Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought

Part I: Early Encounters

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I. CORBIN, RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND THE "GHETTO OF ORIENTALISM"

"Ce qui avait été du passé va désormais descendre de nous." (Corbin, En Islam Iranien)

This paper looks at the influence of Russian religious thought on the French philosopher and scholar of Islamic mysticism Henry Corbin (1903-1978). Corbin came into contact with Russian religious thought through émigré Russian intellectuals in Paris in the 1930s. As the foremost representative of Russian religious thought abroad, Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) acquainted Corbin with Eastern Orthodox theology and influenced his reception of contemporary German philosophical and theological trends. In 1939, Corbin moved to Istanbul where, parallel to his work on the first critical edition of the writings of the Iranian philosopher Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (1155-1191), he deepened his knowledge of Byzantine theology and undertook a translation of the Russian theologian Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944). Eastern Christianity appealed to Corbin particularly because it represented a mediating ground between Christianity and Islam.

In addition to Berdyaev and Bulgakov, Corbin's main writings contain important references to Russian Orthodox thinkers such as Aleksey Khomiakov (1804-1860), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891), Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900), Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919), Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865-1941), Boris Vysheslavtsev (1877-1954), Paul Evdokimov (1901-1970), and others. Despite their diverging views, these thinkers shared a certain base of themes and assumptions that define what is commonly referred to as Russian religious thought.[1] Corbin's

1. See Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, trans. R.M. French (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), 172-207.

writings are in many ways highly evocative of that intellectual tradition. The present work explores this Russian influence as reflected in themes such as East and West, Sophiology, Divine humanity, eschatology, angelology, and Orthodox iconography. In the process, it sheds light on the sources of Corbin's philosophical positions, interest in certain themes, and choice of terminology.

Identifying Corbin's intellectual sources is a crucial task given that his work remains subject to gross and widespread misrepresentations across the academic disciplines of Islamic and Iranian Studies—two disciplines to which he made seminal contributions. It is indeed curious that, generally speaking, the most sympathetic responses to Corbin's intellectual project have come from outside those disciplinary areas. Within them, however, his work has been received, with some notable exceptions, with much reserve and, in certain cases, opposition bordering on pathological hostility which Hermann Landolt fittingly describes as "Corbinophobia."[2]

This paradoxical reception can be explained by the fact that Corbin was "a philosopher standing in a field dominated by historians."[3] On the one hand, he was a pioneering scholar who, upon his death in 1978, left behind some 300 critical editions, translations, books and articles, in which he mainly dealt with Twelver Shi'ism, Ismailism, Sufism, pre-Islamic Iranian religions, and Jewish-Christian prophetology.[4] On the other hand, he approached these traditions as a philosopher, that is, he actively engaged with, developed and endorsed the ideas that he studied.[5]

2. Hermann Landolt, "Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119, no. 3 (1999), 489.

3. Nile Green, "Between Heidegger and the Hidden Imam: Reflections on Henry Corbin's Approaches to Mystical Islam," in *Le Monde Turco-Iranien en Question*, ed. Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Alessandro Monsutti and Anna Neubauer (Paris: Karthala, 2008), 250.

4. For a bibliography of Corbin, see *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 345-360.

5. Corbin describes his personal approach to Islamic philosophy in a letter to the Russian Orientalist Vladimir Ivanov on April 25, 1956: "Voyez-vous, je ne suis pas un banquier qui aurais pris pour tâche de payer son dû à l'homme Nâsir-e Khosraw. Je me défends même pour cela d'être un historien. La personne historique de Nâsir-e Khosraw est largement dépassée par l'intérêt philosophique en cause. Pour moi, le philosophe doit prendre en charge le *stock* d'idées de son auteur et le porter à son maximum de signification. C'est l'Ismaélisme dans son ensemble que j'avais en vue et j'en ai commenté et amplifié les philosophèmes, comme si j'étais moi-même Ismaélien. Cela n'est possible que par une sympathie congénitale. Faute de cette sympathie, le philosophe égaré risque au contraire de porter l'auteur ou son école au maximum de platitude" (*Correspondance Corbin-Ivanow: Lettres Échangées entre Henry Corbin et Vladimir Ivanow de 1947 à 1966*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke [Paris:

He was indeed motivated by the conviction that the Islamic philosophical tradition has something interesting to offer to the West, precisely because, as Landolt notes, "having preserved vital elements of the Gnostic tradition, it did not go along with the radical separation between 'reason and revelation' that had informed mainstream Western thought since the Renaissance."[6]

In fact, Corbin made no secret of his wish to see Islamic philosophy extracted from what he called the "ghetto of Orientalism."[7] He considered his study of Islamic thought to be part of a wider project transcending geographical, historical, religious and institutional barriers. He claimed that

> a philosopher's campaign must be led simultaneously on many fronts… The philosopher's investigation should encompass a field wide enough to hold the visionary philosophy of a Jacob Boehme, of an Ibn 'Arabi, of a Swedenborg, etc…. Otherwise *philosophia* no longer has anything to do with *Sophia*.[8]

Adhering to this vision, Corbin rejected all academic compartmentalisation and considered himself "a philosopher pursuing his Quest wherever the Spirit leads him."[9] His highly personal interpretation of Islamic philosophy cannot be adequately

Peeters, 1999], 126).

6. Landolt, "Between Philosophy and Orientalism," 484. The late Charles Adams was right in pointing out that Corbin had no concern for a comprehensive, systematic, disinterested presentation of historical Islam. His work instead rests on a clear value choice, "one that deems a certain element of the Islamic tradition supremely significant and others not to be worthwhile in the same degree" (Adams, "The Hermeneutics of Henry Corbin," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin [Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1985], 137). Cf. "[Corbin's ambitions] were… *not* limited to the straightforward agenda of 'filling in the gaps' of traditional historiography, by calling attention to a series of historical currents that had been neglected by previous scholars… [He was] after something bigger as well: nothing less than an answer to the question of what is true and of lasting value in… Islam" (Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 310).

7. Henry Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohravardî," in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 33. See also James W. Morris, "Religion after Religions? Henry Corbin and the Future of the Study of Religion," in *Henry Corbin: Philosophies et Sagesses des Religions du Livre,* ed. Moh. Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet and Pierre Lory (Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 29.

8. Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohravardî," 23-24. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Corbin are mine.

9. Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohravardî," 24.

understood in isolation from this fundamental ecumenical perspective.

This also helps explain Corbin's interest in Russian religious thought. As he writes:

> If I am once again citing a Russian thinker as Berdyaev, it is not only because Berdyaev was the great gnostic thinker of Russian Orthodoxy in our times, but rather because, in the attempt to establish a communication between Shi'ite theosophy and the world of Christian theosophy, certain theosophers of Russian Orthodoxy may be a first attempt.[10]

In this regard, Corbin was echoing a similar view about the role of Russia and Orthodoxy that went back to the German theosopher Franz von Baader (1765-1841).[11] As Berdyaev notes, "Baader had a great deal of sympathy [for] the Orthodox Church, and desired closer contact with it. In Russia he saw a mediator between East and West."[12]

10. Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," in *Face de Dieu, Face de l'Homme: Herméneutique et Soufisme*, (Paris: Entrelacs, 2008), 304.

11. See Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church: Its Thought and Life*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Anchor Book, 1963), 199-200. Corbin's writings contain several references to Baader, whom he often associates with Russian religious thinkers, e.g., when he notes the "success of the Joachimite idea… in its effective influence on so many philosophers and theologians of History: on philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and on theosophers such as Franz von Baader, Solovyov, Berdyaev, Merezhkovsky" (*En Islam Iranien*, IV [Paris: Gallimard, 1973], 447). Also: "Revelation is a creative act of the Spirit which only the mystics and theosophers have been able to express: a Jacob Boehme, with whose thought Berdyaev was so familiar; a Franz von Baader, whom [Berdyaev] felt so close to the idea of theandry in Russian theosophy" (Corbin, "Face de Dieu et Face de l'Homme," 308).

12. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 70. In an important letter to the Minister of Education in Russia, S. S. Uvarov, entitled "The Mission of the Russian Church in View of the Decline of Christianity in the West," Baader spoke of the decomposition of the Christian West and the role of Russia and the Orthodox Church in the salvation of the West: "If there is one fact that characterizes the present epoch, it is certainly the West's irresistible movement toward the East. In this great rapprochement, Russia, which possesses both western European and Eastern elements, must necessarily play the part of the intermediary who halts the deadly consequences of the collision. If I am not mistaken, the Russian Church for its part has a similar task to fulfill in the face of the alarming and scandalous decadence of Christianity in the West. In the face of the stagnation of Christianity in the Roman Church and its dissolution in the Protestant Church, the Russian Church to my mind has an intermediary mission—one that is more connected than is usually thought with the country to which it belongs" (cited in Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 71; the original letter can be found in Eugène Susini, *Lettres Inédites de Franz von Baader*, I [Paris: Vrin, 1942], 456-461). See further Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative*

References to Russian "theosophers" occur at widely spaced and irregular intervals in Corbin's writings. Taken in isolation from one another, these scattered references do not easily allow us to identify a distinctively Russian influence on Corbin. However, taken together, those references indicate a continuous, distinct and deep interest in Russian thought. The failure to see this larger picture might explain why the Russian connection in Corbin has been almost completely overlooked in past research.[13]

This paper – the first of two instalments, with the second to appear in the next issue of this journal – offers the first systematic treatment of the Russian content in Corbin's thought. It sheds light on the philosophical and historical context of Corbin's reception of Russian religious thought, and shows how Russian themes influenced his interpretation of Islamic ideas. First we look at the origins of Russian religious thought in Slavophilism, the religious philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov and the eschatological thought of Nikolai Fedorov. Important aspects of this intellectual tradition provided the groundwork for the Russian "religious-philosophical renaissance" at the turn of the 20th century and later came to be reflected in Corbin's thought.

We then turn to Corbin's encounters with Russian thinkers in the 1930s. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, a number of Russian thinkers went into exile and ended up in Paris, which became a thriving centre of Russian philosophy and theology in the interwar period. As the most eminent representative of Russian religious thought in exile, Nikolai Berdyaev initiated Corbin into Orthodox theology. This fuelled Corbin's dissatisfaction with the perceived secularism of Western thought, and contributed to his break with the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

In 1939, Corbin moved to Istanbul where he worked on on the first critical edition of Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi's writings. Parallel to his study of Sufism, Corbin expanded

Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 164.

13. When they have not been completely overlooked, Russian religious thinkers have only received passing mention in secondary literature on Corbin, e.g. Daryush Shayegan, *Henry Corbin: Penseur de l'Islam Spirituel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011), 22. In a recent paper, I briefly highlighted Berdyaev and Bulgakov's respective significance for Corbin. See my "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 Publishing, 2013), 348 and 351.

his knowledge of the Byzantine theological tradition and undertook a translation of the Russian émigré theologian Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. Corbin's mostly unpublished writings from that period show that he was concerned with establishing a common ground between Orthodox and Islamic spirituality.

II. THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION: NEW LIGHT ON CORBIN'S INTELLECTUAL MAKEUP

"As intended by God, Russia is the great integral unity of East and West"(Berdyaev, The Philosophy of Inequality).

Aspects of Russian Religious Thought: Slavophilism, Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Fedorov

The line of thinking commonly referred to as Russian religious thought or philosophy has its roots in the ideas of nineteenth-century Slavophile thinkers, notably Aleksey Khomiakov (1804-60) and Ivan Kireevsky (1806-56).[14] Taking their cue from German conservative romantics and idealist philosophers, especially F. W. J. Schelling (1775-1854), and at the same time firmly rooted in Orthodox Patristic thought, the Slavophiles were chiefly concerned with defining the identity of Russia and Orthodoxy in relation to Europe and Western Christianity (both Catholicism and Protestantism).[15]

14. "It can be argued that the Slavophile philosophers were the first thinkers in Russia to philosophize specifically as *Russians* and to generate a self-conscious Russian intellectual tradition, marked by an interrelated complex of concepts and issues—specifically, what is now known as the tradition of Russian religious idealist philosophy" (James P. Scanlan, "The Nineteenth Century Revisited," in *Russian Thought after Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage*, ed. James Scanlan [New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994], 24). "The term *Slavophilism*, originally one of several derogatory names for a casual association of Russian thinkers, refers to an original group of six landowners: Konstantin Aksakov, Aleksei Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, his brother Peter Kireevsky, Aleksander Khoselev, and Yury Samarin…. As the Slavophiles stressed repeatedly, if they were united in a single movement, it was not by any partiality for the Slavic race, but rather by a shared commitment to the religious and universal calling of Russia; they appear to have preferred calling their movement the 'Orthodox-Russian orientation'…. The name *Slavophile* has stuck most firmly to Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, and their closest allies, as the proper name of the first Russian religious-philosophical movement" (Robert Bird, introduction to *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*, trans. and ed. Boris Jakim and Robert Bird [New York: Lindisfarne, 1998], 7).

