THE VOYAGE AND THE MESSENGER

IRAN AND PHILOSOPHY

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Problem and Method in Religious History*

Only rarely does a publication such as this offer scholars the opportunity to explain what they hope to accomplish, and why they are motivated to do it. In this jubilee edition, our department of religious studies has invited each of us to ask the question: why? For my own part, the answer begins with the simple fact of the existence of such a department in this school. The educational tradition of the *Ecole pratique des hautes études* itself, with its yearly invitation to new intellectual adventures, based on the Chair's own recent research, was what launched me on a career of Oriental studies. This in turn led me to guide others towards research into unexplored areas of religion and spirituality.

This reminds me of the wonder I felt as a young philosophy student attending Etienne Gilson's seminars in medieval philosophy beginning in 1924. It was a time when there were not so many seminars, interdisciplinary colloquia, round tables, etc. Challenges to the old "magisterial" style of education had not yet begun. Actually, it was Professor Gilson who showed us the essential virtue of this magisterial style. The master worked and thought aloud in front of his students, demonstrating the difficulties one encountered in texts, and how to solve them.

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"Learning how to work" is a slogan we often hear today — but inasmuch as this work is an art, we might also ask, to what extent can it be learned? Etienne Gilson showed us how to work with a text experientially, and when this text finally began to emerge into the light of day, it was like a celebration of the mind.

Now, the years in which I took part in this celebration happened to be those which Gilson had assigned to an exploration of medieval Latin translations from the Arabic writings of Avicenna. At that time, this was an unusual departure from the typical faculty curriculum. Here is the question which it aroused in me: would it be best to stick with studying the conventional wise men of philosophy, or perhaps take off on a major adventure, by fully committing myself to the path which Avicenna had opened up for me? This is not the only time the destiny of a whole life has been played out in the sanctuary of our school. Thus it was that I began my Arabic studies, which in turn led to Persian, and the many consequences thereof.

As Chair of Islamic studies in our department, my memories of my immediate predecessors are like those of a spiritual family, since they were also my teachers. Gaudefroy-Demembynes, whose moving obituary Massignon wrote in our 1958–59 yearbook, had initiated several generations of students into the arcana of Arabic grammar, and the Qur'an. As for Massignon himself, I have written elsewhere (in the 1963–64 *Annuaire*) about the vision he inspired in me, as well as my vision of him as a person. But I would like to mention a special gesture of his towards me. He attached a special significance to the personal gift of a book, especially when it was a rare book based on an ancient manuscript. In such a case, the gift from master to student was also like a symbolic transmission of a lineage of thought. Thus it was, that in 1928 he presented me with a copy

of the voluminous lithographed Iranian edition of a work by Suhrawardi, with commentary by Mullah Sadra Shirazi. He had brought it back from a trip to Iran.

This gesture was the seal of my destiny as a scholar. I was drawn into a path which led me to become the editor of Suhrawardi's works. Then Suhrawardi took me far away from my comfortable position at the Bibliothèque nationale: because of him, I wound up spending six years in Turkey as "guardian" of the *Institut français d'archéologie* in Istanbul during the whole of WWII. This was followed by ten years in Iran, where I had the responsibility of organizing the Iranian studies department of the *Institut franco-iranien* in Teheran.

In 1954, when I was offered the honor of succeeding Louis Massignon in our department, I had been living in Islamic countries for some sixteen years. Besides the years in Turkey, I had also spent time in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. But I had been especially affected by the years in Iran, my country of choice and affinity. The contact with its people and their history, their books and problems, is what informs my answer to the question which began this essay.

Certainly none of us can hope to cover more than a limited portion of the open potential which is implicit in the name of our field of studies. Such a name should not be used as a catch-all, like one of those bank windows for general operations of all sorts. Yet it is essential to be ready to welcome the new initiatives which young researchers may present. It is the Chair who should take personal responsibility for exploring those areas previously neglected, or those recently opened up by new and interesting discoveries. In my case, training and inclination clearly ordained a career in Islamic studies.

My own approach to Islamic studies was that of a philoso-

pher. The concern was to open new accesses to the great, often unpublished works which express the highest levels of the spiritual consciousness of Islam. There were few predecessors to guide me in this. Ever since Islamicists have existed in the West, there has been a lamentable lack of any vocation among philosophers regarding Islamic subjects which are of direct concern to philosophy. The age-old assumption has been that the main interest and content of Islamic philosophy concerns its influence on our medieval Latin Scholastics. This neglect has ignored the very existence of intellectual masterpieces which manifest a confluence of spiritual currents. In fact, these turn out to be of great interest for contemporary studies in comparative religion — for example, research in Islamic gnosticism affects and is affected by research relating to recent discoveries of Gnostic manuscripts.

