

Baha'i Studies Review 12 (2004) 128–138

A Prolegomenon to the Study of Babi and Baha'i Scriptures: The Importance of Henry Corbin to Babi and Baha'i Studies

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During his lifetime Henry Corbin was the foremost western authority on the Islamic philosophy of Persia and he ranks among the most influential Islamicists of the 20th century. His work has unique relevance to understanding the philosophical contexts for the emergence of the Babi and Baha'i Faiths in nineteenth-century Persia. While best known for his work on Avicenna, Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi and the school of Isfahan, on imamology and Ismailism, he is also the most significant western scholar of Shaykhism to date. His work thus constitutes a philosophical link between the Babi-Baha'i Faiths and the philosophical and religious matrix within which they were conceived. Dr 'Ali-Murad Davudi, the eminent Baha'i scholar and administrator who 'disappeared' (presumed executed) during the persecution of the Baha'is of Iran following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, captures the philosophical genealogy of the Babi and Baha'i religions in a wonderfully concise yet evocative passage:

The philosophies of the East manifested themselves in Islamic lands with the two aspects of Mashshā'ī (Peripatetic) and Ishrāqī (Platonist Illuminationist). A third aspect of these two ways of thinking was to attain gnosis (*'irfān*) or spiritual wisdom. These three trends found interrelations with each other, with the specific input of Islamic belief, and thus speculative theology (*kalām*) was engendered. This cultural attainment continued its progress in history from Farabi to Avicenna, but this achievement was able to include in its appendage both Ash'ari and Ghazali. From the aforementioned it reached Khwaja Nasiru'd-Din Tusi but was also accepting of the appearance of Suhrawardi. All these inputs enriched each other, often because of a certain admixture of faith (*dīn*) and intersections of ideas from scriptural interpretation (*tafsīr*), some from jurisprudence (*fiqh*), some from mysticism (*tasawwuf*); sometimes one or more elements would be dominant. In this progression these three appeared: Mir Damad, Mulla Sadra, and Mulla Muhsin Fayz and similar souls. It was against this background, but with a preponderance of the religious and faith element, with a predilection for the narrations of the Imams (*akhbār*) and the traditions of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*), that Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti appeared. With such a background, these twin souls disclosed their teachings. And it was this substrate (*mādiḥ*) that had the capacity to receive the Spirit of Divine Revelation and become the bearer of the Trust of God; thus it could pride itself that its verbal and semantic

substratum could be chosen for the exposition of the wondrous new Faith and Cause, and thereby raise its head higher than high heavens.¹

Dr Davudi's intellectual map is not dissimilar to that traced by the great philosopher-poet and founding father of Pakistan, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, who, as far back as 1908, published his first book, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, following the thread of Persian philosophical thought from Zoroaster to Baha'u'llah. Like Davudi, Iqbal highlighted the milestones represented by al-Farabi and Avicenna, al-Ash'ari and al-Ghazali, Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra, and Shaykh Ahmad. 'But all the various lines of Persian thought', Iqbal declared towards the end of his book, 'once more find a synthesis in that great religious movement of Modern Persia – Babism or Bahaism.'² The relationship he thus establishes between Baha'u'llah's thought and that of the great Persian thinkers he highlights earlier in his work accords closely with Davudi's genealogy. Allama Iqbal's insights in this 'neglected book'³ however, were destined to remain in obscurity for a long time.⁴ Professor Walbridge of Indiana University, in his assessment of the significance of this book, writes that 'Iqbal was dealing with aspects of Islamic philosophy that would remain untouched by anyone else for nearly half a century, and whose importance would not be fully appreciated until the 1970s'.⁵ Here Walbridge is tacitly alluding to the work of Henry Corbin, who may be credited with almost single-handedly lifting out of western academic obscurity the mainsprings of Persian philosophical thought after Avicenna, as adumbrated by Dr Davudi and explored in brief compass by Allama Iqbal.⁶

Such was the neglect in which these Persian thinkers languished until well after Corbin's researches began to appear in the 1940s that, when writing his ground-breaking overview of Islamic philosophy, as late as 1962, he felt compelled to justify the designation of 'Islamic', as opposed to 'Arab' philosophy in the title of his book, in response to two misconceptions prevalent among his contemporaries: (1) that Islamic philosophical thought was largely confined to the Arab lands or the Arabic tongue, and (2) that Islamic philosophy accompanied Averroes to his grave, never to rise again. On the contrary, Corbin stressed, Islamic philosophy had, from its beginnings, high and ample expressions in the Persian language, particularly within the Shi'i sphere, and continued to find expression in that language with undiminished vigour well into the 20th century, and he adduced as proof the work of Suhrawardi, the school of Isfahan and Mulla Sadra, and the Shaykhi school

