indicate some parallels between Bulgakov and Corbin’s respective angelological views.

In his book, Bulgakov pursues a “theological anthropology” founded on the idea that “[a] correct understanding of human nature informs a correct

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<sup>288</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>289</sup> Corbin’s papers include a manuscript of his translation of the fourth chapter on “The Nature of Angels” of Bulgakov’s book (Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 10).

understanding of angels and vice-versa.”<sup>290</sup> According to him, “[e]verything in the world is preserved by angels, and everything has *its* angel and its *correlation* in the angelic world.”<sup>291</sup> At the foundation of this ontological unity of the angelic world and the human world, of heaven and earth, is “Sophia the Wisdom of God in whom pre-eternally the prototypes (*paradeigmata*) of everything created are outlined.”<sup>292</sup> The angelic and human worlds are “one in Sophia...but they are distinguished in the form of their being.”<sup>293</sup> The angelic world serves as a “heavenly mirror” to the human world.<sup>294</sup> The guardian angel “is our heavenly I – the Sophianic foundation in the heavens of our being on earth.”<sup>295</sup> Like later Corbin, Bulgakov describes the relation between the human being and his angel as a “syzygy.” This implies an understanding of the self, the “I,” as “having its own double.... [I]t knows and possesses itself only in connection with its double, in a duality.”<sup>296</sup>

What is the function of this angelic double? According to Bulgakov, the task of this syzygic “guardian angel” is to “[make ready] the realization of his own Sophianic idea in the world, the coming of a human into the world with whom he stands in a *personal* relation as with his own other.”<sup>297</sup> Like Corbin, Bulgakov describes this as a “heavenly pedagogy.”<sup>298</sup> The “guardian angel” assists humans “to become themselves, to rise to the plenitude of those creative tasks which they are called to accomplish in their self-creativity.”<sup>299</sup> Given the dialogic relation between human beings and their angelic counterparts, Bulgakov asserts the “co-humanity of angels and humankind’s corresponding co-angelicity.”<sup>300</sup>

Bulgakov’s angelological views were key for Corbin who, for his part, saw “certain traits common to all varieties of Gnosis, traits which put us in the presence of an anthropo-angelology, that is to say, an anthropology which is itself

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<sup>290</sup> Thomas Allan Smith, introduction to *Jacob’s Ladder: On Angels*, by Sergius Bulgakov, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), xii.

<sup>291</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 24.

<sup>292</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 31.

<sup>293</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 42.

<sup>294</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 33.

<sup>295</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 43.

<sup>296</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 6.

<sup>297</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 67.

<sup>298</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 13.

<sup>299</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 97.

<sup>300</sup> Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 38.

only a phase of angelology.”<sup>301</sup> At the basis of this “angelological anthropology” is the Bulgakovian idea that every creature is composed of its earthly part and of its celestial counterpart, its archetype or angel.<sup>302</sup> Indeed, like Bulgakov, Corbin affirms that the totality of our being includes another person, an invisible, transcendent counterpart, which he linked to “what Ibn ‘Arabi designates as our ‘eternal individuality’—our divine Name—what in ancient Iran was termed *Fravashi*.”<sup>303</sup> Corbin identifies this celestial counterpart of the soul with various figures from Islamic and Iranian religious literature.<sup>304</sup> These are but so many exemplifications of a single archetype, which appear in the history of religion “by virtue of a deeper necessity than that for which historical causality is called upon to account.”<sup>305</sup>

Corbin’s “angelological anthropology,” as that of Bulgakov, supports the idea of an “angelic pedagogy.” The possibility of this angelic pedagogy is based on what Corbin describes as the “virtual angelicity of the human soul” (analogous to what Bulgakov refers to as the “co-angelicity of the human being”).<sup>306</sup> Indeed, for Corbin, the human being in the true sense is he who passes from “potential angelicity” to “actual angelicity.”<sup>307</sup> This “angelomorphosis” describes the “individuation of the soul,” which occurs when, becoming aware of its alienation in this world, the soul frees itself from its alienated situation and becomes united with its angelic counterpart.<sup>308</sup> The angel hence represents the “perfect human being,” the divinised state of the human soul: “the divine Epiphany as anthropomorphosis is accomplished on the level of the Angel.”<sup>309</sup>

<sup>301</sup> Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 103. Corbin also uses the expression “angelological anthropology” to refer to the same idea (e.g., in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, 52).

<sup>302</sup> See, e.g., Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 23. Cf. “[T]he sense of a twofold dimension of individual being, [implies] the idea of a celestial counterpart, its being ‘in the second person,’ that provides the foundation of [a] mystical anthropology” (Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 94).

<sup>303</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 173.

<sup>304</sup> “It may be the feminine angel Daēnā in Mazdaism, Daēnā again or Manvahmed in Manichaeism; it may be the Perfect Body...of the Liturgy of Mithra, to which the Perfect Nature corresponds among the Ishrāqīyūn, ‘the philosopher’s angel;’ it may be Hayy ibn Yaqzān, the *pīr*-youth, corresponding to the *spiritus rector* of the Cathari; it may be the crimson-hued Archangel of one of Suhrawardī’s recitals, or any other figure individualizing the relation of the soul to the Active Intelligence. In every case this figure represents the heavenly counterpart of the soul” (Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 21).

<sup>305</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 165.

<sup>306</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 83.

<sup>307</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 83.

<sup>308</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 44.

<sup>309</sup> Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, 116.

The idea that the divine can only reveal itself to man at the angelic level is a basic tenet of Corbin's Docetism, which rejects the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, which instead affirms that "[the Word of God] became human that we might become God," to use St. Athanasius' formulation. Needless to say, Bulgakov's doctrine of the co-angelicity of human beings was never intended to supersede the notion of the Incarnation, which is at the heart of his theology, nor did Bulgakov see any contradiction between his angelology and Christology.<sup>310</sup> While drawing on Bulgakov's angelological views, Corbin promotes a doctrine different than, and in some regards fundamentally opposed to, that of Bulgakov. One can identify elements of Bulgakov's angelology in Corbin, but their overall meaning and purpose are different.

### 3.5. The Imam as Icon—Corbin's Ecumenical Exegesis of Rublev's Icon of the Trinity

At the centre of Corbin's thought is the overarching concern to bridge the dualism between the divine and the human, to mediate the ontological difference between the spiritual and material worlds. As we've shown, the concepts of Sophia, angel, and *mundus imaginalis*, serve to bridge that ontological divide. The same function underlies Corbin's view of the icon as the visible face of God. Here again one can detect the influence of Bulgakov, whose book on icons Corbin partially translated while in Istanbul.<sup>311</sup>

In his book on icons, Bulgakov gives a Sophiological justification for the use and veneration of icons in Orthodox liturgical life. As he states: "Sophia is the Icon of God in God Himself, and every one of our icons is an icon of the Icon."<sup>312</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>310</sup> See, e.g. Bulgakov's remarks in *Jacob's Ladder*, 140. On the place of the Incarnation in Bulgakov's theology, see Aidan Nichols, *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2005), 75-125.

<sup>311</sup> Corbin's papers contain manuscripts of his translation of chapters two, three, four and five of Bulgakov's book on icons, respectively titled "Antinomy of the Icon," "Art and Icon," "The Divine Proto-Image" and "The Content and Limits of the Icon" (Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 10).

<sup>312</sup> Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, 114. Also: "[T]he icon of Divinity is the living and life-giving Idea of all ideas in their perfect all-unity and perfect all-reality, and therefore it is the Divine world, or the world in God, before its creation. In other words, this Divine icon of Divinity, His self-revelation in Himself, is that which, in Biblical language, is called Hokhmah, Sophia, the Wisdom of God (in the patristic language it is called, less precisely, *paradeigmata* and

the God Who is correlative to creation is not the imageless, invisible, unknowable, and therefore unportrayable God; rather, He is the revealed God *Who has His own image*, and this Image of God is the Proto-image of creation which is sketched in the latter. In this sense, in the doctrine of the icon one must take as one's starting point *not the apophatic thesis* of God's invisibility and imagelessness but the *sophiological doctrine* of His imagedness and of the co-imagedness of the world to this image.<sup>313</sup>

God has an image, and this image is Sophia, and our world is made in the image of Sophia, as an icon in relation to the image it represents.

Tom Cheetham has drawn attention to the significance of Orthodox iconography for Corbin. He observes that in Catholicism and the Western Church in general, the religious image had long been harnessed by the Church as a didactic tool for the education and guidance of the masses. In the Eastern Church, on the other hand, the tradition of the icon “as a sacred window onto the invisible world,” appealed to Corbin.<sup>314</sup> Corbin indeed compared the icon with the idea of “theophanic form” implied in the Shi’ite notion of the Imam. Similar to Bulgakov’s concept of Sophia as the Icon of God, the Imam, Corbin holds, is the proto-image or “Face of God.”<sup>315</sup> He thus champions the Shi’ite notion of the Imam against the radical iconoclasm entailed by the view of the absolute incommensurability between God and humankind. As he explains:

Without the Imamate, only a strictly negative theology (that of *tanẓīh*, designated by the Christian tradition as “apophatic” theology) would be possible.... If the *Deus absconditus* becomes an object of knowledge and

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*proorismoi*, proto-images and predeterminations of all creation). She Herself bears witness about Herself by the Holy Spirit: ‘The Lord possessed Me in the beginning of His way’ (Prov. 8:22). But this Icon of Divinity, which is the Proto-icon of all icons, is itself the Proto-image in relation to the creaturely world, which was *created by Wisdom*...and in this sense the world itself is the creaturely icon of Divinity” (Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, 53-54).

<sup>313</sup> Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, 54.