15. Cf. Paul Valliere, "The Modernity of Khomiakov," in *A.S. Khomiakov: Poet, Philosopher, Theologian*, ed. Vladimir Tsurikov (New York: Holy Trinity Seminary

In their writings, the Slavophile thinkers criticised the rationalism dominant in Western thought.[16] They argued that rationalism destroys the inner wholeness of the human personality, and that it is the main factor of social disintegration.[17] Rationalism acts as a disintegrating force, they claimed, because

> it transforms reality into an aggregate of isolated fragments bound together only by a network of abstract relationships… By isolating the knower from reality and setting him up in opposition to it, rationalism casts doubt upon the reality and objective nature of the universe.[18]

While the Slavophiles perceived rationalism to be a "disease of reason," they did not dispute the value of logical argument and

Press, 2004), 131; N.O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York: International University Press, 1951), 13-14; Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (California: Stanford University Press, 1979), 92-99. "The Slavophiles were attempting to respond to the dilemma of Russian culture noted by Pëtr Chaadev in his famous First Philosophical Letter published in 1836: 'We have nothing that is ours on which to base our thinking… We are, as it were, strangers to ourselves… a culture based wholly on borrowing and imitation.' To remedy this crisis of imitation of the West, the Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky proposed in 1856 a 'new principle in philosophy:' 'I believe that German philosophy, in combination with the development that it received in Schelling's last system, could serve us as the most convenient point of departure on our way from borrowed systems to an independent philosophy corresponding to the basic principles of Russian culture,' where he maintained there were 'lofty examples of religious thought in the ancient Holy Fathers'" (Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson, introduction to *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith D. Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson [Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996], 7).

16. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 174.

17. Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 100. "Natural reason, or the capacity for abstract thought, is only one of the mental powers and by no means the highest: its one-sided development impoverishes man's perceptive faculties by weakening his capacity for immediate intuitive understanding of the truth. The cult of reason is responsible for breaking up the psyche into a number of separate and unconnected faculties, each of which lays claim to autonomy. The resulting inner conflict corresponds to the conflict between different kinds of sectional party interests in societies founded on rationalistic principles. Inner divisions remain, even when reason succeeds in dominating the other faculties: the autocratic rule of reason intensifies the disintegration of the psyche, just as rationally conceived social bonds 'chain men together but do not unite them' and thus intensify social atomization. 'The tyranny of reason in the sphere of philosophy, faith, and conscience,' wrote [Yury] Samarin, 'has its practical counterpart in the tyranny of the central government in the sphere of social relations'"

18. Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 101-102.

science.[19] Their claim was rather that, left to itself, reason is insufficient to arrive at true knowledge of reality. True understanding, in their view, cannot be content to grasp abstract notions and relationships, but must attempt to penetrate to the substantial essence of things through a kind of immediate knowledge or intuitive apprehension.[20]

Thus, against the autonomy of reason, the Slavophiles proposed the ideal of "integrality" or "integral cognition," characterised in formulas such as "believing reason" or "reasoning faith."[21] This type of cognition involves an "apprehension by the integral spirit, in which reason is combined with will and feeling and in which there is no rationalist disruption."[22] The Slavophiles saw the basis for "integrality" in religious faith. Faith, as Kireevsky put it, helped to fuse "the separate psychic powers… into one living unity, thus restoring the essential personality in all its primary indivisibility."[23] Further, the Slavophiles thinkers believed that the Russian people, thanks to Orthodoxy, were still capable of attaining this inner integration. The people of Western Europe, on the other hand, had succumbed to the fragmentation of the psychic powers that rationalism entailed, and had consequently lost their capacity for inner concentration and mental wholeness.[24] The Slavophiles thought that Russia's task in relation to Western Europe is imparting health to it through the spirit of Orthodoxy and Christian principles.[25]

The Slavophile concern for integrality is reflected in Khomiakov's doctrine of the Church. He developed a conception of the Church as an "organic whole," an interpretation that he supported with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which describes the Church as "catholic"—"in accordance with everything" or "in accordance with the unity of all." Khomiakov's conception of the Church is summed up in the key Russian concept of *sobornost*—an abstract noun that derives from the word *sobor*, which can mean gathering, council, or cathedral, implying that the Church is based in the gathering of all her members.[26] *Sobornost* thus indicates "a unity

19. Frederick Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy: Selected Aspects* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 10.

20. Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 101-102; Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 10.

21. Anna Lisa Crone, *Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Thought: The Philosophers and the Freudians* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 5.

22. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 174.

23. Cited in Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 101.

24. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 58-59.

25. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 47.

26. Bird, introduction to *On Spiritual Unity*, 15.

which knows of no external authority over it, but equally knows no individualistic isolation and seclusion."[27] By interpreting the unity of Christians as a formal union, the Western Church removed itself from the living unity of the Church. By contrast, the Eastern Orthodox Church maintained its *sobornyi* character.[28]

Khomiakov's characterisation of Orthodoxy in terms of freedom was particularly important for Berdyaev (who wrote a book on Khomiakov).[29] Corbin later said that it was

> thanks to religious thinkers such as Nikolai Berdyaev and Alexis Khomiakov, who were not official theologians, that a certain number of us, who were Westerners, became aware of what is specific to, and yet to come in, Eastern Christianity.[30]

Corbin shared with the Slavophiles their romantic critique of rationalism and emphasis on faith and intuition as valid modes of cognition. The Slavophile adaptation of Orthodox theological notions to the conceptual language of German idealism might be compared with Corbin's interpretation of Islamic philosophy through conceptual categories and assumptions derived from modern German philosophy. In this regard, Corbin can be seen as the representative of a philosophical tradition stretching back through the Slavophiles to Schelling.[31]

27. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 180; Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*, 35-38.

28. Bird, introduction to *On Spiritual Unity*, 15.

29. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Lampert (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 165.

30. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," in *Colloque Berdiaev. Sorbonne, 12 Avril 1975*, ed. Jean-Claude Marcadé (Paris: Institut d'Études Slaves, 1978), 48.

31. Muhsin Mahdi rightly observes that Corbin was "in many ways the last of the German Romantics" ("Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 [1990], 92). Regarding Schelling's significance for the Slavophiles, Frederick Copleston writes: "The Slavophile thinkers… certainly attacked Hegel as representing the culmination of western rationalism, but what they wanted was, not so much adoption of Schelling's philosophy as such, as the development of a specifically Russian line of philosophical thought. It was the late phase of Schelling's philosophizing which came to attract them, when Schelling was criticizing Hegelianism as a 'negative philosophy,' as a logical deduction of abstract concepts allegedly divorced from concrete existing reality. In their view Schelling showed an awareness of historical reality in its varied organic development, an awareness which could serve as a point of departure for the emergence of a recognizably Russian philosophical tradition, in harmony with the Orthodox religious spirit. Schelling's philosophy of religion, as developed when he was combatting the influence of Hegelianism, may have had relatively little impact on the course of Western European

Further, Corbin's contrast between a "spiritual Islam" and a "legalistic Islam" may be likened to the Slavophile distinction between a freedom-based Christianity and a legalistic and authoritarian one. Corbin himself suggests this connection with reference to "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). In that story, Dostoevsky – who was an ardent Slavophile for much of the latter half of his life – depicts a returning Jesus Christ arrested by the Spanish Inquisition (representing the Roman Catholic Church) and charged with heresy.

Dostoevsky's "Legend" had a powerful symbolic value in Russian religious thought and was commented on by several Russian thinkers.[32] For Berdyaev, Dostoevsky's tale reveals the struggle of two principles in the world – of Christ and of anti-Christ, of freedom and compulsion.[33] As he writes: "To the Roman idea which is founded upon compulsion [Dostoevsky] opposes the Russian Idea, which is founded upon freedom of the spirit."[34] The Grand Inquisitor is a personification of the "principle of compulsion," that is, "the dangerous idea that Christ's redeeming work can be consummated only after humanity has been coerced into submission to a single ecclesiastical authority."[35] Christ, on the other, is the image of the spirit of freedom, at the basis of which is Dostoevsky's high regard for the independence and dignity of the human personality.[36]

The antithesis of spiritual freedom and spiritual compulsion portrayed in Dostoevsky's "Legend" coloured Corbin's interpretation of the Islamic tradition. Thus, on the one hand, he compares the figure of the Imam in Shi'ism to the figure of Christ in Dostoevsky's "Legend," and on the other hand, he associates the Muslim legal-scholars or *fuqaha* with the figure

thought, but it seemed to Slavophile thinkers to provide a basis or starting-point for the development of Russian philosophy. In other words, though Hegel and Schelling did appeal to Westernizers and Slavophiles respectively, 'Hegel' has to be seen as leading on to left-wing Hegelianism and 'Schelling' as a point of departure for the emergence of a Russian philosophical tradition" (Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 10: Russian Philosophy* [London: Continuum, 2003], 25).

32. See *La Légende du Grand Inquisiteur de Dostoïevski*, trans. and ed. Luba Jurgenson (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2004), which includes the commentaries of Konstantin Leontiev, Vladimir Solovyov, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, Nicolas Berdyaev, Vasily Rozanov, and Semyon Frank.

33. See Fuad Nucho, *Berdyaev's Philosophy: The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 27-31.

34. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 170.

35. Nucho, *The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity*, 29.

36. Nucho, *The Existential Paradox of Freedom and Necessity*, 31.

of the Grand Inquisitor.[37] Similarly, he contrasts the "traits of the interior man…[and] of prophetic esotericism" with those of "their opponents, whether they are called Doctors of the Law, *foqaha*, or they are among those typified by Dostoevsky's figure of the Grand Inquisitor."[38] Hence, for Corbin, "the Shi'ite Spiritual and the Sufi find themselves with respect to official Islam in a relation analogous to that in which the Spirituals of Christianity find themselves with respect to the Great Church."[39]

Although the Slavophiles defined the programme of a Christian philosophy, and laid down some of the lines of thought that should be followed, none of them developed the projected synthesis. It was Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) who first undertook the task of showing how faith and reason, religious belief and speculative philosophy, can live in harmony and contribute to a unified understanding of the world, human life and history.[40]

One of Solovyov's most influential ideas is that of Divine humanity (Russian *Bogochelovechestvo*). In accordance with the Chalcedonian definition of the being of Christ as one person in two natures, the concept of Divine humanity denotes the "mutual penetration, and the union of two natures,

37. Cf. "Une tradition remontant au V^e^ Imâm, Mohammad al-Bâqir, nous montre le dernier Imâm, le Résurrecteur, se dirigeant vers la ville de Koufa. Alors voici que sort de la ville à sa rencontre un cortège de plusieurs milliers d'homme. Il n'y a là que des gens très bien: des lecteurs professionnels du Qorân, des docteurs de la Loi, etc., bref tout ce que la piété officielle a pu constituer socialement en dévots autoritaires. Et tous s'adressent à l'Imâm pour le récuser: 'O fils de Fâtima! Retourne d'où tu viens. Nous n'avons pas besoin de toi. Nous n'avons pas besoin d'un fils de Fâtima.'

Lorsque je lus ce texte pour la première fois, il me sembla avoir lu déjà ailleurs certaines paroles résonnant en écho lointain. C'est ainsi que je fus reconduit jusqu'au refus que le Grand Inquisiteur, dans un célèbre roman de Dostoïevsky, oppose au Christ revenu à Séville, la nuit où il le tient prisonnier: 'Pourquoi es-Tu revenu nous déranger?... As-tu le droit de nous révéler un seul des mystères du monde d'où Tu viens?... Avais-tu oublié que la quiétude et la mort même sont préférables pour l'homme à la liberté de discerner le bien et le mal?... Va et ne reviens plus, plus jamais.'

Entre l'accueil fait au retour de l'Imâm et l'accueil fait au retour du Christ, il y avait une ressemblance frappante. Je fis part du rapprochement à un shaykh que je savais profond et discret. En réponse, le shaykh me rappela d'abord les textes où il est dit que le XII^e^ Imâm non seulement passe par une occultation comparable à celle de Joseph vendu par ses frères, mais que de tous les humains il est celui qui ressemble le plus au Christ, parce qu'il doit revenir comme reviendra le Christ" (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 441-442).

38. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 27.