¹ I am grateful to Dr Khazeh Fananapazir for kindly providing this translation of this passage from 'Ali Murad Davudi, *Falsafih va 'Irfan*, vol. 1: *Insan dar A'in-i Baha'i* (ed. Vahid Ra'fati, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1987) 298-299. For Dr Davudi, see Novin Dustdar, 'Ali-Murad Davudi', *Obituaries, Baha'i Studies Review* 9 (1999-2000) 241-44.

² Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia* (London: Luzac & Co, 1908) 143,

³ John Walbridge, 'Allamah Iqbal's First Book' *Research Notes in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies*, 5/1 (April 2001), H-Bahai, <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/notes/vol5/iqbalmet.htm>.

⁴ *ibid.* One exception to this neglect comes from the great Italian Baha'i orientalist Alessandro Bausani, who was to map the same philosophical journey in greater breadth (acknowledging his debt to Iqbal's work) in his seminal work *Persia Religiosa* (trans. as *Religion in Iran*, New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2000). Bausani's chronicle of the evolution of religious thought in Persia from Zoroaster to Baha'u'llah arrived yet again at a similar spiritual genealogy of Babi and Baha'i thought.

⁵ John Walbridge, 'Allamah Iqbal's First Book'.

⁶ See also Ann-Marie Schimmel's comments on Iqbal's book in 'Iqbāl and the Baha'i Faith', in Heshnat Moayyad (ed.), *The Bahā'ī Faith and Islam* (Ottawa: Association for Baha'i Studies, 1990) 111-119.

inaugurated by the Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, whose thought proved foundational for Corbin's philosophical project.⁷

It is necessary to stress in this connection that Corbin's project was indeed essentially philosophical in nature, as Corbin, unlike the overwhelming majority of the great Islamicists before and after him, was a philosopher first, and an Islamicist second, as he himself writes: 'Our own approach to Islamic studies was that of a philosopher.'⁸

It was, indeed, while studying philosophy in the Sorbonne under the tutelage of the eminent Etienne Gilson, an authority on medieval thought and seminal Catholic philosopher, that he was first exposed to the thought of Avicenna in its Latin translations. This led him to study Arabic in the 1920s and make acquaintance with the great French chronicler of Islamic spirituality, Louis Massignon, who, in turn, acquainted him with Suhrawardi and thus initiated a lifelong journey into Persian mystical philosophy. In the 1930s Corbin also journeyed to Germany, where he made the acquaintance of Rudolf Otto and Martin Heidegger, becoming instrumental in the introduction of Heidegger's thought to France through his early translations of this philosopher. Thus Corbin entered the field of Oriental studies with a sophisticated philosophical education, and an even more sophisticated philosophical sensibility, giving his work a distinctive quality that made him almost unique among his fellow Islamologists, not only in his approach, but also in his influence outside Islamics. In his native country, Corbin came to be regarded as an eminent philosopher and man of letters, so that his name, for instance, adorns encyclopaedias of French belles-lettres that have nothing to do with Islam.⁹ Through Carl Jung's famous Eranos circle in Ascona, Switzerland, Corbin's thought critically influenced people like James Hillman and Albert Durand, and cross-fertilised with that of eminent figures like Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Kathleen Raine, Joseph Campbell and others.¹⁰

This philosophical perspective made Corbin's approach distinctive within Islamics, and it remains distinctive today. In his introduction to the Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy, Seyyed Hossein Nasr places the emergence of Corbin in context:

. . . from the middle of the thirteenth/nineteenth century onwards, with the rise of the discipline of the 'history of philosophy' . . . combined with the development of Oriental studies, the attention of Western scholars turned to Islamic philosophy, which they sought to study 'scientifically'. The Orientalist view of Islamic philosophy, while contributing much to the edition of texts and historical data, was primarily philological and historical rather than philosophical, the appearance of a figure such as Henry Corbin being quite exceptional. At best this view dealt with Islamic philosophy in the context of cultural history or the history of ideas, but hardly ever as philosophy'.¹¹

⁷ Corbin, 'Avant Propos', *Histoire de la Philosophie Islamique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 5-12.

