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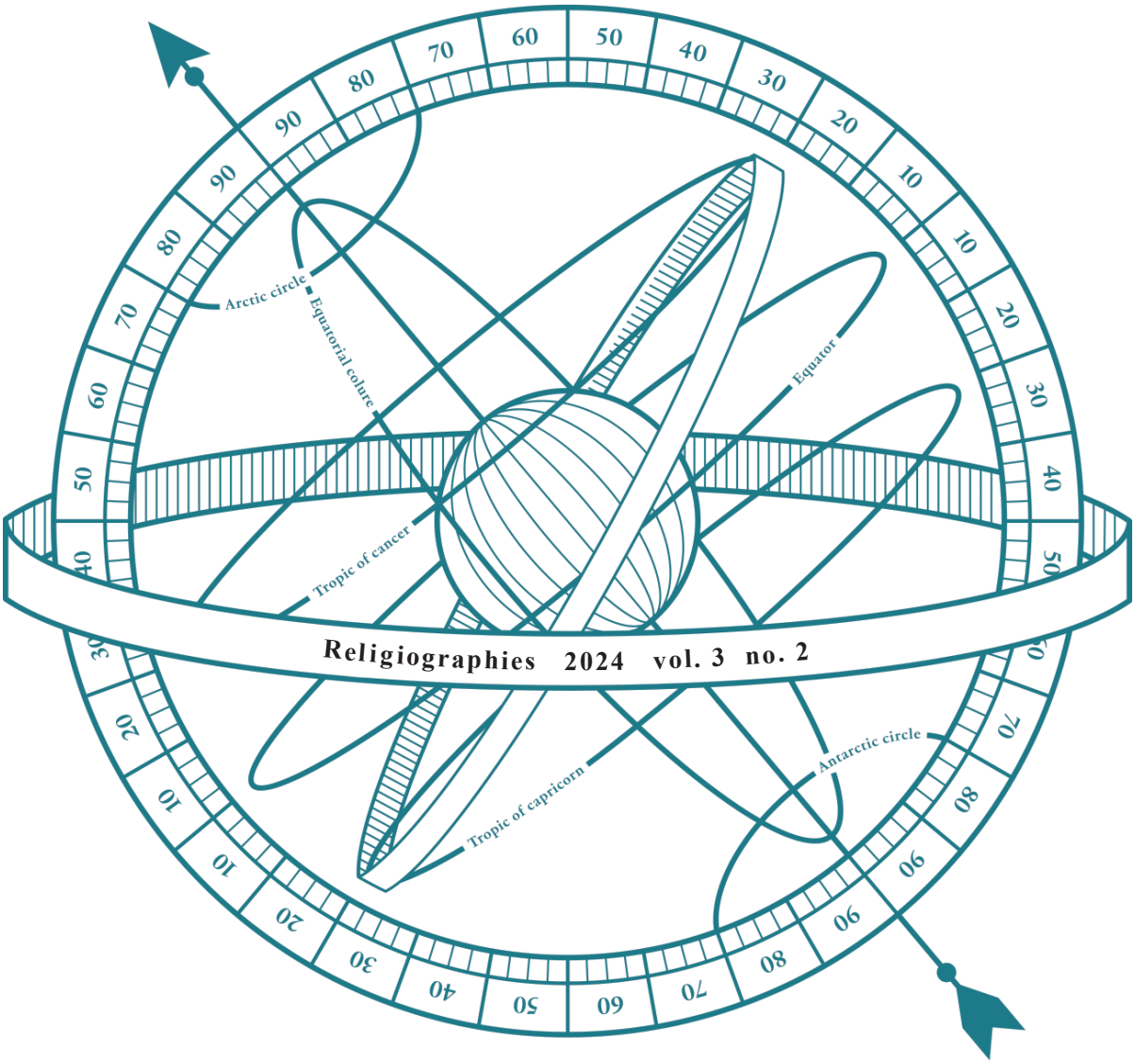

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Ibn ʿArabi between East and West: Henry Corbin and Guénonian Traditionalism

Hadi Fakhoury

Author:
Hadi Fakhoury
Clare College, University of Cambridge
hf410@cam.ac.uk

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Abstract
This article examines how the work of the Andalusian Sufi Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240) became a site of contention between two influential contemporary interpretations of Sufism. This dissension involved the pioneering French scholar of Islamic philosophy, Henry Corbin (1903–1978), author of the book *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi* (1958), and the Urdu literary critic, Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919–1978). In 1963, the French periodical *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* published a polemical essay by Askari, titled "East and West: Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard," provoking a scathing response from Corbin. In his essay, Askari, an early proponent of Urdu literary modernism who later espoused anti-Western and Islamic conservative views, claimed to represent the positions of René Guénon (1886–1951), the French metaphysician who inspired the Traditionalist school of thought as well as Akbarian studies. In his response, Corbin criticized Askari's dogmatic "Guénonism" and its rationalistic distortions of Ibn ʿArabi. Thus, while looking at a significant episode in the reception of Ibn ʿArabi in the twentieth century, this article reconsiders a prevalent view that associates Corbin with Guénonian Traditionalism.

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Introduction

In 1963, the prominent French periodical *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* published a polemical article, translated from the Urdu, titled "East and West: Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard." Its author, Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919–1978), was all but unknown in France. A literary critic who initially acquired prominence in British India as a pioneer of Urdu literary modernism, he migrated to the newly-created state of Pakistan, where he adopted anti-Western positions and defended Islamic traditionalism. If there is one name associated with this later period in Askari's thought, it is that of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya, more famously known as René Guénon (1886–1951), the main inspiration behind the Traditionalist school of thought.[1] Thus, in the above article, it is Guénon whom Askari cites as the main source for his interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi. From Guénon, Askari derives a view that opposes "East" and "West," with the former conceived as the seat of Tradition—the timeless, sacred source of truth and social order—and the latter as the main agent of the negation and dissolution of Tradition in the modern world.

Askari's article provoked a scathing response from the influential French scholar of Islamic philosophy, Henry Corbin (1903–1978), author of the pioneering study *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi* (1958), which Askari had derided. While defending his own interpretation of the Andalusian mystic, Corbin went on the offensive, attacking Askari as an example of what he saw as a trend toward dogmatic "Guénonism." Turning the tables on his critic, Corbin contended that Askari's article evinced a lack of knowledge of Ibn ʿArabi's writings; that it imposed on Ibn ʿArabi a rationalist grid of interpretation imported from modern Western categories, resulting in systematic distortions; and that it seemed ignorant of a long tradition of religious and philosophical interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi that has survived into present-day Iran.

By focusing on this little-known but illuminating dispute between Askari and Corbin, the present article challenges a widespread assumption that indiscriminately associates Corbin with the Traditionalists. Instead, it shows that, despite some thematic and lexical similarities, Corbin's project diverged in significant ways from Traditionalism. In the first section, I discuss the motives and context behind Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*, in particular the role of Eranos in his conception of an esoteric religion existing across historical and national boundaries. In the second section, I outline Askari's intellectual development, highlighting his turn from literary modernism to anti-Western Islamic traditionalism inspired by Guénon. The last two sections, respectively, discuss Askari's article and Corbin's response.

Ibn ʿArabi at Eranos: Corbin's Transhistorical Esoterism

Originally published in 1958, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi* is based on two lectures that Corbin gave at Eranos in 1955 and 1956, respectively, with the titles "Sympathy and Theopathy among 'The Faithful of Love' in Islam" and "Creative Imagination and Creative Prayer in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi."[2] Eranos was a yearly

1 For a recent overview of Traditionalism, see Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (London: Pelican, 2023).