39. Corbin, "De l'Histoire des Religions comme Problème Théologique," *Le Monde Non-Chrétien* 51/52 (1960), 148.

40. Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 11.

the Divine and the human, while the distinction between them and their independence is preserved."[41] One of the fundamental functions of the concept of Divine humanity is that it

> enabled [Solovyov] to overcome the dualism of traditional Christian theology between the divine and the temporal without falling into pantheism…. God is both transcendent and immanent, and the mediating principle that allows the world to become transfused by the Divine spirit—the link between God and created matter—is Man.[42]

The concept of Divine humanity became one of the most characteristic themes of Russian religious thought at the turn of the 20th century. It was notably important for Berdyaev, who showed Corbin that "the divine mystery and the human mystery [are] one and the same mystery."[43]

A closely related concept is that of Sophia, or divine Wisdom, which Solovyov identified with the mysterious feminine figure that appeared to him in three mystical visions.[44] In elaborating his theory of Sophia, Solovyov drew on a wide variety of sources, including Plato and the Neoplatonists, Valentinian Gnosticism, Leibniz (the monadistic conception of ideas), Schelling, as well as the Jewish mystical writings of the Kabbalah (in which Sophia takes the form of a woman), the works of Jacob Boehme, where she is identified with "eternal virginity," and the writings of Swedenborg, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, and Franz von Baader.[45] These sources were equally important for Corbin.

Sophia assumes various roles in Solovyov's writings. She is primarily identified with the divine archetypal ideas. She is ideal humanity—"the ideal and perfect humanity which is eternally comprised in the integral divine being, or Christ," writes Solovyov—whose role it is to bridge or mediate between God and

41. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R.M. French (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 36.

42. Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 380.

43. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49.

44. For a detailed discussion of the role of Sophia for Solovyov, see Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "Who is Solovyov and what is Sophia?" in *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 3-97.

45. Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 381.

the world.[46] She is also identified with the world soul considered as "the active principle which progressively exemplifies in the created world the eternal all-uniting Idea in the Logos."[47] Finally, Sophia is the fully developed divine-human organism, namely spiritualised humanity, the society of persons united in Divine humanity.[48] Sophianic themes became popular in Russian religious and poetic trends at the beginning of the 20th century.[49] In particular, the Sophiological teachings of the Russian Orthodox priest and theologian Fr. Sergius Bulgakov had a profound and lasting influence on Corbin, who sought to articulate a "Shi'ite Sophiology."

A last figure deserving mention in this overview is Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov (1827-1903), whom Berdyaev considered as one of the most "characteristically Russian" thinkers.[50] A humble librarian little known during his lifetime, Fedorov "was a man of a single idea; he was entirely in the grip of one notion; that of victory over death, of the return of the dead to life."[51] In Fedorov's view, the "real enemy" of humankind is "the blind, death-dealing power" of nature.[52] He accordingly called for a utopian "collective action" in which all efforts would be concentrated on resurrecting the dead, and conquering death itself through the planned transformation of life, the subjugation of nature to man.[53] As Berdyaev explains, Fedorov regarded the resurrection of the dead, and renewal of life, "not just [as] an act of God in regard to which man remains passive; it is the work of God-manhood, that is, it is also the work of collective human activity."[54]

Berdyaev agrees with Fedorov that death can and should be overcome, yet he does not interpret "restoration to life" in literal, biological terms, but in a spiritualised, internalised sense—something like "a completion of an individual's potential spiritual

46. Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 158-159.

47. Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 84.

48. *Ibid*,85.

49. *Ibid*, 81.

50. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 226.

51. *Ibid*, 224.

52. Cited in V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy*, II, trans. George L. Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 599.

53. Walicki, *History of Russian Thought*, 386.

54. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 225-226. See also Olivier Clément, "Apocalypse et Transfiguration chez les Philosophes Religieux Russes," in *Apocalypse et Sens de l'Histoire*, ed. Stella Corbin and Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron (Paris: Berg International, 1983), 132-158.

personality."[55] Berdyaev held: "Only in the spirit is the victory over death possible, the resurrection of the dead."[56]An important characteristic of this outlook is an internalised understanding of eschatology. Indeed, much like Corbin after him, Berdyaev did not conceive the end of the world as an objective event set to take place at the end of historical time. Eschatological consciousness, Berdyaev argued, is not passive, but rather an "active agent in the cessation of the world."[57] Indeed, eschatological acts can be enacted at each moment. The meaning of eschatology for Berdyaev thus involves the end of the historical, objectified, material world and the beginning of another, spiritualised world through the transformation of the structure of consciousness.

Like Berdyaev and Fedorov, Corbin was profoundly eschatologically-minded. He considered his own work as "a campaign against Death."[58] Fedorov's "philosophy of resurrection" found echo in Corbin's interpretation of Iranian spirituality. Thus, he noted: "Iranian religious thought… was the first to formulate, and remained constantly concerned with formulating, what may be called a 'philosophy of Resurrection.'"[59] Berdyaev's eschatological views were of key import to Corbin, who transposed them to his interpretation of Shi'ite eschatology. He claimed that "the metaphysics of Shi'ism is essentially, like Berdyaev's, an eschatological metaphysics."[60] Following Berdyaev and Fedorov, Corbin insisted on the personal responsibility and active role of man in the redemption and transfiguration of the world.

55. George Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and his Followers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 138.

56. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 196.

57. Fabian Linde, *The Spirit of Revolt: Nikolai Berdiaev's Existential Gnosticism* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2010), 210. See also Carnegie Samuel Calian, *The Significance of Eschatology in the Thoughts of Nicolas Berdyaev* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

58. In her memoir of Corbin's final days, his wife Stella wrote: "On the 26th of September the doctor authorizes the return to Rue Odéon. Henry, overjoyed, barely sleeps, plans to finish his works, and then, slightly troubled, asks the doctor: 'But do you think I can finish this book?' Dr. Gonnot: 'Oh! I know you. Even if you had 100 years ahead of you, you would ask me the same question. You would have yet another urgent book to finish…and many more besides.' Corbin replies, 'That may well be! The thing is, you see, with my books, I am struggling against the same thing as you. Each in our own way, you as doctor, and I as historian of religions, are engaged in the same struggle, we are leading a campaign against Death'" (cited in Tom Cheetham, *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings* [Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2012], 12).

59. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, 13.

60. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49.

Translated into Shi'ite terms, this meant that "the parousia of the [Hidden Imam] is not an event that simply occurs one fine day," but rather an event that necessarily involves the spiritual consciousness and active collaboration of the Shi'ite faithful.[61]

Beside thematic and conceptual parallels, there are wider affinities between Corbin and Russian religious thinkers. For instance, like Corbin, the main representatives of Russian religious thought—including Khomiakov, Solovyov, Fedorov and Berdyaev—did not belong to the traditional religious clergy. Indeed, Corbin and these Russian thinkers were engaged in a similar pursuit of thinking about religion outside traditional and institutionalised frameworks. To this extent, they may be called "modern religious thinkers"—the first evidence of their modernity being that they engaged in theology at all.[62] Like Corbin after them, the thinkers of the "Russian school" of Orthodox theology

> grappled with the challenges facing all faith communities in modern times, such as the tension between tradition and freedom, the challenge of modern humanism, the mission of the church to modern society, the status of dogma in modern intellectuality and the significance of religious pluralism…. This engagement reflected an interest in philosophy not just as a specialized academic pursuit but in the most basic sense of the word: the quest for *Sophia*, for wisdom, for insight into the meaning of life.[63]

61. "[C]e sont les hommes eux-mêmes qui ont imposé à l'Imâm son occultation; si l'Imâm est caché, c'est que les hommes se sont rendus incapables de le voir. Il ne peut se manifester, puisqu'il ne peut être reconnu. La parousie n'est pas un événement qui puisse survenir un beau jour. C'est quelque chose qui advient de jour en jour dans la conscience des shî'ites fidèles" (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 331). "*Attendre* l'Imâm, cela veut dire que la parousie de l'Imâm dépend proportionnellement de chaque adepte. Cela, parce qu'en définitive…le sens profond de la *ghaybat*, c'est que ce sont les hommes eux-mêmes qui se sont voilé à eux-mêmes l'Imâm, se sont rendus incapables ou indignes de le voir. Nous pourrions dire en transposant: l'historien sacré raconte que Dieu a exilé Adam du paradis, mais le mystique découvre que c'est Adam, l'homme, qui a chassé Dieu du paradis" (Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 433).

62. Cf. Valliere, "The Modernity of Khomiakov," 130.

63. Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 2-3. Valliere elsewhere labels as "liberal Orthodoxy" the work of 19th- and 20th-century Russian Orthodox thinkers "who sought a mutually productive synthesis of Orthodox theology and modern thought" (Valliere, "Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization," in *Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson [Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996], 178).

Nikolai Berdyaev and Russian Émigré Thinkers in Interwar Paris

The course of Berdyaev's career reflects key stages in the development of Russian religious thought into the 20th century. As a member of the Russian emigration abroad, Berdyaev had an important role in acquainting Western audiences with the Russian philosophical tradition.[64] Looking at his philosophical activities in interwar France sheds light on the context of Corbin's encounter with Russian thought in the 1930s.

Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev (1874-1948) was born in the province of Kiev into an aristocratic family with ties to the French nobility and a tradition of military service. Like many other young members of the intelligentsia, he was carried along by the new wave of social thought and became a Marxist in the late 1890s, albeit in his words "an unorthodox, critical and free-thinking one."[65] Between 1901 and 1907, he participated in a St. Petersburg-based movement promoting a "new religious consciousness" that shared mystical leanings in opposition to traditional ascetic Christianity.[66] The movement called for an era of the Holy Spirit (the Christianity of the "Third Testament"), founded on the concept of "holy flesh," and which would synthesise paganism and Christianity.[67]

Sensing the imminence of violent social upheavals, Berdyaev moved to Moscow, and joined the Religious Philosophical Society composed of like-minded intellectuals who stressed the importance of religious values. In 1909 this group of ex-Marxists published one of the most important books of the time, entitled *Landmarks* (Russian *Vekhi*), which criticised the predominant materialism and positivism among the

64. As Lev Shestov notes, "it may be said that in the person of Berdyaev Russian philosophical thinking appeared for the first time before the forum of Europe or, perhaps, even of the whole world" (L. Shestov, *Speculation and Revelation* trans. Bernard Martin [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982], 232).

65. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 117; Donald A. Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolai Berdyaev* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 40.

66. See Ruth Coates, "Religious Renaissance in the Silver Age," in *A History of Russian Thought*, ed. William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 169-193, esp. 179.

67. Matthew Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 22. Cf. "The basic theme of Russian thought at the beginning of the twentieth century is the theme of the divine in the cosmos, of cosmic divine transfiguration, of the energies of the Creator in creation. It is the theme of the divine in man, of the creative vocation of man and the meaning of culture" (Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, 259). See further Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "Eschatology and Hope in Silver Age Thought," in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830-1930*, ed. G.M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 285-304.

intelligentsia while insisting on moral and spiritual regeneration.[68]

In 1916, during the First World War, Berdyaev published *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, which he regarded as among the most important of his writings and to which he frequently referred throughout his later life.[69] Some of Berdyaev's central ideas conveyed and elucidated in *The Meaning of the Creative Act* appear to be of great import to Corbin's own intellectual project. In this book, Berdyaev expounded one of his most original ideas, namely, man's creative role in the transformation of the world. This concept brought him to an "eschatological metaphysics," which stressed man's creative role through his co-operation with God in bringing about the "end of time."[70]

Berdyaev's career was cut short in Russia during the year 1922 when Lenin organised the expulsion of some 160 members of the intelligentsia who were perceived to represent a threat to the Communist establishment. This mass expulsion all but sealed the fate of religious philosophy under the Soviet Regime, forcing the "religious-philosophical renaissance" to undergo an "involuntary relocation abroad."[71] One consequence of this was to allow the influence of Russian thought to spread across Europe. The history of Russian religious thought thereby became closely intertwined with the history of philosophical thought in the West. Corbin stood at the crossroads of this cultural and philosophical confluence between Russia and Western Europe.

Berdyaev had a leading role in helping organise the Russian philosophical community abroad. Upon his exile, he lived for two years in Berlin, where he founded a Religious-Philosophical Academy that regrouped exiled Russian intellectuals. Shortly afterward, in 1924, he relocated the Religious-Philosophical Academy to Paris, which by that time had replaced Berlin as the centre of the Russian emigration.[72] Paris became Berdyaev's home until his death in 1948. It was there that he wrote and published his main philosophical works, including *Freedom and the Spirit*

68. Stuart Finkel, "Nikolai Berdiaev and the Philosophical Tasks of the Emigration," in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830-1930*, ed. G.M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 349; Copleston, *Russian Religious Philosophy*, 32. C.f. Andrzej Walicki, "Milestones and Russian Intellectual History," *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 62 (2010), 101-107.

69. Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 46.

70. Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 46.

71. Finkel, "Nikolai Berdiaev and the Philosophical Tasks of the Emigration," 353.

72. Michel Alexander Vallon, *An Apostle of Freedom: Life and Teachings of Nicolas Berdyaev* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 139.