This means that the Orientalist philosopher — or more precisely in this case, the Islamicist philosopher — has yet to find a proper place or function. When one attempts a philosophical lecture at an Orientalist conference, the distracted looks and nodding heads seem to suggest that one has gone a bit too far afield. With an audience of philosophers, on the other hand, one generally gains their full attention. Unfortunately, however, the citation of certain names and technical terms needs too much explanation, because no one is familiar with them. This very situation shows how important it is to restore the communication between these two worlds as it existed for an all too brief period during the twelfth century.

I have made liberal use of the word "philosophy" here. Yet it is inadequate to our task, if it be used in the narrow modern sense that it has taken on in the West — and the reasons for this divergence would entail an entire investigation in itself. It has long been noted that the Arabic term hikmat ilahiya is the exact

equivalent of the Greek θεοσοφια: metaphysics is thus designated as theosophy. In fact, all the great thinkers whom we have mentioned have been philosopher-theologians, or theosophists. Whereas philosophy is based only on the faculty of the intellect, and theology is based upon tradition *(naql)*, theosophy makes use of the faculty of inner intuition *(kashf)*, which reveals horizons of spiritual worlds. The noetic value of this faculty, or organ, is fully and directly recognized in the East. The confluence of these three sources is only possible through the action of the third. Ever since Suhrawardi, this confluence is what especially characterizes those who have expressed the highest spiritual consciousness of Iranian Islam. Their position is quite different from that of someone like Averroës. Although it is true that Averroës marked an end of something in the western Islamic world, something much vaster continued to develop in eastern Islam. There is a contrast here, which we might characterize as that of the destiny of Latin Avicennism, as compared with that of Iranian Avicennism. This is the context in which a former student of Gilson was led to find a home in the spiritual universe of Iranian Islam.

To speak of Iranian Islam is in fact to speak of Shiite Islam, and for a philosopher with an Islamicist vocation, this adds yet another difficulty. For a number of reasons (especially the distance and the difficult access to sources) the study of Shiite theology has long been completely neglected. Much worse, certain prejudicial notions regarding Shiism have led to summary and even offensive judgments on the part of Orientalists. On the other hand, it is an interesting question as to why it is that a great Islamic philosophical and theosophical tradition has thrived in Shiite settings right down to our time. It has produced powerful works which are both traditional and profoundly original. A philosopher of religious studies must be

above all prejudices which denigrate religious minorities — moreover, it is well-known that significant religious developments tend to appear first among just such minorities. We might add that in contemporary circumstances, Iranian Islam has the virtue of showing the properly religious and trans-national vocation of Islam.[†] The vast *Iranian* theological literature, written in *Arabic,* continues to bear witness to the role of Arabic as the liturgical language of Islam. These writings are an integral part of that spiritual Islam which also includes theological and mystical literature written in Persian.

It is not hard to see how the study of such an immense literature became a field of choice for me. And I am happy to point out that it is only under the auspices of our department of religious studies, and nowhere else, that I could have carried out this work of analysis and classification of massive tomes, lithographs, and manuscripts — all the material collected during my years in Iran, which had never been translated into any European language.

As we have understood it in our department, the chair of Islamic studies has its own specific task, which should not duplicate that of Islamic studies departments elsewhere. We have the privilege of dealing with monumental intellectual works, whose content surpasses all expectations of programs based on previously known material. Its task is carried out alongside that of our other colleagues who are involved with what we have begun to call "theological religions." For such religions, there is no possible confusion of religious studies with social science. The works of these thinkers do have their own

[†] [Translator's note: Henry Corbin died shortly before the Khomeini revolution in Iran. On many occasions, he encouraged Iranian intellectuals to anchor themselves in their own cultural traditions, while avoiding both extremes of Islamic fundamentalism and Western materialism.]

"social milieu," but their world is essentially that of the spirit, as we learn by going through their works. This should never be confused with some "milieu" by which one might be tempted to "explain" them, applying categories which were not theirs, and inserting them into a world and a history which are not theirs. A fitting attempt to repay my debt to this department might be my own efforts towards shedding light on the works of a great number of philosophers of Islam, just as my own teacher Etienne Gilson did for us in those days with the texts of Latin Avicennism. A well-known saying has it that the courses one elects to teach in maturity are those one would have liked to attend in one's youth.