2 Henry Corbin, *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabî* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958). References in the present article are to *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998). The first edition of this translation was published by Princeton University Press in 1969 under the title *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī*. In 1998, a new edition was released with a preface by Harold Bloom, titled *Alone with the Alone*. Although references in this article are to the 1998 edition, I refer to the work as *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī* (or *Creative Imagination* for short), as this is both the universally recognized title and the one originally given by Corbin. The two Eranos essays originally appeared in *Eranos-Jahrbuch* XXIV/1955 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1956) and XXV/1956 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1957).

conference held in Ascona, Switzerland, bringing together some of the world's most influential thinkers in the fields of the comparative study of religions and sciences, including Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Carl Gustav Jung, Erich Neumann, Adolph Portmann, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, and Viktor Zuckerkandl, among others.[3] It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Eranos for Corbin. Corbin attended Eranos almost every year from 1949 until his death in 1978, becoming one of its leading contributors.[4] Indeed, most of his major publications are based on his lectures at Eranos. Parallel to his role as a professor of Islamic Studies in France and in Iran, Eranos allowed Corbin to participate in a cosmopolitan intellectual circle and to express philosophical and spiritual viewpoints free both from academic constraints and any established religious institutions. As he wrote in 1956, Eranos represented for him "the meeting of acting, autonomous individualities, each in complete freedom revealing and expressing his original and personal way of thinking and being, outside of all dogmatism and all academicism."[5]

Eranos played a key role in Corbin's philosophical war against religious and intellectual systems that, in his view, suppressed individuality in favor of group identification and collective entities. Corbin's opposition manifests in his recurrent criticism of ecclesiastical authority (in Christianity) and the rule of jurists (in Islam), both typified in his writings by the figure of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.[6] His opposition is equally reflected in his antipathy toward any ideology that sacrifices the individual upon the altar of sacralized collectivities—whether state, nation, family, race, or social class. It also finds expression in his repeated condemnation of "historicism" conceived as the interpretation of religious phenomena as mere products of impersonal social, political, and material processes. Corbin's concerns were aggravated by the looming threat of Communism in the Cold War, which heightened for him the importance of Eranos. Thus, in 1955—the year of his first lecture on Ibn ʿArabi—Corbin described Eranos as a reaction to a "time of distress such as ours[,] . . . a time where all authentic truth is threatened by the forces of the impersonal, where the individual abdicates his duty and right to differ from the anonymous collectivity, where for [this collectivity] even individuality would already amount to guilt."[7] Similarly, a year later, he wrote that Eranos represented "an acute awareness of differences, a concern for the rights of pluralism against all monism, whether a well-intentioned monism or a brutal and unavowed monism."[8]

Corbin's attacks on "collectivism" and "dogmatism" were not merely unreflecting, expressionistic outbursts of nonconformism, without further import. Rather, they are inextricably tied to his personalist theology and metaphysics, which repudiates abstract universals and conceives all reality in terms of personal presences and relations.[9] Thus, in his already cited essay, "The Time of Eranos," Corbin criticizes "historicism" in the study of religion, and advocates instead for a phenomenology that would allow us to "substitute the hermeneutics of the human individual for the pseudodialectic of facts."[10] He argues that, to understand the individual, we must "perceive the *meaning* of the thing itself, that is, the manner in which its presence determines a certain constellation of things, which hence would have been entirely

3
On Eranos, see Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (London: Routledge, 2013).

4
Hakl, *Eranos*, 161–68.

5
Henry Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), xx.

6
See, e.g., Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 27. On Corbin's use of the figure of the Grand Inquisitor, see Hadi Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought: Part I (Early Encounters)," *Dionysius* 32 (2014): 182–83.

7
Henry Corbin, "De l'Iran à l'Eranos," in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 262. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

8
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xix.

9
See, e.g., Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, trans. Ralph Manheim and James W. Morris (London: Kegan Paul, 1983), 50–51.

10
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xiv.

different if there had not first been this presence."[11] This view rests on a kind of monadological ontology that considers the individual as the only concrete reality, and the reality of everything else as deriving from it. He writes: "There is no explaining the initial fact of which we are speaking, for it is individual and singular, and the individual can be neither deduced nor explained: *individuum est ineffabile*."[12] He contrasts this perspective with "all the attempts toward philosophies of history or toward the socialization of the consciousness: anonymity, depersonalization, and the abdication of the human will before the dialectic net that it began to weave itself, only to fall into its own snare."[13]

It should be noted here that Corbin's attack on what he calls "laicization" or "secularization" does not amount to a rejection of the principle of the separation of religion and state, widely seen as a hallmark of modernity. As he states in his book on Ibn ʿArabi, secularization, as he understands it, is not about the separation or non-separation of "spiritual authority" and "temporal power." Rather, it has deeper roots: it implies "the very idea of associating such concepts as 'power' and the 'spiritual.' "[14] This aspect of his thought has largely been overlooked, leading some critics to suggest that he, like the Traditionalists, rejected the so-called modern world and sought to restore a sacred order.[15] Although this point merits a more comprehensive and nuanced discussion than I can provide here, it should be noted that whereas Guénon and his followers located religion in the social order, and blamed modernity for evacuating religion from matters on the organization of government, Corbin rejected the identification of religion with political power as being itself a symptom of secularization.[16]

Furthermore, while Traditionalism by and large implies a nostalgic recollection of a long-lost "Golden Age," an idealized socio-political order in the distant past, this conception is absent in Corbin. His nostalgia is vertically rather than horizontally oriented: it is that of the individual gnostic for his spiritual homeland. Thus, Corbin denounces both revolutionary and reactionary political ideologies as being equally symptoms of secularization: both "the resentment against the yoke of the past . . . and, conversely, the complexes of reaction" are in his view consequences of a consciousness that has been trapped in the system of unrealities that we have ourselves constructed and whose weight falls on us in turn in the form of history as the only scientific "objectivity" that we can conceive, as the source of a causal determinism the idea of which would never have occurred to a humanity that had preserved the sense of the real subject.[17]

By contrast, Corbin aims to overcome the objectification of history by recovering "the activity of creative thinking at work, thinking by which tradition is, as such, recreated 'in the present.' "[18] Rather than a simple "return to tradition," Corbin seeks to go one step before tradition, as it were, that is, to recover the spiritual source that gave rise to it in the first place. This implies a continuous "re-activation" and "re-creation" of tradition in the present. Thus, Corbin envisions an attitude that transcends the antithesis of modernity and tradition: therein, for him, lies "the *meaning* of Eranos, which is also the entire secret of Eranos . . . it is our present being, the time that we act personally, our way of being."[19]

A brief look at *Creative Imagination* illustrates how the above ap-

11
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xv.

12
Corbin, xv.

13
Corbin, xv.

14
Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 16.

15
See, e.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 301–02.

16
On Guénon's identification of religion with social order, see Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 46.

17
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xvi.

18
Henry Corbin, "Actualité de la philosophie traditionnelle en Iran," *Acta Iranica* 1 (January-March 1968): 6.

19
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xix.

proach shaped Corbin's reading of Ibn ʿArabi. This is above all noticeable in his emphasis on the autonomy and originality of Ibn ʿArabi, presenting him as a nonconformist whose ideas must be understood and evaluated on their own terms rather than judged by the standards of "tradition." In the Introduction, Corbin distinguishes his approach from one that "tends to 'explain' an author by tracing him back to his sources, by listing influences, and demonstrating the 'causes' of which he is supposedly the mere effect." Thus, Corbin presents Ibn ʿArabi as a "genius . . . [who is] radically alien to literal, dogmatic religion and to the schematizations such religion encourages." Any explanation of Ibn ʿArabi's thought as a form of "syncretism," Corbin argues, only appeals to a "dogmatic mind alarmed at the operations of a thinking which obeys only the imperatives of its internal norm but whose personal character does not impair its rigour."[20] By virtue of this "internal norm," Ibn ʿArabi "cannot be reduced to a school or other collective conformism." Rather,

> Ibn ʿArabi is one of those powerful and rare spiritual individuals who are the norm of their own orthodoxy and of their own time, because they belong neither to what is commonly called "their" time nor to the orthodoxy of "their" time. What by a historical convention is termed "their" time is not really *their* time. Accordingly, to affect to believe that such masters are nothing more than representatives of a certain "tradition" is to forget their considerable personal contribution, is to neglect the perfect assurance with which [they] . . . proclaim that such and such an idea, developed on such and such a page of their books, can be found nowhere else, because it is the discovery of their personal experience.[21]

Corbin's criticism in this passage is unmistakably aimed at the notion, characteristic of Guénonian Traditionalism, that the great spiritual traditions of the past—notably, though not exclusively Vedanta, Taoism, and Sufism—rest on immutable metaphysical doctrines, and furthermore, that those who taught these doctrines—in this case, Ibn ʿArabi—did so with the consciousness of being merely transmitters of impersonal, handed-down wisdom. Traditionalists, moreover, generally conceive these sacred traditions as having two aspects: on one hand, an inner, "esoteric" aspect, which is the proper intellectual content of these traditions, expressing timeless, universal truths; on the other hand, an outer, "exoteric" aspect, which refers to particular, culture-specific and therefore relative forms, identified with religion and serving as the basis of social order. While the Traditionalists view exoteric religion as having a subsidiary role in relation to esoteric truth, they see no opposition between them: rather, the esoteric represents the metaphysical foundation of the traditional orthodox exoteric framework. Thus, they regard Ibn ʿArabi's teachings as being fundamentally in harmony with orthodox Islam.