(1927), *The Destiny of Man* (1931), *Spirit and Reality* (1937), *The Beginning and the End* (1946), and *The Divine and the Human* (1947).

In Paris, Berdyaev lectured for a short while at the Orthodox Theological Institute of St. Sergius. Founded in 1925, the theological institute had become, after the disappearance of all theological schools in Soviet Russia, "the only Russian institution of higher theological learning anywhere."[73] It welcomed in its ranks the philosophers, theologians and students of the Russian diaspora, becoming a unique pole of exchange, debate and theological renewal of the Church abroad.[74] Due to their willingness to engage with modern problems, revise traditional doctrines and present creative solutions, some of the thinkers grouped around St. Sergius were viewed as representing a "liberal" school of theology within Orthodoxy, also known as the "Paris School" of Russian theology.[75] The thinkers of the "Paris School" were instrumental in disseminating Russian religious and philosophical themes among the Western intelligentsia. No doubt the most distinguished among the "Paris School" theologians, Fr. Sergius Bulgakov had a decisive influence on Corbin's thought through his Sophiological teachings.

Another important pole for the growth of Russian religious and philosophical thought abroad was the monthly review *The Way* (*Put'*), which Berdyaev founded in 1926 and edited until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.[76] The purpose of *The Way* was "to provide a place of expression for creative thought on the basis of Orthodoxy," and it quickly became the main vehicle

73. Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet*, 195. See also Donald Lowrie, *Saint Sergius in Paris: The Orthodox Theological Institute* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954).

74. Catherine Gousseff, "Une Intelligentsia Chrétienne en Exil: Les Orthodoxes Russes dans la France des Années 20," in *Intellectuels Chrétiens et Esprit des Années 20*, ed. Pierre Colin (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 119.

75. See Paul Valliere, "La 'Scuola Parigina' di Teologia: Unità o Molteplicità?" in *La Teologia Ortodossa e l'Occidente nel XX Secolo: Storia di un Incontro*, ed. Adriano Dell'Asta (Seriate: La Casa di Matriona, 2005), 41-49. See also Stamatios Gerogiorgakis, "Modern and Traditional Tendencies in the Religious Thought of the Russian and Greek Diaspora from the 1920s to the 1960s," *Religion, State and Society* 40, no. 3-4 (2012), 336-348 (I owe this reference to the kindness of Dr. Todd Lawson).

76. Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet*, 198; Vallon, *Apostle of Freedom*, 139. See further A. Arjakovsky, *La Génération des Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe: La Revue La Voie (Put'), 1925-1940* (Kiev-Paris: L'Esprit et la Lettre, 2002). Although the readership of *The Way* was largely composed of Russian émigrés, it also included "sympathisers with the culture of Russia, in addition to Christians open to the ecumenical dimension," such as Donald Lowrie, Berdyaev's biographer and missionary associated with the Fédération Universelle des Associations Chrétiennes Étudiantes (FUACE)—which Corbin presided in the early thirties—and the German theologian Rudolf Otto (Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 34).

of expression for religious thinkers of the Russian emigration, as well as one of the most important periodicals of the Orthodox world.[77] That being said, the periodical was representative of no particular ideology, but rather of a number of trends of thought and Russian theologians and philosophers of various views who were engaged in carrying on the cultural tradition of their native country.[78] Despite wide-ranging divergences, the authors of *The Way* were united by their common origins, the experience of exile, and their shared desire to "recover the living tradition of the Church in the context of creative freedom."[79]

In exile, the Russian thinkers were brought face to face with the painful problem of Christian disunity, which further motivated them to actively participate in ecumenical dialogues with other Christian denominations.[80] Christian ecumenism appealed to the Russian religious thinkers because "it had long been a central purpose in the Russian religious-philosophical tradition," which aspired for an East-West Christian unity.[81] Thus, ecumenism became a main rallying point for Russian and Western intellectuals.

From the moment he moved to Paris, Berdyaev was actively involved in movements looking toward the union of Christian communions into one ecumenical body.[82] He held that it was "Russia's mission… to become east-west, to unite two worlds."[83] Thus, in 1926, he organised interconfessional gatherings between Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants under the auspices of the Russian Religious-Philosophical Academy.[84] At these meetings, Orthodoxy provided, in his words, "a meeting-point between the various sections of a divided Christendom, uninhibited as

77. Gousseff, "Les Orthodoxes Russes dans la France des Années 20," 120. According to Marc Raeff, *The Way* was "the most significant religious journal of Russia Abroad… The list of contributors… included practically all the prominent scholars and thinkers of Russia Abroad... It was… a journal of religious, philosophical and social thought on a high level of erudition and intellectual sophistication. It represented what was best in the intellectual life of Russia Abroad" (*Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration (1919-1939)* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], 144-145).

78. Vallon, *Apostle of Freedom*, 140.

79. Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 108.

80. Nicolas Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth-Century* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), 258.

81. Catherine Baird, "The 'Third Way': Russia's Religious Philosophers in the West, 1917-1996" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1997), 280.

82. Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 84-86.

83. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 327.

84. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 258; Vallon, *Apostle of Freedom*, 140.

it is by the weight of historical memories which impede mutual understanding between the various Western Churches."[85]

Next to these interconfessional meetings, Berdyaev held at his Clamart home monthly meetings with a group of French intellectuals where subjects of mysticism and spirituality were the focus of discussion.[86] Although there is no indication that Corbin attended these meetings, among the regular participants were prominent French intellectuals who were part of his milieu, including the writer Charles du Bos, the Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, the leader of the Catholic Personalist movement and founder of the journal *Esprit*, the medievalist Etienne Gilson, and the distinguished scholar of Islamic mysticism Louis Massignon who had a decisive impact on Corbin's career when, in 1929, he handed him a lithographed copy of Suhrawardi's *Hikmat al-Ishraq* brought with him from Iran.[87] These widespread and fluid exchanges between French and Russian intellectuals defined the context in which Corbin discovered Russian thought.

The Russian thinkers' ecumenical attitude appealed to Corbin, who early on called for closer ties between East and West.[88] Thus, in an article titled "Regards vers l'Orient," written when he was only 24, he declared:

> Eastern intellectuals ought to know that there are in the West, among the young generation, souls that are entirely sympathetic to them—[souls] that, freeing themselves from all prejudice and hypocrisy, suffer with them, aspire to hear them and to understand them, and call with all their might for a close collaboration.[89]

85. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 259.

86. On the "Clamart Tuesdays," see Baird, "Russia's Religious Philosophers in the West," 314-328.

87. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 263. It is worth noting that the Catholic neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, who was responsible for arranging the French membership at the meetings at Berdyaev's house, was "for various reasons… against Protestant participation" (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 263). As a result, "between 1930 and 1932… the Clamart Tuesdays were a strictly Orthodox-Catholic circle." (Baird, "Russia's Religious Philosophers in the West," 315). On Berdyaev's contacts in Paris, see Klaus Bambauer, "The Ecumenical Tasks of N. Berdjajew and his Contacts in Paris (I)," http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/bambauer/Berd_Ecumenical_Contacts.html.

88. Cf. Olivier Clément, *Berdiaev: Un Philosophe Russe en France* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1991), 89.

89. Corbin [Trong-Ni], "Regards vers l'Orient," *Tribune Indo-Chinoise*, August 15, 1927.

Beside the ecumenical disposition it indicated, Corbin's attraction to the East also reflected a wider dissatisfaction with the modern West among the European intelligentsia in the interwar period, represented in works such as Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918-1923) and René Guénon's *La Crise du Monde Moderne* (1927).[90]

Meanwhile, the generation of Berdyaev and Bulgakov condemned the predominant secularism and rationalism of Western thought, and criticised the perceived dogmatism of the Roman Catholic Church, which to them stood as an obstacle to the long-hoped for Reunion of the Churches.[91] This perception was aggravated with the publication, in 1928, of the encyclical *Mortalium animus*, in which Pope Pius IX condemned the ecumenical movement and prohibited Catholics from participating in any inter-confessional encounter. The Catholic encyclical helped reinforce the hostility of the majority of the Russian émigrés toward Rome and probably contributed

90. "L'immédiat après-guerre fut celui d'une remise en cause de la raison occidentale; la guerre avait induit la crise des valeurs occidentales et on entendit de nouveau les 'Appels de l'Orient,' selon le titre d'une enquête qui devint célèbre au début de 1925. Entre 1919 et 1927, une confrontation passionnée mit aux prises l'Orient et l'Occident; 1925 marque l'apogée de ce mouvement, qui poussait l'Europe à mieux connaître l'Asie…. Trois types de positions avaient été adoptées jusque là. Une minorité d'auteurs avaient exalté l'Orient régénérateur; des surréalistes à Romain Rolland, en passant par René Guénon, Keyserling et les milieux spiritualistes chrétiens (Chestov [sic], Berdiaev), le thème de l'Orient, domaine par excellence des valeurs humaines, rassemblait souplement des courants de pensée fort dissemblables. Sur une position moyenne se regroupaient les nombreux spécialistes universitaires de l'Orient. Sylvain Lévi, indianiste, professeur au Collège de France, invitait les Occidentaux à une approche sympathique et intelligente de l'Orient. Il préconisait une politique d'échanges mutuels et adjurait l'Occident de reconnaître dans les civilisations asiatiques un certain nombre de valeurs fondamentales. Il concluait sur une note inquiétante en évoquant la 'déception' (*sic*) des indigènes, et la fascination exercée par la Révolution russe. René Grousset, historien, campait sur un terrain identique, en rappelant les trésors de sagesse et les beautés de l'art hindou ainsi que chinois que l'Occident ne devait plus ignorer. Dans leur approche, on le voit, ces spécialistes considéraient la complémentarité des deux mondes. Enfin, une troisième orientation est tracée par les auteurs qui refusent (Massis) ou se tiennent à distance (Valéry) des valeurs de l'Orient. Pour le directeur de la *Revue Universelle*, il s'agit de dénoncer le péril oriental, incarnation de l'irrationalisme; quant à la vogue de l'Orient, Massis voit là essentiellement un phénomène germanique et anti-français. Paul Valéry avec sa 'Crise de l'Esprit' de 1919 avait donné le ton fondamental de l'après-guerre; cependant, les textes qu'il écrivit par la suite voulurent moins insister sur la fragilité européenne que sur la plénitude de son esprit. Rien-de-nouveau-à-l'Est, aurait-il pu conclure; l'Occident n'avait nul besoin de se régénérer par l'Orient" (François Chaubet, *Paul Desjardins et les Décades de Pontigny* [Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1999], 125-126).

91. Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 70.

to alienating Corbin from Catholicism. As Arjakovsky notes:

> The pontifical condemnation was especially cruel for those in the West who were in quest of universality… Within the Russian modernist generation, the effect of the pontifical condemnation was to strengthen the identification of the contributors of *The Way* with Eastern Christianity. All the same, according to whether the archetype of the East was Moscow or Constantinople, the attitude towards the West varied. The heirs of the Third Rome, Berdyaev, Fedotov, Bulgakov, put the accent on the possibility, here and now, of bypassing the dogmatic divisions through eschatology. On the other hand, the eschatologism of Karsavin, Florovsky, Ilyin, the apologists of the newborn neo-patristic movement, was characterized by a return in time to the Byzantine epoch, to the times of an undivided Christianity.[92]

Berdyaev's Role in the Development of Corbin's Thought in the 1930s

The 1930s were formative years for Corbin. In the lively intellectual climate of Paris, Corbin was simultaneously engaged in a broad spectrum of intellectual pursuits that encompassed Islamic mysticism, contemporary German philosophy, Protestant theology, and Orthodox thought. This extraordinary range of literary and philosophical interests makes the task of charting and elucidating the various influences on Corbin's thought particularly complicated. Previous scholarship has largely focused on Corbin's interest in Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), both of whom he translated into French in those years.[93]

While the fact that Corbin met Berdyaev in the 30s is not unknown, there has been almost no attempt to explain the significance of their encounter. This partly may be attributed to the absence of any reference to Berdyaev in Corbin's publications in that decade. Further, in the two principal autobiographical sources concerning that period, Corbin discusses at length his engagement with Barth and Heidegger in the 1930s, but Berdyaev only receives a cursory acknowledgement.[94] This can be explained by the fact that

92. Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 188.

93. See Maria Soster, "Le Développement de la Pensée d'Henry Corbin pendant les Années Trente" (master's thesis, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2002).