⁸ Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy* (trans. Joseph Rowe, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998) 91ff.

⁹ For a brief overview of Corbin's life and work see *ibid* and Pierre Lory, 'Henry Corbin: his work and influence', in Oliver Leaman and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (eds.), *Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1996, vol. 2, ch. 69.

¹⁰ For Corbin and the Eranos circle, see Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Introduction', in Leaman and Nasr (eds.), *Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, 1:11.

With Corbin the emphasis was reversed. Interested as he was in the place of the thinkers he examined in the cultural history of Islam, he was more concerned with what their philosophies had to say to philosophers in any age, his included. The words of his old teacher, Etienne Gilson, on this issue captured perfectly his own approach to the history of Islamic philosophy:

. . . the biography of a philosopher is of great help in understanding his philosophy; but that is the history of a philosopher, not of his philosophy . . . Philosophy consists in the concepts of philosophers, taken in the naked, impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations. The history of these concepts and their relations is the history of philosophy itself . . . Proceeding as they do . . . the untiring efforts of historians, sociologists, and economists to account for the rise of philosophical ideas by historical, sociological and economic factors seem ultimately headed for a complete failure . . . The trouble with explanations of that sort is not that they do not work, but that they always work with the same infallible success. Any philosophy can be explained away by its time, its birthplace, and its historical setting. Any philosophy can be accounted for by the collective representations that prevailed in the social group in which it was conceived. And any philosophy can as successfully be traced back to the economic structure of the nation in which the philosopher was born and lived. Whatever method you choose, it works beautifully. But it ascribes the birth of Aristotelianism to the fact that Aristotle was a Greek and a pagan, living in a society based on slavery, four centuries before Christ; it also explains the revival of Aristotelianism in the thirteenth century by the fact that St. Thomas Aquinas was an Italian, Christian, and even a monk, living in a feudal society whose political and economic structure was widely different from that of 4th century Greece; and it accounts equally well for the Aristotelianism of J. Maritain, who is French, a layman, living in the 'bourgeois' society of a nineteenth-century republic . . . the ultimate explanation of the history of philosophy has to be philosophy itself.¹²

For Corbin the overriding project was, within the sphere of Islamic, and to a lesser extent western, esotericism, to chronicle the history of 'the concepts of philosophers, taken in the naked, impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations'.¹³ He described his method as phenomenological. Corbin's use of this term to describe his method should be understood in the context of the philosophical hermeneutics inaugurated by Husserl, seeking to extract from the outward aspects of experience from what are designated as the 'perceptual properties' of life, the inner 'essences', the 'abstract' or 'universal' properties that are latent within them, grasped by means of 'eidetic intuition' leading from the image to its essence.¹⁴ A crucial constituent of Corbin's philosophical vision lay in the resonance between this philosophical approach and the spiritual hermeneutics of Islam founded on the

¹² Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955) 308. This passage was first drawn to my attention by Steven Scholl in an electronic list.

¹³ Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* 308.

¹⁴ For a concise introduction to Husserlian phenomenology refer to the Oxford Companion to Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) entries on 'Husserl' and on 'Phenomenology'. Also Husserl's article, 'Phenomenology' (tr. C. V. Solomon), in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., Chicago, 1927.

relationship of the *bāṭin* to the *zāhir* (the Hidden or Latent to the Manifest or Apparent), with *ta'wīl* as the eidetic method developed in Islam to journey from the image to its content, its reality (*ḥaqīqat*).

Thus Corbin's philosophical project was grounded in religious-spiritual hermeneutics. Having been a pupil at the great Catholic seminary of Issy, Corbin subsequently converted to Protestantism, taking a deep interest in the new Protestant approach of Karl Barth to exegesis. His experience of the world, of the Book, and of the Incarnation as an eidetic process, leading from the apparent to the real, the perceptual to the abstract, the physical to the spiritual, the image to its reality, led him to enter into the mindset of *bāṭinī* Islam, with its roots in the traditions of the Imams of Shi'ism, notably the fifth Imam Muhammad al-Baqir and the sixth Imam Jafar as-Sadiq.