By contrast, Corbin posits an essential antinomy between Ibn ʿArabi and orthodox Islam. Ibn ʿArabi, he writes, has "attained to the esoteric Truth, the *ḥaqīqa*, [he has passed] through and beyond the darkness of the Law and of the exoteric religion."[22] This esoteric truth,

20 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 4–5.

21 Corbin, 5.

22 Corbin, 67.

according to Corbin (using here language similar to that of his Eranos colleague, the Swiss psychoanalyst C. G. Jung), involves a "process of individuation"; that is, "releasing the spiritual person from collective norms and ready-made evidences and enabling him to live as a unique individual for and with his Unique God."[23] Rather than complementarity between esoteric truth and exoteric religion, Corbin affirms "the irreducible antagonism between the spiritual Islam of Sufism and legalitarian Islam."[24] If on one hand Corbin argues that Ibn ʿArabi and other mystics of Islam cannot be reduced to any "collective conformism," on the other, he sees them as representatives of an "Oriental spirituality," with "Orient" here designating not a geographical location, but the symbolic source of spiritual individuation.[25] This "Oriental spirituality" is one in which "each human being is oriented toward a quest for his personal invisible guide," as opposed to "[entrusting] himself to the collective, magisterial authority as the intermediary between himself and Revelation."[26] Far from being limited by time and place, this "Oriental spirituality" represents a transnational, "eternal religion extending from the origin of origins down through the history of the human race, whose Spirituals it gathers together, at all times, in a single *corpus mysticum*."[27] Thus, for Corbin, Ibn ʿArabi has less in common with "orthodox Islam" than with figures and movements as widely separated as Jacob Boehme, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Shihabuddin Suhrawardi, Shiʿism, and early Christian sects like the Ebionites, among others, all of which represent in his view a transhistorical family of esoteric spirituality.[28]

That being said, it is important to distinguish here between, on one hand, Corbin's antithesis between "spiritual Islam" and "legalitarian Islam"—as two opposed types of religiosity—and on the other hand the complementarity and necessary dialectical relationship between "esoteric" and "exoteric," which he affirms as a central principle of what he calls "esoteric hermeneutics" or "spiritual exegesis." According to this principle, "to everything that is apparent, literal, external, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) there corresponds something hidden, spiritual, internal, esoteric (*bāṭin*)."[29] Esotericism, for Corbin, designates the recognition of this principle and the application of the exegetical practice of *taʾwīl*, which consists in "[apprehending] all material data, things and facts as symbols, transmuting them, and '[carrying] them back' to symbolized Persons."[30] Importantly, this operation does not entail the destruction of the apparent or literal meaning, but rather aims "to bring out the transparency of its depths, the esoteric meaning."[31] Ibn ʿArabi's approach to the Qurʾan, according to Corbin, exemplifies this esoteric hermeneutics.[32] By contrast, "exoteric Islam" is incapable of looking beyond the literal meaning: "the 'book descended from Heaven,' the Qurʾan, limited to the apparent letter, perishes in the opacity and servitude of legalist religion."[33]

Mohammad Hasan Askari: From Literary Modernism to Guénonian Traditionalism

A relatively minor figure of twentieth-century Urdu literature, Muhammad Hasan Askari may seem an unlikely critic of Corbin. But if Askari was (and remains) largely unknown beyond South Asia, his

23 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 268.

24 Corbin, 68.

25 Corbin, 29.

26 Corbin, 33.

27 Corbin, 47.

28 Corbin, 45, 77, 92, 181.

29 Corbin, 78.

30 Corbin, 28.

31 Corbin, 28. On *taʾwīl* in Corbin, see Hadi Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture," in *Philosophy and the Abrahamic Religions: Scriptural Hermeneutics and Epistemology*, ed. Torrance Kirby, Rahim Acar, and Bilal Baş (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 345–69.

32 Corbin's emphasis on the significance of *taʾwīl* for Ibn ʿArabi has been contested. For instance, William C. Chittick writes: "Certain Western scholars have portrayed Ibn al-ʿArabī as a great practitioner of esoteric commentary (*taʾwīl*), whereby the literal meaning of the text becomes a window through which one looks into the invisible realm. One can agree with this statement, so long as it is understood that no Muslim commentator has been as concerned as the Shaykh to preserve the Book's literal sense. Ibn al-ʿArabī never denies the literal and apparent meaning. But he frequently adds to the literal sense an interpretation based upon an opening which transcends the cognitive limitations of most mortals." Chittick further states that "*taʾwīl* is not an appropriate term to indicate Ibn al-ʿArabī's method of interpretation, since he himself almost invariably uses the term to refer to a mental process pertaining to reflective thought whereby every verse which does not coincide with a preconceived idea of God's incomparability is explained away. More generally, *taʾwīl* is to take one's understanding of God as the standard or 'scale' by which to weigh the revelation . . . Man becomes the standard for judging the revelation, and the Koran is no longer the standard for judging man. Ibn al-ʿArabī rejects this approach entirely, insisting instead that man must allow himself to be judged, shaped, and formed by the Divine Speech" (William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* [New York: State University of New York Press, 1989], xvi, 242).

33 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 28.

knowledge of the Western canon was extensive: he was a careful reader of English, French, German, and Russian authors, and translated French writers such as Flaubert and Stendhal into Urdu.[34] The story of how Askari discovered Ibn ʿArabi and quarreled with Corbin reflects the trajectory of his intellectual career. This trajectory began with literary modernism, of which Askari was one of the most prominent advocates before the partition of the Indian subcontinent; his path took a seemingly opposite turn after the Indian Partition and his move to Pakistan, when, taking his cue from the works of Guénon as well as Indian Sufi-inspired Islamic conservatism, he began to expound an anti-Western and anti-modern vision of the Urdu literary canon.

Askari's turn from modernism to traditionalism was fueled by his disillusionment with the literary scene in the newly-founded state of Pakistan.[35] Seeing that Urdu literature was unable to serve as a basis for Pakistani identity, he declared in 1953 its death, turning his attention instead to Islam and Indo-Muslim culture.[36] Meanwhile, in 1947, Askari read Guénon, whose influence pervades his subsequent writings. The key tenets of Guénonian Traditionalism can be summed up in three points.[37] Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the idea that at the root of the various religious traditions of the world, there lies a single, timeless, primordial Tradition (with a capital T), the source of all truth and sacred order—an idea often called perennialism, a term Guénon himself did not use, but which is associated with some of his followers. Second is a notion of human history that sees nothing but decline from an earlier Golden Age. According to this view, modernity appears only as a process of accelerated, necessary decline, a loss and systematic inversion of the sacred norms of Tradition. Third is a perspective that considers Eastern metaphysical traditions—Vedanta, Taoism, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Sufism—as the purest and most comprehensive reflections of the primordial Tradition in the present age, and as offering true spiritual realization. Since these traditions are but various expressions of the original Tradition, there can be no essential contradiction between them. This assumption is why Guénon often speaks of "Eastern metaphysics" in the singular.[38] In this perspective, "Easterners" are seen overall as preservers of traditional wisdom, and "Westerners" as the principal agents of the inversion of sacred norms.[39] To be sure, Guénon also recognized that the East was not immune to the destructive effects of modernity; moreover, he affirmed that some Easterners are in fact "Westerners" and vice versa (a view also shared by Corbin), and that the world had reached such a stage of homogenization as to render the East/West civilizational binary irrelevant. Nevertheless, Guénon's high regard for Eastern traditions, coupled with his absolute condemnation of the modern Western world, fueled a romantic Orientalism among some of his followers.

Guénon's influence is perhaps most noticeable in Askari's later conception of tradition (*rivāyat*).[40] Earlier, Askari had embraced T. S. Eliot's notion of tradition as a dynamic vehicle that retains features of the past while absorbing innovations. This view of tradition informed Askari's earlier project to revitalize Urdu literature by experimenting with new forms. Later, however, Askari rejected Eliot, arguing that real tradition cannot be a fluid concept subject to change; rather, it must be based on timeless metaphysical principles.[41] In this understanding,

34
Mehr Afshan Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind: Urdu Culture, Islam, and Modernity in Muhammad Hasan Askari* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153.

35
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 144.

36
Adrian Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari: Mulla-Turned Modernist or Saviour of Tradition?" *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasienstudien* 39 (2022): 19.

37
Cf. Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 10–11.

38
René Guénon, *La Métaphysique orientale* (Paris: Éditions traditionnelles, 1939).

39
See René Guénon, *East and West* [1927], trans. Martin Lings (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001).

40
Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari," 23; Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 201. The Urdu noun *rivāyat* derives from the Arabic *riwāya*, itself derivative of the verb *rawi* meaning "to bear by memory, to transmit or recite." In Arabic literature, a *rāwī* is a professional reciter of poetry. See Renate Jacobi, "Rāwī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, ed. P. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6259.