94. The two main autobiographical sources for that period are the 1976 inter-

Corbin had already acknowledged his debt to Berdyaev separately in his inaugural speech as the newly elected president of the Nikolai Berdyaev Association on the occasion of the Berdyaev Colloquium held at the Sorbonne in 1975.[95] On that occasion, Corbin claimed that it was "largely thanks to Berdyaev" that he was able to "face freely as a philosopher the philosophical problems [he] encountered."[96]

Four interrelated aspects of Berdyaev's significance are considered here: (1) as a "religious existentialist," Berdyaev shared family traits with contemporary thinkers such as Karl Barth, Lev Shestov, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, who were key names for Corbin in the 1930s; through his criticism of (2) Barth and (3) Heidegger, Berdyaev inspired Corbin's dissatisfaction and eventual break with these thinkers; (4) Berdyaev familiarised Corbin with Orthodox spirituality, which became particularly important for him at the end of the 30s.

Throughout that decade, Corbin met Russian intellectuals who had relocated to Paris. Born and schooled in Russia, these émigré intellectuals represented a philosophical culture that functioned as a genuine alternative to a generation of disenfranchised French intellectuals seeking to break with the philosophical rationalism, positivism, and optimism that characterised much of the philosophical establishment of the Third Republic. As Ethan Kleinberg writes:

> The arrival of figures fleeing Russia in 1917 via Germany infused French intellectual life with scholars raised on Russian literature, exposed to Marxist doctrine, and schooled in modern German philosophy…. These "foreign" intellectuals working on the periphery of the French university system and publishing in French provided concrete answers to the questions the generation of 1933 felt their own philosophical tradition

view titled "De Heidegger à Sohravardî," and Corbin's 1978 addendum to this interview, titled "Post-Scriptum Biographique à un Entretien Philosophique." It is worth noting that "De Heidegger à Sohravardî" is based on the transcript of a radio interview that Corbin gave for Radio France-Culture on June 2, 1976, on the occasion of Heidegger's death. Corbin is interviewed mainly about his role as the first translator of Heidegger into French. The focus on Heidegger has therefore more to do with the context of the interview than it is an accurate reflection of Heidegger's overall importance for Corbin.

95. Corbin is presumably alluding to that speech when he writes: "[J]'ai eu occasion de dire ailleurs ma dette spirituelle [envers Nicolas Berdiaev]" ("Post-Scriptum Biographique," 43).

96. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49.

was unable to answer.[97]

Émigré Russian intellectuals had a key role in acquainting the French audience with modern German philosophy. "It is curious to observe that it is a Russian who is initiating the French into German philosophy," noted Berdyaev in his review of Georges Gurvitch's *Les Tendances Actuelles de la Philosophie Allemande* (1930), a book that was largely responsible for familiarising the French intelligentsia with recent trends of German phenomenology (Husserl, Scheler and Heidegger).[98]

Among the Russian intellectuals close to Corbin who had a notable role in importing German philosophy into France were Alexandre Koyré (born Koyrenikov, 1892- 1964) and Alexandre Kojève (born Kojevnikov, 1902-1968).[99] Koyré founded in 1931 the journal *Recherches Philosophiques*, which helped popularise German phenomenology and existentialism, and to which Corbin collaborated as a reviewer of German theological and philosophical books. Koyré's studies of German Lutheran mystics, such as Johann Arndt, Caspar Schwenckfeld, Valentin Weigel, and Jacob Boehme, familiarised Corbin with an outlook akin to that of Berdyaev.[100] Koyré's interest in mysticism and Romanticism

97. Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927-1961* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 9. "[T]he generation of 1933 wanted to move beyond Bergsonian spiritualism, which they considered overly subjective and optimistic, and this created a gap in the French philosophical world. The French neo-Kantians attempted to use recent advances in science to explain the increasingly complex nature of the world, but they too faced the harsh challenge that World War I presented to the French notion of progress. Thus both strains of French philosophy appeared insufficient to the generation of 1933. For them, the starting point of philosophy was the desire to come to grips with the events of World War I in relation to the optimistic view of progress and history embodied by French philosophy and the Third Republic…. To the generation of 1933, the traditional academic system seemed more concerned with perpetuating itself and its republican ideals than with confronting the realities of a changing world. The events of history had debunked the theory of historical progress that had guided the Third Republic from its inception. The answers the generation of 1933 sought lay beyond the familiar territory of French academic philosophy" (Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 8).

98. Cited in Clément, *Berdiaev*, 90.

99. See Louis Pinto, "(Re)traductions: Phénoménologie et 'Philosophie Allemande' dans les Années 1930," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 145 (2002): 21-33; Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie in Frankreich* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983), 19-39.

100. Cf. Linde, *Berdiaev's Existential Gnosticism*, 66. Berdyaev wrote a critical review of Koyré's doctoral thesis on Boehme (1929). An English translation of that text

further led him to explore the German sources of the Slavophile movement in *La Philosophie et le Problème National en Russie au Début du 19e Siècle* (1929), a line of research which he pursued in *Études sur l'Histoire de la Pensée Philosophique en Russie* (1950).[101]

As for Alexandre Kojève—who, incidentally, was related to Vladimir Kojevnikov, an eminent scholar and personal friend of Nikolai Fedorov—he had written a thesis on Vladimir Solovyov before turning his attention to the study of Hegel and becoming the central agent in the renewal of Hegelian thought in France.[102] Replacing Koyré at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Kojève led a celebrated seminar beginning in 1933 based on Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and attended by a small group of avant-garde intellectuals, including Corbin, George Bataille, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hyppolite, and Jacques Lacan.[103] In 1935, Corbin collaborated with Kojève in translating Henri de Man's *The Socialist Idea*, which articulated a voluntarist conception of history and rejected the causal determinism and rationalism of Marxism as inadequate to overthrow capitalism.[104]

Thinkers like Koyré and Kojève represent the milieu of fluid interpenetration between French, German and Russian culture in which Corbin was embedded in the 1930s. However, these thinkers adopted an agnostic stance, and thus, they could only indirectly address Corbin's preoccupation with religious truth.[105]

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prepared by Fr. Stephen Janos can be found at http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1929_347.html, accessed on August 12, 2013. In turn, Koyré reviewed the French edition of Boehme's *Mysterium Magnum* published by Aubier-Montaigne in 1945, which included two studies of Boehme by Berdyaev (*Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 133, n. 1/3 [1947], 215-216). On Boehme's reception in Russia, see Oliver Smith, "The Russian Boehme," in *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception*, ed. Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei (New York: Routledge, 2014), 196-223.

101. See Wladimir Katasonov, "Koyré et la Philosophie Russe," in *Alexandre Koyré: L'Avventura Intellettuale*, ed. Carlo Vinti (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1999), 153-159.

102. Alexandre Kojevnikoff, "La Métaphysique Religieuse de Vladimir Soloviev," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 14, no. 6 (1934), 534-554, and 15, nos. 1-2 (1935), 110-152. On this work, see James H. Nichols, *Alexandre Kojève: Wisdom at the End of History* (UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 11-13.

103. Christian Delacampagne, "Heidegger in France," in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 250-251.

104. Steve Bastow, "Third Way Discourse in Inter-War France," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 2 (2001), 173

105. Alexandre Papadopoulo describes thinkers like Georges Gurvitch, Alexandre Koyré and Alexandre Kojève as "non-religious émigré philosophers" to distin-

By contrast, thinkers like Berdyaev and the Russian Jewish émigré Lev Shestov (1866-1938), by their willingness to engage with modern challenges while remaining rooted in religious faith, were more likely to address Corbin's religious aspirations.[106]

In the interwar period, Berdyaev and Shestov represented a Russian version of "religious existentialism," which also included the likes of Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). According to George Pattison, these thinkers were united by "a shared rejection, with varying degrees of hostility, of the ambition of formulating a unitary world-view," with Hegelian dialectic idealism being often the target chosen for their polemics.[107] In this regard, the "religious existentialists" found inspiration in the writings of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, as well as Schelling, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche, all of whom had criticised the systematising and totalising idealism of Hegel.[108]

Writing in the era following the First World War, the "religious existentialists" also rejected the optimistic belief in historical progress that underlies laissez-faire policies and capitalism, while expressing their concern for the "integrity of the human person."[109] They shared the view that

> if religion is to become a live option for post-Enlightenment humanity, it cannot be presented in the direct form of traditional teaching…. On its own ground, the ground of reason and of fact, the Enlightenment will always prevail, but the exploration of new understandings and new methods of communication rescues the religious existentialists' endeavour from mere negativity, opening a realm of possibilities that is

guish them from the religious thinkers of the Russian emigration (*Introduction à la Philosophie Russe: Des Origines à nos Jours* [Paris: Seuil, 1995], 248). See Appendix I.

106. Corbin met Shestov in the early 1930s. At that time, Shestov was giving lectures on Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, which formed the basis of his study *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy* (1936). See Appendix II.

107. George Pattison, *Anxious Angels: A Retrospective View of Religious Existentialism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 3.

108. Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 8-91; G. Pattison, "Fear and Trembling and the Paradox of Christian Existentialism," in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 212.

109. Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 3.

> far from exhausted.[110]

Meanwhile, a certain religious renaissance comparable to that which had flourished in pre-revolutionary Russia was also taking place in interwar France. A number of French intellectuals reached a similar point of disenchantment with positivism and worked toward a renewed understanding of spiritual and religious principles.[111] In his autobiography, Berdyaev mentions

> a number of important movements among the younger generation in France which, in contradistinction from most of the other youth movements in Europe, were born of a genuine search for truth…. I felt confident when meeting these young people, not only because I knew they had thought deeply but because their minds had lived, too.[112]

Berdyaev notably became one of the main inspirations for the Catholic Personalist journal *Esprit*, founded by Emmanuel Mounier, who like many Frenchmen considered Berdyaev to be "the voice of the Orthodox world" (a perception Berdyaev actually sought to dispel).[113] With the appearance of "Truth and Falsehood of Communism" in the first issue of *Esprit* in 1932, then in 1933, with his article "Russian Christianity and the Modern World," Berdyaev acquainted the French audience with the Russian eschatological tradition from Dostoevsky to Fedorov. Further, four anthologies of his articles were published in French between 1932-1934, in

110. Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 6-7.

111. Catherine Baird, "Russia's Religious Philosophers in the West," 287.

112. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 275. Berdyaev discussed the problems and aspirations of the young generation of French intellectuals in an article published in *The Way* in 1933, and which subsequently appeared in English with the title "Young France and Social Justice" (*Dublin Review* 94 [Jan. 1935], 37-46). Berdyaev compares the young generation of modern France with the "the youth of Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century" (38). What motivates and unites the dissatisfaction of this generation? Both left wing and right wing groups are unanimous in their protest against "the contemporary parliamentary regime, the corruption of politicians and ministers, against the scepticism and free-thinking of the liberal and radical bourgeoisie" (38). Even when these groups are at a variance, they all "repudiate materialism, scepticism, godlessness; all are in quest of spiritual and religious foundations upon which to build up the new social order" (42).

113. Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 373-374. See also Catherine Baird, "Religious Communism? Nicolai Berdyaev's Contribution to *Esprit*'s Interpretation of Communism," *Canadian Journal of History* 30, no. 1 (1995), 29-47.

addition to the publication of the French editions of *Freedom and the Spirit* in 1933, and *The Destiny of Man* in 1935, through which his philosophical views became known to the French public.[114]

Corbin and Berdyaev may have met for the first time at one of the Friday meetings beginning in 1935 at Gabriel Marcel's house, which both of them attended.[115] For Berdyaev, these were "the only kind of meetings likely to have a permanent value… It was probably the only place in France where problems of phenomenology and existentialist philosophy were seriously studied."[116] Corbin later said that

> Nicolas Berdyaev and Gabriel Marcel are two names that the generation of those who turned thirty between the two World Wars are keen not to separate, at least among those who were philosophically engaged in the sort of problems which the mention of those two names suffice to evoke. The moments were privileged and unforgettable whenever we found Nicolas Berdyaev and Gabriel Marcel gathered as partners in a discussion charged with teachings for the young men that we were.[117]

Berdyaev's influence helps explain Corbin's disenchantment with the Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth, whom he was among the first to introduce to France in the beginning of the 30s.[118] There were certain affinities between Barth and Berdyaev, notably their common appreciation for Dostoevsky.[119]

114. Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe,* 374-375 and 380.

115. Joël Bouëssée, *Du Côté de chez Gabriel Marcel: Récits* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2003), 21 and 216.

116. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 275. Cf. "La phénoménologie était aussi le plus souvent au centre des entretiens qui occupaient de longues soirées chez Gabriel Marcel. Il y avait là les philosophes Le Senne, Louis Lavelle, aussi agréable à entendre que pénible à lire, et puis, comme autour de Koyré, maints collègues israélites ayant fui l'Allemagne. 'Jaspers et Heidegger': autre sujet de confrontation dont les imprévus amenaient la même fréquente exclamation. 'Cela me semble très grave… C'est très grave,' entendions-nous répéter le cher Gabriel Marcel sur les hautes notes pointues de la gamme. Et ces gravités accumulées pesaient de plus en plus lourd sur nos cogitations" (Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 44).

117. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 47.

