Religion after religions?: Henry Corbin and the future study of religion

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HENRY CORBIN
PHILOSOPHIES ET SAGESSES
DES RELIGIONS DU LIVRE

Histoire et prosopographie de la section des sciences religieuses 1

BREPOLS
One of Henry Corbin's most vehemently repeated exhortations, during the years I was studying with him in Iran near the end of his life, was 'Il faut sortir la philosophie islamique du ghetto d'orientalisme!'-referring above all to the fundamental need to 'translate' and communicate the universal masterpieces of Islamic thought into forms and contexts where they could again inspire a larger circle of properly apt readers, so that they could again serve the wider, perennial human purposes for which they had originally been composed and intended. Since then, a great many scholars of Islam, including several of his former students gathered for this commemoration, have made enormous strides in translating and introducing (in several European languages) major works by most of the key Islamic thinkers, metaphysicians and spiritual figures whose works Corbin had himself first discovered and presented, especially through a monumental set of critical editions. But despite those collective efforts, one may legitimately wonder how much progress has really been made in awakening and nurturing, beyond the narrow confines of Islamic intellectual scholarship, a much wider appreciation of the essential contemporary importance and relevance of those figures whose perennial, potentially universal significance was so clear to Henry Corbin himself. Indeed, with regard to the openness and receptivity of the wider worlds lying outside that narrow scholarly specialisation (in Islamic philosophy), one cannot but note that Corbin's own deeply held conviction of the universal human value and interest of these philosophic traditions—an outlook which he certainly shared with most of those earlier Muslim thinkers whose works and thought he was seeking to communicate—today runs profoundly counter to the host of new religio-political ideologies, with their fiercely particularist credos and institutions, that have come to dominate public intellectual and cultural life throughout much of the Islamic world (and most notably in Iran) since his death.

However, as we look more closely today, both in the Islamic world and in the West, we discover that that situation may already be changing. This paper is devoted to exploring some of those 'Signs' and conditions for a wider appreciation of Corbin's scholarly and intellectual contribution, especially in the emerging new field of the 'Study of Religion.'

In the realms of thought and spirituality, in particular, 'influences' are remarkably mysterious things. As one must explain to new students each year, our language seems to imply some sort of causality passing from one 'source' of influence
to another ‘receiver’ — yet in reality the actively determinant, creative element in that process is almost entirely on the ostensibly ‘receiving’ side: in the intellectual, spiritual, linguistic and artistic situation which awakens the mysterious recognition of each insight, observation or response appropriate to that outwardly new historical context. One obvious corollary of that recognition is that most of the powerfully inspiring and transforming influences in the life and work of any serious seeker, philosopher, artist or intellectual, even if their works do become publicly and lastingly visible in some way, normally remain entirely invisible unless that person chooses (through autobiography or other means) to draw attention to this or that inspiring factor. 2

When we look at Corbin’s influences in different linguistic and cultural domains outside of his own twin homelands of France and Iran, the essential role of very selective, particular local factors of receptivity is immediately apparent. That is to say, the chosen objects of intellectual and cultural interest and elaboration are largely dictated by peculiar local interests, needs and other conditions, not by the author’s own ideas, works and intentions. 3 For example, outside the specialised realms of studies of Islamic thought and modern French philosophy and literature, which are the subject of a number of contributors to this commemoration, the best-known wider influences of Henry Corbin’s thought in the Anglophone world have for decades come in diverse areas of religious studies, Jungian psychology, and art and literature where people have fortunately had access to the limited set of translations appearing with Bollingen support. This includes the three Princeton volumes on Ibn ‘Arabi, ‘Avicennism,’ and the anthology of Islamic texts on the imaginal world (Terre céleste et corps de résurrection), together with shorter summaries and extracts from the annual Eranos Jahrbuch. Even in those domains (and again, we are speaking only of Anglophone contexts), Corbin’s own wider influence — and any awareness of his underlying Islamic sources — has been largely mediated by the activities of his friends such as Mircea Eliade (who was so influential in spreading the phenomenological approach to religious studies in North America) and the recently departed poet Katherine Raine; or by the more indirect medium of the handful of specialised students of Islamic philosophy and spirituality (whether or not they were privileged to study with him) who will remain continually indebted to his prodigious accomplishments in editing, translating and bringing to public attention so many diverse and significant traditions of Islamic thought, in philosophy, spirituality and the related Islamic humanities. What is so particularly striking about that whole spectrum of artistic, literary and psychological influences to date (beyond specialised Islamic scholarship), of course, is that they have systematically excluded any serious appreciation and further creative

