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Alternative Orientalism: Henry Corbin's "Iranian Islam" as European Nostalgia[1]

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Abstract: Henry Corbin (1903–1978), through his extensive contributions to Islamic and Iranian studies, introduced a paradigm shift in modern Western scholarship on Iran and Islam. As a counternarrative to classical Orientalism's relegation of Islamic societies, Corbin's construction of "Iranian Islam" generated a comprehensive body of knowledge that valorized Iran as a model for the West. He depicted Iran as an exceptionally continuous tradition that preserved mystical and philosophical practices from pre-Islamic times, assimilated foreign influences, and resisted the nihilism of modernity. This sophisticated image of Iran as uniquely spiritual and intellectual was celebrated by makers of Iranian nationalism. Yet, I argue that Corbin's narrative of Iranian religious history ultimately constitutes another Eurocentric account of the Orient. Instead of disparaging the "Orient" to elevate the West, Corbin recast the Orient as the repository of an alternative future – a projection of the West's own lost past to which it might return.

Keywords: Henry Corbin, Orientalism, Iranian Nationalism, Iranian Islam

As Nikki R. Keddie observes, a form of cultural identity – arguably closer to the modern notion of nationalism than that found in any other Muslim or Middle Eastern society – had long existed within the loosely defined realm of Iran, centuries before the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911).[2] Yet the intellectual and socio-political transformations of the years preceding the Constitutional Revolution were pivotal in shaping the eventual emergence of a modern, centralized Iranian nation-state. Under Reza Shah (r. 1925–1941), the state not only consolidated its administrative apparatus but also institutionalized a monolithic national identity – one closely tied to a national tradition of monarchy[3] and to the historical narrative of Iran's persistence as a distinct political and cultural entity.[4]

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2. Nikki R. Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan, 1796–1925* (Mazda Publishers, 1999), 61–62.

3. Gheissari has noted the significance of the dynastic name chosen by Reza Shah – *Pahlavi* – as a deliberate reference to the ancient language of the pre-Islamic Sassanian era (Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (University of Texas Press, 1998), 46).

4. Regarding the formation of Iranian national identity and its relation with Islamic, ancient Iranian, and European ideas and practices, several significant works have been published in recent decades. In *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*, St. Antony's Series (Palgrave, 2001), Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi challenges Eurocentric and Orientalist frameworks of nationalism by examining alternative histories of "Persianness." His analysis focuses on Persian texts and their networks of production in India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and on how religion informed conceptions of Iranian nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Afshin Marashi's *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870–1940* (University of Washington Press, 2008), turns to the transition from the late Qajar period to the early Pahlavi era, emphasizing the rise of secular

Among the modern ideas that inspired this new social and political fervour was the emergence of modern historiography, which presented a radically revised understanding of Iran's past. This newly articulated past contrasted sharply with the narratives transmitted through classical Persian historical literature. Premodern historiography often combined mythical accounts of pre-Islamic history – sometimes regarded primarily as literary creations – with records of historical events. A recurrent feature of these works was the amalgamation of Islamic and pre-Islamic history; for example, Zarathushtra was at times identified with Abraham, portrayed as a disciple of the patriarch, or associated with other Biblical figures.[5] In contrast, the modern narrative of Iranian pre-Islamic history, reconstructed in accordance with European academic historiographical methods, conveyed to Iranians that they were not merely a contemporary nation but had been a continuous political and cultural entity throughout history.[6] Even facing the harshest tempests of history, the enduring "Iranianness" of the nation was now depicted as preserved through the assimilation of foreign peoples into the civilizational power of the Iranian spirit. One exception, however, was the Arab-Muslim conquest of Iran, which was represented as a cataclysmic rupture. The writings of Iranian modernist intellectuals, from the onset of the Constitutional Revolution, are replete with elegiac reflections on this loss.[7] A particularly telling example comes from the writings of Shaykh Ebrahim Zanjani (1853–1934), an influential Shi'a clergyman and a leader of the Constitutional Revolution. Reflecting on historical conflicts among nations, he wrote:

> This type of invasion and dominance of one people over another […] has occurred many times in history, as has happened in the history of Iran several times. However, nothing has ever occurred comparable to the attack of the Muslims and Arabs on the Sassanians, which would annihilate all

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nationalism as a new locus of political power that displaced premodern conceptions of sacred authority (5). His discussion of institutional development, particularly in education (chapters 3–4), and the reshaping of urban space, highlights the interplay of religion and national identity in the construction of Iranian nationhood (80, 90). Ali M. Ansari's *The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, 40 (Cambridge University Press, 2012), argues that Iranian nationalism drew heavily on intellectual engagements with the Enlightenment. In the second chapter, he identifies a striking point of continuity between Mohammad Reza Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini: both claimed forms of esoteric religious legitimacy rooted in Iran's religious history. Ansari notes that by juxtaposing "religion" with "constitutionalism," Iranian thinkers invoked antithetical traditions, one implying a Divine Right monarchy with broad interpretive authority and the other gesturing toward constitutional limitation – an ambiguity that, in some respects, prefigured the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* more than the constitutional monarchy envisioned in 1906. David N. Yaghoubian, in *Ethnicity, Identity, and the Development of Nationalism in Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2014), examines how nationalist discourse mobilized both religious and ethnic minorities, particularly in moments of conflict with an external Other (17, 27). Farzin Vejdani's *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) explores how education and print culture shaped narratives linking nationalism, Islam – especially Shiʿism – and ancient Iran (22–28, 67–70, 82–91). Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, in *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (Columbia University Press, 2016), likewise underscores the complex interplay of religion, race, and historical imagination in the consolidation of Iranian national identity (2–3). Marashi's *Nationalizing Iran* further demonstrates that the embedding of modern national identity began as early as the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (1848–1896). Taken together, these studies show that the construction of Iranian identity was shaped not only by efforts to reconcile Islam, ancient Iran, and European intellectual currents but also by tensions between attempts to disassociate and to integrate these components into a coherent nationalist project.

5. For a comprehensive list of such confusions, see Mohammad Mo'in, *Mazdayasnā va Ta'sīr-e Āan Dar Adabiyyāt-e Parsī* (Tehran University Press, 1947), 83–101.

6. On the centrality of such narratives on continuity, see Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 142–143.; Vejdani, *Making History in Iran*, 143–144.

7. See Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 4, 95–97.

> their heritage from the preceding generations, their history, and everything with which they had spent centuries and consolidated their foundations to such an extent […]. Never has a big calamity like the takeover by Arabs and Muslims occurred to Iran decimating all the heritage of the past.[8]

As a consequence of this tragic-nostalgic dimension, Iranian nationalism, from its early stages, generated an obsessive demand for a narrative of Iranianness that would fulfill a triple function:
First, this narrative needed to preserve the continuity of Iranianness both before and after the Arab-Muslim conquest. Without this continuity, Iranian identity would either have been impossible (if Iranianness had not survived the invasion) or not have been ancient (if it had not constituted the continuation of the pre-invasion identity).

Second, to account for the historical predominance of Islam in Iran while also asserting the Iranian contribution to the development of Islamicate culture and civilization, the narrative had to specify a set of traits that defined Iranians as Muslims. Iranians had to be imagined as sufficiently similar to other Muslims to legitimize their Islamic identity.