118. On Corbin's relation with Barth, see Soster, "Le Développement de la Pensée de Henry Corbin;" Arnaud Baubérot, "La Revue *Hic et Nunc:* Les Jeunes-Turcs du Protestantisme et l'Ésprit des Années Trente," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 149 (2003), 569-589.

119. See Appendix III.

As Catherine Baird remarks, Barth developed many themes that corresponded to those promoted by the Russian religious philosophers. A proponent of Christian action and "authentic" Christian belief, Barth "saw the need for a revitalization of Christian principles in order to combat the rising appeal of ideologies."[120]

However, despite their common commitment to a Christian spiritual resistance against the prevailing secular ideologies, there were important divergences between Berdyaev and Barth. Berdyaev expressed his disagreements with Barth in a lengthy essay titled "The Crisis of Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy," which appeared in German in 1929 in the journal *Orient und Occident* founded by Fritz Lieb (a close friend of Corbin in the 30s).[121] Berdyaev's criticism of Barthian theology helps explain Corbin's dissatisfaction with Barth in the second half of the 1930s.

Berdyaev considers Barthianism as "the most important and serious phenomenon in Protestantism, reflecting its inner shock and crisis."[122] He praises Barth and his followers for breaking with the cultural idealism characterising 19th-century Protestant liberal thought, and for desiring a return to the sources of divine revelation. In its critique of religion as a cultural phenomenon Barthian thought converges with Russian religious thought.[123] However, following Kierkegaard, the Barthian current regards faith as something resistant to any incorporation by reason—as a *dementia* or a paradox. One consequence of this position, according to Berdyaev, is a depreciation of culture, history, and human life, with the result that "only God remains; the human person, however, and human behaviour must disappear."[124]

In his commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Barth argues that God is "wholly other," totally unlike humankind—that there is an "infinite qualitative difference" between God and man. By radically separating man and God, Barth fails to understand the essence of Christian mysticism, which, according to Berdyaev, is based on the deification (Greek *theosis*) of the human person in the

120. Baird, "Russia's Religious Philosophers in the West," 368. Cf. Rémi Fabre, "Les Étudiants Protestants Face aux Totalitarismes dans les Années Trente," *Revue d'Histoire de l'Eglise de France* 73, no. 191 (1987), 282-283.

121. Lieb (1892-1970) was a Swiss theologian who went into exile in France following the Nazi *Machtergreifung* in 1933. For Corbin's account of him see Appendix IV.

122. Berdyaev, "Die Krisis des Protestantismus und die Russische Orthodoxie," *Orient und Occident* 1 (1929), 11. See also Th. Strotmann, "Karl Barth et l'Orient Chrétien," *Irénikon* 42, no. 1 (1969), 33-52, esp. 36-43.

123. Berdyaev, "Die Krisis des Protestantismus," 12.

124. *Ibid*,

divine light: "In [genuine Christian mysticism] there is a unification of the human person with God without the two natures becoming mixed, without the disappearance of the human person."[125] Berdyaev's criticism of Barth in light of the Orthodox notion of *theosis* was important for Corbin, who later said that it was Berdyaev who revealed to him the idea that "the divine mystery and the human mystery [are] one and the same mystery."[126] This idea lies at the core of Corbin's interpretation of the Shi'ite notion of the Imam.

Further, Barth's theology could not satisfy Corbin's quest for universality.[127] Like Berdyaev, Corbin affirmed an ecumenical vision embracing gnostics of all times and places, bypassing the official boundaries of established religious confessions. This ecumenical imperative enabled him to emphasise the necessity of developing a "general theology of religions." As he later noted,

> Karl Barth's theology professed the greatest contempt for any science and history of religions…. By deliberately opting for a total ignorance of the *res religiosa*, the Barthian dialectical theology proved impotent to think through any "general theology of religions," which has become increasingly urgent in our age.[128]

Particularly disappointing for Corbin was Barth's rejection of Suhrawardi as another instance of "natural theology," that is, knowledge of God acquired by mere human endeavour, apart from revelation.[129]

In contrast with Barth, Berdyaev regarded himself not as a theologian, but as a Christian theosopher, in the sense in which Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, Jacob Boehme, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, Franz

125. *Ibid*, 14.

126. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49.

127. Berdyaev, "Die Krisis des Protestantismus," 12-13.

128. Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 45.

129. "[I]l est impossible de ne pas constater l'écart entre le commentaire du *Römerbrief*, aux étincelles prophétiques, et la lourde, la colossale *Dogmatique* que composa le Karl Barth de la maturité. Une nouvelle 'dogmatique'? Non vraiment, ce n'est pas cela que nous avions attendu et espéré… J'avais communiqué à Karl Barth ma première publication d'orientaliste: l'édition et la traduction du *Bruissement des ailes de Gabriel* de Sohravardî. Il le lut et m'en parla plus tard avec un bon sourire bienveillant, prononçant les mots de 'théologie naturelle.' Cela n'allait pas plus loin. J'étais consterné" (Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 45).

von Baader and Vladimir Solovyov were Christian theosophers.[130] He claimed that the *homo mysticus* prevailed in him over the *homo religiosus*. That is, for him the intuitive, inner, personal revelation of the divine took precedence over the historical revelation as found in the Scriptures.[131] This attitude is very similar to that of Corbin.

In 1938 appeared Corbin's translation of a collection of essays by Martin Heidegger under the title *Qu'est-ce que la Métaphysique*? Partly because of this famous publication, and partly because Heidegger was the focus of an important interview Corbin gave in later life, there is a tendency to want to explain Corbin through Heidegger. To be sure, Heidegger had an important role in Corbin's philosophical formation. It was Heidegger, Corbin later said, who give him the "hermeneutical key" to understand the Islamic philosophers.[132] However, Corbin also indicated there were "hermeneutical levels" Heidegger "had not foreseen," in particular "the celestial hierarchies of the great Neoplatonist Proclus, as well as those of Jewish gnosis, Valentinian gnosis, and Islamic gnosis." Corbin particularly rejected the finality of death expressed in the Heideggerian notions of "Being-toward-death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*) and "Freedom-toward-death" (*Freiheit-zum-Tode*).[133]

Berdyaev helped Corbin reject the limits of Heideggerian ontology. Like Heidegger and other contemporary thinkers, Berdyaev affirmed the primacy of the existential subject over the objectified world.[134] At the same time, he also radically

130. Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Olivier Fielding Clarke (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1935), xix.

131. Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 105. Cf. "I believe in the existence of a universal mystical experience and a universal spirituality which cannot be described in terms of confessional differences…. There is more depth and insight in the gnostic and "esoteric" type of mysticism than in that which has received the official sanction of the Church and is not suspected of heterodoxy" (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 83). Cf. "There are greater affinities between the mystics of various religions than between the religions themselves. The depths of spirituality may manifest a greater community than objectified religions" (Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, trans. George Reavy [San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009], 134).

132. Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohravardî," 30.

133. *Ibid,* 32.

134. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 61. Cf. "I regard my type of philosophy as 'existentialist,' even though one should qualify this by pointing out that true existentialist philosophy is represented by St. Augustine, Pascal, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rather than by Heidegger, Jaspers or Sartre…. I am an existentialist because I believe in the priority of the subject over the object, in the identity of the knowing subject and the existing subject; I am, furthermore, an existentialist because I see the life of man and of the world torn by contraries, which must be faced and maintained in their tension, and which no intellectual system of a closed and

differed from the existentialists of his day. He pointed out that in their system "the integral image of man disappears."[135] In Heidegger's philosophy, for instance, human existence is chiefly characterised by anxiety and care. "Worry turns out to be more significant than the man who worries. Man is constructed out of worries, just as human existence is built up from death."[136]

Berdyaev especially objected to the finitude of human existence expressed in Heidegger's concept of "Being-toward-death." He writes: "I cannot be reconciled to death and the tragic finality of human existence; and my whole being resists the notion, naturalized by Heidegger, of death as the ultimate reality."[137] It is not death as such that Berdyaev objects to, but rather the idea that death is the ultimate limit of life. Although he agrees that "man's dignity is revealed in his fearlessness before death, in his free acceptance of death in this world," he stresses that this should only be "for the sake of a final victory over death, for struggle against death's triumph."[138] Against the modern secular tendency to recognise death as the last word in life, Berdyaev refers to "the very Russian thought of [Nikolai] Fedorov, the great fighter against death," who affirmed "not only the idea of resurrection, but actual raising from the dead."[139]

At the basis of Corbin's criticism of Heidegger is the same belief in the eschatological victory over death championed by Fedorov and Berdyaev. In a late interview, Corbin discusses the "fundamental difference" which resulted in his "passage" from Heidegger to Suhrawardi. Objecting to Heidegger's notions of "Being-toward-death" and "Freedom-toward-death," he writes:

> People comfort themselves by repeating: "Death is a

complete totality, no immanentism or optimism can resolve. I have always desired that philosophy should be not *about* something or somebody but should be that very something or somebody, in other words, that it should be the revelation of the original nature and character of the subject itself" (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 93). See further Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 93-112; Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, 170-193.

135. Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 78.

136. Cited in Spinka, *Captive of Freedom*, 78. Cf. Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R.M. French (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 41-42.

137. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 323.

138. Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 27.

139. Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, 27-28. Cf. John R. Lup, Jr. "Eschatology in a Secular Age: An Examination of the Use of Eschatology in the Philosophies of Heidegger, Berdyaev and Blumenberg" (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 2013), 180-182.

> part of life." This is not true, unless we understand life only in a biological sense. But biological life itself derives from another life that is its source and independent from it, to wit, essential Life. So long as the decision-taken is "Freedom-toward-death," death presents itself as a closure, not as an exit. Then we can never leave the world. To be *free for beyond death* is the anticipation and the making of the future as the *exitus*, a *way out* of this world towards other worlds. But it is the living, not the dead, who leave this world.[140]

For Corbin, the higher realities of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism remained inaccessible to Heidegger.[141] By contrast, Corbin considered Berdyaev to be a "modern gnostic."[142] In a recent study, Fabian Linde showed the Gnostic affinities in Berdyaev's thought, describing it as a form of "existential gnosticism."[143] This outlook involves

> a form of knowledge that is *religious*, since it has God as one of its knowledge objects and also presupposes faith; *non-rational* or *transrational*, since it transcends the rational cognitive faculty, and is *non-conceptual* and is *mythopoeic* in expression; *revelatory*, since it is not "natural" and involves the disclosure of a higher reality. Furthermore, it is *participatory*, as it is not separable from the knower himself, but is in this sense rather *concrete* and *experiential*. It concerns the triangle God-world-man.[144]

In contrast with secular forms of existentialism, Berdyaev grounds his thinking in myths and symbols borrowed from the Christian theosophical tradition. Further, according to Linde, whereas Heidegger's "fundamental ontology" propounds "a dualism without transcendence," Berdyaev "postulates a dualism which champions very emphatically transcendence as the ultimate

140. Corbin, "De Heidegger à Sohravardî," 32.

141. *Ibid*, 32-37.

142. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 50.

143. Linde's definition of "existential gnosticism" draws on the work of Hans Jonas (1903-1993), who gave an existential reading of ancient Gnostic thought in his book *The Gnostic Religion* (1958). "Jonasian Gnosticism is the ancient Gnostic phenomenon interpreted from an existentialist philosophical viewpoint using a phenomenological method" (Linde, *Berdiaev's Existential Gnosticism*, 9).

144. Linde, *Berdiaev's Existential Gnosticism*, 187.

eschatological goal." This indicates a profound discrepancy between Berdyaev's existential philosophy and that of Heidegger.[145]

Corbin's philosophical outlook, like Berdyaev's, can also be described as a form of "existential gnosticism," except that Corbin mainly worked with concepts and images drawn from the Islamic mystico-philosophical tradition. Heidegger may well have initiated Corbin into an existential way of thinking, but it was Berdyaev with his Orthodox-inspired version of "existential gnosticism" who taught Corbin how to "face freely as a philosopher the philosophical problems [he] encountered."[146] It was largely thanks to Berdyaev that Corbin discovered the Orthodox theological tradition, which became particularly important for him at the end of the 30s. Alongside his study of Islamic mysticism, Orthodox theology facilitated his break with the secularised thought of the West and acquainted him with an Eastern way of thinking. Corbin's passage "from Heidegger to Suhrawardi" was therefore also a passage through the "median and intermediary" world of Eastern Christianity.