<sup>314</sup> Cheetham, *All the World an Icon*, 173. Cheetham further compares Corbin’s concept of the Imagination with the theory of the dream world articulated by the Russian Orthodox priest, theologian, philosopher and scientist Pavel Florensky (1882-1937). In his book *Iconostasis*—his last before he was murdered by the Soviet secret police in 1937—Florensky argues that dreams give us access to imaginary space and time. With respect to our waking world, that world is “turned inside out,” a description which, Cheetham points out, Corbin also uses to describe the *mundus imaginalis* (Cheetham, *All the World an Icon*, 173-177).

<sup>315</sup> On this theme, see especially Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 245-313.

an object of love, this happens thanks to the Face, the epiphanic Form (the *mazhar*), that makes of it a *Deus revelatus*.<sup>316</sup>

Elsewhere he writes:

The ambiguity of the Image comes from the fact that it can be either an idol (Greek *eidolon*) or an icon (Greek *eikon*). It is an idol when it fixes the viewer's vision on itself. Then it is opaque, without transparency, and remains at the level of that from which it was formed. But it is an *icon*, whether a painted image or a mental one, when its transparency enables the viewer to see through it to something beyond it, and because what is beyond can be seen only through it. This is precisely the status of the Image that is known as a "theophanic form." The Image of the Imam, the Image of the Fourteen Immaculate Ones, has for the faithful Shi'ite this theophanic virtue.<sup>317</sup>

The significance of Orthodox iconography for Corbin is further evinced by references in his writings to Orthodox icons, notably the famous icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev (c. 1360-c. 1430), considered to be the greatest medieval Russian painter of icons and frescoes. Rublev's icon holds a special place in the Russian Orthodox tradition, which is reflected in Fr. Florensky's "proof of the existence of God": "There exists the icon of the Trinity by St Andrei Rublev; therefore, God exists."<sup>318</sup>

The original theme of Rublev's icon is the Biblical scene known as the "Philoxeny" depicting the three angels at the table of Abraham. The Russian Orthodox iconographical tradition has looked upon the three angels in Rublev's icon as figurations of the three persons of the Trinity.<sup>319</sup> Since its restoration in 1904, Rublev's icon has received various theological commentaries from Russian theologians. Corbin likewise took special interest in Rublev's icon.<sup>320</sup> In his book on Ibn 'Arabi, he suggests a novel way of perceiving the scene depicted in

<sup>316</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 295.

<sup>317</sup> Corbin, *La Philosophie Iranienne Islamique aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècles* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1981), 358-359.

<sup>318</sup> Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 107.

<sup>319</sup> See the chapter on Rublev's Trinity in Paul Evdokimov, *L'Art de l' Icône: Théologie de la Beauté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1972), 205-216. Corbin cites this work in *En Islam Iranien*, II, 375 n. 520.

<sup>320</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 130.

Rublev's icon.<sup>321</sup> Corbin indeed claims that Ibn 'Arabi has given us "the most magnificent mystic exegesis of Andrei Rublev's icon."<sup>322</sup> Abraham's philoxeny, the mystic repast presented to the Angels, as Ibn 'Arabi leads us to meditate upon it, is "the most perfect image of *devotio sympathetica*."<sup>323</sup>

This notion expresses the fundamental co-dependence and co-penetration of the divine and the human, of God and man. For Corbin, the way in which Ibn 'Arabi meditates Abraham's philoxeny leads to the essence of his theosophy and mystic experience: "to feed the Angel from one's own substance."<sup>324</sup> "To feed the Angel" is

to answer for this God who would perish without me, but without whom I should also perish.... And if this God is "proof of himself," it is because he is nourished by *my* being, but *my* being is *His* being which precisely He has invested in me.<sup>325</sup>

Corbin links this idea to the paradoxical dictum of the *Cherubinic Wanderer* of the German mystic Angelus Silesius (1624-1677)—the same dictum which Berdyaev used as the epigram to his book *The Meaning of the Creative Act*—: "I know that without me, the life of God were lost; / Were I destroyed, he must perforce give up the ghost."<sup>326</sup>

In a 1973 article titled "Toward a New Chivalry," Corbin gives a personal, unique interpretation of Rublev's icon. In Corbin's eyes, Rublev's icon becomes "a symbol gathering the three lights of the Abrahamic tradition: the Mosaic and Davidic Light, the Christic Light, the Muhammadan Light."<sup>327</sup> Corbin further tells us that the icon of Abraham's philoxeny is "par excellence the icon of the Temple. The table of Abraham is a herald of the table of the Grail." Wolfram von Eschenbach (c. 1170-1220), author of *Parzival*, the classic epic poem about the Holy Grail, and Suhrawardi, Corbin claims, were kindred spirits who professed the idea of a "spiritual chivalry" common to East and West, Christianity and Islam. This ecumenical experience is conceivable only through a

<sup>321</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 130-131. See also *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme*, 101-102.

<sup>322</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 315 n. 75.

<sup>323</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 131.

<sup>324</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 63.

<sup>325</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 315-316 n. 75.

<sup>326</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 130.

<sup>327</sup> Corbin, "Pour une Nouvelle Chevalerie," *Questions de*, 1, no. 4 (1973), 111. This article is not mentioned in the bibliography given in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet.



full acknowledgement of “the unique sovereignty of the Spirit.”<sup>328</sup> Corbin’s ecumenical interpretation of Rublev’s icon of the Trinity is a unique example of his view of the intermediary role of Russian Orthodoxy in establishing closer ties between East and West, Christianity and Islam.



Figure 1: Andrei Rublev's Icon of the Trinity (15th c.). A version of this icon is reproduced in Corbin, “Pour une Nouvelle Chevalerie” (1973).

Corbin’s interpretation of Abraham’s philoxeny in Rublev’s icon as the “table of the Grail” that gathers around it a “spiritual chivalry common to East and West, Islam and Christianity,” further recalls his vision of a “sophianic chivalry” while visiting the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. In the opening lines of his book *The Wisdom of God*, Bulgakov evokes “a new apprehension of the world in God, that is, of the Divine Sophia,” confirmed by the very site of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.<sup>329</sup> Indeed, the Byzantine Church of

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<sup>328</sup> Corbin, “Pour une Nouvelle Chevalerie,” 112. Interestingly, Bulgakov gave an Orthodox interpretation of the legend of the Holy Grail in his *The Holy Grail and the Eucharist*, trans. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1997).

<sup>329</sup> Bulgakov, *The Wisdom of God*, 13. Cf. “[The] transparency of the image that is adequate to the idea is Beauty.... Beauty is Sophianic, it is the obvious, tangible revelation of Divine Sophia as the pre-eternal foundation of the world.... For, creation is completely transparent for the Creator, but the Creator in Himself remains transcendent to creation, although He reveals Himself to it, inasmuch as He becomes immanent. But this immanence to the world is not realized immediately, but through the mediation of a being, which though creaturely is spiritual all the

Hagia Sophia was for Bulgakov a tangible expression of his Sophianic vision of the world.<sup>330</sup> This view captivated Corbin who, in a letter to Fritz Lieb on April 25, 1940, wrote: “Each time I pass in front of the wonder that is the temple of the ‘Eternal Sophia,’ I send a good thought to Fr. Bulgakov, thanks to whose theology we understand the signification of all of that.”<sup>331</sup> In 1978, Corbin noted:

The Temple of Saint Sophia was for me the temple of the Grail, at least an exemplification of its archetype.... This presence of an invisible sophianic knighthood, also known to the Platonists of Persia, has never left me. One can find a clue of what it has inspired me in my most recent researches and projects.<sup>332</sup>

One such clue can be found in a section titled “From Byzantium to Samarra” in the fourth volume of *En Islam Iranien*. That text highlights the Byzantine origins of the princess “Narkes,” or Narjis, who was the mother of the 12<sup>th</sup> and last Imam of the Shi’a. In Corbin’s view, the “young Byzantine girl” accomplishes through her “mediation” the “initiation of Christianity into Islam, or rather into Islamic gnosticism.” Commenting on the initiatic vision in which the “young Byzantine princess,” under the auspices of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and Muhammad and his descendants, celebrates her nuptial union with the 11<sup>th</sup> Imam, Corbin pictures “the grandiose scene, unfolding in the temple of Saint Sophia, in Constantinople.”<sup>333</sup> The Byzantine Church dedicated to Saint

same, and has a support in the divine nature. The world is Sophianic on the basis of Divine Sophia, but it is Sophianic through creaturely Sophia which is hypostatized in the angelic world. Therefore the beauty of the world is Sophianic through the operation of angels; it is the tangible presence and operation of the angels in the world” (Bulgakov, *Jacob’s Ladder*, 84 and 86-87).

<sup>330</sup> In another account of his visit to the Church of Hagia Sophia, Bulgakov writes: “Truly, the temple of St. Sophia is the artistic, tangible proof and manifestation of St Sophia—of the Sophianic nature of the world and the cosmic nature of Sophia.... We perceive here neither God nor man, but divinity, the divine veil thrown over the world” (Bulgakov, *A Bulgakov Anthology*, eds. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov [London: S.P.C.K., 1976], 13-14).

<sup>331</sup> “Chaque fois que je passe devant la merveille du temple de la ‘Sagesse éternelle,’ j’envoie une pensée au P. Boulgakov, grâce à la théologie de qui on comprend la signification de tout cela” (Lieb Papers, Basel University Library, University of Basel, NL 43: Aa 260, 1-9).

<sup>332</sup> Corbin, “Post-Scriptum Biographique,” 46.

<sup>333</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 313. Cf. “C’est au jour de la Pentecôte que le jeune Galaad, le chevalier ‘attendu,’ le ‘Désiré,’ paraît à la cour du roi Arthur et de là prend départ pour la Quête du Graal. D’autre part, nous avons signalé déjà la certitude avec laquelle plusieurs théosophes shī’ites identifient l’Imâm ‘attendu’ avec le Paraclet. Le mystère liturgique dans lequel se rencontrent invisiblement chevaliers d’Occident et chevaliers d’Orient, apparaît alors comme le mystère même de la Pentecôte. Et comme mystère dont le cérémonial fut contemplé, au cours de ses visions en songe... par la princesse Narkès (Narcisse), mère du XII<sup>e</sup> Imâm, lorsque dans l’enceinte d’un temple idéal de Sainte-Sophie, elle vit le Christ et ses douze apôtres, le Prophète et

Sophia thus becomes the meeting place between an idealised “Christian gnosticism” and an idealised “Islamic gnosticism.”