Third, however, Iranians could not be portrayed as too similar to other Muslims. Although Iran was a majority-Muslim nation and had made significant contributions to Islamicate culture and civilization, other Muslims – particularly the surrounding Arab nations – were, in J. Z. Smith's terms, the "proximate others" of the Iranian nation.[9] Consequently, the narrative of Iranianness had to emphasize distinctions that made Iranians sufficiently different from the broader Muslim world.[10]

This article provides a critical reading of the oeuvre of one of the most influential intellectual figures associated with Iranian nationalism: the French philosopher and orientalist Henry Corbin (1903–1978), whose work articulated a sophisticated vision of Iran's religious, philosophical, and national identity and left a lasting imprint on the country's political and ideological formations.[11] In addition to the erudite and creative synthesis of religious and philosophical studies manifested in his work, Corbin has also been praised for countering the Orientalist approach to Islam. These admirations do not remain restricted to his erudite and insightful defiance of the Orientalist narrative of Islamic philosophy as simply a mediator whose task was to maintain ancient Greek philosophy through the Middle Ages, as Herman Landolt has pointed out.[12] Beyond this, in van den Bos's view, his project has been acclaimed as one in which the Orientalist is

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8. Ebrahim Zanjani, *Sarguzahti Zindigiyi Man*, ed. Gholamhossein Mirzasaleh (Nima Verlag, 1999), 240.
9. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 258–259.
10. See Juan R. I. Cole, "Marking Boundaries, Marking Time: The Iranian Past and the Construction of the Self by Qajar Thinkers," *Iranian Studies* 29, no. 1–2 (1996): 35–36.
11. For an organized overview of the ideological appropriations of Henry Corbin's intellectual legacy in Iran, see Ahmad Bostani, "Henry Corbin's Oriental Philosophy and Iranian Nativist Ideologies," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 997; and Ahmad Bostani, "Henry Corbin and Political Islam: 'Iranian Islam' in the Aftermath of the 1979 Revolution," in *New Perspectives on Henry Corbin*, ed. Hadi Fakhoury (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025). Bostani presents Corbin as mainly passively amenable to political appropriation by intellectuals and ideologues seeking to articulate a nativist ideology prior to the Revolution (see his 2021 article) and an Islamist ideological framework in its aftermath (see his 2025 book chapter). Same is the position of van den Bos, who views the political capacity of Cobrin's work in the posterior turn it took after his death, toward a case illustrating how "non-political and transhistorical definitions of religiosity serve exterior and temporal purposes." See Matthijs van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in Iran, from the Late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic* (Brill, 2002), 22, 35–44. This interpretation may be supplemented by Ali Mirsepassi's account of Corbin's more direct engagement with the Iranian court and state; see Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 116–118.
12. Hermann Landolt, "Henry Corbin, 1903–1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 3 (1999): 484–485.

"neither 'morally' nor 'existentially' (as Said had it) distanced. On the contrary, it was Corbin's distance taken from 'the West' which enabled the confluence of interests in 'the East' and which made for his success."[13] Beyond a challenge to Orientalism, some scholars have gone even as far as describing Corbin's work as "reverse Orientalism."[14] In its critique, this article will argue that Corbin's lifelong engagement with the religious history of Iran as a unique and continuous intellectual and spiritual tradition ultimately constitutes a Eurocentric project. This project, I contend, was oriented toward a deeply European-centred perspective.

In light of the preceding literature critiquing Corbin's project, particularly with regard to the Eurocentrism of his work, I first need to address what this article adds to the conversation in this regard.

The Contribution of this Article

This article does not claim to initiate the critique of the Eurocentric dimensions of Corbin's scholarship on Iranian Islam, as significant scholarship has already addressed this issue. A major contribution advancing this critique has been put forward by Steven M. Wasserstrom,[15] who has shed critical light on Corbin's academic career alongside those of two other central figures of the Eranos circle, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982). A focal point of his critique is the manner in which these three "European men, who mastered 'non-European' religious studies and who left the continent itself, were nonetheless still European in certain fundamental respects."[16] It would, of course, contravene the basic demands of a historically grounded approach to expect any scholar to think beyond the bounds of their own historical situatedness. Acknowledging this point, Wasserstrom nevertheless demonstrates the ways in which Corbin's understanding of Islam ultimately took the form of a theosophy shaped by an intellectual system that was primarily "German in provenance."[17] In light of the theme of this special issue, this observation helps explain why Corbin's "Iranian Islam" was embraced by proponents of Iranian nationalism, particularly in its dislocative dimension, as further evidence that Iran properly belonged with the European nations – most notably its "German twin."[18]

Mirsepassi builds on Wasserstrom's critique to argue that Corbin's project constructed an understanding of Islam that marginalized its historical, social, and institutional dimensions, reducing them to a narrow framework of "legalism."[19] In his account, the spiritual hermeneutics Corbin proposed effectively displaced Islam as a lived historical tradition, replacing it with a form of New Age spirituality closely aligned with his reading of medieval and modern Christian mystical figures and movements. According to Mirsepassi, Corbin's project thus amounted to the construction of a spiritual cosmopolitanism in which the teachings and experiences of diverse traditions – Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam – could be reconciled and mobilized as an antidote to modern materialism.[20]

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13. Matthijs van den Bos, "Transnational Orientalism. Henry Corbin in Iran," *Anthropos* 100, no. 1 (2005): 118–119.
14. Mark Corrado, "Orientalism in Reverse: Henry Corbin, Philosophy, and the Critique of the West" (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2004).
15. Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton University Press, 1999).
16. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 10.
17. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 173.
18. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 134.
19. Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 114–115.
20. Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 140–142.

What does this article, then, add to this critique? I will argue that the problem of Eurocentricity in Corbin's oeuvre is still more fundamental. Corbin's project, I contend, was not only a Eurocentric study of Islam or of Iranian religious history in the sense of addressing its object from a European perspective, and applying local European questions and methodological assumptions to a non-European phenomenon. It was, rather, driven by a deeply European-centred perspective and a nostalgic alternative history of Europe: a historically nonexistent construct created by the imagination of the European savant to serve as the extension of a *temps perdu* that Christian Europe should have maintained, but, from a point in its history onward, fell short of pursuing. In other words, it is not a study of Islam or Iran, but a narrative of a possible Europe. In this view, what makes "Iranian Islam" worthy of study is that, while Europe lost a system of ontology and epistemology to the temptations of modern historicity, "Iranian Islam" maintained that system, and kept it alive to our times. Very close to this latter point is Hadi Fakhoury's study of the impact of Orthodox Christian traditions, Russian and Greek, in the work of Henry Corbin in the early years of his studies on Suhrawardī. Fakhoury shows that Corbin's years in Istanbul were years of extending his earlier interest in Russian Orthodox tradition to Greek Orthodox tradition, or as Fakhoury calls it, "romantic Byzantinism," through textual studies as well as developing contacts with the Greek Orthodox community.[21] For Corbin in his Istanbul years, the Byzantine mind manifested itself among the Muslim mystics in the East.[22] His own idea of "Iranian Islam" in this era was shaped by a form of Hellenism paralleling "Iranism," in which "Suhrawardī and his confrères are, above all, Greeks who speak Persian or Arabic."[23] My argument here diverges from Fakhoury's in showing that this was not merely a feature of his Istanbul years, as Fakhoury emphasizes. I will show that this approach to Islam was present early in his years as a European Christian intellectual and remained with him until the end.

Furthermore, I will argue that in spite of his reverential engagement with Iranian traditional and modern scholars, Corbin's narrative of "Iranian Islam" effectively deprives Iranians of agency in composing their own history and the fundamental capacity to comprehend and engage with it. In the final analysis, I argue, the Iranians' role within Corbin's framework of Iranian Islam is that of an indigenous informant subaltern to the European. Corbin's approach to the study of Iranian Islam appears to provide an antithesis to classical Orientalism, where, according to the Saidian critique, the Orient, particularly the Islamic Orient, is portrayed with a variety of negative features to set the West, in contrast, as the progressive and positive side of history.[24] However, I will suggest, as a combined effect of the aforementioned components, rather than an alternative to Orientalism, Corbin's discourse on Iranian Islam presents an alternative Orientalism, still centred around an ideal, albeit currently lost, European self-image. In this version, the Oriental object is constructed as a desirable image that, by preserving the lost treasures of the Helleno-Christian West, can serve as the model for retrieving a lost golden past of Europe.

Henry Corbin: A European Philosopher Facing the Orient

Radically invested in the esoteric domains of philosophy and mysticism, Corbin published intensely technical writings[25] about the intellectual and mystical tradition in Islam with a focus on Iran, as well as on

21. Hadi Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin and Russian Orthodox Theology (1939-1942)," in *New Perspectives on Henry Corbin*, ed. Hadi Fakhoury (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 68–70.
22. Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin and Russian Orthodox Theology," 74–75.
23. Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin and Russian Orthodox Theology," 75.
24. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (Vintage Books, 1978), 40.
25. For a comprehensive bibliography of his publications, see Christian Jambet, dir., *Henry Corbin* (Édition de l'Herne, 1981), 345–360. The online resource *Association des amis de Henry et Stella Corbin* (https://amiscorbin.com)

the phenomenology of religion. Culminating in the four-volume work *En islam iranien* (1971–1972), his scholarship was received by Iranian nationalist audiences as an attempt to "manifest the continuities and associations between Islamic Iran and the ancient past of Iran."[26] Yet Corbin's contribution extended further: the distinct continuum of Iranianness he delineated also established an intellectual and spiritual kinship between Iran and Europe. The largely Francophile architects of Iranian nationalism, who, as Zia-Ebrahimi has argued, were preoccupied with a sense of dislocation – believing that the Iranian nation belonged culturally with Europe rather than with its geographical neighbours[27] – could not have received a more authentically European affirmation. A French philosopher and Orientalist sought to align the intellectual concerns and practices of the Iranian nation with those of their European kin.