41
Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari," 24; Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 192. See Mehr Afshan Farooqi, "Towards a Prose of Ideas: An Introduction to the Critical Thought of Muhammad Hasan ʿAskari," *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 19 (2004): 181, https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/18631.

tradition is the regulative norm and ultimate principle of social order as well as all spheres of human life and activity, including religion, culture, aesthetics, and literature.[42] The absence of such a foundation, Askari contends, drives modern Western authors into a plurality of ideologies, but these can never replace the unity and universality of truth upheld in Eastern intellectual traditions.[43] Thus, Askari sees an incommensurable and irreconcilable gulf between modern Western civilization and traditional Eastern cultures, including those of Indo-Muslims, Hindus, and the Chinese.[44]

East and West: Askari's "Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard"

Guénon's influence suffuses Askari's essay "East and West: Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard." This is the article that was published in a French translation in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1963, triggering a response from Corbin.[45] Although the Askari-Corbin quarrel was ostensibly about competing interpretations of Ibn ʿArabi, there were larger and more fundamental issues at stake. In fact, Askari's article, as its title suggests, is primarily about the perceived antithesis between "East" and "West." Askari opens with an allusion to a work by André Gide titled *The Fruits of the Earth* (1897), a book that Askari describes hyperbolically as "beyond a doubt" having had "the most profound influence on the most qualitatively significant portion of Western literature in the twentieth century," and having been "seminal in the intellectual upbringing of easily three or four generations of Western writers."[46] If Askari targets Gide, it is because the latter had defended the "Western" in contrast to the "Eastern" mentality.[47] Rejecting Gide's "defense of the West," Askari refers to Guénon who, he writes, "around 1925 . . . had presented the basic concepts of the East in their original form to the West and had also analyzed Western civilization in light of those concepts." The rest of Askari's essay illustrates the East/West clash by comparing two representative thinkers: on one hand, Ibn ʿArabi, "the greatest spiritual Muslim guide," and on the other, Kierkegaard, whom Askari describes as "nowadays the most respected master of Western spirituality and philosophy."[48]

By contrasting Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Ibn ʿArabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*, Askari aims to "reveal the essence of East and West in ways that are impossible through any other method."[49] The juxtaposition of these two works, in his view, reveals "the conflict between East and West."[50] This contrast is already reflected for Askari in the motive behind each of these works. In *Fear and Trembling*, according to Askari, Kierkegaard interprets the story of Abraham through the lens of his own emotional struggles; the thoughts Kierkegaard ascribes to Abraham result from his "own confusion and perplexity." By contrast, Ibn ʿArabi's works, Askari argues, have nothing subjective about them: they are "entirely non-individual and impersonal," dealing with subjects that are "as remote as one can get from psychology, ethics, or philosophy, being entirely metaphysical in their character."[51] Consequently, Askari attacks Henry Corbin for "[digging up] a Beatrice . . . for Ibn ʿArabi."[52] In fact, in *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*, Corbin emphasized the significance for Ibn ʿArabi of meeting the daughter of an Iranian shaykh in Mecca: this young wom-

42
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 179.

43
Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari," 25.

44
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 167 and 184.

45
Muhammad Hasan Askari, "Orient et Occident: Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," trans. André Guimbretière, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 1 (January-March 1963): 1–24. The Urdu text can be found in a posthumously published collection of Askari's essays titled *Vaqt kī Rāgnī* (Lahore: Maktabat-i Mihrāb, 1979). For a discussion of this collection, see Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 177–201.

46
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 1 [312]. All translations are mine and based on the French version, which Corbin references. I provide in brackets the pagination of the corresponding passage in Muhammad Umar Memon's translation of the original Urdu version into English (Muh. Hasan Askari, "Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard [A Study in Method and Reasoning]," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 19 [2004]: 311–35; see also the translator's preface, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard' [Translator's Note]," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 19 [2004]: 302–10, http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/18617). There are some noteworthy variations between the French and English versions. The English version seems more faithful to the original Urdu, if a little more stylistically ornate. The French version, however, might have been authorized by Askari (who, as already noted, was proficient in French): not only was it produced during his lifetime, but the translator, André Guimbretière, professor of Urdu and Hindi at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales in Paris, had previously collaborated with Askari on a translation of a poem by Muhammad Iqbal ("La Mosquée de Courdoue," trans. André Guimbretière and Mohd. Hasan Askari, *Esprit* 259, no. 3 [March 1958]: 431–36).

47
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 1–2 [312–14].

48
Askari, 4 [316].

49
Askari, 4 [316].

50
Askari, 4 [316].

51
Askari, 5 [317] and 8–9 [321–22].

52
Askari, 5 [318].

an, Corbin wrote, "combined extraordinary physical beauty with great spiritual wisdom. She was for Ibn ʿArabi what Beatrice was to be for Dante; she was and remained for him the earthly manifestation, the theophanic figure, of *Sophia aeterna*."[53] Even if this person existed, Askari maintains, the relationship between her and Ibn ʿArabi has no bearing on the latter's writings.[54] A work like *Fusus al-Hikam*, Askari argues, can only be the product of a mind that has "risen far above the sphere of the psyche and its myriad conundrums." While Kierkegaard writes to disentangle his emotional problems, Ibn ʿArabi has already attained the level that Sufis call the "truth or reality of certainty." This, Askari contends, "contrary to what Corbin thinks . . . has nothing to do with 'creative imagination.' " Rather, he adds, "Ibn ʿArabi is writing by means of an ability that the East identifies as 'intellect' (*ʿaql*) and which René Guénon, in order to make it easier to understand for Westerners, has described as 'intellectual intuition.' "[55]

Related to Kierkegaard's and Ibn ʿArabi's respective methods of obtaining knowledge, and of the character of their respective works, are questions of authority and orthodoxy. Askari criticizes Kierkegaard for being the sole authority behind his own book. By contrast, Askari claims, "Ibn ʿArabi would have never dared to write a single word that did not accord with the Qurʾan and hadith."[56] Whereas Corbin sees antagonism between Ibn ʿArabi and the "collective conformism" of "exoteric religion," between "spiritual Islam" and "legalitarian Islam," Askari posits a harmony between Ibn ʿArabi and the normative, orthodox Islamic tradition. The Guénonian tenor of Askari's position is unmistakable. As Mark Sedgwick writes:

> [Guénon] not only condemned the idols of progress, civilization and science, but also attacked belief in originality, individualism, and sentimentality . . . For Guénon, truth was ancient, not new, and certainly not individual or "original" in the modern sense. Those who value what is new thus miss the value of ancient truth. Emphasis on the originality of individual ideas blocks access to true metaphysical ideas, which are neither original nor the creation or property of any one individual.[57]

Taking another page from Guénon, Askari highlights correspondences between Sufism and Vedanta to consolidate his representation of the "East."[58] According to him, Gide's defense of the West meant upholding multiplicity instead of unity, limited individuality instead of absolute being, and analytical intelligence, passion, and the senses, i.e., the psyche and the body, instead of spirit. Askari readily agrees with Gide's characterization of the Western mindset, but only to oppose it to the Eastern mindset, which in Askari's view transcends dualisms. He writes:

> In the East, there can be no question of contradiction or opposition. In every fibre of the Eastern civilization one finds the doctrine which Muslims call: unicity, and Hindus: non-duality. Ibn ʿArabi expressed very clearly that the affirmation of divine transcendence alone does not suffice, no more than the mere affirmation of immanence. The essential truth resides in

53
Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 52.

54
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 5 [317].

55
Askari, 5 [318].

56
Askari, 5–6 [318].

57
Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 106.

58
On the role of Vedanta for Guénon, see Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 52, 61, 140, 147–54, 175, 360.