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ses *onze* Imâms, gravir ensemble les degrés de la même chaire de lumière” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 430).

## Chapter 4: Iranian Islam in a Russian Key: Philosophical and Spiritual Aspects

“Mais comment reconnaît-on que c’est l’Imâm, me demanda-t-on encore? – Aussi simplement qu’un chrétien de n’importe quelle confession reconnaît une image de Christ”

(Corbin, “Avicennisme et Iranisme dans Notre Univers Spirituel”).

In 1974, Corbin retired from the École Pratique des Hautes Études and helped found the Université Saint-Jean de Jérusalem, a society of scholars dedicated to comparative studies in spiritual matters.<sup>334</sup> That same year he succeeded Gabriel Marcel in becoming president of the Nikolai Berdyaev Association.<sup>335</sup> In a personal tribute to Berdyaev on the occasion of the symposium dedicated to him in that year, Corbin said:

If I have been able to face freely as a philosopher the philosophical problems I encountered, I think I owe it largely to Berdyaev, as shown by the references to his writings in my books. This is especially the case because the metaphysics of Shi’ism is essentially, like that of Berdyaev, an eschatological metaphysics.<sup>336</sup>

Corbin’s debt to Berdyaev is particularly evident in his *magnum opus* in four volumes, *En Islam Iranien* (In Iranian Islam, 1971-1973). In the prologue of that work, he asserts: “Let no one be surprised if reference to the Russian philosopher Berdyaev is made on more than one occasion in the course of this work.”<sup>337</sup> Close to the end of the work, Corbin again states:

There have been very few Christian thinkers who have had the lucidity and courage to face the drama of Christianity. Berdyaev was one of

<sup>334</sup> The yearly USJJ colloquium attracted participants who were in one way or another connected to émigré Russian religious thinkers, including the French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément, the French philosopher and friend of Berdyaev Marie-Madeleine Davy, and Constantin Andronikof, best known for his translations of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov into French.

<sup>335</sup> The Nikolai Berdyaev Association was founded in 1951 at the initiative of Eugénie Rapp, Berdyaev’s sister-in-law, for the purpose of encouraging studies about him (Bambauer, introduction to *Wahrheit und Offenbarung*, 94 n. 140, and Baird, “Russia’s Religious Philosophers in the West,” 483).

<sup>336</sup> Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 49.

<sup>337</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, xx.

them. It is no coincidence that, having cited him at the beginning, we cite him again at the term of this study. The motifs that he brings to light are also those that Shi'ite theosophy and imamology can inspire to the researcher in "divine sciences."<sup>338</sup>

In fact, the perceived "convergences" between Berdyaev and Shi'ism are neither arbitrary, nor incidental, but aim at consolidating Corbin's ecumenical project. As he noted in 1967:

If I am once again citing a Russian thinker in the person of Berdyaev, this is not only because Berdyaev was the great gnostic thinker of Russian Orthodoxy in our times; rather it is because, in attempting to establish a communication between Shi'ite theosophy and the world of Christian theosophy, certain theosophers of Russian Orthodoxy may be a first step.<sup>339</sup>

Corbin's writings consequently also refer to thinkers such Aleksey Khomiakov, Konstantin Leontiev and Vasily Rozanov. With Berdyaev, Bulgakov, and others, Corbin saw these thinkers as "[representatives] of this Christian philosophy of Russian Orthodoxy, generally so little known to our Eastern [viz. Iranian] friends, yet unquestionably closer to their thought than our socio-political ideologies."<sup>340</sup>

The chapter looks at different cases of "convergences" between Russian thought and "Iranian Islam." Several aspects of Berdyaev's "critique of revelation" are discernable in Corbin's approach to Islam. The first section particularly considers Berdyaev's distinction between "historical Christological" and "eschatological Christianity" in relation to Corbin's own distinction between a historical, exoteric, legalistic Islam, identified with Sunnism, and an eschatological, esoteric, spiritual Islam, identified with Shi'ism. The concept of Divine humanity (theandry) was further a main point of reference for the elucidation of the Imam as being the face that God shows to man and the face that man shows to God. In this connection, Rozanov and Berdyaev's criticisms of mainstream Christianity were perceived as "converging" with the propositions

<sup>338</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 451.

<sup>339</sup> Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," in *Face de Dieu, Face de l'Homme: Herméneutique et Soufisme*, by Henry Corbin (Paris: Entrelacs, 2008), 304.

<sup>340</sup> "Nicolas Berdiaev [représente] cette philosophie chrétienne de l'Orthodoxie russe, si peu connue en général de nos amis orientaux, d'emblée pourtant plus proche de leur pensée que ne le sont nos idéologies socio-politiques" (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 30).

of Imamology. In a final aspect, Khomiakov and Leontiev's respective notions of "Iranism" and "Byzantinism" are reflected in Corbin's elucidation of Suhrawardi's "Iranism."

#### 4.1. Eschatological Metaphysics in Berdyaev and Shi'ism

Corbin makes reference to Berdyaev in the important introductory chapter titled "Shi'ism and Iran" of the first book of *En Islam Iranien*, devoted to Twelver Shi'ism. In a section titled "Problems to Overcome Together," Corbin discusses the phenomenon of "secularisation," which he also describes as the "socialisation of the spiritual."<sup>341</sup> This implies a view of man and the world in which every reference to what is beyond this world is eliminated, such that "the hopes of men [can] no longer cross the boundaries of death."<sup>342</sup> This phenomenon, Corbin indicates, has its roots in what Berdyaev describes as the passage from "eschatological Christianity" to "historical Christianity," that is, "the adaptation of Christianity to external historical conditions."<sup>343</sup>

In his book *The Beginning and the End* (1946), Berdyaev argues that the Christian revelation is essentially an eschatological revelation, a revelation of the Kingdom of God, which implies the end of this world, and the coming of another, a transformed world. Primitive Christianity was eschatological in its orientation. It expected the Second Advent of Christ and the coming of the Kingdom of God. However, when the path of history between the first appearance of the Messiah and the second came into view, the eschatological character of Christianity began to weaken, causing the accommodation of the Christian revelation to historical conditions<sup>344</sup> As Berdyaev states: "In the wilderness Christ, the Messiah, had rejected the temptation of the kingdoms of this world. But Christian people in history have yielded to that temptation."<sup>345</sup> Historical Christianity and the historical Church thus represent failure in the

<sup>341</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 22-38.

<sup>342</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 23; Corbin, "De la Situation Philosophique du Shi'isme," 65.

<sup>343</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 31-32; Corbin, "De la Situation Philosophique du Shi'isme," 65-66.

<sup>344</sup> Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 203.

<sup>345</sup> Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 203. Corbin cites this passage in *En Islam Iranien*, I, 32. Cf. "N. Berdiaev a énoncé le diagnostic exact: la grande tragédie est là, dans le fait que le christianisme, sous ses formes officielles et historiques, a succombé à la tentation que le Christ avait repoussée" (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 23).

sense that the Kingdom of God has not come as a result of the adjustment of the Christian revelation to the kingdom of this world.<sup>346</sup>

Corbin adapted Berdyaev's distinction between "historical Christianity" and "eschatological Christianity" to his own distinction between a historical, legalistic, exoteric, Sunni Islam, and an eschatological, spiritual, esoteric, Shi'ite Islam. Thus Corbin likens the suppression of prophetic inspiration in Christianity and its replacement by the authority of the dogmatic magisterium of the Church to implications, within "official Islam," arising from proclamation that the Prophet Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets," that is, that there will be no prophets after him.<sup>347</sup> In thus limiting the prophetic event to a fixed historical moment, "official Islam," Corbin maintains, has prepared the ground for the "socialisation of the spiritual." The denial of the possibility of future prophetic inspiration transforms Islam into an external, legal doctrine primarily concerned with the regulation of the social system, and in which conformity to social norms and external regulations becomes the sole measure of faith.<sup>348</sup>

Likewise, Corbin associated the formation of "historical consciousness" with the doctrine of the Incarnation when it affirms that "God became historical, incarnated in the fabric of visible and material facts."<sup>349</sup> Because it asserts that Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection, were historical events, the Christian teaching confines the event of revelation to the past. In Corbin's view, this entails the closure of prophetic inspiration, and the instauration in its place of an infallible dogmatic magisterium, or the "phenomenon of the Church."<sup>350</sup> This poses serious difficulties for formulating a general theology of religions that would include post-Christian revelations, to wit, Islam.<sup>351</sup> Indeed, Corbin's desire to justify the Islamic revelation is fundamentally related to his criticism of the closure of prophecy in "official Christianity" and "official Islam."

These concerns help explain Corbin's preference for Berdyaev's conception of revelation as a spiritual event. This notion maintains that revelation

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<sup>346</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 210.

<sup>347</sup> Corbin, "De l'Histoire des Religions comme Problème Théologique," 147.

<sup>348</sup> Corbin, "De la Situation Philosophique du Shi'isme," 65-66.

<sup>349</sup> Corbin, "De la Situation Philosophique du Shi'isme," 67-68.

<sup>350</sup> Corbin, "De la Situation Philosophique du Shi'isme," 65-66.