What Corbin found in Iranian Islam was more than a philosophical school. Rather than describing this tradition solely in terms of philosophy or mysticism, he understood it as a synthesis of both. Accordingly, he preferred to characterize this trajectory not merely through the lenses of philosophy or theology but as theosophy – a translation, he suggested, of the Arabic term *ḥikma ilāhiyya* (literally, "divine wisdom") that, in turn, mirrored the Greek word *sophia* – employed by the contributors to this tradition.[28] But what drew this French philosopher to a devoted study of the theosophy of "Iranian Islam"?

The isolated European academic who came to discover his spiritual homeland of choice[29] in Iran was first drawn to the history of Iranian philosophy and mysticism through his study of medieval European philosophy. Frustrated with what he described as the nihilism of European philosophies transitioning into the modern era, he found a new philosophical path through a conversation with the prominent scholar of Islamic mystical traditions, Louis Massignon (1883–1962). In this encounter, in 1927–1928, Massignon handed Corbin a lithographed copy of the magnum opus of Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn Ḥabash al-Suhrawardī (549/1155–587/1191), *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (*Philosophy of Illumination*, or, as Corbin preferred, *Oriental Theosophy*). Following this path, Corbin dedicated his life to the study of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, with a particular focus on Iran. Pursuing this goal, he founded and directed the Département d'Iranologie at the French Embassy in Tehran, held a professorship at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, served as a senior member of the Tehran branch of the McGill University Institute of Islamic Studies, and contributed continuously to the Eranos circle with his lectures on Iran and Islam.[30] His paradigm-shifting[31] and systematic contributions to Islamic studies and *Religionswissenschaft* have been widely acknowledged for bringing numerous Iranian philosophical and mystical figures and texts – including a significant corpus of Shi'i intellectual heritage – from forgotten

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also provides a bibliography with links to Corbin's publicly available writings; however, as of August 20, 2025, it has been inaccessible from the United States.

26. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Yādī Az Henry Corbin va Ta'ammolī Dar Andīshehāyash," in *Yādī Az Henry Corbin*, ed. Shahram Pazouki (Iranian Institute of Philosophy, 2008), 49.

27. Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*, 2–9; 147–168.

28. Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Gallimard, 1964), 8.

29. Henry Corbin, « Post-scriptum bibliographique à un entretien philosophique », dans *Henry Corbin*, dir. Christian Jambet (Éditions de l'Herme, 1981), 46.

30. On the Eranos circle and its role in aligning religion with the demands of a secular Europe, see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*.

31. His oeuvre introduced such a drastic shift of paradigm in the study of Islam that, as Charles J. Adams observes, "Were his methodological leads to be followed, Islamic studies would be reoriented if not revolutionized, and many of us who profess to be historians of religion would undergo a commensurate personal change." See Charles J. Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (University of Arizona Press, 1985), 130.

manuscript archives or marginal positions in Iranian seminaries to the center of the modern study of Islam.[32] Yet a closer examination of his scholarship reveals an atypical trajectory through "Iranian Islam" that began in and ultimately returned to the twentieth-century European philosophical scene.

Iranian Islam as European Nostalgia: The Alternative Future of a Lost European Past

Re-reading Corbin's life and oeuvre in retrospect, it is not difficult to notice a constant penchant for recuperating through Islam a set of regretted elements of pre-modern Europe. This European elegy dawns on the reader from his earliest writings. For instance, in his 1931 review of Martin Plessner's *Die Geschichte der Wissenschaften in Islam*, he recommends particular attention to Islam as a frame of reference for a critical assessment of Europe's present, given Islam's close similarity to "our own medieval culture."[33] What was the source of this sense of loss in Corbin's view of modern Europe in contrast to Islam?

Corbin's view of modern European philosophies diagnosed a disease plaguing all schools of modern Western philosophy. Submission to Cartesian dualism, as he bemoaned, had led to "the incapacity before the dilemma of *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. As a result, a certain nihilism had befallen European philosophies, causing modern Western philosophies to lose any sense of concrete metaphysics.[34] In a conference presentation a year before his death, he thus described the predicament as follows:

> I see the most outstanding symptom of the nihilism that has befallen us in our days in all areas of thought and conscience that have succumbed to Cartesian dualism (trapped in opposing the world of thought to the world of extended substance). It is a grip that makes it so difficult, if not impossible, for us to conceive of a *spiritual body*, a *spiritual matter*.[35]

In contrast to modern Western philosophy, Corbin maintained that the history of Iranian religious thought – from the pre-Islamic period through the Islamic era – preserved within it an ontological principle capable of addressing this problem: the "Imaginal World." This realm, which the sages of Iranian Islam variously described as *hūrqalyā* (the ethereal world) or *iqlīm-i hashtum* (the eighth clime), Corbin rendered into Latin as *mundus imaginalis*. He regarded it as a continuous feature of the Iranian religious and intellectual tradition, originating in pre-Islamic thought and later revived and reformulated by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī in the idiom of Islamic philosophy and mysticism.[36]

As an ontological realm situated between the spiritual and the material, the abstract and the concrete, the Imaginal World provides Iranian mystic-philosophers with a conceptual means of bridging the divide between the subjective and the objective. Within this schema, Being is articulated in three ranks: above lies the spiritual order (*ʿālam al-jabarūt*); below, the material domain in which human existence is situated (*ʿālam al-nāsūt*); and between them, an intermediary world (*ʿālam al-malakūt*), the Imaginal

32. See Daryush Shayegan, *Henry Corbin: penseur de l'islam spirituel* (Albin Michel, 2011), chap. 5.
33. Henry Corbin, "Review of *Die Geschichte der Wissenschaften im Islam als Aufgabe der modernen Islamwissenschaft*, by M. Plessner," *Revue Critique* (December 1931), 541.
34. Corbin, « Post-scriptum bibliographique », 49.
35. Henry Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Éditions de l'Herne, 1981), 252. This is one of the Heideggerian themes that resurface in Corbin's works.
36. For Corbin's elaboration on Suhrawardī's revival of this concept, see Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vol. (Gallimard, 1971), vol. 2.

World.[37] In this intermediate realm, individuated Platonic forms of phenomena not only exist but are also presented to a distinct human cognitive faculty that Corbin, following the Islamic philosophical tradition, identifies as the "Active Imagination."[38] The Imaginal World – where the spiritual becomes material, and the material becomes spiritual – functions, in Corbin's view, as the bridge between subjectivity and objectivity. It is the only locus in which the process of intellection encounters an external referent, a point of objective certainty that may be shared among subjects of intellection and that thus provides the foundation for metaphysics.[39] In Corbin's interpretation, Iranian Islam preserved this mediating sphere, "the place of events that happen in *malakūt*."[40]

In addition to the calamity of Cartesian dualism, Corbin identified a second source of the modern crisis in European thought: the loss of the gnostic dimension. To address this deficiency, he turned to Iranian Islam, which, in his view, had preserved at its core the very element that Christianity had forfeited.[41] Corbin rejected the prevailing tendency in the historiography of religion to confine Gnosticism to early Christianity, instead emphasizing the presence of Jewish, Muslim, and even Buddhist forms of Gnosticism alongside the Christian tradition.[42]

The loss of this gnosis, Corbin argued, has produced consequences extending far beyond the mystical aspirations of particular religious movements. The agnosticism that characterizes much of the modern humanities and social sciences, in his view, stems from the neglect of gnosis, which can only be accessed through a mystical hermeneutics of scripture. Equally complicit are forms of religion reduced to mere legalism and theologies grounded solely in rationalism, both of which, he contended, are themselves agnostic.[43] By contrast, Iranian Islam has preserved a gnostic hermeneutical tradition that finds its fullest articulation in Shiʿi thought. Within the continuum of Iranian Islam, Shiʿism functions as the apex of theosophical inspiration,[44] containing an esoteric gnosis essential to comprehending the teachings of the "Religions of the Book."[45]

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37. To be more precise, as Henry Corbin points out, Suhrawardī's hierarchy of worlds includes four levels: (1) *jabarūt* (the world of pure Intellects); (2) *malakūt* (the world of celestial and human souls); (3) *ʿālam al-mithāl* (the Imaginal World), standing in intermediation between the souls of *Malakūt* and the material entities of *Nāsūt*; and (4) *Nāsūt*/*Mulk*, the material world in which we currently live (Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 297–298; and *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée* [Académie impérial iranienne de philosophie, 1977], 123–124). However, the more widely accepted hierarchy of worlds in the later tradition of "Iranian Islam" was that of Mullā Ṣadrā, who modified Suhrawardī's division by conflating *malakūt* and the *ʿālam al-mithāl* (Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 298).