In Corbin's expositions, understanding is conditioned on a mode of being, and one's mode of being is conditioned upon understanding: 'The lived situation is essentially a hermeneutical situation. That is to say the situation where the true sense germinates, which simultaneously renders one's existence true. This truth of meaning, correlative with the truth of being, truth which is real, reality which is true, all this is expressed in one of the key terms of the philosophical vocabulary of Islam: the word *ḥaqīqat*.'¹⁵

Moreover, the esoteric tradition of Shi'i eschatology, with its emphasis on the fourteen Pure Ones (the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah and the twelve Imams) as loci for the manifestations of the unknowable God (theophanies) in both the physical and the spiritual world, illuminated Corbin's own perspective of the central facts of Christianity: the incarnation of Christ, his resurrection, his ascension, and his promised return.¹⁶ In Shi'i esotericism, the pre-existence of the fourteen Immaculate Ones, their appearance and function in this world, the occultation of the Twelfth Imam and the expectation of his parousia provided rich philosophical material for Corbin's theological contemplations. Thus, the philosophy that Corbin was interested in was what he designated 'prophetic philosophy', which is acquired and developed in recognition of, and adherence to, a divine Revealer and his revelation, an intermediary between the unknowable Essence and contingent being. For what Corbin characterized as 'the paradox of monotheism' – transcendent, unknowable God worshipped by limited, contingent minds – could only be resolved by the positing of intermediary stages of existence between God and human consciousness. The exploration of this 'imaginal' realm, where the human and the divine encounter one another, became Corbin's *raison d'être*, leading him to immerse himself in Iranian spirituality from Zoroastrianism to Shaykhism and, in the western tradition, in the visionary architecture of thinkers such as Emmanuel Swedenborg.

Corbin was prolific, producing some 300 publications. Much of his work consisted of the painstaking collection of significant manuscripts and their publication and translation in scholarly editions in Iran, where he founded the Franco-Iranian Institute of Islamic studies, and in Paris, where he succeeded Massignon in the École Pratique des Hautes Études. But his truly ground-breaking work lay in three main fields:

1. His seminal monographs on major Islamic philosophers, both the well-recognized and the neglected, which, fifty years on, remain indispensable. Suhrawardī, Avicenna, Ibn Arabī, Ruzbihan Baqlī, Shaykh Ahmad and his successors, among others, all benefited from such focussed treatment.

¹⁵ Corbin, *Histoire de la Philosophie Islamique*, 8.

¹⁶ Cf. Gilbert Durand, 'Henry Corbin: L'Envers d'un Siècle de Ténèbres', *Révue intemporelle des Humains Associés*, no. 8, <http://www.humains-associes.org/No8/HA.No8.Durand.html>.

2. His thematic monographs on key philosophical ideas, such as the imaginal world, the Man of Light, the Hidden Imam, idea of the Temple, cyclical time, angelology, spiritual chivalry, alchemy and others besides. It is in these works that Corbin's philosophical vision is developed most distinctively. These were often developed in the context of the Eranos circle.
3. His great syntheses of Islamic mystical philosophy; notably but not exclusively in his *Histoire de la Philosophie islamique* and his magnum opus, the four volume *En Islam iranien*.

While recognising Corbin's undoubted achievements and the monument of research that he has bequeathed us, it is also important, however, to point to the limitations of method and perspective that affect his work.¹⁷ As a philosopher, his concern with ideas is sometimes pursued at the expense of historicity, and it is not always possible to recognise where Corbin's thought ends and where that of the authors he describes begins. For Charles Adams, the result of Corbin's philosophical approach to Islam has resulted in a 'distortion of the historical reality'¹⁸ of his subjects, in favour of a philosophical project that, often, was Corbin's own rather than that of the authors he examines. The critique of Corbin has therefore to be borne in mind while mining his corpus for insight, without, however, minimising either the legitimacy of his philosophical exploration, or the actual and potential contributions that his studies have made and will make. This overview of Corbin's life and work provides a promontory from which to judge Corbin's potential contribution to Babi and Baha'i studies. Before proceeding however, a word on Corbin's attitude to the Babi and Baha'i religions is in order