It is my belief that I will succeed in my endeavor to the exact extent that I was able to benefit from the legacy of my illustrious predecessor, Louis Massignon. We might well summarize his methods and intentions by recalling his own antipathy for what he called "nominalist historical criticism." He maintained that the gnostic interpretation of a personage does not substitute some sort of unreal ghostly survival for an authentic human presence. Instead, it expresses the need for a comprehensive explanation which embraces several levels of being and consciousness. Hence the tradition must not be *a* priori called into question because of such interpretations.[1] He refused to accept the notion that the Prophet built Islam by some conscious, ingenious mixture of Judaeo-Christian elements drawn from here and there; likewise for the notion that the Qur'an is the result of methodical borrowings from various Arabic dialects, and even from Aramaic and Ethiopian.[2] Louis Massignon also proposed some excellent formulas for reading the

[1] *Opera Minora,* I, 448.

[2] *Ibid.,* II, 604-05

hadith, such as his idea that "the purely formal critique of the *isnad* (chains of transmission) should never have gone beyond its negative role of the servant who sweeps out the house,"[3] and that "a *hadith* does not attain currency among believers because of its date of origin, but because of its substance."[4] He also foresaw that the *hadith qudsi* (inspired *hadith*) could benefit from an "understanding" inspired by the principle of *Formgeshichte* (what we now call *Redaktionsgeshichte*). This would bring more rigor and success than with other methods of interpretation. I would also add that this applies to certain of the Shiite *hadith,* especially the homilies *(khotab).*

I have never been able to understand the obscure reasons for his exclusion of certain individuals and spiritual schools of Islam from the light of his intuitive understanding. But I do believe that my own extension of the spirit of his method to these neglected areas has established an essentially positive link between them and Massignon's teaching. It might seem that the motivations which inspired my extension would alter this relationship; yet such an alteration amounts to no more than the exclusion of an exclusion, the negation of a negation.

There were those who objected to Massignon's method on the grounds that it risked confusing history as science with history as testimony. I do not believe this objection can be taken seriously by anyone who is fully aware of the hidden assumptions of historical consciousness as such, as well as the challenges which philosophers and metaphysicians have raised regarding the excesses of naive historicism. It would be more appropriate to question the process of imposing certain kinds of critical judgement which are based on a mode of perception

[3] *Essai,* p. 123

[4] *Ibid.,* p. 125

of things which is entirely foreign to those who perceive the religious objects we are studying — after all, it is only by virtue of their perceptions that we are able to study them. There is a polarity between the object which is shown, and the person to whom it is shown. In order for the scholar to be able to speak of it, the object must also show itself to him, so that a new polarity is established.

What are the conditions that produce such *understanding?* Where is the scholar's place in this polarity? Over the course of my own long career, I would readily answer that the method has been and continues to be essentially "phenomenological." But in order to avoid misunderstandings, I must specify that this implies absolutely no sort of adherence to any existing school of phenomenology. I am using this term in the original sense of *sozein ta fainomena* (saving the phenomena). In other words, how are we to "save" the religious phenomenon as it appears to the person for whom it is, and without whom it could never appear? Of course we may still study the Qur'an critically, taking its peculiarities into account in light of philological explications, which we may even judge to be far superior to those of the *mufassirin.* But what are we to make of reconstructions of it according to our hypotheses, in which we are finally left with a Qur'an which has never been read by any believer? The authentic religious *fact* which should be the primary concern of our religious studies, is the Qur'an as it has been read and understood by believers, and even more so, by those of high spirituality. The interpretations of believers show us the religious "object," and without them we would never see it.

This is why I speak even more readily of a *hermeneutic* of the religious phenomenon, which reveals to us both the phenomenon and those to whom it is manifest. The word

"hermeneutic" has become fashionable lately, but this is not how I am using it. I would rather invoke it as it was used long ago by our much-missed colleague Alexandre Koyré. In those days (1937–1939), when invited to assist him while he was directing a special conference, I was already involved in examining the application of Luther's hermeneutic in the lived experience of the *significatio passiva*. This brings to mind another person of whom we were all fond, Jean Baruzi. His lectures at the Collège de France were extraordinarily stimulating — I think especially of those on Sebastian Franck, Weigel, Schwenckfeld, Boehme, etc. This resulted in my establishing deep links with the world of Germanic scholarship. Since that seems to have been the occasion for some confusion regarding my own biography, I would like to take this opportunity to set things straight. Because I was the first French translator of Heidegger, someone wrote that, disappointed by Existentialist philosophy, I subsequently sought refuge in Islamic mysticism. This is sheer fantasy. My first publications in Islamic mysticism date from 1933 and 1935, well before my translation of Heidegger in 1938. No, there are simpler explanations for the various wanderings and pilgrimages of a philosopher.

Their totality forms a continuous path. All of us leave the traces of it in the reports contained in our *Annuaire* [Yearbook], which can be a way of "dating" events, even when our publications are spread out over time. Looking over several years of these reports, one notices that they form sort of a journal of our research. Anyone can consult these, and I would hope not to have to repeat their contents. However, it might be useful to summarize certain steps, since they only appear in hindsight.