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3 Thus, to take one telling example, no one in France could possibly have imagined that, within the space of only a few decades, dozens of new university literature departments (and perhaps thousands of books and theses) in North America would be dedicated almost entirely, and quite exclusively, to interpreting and applying the ideas of a Foucault or Derrida.
exploration of two of the most fundamental dimensions of almost all of Corbin's own writing: its profound embeddedness in the larger enterprise of metaphysics, and his devotion throughout the last half of his life to many of the most creative and influential metaphysical figures in the wider Islamic tradition.  

Today, however, that situation may already be changing. Thus our subject in this essay is not so much historical as prospective: that is, it is the preliminary exploration of a potential—and certainly desperately needed—influence of Corbin's work that has not yet become very visibly significant either in the Islamic world or in the wider field of the study of Religion. However, the corresponding human and intellectual needs are already everywhere quite apparent. That has to do with the growing recognition, both within the study of Religion and in many wider public contexts, of the indispensable need for a comprehensive science of spirituality—for a discipline at the convergence of, and equally rooted in, the historical study of past spiritual traditions; in a host of practical and therapeutical forms (and expressions) of spirituality; and in the overlapping interests of several sciences touching on related areas of the actual phenomenology of spiritual experience. On the other hand, students of Islamic thought know that Corbin in fact devoted the last half of his life to the pioneering exploration and revivification of precisely those key intellectual and spiritual figures whose works were most clearly responses to that same perennial need, in their own earlier historical and civilizational contexts. In that sense, the remarkable ensemble of Corbin's published works is already a central inspiration to this formidable world-wide task of the slow elaboration of what we have elsewhere called this 'New Science' of spirituality at the heart of the contemporary field of the study of Religion. And that enterprise itself will certainly not be complete without taking into account several of those key Islamic philosophical and spiritual figures whom Corbin so effectively brought to our wider attention.

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4 To some extent, of course, this 'deafness' to such central dimensions of Corbin's writing reflects the heated and still ongoing divorce of Anglo-American philosophy departments from earlier philosophical traditions over much of the past century. But it could also be argued—as we do in the remainder of this chapter—that it was precisely that divorce which made possible and even encouraged the phenomenal explosion of departments for the Study of Religion in recent decades. 

5 There is another, entirely different essay, which we could have written here on the even deeper corresponding need for Corbin's philosophical perspectives, and for the Islamic authors and traditions at the heart of his later work, throughout the wider Islamic world today. While an appreciation of those neglected metaphysical dimensions of Islamic tradition is today visible only among scattered scholars in the Arab world—especially, and understandably, in regions with an ongoing Francophone intellectual connection, or among adherents of traditional Sufism—wider circles of Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia and Malaysia, in particular, have recently begun to translate and study many of the central figures (Ṣadr, Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi) at the heart of Corbin's work. 

6 As with any author, the list of those works of Henry Corbin he published as books in his own lifetime (in contrast with the considerable body of unpublished, often more specialised lectures, texts and translations, especially on subjects in Shi'ite studies, which were brought out only after his death) is generally more indicative of those works which he understood to have a wider potential audience. 

I. Henry Corbin and Islamic 'Philosophies of Religion'

Everyone involved in the world of scholarship is intimately aware of those mysterious 'elective affinities' that so spontaneously and invisibly direct each student—beginning at university or even earlier, and going on through the choices of papers, theses and dissertations, to the grand projects and research efforts of whole lifetimes—toward a very particular, always uniquely individual selection of topics and figures who are somehow the ongoing reflection of an initially unconscious spiritual and intellectual quest. In the case of Henry Corbin and Islamic thought, especially—at least for those connoisseurs who are aware of the vast spectrum of fascinating fields of potential intellectual and philosophical interest that awaited the young Corbin when he first turned to Suhrawardi, and first travelled to Turkey and then Iran—there is one constant connecting thread that runs through virtually all the published studies of Islamic thought from the last half of his life. This essential personal focus certainly falls broadly within the 'philosophy of religion,' but is also considerably more specific than that. It has to do particularly with the complex intersection of metaphysics and spirituality—a spiritual domain that is necessarily at once both practical and conceptual, artistic and intellectual, religious and philosophical, intensely personal and yet ultimately quite political in its implications.8 In the case of Henry Corbin, this constant guiding thread—which is intrinsically and complexly 'comparative' by its very nature—was of course already apparent in his earlier studies and research, which bring together his own intellectual training in classical (Greek and Hellenistic) philosophical and theological traditions, Catholic scholastic philosophy, classic figures of 19th-century German philosophical and (Protestant) religious thought, and key related mystical and spiritual figures.9 To a remarkable extent, while the turning of Corbin's interest to Islamic subjects and figures takes us into a very different historical and cultural sphere, the themes and guiding interests of his research remain remarkably constant—and perhaps equally importantly, his implicit audiences (and their assumed interests and breadth of background) likewise remain largely the same.