<sup>351</sup> Corbin, "De l'Histoire des Religions comme Problème Théologique," 147.

is not an external, historical event, but rather “the fact of the Spirit in me, in the subject; it is spiritual experience, spiritual life.”<sup>352</sup> As Berdyaev claims:

[T]he concept of historical revelation involves a contradiction and is a product of religious materialism.... Only spiritual revelation exists, revelation in the Spirit, whereas historical revelation is the symbolization in the phenomenal historical world of events which take place in the noumenal historical world.<sup>353</sup>

There is, according to Corbin, a “remarkable convergence” between Berdyaev’s views in this passage and the views of the Shi’ite theosophers “when they show us where the spiritual events have *their place*, and when they talk about events that take place and have *their place* in the *Malakut*.”<sup>354</sup> Corbin here is alluding to the *mundus imaginalis*, a world “where the spiritual takes a body and the body becomes spiritual,” and which is therefore “the *place* of theophanic visions, the scene on which visionary events and symbolic histories *appear* in their true reality.”<sup>355</sup>

In this connection, Corbin indicates that Shi’ite theosophers have developed ideas that would “usefully converge” with Berdyaev’s argumentation concerning the difficulties raised by the breaking of “metahistory” into the historical world and its inevitable adaptation to the limits of historical time and space.<sup>356</sup> On the one hand, Shi’ite theosophy affirms the bipolarity of the exoteric and the esoteric. On the other hand, Berdyaev also affirms that revelation necessarily involves an exoteric and an esoteric.<sup>357</sup> This is particularly significant, Corbin notes, as “Christian theosophers are generally the only ones who have dared to make such an affirmation.”<sup>358</sup>

In a related aspect, Corbin holds that Shi’ism and Berdyaev share the same sense of the primacy of apophatic or negative theology.<sup>359</sup> In this regard, Berdyaev champions the significance of the Orthodox tradition, which is

<sup>352</sup> Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 14.

<sup>353</sup> Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, 17.

<sup>354</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 309.

<sup>355</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 4.

<sup>356</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 309.

<sup>357</sup> “I favour the distinction between ‘esoteric’ and ‘exoteric’ religion. The act of revelation is a twofold act, and takes place, as it were, on two levels: it issues from God, who cannot be reduced to any categories taken from this world, but it is also dependent on man, the recipient, limited and imperfect though he be” (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 300).

<sup>358</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 309-310.

<sup>359</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme” 309.



disposed to privilege the use of negatives when speaking about God, in contrast to Western theology, which has been predominantly affirmative or kataphatic.<sup>360</sup> Berdyaev's "critique of revelation" thus involves the cleansing of the understanding of God from the "sociomorphic" categories with which historical theological traditions have operated.<sup>361</sup> As Berdyaev writes:

The existence of God is revealed in the spirit in man. God resembles neither the forces of nature, nor the authority of society or of the state. Here no analogy is valid: all analogy would mean slavish cosmomorphism and sociomorphisms in the understanding of God. God is freedom, and not necessity, not authority over man and the world.<sup>362</sup>

Berdyaev accordingly argued that God "is in the world *incognito*. He both gives glimpses of himself in the world and at the same time hides himself."<sup>363</sup>

These views fed into Corbin's interpretation of Shi'ism. To be sure, like Sunnism, Shi'ism also considers the Prophet Muhammad to be the last in a long line of prophets. However, according to Corbin, the Shi'ite concept of *walaya* and the concomitant doctrine of the Imam enable the continuation of divine guidance after the Prophet's death. This divine guidance is not to be equated with the dogmatic magisterium of the Church or the legal Islamic authority, but instead designates the intimate, personal relation between the faithful Shi'ite and the Hidden Imam.<sup>364</sup> In a passage with a Berdyaevian flavour, Corbin writes:

If Shi'ite prophetology and Imamology withstand the efforts of socialisation of the spiritual, this is because the idea of *walaya* is that of a spiritual Initiation, a gnosis, not that of a Church: the Friends of God,

<sup>360</sup> Linde, *Nikolai Berdyaev's Existential Gnosticism*, 136.

<sup>361</sup> Linde, *Nikolai Berdyaev's Existential Gnosticism*, 137.

<sup>362</sup> Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, 41.

<sup>363</sup> Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, 112.

<sup>364</sup> "Dans le christianisme, l'inspiration prophétique et l'herméneutique prophétique ont été closes officiellement dès le II<sup>e</sup> siècle, avec la répression du mouvement montaniste. Désormais le magistère de la Grande Eglise est la source et le seul organe régulateur du dogme.... D'autre part, lorsque l'Islam officiel proclame que Mohammad est le 'sceau des prophètes,' qu'il n'y aura plus de prophète après lui, il en résulte même que, dans cette conception, l'histoire des religions est définitivement close. D'où l'apparence monolithique, légale et statique, de cet Islam officiel.... Or, cette clôture de la mission prophétique, le shi'isme, lui aussi, la professe, mais – il y a un grand *mais* – il y a la *walayat* et l'imâmât. Et avec elle par la fonction initiatique de l'Imâm, il y a encore quelque chose à venir la pénétration du sens caché des Révélation, jusqu'à la *parousie* du XII<sup>e</sup> Imâm, l'épiphanie de l'Imâm caché" (Corbin, "De l'Histoire des Religions comme Problème Théologique," 147-148).

the “men of God,” are Guides, Initiators; they do not constitute a dogmatic magisterium. Theophanic visions and persons do not postulate any Incarnation that secularises the divine by bringing it into empirical history. The *ghaybat*, the occultation of the Imam, the divine *incognito*, maintain the eschatological dimension (that of primitive Christianity), just as it maintains in the *incognito* of an *Ecclesia spiritualis* the esoteric hierarchy that evades any socialisation, and thereby any secularisation.... The time of the *ghaybat* is not a time with which external history “is made;” it is an existential time. The hidden Imam *is* the time of the Shi’ite conscience, its permanent link with metahistory.<sup>365</sup>

To be sure, Corbin’s criticism of the Incarnation and “official Christianity” goes well beyond Berdyaev’s criticism of “historical Christianity.” Berdyaev indeed affirmed the Incarnation as well as the necessity of the historical Church. Despite its apparent radicalism, Berdyaev’s critique of Christianity therefore was, and always remained, that of a Christian critic. That of Corbin, by contrast, marked his clear break with historical Christianity.

#### 4.2. From Theandry to Polarity: Berdyaev and Rozanov as “Imam-Seekers”

In chapter three we saw how the doctrine of Sophia fed into Corbin’s interpretation of the Shi’ite concept of Fatima. Likewise, the Russian concept of Divine humanity (Russian *Bogochelovechestvo*, literally “God-manhood,” a word parallel to the Greek *theandria*, which, in the patristic writings, referred to the incarnation of Christ) was a crucial point of reference for his elucidation of the Shi’ite notion of the Imam.

It was Vladimir Solovyov with his *Lectures on Divine Humanity* who gave currency to the concept of Divine humanity in Russian thought (see chapter

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<sup>365</sup> “Si la prophétologie et l’imâmologie shî’ites résistent aux efforts de socialisation du spirituel, c’est que l’idée de la *malâyat* est celle d’une Initiation spirituelle, d’une gnose, non pas celle d’une Église: les Amis de Dieu, les ‘hommes de Dieu,’ sont des Guides, des Initiateurs; ils ne constituent pas un magistère dogmatique. Visions et personnes théophaniques ne postulent aucune Incarnation qui laïcise le divin en le faisant entrer dans le trame de l’histoire empirique. La *ghaybat*, l’occultation de l’Imâm, l’*incognito* divin, maintient la dimension eschatologique (celle du christianisme primitif), comme elle maintient dans l’*incognito* d’une *Ecclesia spiritualis* la hiérarchie ésotérique qui échappe à toute socialisation, et partant, à toute laïcisation.... Le temps de la *ghaybat* n’est pas un temps avec lequel ‘on fait’ de l’histoire extérieure; c’est un temps existentiel. L’Imâm caché *est* le temps de la conscience shî’ite, son lien permanent avec la métahistoire” (*En Islam Iranien*, I, 35-36).

one).<sup>366</sup> Solovyov and his successors derived this concept from the implications of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, in particular the Chalcedonian formula that Christ possessed two natures in one person. As Berdyaev writes:

The secret of Christianity is the secret of God-manhood, the secret of the meeting of two natures which are united but not commingled. Man does not cease to exist, but he is deified and retains his humanity in eternity.<sup>367</sup>

The Russian thinkers thus affirmed the “divine in man” in contrast to the juridical interpretation of the relation between God and man allegedly prevalent in Western Christian theology.<sup>368</sup> For Berdyaev, Christ reveals that the human being “bears within himself the image which is both the image of man and the image of God, and is the image of man in so far as the image of God is actualized.”<sup>369</sup> Through Christ, the Second Hypostasis of the Trinity, the Face of Divinity is manifested as the human face.<sup>370</sup> Indeed, in affirming the divinity of humanity, the concept of Divine humanity simultaneously affirms the humanity of God. “True human-ness,” Berdyaev states, “is likeness to God.” The human being at present “is but to a small extent human; he is even inhuman. It is not man who is [fully] human but God,” and the fullness of our humanity is contingent upon our participation in the divine life.<sup>371</sup>

Corbin acknowledged his debt to Berdyaev for revealing to him the idea that “the divine mystery and the human mystery [are] one and the same

<sup>366</sup> These lectures were delivered at the University of St. Petersburg in 1878. See Boris Jakim, introduction to *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, by Vladimir Solovyov, trans. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1995), vii-xvi.

<sup>367</sup> Cited in Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 143.

<sup>368</sup> “The idea of God-manhood means the overcoming of the self-sufficiency of man in humanism and at the same the affirmation of the activity of man, of his highest dignity, of the divine in man. The interpretation of Christianity as the religion of God-manhood is radically opposed to the juridical interpretation of the relation between God and man, and the juridical theory of redemption which is widespread in theology both Catholic and Protestant... Russian religious philosophical thought in its best representatives makes war upon every juridical interpretation of the mystery of Christianity, and this enters into the Russian Idea. At the same time, the idea of God-manhood tends toward cosmic transfiguration. It is almost entirely alien to official Catholicism and Protestantism. In the West affinity with the cosmology of Russian religious philosophy is to be found only in German Christian theosophy, in Jacob Boehme, Franz Baader and in Schelling” (Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 189).