38. Although Corbin emphasizes the difference between his use of the term as a theosophical concept and earlier uses of it in theories of art and literature, one fact that does not change is that, insofar as it concerns theorizing a religious unity in human history, both terms share the same function. The path for employing "creative imagination" as the transhistorical ground of religious unity in various contexts had already been established by Andrew Lang, the nineteenth-century theorist of literature and religion, who studied the religious aspects of indigenous legends of African tribes. He argued that the source of religious uniformities was not historical development but rather human creative imagination (David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014], 133–136).

39. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 291–295.

40. Corbin, *Philosophie iranienne et philosophie comparée*, 42–43.

41. Henry Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste : de l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shî'ite*, 2e éd. (Buchet/Chastel, 1979), 8.

42. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 1 : xv.

43. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 4 : 206.

44. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 3 : 34–36.

45. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 1 : 137.

The Imaginal World plays a pivotal role in sustaining this gnostic understanding of religion in Iran. Across both pre-Islamic and Islamic eras, it has served as the locus in which the Iranian spirit apprehends the true meaning of scripture, embodied in the figure of the divine guide – known in Shiʿi terminology as the Hidden Imam.[46] It is, ultimately, not the profane time of this world, in history, that the "religious facts"[47] take place and are revealed. These "religious facts" belong, rather, to "hierohistory," the subtle, immaterial time, of the Imaginal World. Corbin's "Iranian Islam" can present Europe with the key to recoup this gnostic element.

Too Old for History: Iran as a Hierohistoric Phenomenon

In Corbin's view, Christianity took its first misstep toward the historicization of religion when it shifted from the Docetism of its early beliefs to a later emphasis on the incarnation. This doctrinal development redirected Christianity's focus from a manifestation of the divine in the material world toward a materialist preoccupation with history.[48] In doing so, it placed historical consciousness at the center of Christian thought, wherein, "from year 1 of the Christian era," God is understood to have entered history. This historical orientation was reinforced by another feature absent from Islam: the Church as the intermediary between God and humanity.[49]

By succumbing to the "perils of History," Christianity, as Corbin saw it, lost its gnostic dimension. Iran, however, remained largely immune to this domination of History, taking refuge instead in hierohistory. As a consequence, "a long pilgrimage through one of these 'religions of the Book,' namely the Shiʿi gnosis in two strands of it (Twelver Imāmī and Ismāʿīlī), leads one back to a Christianity whose place is permanent in the cycle of prophetic religion."[50]

Corbin's resistance to the historicization of religion can be traced to the early stages of his intellectual formation. A persistent skepticism toward approaches that situate religious thought primarily within history appears early in his work and remains a recurrent theme throughout his career. In a 1932 essay, the young Corbin criticized established methodologies for depriving the inquirer of a sense of lived presence by privileging the present as a mere consequence of a pure but lifeless past.[51] The previous year, in a report on the fortieth general congress of the German Christian Students Association, he had expressed his dismay at what he called the "passion for the new matter-of-factness (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), where there is no longer any elaboration of existence in depth, and objects are conceived only as things."[52] In contrast, the twenty-year-old Corbin, serving as the French delegate to the conference, celebrated "the nostalgia of redemption."[53]

This phenomenology entails its own conception of time, which in turn informs a distinct formulation of history. By rejecting the facticity of material embodiment, the question of history becomes

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46. Henry Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardî, Shaykh-ol-Ishrâq (ob. 587/1191)* (Éditions du Courrier, 1946), 44; *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 113.
47. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 151–176. On the associations of his notions of "fait religieux" with the broader tradition of phenomenology of religion, see Shayegan, *Henry Corbin: penseur de l'islam spirituel*, 13.
48. Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton University Press, 1970), 276.
49. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 23; *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism*, 82–84.
50. Corbin, « Post-scriptum bibliographique », 46.
51. Henry Corbin, « Philosophes », *Hic et Nunc,* no. 1 (novembre 1932) : 19–32.
52. Henry Corbin, « La Fédération allemande à Caub – 40e Congrès général de la Christliche Studenten Vereinigung », *Le Semeur*, no. 2 (décembre 1931) : 38–42.
53. Corbin, « La Fédération allemande à Caub », 38–42.

secondary, and the entire scene of events is entrusted to *hierohistory*, which Corbin identifies as the temporal framework of "Iranian Islam." For instance, to counteract the historicization that Christianity underwent following the loss of its early Docetism, Iranian Islam posits that the body of the Imam is not a carnal body but an ethereal one, produced through an alchemical process.[54] This tenet of Shi'i theosophy represents, for Corbin, a central feature of "Iranian Islam," in which Shiʿism emerges as the authentic esoteric form of Islam, "where imamology assumes a function homologous to that of Christological theology."[55]

As an uninterrupted tradition, Iranian Islam cannot be subjected to the profane temporality of history, for it is not the product of a historically contingent synthesis of ideas across successive generations. Within this tradition, each thinker engages with philosophical notions and relations as they are encountered in the Imaginal World; consequently, these philosophers are not bound by a preexisting philosophical tradition.[56]

By removing Iran from the contingencies of historical particularity and framing it as a hierohistorical phenomenon, Corbin renders it capable of serving as an alternative model for Christianity prior to its historicization. In his view, Shiʿism and early Christianity converge in their negation of any secular or social production of history. For both, history is not the result of human actions within the contingent temporal world but rather the external revelation and manifestation of a divine drama, unfolding toward a predetermined and anticipated realization of the ultimate meaning of Being:

> In Islam, Shiʿism defies at the same time past and present with its eschatological waiting while professing that, posterior to the closure of the "legislator prophecy," the religious future (*avenir*) of humanity is not closed. There is still something to wait for, not to say only a future (*futur*) that gives the "present" its meaning, but an irruption of metahistory that makes the unidimensionality of our "historical consciousness" burst. This irruption is the meaning of the advent of the Imam of the Resurrection that many Shiʿi authors expressly identify with the Paraclete announced in the Gospel of John (15:26; 16:13–14). Now, this eschatological waiting was an essential element in early Christianity.[57] Insofar as it has not become a pure verbalism in our times, on its own, it can untie the situation toward which we are inevitably headed, at one moment or another, a comparative spiritual hermeneutics of the Bible and the Qur'an, that is to say, the hermeneutics of the "sacred Book" as it is practiced, never by the literalists or by the rational dogmatists, because for them it is a dead-end, but by those who, on either side, we refer to as mystics or mystic theosophers.[58]

In the development of this cosmic drama, Iran occupies a unique position. The spiritual hermeneutics that enables such an understanding of history has been a defining characteristic – or, more precisely, a vocation – of Iran, to the exclusion of all other nations. While India and Iran share, at least linguistically, a common Indo-Iranian heritage evident in the affinities between Avestan and Sanskrit literatures, Iran possesses a singular element that renders it exceptional, destined to embody this formulation of hierohistory:

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54. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 136–137.
55. Henry Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme : hérmeneutique et soufisme* (Flammarion, 1983), 160.
56. Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton University Press, 1998), 5.
57. Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*, 159.
58. Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*, 159.