Now for those who happen to know the wider spectrum of Islamic thought, or even a few of the complex Arabic and Persian intellectual, spiritual, religious and philosophical traditions from which Corbin selected the impressive gamut of figures and topics filling the later decades of his life and teaching, the persistent inner criteria and interests dictating those particular choices of his studies and publications are impressively clear. In particular, one cannot begin to stress too emphatically that those selections and focuses were in no way dictated or bounded by access to particular texts or traditions somehow limited to present-day Iran or any particular sectarian tradition. Nor—unlike many of his famous 'orientalist'

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8 Almost all of Corbin's own publications on Islamic subjects would fall into the category of what modern Iranian scholars tend to call in an offhand fashion 'irfā-ī-nāzārī (literally, 'speculative gnosis'). But neither Corbin nor the actual historical figures he studied, edited and translated approached this subject from the scholastic, purely intellectual perspectives (typically devoid of any creative spiritual content or contexts) that have unfortunately come to typify most contemporary local approaches to these subjects.

9 See the related specialised studies of Corbin's work in some of those areas included in this same volume, including Prof. Paul Fenton's fascinating account of the significance of Corbin's previously unknown or unappreciated contacts and interaction with the younger Abraham J. Heschel.
contemporaries—were Corbin's interests ever limited by narrowly academic textual or philological concerns. This particular guiding elective affinity—i.e., with the philosophic intersection of metaphysics and spirituality—is all the more visible in that, as a result, he typically explored, highlighted and treated very specifically, in almost every case, only those works (indeed often much more specific chapters or sections) that happened to discuss particular facets of his personal lifelong fascination with this inner connection of spirituality and metaphysics. In this commemorative context, for an audience including many specialists in those fields, it should suffice simply to list indicatively the successive subjects of each of his major studies in Islamic thought: Suhrawardi, the 'spiritual (Neoplatonic) Avicenna' of later Islamic (and medieval Christian) tradition; early Ismaili cosmologies and philosophies of history; Ibn 'Arabi (and more implicitly, Rūmī); and Mulā Shārā and later Iranian philosophical traditions primarily interpreting Shārā and Avicenna. In each of those cases, the same 'family' of philosophic interests and allusions run through all of his works on these seminal Islamic figures. Indeed even when he turned explicitly to the more practical and popular aspects of Sufism and Islamic spirituality—which is, significantly, quite rare in his published works, even though his philosophical studies and interpretations frequently presuppose an intimate familiarity with those widespread practical spiritual traditions—Corbin's systematic approach to Simnānī's spiritual teaching and experience, or his choice

10 This point actually applies in fairly dramatic fashion to virtually every particular Islamic figure or tradition about which Corbin wrote. (See the careful illustrations of this process, within this same volume, in the studies of Corbin's highly selective approach to both Sufism and Persian poetic traditions by P. Ballanfat and C.-H. de Fouchécour.) Since his time, younger scholars researching and interpreting figures first highlighted by him have continually re-discovered how much of each subject or book he discussed was typically left out of his own introductory discussions and interpretations—and have often pretended or supposed, as a result, that he must have either intentionally misrepresented or else completely misunderstood their own specialised subject. In fact—especially since Corbin had himself often painstakingly edited many of the lengthy Arabic volumes in question—it is quite clear that, like many other scholars of his more literate time, he typically wrote for what he normally assumed was a highly knowledgeable specialist audience, taking it for granted that they were all well aware of the very specific focuses of his particular remarks and interpretive interests. In other words, his French introductions, summaries and treatments of many of the volumes he edited deal with those very specific topics he felt had a particular interest for his own rather specialised audience and interlocutors—who seem to have mirrored the wide-ranging intellectual background, for example, of his fellow Eratos contributors and his scholarly colleagues in Paris. 