<sup>369</sup> Cited in Vigen Guroian, “Nicholas Berdyaev (1874-1948): Commentary,” in *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity: On Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, eds. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander, 120 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>370</sup> Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 206.

<sup>371</sup> Cited in Guroian, “Nicholas Berdyaev,” 121.

mystery.”<sup>372</sup> This concept formed the basis of his understanding of the Imam in “Face of God and Face of Man” (1967). In that important essay, Corbin indeed argues that the “Imam is simultaneously the divine Face shown to man and the Face that man shows to God.”<sup>373</sup> From the outset, he remarks that “at the heart of this discussion [are] present the concept and problems connoted by the Greek term *theandria*, a term that designates the humano-divine unity that dominates the horizon of Christology.”<sup>374</sup> Later, he asserts that “in [the] idea of the Imam as humano-divine Face we approach the mystery of *theandry*, which in turn is the very mystery of Christology.”<sup>375</sup>

Indeed, given that “Imamology assumes [in Shi’ite theology and theosophy] a function homologous to the function of Christology in Christian theology,” Corbin contends that Shi’ite theologians have solved the problems of Christology in a way that has been marginalised in the history of “official Christianity.”<sup>376</sup> Imamology indeed marks a contrast with Christology inasmuch as the Imam is not “incarnated,” but is rather a “theophanic figure.” In contrast with the doctrine of the Incarnation, Shi’ite Imamology, Corbin holds,

remains a theology of transfiguration. The manifestation of a theophanic form correlatively implies that the perceiver undergoes an intimate metamorphosis. If one had to translate the theophanic mode of being of the Imam in a Christological context, this would only be possible within

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<sup>372</sup> “C’est à [Berdyayev] 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” (Corbin, “Allocution d’Ouverture,” 49).

<sup>373</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 246.

<sup>374</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 246.

<sup>375</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 265. In a chapter of his introductory study to the German edition of Berdyayev’s *Truth and Revelation*, the late Klaus Bambauer compared aspects of theandry in the works of Berdyayev, Corbin and Raimon Panikkar (Bambauer, introduction to *Wahrheit und Offenbarung: Prolegomena zu einer Kritik der Offenbarung*, by Nikolai Berdjajew, trans. Klaus Bambauer [Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1998], 94-109).

<sup>376</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 246.

a Christology that essentially professes the idea of a *caro spiritualis Christi*.<sup>377</sup>

This argument is further developed in the section titled “Aspects of Theandry.” Corbin here invokes the unique example of Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919). In a manner that recalls his simultaneous study of Suhrawardi and Bulgakov in Istanbul, Corbin’s interest in Rozanov converged with his study of Shi’ite theology. He writes:

At the time I was studying and expounding the texts of the Shi’ite Imams and of their commentator, Qazi Sa’id Qommi [c. 1633-1692], on the theme of the Imam as the divine Face and the Face of God, I was struck by reading the book of a Russian thinker very little known to the West, an extraordinary man whose tormented genius eludes every classification: Vasily Rozanov.... This book was titled *The Dark Face of Christ*.<sup>378</sup>

Corbin is chiefly interested in Rozanov’s dissatisfaction with Christianity. A controversial figure in his generation, Rozanov was indeed torn between the Greek and Egyptian religions of antiquity and Christianity, between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Particularly troubling for him was the perceived acosmic character of Christianity. For him, God has two children: the world and Jesus Christ. Christ is devoid of the joys of this world; he demands that Christians love only Him and forsake this world. This expresses the “dark face of Christ.” Thus Rozanov accuses of Christ of “[disrupting] the divine activity on Earth by refusing to perpetuate [God’s creative activity].” He depicts

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<sup>377</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 281. Cf. “Les Imâms ne sont pas non plus des Incarnations divines; ce sont des figures théophaniques. Il est capital de marquer techniquement la différence pour la conscience religieuse: l’image *n’immane* pas dans le miroir, comme la couleur noire, par exemple, dans le corps noir. Elle y est ‘en suspens’; le miroir la montre, c’est tout; l’image n’est par ‘incarnée’ dans la substance du miroir. Les saints Imâms sont des miroirs théophaniques, rien de moins ni de plus, parce que l’Homme Parfait est créé à l’image de la forme du Très Miséricordieux. Ce n’est pas un hasard, si chaque fois que l’imâmologie s’est trouvée en présence de problèmes analogues à ceux de la christologie, ce fut pour incliner à des solutions conformes à l’esprit de la Gnose et rejetées par le christianisme officiel” (Corbin, “De la situation philosophique du shî’isme,” 77).

<sup>378</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 300.

Christ as being at war with the world.<sup>379</sup> He consequently remains torn between the reign of God and the reign of the Son.<sup>380</sup>

Rozanov's impasse, Corbin notes, is a consequence of the "official Christological dogma."<sup>381</sup> He indeed points to the concept of the Imam as being the implicit solution to Rozanov's spiritual dilemma. The latter thus "remains as if in quest of that spiritual concreteness of the *mundus imaginalis*" contained in the "secret of the Imam."<sup>382</sup> Corbin insists that "every question we might ask regarding [Rozanov] would seem to lead us back to the theme that we have developed here: the Face that God shows to man is the very Face that man shows to God."<sup>383</sup> In view of the fact Rozanov and other thinkers of his generation were known as the "God-seekers" (Russian *Bogoiskatel'i*), it might be said that Corbin interprets Rozanov as an unknowing "Imam-seeker."<sup>384</sup>

Rozanov's misgivings about Christianity are apparently sufficient to situate him, in Corbin's perspective, "between" Christianity and Islam. However, Corbin further points to a "current of thought with an entire tradition within Christianity, and that replies differently than official Christology to the question: At which level of man does the meeting of the divine nature and the human nature occur?"<sup>385</sup> This heterodox current consists of "all those who have been animated by the spirit of gnosis." In contrast to the dogma of the hypostatic

<sup>379</sup> Adam Ure, "Rozanov, the Creation, and the Rejection of Eschatology," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 89, No. 2 (April 2011), 241-242.

<sup>380</sup> Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 301. Anna Lisa Crone draws parallels between Jung and Rozanov relevant to our discussion. For example, she writes: "In his important article 'Answer to Job,' Jung treats the unconscious dark side—the shadow—of the Christian godhead of which the believer is usually not conscious. Rozanov, too, sees the Christian believer as mesmerized by the unearthly beauty of the Gospel texts, as so stunned by the beauty and incapacitating 'love' and 'tenderness' of the Gospel words that he forgets to understand the harm the bright face of Christ is actually causing him. While both [Jung and Rozanov] see the average believer as largely unconscious of or afraid to admit his ambivalence about 'the dark face' of Christ, Rozanov is maximally cognizant of it, as this book so amply attests" (*Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Renewal*, 235-236).

<sup>381</sup> Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 301.

<sup>382</sup> "[Rozanov] reste ainsi comme à la recherche de ce spirituel concret du *mundus imaginalis*, dans lequel nous avons vu la Nature transfigurée par le geste de l'Imâm frappant la terre de la paume de sa main, si bien que toutes les beautés germant de la Terre germent du *malakût* comme un secret de l'Imâm; c'est ce secret que l'Imâm montre à une poignée de fidèles, en les enlevant sur le 'Nuage blanc' jusqu'à ce *malakût*" (Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 301).

<sup>383</sup> Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 302.

<sup>384</sup> According to Corbin, Rozanov's diagram representing his intimate relation with God "perfectly corresponds" to the diagram provided at the beginning of his essay to describe "the polarity between the *Deus absconditus* and his theophanic Form, his Face, that is the Imam; and the polarity between this Face and man to whom it is revealed as divine Face" (Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 255).

<sup>385</sup> Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 304.

union of the two natures, which situates the humano-divino encounter, in the person of Jesus Christ, “at the level of the carnal man perceptible to our senses and subject to the laws of physics, history, [and] society,” Corbin mentions a lineage of Christian gnostics who “have known that it is at the level of the *real* man, that is, of the spiritual man and the *caro spiritualis*,” that the meeting of the divine and human natures occurs.<sup>386</sup>

The discussion that follows attempts to harmonise Berdyaev’s claims with those of Shi’ism in showing that the divine anthropomorphosis does not occur at the level of “perishable” flesh, but in the spiritual world. In ten dense passages, it is impossible to distinguish where Berdyaev ends and Shi’ism begins. In fact, while drawing equally on these sources, Corbin is expressing his own personal theory. It will be enough here to point out an insight by Olivier Clément, who in his response to Corbin, recalled Berdyaev’s view that “the Holy Spirit is beyond the opposition of spirit and matter, and that flesh can, and must, become spiritual.” Clément therefore suggests this nuance with Corbin’s thought: “the *caro spiritualis* for Berdyaev is not the place of the Incarnation, but its result.”<sup>387</sup>

#### 4.3. Iranism and Byzantinism: Suhrawardi, Khomiakov and Leontiev

In chapter three we saw how Corbin used the theme of Sophia as a basis for his unified, progressive spiritual narrative from Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran. Corbin indeed perceived the Iranian world as “forming an enduring totality and cultural unity.”<sup>388</sup> In an essay titled “Iranologie et Philosophie” (1951), he claimed: “There exists an Iranian spiritual universe forming a totality with definite outlines, and whose constant inner principle ensures the unity amidst its many vicissitudes.”<sup>389</sup> In *En Islam Iranien*, he further asserted:

The Iranian world has formed since its origin a totality, whose characteristic traits and vocation can only be explained on the condition

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<sup>386</sup> Corbin, “Face de Dieu et Face de l’Homme,” 304-305.

<sup>387</sup> Clément, “Histoire et Métahistoire chez Nicolas Berdiaev,” in *Temps et Hiérobistoire*, eds. Stella Corbin and Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron (Paris: Berg International, 1988), 155.

<sup>388</sup> Corbin, *L’Iran et la Philosophie*, 42.