The first thing I should mention is the guiding orientation of the "phenomenon of sacred revealed Scripture," which is common to all Abrahamic religions and theologies. The great question for all believers is the true meaning of Scripture. Once it is postulated that this true meaning is the inner, spiritual one (*batin*, or esoteric), hidden under the literal surface appearance (*zahir*), the phenomenon of sacred Scripture implies an entire theory of gnosis, with a hierarchical principle of modes of "understanding" — in sum, a hermeneutic.

The Shiite phenomenon thus appeared to me in an essentially hermeneutic way, as in the monumental *Tafsir Mir'at al-Anwar* of Abu'l-Hasan Sharif Isfahani (seventeenth century), which is a veritable *Clavis hermeneutica*. From beginning to end, this hermeneutical key is the very idea of the *walayat* of the Imam, as the esoteric sense of prophetic revelation. This work was only one such incomplete attempt to lay out the *body of hadith* of the Imams for each verse of the Qur'an. Of enormous proportions, this body represents the very teaching which passed from Imam to disciple over the first three centuries of the Hegira. It is the basic hermeneutic particular to Shiism, seen as a spiritual hermeneutic of the Qur'an (*ta'wil, tahqiq* and *tafhim*). Chapters and verses have also been singled out for considerable amplification. One example we considered was the Surat (Chapter) known as the "Throne" (*Ayat al-Korsi*, 2–256). From among the many commentaries, I selected those of Mullah Sadra Shirazi and Sayyed Kazem Reshti. These commentators show us what a powerful stimulant the teaching of the Imams was for philosophical and theosophical meditations. This would already provide one answer for the question we asked earlier, as to how it is that Islamic philosophy has continued in Shiite contexts right down to the present time.

This question is not just our own: it was forcefully posed by Mullah Sadra Shirazi himself, and passed on to his disciples. We also find that the Fifth Imam formulated some golden rules of hermeneutics which have a curious resonance with contempo-

rary questions. All of this barely begins to suggest the possible research in comparative *ta'wil*. The *hadith* of the Prophet referring to seven levels of esoteric depth of the Qur'an has shaped an entire *Tafsir* of at least one Sufi master, 'Alauddawleh Semnani (died 1336 C.E.). Ismaili gnosticism is a continuous process of *ta'wil*. The great work entitled *Asas al-ta'wil*, by Qazi No'man (died 974 C.E.), contains a systematic development of the correspondences between earthly and heavenly hierarchies, thereby revealing the real agents in humanity's hidden history. This hierohistory, as it were, is that of a *Da'wat* which begins "in Heaven," continuing from prophet to prophet, and consummating itself only with our *Aion*. In the guise of external events, Qur'anic passages lead us back to hidden events which are entirely real, but of an order which is other than that of visible events. In the verses about the immaculate conception of Jesus and his prophetic mission, for example, the Ismaili hermeneutic decodes the "cipher" of an initiatory history. Research in comparative *ta'wil* leads us to encounter the different aspects informing the ways in which spiritual people have meditated and lived the Qur'an: the aspects of the religious fact in its essence. This literature is so vast that even a long career of studying it has barely enabled me to cross the thresholds into a few avenues.

The same is true of my researches into *Ishraq*, as well as Ismailism, Sufism, and "Imamism" (i.e., the theology and theosophy of Twelver Shiism). But these studies have at least borne some preliminary fruits. Faithful to the call which set me upon this path, I devoted an entire period (1954–1961) to Suhrawardi, which also was a period of studying the vast commentary which forms one of the dense and voluminous works of Mullah Sadra Shirazi. The latter was the greatest figure of what I term the "Isfahan School." He was the guiding thinker

for several generations of philosophers continuing right down to our era, for it is his name and work which are at the heart of the renaissance of traditional philosophy in Iran. Over the centuries, the thought of this *Sheikh al-Ishraq* has been integrated into the Iranian spiritual tradition. Earlier, we alluded to the divergent destinies of Latin Avicennism, which did not survive Averroism, and Iranian Avicennism, which thrived in Shiite environments.

With Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi, contemporaries of Averroës, a decisive moment occurs. Their work is the key to this divergence, and they each had a profound influence upon all subsequent developments in eastern Islamic thought. Suhrawardi gave a very clear explanation of his technical sense of the words ishraq and ishraqi, the equivalents of *mashriq* and *mashriqi*, "East" and "Eastern." It was a spiritual meaning rather than a geographical one, and an entire tradition adopted it. His desire was to found an "Eastern theosophy" which he repeatedly declared to be a "revival of the theosophical wisdom of the ancient Persians, because this wisdom was also a recognition of the spiritual sense of the word 'East.' "At first, this affirmation apparently caused some alarm, surprise, and skepticism among Islamicists whose previous idea of Islam had no place for a secular *Ishraqi* tradition. Yet it is definitely Suhrawardi himself who informs us of this intention.