> The adventure particular to Iran, or let us rather say its vocation […] was its encounter with Islam, and an Islam that was still very close to its birth. To consider things from an entirely political, external side, we could speak of an Iranian resistance; it has endured for many centuries. But if we consider things in their spiritual dimension, another aspect is uncovered, that is to say, the event that happens in the secret of the souls, in the sincerity of faith that admits no doubt (typified in the personage of Salmān the Persian or Salmān the Pure) and which provided to the message of the last Prophet the plenitude of its mystical meaning.[59]

Iran itself should be understood not as a historical phenomenon with a complex past, but as an exceptional manifestation of hieratic meaning among all nations. Even the origins of Iranian history cannot be located in the ancient land of *Airyanem Vaējah* of the Avesta as a geographic place, for it was originally conceived not as a physical location, but as a hierohistorical idea.[60] It is from this perspective on the meaning of Iran's history that Suhrawardī's Iranism finds a hieratic meaning in the Neoplatonist sense of the word.[61] Suhrawardī's innovation lay in transforming the heritage of Iranian spirituality into more than a mere history. Prior to him, the continuity of Iranian religious thought could only be traced as vestiges in the exoteric historiography of religions, which served primarily to explain:

> The continuity from one Persia to the other […] but they are discussed as one discusses vestiges in the absence of the one who left them. From Shaykh al-Ishrāq on, we are not speaking any more of vestiges to gather but of the imperative presence of the *spiritual fact* that imprinted its vestige on all who succeeded him, that is, the Ishrāqī tradition in Islamic Iran.[62]

For Corbin, European salvation was within reach: it required only the reintegration of two essential elements into European thought, drawn from the precious sources of the uninterrupted tradition he identified as "Iranian Islam." Beyond serving as an intellectual model, the life and work of Suhrawardī provided, in Corbin's account, a historical precedent for such a recovery. Suhrawardī, as Corbin portrayed him, had overcome the obstacles of history to retrieve the ancient heritage of Iranian theosophy and rearticulate it within the conceptual framework of Islamic philosophy. The achievement of Suhrawardī and the later Illuminationists was to liberate Neoplatonism from the constraints that had persisted even among the Muslim Peripatetics, who were never entirely free from them.[63] Yet Corbin's engagement with Suhrawardī simultaneously discloses a particularly revealing instance of the Eurocentrism underlying his construction of "Iranian Islam."

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59. Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*, 166–167.
60. Henry Corbin, *L'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien* (Éditions Présence, Diffusion : librairie de Médicis, 1971), 49–50.
61. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 2 : 81–89.
62. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 2 : 212.
63. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 216–217.

Suhrawardī: A European Discovery

Corbin's intellectual formation within the traditions of European philosophy warrants reflection on the reasons for his decisive turn toward a lifelong engagement with Suhrawardī. In tracing this shift, particular attention must be given to his background as a deeply engaged Heideggerian thinker.[64]

When asked about Heidegger's role in shaping his interest in Suhrawardī, Corbin offered responses that appear inconsistent. He denied that his engagement with Suhrawardī was inspired by Heideggerian inclinations, emphasizing instead that his first works on Suhrawardī were published in 1933 and 1935, following his graduation from the School of Oriental Languages in 1929, whereas his personal encounters with Heidegger occurred only later, in April 1934 and July 1936.[65] Yet the chronological priority of his Suhrawardian publications over his meetings with Heidegger is not especially convincing as a rebuttal of Heidegger's influence, particularly when considered in light of the broader record of Corbin's works. As early as 1931, Corbin had completed the first translation of *Being and Time* into any language, though he later omitted mention of this accomplishment in retrospective accounts of his career.[66] Moreover, he explicitly acknowledged that the fundamental orientation of all his scholarship had been shaped by Heidegger's analysis of the ontological foundations of historical science, especially the notion of a historicity more primordial than the conventional idea of universal History.[67]

It was precisely this more radical freedom from history that ultimately endeared Suhrawardī's ontology to Corbin beyond that of Heidegger: it released Being from what Corbin regarded as the Heideggerian bind of temporality.[68] Through Suhrawardī, Corbin sought to undo the "agnostic" – that is, "not in accordance with gnosis" – separation between thinking and being to which Western thought had consented.[69] Whereas for Heidegger time constitutes "the horizon for all understanding of Being and for

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64. In an account cited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Corbin reflects on the Heideggerian phase of his intellectual life and his passage from Heidegger to the Iranian theosophers: "Ten years ago, when Mr. Corbin and I were in Strasbourg for the first conference on Shiʿism, one day we made an excursion to the top of a beautiful hill that separated France and Germany. He glanced at the hills on the other side of the border and said: 'When I was young, I took this very same path into Germany to meet with Heidegger; however, having discovered Suhrawardī, Mullā Ṣadrā, and the other Iranian theosophers, I no longer need a trip to the other side of this border'" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, « Zendegī va Āsār va Afkār-e Ustād Henry Corbin », dans *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, dir. Seyyed Hossein Nasr [Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Tehran Branch, 1977], 23).

65. « De Heidegger à Sohravardî. Entretien de Henri Corbin avec Philippe Némo », in *Henry Corbin*, dir. Christian Jambet (Éditions de l'Herme, 1981), 23–24; Corbin, « Post-scriptum bibliographique », 135.

66. The bibliographic records of Corbin's works curated by the website of the association *Les Amis de Henry et Stella Corbin* include an interesting note on his publications in 1931: "We expressly remark this point here, that Henry Corbin wished that his first attempt at translation, of which he was dissatisfied, would never figure in his bibliography" ("Bibliography," *Les amis de Henry et Stella Corbin*, accessed March 25, 2022, https://www.amiscorbin.com/en/bibliography/.).

67. « De Heidegger à Sohravardî », 28. Particularly, Corbin's anti-Cartesian point of departure suggests that Iran left an ostensibly Heideggerian impression on his thought. Corbin's objection to Descartes resonates with Heidegger's critique of Descartes' formulation of being as one of the major errors leading to the philosophical predicament of modern Europe, though with an important difference. Prior to Corbin, Heidegger had objected to Descartes for neglecting any philosophical explanation that would bridge the lacuna between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [Harper & Row, 1962], 83–85). Yet there was a significant nuance. As Heidegger saw it, Descartes based his analysis on an axiom inherited from tradition (*Being and Time*, 44) and therefore assumed that the subject of the verb *cogito* simply existed, without further investigating the question of its being.

68. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 428.

69. Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*, 13.

any way of interpreting it,"[70] Suhrawardī offered the possibility of a knowledge of Being grounded in presence – manifested in visionary events within the Imaginal World – which transcends time and bridges the divide between subject and object. Within this ontology of "Iranian Islam," Being is no longer conceived in terms of Heideggerian temporality, which Corbin characterized as "*ekstatikon* [= standing outside of oneself] pure and simple."[71] Instead, the theosophical seeker transcends temporality in the *malakūt* (angelic world), where she encounters her own being in angelic form, along with the true essences of all other entities.

For Corbin, Suhrawardī's Iranian background was not merely a historical contingency. The "martyred Persian prodigy" represented the manifestation of a deeper spiritual disposition of the Iranian spirit. Long before their conversion to Islam, Iranians, in Corbin's view, were already "people of the Book," deeply attuned to the spiritual hermeneutics of scripture through the Avesta, the sacred corpus of Zoroastrianism, which provided a mystical narrative of history. Suhrawardī thus became the pivotal figure who bridged the spiritual hermeneutics of ancient Iran with those of the Abrahamic traditions. For this reason, among the many figures associated with the mystical epic or rhapsody in Persian literature, Suhrawardī is regarded as the reviver of the wisdom of the ancient Persian sages.[72] Through his recovery of pre-Islamic Iranian theosophy, Suhrawardī embodied what Corbin termed the "spiritual vocation of Iran": the task of linking the Abrahamic faiths with the Aryan spirituality articulated in Platonic terms by the Hellenized Magi of Iran.[73]