Corbin states his position on the Babi-Baha'i Faith in several places. One of the clearest of these occurs in an important Eranos article dealing largely with Shaykhism, titled the 'Morphology of Shi'ite Spirituality'.¹⁹ In it Corbin dwells on the Shaykhi vision of simultaneous, hierarchical realms of being that receive and manifest the effulgences (*tajalliyat*) of God in accordance with their own degree. In the same way that the human body exists simultaneously in the mineral, vegetable and animal realms, the human soul exists simultaneously in a hierarchy of spiritual dimensions. Corbin, inspired by the work of Victor Zuckerkandl, uses the analogy of different octaves in which the same melody is played simultaneously. The reality of the Imams, Shaykh Ahmad explains, originates and belongs in these spiritual realms. The occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the Promised One of Shi'i Islam, which Corbin describes as 'the fundamental idea of Shi'ism', refers, in Shaykhism, to his existence in that suprasensible spiritual dimension, and the mysterious cities of Jabulqa and Jabulsa allude to these higher spiritual realms. The occultation of the Twelfth Imam constitutes for Corbin the driving force of Shi'i spirituality, nowhere more so than in Shaykhism. Shaykhism spiritualised Shi'i eschatology, developing, in Corbin's

¹⁷ For an overview of the critique of Corbin in the scholarly literature, see J. Vahid Brown, 'A Counter History of Islam: Ibn al-'Arabi within the Spiritual Topography of Henry Corbin', *Journal of the Ibn 'Arabi Society* 32 (March 2003) 45-65. For more in depth critiques see Hamid Algar, 'The Study of Islam: The Work of Henry Corbin', *Religious Studies Review* 6:2 (April 1980) 85-91, and Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*. A balanced assessment may be found in Charles C. Adams, 'The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin', in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (ed. Richard C. Martin, Oxford: Oneworld, 2001) 119-150. There was a colloquium held in Paris in 2001 on Henri Corbin.

¹⁸ Adams, 'The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin', 139.

¹⁹ 'Pour une morphologie de la spiritualité Shi'ite', *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 29 (1960) 57-107.

words, ‘a veritable phenomenology of the *ghaybat*, the occultation, the realm of the invisible’ and opening the way to two possible resolutions to the chiliastic expectations associated with the return of the Hidden Imam. These interpretive alternatives came to constitute the dilemma facing the Shaykhi community at the death of Siyyid Kazim. At the crux of this dilemma lies the Shaykhi perspective on communion with the Imam. Shaykhism had its genesis in Shaykh Ahmad’s experiences of spiritual attainment to the presence of the Imams by means of dreams and visions. For Shaykh Ahmad, the journey to the Imams involved not a horizontal, but a vertical, journey of consciousness into the higher realms of spiritual awareness, where the reality of the Imam had its locus. Shaykh Ahmad’s ascent into the realms of consciousness to reach the presence of the Twelfth Imam may also be regarded as the descent of the Imam to the heart of Shaykh Ahmad. Thus the possibility of a spiritualised interpretation of the promised return of the Imam, preserving the *ghaybat* intact (i.e. not entailing his physical appearance in the world or the instauration of a particular social order), was opened up. This was to be Corbin’s interpretation, shaped in significant measure by the thought of the Sarkar Aqa (the leadership title of the Kirmani branch of the Shaykhi order) in the 1950s and 1960s. The alternative was that a uniquely pure soul could come to manifest the spiritual reality of the Hidden Imam in his own being so fully as to become the vehicle for the physical manifestation of the Qa’im (the Twelfth Imam) in this world, in turn opening up the possibility of his subsequent and subordinate reflection within the mirror-like community of believers that recognised his advent. This was the interpretive avenue that led Shaykhi students to embrace the Bab, and opened up the way for the Bab’s highest claim to be the Point of Manifestation in this world of the Primal Will Itself, the primordial Intermediary between God and His creation. For Corbin, this interpretation represented a negation of the *ghaybat*, and thus of the cycle of inward meaning and inward realisation, which to him constituted a negation of the very premises of the spiritual philosophy of Shi’ism:

If the Imam, first and last Theophany, is today the Hidden Imam, this is not a situation stemming from an external event taking place suddenly, on a certain day, in the past. The date of the death of the last *nā’ib*²⁰ marks merely a staging point . . . It is men that have veiled themselves from the Imam, that is, have rendered themselves incapable of seeing him, have paralysed the organs of theophanic perception, perception of the *dimensio mystica*. Hence neither the Imam nor his people can show themselves, declare themselves publicly, outwardly and unveiled. Such an epiphany would presuppose humanity’s possession of a perceptive organ such that the Imam and his people might show themselves and, rendered visible by such an organ, be recognised through it. In fact, in its current state, and for whatever reason, humanity is deprived to such an extent of an organ of this kind, that any public declaration reclaiming the station of Bab to the Imam, let alone that of the Imam himself, can only be an imposture – an imposture against which the Imam himself warned all his followers, in his last message to his last *nā’ib*.