Although his project had absolutely no aim of challenging Islam, we note that this is because the Islam that he professed was precisely one whose spiritual hermeneutic *(ta'wil)* had the capacity and vocation of establishing the proper meaning of pre-Islamic prophetic revelations. This *ta'wil* was what enabled Suhrawardi to bring about something like a repatriation of the "Hellenized Magi," in the context of Islamic Iran. Although this Hellenized Magian doctrine may have an affinity with Pro-

clus or with the *Theology* attributed to Aristotle, there is nevertheless a direct connection with a living tradition, as evidenced by the Suhrawardian technical vocabulary concerning the *xvarnah* (the Light of Glory) and Zoroastrian angelology. For Suhrawardi, the Zoroastrian concept of *xvarnah* is the very source of the metaphysics and theosophy of Light. The fact that a philosophical training includes a thorough knowledge of the Peripatetics does not rule out a systematic critique of them. Often, the *Ishraqiyun* have been described as "Persian Platonists." The teachings and ecstatic visions of Hermes, Zoroaster and Plotinus (under the name of Plato) form a lineage which extends towards the *mi'raj* of the Prophet of Islam.

Suhrawardian ethics are rigorous in this regard: philosophy is vain and sterile if it is not a preparation and a guide which leads towards mystical experience. Likewise, mystical experience without previous philosophical training is in serious risk of going astray. Mullah Sadra often stressed this dual requirement, and this gave a characteristic stamp to all subsequent philosophy in Iran. For Suhrawardi, this was what characterized the theosophical wisdom of those ancient Persians which he named the *Khosrawaniyun,* after Kay Khosraw, the greatest ecstatic before Zoroaster. It is this metaphysics of ecstasy, combined with the burgeoning prophetic philosophy of the *hadith* of the Imams, which impelled Mullah Sadra in his twofold work. One the one hand, he brought about a revolution in the metaphysics of being, by according primacy to *existing* over quiddity; and on the other, he emphasized the theme of the *'alm al-mithal,* the *mundus imaginalis,* which I have proposed to call the imaginal, so as not to confuse it with the imaginary. Suhrawardi was the first to establish its ontological position. For Mullah Sadra, the prophetic and eschatological necessity of this "intermediate East" resulted in a doctrine which considered

active Imagination as a spiritual faculty independent of the physical organism, the subtle vehicle of the soul after death.

Thus we begin to see a slowly emerging diagram of the spiritual history of Iran. A new insight is gained into the trial and judgement by Saladin and the *'ulama* against Suhrawardi, the "martyred Sheikh" of Aleppo, when we compare the prologue of his *Eastern Theosophy* with the texts of prophetic philosophy alluded to afterward.

In a publication of 1958–59, I pointed out that this theosophy of Light occurs in another form in the Sufism of Najmuddin Kobra (died 1220), and his school, which includes Najm Dayen Razi and Semnani. This marks the appearance of something new in Sufism. Najm Kobra was the first to give attention to phenomena regarding the aura, or supersensible perceptions of colored light, which inform the mystic of his spiritual state. This led Semnani (736–1336) to outline a physiology of the subtle body, with each of these lights corresponding to one of the centers or organs (the *latifa*) of this subtle body, which are associated with the seven great prophets. This leads to an internalization (the "prophets of your being") which determines and sets the tone for any hermeneutic of the Qur'an, verse by verse.

My studies focused on Shiism are divided into two cycles: Ismaili, or Sevener Shiism; and Imamist, or Twelver Shiism. The Ismaili texts were those of Abu Ya'qub Sejestani, which I also edited as the *Trilogie ismaélienne* (1954–55, 1959–60). Then there was a major, particularly abstruse work by Hamiduddin Kermani (1955–58), followed by that of Qazi No'man mentioned above (1963–64).