> maintaining the perfect complementarity of transcendence and divine immanence. The point of view of Shankaracharya is exactly the same, and René Guénon insisted many times on this notion in his books. But Gide, who had read [Guénon's] books, decided to continue in his errors . . . René Guénon had felt that his writings would not be understood by Westerners, who had deliberately chosen to stick with Bacon and Descartes.[59]

According to Muhammad Memon, who translated Askari's essay into English, it "as a study in method and reasoning . . . remains without precedent or parallel in Urdu literary criticism."[60] Memon, however, in his otherwise detailed introduction, omits to mention the significant influence of Guénon on Askari. Taking this influence into account, we can note that Askari's approach, to a considerable degree, amounts to applying typical Traditionalist notions to Kierkegaard and Ibn ʿArabi. In his own way, Askari ventriloquizes Guénon, a tendency noticeable also among other Traditionalists. In Askari's case, this may even have been intentional. After all, as was already noted, Askari condemns originality as a symptom of Western individualism and praises the impersonality of the Eastern mind. Thus, he asserts that Ibn ʿArabi never dared to contradict the Qurʾan and the hadith. Similarly, we can observe that Askari did not dare to contradict Guénon, as he himself confessed at the end of his article:

> As far as Ibn ʿArabi is concerned, I am truly frightened of having failed at my task. Here, there is no room for misunderstanding or personal opinion.[61] At any rate, I have taken every precaution on my part and have been inspired in doing so by the works of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya (René Guénon). If I have made any mistake, consider it mine, and whatever I have presented correctly is thanks to Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya.[62]

A True "Guénonian"? Corbin's Response to Askari

Askari's article was followed by "some reflections" by Jean Wahl, at the time director of the *Revue* and a leading scholar of Kierkegaard and existentialism.[63] Wahl's reply consists of an almost point-by-point rebuttal of Askari's interpretation of Kierkegaard.[64] In contrast to Askari's cavalier attitude, Wahl's response, though condensed, is on the whole sincere and thoughtful (he made the decision, after all, to publish Askari's essay); he methodically considers, and mostly rejects, Askari's characterizations of Kierkegaard. Whereas Askari presents Kierkegaard as a sentimental author who was limited to purely human questions, Wahl contends that, no less than Ibn ʿArabi, Kierkegaard was concerned with the world of the soul and more-than-human realities.[65] Countering Askari's claim that Kierkegaard relied on his own individual authority, Wahl points out that the Danish philosopher insisted that his thinking and authorship were guided by Providence.[66] Askari's more patronizing statements are met with sarcasm. For instance, to Askari's claim that Guénon had translated *ʿaql* as "intellectual intuition" in order "to make it easier to understand for Westerners," Wahl "thanks [Askari] . . . for the generosity he has shown us

59
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 3 [314–315]. Other comparisons of Hinduism and Islam can be found on pp. 13 [327], 16 [331], and 17 [332].

60
Memon, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard,'" 310.

61
In the Urdu and English versions, there follows here a sentence curiously absent in the French version: "Nor is this kind of knowledge accessible through books" (Askari, "Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard," 334).

62
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 18 [334].

63
On Wahl, see Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France; 1927–1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 84–87.

64
Even Memon, who is rather sympathetic to Askari, notes that the latter's treatment of Kierkegaard "does raise some questions" and that "Askari [has] . . . insufficient regard to the historical context of [Kierkegaard's] ideas" (Memon, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard,' " 307).

65
Jean Wahl, "Quelques réflexions," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 1 (January-March 1963): 20–21. This text is included as an appendix at the end of Askari's article.

66
Wahl, "Quelques réflexions," 20–21.

[poor Westerners] by pointing the way for us."[67] Repudiating Askari's monolithic and essentialist views of the East and the West, Wahl states that "the West is not so easy to define, and neither, no doubt, is the East."[68] Rather than opposing East and West, Wahl affirms the "unity of humanity," seeing confluence between the summits of Eastern and Western thought. In sum, for Wahl, Askari's article adds little to our understanding and does not promote meaningful dialogue: "we are not aware that we have taken a single step forward," he concludes.[69]

While Wahl focused on Kierkegaard—a thinker, it bears mentioning, whom Corbin alongside Wahl and others helped introduce in France in the 1930s—Corbin's reply, which appeared in the next issue of the journal, was mainly concerned with Ibn ʿArabi. Written in the form of a letter addressed to the director of the periodical (Wahl), Corbin's response is noteworthy for multiple reasons.[70] For one, it is the only time ever that Corbin replied to one of his critics directly and publicly. This fact is all the more remarkable given that Corbin is only mentioned once in Askari's article. That Askari's passing criticism should have provoked Corbin to pen a forceful public rejoinder is in itself striking. It seems even more striking if one considers that Askari was (and remains) virtually unknown in France; his article in the *Revue* was his only work ever to appear in French.

Why, then, did Corbin—by then already an established scholar of Islam—dignify Askari's article with a reply? At least three overlapping reasons can be noted here. For one, given that Askari's article was published at the top of one of the most prominent journals for philosophical debates in France, Corbin might have felt pressured to defend his own scholarship.[71] After all, one of the main motives behind Corbin's work was to introduce non-specialist Western audiences to the Islamic philosophical tradition, which he thought had something vital to offer to the West.[72] Consequently, he was concerned with the reception of his work not only among historians of Islamic thought, but perhaps even more so among the wider French philosophical community, the main readership of the *Revue*. As for Askari's article—one of a precious few in the *Revue* to deal with Islam—it had considerable potential to shape the non-specialist perception of Ibn ʿArabi. For Corbin, there was much at stake. A second, related reason for which Corbin might have felt compelled to respond to Askari is that, despite the latter being unknown in France, his native Indo-Muslim credentials, suggested by his name and the fact that his article was originally written in Urdu, automatically imparted to Askari a quality of authenticity, the authority of a native. That is not to say Askari intended to manipulate Western readers. Indeed, as Memon in his introduction to the English translation of the article remarks, "Askari's intended audience is the insider—the Urdu reader and writer."[73] Nevertheless, the fact that the *Revue* published his article without any preface or information about the author probably contributed to Askari's mysteriousness. Shrouded in anonymity, Askari appeared on the French literary scene as a generic Indo-Muslim author; nothing was known about him, his background, or his qualifications. Yet rather than being a disadvantage, this may have only reinforced the impression of his nativity and "Orientality." His biographical erasure had the perhaps unintended effect of imparting a venerable quality to his voice, as that of one who is (in

67
Wahl, 20–21.

68
Wahl, "Quelques réflexions," 20.

69
Wahl, 24.

70
Henry Corbin, "Correspondance [lettre du 28 fév. 1963 au Directeur de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale (Jean Wahl) en réponse de l'article de Moh. Hasan Askari: 'Ibn ʿArabî et Kierkegaard']," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 2 (April-June 1963): 234–37.

71
On the history of the *Revue,* see Stéphan Soulié, *Les philosophes en République: L'aventure intellectuelle de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de philosophie; 1891–1914* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

72
Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought: Part I," 174–75.

73
Memon, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard,'" 307.

Guénon's words) an "authentic representative" of traditional Eastern doctrines.[74] This image of Askari would have served to add weight to his argument, reinforcing his claims about an impersonal character of "Eastern" metaphysics. Furthermore, it simultaneously confirmed and was confirmed by the Guénonian notion of the East as a guardian of Tradition.

Yet, despite the imperious tone of his article, Askari does not pretend to be an authority on Ibn ʿArabi. Rather, as we saw, Askari defers to Guénon—whom he names by his Muslim moniker, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya—as the ultimate authority on Ibn ʿArabi. This deference to Guénon by an Indo-Muslim writer no doubt played into what Mark Sedgwick has called the "myth of origin" or "sacred history" of Guénonian Traditionalism.[75] This "myth" posited that Guénon's ideas were not a synthesis of pre-existing theories, but rather, as the Traditionalist Jean Robin put it in 1978, a "mysterious body that . . . no study of sources can account for, and that one is obliged . . . to accept or refuse as a whole, as an inseparable and invariable whole from the beginning, pre-existing in its entirety."[76] Indeed, Askari's deference reinforces the Traditionalist belief that Guénon acquired his knowledge of Hindu and Islamic doctrines from the oral teaching of "Oriental masters." Consequently, as Sedgwick remarks, many Traditionalists—among whose ranks Askari can certainly be included—assumed "that they were accepting . . . an authoritative exposition of Oriental metaphysics, not the personal theories of one particular French esoteric philosopher."[77] Because Askari was Indian, his deference to Guénon would have been seen as further validation of this Traditionalist conviction. But for the same reason, Askari's Guénonism indirectly served to bolster his own authority as an authentic "Easterner." Thus, notwithstanding his apparent anti-modernism and anti-Westernism, Askari still relied on what was effectively a modern Western thinker. The irony was not lost on his critics.[78] Perhaps to avoid this paradox, Askari "orientalized" Guénon by presenting him as a Muslim shaykh, an authority on Eastern thought, and by disregarding his Western background. Contrary to this view, Corbin called attention to Guénon's "Western" sources and remarked that while some of Guénon's followers "believe that they speak as 'Orientals,' their 'occidentalism' is betrayed in their bias towards systematic rationalism."[79]

This brings us to the third and perhaps most significant reason for which Corbin saw fit to respond to Askari. This is the fact that Askari's article represented for Corbin a bold example of a widespread current of interpretation of Sufism based in the work and intellectual legacy of Guénon. Commonly referred to as the Traditionalist or the Perennialist School, this current includes influential figures such as Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and one of Corbin's own associates, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.[80] According to James Morris, the more or less covert influence of this school is "to be found virtually everywhere," both in academia and beyond, and also largely explains Ibn ʿArabi's invisible but "far-reaching influence in the West."[81] Sedgwick likewise connects the flourishing of Ibn ʿArabi studies in France with the "presence of accomplished Traditionalist scholars in French academia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries."[82] Corbin himself, in his pseudonymous and earliest publication at the age of twenty-four,

74
René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne (London: Luzac, 1942), 35, 51, 60, 151.

75
Mark Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 170–71.

76
Cited in Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," 171.

77
Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," 171.