11 Almost all of which, we should stress, began with and were based on time-consuming scientific editions, as well as translations or critical appreciations. That is, as just noted (n. 10), Corbin himself in most cases knew very well the wider gamut of topics and approaches found in most of the authors he was introducing—and in most cases chose to write about that far narrower, recurrent selection of central metaphysical and spiritual issues that he personally found philosophically interesting and stimulating. Even more obviously, for those aware of the actual, original Islamic cultural contexts of all his subjects, Corbin's constant focus on metaphysics—which has appeared to many as a kind of inexplicable ignoring of the indispensable practical religious and spiritual presuppositions of his authors—can instead be seen as part of a conscious, intentional effort to highlight (and eventually communicate) to his own wider, culturally foreign audiences what he considered to be the essentially universal dimensions, and correspondingly irenic religio-political intentions, of their explicitly metaphysical explanations and formulations of their spiritual insights and discoveries. Certainly it was in that spirit that he himself understood the repeated exhortation with which we opened this essay.

12 See H. Landolt's contribution to this volume.
James W. Morris

of Ruzbihan's Shahr-i Shafiyyat, are equally telling indications of the primarily philosophic interests and aims shared with all his other selections. But why should Henry Corbin's personal philosophic interests and historical research be of such potential relevance to the contemporary development of religious studies?

II. Religious Studies or the Study of Religion? Unfinished Business

In its present state, the burgeoning academic discipline of the Study of Religion—or of 'Religious Studies'? the shifting range of new departmental titles is itself highly significant—cannot but remind us of the familiar children's story of 'the Emperor's New Clothes.' As newly arriving undergraduates cannot but notice each year, any deeper justification or philosophical explanation of some kind of substantial disciplinary unity, beneath the far more visible conglomeration of different historical subjects and methodological approaches, is still almost entirely lacking. (Thus at first glance, the modestly vague and descriptive 'religious studies' seems far more appropriate than the imperial, intentionally provocative 'Study of Religion' that is very consciously selected by the majority of scholars in this new discipline today, as in the title of their immense and rapidly growing professional society. Certainly most of those now working in this field are quite happy to continue with this ad hoc arrangement, which allows an extraordinary creative and eclectic variety of interdisciplinary approaches and interests, and which attracts an equally wide-ranging mix of highly motivated students. Indeed ultimately—if one sets all its present-day teachers and practitioners side by side—the departments in this field of study commonly include scholars individually focusing on the arts, humanities, historical and philological disciplines, psychology, and many related dimensions of anthropology, sociology and politics. (The corresponding institutional situation, of course, is totally different in most European countries, where there are few or no undergraduate departments devoted to this subject, and where the advanced scholarly specialists in these component fields of religious studies are themselves typically housed in disparate linguistic, regional, historical, or methodologically based departments.)

13 Again, see the related studies by P. Ballanfat and C.-H. Fouché in this same volume. But we cannot too strongly emphasise that Corbin's emphasis on the metaphysical, universal dimension and formulation of these intellectual traditions was not due to any ignorance of their complex religious and cultural underpinnings, but rather to a very conscious choice as to what was of wider philosophic value and interest to his own chosen audiences. Those who knew the Corbins personally in Iran, or who are able to read his works with a firsthand knowledge of the actual religious life and cultures of the Persianate world (as of France, or Germany!), will immediately recognise the recurrent allusions to so many key features and dimensions of popular religious and devotional life within that Persianate culture, in ways that often still extend far across Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. (An apparently profound ignorance of the history and defining features of those central Islamic cultures may help account for some of the peculiar misinterpretations bedevilling the recent eponymous study alluded to in our title.)