. . . For this reason this manifestation [of the Imam and his invisible Companions] remains a secret, or at any rate the privilege and personal testimony of whoso is thus favoured; it legitimates no pretensions to a collective recognition . . . The consequences go very far: whoever would proclaim himself publicly to be the Bab of the Imam, would place himself *eo*

²⁰ The last living representative of the 12th Imam according to Shi’ism.

ipso outside the Shi'ite sodality, since he would profane the fundamental secret, violate the *ghaybat* . . . It would mean the destruction of the gestalt of time, as monstrous as the destruction of a musical form by its *intempestivo* interruption. It is for this reason that Babism (whatever other interest it might engender, and which captured the attention of Gobineau and of E. G. Browne) cannot but appear, on this decisive point, as the negation of Shaykhism; it requires considerable inattention or philosophical inexperience to judge otherwise.²¹

Corbin, more than perhaps any other scholar before or since, captured in his writings the philosophical mood of Iran on the eve of the Bab's declaration. The writers he studied, the themes he highlighted, touched the very fabric of the philosophical language of early Qajar Iran. The fact that the *terminus ad quem* of his philosophical exploration of Persia was Shaykhism is highly significant. No other western scholar before or since has engaged with Shaykhism in such depth or with such persistence. As Todd Lawson has explained, 'he was the only person to really take the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad seriously (at least in the twentieth century). He was attracted to Shaykh Ahmad because he saw in his thought the logical culmination of a long and rich philosophical history. What was this history? Very briefly and at the risk of offending professional philosophers in the audience, Corbin read the history of Western philosophy as a tragedy. He saw in Islamic philosophy a kind of salvation.'²² From the beginning of his research into Islam in the 1940s to the last decade of his life in the 1970s, Corbin returned again and again to the insights of Shaykhism.

In this he showed himself more in touch with the intellectual world of Persia in the first half of the 19th century than with that of 20th-century Islamics. For early Qajar Iran and Corbin were agreed on considering Shaykhi thought of considerable significance, and in regarding Shaykhism's central questions – what Corbin described as 'a phenomenology of the occultation' of the Twelfth Imam – as of critical importance. In contrast, contemporary scholars failed to pick up the baton from Corbin, judging Shaykhism to be peripheral and transient – philosophical ephemera. For this reason Corbin, more than perhaps any other western Iranologist, can assist Baha'i scholars in appreciating the philosophical sub-text, the 'substratum' to cite Davudi, of the language of the Baha'i revelation. Corbin captures the questions and concerns that gave rise, in the form of answers and responses, to the distinctive articulation of the Bab and to a lesser extent Baha'u'llah's thought. Corbin, in other words, powerfully evokes the most immediate intellectual contexts for the emergence of the Babi-Baha'i revelation.

It is inevitable that as Baha'i scholarship evolves, the words of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i and Siyyid Kazim Rashti, whom Shoghi Effendi referred to as 'Twin Luminaries',²³ will be rescued from their relative oblivion, and their ideas will be harnessed to accentuate previously hidden or dimly heard tonalities in the melody of the Baha'i writings. If an understanding of Islam is said by Shoghi Effendi to be indispensable for an informed understanding of the Baha'i teachings, then within Islam, it follows that nowhere would this

²¹ Corbin, 'Pour une morphologie de la spiritualité Shi'ite', *Eranos Jahrbuch* 29 (1960) 85-86 (my translation).

²² Todd Lawson, 'Henry Corbin and the Spiritual foundations of Culture', unpublished workshop notes, Association of Baha'i Studies, Ottawa, 1988. See also Lawson, 'Coincidentia Oppositorum in the Qayyum al-Asma', *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies*, 5:1, January 2001 (<http://h-net2.msu.edu/~bahai/>).