<sup>389</sup> Corbin, *L’Iran et la Philosophie*, 40.

that we consider the Iranian spiritual world as forming a whole, before and after Islam.<sup>390</sup>

This view led Corbin to argue for “the introduction of a concept of ‘Iranism’ into the universe of philosophical and religious conceptions.”<sup>391</sup>

Corbin adapted the word “Iranism” from the lexicon of Russian religious thought, specifically from the Slavophile thinker Alexei Khomiakov (1804-60). Similar to his adaptation of Russian Sophiology in formulating a “Shi’ite Sophiology,” Corbin adapted Khomiakov’s concept of “Iranism” to his interpretation what he also termed Suhrawardi’s “Iranism.” In elucidating Suhrawardi’s “Iranism,” Corbin further drew on the concept of “Byzantinism” coined by the conservative Russian religious thinker Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891).

Corbin defines Suhrawardi’s “Iranism” in an essay titled “From the Heroic Epic to the Mystical Epic” (1966).<sup>392</sup> The title of this essay is an allusion to Suhrawardi’s mystical interpretation of the ancient Iranian heroic epics. According to Corbin, Suhrawardi’s main project as he conceived it and as it appeared to his disciples was to “resuscitate” the “theosophy” professed by the Sages of ancient Persia whom he named “Khosrawaniyun,” after Kay Khosrow, a legendary king of the Kayanid dynasty and a character in the Persian epic book, the *Shahnameh*.<sup>393</sup> Suhrawardi presumably viewed the “Khosrawaniyun” of ancient Iran as the predecessors of the “Oriental theosophers,” the “Ishraqiyun” in Islamic Persia.<sup>394</sup> This self-proclaimed kinship with the sages of ancient Iran reveals Suhrawardi’s “Iranism,” according to Corbin.<sup>395</sup>

In tracing the philosophical lineage of the “Ishraqiyun” to the sages of ancient Iran, Suhrawardi is not writing an objective history of philosophy. His claim of kinship with the “Khosrawaniyun” of ancient Persia, Corbin argues, is not a historical fact—it cannot be verified by historical and genealogical records—but rather a “meta-historical” fact, in the sense that it refers to an

<sup>390</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, xxvii.

<sup>391</sup> Corbin, *L'Iran et la Philosophie*, 63.

<sup>392</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” in *Face de Dieu, Face de l’Homme* (Paris: Entrelacs, 2008), 175-243.

<sup>393</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 179 and 223-224. Cf. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 10 and 30.

<sup>394</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 186-187.

<sup>395</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 179.



“event” that took place in Suhrawardī’s soul.<sup>396</sup> Corbin thus indicates that Suhrawardī’s “Iranism” is not based on racial or ethnic affiliation, but that it is rather “essentially sacral, hieratic.”<sup>397</sup> In other words, Suhrawardī’s self-proclaimed kinship with the sages of ancient Persia does not depend on the fact of his originating from the same geographical region, or of his belonging to the same ethnic stock, as the ancient Persians. Rather, it involves a “creative intuition” that cannot be explained by historical causation or contingent circumstances, because it “is itself the *source* and *principle* of explanation. It is from this creative intuition that antecedents become precisely antecedents.”<sup>398</sup> According to Corbin, Suhrawardī “*absolves* the past of ancient Persia from its discontinuity in relation to Islamic Persia.”<sup>399</sup> With Suhrawardī, it is “a *new past* that emerges, as new as the present, and that finds itself in relation to the present in a relation of prophetic fulfilment.”<sup>400</sup> We might note in passing that Corbin’s conception echoes Berdyaev’s insight that “creative newness” cannot be explained in terms of the past, because “it is achieved in existential time which

<sup>396</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 38. Cf. “[A]vec Sohrawardī un philosophe ‘oriental’ ne ‘fait l’histoire’ de la philosophie qu’en faisant acte de philosophe. Or, faire acte de philosophe, ce n’est pas être un spectateur de la philosophie, c’est *agir* la philosophie. Sohrawardī nous a montré que, pour lui, ‘faire l’histoire’ des *Isbrāqīyūn*, c’était faire la ‘théosophie orientale’ en revendiquant pour elle l’ascendance des *Khosrawānīyūn*, des Sages de l’ancienne Perse. L’événement a lieu d’autorité, et mobilise *eo ipso* le passé que le *shaykh al-Isbrāq* fait sien comme ‘résurrecteur de la théosophie de l’ancienne Perse;’ ce faisant, il ‘fait l’histoire’ des *Isbrāqīyūn*, et l’Événement désormais demeure, parce que Sohrawardī ne décrit ni ne raconte pas seulement une histoire; il *est* cette histoire” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 202). And further: “Sa [Sohrawardī] propre ‘histoire’ est une *métahistoire*, parce qu’elle brise la contrainte linéaire de l’histoire exotérique, et cela parce que son origine et son avenir n’ont pas lieu, n’ont pas *leur lieu*, au niveau de cette dernière” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 212).

<sup>397</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 179.

<sup>398</sup> “[L]e grand projet de Sohrawardī ne saurait être ‘expliqué’ par la simple récapitulation d’antécédents. Disons plutôt que c’est à l’inverse sa personne qui, en première et dernière instance, est elle-même l’explication rendant raison de la rencontre de ces antécédents. L’accumulation des antécédents ne suffirait jamais à expliquer l’éclosion d’un projet de ce genre, aux yeux de quiconque est convaincu que l’intuition créatrice n’est pas l’*objet* explicable, mais est elle-même *source* et *principe* de l’explication. C’est à partir de cette intuition créatrice que les antécédents deviennent précisément des antécédents” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 26). Cf. “Certes, l’historien qui ne peut se prononcer que sur les faits matériels, branle la tête devant un *fait* qui échappe aux catégories de la science positive, et dont on ne peut rendre compte causalement en remontant du même au même. Lorsqu’il arrive à un philosophe de reconnaître ses ancêtres spirituels et d’en revendiquer l’ascendance, il ne s’agit pas d’une succession d’ayants droit, légalisable par des documents d’archives. Et c’est un événement qui *innove*, qui s’accomplit dans l’histoire de l’âme et dont le retentissement, jusque dans son passé, est capable de remodeler celui-ci, si bien qu’on ne peut ‘expliquer’ l’événement en le ramenant à quelque antécédent. Ou plutôt l’‘antécédent’ est ailleurs, au niveau d’un monde dont la réalité historique en ce monde-ci n’est que la manifestation éphémère” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 165).

<sup>399</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 187.

<sup>400</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 180.

knows no system of causal links.”<sup>401</sup> As will shortly be seen, Khomiakov expressed a similar idea of creativity that implies freedom from material constraints and causal determinism.

Corbin consequently claimed that Suhrawardi’s sacral, hieratic “Iranism” involved a “reversion of time.”<sup>402</sup> Corbin finds this best illustrated in Suhrawardi’s “mystical recitals.” In these short tales, the protagonist narrates the deeds of the heroes of the ancient Iranian epic, the *Shahnameh*, as the personally lived adventure of his soul. “In the person of Suhrawardi, in the mystical Recital,” Corbin writes, “the deeds of the heroes of ancient Iran are accomplished in the present.”<sup>403</sup> Suhrawardi’s hermeneutics, Corbin maintains, involves a retrospective action, which “absolves” the deeds of the ancient Iranian heroes from the past and “resuscitates” them in the present of the first person.<sup>404</sup> To describe this process, Corbin uses the Arabic word *bikayat*, which denotes a narration that is at the same time an imitation, a repetition.<sup>405</sup> He explains this notion as follows:

[The *bikayat*] is a re-cited history, but whose Reciter is therefore the “mime,” the *actor* in the *active* and *actual* sense of the word. This is because the *event* is never closed, and only becomes a *history* to the extent

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<sup>401</sup> Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 169. Cf. “Newness cannot be explained with the object as the point of departure. It is only when we start from the subject that it becomes explicable” (Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 168). Also: “It is in fallen time that the life of nature and historical life flow on. But everything that happens in time which has broken up into past, present and future, that is to say in time which is sick, is but a projection on to the external of what is being accomplished in depth. True creative newness is achieved in existential time, time which is not objectified, that is to say it happens in the vertical and not in the horizontal. But creative acts which are accomplished in the vertical are projected upon a plane and are accepted as accomplished in historical time. Thus it is that meta-history enters into history” (Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 163).

<sup>402</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 39.

<sup>403</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 214. Cf. “On peut concevoir que Sohrawardî ait lu le *Shâb-Nâme* comme nous-mêmes lisons la Bible ou comme lui-même lisait le Qorân, c’est-à-dire comme s’il n’avait été composé que ‘pour son propre cas’.... [L]e *Shâb-Nâme* pouvait donc ainsi devenir l’histoire ou la métahistoire de l’âme, telle qu’elle est présente au cœur du gnostique. Spontanément donc, c’est toute l’histoire de l’âme et du monde de l’âme que Sohrawardî pouvait percevoir jusque dans la trame du *Shâb-Nâme*, en le lisant au niveau auquel il est lisible dès que l’on a présente à la pensée la totalité de l’être et des mondes de l’être, c’est-à-dire à la façon dont l’éminent Proclus savait lire l’histoire de la mystérieuse Atlantide comme histoire vraie et simultanément comme ‘image d’une certaine réalité existant dans le Tout’” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 212-213).

<sup>404</sup> “[Le Récitateur] est donc le *patients*, le ‘lieu’ dans lequel s’accomplit au présent la geste récitée, ‘parce qu’il a aboli en lui-même la montagne de l’Égoïté close.’ Il est l’absolu dans lequel cette geste passée s’absout de son passé, parce que simultanément il est celui que cette geste, en s’absolvant ainsi, *absout* du passé” (Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 206).