Kermani's work, the *Rahat al-'Aql,* is remarkably dense. It rigorously establishes the apophatic theology *(tanzih),* which is necessary in order for *tawhid* not to unconsciously degenerate into metaphysical idolatry. It dismisses the polarization of

mutakallimun and *falasifa,* and its doctrine of being insists on the distinction between human and divine substance. It is precisely this rigorous apophatic theology which results in the principle of *theophanies,* whose foundation is the theory of the celestial hierarchy of Intelligences, or "Cherubim," which corresponds exactly and in detail to the terrestrial esoteric hierarchy of the *Da'wat.* His theology of the Logos, or more exactly, the Logos-Angel *(al-malak alladhi yosamma bi'l-Kalima),* which is also his doctrine of *Anthropos,* invites deeper comparisons with Shiite gnosticism in general, as well as with more ancient gnosticism. Kermani's theosophy differs from that of his predecessors (Nasr-i-Khosraw for instance) in that it makes a place for the Avicennian system of the ten Intelligences of the pleroma. On the other hand, it has nothing equivalent to the "Celestial Drama" (the drama of the spiritual Adam, or *Anthropos*), as delineated in detail by Yemenite Ismaili authors. Guided by the texts published by W. Ivanow, I set out to pin down what it is that distinguishes the Alamut reformation of Iranian Ismailism from Fatimid Ismailism, and to explain how Iranian Ismailism, under the protective cloak of Sufism, could have survived the Alamut catastrophe. At the same time, I wanted to determine the exact time at which Ismailism and Imamism began to diverge philosophically. Two years later, I was happy to discover an explanation in Haydar Amoli which was identical to my own conclusions.

For too many years now, it has been believed that Ismailism is the only Shiite branch which represents a gnostic or esoteric Islam. We can now be certain of the existence of a gnostic, mystical theosophy in Twelver Shiism, whose wealth and depth of writings are every bit as great as those of Ismailism. Their later appearance is undoubtedly due to misfortunes and persecutions. Yet it is the Twelver Shiites who were responsible for the

writings of the traditions of the Imams which gave rise to this gnosticism. These traditions were common to both Shiite branches until the Sixth Imam.

It has also been too often repeated that "modern" Shiism was a Safavid creation. But this assertion does not withstand examination. In the fourteenth century, Haydar Amoli had already laid the groundwork for the Shiite "prophetic philosophy" which would be developed further in the great works of the Safavid era. As indicated by his name, Sayyed Haydar Amoli came from the town of Amol in Mazandaran, in the mountains south of the Caspian Sea — an area which had been populated by Shiites since the beginning. We may justly claim that the works of this author (often cited, but rarely published) were resurrected by our department during the years 1960–1963; a portion of his works I located in manuscript form is now being prepared for publication. The works which have been discovered so far consist of a summation of Shiite theosophy (the *Jami al-Asrar,* which I discovered in Iran), an essay on the knowledge of being *(ibid.),* and a huge commentary on Ibn 'Arabi's Fusus, embellished with diagrams, and with an introduction which is in itself a kind of summation (this found in Istanbul by Mr. Osman Yahia).

A major interest of Haydar Amoli's work is its demonstration of the rapidity with which the thought and doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi were assimilated by Shiite theosophy, which recognized a great virtue therein. He developed a metaphysics of being, derived from that of Ibn 'Arabi, which permitted a differentiation of tawhid into theological *(uluhi)* and ontological *(wujudi)* categories. He hoped that his book would put an end to the disputes between Shiites and Sufis. Such disputes would never have occurred if Shiism had maintained awareness of its role as esoteric Islam, and if Sufism had not forgotten its own origin

there, and that the chain of its own lineage would be suspended in a void without the *walayat* of the Imams.

In spite of his veneration of Ibn 'Arabi, Haydar Amoli is adamant about the question of the "Seal of the Saints." This is one of the major themes of Shiite prophetic philosophy, which separates the theosophy of history into a dual cycle: that of the mission of the prophets, and that of the *walayat,* or saints. The latter is informed by the charisma which makes the Imams those who are close to God, or the "Friends of God." Thus the *walayat* mission is essentially the esoteric *(batin)* counterpart of the prophetic mission. But Ibn 'Arabi had declared Jesus to be the Seal of the *walayat.* For Haydar Amoli, this thesis is contradictory and lacking in either philosophical or traditional support. Just as Mohammed is the Seal of the Prophets, only the Imam can be the Seal of the *walayat.*

Thus Haydar Amoli's powerful work was my introduction to a series of systematic studies of the *hadith* of the Twelver Shiite Imams, for which no hermeneutic can replace that of Shiite thinkers themselves. These studies were as follows: from 1961–1964, the Kafi of Kolayni (died 940), and Book II of the *Kitab al-Hojjat* (130 chapters devoted to Shiite prophetic and Imamist studies) with the vast commentary in lithographed edition by Mullah Sadra Shirazi; and from 1964–1967, the *Kitab al-Tawhid* of Saduq Ibn Babuyeh (died 992), with its no less vast commentary by Qazi Sa'id Qommi (died 1691). The latter was a student of Mullah Rajab 'Ali Tabrizi of the Isfahan School, whose orientation is different from that of Mullah Sadra, mainly regarding the metaphysics of being.