²³ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980) 101.

prove more so than in Islam's exposition by the 'twin harbingers' of the Bab's Revelation.²⁴ When the time comes for such systematic study of early Shaykhi thought, the following works by Henry Corbin will prove indispensable:

- *L'école shaykhie en théologie shî'ite*, Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes-Études (Sorbonne), Section des sciences religieuses, 1960-1961
- 'L'École Shaykhie', *En Islam Iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, volume 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pages 205-300
- *Terre Célèste et Corps de Resurrection de l'Iran mazdeen à l'Iran Shi'ite* Paris, 1960, translated by N. Pearson as *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Princeton, 1977, especially chapters 2, 9-11
- Mulla Sadra, *Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques (Kitâb al-Mashâ'ir)*, (includes Shaykh Ahmad's commentary thereon), tr. Henry Corbin, Bibliothèque Iranienne, volume 10. Tehran; Paris: A. Maisonneuve, 1964
- 'Face de Dieu et Face de L'Homme', *Eranos Jahrbuch*, volume XXXVI (1967), pages 165-227
- 'Pour une morphologie de la spiritualité Shî'ite', *Eranos Jahrbuch*, volume XXIX (1960), pages 57-107.
- 'De l'Épopée héroïque à l'Épopée mystique', *Eranos Jahrbuch*, volume XXXV (1966), pages 177-239

Beyond Corbin's researches in Shaykhism, Corbin's entire corpus, as indicated earlier, is suffused with themes, terminology and ideas that run through the Baha'i writings and are in very early stages of exploration in Baha'i studies. Corbin's work serves as a genealogical map of such terms and ideas, linking them to writers, texts and traditions that illuminate their meaning and enrich their allusions. Crucial among the vast number of relevant concepts explored in depth by Corbin is the concept of Manifestation of God. Juan Cole's ground-breaking monograph on the subject merely scratched the surface of the valuable material to be found in Corbin. Again and again the latter explores and expounds on this theme, in all four volumes of *En Islam Iranien*, in his monographs, in several of his Eranos submissions, demonstrating how rooted this concept is in *bâtinî* or gnostic Imamology. A detailed exploration of Corbin's work on this subject is certain to yield new and powerful insights into the appropriation and reformulation of this concept in the writings of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. Similar explorations may be fruitfully pursued in relation to other foundational Baha'i theological concepts, such as progressive revelation, to which Corbin

²⁴ In an as yet untranslated tablet Baha'u'llah, referring to Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kazim, declares that only two souls truly appreciated the purpose of Muhammad after the setting of the Star of the Imamate (i.e. occultation of the Twelfth Imam) in the year 260 AH (cited in Ishraq-Khavari, *Rahîq-i Makhtûm*, Tehran: Mu'assisih Matbû'ât Amrî, 130 BE/1973, 2:763; I am grateful once more to Dr Fananapazir for the reference). In his *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988, 120), Baha'u'llah also affirms: 'The followers of Shaykh-i-Ahsa'i (Shaykh Ahmad) have, by the aid of God, apprehended that which was veiled from the comprehension of others, and of which they remained deprived.'

devotes major attention in his examinations of prophetic cycles within Isma'ilism as within Twelver Shi'ism.

With the notable exception of Dr Todd Lawson's works, Corbin's extensive studies on the eschatology of the Hidden Imam in Shaykhism have been insufficiently used in historical studies examining the Bab's claims in the context of his Shaykhi milieu.²⁵ Typically, one finds citations of *En Islam Iranien* and his monograph on Shaykhism, but seldom, if ever, does one see references to the three Eranos articles (not counting those that appeared in book form subsequently, in such works as *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*), which devote major sections to Shaykhi thought.²⁶

Beyond the philosophical and cultural understandings of the Babi-Baha'i Faiths that familiarity with Corbin's writings promises, they also offer a rich source of literary references for words and allusions in the Baha'i writings. In the dispensation of Baha'u'llah, for instance, 'Abdu'l-Baha states that the believers in Baha'u'llah attain the station of the prophets of Israel who are not endowed with constancy.²⁷ Corbin, in his *Histoire de la Philosophie islamique*, identifies a source that states in very similar terms that the Imams after Muhammad occupy the station of the same ancient Jewish prophets. Other symbols, images and concepts whose genealogy may be explored with the aid of Corbin include the analogy of the mirror for the Manifestation of God and the symbolism of Sinai, of mount Qaf, of the Throne, of veils and of heavens. The concepts of the unity of all the prophets, the Seal of the Prophets, the Countenance of God, the Maiden, the worlds of God and the notion of spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*) and of the Covenant of *Alast*. Alchemical and colour symbolisms are also given substantial treatment, as are significant *hadīth* and *akhbār* cited in the Baha'i writings.