<sup>405</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 176-177.

that it is a *comprehended event*.... We are the *mimes* who actualise the meaning of the exemplary models. We do not make ourselves captives of that past, not any more than this past is captive of itself, as if it were “outpassed”.... No, we ravish this past, and ourselves with it, from the *causality* known as historical causality.<sup>406</sup>

The recital is accordingly a “history that breaks history,” an eschatological history, which in reverting the deeds of the heroes of ancient Iran to their “true,” “inner” meaning, simultaneously leads the mystical pilgrim “to his real being, to his *origin*, to his ‘Orient.’”<sup>407</sup> This defines what Corbin describes as “the passage from the heroic epic to the mystical epic.”<sup>408</sup>

The “essentially sacral, hieratic” sense of Suhrawardi’s “Iranism” is denoted precisely by this “passage.” This is because Suhrawardi’s hermeneutics of the Iranian epics involves an interiorisation: the exploits of the ancient heroes become the exploits of Suhrawardi’s soul during its visionary ascent from the “occidental Exile” to the “Orient of Light.” Suhrawardi’s “Iranism” therefore also involves a spiritual aesthetic insofar as his visions are imagined after the ancient Iranian epic style. In this regard, as we shall see, Suhrawardi’s “Iranism” shares affinities with Leontiev’s “Byzantinism,” which also involves a spiritual stylisation.

In the closing section of his text, titled “Of Iranism and the Hieratic World,” Corbin draws a comparison, whose development, he notes, “might perhaps be one of the pathways allowing Iranian philosophers, who have remained all but unknown in the West, to make their way into the circuit of our

<sup>406</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 177. Cf. “Comment notre Récitateur craindrait-il que le passé soit dépassé ou que lui-même soit alors dépassé, puisqu’il est là, lui, et que c’est en lui-même que le passé se passe, et qui lui-même, en s’absolvant de sa propre égoïté close, *absout* le passé, l’arrache à sa fixité, si bien que désormais c’est ce passé qui lui succède? La Tradition ne se *transmet* que par cette création” (Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 198).

<sup>407</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 179 and 191. Cf. “[C]omme en témoigne l’épopée iranienne des Kayanides, ce n’est pas dans l’histoire habituelle de nos chroniques que les héros d’épopée font leur entrée. Leur geste visible s’amplifie simultanément à la dimension du monde *imaginal*, du ‘huitième climat,’ là où sont *pris au mot* leurs actes qui défient les lois physiques de notre monde. C’est pourquoi justement leur histoire est *orientable*, je veux dire peut être reconduite à l’‘Orient’ métahistorique, au *pôle* céleste, et y trouver son dénouement” (Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 189-190). Also: “Le récit, la *hikāyat*, est essentiellement la mise en œuvre herméneutique, reconduisant chaque fois chaque ‘récitateur’ au sens vrai de ce récit pour lui, et *eo ipso* au sens vrai de son être” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 239).

<sup>408</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 191.

thoughts and problems.” Alluding to Suhrawardi’s “Iranism,” Corbin observes that while

historians of religions know the importance of the Iranian spiritual world, it is remarkable that *Iranism* has occupied so little space in the thinking of philosophers who have thought through great projects for a philosophy of history. An important exception, however, in a country adjacent to Iran, offers us the second term of our comparison.<sup>409</sup>

He then refers “to the use of the word *Iranism*, as it was understood by Alexis Khomiakov and the Slavophiles in ancient Russia during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>410</sup>

Khomiakov distinguished two fundamental principles that he placed at the foundation of his historiosophy. On the one hand, there is the principle of freedom, expressed through creation, and on the other hand, there is the principle of necessity and materialism. “Freedom and necessity,” Khomiakov wrote, “constitute the mysterious principle around which, in various forms, all human thoughts are centred.”<sup>411</sup> In his posthumously published “Notes on Universal History,” Khomiakov calls the first principle “Iranism” [Russian *iranstvo*]. The “Iranian” principle denotes “the creative spiritual principle, the religion of moral freedom.” The second principle Khomiakov refers to as “Kushitism” [Russian *kushitstvo*], in reference to Kush, the Biblical name for Ethiopia. The “Kushite” principle designates the power of materialism and

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<sup>409</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 235-236.

<sup>410</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 236.

<sup>411</sup> Corbin cites this passage from Khomiakov without providing a reference. Corbin most likely found it in Zenkovsky who cites that same passage in his *History of Russian Philosophy*, 1, 189. Corbin cites Zenkovsky’s work in *En Islam Iranien*, II, 362 n. 512.

logical necessity. “Kushitism,” according to Khomiakov, finds its fullest expression in Hegel’s system.<sup>412</sup> “Iranism,” on the other hand,

is founded on tradition and cannot be restored by a purely logical action, because the concept of creative freedom cannot be chained to and deduced from formulae. It can only be discerned by a superior intuition, going beyond the narrow limits of reasoning, or by the work of centuries, having gone through all the degrees of negation.<sup>413</sup>

As this passage reveals, Khomiakov associates the notions of “tradition” and “creative freedom.” This anticipates Corbin’s own association of the notions of “tradition” and “renaissance.”

In fact, Corbin draws a parallel between, on the one hand, Khomiakov’s notion of “Iranism,” which denotes “creative freedom” rooted in tradition, and on the other hand, the “free creative inspiration” which enabled Suhrawardi to claim he was the “resurrector” of the theosophical wisdom of ancient Iran.<sup>414</sup>

Corbin elucidates this connection in an important passage from the final chapter of the second volume of *En Islam Iranien* devoted to Suhrawardi and the Platonists of Persia. He writes:

Can we not say that, in Suhrawardi, *Kushitism* is represented by Peripatetic philosophy, the dominion of Logic, of the necessity of the laws of rational understanding? Peripateticism, if not Aristotle himself, typified for Suhrawardi what Hegel represented for Khomiakov. It is the dominion of logical necessity, as well as that of physical necessity, that is shattered by the visionary theosophy of the *Khosrawaniyun* from Iran, by the free flight of the configuring vision, the “superior intuition” penetrating into the

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<sup>412</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 236-237. Cf. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 336-338. Cf. “[Khomiakov’s “Notes on Universal History”] rests as a whole upon the contrast between two types and upon the conflict of two principles in history, that is to say, it is consecrated to what is always the same fundamental Russian theme, of Russia and Europe, of East and West.... [Khomiakov] sees the conflict of two principles in history—freedom and necessity, spirituality and materialism. Thus it is made clear that the principal thing, the thing of highest value to him, was freedom. Necessity, the power of the material over the spiritual was an enemy against which he fought all his life. He saw this necessity, this power of materiality over the spirit in pagan religion and in Roman Catholicism, in Western rationalism and in Hegel’s philosophy. The principles which are seen in conflict by him he expressed in terminology which is relative and fruitful of misunderstanding. They are *iranstvo* and *kushitstvo*. *Iranstvo* is freedom and spirituality; *kushitstvo* is necessity and materiality, and of course it becomes clear that Russia is *iranstvo* and the West is *kushitstvo*” (Berdyayev, *The Russian Idea*, 61).

<sup>413</sup> A. Gratieux, *A.S. Khomiakov et le Mouvement Slavophile. II: Les Doctrines* (Paris: Cerf, 1939), 68-69 and 71-73, cited in Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 237.

<sup>414</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 237.

spiritual universes forbidden to the dialectic of Logic. The affirmation of the *mundus imaginalis* is therefore the paradox, which in daring to “exit” the constraints of empiricism and rational Logic, surmounts their antagonism.<sup>415</sup>

As this passage shows, the Russian themes of freedom/necessity, intuitivism/rationalism, East/West, etc., are reflected in Corbin’s treatment of Suhrawardi. This helps explain the context for Corbin’s controversial emphasis on Suhrawardi’s mystical writings as being ultimately more valuable than his logical and doctrinal works.

However, Corbin also notes a divergence between Khomiakov and Suhrawardi. In Khomiakov’s “Iranism,” Corbin perceives “the desire to elevate the hidden type at the root of the life of a people, viz. the Russian type, to a universal value.”<sup>416</sup> For Khomiakov, as for the Slavophiles in general, the vocation of the Russian people is to become the most Christian of societies, the “pravoslav,” Orthodox people.<sup>417</sup> Corbin criticises the “populism” implied in this vision, which is too concerned, in his view, with the consolidation of a “temporal ideal.” This is completely foreign to Suhrawardi’s purely spiritual “Iranism.” As he writes:

It is not the Iranian people that merited, as such, the qualification of “Orientals” in the sense that [Suhrawardi] understands this word. The knowledge of his ancient Sages was not “Oriental” simply because they

<sup>415</sup> “Ne pourrait-on pas dire que, chez Sohrawardî, le *kouschisme* serait représenté par la philosophie des Péripatéticiens, l’empire de la Logique, la nécessité des lois de l’entendement rationnel? Ce que Hegel représentait aux yeux de Khomiakov, le péripatétisme, sinon Aristote lui-même, le typifiait au regard de Sohrawardî. Et c’est l’empire de la nécessité logique, comme celui de la nécessité physique, qui se trouve brisé par la théosophie visionnaire des *Khosrawânîyân* de l’Iran, par le libre essor de la vision configuratrice, l’‘intuition supérieure’ pénétrant dans les univers spirituels interdits à la dialectique de la Logique. L’affirmation du *mundus imaginalis* est alors le paradoxe qui, en osant ‘sortir’ des contraintes de l’empirisme et des évidences de la Logique rationnelle, surmonte leur antagonisme. ‘Ayant parcouru tous les degrés de la négation,’ dit Khomiakov. De son côté, Sohrawardî, antipéripatéticien au possible, exige pourtant que son disciple ait tout d’abord parcouru toutes les étapes de la philosophie péripatéticienne, celles du monde de la Logique (il le fait lui-même tout au long de la première partie du livre de la ‘Théosophie orientale,’ mais sous une inspiration stoïcienne où l’herméneutique domine la dialectique, si bien que la Logique en sort simplifiée et brisée, et le livre aboutit à une métaphysique de la vision). On ne surmonte pas le principe kouschite en passant à côté, en le laissant en dehors. Peut-être le pressentiment génial de Khomiakov prendrait-il un développement inattendu, s’il était confronté plus en détail avec le propos de Sohrawardî, ‘résurrecteur’ de la sagesse théosophique de l’ancien Iran” (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 337-338).