78
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 167.

79
Corbin, "Correspondance," 236.

80
Nasr recalls how, after meeting Corbin in Iran in the fall of 1958, they "began immediately to discuss matters of mutual interest. At first, there was a certain friction between us, because [Corbin] was opposed to the position of Guénon and the traditionalist perspective in general, which was mine. At the same time, however, he himself was really the reviver of many aspects of traditional philosophy. Once he made a few harsh criticisms including personal attacks and I became angry. His attack during a meeting we had at the Institut Franco-Iranien was not against Guénon but against Burckhardt, who was also a very close personal friend of mine. So I got up and left the Institute. Then Stella Corbin, his wife, called me up and apologized that Corbin had said these things. She said, 'No, please, come. He wants to see you.' In any case, after that episode, I always took great care not to discuss such matters with him and so did he. I understood his idiosyncrasies and avoided matters that he disliked" (S. H. Nasr and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* [Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010], 92).

81
James Morris, "Ibn ʿArabī in the 'Far West': Visible and Invisible Influences," *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn ʿArabī Society* 29 (2001): 89, 106.

82
Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," 177.

acknowledged Guénon as a representative of "true esotericism," who debunked "theosophical" and "occultist" approaches to the study of Eastern traditions; Guénon's work, he stated at the time, "was an excellent introduction to the purely metaphysical point of view, to the domain of the 'formless' [*informel*], and we will often find ourselves in agreement with the rich suggestions scattered through it." Significantly, however, Corbin qualified his praise by expressing reservations about "Guénon's harsh criticism of all western philosophy and of European scientific methods."[83]

This last point underscores another key difference between Corbin and Guénonian Traditionalism, namely their different attitude as regards modern European philosophy. Following Guénon, Traditionalists tended to condemn modern philosophy as rationalistic and therefore incapable of accessing metaphysical realities.[84] Corbin took a more nuanced view: while rejecting rationalism, materialism, and atheism, he did not deny all value to modern Western philosophy, as evidenced by his interest in and appreciation of thinkers like Schelling and Kierkegaard, or even contemporaries like Heidegger, Berdyaev, and Souriau. This is because, for Corbin, truth is not and cannot be the property or exclusive privilege of something "out there," whether a particular historical period or a social order. Rather, it is located in the mystical encounter of the individual seeker with "what we tend to call the alter ego, who in Sufism, as in allied traditions, is the guardian angel who strangely is our own self."[85] This theme runs through Corbin's reading of Ibn ʿArabi and other mystics. Indeed, if his own lifework had any message, it is precisely that "each human being is *oriented* toward a quest for his personal invisible guide."[86] Hence, whereas Guénon rejected philosophy as expressing an individual and limited point of view, to which he opposed "metaphysics" as the proper content of a revealed body of sacred doctrine, expressing objective, universal truths, Corbin defended philosophy as a "personally lived adventure," wherein truth is not conceived as an abstract set of metaphysical propositions, but as the absolutely individual expression of the soul's encounter with its transcendent Self in "a figure that announces itself to the soul *personally* because it symbolizes *with* the soul's most intimate depths."[87] Therein, for Corbin, lies a lesson that can unite "philosophers of the Orient and philosophers of the Occident."[88]

Between that early article and his response to Askari some forty years later, there are, to my knowledge, no references to Guénon in Corbin's writings. Meanwhile, and without ever denying what he owed to Western philosophical and theological sources, Corbin worked primarily from Arabic and Persian texts, sometimes in collaboration with Muslim scholars, to develop an original interpretation of Islamic mystical spirituality. Having mastered those languages early on and with access to primary sources, Corbin felt no need to rely on Guénon for interpreting Islamic doctrines. But Guénon's ideas and influence, as already noted, continued to spread among Western students of Islam and Sufism over the next decades. Up until Askari's article, Corbin saw no need to criticize Guénonian Traditionalism explicitly in his writings, whether because of a lingering respect for Guénon or to avoid an unnecessary confrontation with the latter's followers. After Askari's article, however, the gloves were off: Corbin presumably had no reason

83
Trong-Ni [H. Corbin], "Regards vers l'Orient," *Tribune indochinoise*, August 15, 1927, 4. For a discussion of this text, see Xavier Accart, "Identité et théophanies: René Guénon (1886–1951) et Henry Corbin (1903–1978)," in "René Guénon, lectures et enjeux," *Politica Hermetica* 16 (2002): 176–200.

84
Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 46, 47, 105.

85
Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, xv.

86
Corbin, 33.

87
Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 4, 20.

88
Corbin, *Avicenna*, 4.

to hold back his objections to "Guénonism," especially since he was now the target of an apparently unprovoked and public attack by a self-styled disciple of Guénon; Corbin had little choice but to respond.

Corbin begins by questioning Askari's ostensible knowledge of Ibn ʿArabi. "There is no doubt," he writes, "that the author [i.e., Askari] read René Guénon, since he presents himself as his disciple. But we have the right to ask to what extent the author has personally read the works of Ibn ʿArabi." Corbin's irony permeates his response. Addressing Askari's claim that Corbin had invented a "Beatrice" for Ibn ʿArabi, Corbin sarcastically "[wonders] whether [Askari] has ever heard of a famous collection of poems entitled *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Ardent Desires), composed and commented on by Ibn ʿArabi himself." Furthermore, he writes:

> To claim that what Ibn ʿArabi, one of the greatest visionary theosophists of all time, writes is "essentially impersonal and not individual," without any link to his personal experiences, is to ignore completely that his great work (*The Revelations Received in Mecca*) is essentially based on his visionary experiences, his intuitions and his most personal dreams. Other than that, there is nothing personal or individual about this work . . .[89]

Corbin takes aim at what he sees as Askari's "rationalization" of Ibn ʿArabi. Askari had derided the importance that Corbin attributed to the "creative imagination" in Ibn ʿArabi, and instead, in Guénonian fashion, had prioritized the "pure intellect." Turning the tables on his critic, Corbin states that to translate *ʿaql* as "intellectual intuition" is to run the risk of "colouring everything . . . with an unavowed Spinozism that is out of place." For Corbin, this leads to a mutilation of Islamic spirituality, which he blames on a "fashionable" trend that hastily combines Sufism and Vedanta, imposing on Ibn ʿArabi and other Islamic mystics "a perspective and categories that are not their own."[90] To claim that metaphysical knowledge is obtained through the "pure intellect," beyond "mental" and "human" conditions, Corbin argues, is to neglect the fact that "our mystics in Islam have repeated this comparison over and over again: water necessarily takes on the colours of the vase that contains it."[91] For Corbin, the Guénonians' rationalization of Sufism goes hand in hand with the lack of references in their writings:

> The author of the article [i.e., Askari] gives the impression that I simply misunderstood Ibn ʿArabi when I spoke of his "creative imagination." The unfortunate thing is that it is not what I thought, but what Ibn ʿArabi's texts say. Does the author even know the extremely dense and exhaustive pages that Ibn ʿArabi devotes to the different aspects of Imagination? He doesn't even refer to them. If his method forbids any reference, is it because, willingly or not, everything in Ibn ʿArabi has to proceed from a knowledge whose sole organ is supposedly the pure intellect (*ʿaql*)?[92]

Askari had accused Corbin of distorting Ibn ʿArabi with Western presuppositions, but Corbin responds to the accusation with an accusation

89
Corbin, "Correspondance," 234.

90
Corbin, 235–36.

91
Corbin, 236. On Corbin's and the Perennialists' uses of Ibn ʿArabi's metaphor of the vase, see Gregory A. Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ʿArabi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24–54.