But this is not the place to recount the detail of results already published in our yearbook. What I do want to point out is the extent to which these authors were conscious of the reasons for the divergence between Sunni and Shiite conceptions

of the imam. The texts they cite offer an entire retrospective of Islamic theology. They were keenly aware of the fact that the origins of this division date back to the lifetime of the Prophet himself, and that they represent differing visions of humanity and of the world. The Sunni vision of the imam is conditioned by the purely temporal necessity due to social and political considerations. The Shiite vision is of a metaphysical essence of the imam, one which conditions the entire universe of being and consciousness, and is not itself conditioned by something else. This gives rise to a metaphysical horizon of the original existence of the Imam: the "primordial Mohammedan Reality" *(Haqiqat mohammadiya)* of which the Imam is the esoteric aspect.

This is the origin of an entire theology of the Logos which (as with Ismailism) invites extensive comparison with Christology previous to the Council of Nicaea. Hence, all talk of "legitimizing" the lineage of 'Ali is a completely modern, Western way of seeing things. The *hadith* of the Imams never speak in political terms. The pleroma of the Twelve Imams is not a dynasty in competition with any dynasty of this world, like the competition between the Plantagenets and the Capetians. Qazi Sa'id Qommi repeatedly emphasizes this. The role of the Imams as successors of the Prophet is not at all legitimized by their "blood" lineage. There must also be *ismat,* which is a condition of immunity to all evil and blame. Their earthly family lineage is only the sign of their lineage in the pleroma, whence their *ismat,* that of the "Fourteen Immaculates." The limitation of their number to twelve implies the occultation *(ghaybat)* of the Twelfth, this divine incognito who eludes all social categories, for the Imam has no need to be recognized by human beings in order to be what he is. This is why this vision bears fruit in an Imam-centered piety which preserves the transcendence of

tawhid. This exists in Shiite Sufism, yet it has no need for the social phenomenon of Sufism in order to be what it is.

In sum, this is what is so striking about the Sheikhist school — its thought and spirituality have a number of things in common with Sufism, yet it must not be identified or confused with any sort of Sufi order. In an appended article to the departmental yearbook of 1960–61, I gave a number of indications regarding the sheikhs and doctrines of this Shiite school, which until then had been a *terra incognita* of our religious studies. In fact, even in Iran this school has remained scarcely better-known beyond its adherents and sympathizers, whether because of its small size, or because of misunderstandings arising from a doctrine which is not easily accessible. But such contingencies should not concern the philosopher of religion, for it is the intrinsic value of its works that counts.

The cycle of studies (1965–1967) devoted to Sheikh Ahmad Ahsa'i (died 1826) finally convinced me that I had come upon a system of thought which, though certainly very difficult, was of incomparable profundity. His work is an attempt to construct an integral Imamist theosophy, based on the complete collected teachings of the Imams, which he extends in every direction of scientific and philosophical knowledge. The metaphysics of being of Sheikh Ahmad Ahsa'i speaks unhesitatingly of an Adamology — that is, a comprehensive view of all levels of manifestation of *Anthropos* — and therefore also in terms of the pleroma of the Fourteen Immaculates. The ultimate concept is not at all that of absolute being, since this presupposes an *absolvens* which only apophatic theology can distantly comprehend. This *absolutum* is eo ipso the universal "spiritual matter," analogous to that of the neo-Empedocleans. This upsets all traditional hylomorphism, because this material pole of being is no longer feminine (*mater* being the origin of

materia), but masculine. It is the Father who receives form (the feminine, the Mother), which gives birth to new being. This results in a worldview which is both deeply original and deeply traditional. Elsewhere, I have described the entire library which is filled by works (published and unpublished) of this Sheikist school, and have devoted a good part of a book to its doctrine of the "resurrection body." On this occasion, I shall only mention a few memorable meetings and long, devoted friendships relating to this subject.

These few pages barely offer a glimpse of these exploratory efforts. Again, this is a recapitulation, and each of us best knows how far we still have to go in our own path as scholar. This account would be incomplete without an acknowledgment of the faithful and attentive support of my students and my audiences. The presence of young philosophers during the last few years — none of them Orientalists, at least initially — has vindicated my feeling that the works I have been deciphering and commenting upon for them, have implications far beyond what is thought of as a specialist interest. The greatest joy of a director of studies is to see a proliferation of research work all around him. I want to make special mention of dissertations by Mr. Osman Yahia (1958–59); Mr. Hermann Landolt (1964); Mr. Karim Modjtehedi (1964). Others are now in preparation, but it would be premature to mention them. For the last three years, my own seminar has found a very valuable complement in Mr. Osman Yahia's seminar on the works of Ibn 'Arabi, which has been followed with great interest by a number of my students. He has also taken upon himself the heavy but necessary task of completing the first critical edition of that monumental work of Ibn 'Arabi, the *Kitab al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*. Our modest microfilm library is now able to provide all the

material needed for this edition, thanks to Mr. Osman Yahia's successful missions in Middle-Eastern libraries.