III. BECOMING AN ISHRAQI: READING SUHRAWARDI THROUGH EASTERN CHRISITANITY

> *"Mais Istanbul, c'était Byzance, Constantinople" (Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique à un Entretien Philosophique").*

On a "dramatic evening" in the spring of 1939, on the eve of the Second World War, Corbin paid a last visit to Berdyaev where, in the company of Fritz Lieb, the three were engaged in an "eschatological conversation."[147] In a later account, he recalled how, on his last meeting with Berdyaev:

> [He] discussed with [him] what [he] was hoping to discover in theological regions yet unexplored [in the East]. I was only anticipating what I would later find there…. But I let [Berdyaev] catch a glimpse of what I was anticipating and hoping for, and he was one of the very few to anticipate its meaning and scope…. I am convinced that Berdyaev would have considered

145. *Ibid*, 45.

146. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 49.

147. Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 43. Corbin's last meeting with Berdyaev happened in April 1939 ("Repères Biographiques," in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 17).

> [Suhrawardi] a spiritual hero according to his own heart.[148]

Few months later, Corbin traveled to Istanbul on a commission from the Bibliothèque Nationale to catalogue and photograph manuscripts there.[149] Stranded there for the remainder of the war, he immersed himself in the study of Suhrawardi and worked on the first critical edition of Suhrawardi's writings.

Little about those six years is known outside of what Corbin later related:

> In the course of these years…I learned the inestimable virtues of Silence, which initiates call the "discipline of the arcane" (*ketman* in Persian). One of the virtues of Silence was to put myself in solitary confinement with my invisible shaykh, Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi, who died a martyr in 1191, at the age of 36, the very age I was at that time. Day and night, I translated from the Arabic, taking as guides only the commentators and continuators of Suhrawardi, and consequently avoiding every external influence of any philosophical or theological school or current of our day. At the end of those years of retreat, I had become an *Ishraqi*.[150]

By claiming that he avoided "every external influence of any philosophical or theological school or current of [his] day" while immersed in Suhrawardi, Corbin sought to emphasise the unique and personal character of his relation with his "invisible shaykh." However, from closer scrutiny it appears that, far from being cut off from external influences, Corbin was actively and deeply interested in Eastern Christian theology and undertook a translation of the Russian theologian Fr. Sergius Bulgakov parallel to his study of Suhrawardi.[151]

148. Corbin, "Allocution d'Ouverture," 48-49.

149. Incidentally, Julien Cain, the then-director of the Bibliothèque Nationale who commissioned Corbin to go to Istanbul, was part of Berdyaev's social circle (Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Relgieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 380). His wife, Lucienne Daniel-Mayer Cain, translated three books by Berdyaev into French (*L'Esprit de Dostoïevski* [1929], *Les Sources et le Sens du Communisme Russe* [1938], *Le Sens de la Création* [1955]), and was also the author of a book on him (*Berdiaev en Russie, Précédé de La Russie est Sortie des Ombres* [1962]).

150. Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 46.

151. Shayegan, *Penseur de l'Islam Spirituel*, 24.

Corbin's exploration of the Orthodox theological tradition was not external to his study of Islamic mysticism, but rather complemented, and blended with, it. Particularly interesting for Corbin were the intersections and connections between Byzantine theology and Islamic mysticism. Thus, in his 1940 introduction to a work on "Plato and the Delian problem" by the 15th centry Ottoman scholar Lutfi al-Maqtul, he situates this figure "at the crossroads of the Greek-Byzantine, Persian, Arabic and Turkish spiritual universes."[152] Also, in his 1943 introduction to the correspondence between the Andalusian Sufi philosopher Ibn Sab'in and the Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, he deplores the "custom in the West since the time of Frederick II" to ignore, in research on medieval Arabic and Latin theology, "what can be learned… from Byzantium and Byzantology."[153]

Toward the end of the 30s, Corbin intensified his study of Eastern Christianity. Between 1937 and 1939, he studied Aramaic and Syriac under André Dupont-Sommer at the Fourth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études.[154] In the period leading up to his move to Istanbul, he taught himself Russian, which enabled him to translate parts of Fr. Bulgakov's *The Icon and its Veneration* (published in 1931) and *Jacob's Ladder: On Angels* (1929).[155] In a letter to Berdyaev on March 7, 1939, he wrote: "It seems to me that at present the voice of Greco-Russian Orthodoxy so urgently needs to be heard."[156]

In November that year, the periodical *Hermès* printed a review by Corbin of the French edition of the autobiography of the 17th-century schismatic Russian Archpriest Avvakum, who led the Old Believers,

152. Corbin, introduction to *La Duplication de l'Autel: Platon et le Problème de Délos*, by Molla Lufti'l Maqtul (Paris: De Boccard, 1940), 33.

153. Corbin, foreword to *Correspondance Philosophique avec l'Empereur Frédéric II de Hohenstaufen*, by Ibn Sab'in (Paris: De Boccard, 1943), xviii.

154. "Repères Biographiques," in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 17.

155. In the draft of a letter to Fr. Georges Florovsky dated February 17, 1941, Corbin writes: "[D]epuis notre dernière entrevue, j'ai beaucoup lu le P. Boulgakov…. Tout ce que j'ai trouvé en anglais et en allemand, avant de pouvoir le lire en russe. J'ai une parfaite admiration pour lui, et ce m'est un regret très amer de ne pouvoir correspondre avec lui en ce moment…. Je compte à l'avenir tirer le plus grand fruit de sa pensée. Sa 'Tragédie de la Philosophie' est une admirable chose…. Je fais toujours du russe petit à petit (avec la méthode Gaspey Otto Summer) et je commence même à déchiffrer le livre du P. Bulgakov sur les icônes!" (Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 15). I thank Dr. Pierre Lory and Dr. Daniel Gastambide for allowing me to consult Corbin's archives. For their kind assistance at the library of the EPHE, I am grateful to Mr. Morgan Guiraud and Ms. Océane Valencia.

156. Cited in Arjakovsky, *Penseurs Religieux de l'Émigration Russe*, 552.

a group that splintered from the Russian Orthodox Church. In his review, Corbin expressed reservations about the schismatic Archpriest, and instead defended the reforms that sought to bring the Russian rite into harmony with the Greek Byzantine rite. He further affirmed the "imprescriptible mission" of Orthodoxy (from which, he noted, "there is much to learn"), and warned against traditional "Latin" attitudes toward Greco-Russian Orthodoxy, stating that, "to *understand* Orthodoxy one must do away with certain categories, confusions or distinctions, assimilating dissimilar situations."[157]

Considering his later criticism of the historical Church, and his characteristic sympathy for figures and movements on the margins of religious orthodoxy, it is surprising to find Corbin in this review justifying the reforms that tried to bring the Russian Old Believers into the fold of the Byzantine Orthodox Church headquartered in Constantinople. Interestingly, the same issue of *Hermès* contains a review by Corbin of his own book *Suhrawardi d'Alep: Fondateur de la Doctrine Illuminative (1939),* but written under the the pseudonym of "S. Cyrille," perhaps a reference to Saint Cyril, the 9th Byzantine Greek theologian, who with his brother Methodius, introduced the Orthodox faith and Byzantine Christian civilisation to the Slavic nations, earning them the title of "the Apostle to the Slavs."[158]

It is therefore no surprise to find that in the months leading up to the publication of the *Hermès* issue, while still in Paris, Corbin made contact with the émigré Russian theologian Fr. Georges Florovsky (1893-1979).[159] A professor of patristics at the St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris since 1925, Florovsky denounced external influences (Catholic, Protestant, philosophical) on Orthodox theology, while simultaneously defending "a spiritual return to, and renewal in, the Byzantine heritage" founded on the Greek patristic tradition.[160] A similar "romantic Byzantinism" can be observed in

157. Corbin, review of *La Vie de l'Archiprêtre Avvakum Écrite par Lui-Même,* trans. Pierre Pascal [Paris: Gallimard, 1939], in *Hermès* 3 (Nov. 1939), 123.

158. Corbin [S. Cyrille], review of H. Corbin, *Suhrawardi d'Alep (d. 1191), Fondateur de la Doctrine Illuminative* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1939), in *Hermès* 3 (Nov. 1939), 125.

159. In a letter to Fritz Lieb on June 25, 1939, Corbin wrote: "J'ai pris un contact très intéressant avec le P. Florovsky. On va tâcher de faire quelque chose" (Lieb Papers, Basel University Library, University of Basel, NL 43: Aa 260, 1-9).

160. Brandon Gallaher, "'Waiting for the Barbarians': Identity and Polemicism in the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 4 (2011), 659. However, Florovsky's "Christian Hellenism" should not be reduced to some kind of Eastern cultural chauvinism. As Matthew Baker notes: "Neopatristic synthesis is, for Florovsky, *not only* an agenda for internal theological renewal within the Orthodox Church (though it is also, and equally, that), but *also* an ecumenical program: one that both grows out of concern for Christian unity and is ordered

Corbin's letters and writings in the period following his move to Istanbul, formerly Constantinople, seat of the Byzantine Empire. For example, in a letter to Joseph Baruzi on December 27, 1939, he wrote:

> Greek Christianity had so filled our last conversations, my dear friend, that it is especially through Byzantium, as you can imagine, that we have been wandering and meditating…. Constantinople is a mystical city, an end where one's entire life is recapitulated.[161]

Some of Corbin's unpublished writings from the same period reveal the extent of his fascination with Byzantium. For instance, in a typed manuscript note from 1942 found in his papers, he writes:

> The Byzantine mind constantly operates an anagogical exegesis of all reality: the Basileus and his court are understood, transcended, insofar as they are understood as something other themselves: heavenly king. The cantors at the Palace and at the Church of Saint Sophia are equally transposed by the same anagogical exegesis and become literally μιμήται τοῦ ἀγγέλου [imitators of the angel]. Thus, the Byzantine world presents itself as a world that has been ordered to absolve itself from the letter. In this sense, it is the only human State that does not only allow, but orders (since its existence depends on it) this understanding that surpasses it, and that makes it surpass itself and accomplish itself through this surpassing…. The Byzantine world was – and its current meaning and appeal remains – the only space for the freedom of the Spirit.[162]

towards it. It is the work of cooperation, encounter and mutual discernment between Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars, aimed at the 'reintegration' of Christian tradition, a work in which – Florovsky is convinced – Orthodox theology has a unique and critical role to play" (see Matthew Baker, "Neopatristic Synthesis and Ecumenism: Toward the 'Reintegration' of Christian Tradition," in *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness: Values, Self-Reflection, Dialogue*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014], 235-260. I am indebted to Brandon Gallaher and Matthew Baker for their helpful suggestions and insights concerning Florovsky.

161. Letter from Corbin to Joseph Baruzi on December 27, 1939, *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 308.

162. The original passage reads: "A Byzance la pensée de l'homme byzantin opère constamment une exégèse anagogique de tout le réel: le Basileus et sa cour sont compris, transcendés, en tant que compris comme autre chose qu'eux-mêmes:

This idealised representation of Byzantium never lost its appeal for Corbin, who later used it to express his ecumenical vision embracing Jewish, Christian and Islamic spirituality. As he wrote in 1971: "Could the mystical Byzantium be the icon of the celestial Jerusalem if it did not bring together all the spirituals among *Ahl al-Kitab* [the People of the Book]?"[163]

In particular, the former Greek Orthodox basilica of Hagia Sophia, later an imperial mosque, and which in the 1930s was turned into a museum and restored, left a deep impression on Corbin.[164] In a letter to Fritz Lieb on April 25, 1940, he wrote: "Each time I pass in front of the wonder that is the temple of the 'Eternal Sophia,' I send a thought to Fr. [Sergius] Bulgakov, thanks to whose theology we understand the signification of all that."[165] For Bulgakov, Hagia Sophia was indeed a tangible expression of his Sophianic vision of the world.[166] Later, Corbin described Hagia Sophia as "an exemplification of the archetype of the [temple of the Holy Grail] anticipated by many seekers

roi céleste. Les chantres du chœur du Palais, de Sainte-Sophie, sont également transposés par la même exégèse anagogique et deviennent littéralement μιμηται του αγγελου. Le monde byzantin se présente donc comme un monde ayant reçu l'ordre de s'absoudre de la lettre; il est en ce sens le seul Etat humain qui non seulement permet, mais ordonne, par ce que son existence y est suspendue, cette compréhension qui le dépasse et qui le fait se dépasser et s'accomplir en se dépassant. Partout ailleurs l'herméneutique spirituelle n'est plus conservée, ni tolérable, que comme un ensemble de ressources techniques, inoffensives, et ayant perdu toute efficacité trans-substantielle. Si elle garde celle-ci c'est qu'elle est alors le bien de la secte ésotérique, d'un ordre du Temple qui menace les fondements mêmes de la société et qui reste exorbitante à la normalisation du spirituel. Partout ailleurs donc il y a crise ou défi, déchéance ou défaite. Le monde byzantin fut, et sa signification, son invite présente, reste le seul espace pour la liberté de l'Esprit" (Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 45).

163. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, I, xx.