92
Corbin, 235. Corbin's remark, while not aimed at Guénon directly, recalls Antoine Faivre's characterization of Guénon as the "Descartes of esotericism" (A. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin [New York: State University of New York Press, 1994], 101).

of his own. Askari and other "authors" (i.e., Traditionalists), Corbin writes, "believe that they speak as 'Orientals,' " when in fact "their 'occidentalism' is betrayed in their bias towards systematic rationalism, which Ibn ʿArabi would have never admitted." Indeed, "Guénonism" appears to Corbin as a "typically Western phenomenon."[93] Thus, Corbin highlights the irony of the Traditionalists' alleged anti-Westernism:

> I don't think I can be suspected of being among those who deliberately remain on the side of Bacon and Descartes. But it is precisely for this reason that I reject a one-sided and restrictive interpretation of "Eastern" thought. This interpretation constructs a certain idea of the East, which is linked to a critique of the West; but it is curious that the inspiration and implementation of this critique should derive precisely from the categories of Western thought.[94]

Furthermore, Corbin rejects Askari's characterization of Ibn ʿArabi as an "orthodox" thinker who never wrote a line that disagreed with the Qurʾan and the hadith. Rather, Ibn ʿArabi's approach to the normative sources of the Islamic tradition, according to Corbin, should be understood in light of the "fundamental problem of *taʾwīl* (spiritual exegesis), the relationships between *ẓāhir* (the apparent, literal meaning) and *bāṭin* (the inner, hidden meaning)." In other words, the true, spiritual meaning of the Qurʾan remains hidden, personal, outside legal uses and the grasp of common consciousness. For this reason, Corbin argues, Ibn ʿArabi's "orthodoxy" should not be confused "with that of a Church that does not exist in Islam, and above all so that we understand why this superior 'orthodoxy,' which is the true one, happens to be something that the banal common 'orthodoxy' of Islam does not want to hear about."[95] To be fair, the notion of harmony between shariʿa (Law) and *ḥaqīqa* (the most secret of truths)—corresponding respectively to the "outer" and "inner" dimensions of Islam—has a long pedigree in Sufism, and can certainly be found in Ibn ʿArabi.[96] This Sufi notion also influenced Guénon, who, after moving to Egypt and living as an observant Muslim, revised his earlier understanding of the relative dispensability of exoteric religion, beginning instead "to emphasize the necessity of an orthodox exoteric religious frame for the metaphysical realization that was the aim of the primordial tradition."[97] In a posthumously published article, "The Necessity of Traditional Exoterism" (1952), Guénon went so far as to claim that, given the growing gap between the "profane" nature of modern life and spiritual truth, "adherence to an exoterism . . . is a preliminary condition for coming to esoterism."[98] Corbin, by contrast, argued that "it is hopeless to attempt to integrate an esoteric tradition with the dogmatic tradition of a magistery, which by its very nature excludes it."[99] Furthermore, Corbin claims that the Guénonian notion of metaphysics

> which claims to be so "pure," is strangely in tune with the intellectual fashion of the day in so many areas. Denouncing and devaluing everything that has to do with personal individuality. Fleeing into the impersonal and the spirit of "orthodoxy." De-

93 Corbin, "Correspondance," 236.

94 Corbin, 237.

95 Corbin, 236.

96 Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, The Book, and the Law*, trans. David Streight (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 101.

97 Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 180–81.

98 Cited in Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 181.

99 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 90.

> nouncing "interiority" as "the greatest temptation," whereas all our Spirituals are pilgrims of the "interior world."[100]

[100] Corbin, "Correspondance," 237.

[101] Corbin, 236.

Corbin's ire appears to be aimed more at "Guénonism" than at Guénon himself. Indeed, he appears to distinguish between a "true" understanding of Guénon and a dogmatic, rigid interpretation of his work. Corbin gives due regard to Askari for "courageously [claiming] to follow" Guénon, adding that reading the works of Guénon "can, at some point in one's life, provoke a salutary shock." This admission may well be autobiographical given Corbin's early appreciation of Guénon mentioned above. Guénon's appeal for Corbin, however, appears to have been quite short-lived; it was already well in the rearview by the time he published his earliest works on Islamic thought at the beginning of the 1930s. Therefore, in his response to Askari, Corbin states that "anyone who has devoted his life to seeing the texts for himself will find it impossible to accept that the last word has been said in René Guénon's work, that the 'true' and definitive interpretation is his own." Curiously, however, he adds that a "true 'Guénonian' is rather one who refuses to get bogged down in a one-sided and deadly dogmatism, which is worse than what Westerners are accused of."[101] Unfortunately, Corbin does not expand here on what he understands by "a true 'Guénonian.' " This cryptic reference is made all the more ambiguous by the fact that Corbin places the word "Guénonian" in scare quotes, suggesting that the reference is not to Guénon as such, but perhaps to what he represented in a general sense, namely an attempt to regenerate Western thought with the help of Eastern intellectual traditions. In this case, the true "Guénonian" is one who, like Corbin, followed that calling.

But if the reference is to Guénon specifically, Corbin's apparent homage may contain an allusion to the fact that, for all his insistence on the need to conform to tradition and orthodoxy, Guénon was actually a pathbreaking and nonconformist thinker who boldly rejected the accepted intellectual standards of his time; moreover, Guénon always refused to have disciples of any kind and to be seen as the founder of any school. While Corbin may have admired Guénon for these reasons, and therefore might have even been willing on this occasion to imagine himself as a true "Guénonian" (recalling his above-mentioned early endorsement of Guénon as an exponent of "true esotericism") or as someone faithful to the spirit of Guénon, he was far less well disposed to Guénon's followers insofar as they transformed the latter's ideas into a "one-sided and deadly dogmatism" at odds with the independent spirit of their progenitor. For, as was noted earlier, true esotericism for Corbin entails spiritual autonomy, liberation from "collective conformism." Consequently, for Corbin, the source of spiritual degradation is not the so-called "modern world" ("what Westerners are accused of") but rather the "exoteric" attitude ("a one-sided and deadly dogmatism") prevalent throughout most of human history. In his conclusion, Corbin refers to his collaborations with Iranian shaykhs who

> know very well that in the East as in the West, there has never been and there will never be more than a small number of people to understand these things. But a Meister Eckhart and a Jacob Boehme

would have understood Ibn ʿArabi perfectly, and vice versa.[102]

Conclusion

This article examined the literary feud between Corbin and Askari both to throw light on the reception of Ibn ʿArabi in the twentieth century and to clarify the poorly understood relationship between Corbin and Guénonian Traditionalism. With respect to the latter point, the above discussion should be seen as preliminary to a comprehensive treatment that would take into account the entirety of Corbin's output and a wider range of topics in order to examine his relationships with different Traditionalist thinkers—some of whom, unlike Askari, were partly also influenced by him, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Philip Sherrard—and to highlight divergences as well as convergences between them. This is a project for a different time.

One question persists at the end of this article: why, given its awful quality, did the *Revue* see fit to publish Askari's article? One hypothesis is that it appeared typical, almost to the point of caricature, of what Corbin called a "fashionable" trend of "Guénonism," and so Wahl published it only to have it refuted. Corbin highlighted the incoherence of Askari's anti-Westernism and anti-modernism, contending that the latter's construction of a timeless, monolithic "Eastern" identity is itself a "typically Western phenomenon." As for Corbin's transhistorical approach to Sufism and related traditions, it has been welcomed by some Muslim scholars and practitioners in Iran (and beyond). As Matthijs van den Bos puts it, "paradoxically, Corbin's disembodied representations have now become 'Shiism from the point of view of Shiism itself' in Iran."[103] Of course, as Askari's own example showcases, Guénonian Traditionalism has had a no less far-reaching influence in the Islamic world.

Consequently, beyond their differences, Askari and Corbin illustrate what Mark Sedgwick describes as the globalization of Sufism, which has made it "increasingly difficult to distinguish West from non-West, and where intercultural transfer is being superseded by transcultural spaces that ignore boundaries between cultures."[104] Their responses to globalization, however, differed. Whereas Askari retreated into Islamic anti-Westernism, Corbin affirmed a transhistorical esoteric spirituality for which he found validation across national and cultural boundaries: from the post-confessional, international milieu of Eranos, to traditional Shiʿi interlocutors in Iran.

In conclusion, the Askari-Corbin feud is not just a scholarly debate about the historical Ibn ʿArabi but also illustrates contemporary expressions and uses of Sufism. Both Corbin and the Traditionalists are not simply external observers, but respectively also re-interpreters and continuators of Ibn ʿArabi's spiritual legacy. As James Morris observes, "Corbin's personal example—his indefatigable seeking, ecumenical breadth of interests, and wide-ranging efforts of communication—is likely to serve in the future as an inspiration almost as significant as the many particular earlier figures and traditions he so effectively helped to rediscover."[105] The same surely holds true for Guénon and some of his followers.

102 Corbin, "Correspondance," 237.

103 Matthijs van den Bos, "Transnational Orientalism: Henry Corbin in Iran," *Anthropos* 100 (2005): 122.

104 Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism from the Abbasids to the New Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 249.