<sup>416</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 237.

<sup>417</sup> Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 238. Cf. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 338.

happened to live in the geographical East. Rather, inversely, it is “Oriental” knowledge that made these Iranians “Orientals” *par excellence*. The light of this “Orient” is the Light of Glory (the *Xvarnah*), which can now invest a being, and now withdraw from him. The “Oriental” kinship claimed by Suhrawardi and his followers is not an ethnic principle, but a hieratic ascendant (in the Neoplatonic sense of the word).<sup>418</sup>

In other words, the “Orient” in Suhrawardi’s “Oriental Theosophy” does not designate the geographical East, but rather symbolises spiritual light and knowledge.

To illustrate this point, Corbin draws a parallel between Suhrawardi and another Russian thinker, Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891). At one time an admirer of Solovyov, Leontiev was an aesthete in early life and died as an Orthodox monk. Leontiev’s religious and political conservatism placed him at odds with the other religious thinkers of his generation. He rejected Solovyov’s “humanism,” charged Dostoevsky of promoting a “rosy Christianity,” and considered Khomiakov’s Orthodoxy as “too liberal and modernised.” By contrast, he affirmed Byzantine Orthodoxy and the ascetic monasticism of Mount Athos.<sup>419</sup>

Leontiev, unlike Khomiakov, “placed his faith neither in Russia nor in its people, but in the sacral and hieratic ideal of the Byzantine world.”<sup>420</sup> “Any attempt to give a mystical foundation to a temporal theocratic kingdom was alien to [Leontiev],” Corbin remarks.<sup>421</sup> Therefore, in Corbin’s view, Leontiev’s outlook converges with that of Suhrawardi. Indeed, he claims that

<sup>418</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 338-339.

<sup>419</sup> Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 68-69.

<sup>420</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 339. Cf. “[Leontiev] certainly did not believe in the Russian people. He thought Russia exists and is great thanks simply to the fact that Byzantine Orthodoxy and Byzantine autocracy had been imposed upon the Russian people from above” (Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 85). Cf. “[Leontiev] was in no sense a nationalist as might appear at first sight: he was even avowedly hostile to nationalism. The principle of race and blood had no intrinsic value for him. He was very much on his guard against it. Like Solovyev he tended to be a universalist. What mattered in the first place were the universal elements, dominating the national idea and stimulating national development.... Rome was Solovyev’s universal symbol, Byzantium was Leontiev’s. The latter had, indeed, never believed in Russia or its people, but rather in the principles of the Byzantine Church and State. The only mission he believed in was the universal Byzantine one.... In Leontiev’s mind, the essential fact was *not the people itself, but the idea dominating it*” (Berdyaev, *Leontiev*, trans. George Reavy [Maine: Academic International, 1940], 153-154). See also Igor Sokologorsky, “‘Principe Byzantin et Principe Slave’: La Russie et l’Europe selon Constantin Léontiev,” *Istina* 44, no. 1 (1999), 30-45.

<sup>421</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 339.

[for both Leontiev and Suhrawardī], it is not the people that is in itself essential, but the sacral idea which inhabits it and prevails in it. What the sacral Byzantine idea was for [Leontiev], the idea of the theosophical wisdom of ancient Iran was, in turn, for [Suhrawardī]. Here again, the principle of freedom that typified *Iranism* in the historiosophical dramaturgy of Khomiakov could be seen at work. For no one was simultaneously more revolutionary and more traditional than Suhrawardī; for while he proclaimed that he had no predecessors, the fact remains that it was through him and beginning with him that the “Oriental” tradition, the *Isbraqi* tradition, linking the spirituality of ancient Iran with that of Islamic Iran, came to exist.<sup>422</sup>

The connection that Corbin posits here between Suhrawardī’s “Iranism” and Leontiev’s “Byzantinism” reflects his view of an essential affinity between the Byzantine and Iranian spiritual universes.

The perceived “sacral” and “hieratic” sympathy between Byzantium and Iran defies every historical analysis. Its proper context is Corbin’s ecumenical vision. Thus, in a passage commenting the luminous surface of glazed earthenware decorating the southwest portal arch of the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan, he writes:

The surface of Iranian glazed earthenware, like the surface of Byzantine mosaics, emits its own light. Few years ago, the Ravenna Mosaic Art School held in Teheran an exhibition that showcased a large number of reproductions of mosaics, whose tradition [the Ravenna School] maintains. The extreme interest that our Iranian friends showed for the Ravenna mosaics suggested to us that there had to be something

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<sup>422</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 339. Cf. “La conscience religieuse d’un Leontiev est d’essence toute spirituelle et ascétique. Il est même étranger à tout souci de donner un fondement mystique au royaume théocratique temporel. Il croit à l’Église orthodoxe, il croit à l’idée, à la beauté surtout, à certaines personnalités élues, puissantes et créatrices. Mais il ne croit pas au peuple, à la masse humaine, et par là même il se détache, avec une originalité puissante, de l’ensemble des penseurs russes. Il reste le témoin d’un monde *hiératique* (je pense principalement au sens que le néoplatonicien Jamblique donne à ce mot, lorsqu’il parle des ‘vertus hiératiques’), — un monde aux figures de Lumière d’au-delà dont il arrive au monde humain terrestre de pouvoir être liturgiquement la typification, comme en une succession d’icônes ou comme dans la chevalerie du Graal. Et c’est pourquoi je crois que l’étude comparée entre l’*iranisme* de Sohravardī et l’*iranisme* de Khomiakov nous conduirait peut-être finalement à la constatation suivante: que ce que l’idée et les Sages de l’ancienne Perse ont représenté pour Sohravardī correspondrait plutôt à ce que Byzance et le principe byzantin ont représenté pour un Leontiev” (Corbin, “De l’Épopée Héroïque à l’Épopée Mystique,” 238-239).



common to both traditions. In fact, is not the distinguishing feature of emblematic spaces precisely their ability to communicate by secret ways that lie beyond the jurisdiction of History?<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Corbin, “Les Cités Emblématiques,” preface to *Ispahan, Image du Paradis*, by Henri Stierlin (Genève: Sigma, 1976), 8.

## Heresiological Post-Scriptum: In Corbinian Islam<sup>424</sup>

“On ne peut prétendre *écrire* l’histoire d’un thème quelconque sans être pris soi-même dans cette histoire et inéluctablement *faire* cette histoire, d’une manière ou d’une autre, en la prolongeant ou en y mettant fin”

(Henry Corbin, *La Philosophie Iranienne Islamique aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles*).

At the outset, it was suggested that the study of the Russian content of Corbin’s thought could contribute to the controversial debate within Islamic Studies concerning his understanding of Islamic philosophy. A common criticism of Corbin is that in valuing certain aspects of the Islamic tradition as more worthwhile and significant than other aspects, he was promoting his own philosophical agenda at the expense of a disinterested, historical and scientific presentation of Islam.<sup>425</sup>

This criticism is legitimate insofar as it serves to counteract approaches to Corbin that treat and apply him as a source of positive data about Islam. Uncritical approaches of this sort are to be found, for example, in Iran, where, as Matthijs van den Bos has shown, Corbin’s project “linked up seamlessly with Iranian concerns for the legitimacy of Shi’ism in the face of modernity.”<sup>426</sup> Thus Corbin’s “disembodied representations” of Shi’ism and Islam have now become “‘Shi’ism from the point of view of Shi’ism itself’ in Iran.”<sup>427</sup> Revealing the Russian content of Corbin’s thought shows that, while relying extensively on Shi’ite sources, his project was driven by concerns, and shaped by themes, largely external to the historical Shi’ite tradition.

That being said, critics of Corbin who limit themselves to a historical critique of his writings tend to converge with uncritical readers in treating his works as those of a historian. As previously indicated, despite the historical nature of his sources, Corbin was primarily a philosopher. Whatever historical

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<sup>424</sup> This conclusion takes free inspiration from Prof. Todd Lawson’s keynote speech at the McGill Institute of Islamic Studies Graduate Student Symposium held on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2012.

<sup>425</sup> Adams, “The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin,” 137.

<sup>426</sup> Matthijs van den Bos, “Transnational Orientalism: Henry Corbin in Iran,” *Anthropos* 100, no. 1 (2005), 113.

<sup>427</sup> Bos, “Transnational Orientalism,” 122.

aspects his works might contain are secondary with respect to his essentially philosophical undertaking. Readers who assess the value of his writings exclusively in terms of their historical dimensions therefore miss the point of his project.

Corbin's explanation of Suhrawardi's claim to have revived the illuminative philosophy of ancient Iran helps to clarify the nature of his own project. In defining his spiritual lineage, Corbin argues, Suhrawardi

is not writing an (objective) history of philosophy or mysticism. It is the history of souls that he is describing, as he perceives it in the history of his own soul, which is its proper place. It would therefore be totally void to object, as historians, that his schematisation of history is a figment of the imagination, on the grounds that it is inconsistent with our historical annals. The objection would miss the only history Suhrawardi intends to tell us, since he *makes* and *is* himself that history...in the lived reality of his innermost depths. And it is at that very moment in which his spiritual perception *accomplishes* this history that the precursors [he claims] become and really *are* the precursors of the *Isbraqiyyun*.... This is the main difference between existential historicity and what is nowadays commonly called historical existence.<sup>428</sup>

Similarly, the idea of Islam that emerges in Corbin's writings differs in many significant ways from orthodox, traditional and historical definitions of that religion. One might indeed speak of a distinctly "Corbinian Islam." The fact of its irreducible singularity in no way diminishes its legitimacy. On the contrary, it is a testament to "the unique sovereignty of the Spirit."

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<sup>428</sup> Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, II, 38-39.

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