It is at this point that Corbin's account of Suhrawardī's revival of pre-Islamic Iranian thought becomes most compelling for Iranian nationalism. This project represents the apex of a perceived continuity in the self-identity of the Iranian Muslim, set in distinction from the Arab. Whereas "the Arabs, looking back to their pre-Islamic past, would not find anything but the desert," Iranians, Corbin argued, discover an entire spiritual tradition, given sophisticated philosophical expression in Suhrawardī's work.[74] The Neoplatonic structure of pre-Islamic Iranian thought, as reformulated in Suhrawardī's philosophy, embodied the essence of the "gnosis of Islam," harmonizing with both the metaphysical formulations of Sufism and the traditional teachings of the Shi'i Imams.[75] In "resurrecting" Iranian wisdom in a form compatible with Islam, Suhrawardī played a role comparable to that of Salmān the Persian in linking Iran's spiritual heritage to Islamic teaching:[76] "From him onward, the past is no more what it used to be; time has become reversible, and this is what the word 'resurrection' implies."[77] Suhrawardī thus emerges as the turning point after which philosophy and Sufism become inseparable, woven together "in the high spirituality of Islam."[78]

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70. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 39.
71. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 377.
72. Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*, 166–167.
73. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 2 : 34–35, 4 : 390–391.
74. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 4 : 16–17.
75. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 220.
76. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 2 : 11. For Corbin, Salmān is not only the embodiment of the historical manifestation of Iranian Islam; he is, more profoundly, the figure in whom the spiritual link between being Iranian, discovering the truth of Gnostic Christianity, and ultimately embodying the spiritual aspect of Islam through affiliation with the Shiʿī Imams is revealed. Salmān is, on the one hand, the son of a Mazdean knight who converted to Christianity and later became a follower of Muḥammad upon meeting him. Yet behind this historical narrative, Corbin maintains, Salmān was the human in whom the angel of revelation manifested to Muḥammad, and he became the spiritual adopted son of ʿAlī (Henry Corbin, *Temps cyclique et gnose ismaélienne* [Berg International, 1982], 139–142).
77. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 53–54.
78. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 300.

In a manner well suited to Iranian dislocative nationalism, Corbin underscores the particular significance of the vocation of the Iranian spirit for the European seeker:

> From the outset, we would like to awaken interest in the spiritual situation of these amiable people who have never given up their vocation of being a people of thinkers and poets. We would like to grasp how they intertwined the modern and the traditional in their millennial culture, so far from us in terms of space and so close to us in its soul. So many religious concepts that our West has preserved were taught around nine centuries before the common era by Zarathushtra, the prophet of the Aryans, the herald of Lod-Wisdom, of the world of Archangels, and of the final transfiguration of the world.[79]

For centuries, Iran has served as the stage upon which the drama of Aryan history has unfolded. Iranian thought, articulated and preserved in Pahlavi, Persian, and Arabic, exceeds the limits of national vision, constituting a spiritual world instead.[80] The history of Iran thus appears as a continuum in which Iranian chivalry resisted the Arab conquerors for centuries. Centuries that gave the most extraordinary religious phenomenon time to unfold: gradually, through the interference of multiple and complex aspirations that are clear to the consciences of some, Iranian Shi'ism produced the Islamic Annunciation through devotion to the sacrosanct Imams.[81]Since pre-Islamic times, Iranians, in Corbin's view, had been endowed with distinctive intellectual and spiritual aptitudes that enabled them to cultivate alternative formulations of the European heritage. Not only had they undertaken translations of Greek philosophical works, but by the late Sassanian period, they had also embraced forms of Christianity that the Roman Church would never have tolerated.[82] The proximity between the Iranian and European spirits constitutes, as Steven Wasserstrom has observed, a central element of the "Aryan triumphalism" in Corbin's thought. Corbin's Iran, thus conceived, is "not so much a Middle Eastern nation-state as a post-Nietzschean response to the Death of God."[83] It is precisely this rendering of the religious history of an Aryan nation that preserves Europe's hope for the "rebirth of gods":

> I believe that this imaginal world is the locus of the rebirth of the gods, those of Greek theogony, as well as of Celtic theogony, which, with those of the Greeks and the Iranians, *are the closest to our consciousness*.[84]

With its unique affinity to the European spirit, the continuum of Iran's religious history assumes a paramount role in Corbin's vision of rescuing European thought from the impasse of nihilism. The hope for this salvation lies in the enduring synthesis of philosophy and religion throughout Iran's intellectual history. In Corbin's reading, the same mystical-philosophical ontology continued to inform the inward, intellectual, and spiritual pursuits of the Iranian nation despite the vicissitudes of historical time. The persistence of this

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79. Henry Corbin, « L'Iran, patrie des philosophes et des poètes », dans *L'âme de l'Iran*, dir. G. Conteneau (Albin Michel, 1951), 27.
80. Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie*, 8.
81. Corbin, « L'Iran, patrie des philosophes », 30–31.
82. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 45–46.
83. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 135.
84. "A Letter by Henry Corbin," dated 9 February 1978, published as the "Preface" to David. L. Miller, *The New Polytheism: Rebirth of the Gods and Goddesses* (Spring Publications, 1981), 1–7, quotation at 4, cited in Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 135.

synthesis – of a spiritual and philosophizing nation – offered an alternative future to the lost golden past of European religious and philosophical life.

It thus became crucial for Corbin to theorize this lived and embodied counterargument to modern philosophy and historiography as a successful synthesis of religion: on the one hand, an exoteric legalist meaning for the masses; on the other, an esoteric, arcane philosophical universe of meaning for the elite. Borrowing Jan Assmann's formulation for the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists' reimagination of ancient Egyptian religion – a tradition Corbin particularly admired for its affinity with Iranian theosophers[85]– this dual arrangement may be described as a *religio duplex*, following Jan Assmann.[86] For Corbin, such a *religio duplex* provided a recalibrated phenomenology capable of reviving the spiritual life of Europe on the basis of the religious heritage of a kindred people, the Iranians.

In Corbin's construction of Islam, and particularly of Iranian Islam, the histories of philosophy and spirituality remain inseparable.[87] This very arrangement of a *religio duplex* was, in his view, the essence of Suhrawardī's achievement as the epitome of Iranian Islam. Suhrawardī's project, Corbin argues, was directed toward the revival of "a whole spiritual culture" that encompassed "the totality of philosophical knowledge." Drawing from Philo of Alexandria, Corbin names this synthesis "the royal path."[88]

All the admiration with which Corbin eulogizes the "Iranian spirit," however, does not entail a recognition of the Iranian's agency in knowing, engaging with, or articulating her own heritage. This limitation, an implicit message in Corbin's writings, has frequently been overlooked by proponents of Iranian nationalism. While the spiritual treasure of Iran resides within its religious history, Corbin contends that Iranians are insufficiently appreciative of its value, having not endured the existential consequences of its loss. In contrast, Corbin – exceptionally well-versed in both Islamic and Western philosophical traditions – assumes the responsibility of instructing Iranian intellectuals on the importance of safeguarding this heritage against the encroachments of secular, historicized reason.

Corbin is conscious of the divergence between his project and the approach of Iranian savants toward their religious history, and he advocates for cooperative engagement.[89] This kind of engagement manifested in Corbin's companionship with Iranian traditional and modern scholars, from Mohammad Hossein Tabatabaei to Daryush Shayegan. Nevertheless, he argues that the initiative to reassess the value and significance of the Iranian patrimony should be led by the Western scholar. According to Corbin, Iranian intellectuals, as a rule, are not sufficiently prepared to undertake this endeavour independently. In Iran, he

85. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 1 : xiii.

86. Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, trans. Robert Savage (Polity Press, 2014), 43–53, 70–73. This portrait of the intellectual and spiritual history of the Iranian nation soon became a component of the official historiography of Iranian intellectual and religious traditions among Corbin's companions. As one example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr emphasizes that in the pre-Islamic era Iranian philosophy was inseparably woven into religious teachings: "If we search for the sources of the *sophia* or *khirad* of the ancient Persians, which in fact the Greek philosophers and sages sought, we would be mistaken to expect to find works like the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle or even the *Dialogues* of Plato, that is, works similar to those belonging to a period of Greek history when religion, philosophy, and science had become separated from each other. In ancient Persia, as in all other Oriental civilizations, the separation between religion and philosophy that one observes in ancient Greece and Rome and again in post-medieval Europe never took place except in rare cases, which remain of secondary importance. If we search for the 'philosophy' of the ancient Persians or for what Suhrawardī called the *khusrawānī* theosophy (*ḥikmat-i khusrawānī*), we must delve into such religious works as the *Bundahishn* and the *Shkand gumānīk vīchār* and be aware of the oral teachings which must certainly have existed along with the written texts" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi [Curzon Press, 1996], 7).

87. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 15.

88. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 2 : 335.

89. Corbin, « Post-scriptum bibliographique », 47.

observes, there exist, on the one hand, people with only superficial knowledge of both their own spiritual heritage and Western thought, and, on the other hand, those who possess deep expertise in Iranian knowledge but lack familiarity with the West and its grand spiritual traditions.[90] Not surprisingly, this incapacity of the "Oriental" to acquire the knowledge available to the "Orientalist" is rooted in a privilege that the "Orientalist" rejoices and the "Oriental" dully lacks: the capacity to acquire consciousness of this world into which the "Oriental" is thrown, and then to reconquer it in the soul.

> Maybe it is opportune here to speak from experience. The Orientalist living in Iran, especially dedicated to the study of the philosophy of Ishrāq, feels internally united with his contemporaneous Iranian Ishrāqī confrères by the same links of spiritual sympathy. It is clear, however, that their sympathy does not hold the same meaning. Seeking to formulate this difference is of utmost importance because, in the final analysis, this is the effort toward acquiring consciousness to which, as we said earlier, the example of Avicenna invites us. I believe one can say in broad terms as follows: The Oriental philosopher who professes traditional philosophy *lives in, for example,* the Avicennian or the Suhrawardian cosmos. As for the Orientalist, it is rather the cosmos that lives in him. This inversion of the meaning of interiority expresses at the same time what, from the viewpoint of the conscious person, is called integration. But to integrate a world, to make it one's own, also implies that one has left it in order to make it re-enter into him […] It is only on the condition of being thus reconquered as a living world within the soul, and not any more within which the soul will be thrown captive for lack of consciousness of it, that this spiritual cosmos will cease to be exposed to shattering into pieces upon contact with material progress or with ideologies nourished by other sources.[91]

If Suhrawardī's project consisted of reintroducing the wisdom of the ancient Persian sages to Iran, this time articulated within frameworks compatible with Islamic spirituality,[92] then a central dimension of Corbin's own mission was to reintroduce the mystical heritage of Iranian Islam to Iranian Muslims. In this schema, the Iranian intellectual assumes a subaltern position, rendered incapable of fully knowing or speaking for her own tradition. More broadly, this dynamic reflects Corbin's larger conception of the relationship between the "Westerner" and the "Easterner," in which the former assumes the role of interpreter, mediator, and custodian of spiritual knowledge for the latter.

> Only the Westerner is able to secrete the antidote and help the Easterner to surmount the spiritual crisis that the impact of the West has provoked in him, and which has already forever ruined several traditional civilizations.[93]

From Iranian Islam to European Christianity: From Comparison to Appropriation

The conjunction of two axioms – first, that Iran constitutes an exceptionally hierohistorical phenomenon, and second, that the significance of this hierohistorical reality is fully intelligible only to the European thinker – imbues Corbin's exposition of "Iranian Islam" with a rhetoric of discursive and

90. Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, 497–498.
91. Henry Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Verdier, 1999), 25–26.
92. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 2 : 34–35.
93. Henry Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," in *Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks, Eranos 3: Man and Time*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton University Press, 2015), xix.

intellectual appropriation. On numerous occasions, Corbin employs his notion of hierohistory to elucidate elements of Iranian Islam by mapping them onto allegedly analogous concepts within esoteric Christianity. A fair reader might contend that Corbin's comparisons between pre-modern Islamic and pre-modern European phenomena are merely acts of scholarly juxtaposition, and that labelling them as appropriative is unduly harsh. After all, it is a common argument within the study of religion that the very category of "religion" emerges from the comparison of phenomena identified as religious.[94] That being the case, while it is necessary to critique modern comparative religion for its Eurocentric roots and for the ways comparison has historically been deployed to subordinate non-European cultures,[95] Corbin should not be singled out for such criticism.

In response, I would present my critique of Corbin's approach to comparison on two levels: first, hermeneutical comparison versus historical comparison, and second, identification instead of comparison. On the first level, I concede that in many cases where Corbin employs a term from his European lexicon to describe a phenomenon from an Islamicate context, there is a genuine ground for resemblance, even if implicit. A clear example is his recurrent use of *Parousia* to refer to the Shiʿi doctrine of the awaited return of the hidden Imam.[96] In such instances, there is sufficient conceptual similarity to justify the comparison. Of course, even in such a case, Corbin's use of the Christian term *Parousia* to describe the Shiʿi awaiting, combined with his avoidance of addressing the specific historical points of similarity and difference between the two, is telling. The implied audience is Christian, or at least a scholar of Christianity already familiar with *Parousia*. The Shiʿi doctrine is thus presented through a Christian interpretive lens, as if it were another cultural manifestation of the same concept. Such cases exemplify J. Z. Smith's distinction between comparison as a method of historical study and comparison as a hermeneutical device. In the historical approach, particularly in the study of religion, comparison is always caught between two extremes: total strangeness (radical difference) and complete sameness (lack of any strange element).[97] When leveraged as a hermeneutical device, which is what Corbin explicitly frames his work as,[98] comparison is used to interpret a motif, symbol, or custom in one culture on the basis of its understanding in another.[99]

On the second level, in many instances, what Corbin frames as a comparison between Euro-Christian and Iranian-Islamic phenomena is, in fact, not a comparison at all, but an act of appropriation. As a central rhetorical strategy, his works are saturated with equivocations masquerading as comparisons. Across his writings, as Wasserstrom[100] and Saif[101] have also pointed out, one encounters recurring instances of such equivocation: the mystical dimensions of Islam are presented as *gnosis*[102] shaped around a salvific notion of knowledge, which he speaks as *sophia*;[103] the tradition of *futuwwa/javānmardī* is rendered as

94. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (University of Chicago Press, 1988), xi.
95. Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 5–10, 21–24.
96. For recurring examples, see Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 1.
97. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Adde parvum parvo magnus acervus erit," *History of Religions* 11, no. 1 (1971): 69.
98. Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*, 41–47.
99. Smith, "Adde parvumparvo," 71.
100. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 16; 149–150.
101. Liana Saif, "'That I Did Love the Moor to Live with Him': Islam in/and the Study of 'Western Esotericism,'" in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (Brill, 2021), 76.
102. See particularly his comparative study of Swednborgian and Isma'ili "gnoseology" in Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*.
103. For an explicitly gnostic exposition of what he means by associating '*irfan* or *maʿrifa* with *Sophia*, see Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 1 : xv–xvi, 2 : 217.

"spiritual chivalry";[104] love-intoxicated Sufi wayfarers receive the title of Dante's *fedeli d'amore*;[105] and the esoteric secrets associated with the Hidden Imam are analogized to the Holy Grail,[106] etc.

These purported identities between phenomena are even more problematic than the hermeneutical comparisons discussed above. As Susan Stanford Friedman notes, comparison is not merely an act of identifying similarities and differences; it also involves navigating a "contradictory pull between the particular and the abstract."[107] In order to render Iranian Islam serviceable for his European revivalist project, Corbin strips it of its historical particularities, producing an abstract construct of "Iranian Islam" that is then presented as a model for Europe to emulate.