105 James W. Morris, "Religions after Religions? Henry Corbin and the Future of the Study of Religion," in *Henry Corbin: Philosophies et sagesses des religions du livre*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet, and Pierre Lory (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 39.

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Appendix

Henry Corbin's Response to Mohammad Hasan Askari's Article "Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard," in Revue de métaphysique et de morale 68, no. 2 (April-June 1963): 234–237.

28 February 1963

Mr. Director

I thank you for sending me a copy of Mr. Mohammad Hasan Askari's article in which I am implicated.

At first sight, the association of the two names: "Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard" came as something of a surprise to me. Can the comparative method afford simply to juxtapose two terms? Wouldn't it have been better to have an analogy of relationships, and for that to have four terms? On reading the article, I had the impression that it was so far off the mark that every page would have to be rewritten. Your pertinent "reflections" do justice to what is imputed to Kierkegaard. I shall therefore confine myself to what concerns me by name.

There is no doubt that the author has read René Guenon, since he refers to himself as his disciple. But one is entitled to wonder to what extent the author has personally read Ibn ʿArabi's works in the original. In any case, I doubt that he has ever read or understood my book on the *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*. The way in which he calls me into question, without giving any reference, could lead one to believe that I made it all up. So I need to set the record straight.

To claim that what Ibn ʿArabi, one of the greatest visionary theosophists of all time, writes is "essentially impersonal and not individual," without any relation to his personal experiences, is to ignore completely that his great work (*The Revelations Received in Mecca*) is essentially based on his visionary experiences, his intuitions and his most personal dreams. Other than that, there is nothing personal or individual about this work . . .

Reading the author of the article, one might think that I had invented the personage of Ibn ʿArabi's "Beatrice" out of thin air. One wonders whether the author has ever heard of a famous collection of poems entitled *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Ardent Desires), composed and commented on by Ibn ʿArabi himself. Thanks to this book, we are perfectly familiar with the character of this "Beatrice," her family and Ibn ʿArabi's relations with them. She even appears allusively elsewhere in his work. Without her, some of Ibn ʿArabi's pages on the dialectic of love would not have been written. Nevertheless, it is not necessary, we are told, to establish any relationship "between this fact and the substance of Ibn ʿArabi's books." The unitive fusion of the

lover and the beloved, of the knower and the known object, inspired many of Ibn ʿArabi's other poems. Despite this, we are told that he is not a poet.

The author of the article gives the impression that I simply misunderstood Ibn ʿArabi when I spoke of his "creative imagination." The unfortunate thing is that it is not what I thought, but what Ibn ʿArabi's texts say. Does the author even know the extremely dense and exhaustive pages that Ibn ʿArabi devotes to the different aspects of the Imagination? He doesn't even refer to them. If his method forbids any reference, is it because, willingly or not, everything in Ibn ʿArabi has to proceed from a knowledge whose sole organ is supposedly the pure intellect (*ʿaql*)?

Let's ask ourselves, in passing, whether Westerners really needed things to be "made easier" for them by translating the word *ʿaql* as "intellectual intuition." We simply run the risk of colouring everything in this way with an unavowed Spinozism that is out of place. Since the 12th century, it has been known in the West that *ʿaql* is *intellectus* and *intellectio*, *nous* and *noesis*. Unfortunately, however, the translation of the word as "intellectual intuition" is far from covering all the meanings, functions, and aspects of the notion of *ʿaql*. The *ʿaql qudsī* (*intellectus sanctus*) is not quite what we commonly call the pure intellect. Moreover, it is also far from the case that our authors limit the source of their higher knowledge to the *ʿaql* alone, considered as the pure intellect. There is a multitude of technical terms (*ilhām*, *himma*, *kashf*, *shuhūd*, *mushāhada*, *mukāshafa*, etc.) that indicate something quite different, and which require us to refer to the *ʿaql* with the *qalb*, the *heart* (the *Gemüt*). It is significant that, not once, does the author of the article pronounce the latter word, nor the term *maʿrifa qalbiyya.*

The impression that emerges is that of an alteration, unconscious perhaps, but seriously mutilating the perspective of the great Spirituals of Islam. Rather than hastily relating them to India and Vedanta, as is the fashion of the day, it would be more fruitful to study the great texts in which the different Schools of Islamic spirituality expressed themselves in Arabic and Persian. There was esotericism in Islam long before Ibn ʿArabi, even if the texts are not always easily accessible to us. Above all, we must not impose on our authors a perspective and categories that are not their own.

The author of the article courageously claims to follow René Guenon. I have no doubt that reading the works of René Guenon can, at some point in one's life, provoke a salutary shock. The author refers us to the example of André Gide. Unfortunately, André Gide could not go and see for himself what Eastern texts were all about. However, anyone who has devoted his life to seeing the texts for himself will find it impossible to accept that the last word has been said in René Guenon's work, that the "true" and definitive interpretation is his own. A true "Guénonian" is rather one who refuses to get bogged down in a one-sided and deadly dogmatism, which is worse than what Westerners are accused of. We forget to remind ourselves of René Guenon's "Western" sources, and we also forget that there is a mass of Arabic and Persian texts that one man alone could not have reached.

The example given above concerning the word *ʿaql* is particularly typical. It reveals in a certain "Guénonism" and in its criticism of

the West, a typically Western phenomenon. Although the authors of these criticisms believe that they speak as "Orientals," their "occidentalism" is betrayed in their bias towards systematic rationalism, which Ibn ʿArabi would never have admitted. Some evidence of this can be gleaned throughout the article.

We are told of a metaphysical knowledge [acquired] through the pure intellect, which would be neither "mental" nor "human." Yet our mystics in Islam have repeated this comparison over and over again: water necessarily takes on the colour of the vase that contains it. This raises the question of the colour of the vase.

We are told of an "orthodoxy" so strict that Ibn ʿArabi never wrote a line that disagreed with the Qurʾan and the hadith. But first we need an explanation of the fundamental problem of *taʾwīl* (spiritual exegesis), the relationships between *ẓāhir* (the apparent, literal meaning) and *bāṭin* (the inner, hidden meaning), a problem posed from the very beginning in Islam, well before Ibn ʿArabi. I say this so that we do not confuse this "orthodoxy" with that of a Church that does not exist in Islam, and above all so that we understand why this superior "orthodoxy," which is the true one, happens to be something that the banal common "orthodoxy" of Islam does not want to hear about.

We are told that it is absurd to look for a difference between East and West, but we are told that the work of the initiate is not within the power of Europeans, that Western thinkers are incapable of perceiving the difference between the concept of the *general* and the concept of the *universal*. We should remember that this fundamental distinction goes back to Avicenna's metaphysics, which posits the idea of an essence that is indifferent in itself to both the "general" and the "particular." But this in no way authorizes the misinterpretation which defines the general as "the repetition of particularity and individuality." It is no better to translate the notion in question by the term *universal* as contrasting with the *general*, because the two words are too often mistaken for each other. Unfortunately, it is this bias towards the "universal" that leads to reducing the *Intelligentia agens* to a "universal intellect," and to reducing the Perfect Man (the *Anthropos teleios*) to a "universal" Man.

The most worrying thing is that this metaphysics, which claims to be so "pure," is strangely in tune with the intellectual fashion of the day in so many areas. Denouncing and devaluing everything that has to do with personal individuality. Fleeing into the impersonal and the spirit of "orthodoxy." Denouncing "interiority" as "the greatest temptation," whereas all our Spirituals are pilgrims of the "interior world."

I don't think I can be suspected of being among those who deliberately remain on the side of Bacon and Descartes. But it is precisely for this reason that I reject a one-sided and restrictive interpretation of "Eastern" thought. This interpretation constructs a certain idea of the East, which is linked to a critique of the West; but it is curious that the inspiration and implementation of this critique should derive precisely from the categories of Western thought.

I have spent almost twenty years in the East. I know, in Iran in particular, some admirable shaykhs who continue a venerable tradition in which Ibn ʿArabi occupies an important (but not unique) place. Their books are very different from what we can read in the article in ques-

tion and others like it. They know very well that in the East as in the West, there has never been and there will never be more than a small number of people to understand these things. But a Meister Eckhart and a Jacob Boehme would have understood Ibn ʿArabi perfectly, and vice versa. I experienced this when I had some of Meister Eckhart's sermons translated into Persian for a study group with our shaykhs.

It is a meeting of this kind that today we should finally make possible. You conclude your "few reflections" on the article in question with a melancholy observation: "We are not aware that we have taken a single step forward." I'm very much afraid that, if we were to apply and generalize the author's method, we would take several steps backwards at every encounter.

Yours sincerely,

Henry Corbin