14 In North America, the 'American Academy of Religion' (AAR). That organisation, founded only in the 1950's, includes thousands of active university professors belonging to cross-cultural departments of 'Religion' or religious studies. This umbrella organisation is now entirely separate from the earlier academic grouping (the 'Society for Biblical Literature') that continues to serve faculty from the theological and divinity schools and departments associated with particular (primarily Christian) religious groups and denominations.
Henry Corbin and the Future of the Study of Religion

In fact, this situation of religious studies has rapidly evolved—especially over the past two decades—in North American universities (i.e., in Canada as much as the U. S.), where precisely that inherent disciplinary openness and comprehensiveness corresponds ideally to the traditional undergraduate emphasis on the 'liberal arts,' and whose very open institutional structures favour necessarily inter-disciplinary and increasingly multi-cultural forms of study. There, considerably more than a thousand, typically undergraduate-oriented departments (with more than a hundred teaching positions, for example, now devoted to Islam alone) graduate tens of thousands of undergraduate religious studies students each year. And the corresponding need for qualified professors, teaching materials, specialised publications and so on has nurtured a subsequent expansion of related advanced graduate programmes. The extraordinary, entirely spontaneous institutional expansion of this new discipline has certainly been accompanied—and indeed encouraged—by a corresponding expansion in its topics, methodologies and fields of study that is clearly mirrored in the shifting choice of nomenclature. Thus the earlier historically and philologically focused—and therefore highly specialised and almost inevitably graduate-level—field of 'comparative religions' or 'history of religions,' during the first half of the past century, had only very slowly and fitfully emancipated itself from earlier denominational theology and 'divinity school' programmes devoted to training clergy. Such departments, openly based on German models, were very rare and found only in a handful of elite graduate institutions. More recently, in contrast, the host of new undergraduate departments have since moved from the more wide-ranging, neutrally descriptive rubric of 'religious studies' to the increasingly predominant—and philosophically quite problematic—choice of the 'study of Religion,' with its forceful, if rather problematic, insistence on the singular. Hence the interrogation in the title of this essay.

15 There are significant parallels in the simultaneous and almost equally sudden institutional expansion of undergraduate programmes in 'environmental (or ecological) studies': see the concluding chapter of our Orientations (n. 7 above).
16 'Islam' here refers specifically in virtually all cases to the historically and phenomenologically comprehensive religious and related cultural traditions of Muslims throughout the world (including many 'Western' countries)—and not to the narrowly exclusive focus on an arbitrary subset of politics, ideologies and related social movements of a handful of contemporary countries and movements that typically interest today's academic students of politics, sociology, international relations and the media. (Unlike the situation in most of Europe today, in North America scholars with those narrowly restricted socio-political interests tend to work in relation to separate 'Middle East Centers,' and they have their own specialised professional society, the 'Middle East Studies Association'.)
17 For scholars from other countries and institutional settings, it is essential to point out that there has been absolutely no national or local state impetus, agenda or wider group somehow encouraging the spontaneous establishment of such departments, which have been formed almost everywhere in local response to manifest ongoing undergraduate student 'demand'—clearly, if unquantifiably, tied to the corresponding disappearance of many traditional forms of family and community-based, parochial religious education. Especially in the case of the individual states' university systems (but also in originally denominational, church-founded private universities), the establishment of undergraduate religious studies departments has normally taken place despite the protests of various religious (or anti-religious!) groups who naturally tend to confound this new, initially unfamiliar discipline of religious studies with earlier strictly denominational 'theology' or 'divinity' departments. Also, only rarely have significant undergraduate religious studies departments actually evolved from pre-existing theology programmes, since the methods, approaches, subjects and interests of their respective disciplines are of course normally entirely different.
In reality, as everyone working in this new field certainly knows, these astonishingly rapid institutional innovations have themselves followed and mirrored much wider cultural and sociological transformations, as what were once virtually universal, long-established and taken-for-granted local 'religious' traditions have almost overnight either gradually faded away among younger generations, or else splintered into a host of noisily sectarian, complex and rapidly shifting social groups typically reflecting much narrower and superficial social, ethnic or political affinities. Corresponding to that ongoing development, which is so visibly and rapidly taking place all over the world,18 is an increasing, albeit often inchoate, awareness of what newly arriving undergraduates of this generation immediately phrase in terms of the fundamental contrast between what they immediately call 'religion'19 and (much more inclusive, practical and universal) 'spirituality.' Within the wider cultural framework defined by that fundamental popular distinction—however problematic any philosopher or religious specialist might immediately find such categories—today's undergraduate students in great numbers flock to these new departments of 'Religion' primarily to study and explore what they themselves begin by calling 'spirituality.'20 Outside the universities, but even more immediately reflecting those same larger social and cultural transformations, the largest mega-bookstore chains correspondingly now have small specialised shelves devoted to Bibles and other devotional interests of the locally predominant traditional religious denominations, but far larger sections entirely devoted to a vast range of 'spiritual' subjects. These new sections (and related specialised publishing houses) correspond, in fact, to the equally distinctive traditional French phenomenon, present in almost every city, of specialised 'esoteric' bookstores that normally cover (in translation, of course) the gamut of practical and metaphysical expressions of spirituality associated with each of the world religious traditions.