Once again, a fair reader might object that even if such identifications stem from careless comparisons, it is excessive to label them as acts of Eurocentric appropriation. Yet, toward the end of his life, reflecting on the pinnacle of his career, Corbin employed several of these identifications to present an explicitly appropriative image of Iranian Islam, even through the lens of what he observed in Istanbul. This reflection emerges from the years during World War II, when he resided in Istanbul and spent considerable time visiting its historical monuments in an utmost nostalgic mood:

> But Istanbul was Byzantium; it was Constantinople. In the same way the Temple of Solomon was the center of Jerusalem, the Temple of Hagia Sophia (*Sacred Sophia*) was the center of the second Rome. During those years, the American scholar, Whitemore, had dedicated himself to the restoration of the mosaics. Visiting Hagia Sophia in his company was at the same time a privilege, an adventure, and a pilgrimage. He was at home there, the guardian of the Temple; he would give you an honorary reception, stationing for a long time with you before the luster of the interior light of the mosaics that were marvelously released. You had to be in his company to become attentive to a late design, above the Western interior wall, which "encrypts" the secret of the Temple of the Sophia. The drawing presents a small cupola to which one can reach by seven steps. Evocation of the Temple of Wisdom to the seven pillars (Prov. 9/1). "Say to Sophia: you are my sister! And call Intelligence your friend." (Prov. 7/4) An *Ishrāqī* is spontaneously a sophiologue. The Temple of Hagia Sophia was the Temple of the Grail for me, at least an exemplification of its archetype foreboded by many seekers of gnosis. In a vast chamber that could have been formerly the sacristy, there was a precious collection of Arabic and Persian manuscripts. I often went to work there, and, crossing the Temple, I would hum the themes of Grail and of the mystical Last Supper of Wagner's Parsifal very sweetly. This presence of invisible Sophianic chivalry, which was also known to the Platonists of Persia, has never left me. One will find the clue of what inspired me in my most recent research and projects.[108]

The Iranian as the Subaltern of Iranian Islam

It is, of course, problematic that, as Charles Adams has noted, Corbin's study of Islam replaces a regional focus with a selective narrative that excludes the particular formations of Islam among Sunni Muslims and non-Iranian communities.[109] To render his account even more exclusionary, as several of his

104. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 3 : 102–111.
105. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 3 : 17.
106. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 4 : 363–368.
107. Susan Stanford Friedman, "Why Not Compare?," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 758.
108. Corbin, « Post-scriptum bibliographique », 46.
109. Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin," 136–138. Also see Hamid Algar, "The Study of Islam: The Work of Henry Corbin," *Religious Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (1980): 78.

interlocutors have observed, Corbin's depiction of Shi'i Islam purges any non-esoteric strands from the tradition of Iranian Islam – stripping it of the decisive role played by exoteric scholars, whose legalistic approach to Shi'i Islam continues to shape political formations within and beyond Iran to this day.[110]

He engages in the same practice in his account of pre-Islamic Iran. A particularly clear example is his treatment of Zoroastrianism as a monolithic tradition, conveniently aligned with his construct of the "Iranian hermeneutic of the Sacred Book," shaped around the narrative of orthodoxy that developed in the Sasanian era. By dismissing the role of the extensive clerical apparatus and its interactions with the Sasanian state in shaping this version of Zoroastrianism, Corbin shows almost no interest in the variations of Zoroastrian cosmologies.[111] For instance, without offering any historical argument or evidence, he dismisses one of these suppressed varieties – Zurvanism – as mere absurdity in the eyes of "the Zoroastrians."[112]

This prioritization of the majority narratives of religion reveals a notable irony in Corbin's scholarship of religion. By largely disregarding the role of social and political forces in shaping "religion" as a historical construct, Corbin's oeuvre often uncritically adopts narratives endorsed by the majority and legitimized by political power, particularly the institutions of the state. Any religious formation that does not fit his overarching vision is implicitly devalued as inauthentic. In the pre-Islamic era, for instance, Iranian religion is equated with the Zoroastrianism codified in the official Avesta and Middle Persian texts. In the Islamic era, the same pattern recurs in his treatment of the Shi'i–Sunni binary. By appealing to the political and academic institutions of Shi'ism and asserting that "naming Iranian Islam is naming Shi'ism,"[113] Corbin appears to address a historical problem: the fact that the Shi'i majority in Iran is a post-Safavid development, not a historical constant. To reconcile this, he equates Sufism and Shi'ism, claiming that prior to the Safavid era, they were almost synonymous.[114] What he overlooks, however, is that grounding Iranian religion in Shi'ism effectively relies on the notion of a state religion, thereby linking the ostensibly "trans-historical" and "spiritual" genius of the nation to the concrete historical structures of secular authority.

With this construction, Corbin's notion of "Iranian Islam" produces subalterns on three interconnected levels. First, it legitimizes the marginalization of minority communities in favour of the majority identity. Second, within the majority community itself, it suppresses the diversity of discourses, privileging elite and elitist interpretations. Third, Corbin positions the elite discourse that governs the majority community as having a subaltern history, one that is subordinated to an external narrative imposed by the European savant. All this makes Corbin's oeuvre an illustrative example of Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that the subaltern past is not just that of the socially subaltern, but "the elite or dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts to the extent that they participate in life-worlds subordinated by the 'major' narratives of the dominant institutions."[115]

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110. For a concisely formulated example, see Algar, "The Study of Islam."
111. Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste*, 36.
112. Corbin, *L'homme de lumière*, 74.
113. Henry Corbin, « Islamisme et religions de l'Arabie », dans *Problèmes et méthodes d'histoire des religions, mélanges publiés par la Section des sciences religieuses à l'occasion du centenaire de l'École pratique des hautes études* (Presses universitaires de France, 1968), 132–133.
114. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 2 : 17.
115. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, new ed. (Princeton University Press, 2008), 101.

Conclusion

It would be unfair and also tasteless not to appreciate Corbin's insightful, ingenious, and systematic presentation of a sophisticated answer to the question of the lost certainty in the modern age. As other students of his work have pointed out, his novel project was one of braving an uncharted territory.[116] When it comes to his notion of Iranian Islam, his advocates might argue that his approach, with its unique place beyond the methodological straits of common historical or philosophical methodologies of the time, empowers the Iranian or Muslim as both subject and object of knowledge, granting her the authority to guide Europe through a new *Bildung* based on the Iranian Islamic model. This aligns with Dennis Porter's critique of Orientalism, which envisions intercultural dialogue where subject–object roles alternate, allowing us to "read ourselves as the others of our others."[117]

Right there, alas, is the point where Corbin's Iranian Islam fails to constitute an alternative to Orientalism and, rather, becomes an alternative Orientalism. According to the famous Saidian critique, the classical heritage of Orientalism presented Islam as a demonic embodiment of backwardness, symbolizing terror and devastation so that Europe could make its own self-image as a positive entity by contrast.[118] Now, in Corbin's version, "Iranian Islam," as the only "true Islam," was constructed as a desirable entity because, by preserving the lost treasures of the Helleno-Christian West, it could be conducive to retrieving the best days of Europe and overcoming the nihilism of modern European philosophies. Corbin does not engage with the Iranian as an autonomous "other." By linking Iranian and European esoteric traditions and constructing an interconnected past, he transforms the Iranian into a mirror of the European self. Yet, the authorship of this "old self" is entirely controlled by the European Orientalist, reflecting Corbin's belief that Iranians are not yet intellectually equipped to grasp or articulate their own spiritual heritage in response to modern challenges. Relating to the critique that Chakravorty Spivak raises against other European intellectuals' critique of the modern West, in Corbin's case, also, what is eventually at stake is "an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as subject."[119]

Bearing in mind Talal Asad's sobering point that the disenchantment of the modern West was itself a product of enchanting the premodern.[120] One could justifiably say that what Corbin does through his obsessive emphasis on Shi'ism as the "true Islam" is construct an entirely esoteric concept.[121] At the end of the day, this is ostensibly the reemergence of the force of Orientalism, casting the overromanticized and mysticized image of the East as the opposite of the radically and essentially rational West.[122] Also, in spite of all his animosity toward secularism, the esoteric and depoliticized Islam that he crafts is yet another manifestation of the modern Western category of religion as an essential component of secularity.[123] The equivalence made between "the authentic spiritual" and "authentic philosophical," which eventually

116. Francesco Piraino, *Sufism in Europe: Islam, Esotericism and the New Age* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 90–91.
117. Denis Porter, "Orientalism and Its Problems," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Routledge, 2015), 153.
118. Said, *Orientalism*, 59–60.
119. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalin C. Morris (Columbia University Press, 2010), 22.
120. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford University Press, 2003), 155.
121. Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 1 : 90, 94, 115; 2 : 96, 194–195; 3 : 187, 380.
122. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (Routledge, 1999), 7–15.
123. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 19.

"spiritualizes what are material practices and turns them into expressions of something timeless and supra-historical, which is to say, depoliticizes them," fits the development of the category of religion as an attempt to impose the patterns of the West upon all other regions of the world.[124]

124. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 20.

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