Other actions and organizations have also offered regular help in fulfulling my task as director of studies. I must mention the Eranos Circle in Ascona, Switzerland, which has also welcomed a number of colleagues from our department. For eighteen years, the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* has provided a preliminary condensed publication of essential results of works in progress.

There has also been a yearly process of keeping in touch with Iranian Islam. The general office of Cultural Relations has in effect asked me to assume the direction of the Iranology department of the *Institut franco-iranien* by means of a yearly voyage there. The recent decision to create a real Institute of academic research in Teheran will be a vitalizing force for the Iranology department, by becoming one of its research sections. The Iranian Library which I have directed there since its beginning, has at times collected certain texts studied in my seminars, and at other times furnished the textbooks of them, as well as accommodating the work of young researchers. Since 1957, at the request of the Dean of Letters at the University of Teheran, I have agreed to offer a free course there in Islamic philosophy each fall semester. In this brief course, I give a distillation of the one taught at the *Ecole des hautes études*. Some of my students in Teheran have subsequently come to Paris to study in this department. This creates a current of exchange which we would do well to develop further.

It gives me pleasure to give this example: McGill University in Montreal has now decided to create an Institute of Islamic Studies section in Teheran. As Professor Adams told me in Teheran in November of 1967, this Institute will be especially dedicated to research in Islamic philosophy in the broadest sense of the term, covering *falsafa, hikmat ilahiya, irfan,*

tasawwuf, kalam — the type of research to which the Iranology section has been mostly devoted for the last twenty years. And the director of this new institute has been named as Hermann Landolt, currently a professor at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill, and a graduate of this department of religious studies.

Finally, I must mention a private study group in Teheran, founded through the initiative of an eminent Sheikh, a professor of philosophy at the Theological University of Qom. Each autumn semester, students of the Sheikh are joined by some of our colleagues at the University of Teheran and some other auditors. I cannot express how much we have learned from the last ten years or so in such a group. This renewed contact with people, with their questions and studies, has been a priceless source of teaching for our own school.

Let us recall that this subject bears the formal title of "Islam and Religions of Arabia." The first part is perfectly adequate. In current usage, there is a relationship between Islam and the Islamic World, which is analogous to that between Christianity and Christendom.

As for "Religions of Arabia," there has been little mention of this in the preceding pages. I believe that this was also the case for my predecessors — but they never requested that this second part of the title be removed, nor have I. This is not at all because I believe that a single direction of studies will overrule the double title. But I would like to point out the following: according to the sources we now have at our disposal, the study of pre-Islamic Arab religions, being founded basically on epigraphy, is being fully and ably pursued elsewhere. We therefore want to avoid redundancy. Besides this, we must be clear as to what the word "and" implies. Islamic consciousness eschews any historical antecedents to Qur'anic revelation,

except for those admitted in its concept of the *nubuwwat*, which is already quite considerable. It turns out that certain southern Arabian inscriptions show us some names of divine attributes which correspond to those in the Qur'an. Now, the theology or theosophy of the divine Names is a fundamental part of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine, and of his school in the succeeding centuries. We still hope that we may find time in the future to devote to this type of research, which we might call comparative, which would justify our giving a new sense to the conjunction "and" in our title.

Speaking of "comparative," I shall close in expressing my hope for a new path of studies in our department, which will bring together things which have never been combined elsewhere. In our overall studies, we draw upon a whole group of traditions which have in common what has come to be known as the "theologies of religions of the Book." We spoke earlier of the "phenomenon of sacred Scripture." Hermeneuticists of both the Bible and the Qur'an have found themselves facing the same problems when they have sought the spiritual sense as the true sense. The theology of the Logos has developed along different but comparable lines in early Imamist theory and in Christology. Apophatic theology has responded to comparable needs in both religions. The theology of the divine Names amplifies a theme common to both Ibn 'Arabi and pseudo-Dionysos. Neo-Platonic concepts in the doctrines of both Ibn 'Arabi and Sadra Shirazi follow a path parallel to that of, for example, the Cambridge Platonists.

I have expressed my censure of the isolation which affects our "specialist" studies. One of our future tasks will no doubt consist in bringing the great themes of our studies to term, so that this maturity will enable us to communicate with some of the other fields I have suggested. It would be premature to

define the methods and means of doing this. Since our colleagues in "theologies of religions of the Book" also share this conviction, I believe that further and deeper research will yield results which our department of religious studies has a primary mission of pursuing, and which only it can bring forth.