To remain for the moment within the strictly academic arena, one of the curious remaining institutional fossils of the older 'comparative religions' approach, with its avowedly historical roots and assumptions, is that this rapidly transforming discipline of religious studies allows a great variety of related subjects and approaches to coexist under the suitably vague methodological umbrella of 'phenomenological' description and analysis. Yet at the same time, this field often remains remarkably resistant to the expanded pursuit of a wider range of empirical and phenomenological approaches rooted in the actual realities of spiritual

18 Unlike the mass media, students of religious history (and of the historical backdrop to the earlier cognate movements of fascism and communism) are aware that the volatile global phenomenon of newly invented, self-consciously sectarian political and social movements framed in the appealingly empty slogan-symbols of past local traditions have far more in common with each other than with the earlier world-religious traditions they often claim to somehow represent.

19 Quite vaguely understood (again largely from media stereotypes)—since for the first time, today's undergraduates typically have little or no formal family 'religious' training or explicit orientation whatsoever. As a result, when they speak of 'religion'—as opposed to 'spirituality'—, they are usually referring to those highly visible political, or otherwise sectarian, institutions and forces responsible for the 'religious' warfare and strife so often dominating today's defining world media events.

20 In the past two centuries, in terms of earlier North American religious patterns, such interests and curiosity would instead probably have been reflected in adherence to one or another of the hundreds of constantly proliferating and transforming Protestant religious 'denominations' which have dominated local religious history.
experience that actually first attracted so many students. This is particularly true of the failure, up to the present, of any serious academic and intellectual integration of the corresponding sciences (psychology, medicine, biology) and the immense range of practical therapeutic, healing and educational activities which the students themselves understandably recognise as the natural offshoot and eventual application of their guiding interest in spirituality. The primary resistance to this otherwise quite natural—and in the longer run, probably inevitable—expansion of the ambit of the study of spirituality, interestingly enough, clearly comes not so much from any particular confessional allegiances of the teaching faculty (and even less from external religious institutions), as it does from those scholars’ own years of investment in the mastery of complex historical and intellectual disciplines associated with the world religious traditions.

III. The Missing Capstone: Metaphysics As a Logos of Spirituality...

At the heart of all these recent historical developments, there is a single vast intellectual and spiritual challenge—a challenge which corresponds remarkably to the original contexts and creative concerns of each of the specific traditions of Islamic philosophy (or more specifically, of ‘philosophic spirituality’) selected for study by Henry Corbin. In other words, virtually any undergraduate student of religion today quickly comes to see that there is nothing intrinsically ‘religious’ or unique to the study of religion about the relevant methodologies, subject matter, and interpretive results of sociology, anthropology, political science, ‘critical theory,’ or any of the other narrower disciplines commonly pursued in religious studies departments. In respect to those diverse—and each complementary and indispensable—methodologies borrowed from other disciplines, the only distinguishing difference is that teachers in religion departments happen to apply those analytical approaches and research methods to what some particular culture has at some time happened to define as ‘religious.’ But just as in Plato’s early dialogues, the arbitrary and intensely problematic nature of such shifting cultural definitions of ‘religion’ is quickly recognised (like the emperor’s nakedness) by any intelligent student—and by those many researchers and teachers who are also busily explor-
ing the 'civil religions' and 'non-traditional' spiritualities of even the most avowedly 'non-religious' states and cultures. What those able young students have also already recognised, of course, is that what cuts across and actually connects all those disparate cultures and civilisations are the actual perennial realities of what they choose to call 'spirituality': i.e., both the commonalities of spiritual experience and practice (where today's students can sometimes be more widely informed and experienced than their own professors), and the corresponding commonalities of metaphysical and philosophical explanation and inquiry.