Why is such genealogy important? Clearly, it illuminates the context and allusions of many Baha'i texts, while also providing opportunities to appreciate the originality and power of the Bab's and Baha'u'llah's transformation of a rich intellectual and spiritual legacy. Evidently there are pitfalls. Dr. Nader Saiedi, in his seminal study of Baha'u'llah's thought,²⁸ warned against over-simplistic readings of Baha'i texts that reduce their meaning to the discourse and understanding of his contemporaries and predecessors. As he points out, such exercises risk distorting the meaning of texts that, while drawing on time-honoured concepts, give them altogether new and revolutionary meanings, that can best be apprehended with reference to keys found within the writings of Baha'u'llah themselves, and not in their surroundings. As Baha'u'llah declared most emphatically: 'Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men.'²⁹

²⁵ See especially the unpublished PhD dissertation of Todd Lawson, 'The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Alī Muhammad, the Bab', (Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Canada, July, 1987) where Lawson states 'I have relied heavily on the works of Henry Corbin. Corbin's contribution to the understanding of Iranian Islam, has provided, in many instances, the only source of information on many of the more obscure problems which the Bab's *tafsīr* contains.' (17) Lawson's seminal work provides a good indication of the gems awaiting the scholar who delves into the Corbin corpus.

²⁶ Cf. *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 29 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960) 57ff.; vol. 35 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1966) 177ff.; vol. 36 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1967) 165ff.

²⁷ Cited in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahā'u'llāh* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1991) 112.

²⁸ Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2000) 41-5.

²⁹ *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa, Israel: Baha'i World Centre 1992) 56. Also: 'Through the movement of Our Pen of glory We have, at the bidding of the omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency' (*Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh*, Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988, 84). And again, 'Every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a mother letter, and every

Nevertheless, to ignore the importance of previous thinkers, and contemporary questions, in shaping the language of Baha'u'llah's Revelation would be to miss the powerful manner in which Baha'u'llah preserves and transmits the collective wisdom of mankind, and the manner in which he generates aesthetic and spiritual effects by drawing on the rich literary, historical, philosophical and mystical heritage of the Middle East. Again, Baha'u'llah asserts: 'The highest essence and most perfect expression of whatsoever the peoples of old have either said or written hath, through this most potent Revelation, been sent down from the heaven of the Will of the All-Possessing, the Ever-Abiding God.'³⁰

Even more clearly, Baha'u'llah explains the relationship of his religion to the thought of past ages in the following passage:

If it be said that all things (*kull*) were hidden and concealed (*mastūr wa maknūn*) in the Book of God and, in the Manifestation of the Point of the Bayan – may the spirit of all being be his sacrifice! – the countenances of meanings (*ma'ānī*) heretofore hidden in the chambers of divine Words (*kalimāt*) came forth from behind their veils, then this utterance is the indubitable truth (*ḥaqqun lā rayba fīhi*). If it be said that in the past the meanings were mentioned in summary (*ijmāl* – abstract, summary, abridged, synopsis) and it is now that the interpreter (*mubayyin*) and expounder (*mufaṣṣil*) has come, this utterance is also true and no doubt attacheth thereunto. Again if it be said that all that has appeared (*ẓāhir*) in this new wondrous Manifestation has not been there before (*na-būdih*) and everything is a new creation, this manner of utterance is also correct and accurate (*saḥīḥ wa tamām*) for if the One True God – glorified be His remembrance (*dhikr*) – speaks a Word – a Word which all peoples have been speaking from time immemorial – nevertheless that Word is new, were ye to ponder this theme in depth (*tatafakkarūn*) . . .³¹

Finally, not only may Corbin's work potentially assist in our intellectual grasp of the teachings of Baha'u'llah, but, through a deeper appreciation of the allusiveness and philosophical richness of his writings, it might lead to a more intense aesthetic experience of Baha'u'llah's words, adding layers of meaning that are not immediately apparent from a surface reading of the English translation.

word uttered by Him Who is the Well Spring of Divine Revelation is a mother word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth.' (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh*, Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976, 142).

³⁰ Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* 95.

³¹ Baha'u'llah, *Alvāḥ-i Mubārakah-yi ḥaḍrat-i Baha'u'llah shāmil-i iqtidārāt va chand lawḥ-i digār* (Bombay 1310/1893) 86-87. I am grateful to Khazeh Fananapazir for this reference and provisional translation.