As those students advance into later years, and if their natural curiosity is not too dulled by the formidable pressures of graduate school, they inevitably begin to realise that what they are seeking to discover at the core of their study of Religion—the recurrent dilemmas arising at the intersection between spiritual practice and spiritual intelligence, on the one hand, and the relevant larger bodies of conflicting religious forms and claims surrounding those domains—are perennial issues that have already arisen within many earlier civilizations and religious traditions. Today, of course, such students are at least as likely to encounter those earlier relevant philosophical discussions in their Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic forms as in the Neoplatonic, Christian and 19th-century German philosophical traditions shared by Corbin's generation and largely assumed throughout his writings. And since today's students of religion are informed about many earlier traditions—and thus particularly sensitive to all the dangers and pitfalls of purely intellectual 'scholasticism,' or of prematurely generalising from a single cultural perspective—they are far less likely to stop with (much less be intellectually or spiritually satisfied by) the historical answers of any single earlier thinker, school or tradition.

Here, to recapitulate the key points already embedded in our brief preceding discussion, it may be helpful to list in summary form the most essential convergent elements and eventual requirements of that emerging 'science of spirituality'—or whatever name one might prefer—which our students today are certainly seeking, behind a still embarrassingly empty scaffolding, at the heart of this challenging new enterprise of the 'study of Religion':

- A comprehensive historical phenomenology of the relevant data within the textual resources of each major religious tradition, doing full justice to all the relevant dimensions of spiritual practice, experience, and interpretation.
- The construction—which has as yet barely been imagined, much less begun—of an equally comprehensive and inclusive contemporary phenomenology of the same dimensions of spiritual practice, experience and interpretation, including the burgeoning variety of related practical disciplines (healing arts, therapies, educational experiments, and so on) which are so evident outside academia, and whose absence from academic departments of Religion is still so glaringly obvious.
- The encouragement and gradual integration of relevant forms of both experimentation and theoretical insight drawn from related areas of the overlapping disciplines of psychology, medicine, biology, ecology, and other sciences.

24 Each area with its own vast and perennial internal problematic, needless to say.
Henry Corbin and the Future of the Study of Religion

- The gradual elaboration, based on all three above elements, of a truly comprehensive 'phenomenology of the Spirit,' genuinely inclusive of the specialised contributions drawn from every related domain of inquiry and practice.

Such a project is daunting, but not at all utopian. As we have already pointed out in our initial list of Corbin's own carefully chosen Islamic philosophers and metaphysicians, earlier versions and pioneering attempts in this direction are quite evident in the immense works of Ibn 'Arabi, Mullā Ṣadrā, and even Suhrawardi—all extraordinarily impressive accomplishments within the conditions and limitations of their own times. And today representatives of most of these necessary constituent elements and contributors are already hard at work in this direction (albeit not always in departments of Religion), as one can readily see by carefully monitoring the relevant library and bookstore shelves, and by personal contact with interested researchers and practitioners in the relevant fields. What is still too often lacking, of course, are more intangible resources: above all, the requisite will, intention and collective vision to bring that ongoing process to fruition. Hence the signal importance—to return to our opening sections and the theme of this conference, of Henry Corbin's inspiring personal example, as much as his scientific works and chosen authors themselves. When I was studying with him in Tehran (and no doubt the same was true throughout his earlier life), young philosophy students or other visitors would often ask, as an implicit or even open criticism, about his apparently eclectic interest and devotion to particular figures—from Swedenborg to Isma'ili, Shaykhs and others—that those interlocutors happened to consider insufficiently 'serious,' 'philosophical,' 'important,' or otherwise orthodox in terms of their own personal criteria. Corbin's own characteristically telling response was that 'philosophy is too important to be left to the professors.'

Against the backdrop of that particular set of now very widespread, indeed collectively unavoidable intellectual needs and expectations, it is certainly interesting, as we have already noted, that Henry Corbin seems, almost providentially, to have gone out and identified an entire range of the most creative and original Islamic philosophers (in Plato's generous original sense of that term) who had already struggled in their own revealing ways with precisely that perennial complex of issues. In that sense, 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. And certainly any future science of spirituality, or more deeply grounded 'study of Religion,' could not safely neglect any of that extraordinary series of pioneering contributions we have earlier enumerated, and which are recalled in each of the specialised contributions to this volume. So if, having carefully canvassed those particular traditions and many others, we have with time and experience—along with many centuries of earlier students—eventually found Ibn 'Arabi's works to be by far the most phenomenologically all-encompassing, spiritually penetrating, intellectually challenging, and creatively inspiring of those many earlier resources Henry Corbin helped bring to the study of Religion, that is only a strictly practical conclusion which others are happily invited to test and verify for themselves.