164. Cf. "De même que le Temple de Salomon était le centre de Jérusalem, le temple de Sainte-Sophie était le centre de la seconde Rome. Au cours des années précédentes le savant américain [Thomas] Whitemore [sic] avait consacré tous ses efforts à la restauration des mosaïques. Visiter Sainte-Sophie en compagnie de Whitemore [sic] était à la fois un privilège, une aventure et un pèlerinage" (Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 46).

165. "Chaque fois que je passe devant la merveille du temple de la 'Sagesse éternelle,' j'envoie une pensée au P. Boulgakov, grâce à la théologie de qui on comprend la signification de tout cela" (Lieb Papers, Basel University Library, University of Basel, NL 43: Aa 260, 1-9).

166. See, e.g., Sergius Bulgakov, *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (London: S.P.C.K., 1976), 13-14.

of gnosis."[167] He further saw it as the symbolic place of "the initiation of Christianity into Islam" accomplished by the Byzantine princess Narkes who was the mother of the 12th Shi'ite Imam.[168]

Eastern Christianity represented for Corbin a "median and intermediary" space between Islam and Christianity, and thus, it allowed him to mediate the formal and categorical divide between these two religions. Corbin was particularly interested in establishing connections between Byzantine theology and Islamic mysticism. In a letter to Joseph Baruzi on December 27, 1939, he wrote:

> Sufism is a much larger phenomenon than Islam (this is my "nuance" of opinion with our dear Massignon…). Islam cannot even encompass [Sufism], and therein lies the whole origin of the drama and the martyrs. This becomes abundantly clear when considered against the background of contemporary Byzantine mysticism. I will gradually get to it, but Suhrawardi is an enormous chunk.[169]

Corbin was convinced that Eastern Christianity and Islam share essential spiritual affinities that transcend their historical, political, and geographic boundaries. Thus, some of his unpublished essays written between 1939 and 1942 deal with subjects such as "Islamo-byzantine syncretism," "Byzantine and Arabs in front of Latin scholasticism," "Byzantine mystics and Oriental Sufis," (actual titles) etc.[170] In an unpublished essay from that period titled "Moscow and Isfahan," he writes:

> Bringing together the names of those two cities will first of all seem like a sudden whim, a paradox, historical or geographical nonsense, about which one might ask what could possibly have given rise to it. However, I take these two names simultaneously first of all as symbols of two spiritual magnitudes in which I find something in common, and, secondly, through this very community,

167. Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 46.

168. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, IV, 430.

169. Letter from Corbin to Joseph Baruzi on December 27, 1939, *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. C. Jambet, 309.

170. Corbin's unpublished writings from that period are critical for explaining the development of his thought. I am currently preparing an edition of those texts for publication.

> what initially seemed to be only a symbol, can develop into an ontological truth.[171]

Corbin gave a condensed account of his views concerning the affinities between Byzantine theology and Islamic mysticism in his introduction to Suhrawardi's mystical writings in the periodical *Hermès* in 1939. In that text, Corbin notes that Illuminationist motifs such as those of "illumination" and "God as primordial Light" were not unknown "well before Islam... in those same countries where Islamic culture allowed their elaboration in the Arabic language." "Christian mystics of Syrian convents (from an Isaac the Syrian to a Bar-Hebraeus) and itinerant Sufis," he writes, "have common masters," reaching back to the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the "Book of the Hierotheos," ascribed to the 6th-century Syriac mystic Stephen bar Sudaili. "Eastern Christianity," he continues,

> has never lost the authentic presence [of the spirituality represented by that lineage]; all of Byzantine Orthodoxy, and what, directly or indirectly, owed and still owes it the feeling of the theophanic mystery, remains in this *parousia.* Therefore, inquiring into the meaning of mysticism in Islam could nowhere be more urgent.[172]

Corbin further points out that Islamic mysticism "cannot simply be reduced to vague techniques or to 'pantheistic' speculations," but rather, "as the lineage of Hallaj, Ghazali and Suhrawardi shows," it reveals "the contrast between the monotheistic affirmation and the Trinitarian mystery made manifest in the ultimate possibility left to man." He compares the mount where the *Sakina* manifests to the protagonist in one of Suhrawardi's mystical tales to the Mount Tabor where Christ is

171. The original passage reads: "Rapprocher les noms de ces deux villes semblera tout d'abord une fantaisie, un paradoxe, un non-sens, historique ou géographique, dont on peut se demander ce qui a bien pu y donner lieu. Pourtant, je les prends tout deux simultanément tout d'abord comme symboles de deux grandeurs spirituelles dans lesquelles je trouve quelque chose de commun, et en second lieu, par cette communauté même, ce qui tout d'abord n'était que symbole, peut éclore en vérité ontologique" (Corbin Papers, Bibliothèque des Sciences Religieuses, École Pratique des Hautes Études [5ème Section], box 45).

172. Corbin, "Deux Épitres Mystiques de Suhrawardi d'Alep (ob. 1191)," *Hermès* 3 (Nov. 1939), 19-20.

said to have appeared to his disciples in a transfiguring Light.[173]

In the Orthodox theological tradition, the Transfiguration of Christ has been closely linked with decisive debates concerning the possibility of deification (*theosis*), the attainment of likeness of God. While the ideal of deification ceased to have a central importance in Western theology from about the 12th century, it never lost its primacy in Eastern Orthodox theology.[174] Within Russian religious thought, deification was commonly associated with the theme of Divine humanity.[175] Thus, for Berdyaev, the idea of *theosis* is "based on the union of man and God, on Divine humanity, through which man may be deified without surrendering his human nature to Divine nature."[176]

Similar to the Slavophile concept of "integral cognition," which combined faith and reason to counteract Western rationalism, the notion of *theosis* affirmed intuitive, mystical illumination, and communion with the divine, in contrast with the perceived hypertrophy of reason in Latin scholasticism. By affirming the possibility of union with God, and thereby of bridging the gap between the Creator and the creature, *theosis* represented for Corbin an alternative to the secularised and agnostic modes of thinking prevalent in the West. Thus, he evokes the Orthodox monastic island of Mount Athos as

> the place where the "Taboric Light" was desired and contemplated; where, against all scholastic objections, against all the objections of even a Christian rationalism, was elaborated the mystical motif [of *theosis*, deification] which Greek Orthodoxy stamped with the mark of its

173. Corbin, "Deux Épitres Mystiques de Suhrawardi," 20. Cf. "Lorsque Sohravardî parle de *ta'alloh* (*theôsis*), cela ne se passe pas en ce monde mais dans le *'âlam al-mithâl*, au sommet de la montagne psycho-cosmique (comme la Transfiguration au sommet du mont Thabor)" (Corbin, *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme*, 125). The references to the Transfiguration in the Synoptic Gospels are Math. 17:1-9; Mk. 9:2-9; and Lk. 9:28-36.

174. Andrew Louth, "The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 33.

175. Boris Jakim, "Sergius Bulgakov: Russian Theosis," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 250-251.

176. Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality*, 134.

> imprescriptible mission.[177]

Here Corbin almost certainly had in mind the Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). Palamas's theology, which Orthodox theologians rediscovered in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly appealed to Corbin because of the similarities it presented with Suhrawardi's philosophy of Illumination. Indeed, while he was immersed in Suhrawardi, Corbin studied Palamas and translated parts of his important book *The Triads*. In this work, Palamas attempts to provide an objective foundation justifying the hesychast monks on Mount Athos in the pursuit of their avowed goal, the deification or *theosis* of man in Christ.[178] This involves a conscious experience of the presence of God, often in the form of a vision of Light. In his theological rationale for this, Palamas

> [distinguished] between the essence and energies of God, according to which God is unknowable in his essence but genuinely knowable in his energies, in which God is himself known and not merely something about God. Preeminent among these divine energies is the uncreated light of the Godhead, the light in which Christ was transfigured before his disciples on Mount Tabor, for which reason the uncreated light came to be called the light of Tabor, or the "Taboric light."[179]

For Corbin, Byzantine mystics and Islamic theologians wrestled with similar questions. "The meaning of the divine attributes, the possibility of a sensible vision of the essentially Non-Sensible," he writes, "all this also captivated the theologians of Islam, neighbours of the Syrian theologians." Pointing to al-Hallaj and Suhrawardi, Corbin asks:

> How can mystical union occur, unless it presupposes the hypostatic union of the divine nature and the human nature? How can it occur without a God who

177. Corbin, "Deux Épitres Mystiques de Suhrawardi," 20-21.

178. On Palamas's "Defense of the Holy Hesychasts," see John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 167-194.

179. Andrew Louth, "Light, Vision, and Religious Experience in Byzantium," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 88).

> is at once "Same" and "Other"? It matters that it was in Byzantium, and in the Greek language, that the debate was settled. We cannot overestimate the anthropological importance of the decision, its consequences for the structure of the human community.[180]

The theological themes indicated here already point to some of the most characteristic themes in Corbin's later writings. In particular, the question about the "possibility of a sensible vision of the essentially Non-Sensible," which is at the centre of the Byzantine debate concerning the vision of light, underlies Corbin's concept of the *mundus imaginalis*, a term he coined to translate the Arabic phrase *'alam al-mithal*, and which was fundamental to his philosophical outlook. Ontologically situated between the sensory and intelligible worlds, Corbin's "imaginal realm" is a spiritual dimension where spiritual visions and prophetic revelations "take place" and "have their place." Corbin's rationale for the *mundus imaginalis* might be compared with Palamas's attempt at justifying the hesychast experience of light. Corbin himself suggested this connection by describing the *mundus imaginalis* as "[the] world of the body of sovereign light emerging from a gold-framed Byzantine mosaic."[181] It is therefore no surprise that the *mundus imaginalis* has appealed to certain Orthodox theologians.[182]

The period we have been reviewing—roughly between 1939 and 1942—represents the high point of Corbin's interest in Orthodox Christianity. As he increasingly became immersed in the study of Islamic philosophy, and especially after his move to Iran at the end of the war, where his research became almost exclusively focused on exploring unchartered areas of Islamic thought, his study of Orthodox theology appears to have abated. However, far from losing interest in Orthodoxy, Corbin, beginning with his post-war publications and until his last written text before his death on "The Urgency of Sophiology" (1978), continually made references to Russian Orthodox thinkers, especially Berdyaev and Bulgakov, but also Konstantin Leontiev, Vasily Rozanov, Boris Vysheslavtsev, and others. Indeed, his interpretation of Islamic ideas and trends is strongly coloured by characteristically Russian themes such as Divine humanity, Sophiology, eschatologism, the antithesis of East and West. Corbin's writings thus become the meeting point of traditional Islamic philosophy and modern Orthodox thought.

180. Corbin, "Deux Épitres Mystiques de Suhrawardi," 21.

181. Corbin, "La Rencontre avec l'Ange," preface to *L'Ange Roman dans la Pensée et dans l'Art*, by Aurélia Stapert (Paris: Berg International, 1975), 18.

182. See, e.g., Andrei Pleşu, *Actualité des Anges*, trans. Laure Hinckel (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 2005).

Appendices

I) Cf. "A cause de l'ouvrage sur Boehme et d'autres publications sur les Spirituels que Jean Baruzi étudiait d'autre part, beaucoup s'imaginaient qu'Alexandre Koyré était lui-même un grand théosophe mystique. Mais ce fut un homme d'une pudeur et d'une discrétion totales concernant ses convictions intimes. Souvent une boutade laissait croire à un agnosticisme, voire à un nihilisme désespéré. En fait, notre ami Koyré a emporté son secret avec lui" (Corbin, "Post-Scriptum Biographique," 44). Corbin's religious personality is described in the following portrait by the pastor Roland de Pury in a letter to a correspondent on August 21, 1931: "Ce Corbin est bien l'homme le plus savant que j'aie jamais rencontré. Il est étouffant. Il sait le français, l'allemand, l'italien, l'espagnol, l'anglais, l'arabe et le persan. Et assez pour lire: le sanscrit, le turc, le hollandais, le suédois et le latin. Il est plongé dans la mystique arabe et n'ignore pas un recoin de la philosophie et de la théologie allemande contemporaine, dont il connaît tous les coryphées personnellement. Mais surtout, il n'est rien de tout ce qu'il sait, qui ne soit pour lui en rapport direct avec sa tâche immédiate, rien qui ne soit existentiel, c'est-à-dire qu'il hait l'histoire lorsqu'elle est autre chose qu'une 'présentation' des choses et des hommes, et s'indigne avec enthousiasme contre tant de méthodes françaises psychologiques, précautionneuses et irréelles. Simplement dit, il est chrétien. C'est un type de Français assez rare et bienfaisant" (Roland de Pury, *Lettres d'Europe: Un Jeune Intellectuel dans l'Entre-Deux-Guerres 1931-1934* [Genève: Labor et Fides, 2010], 188-189).

II) This book "was highly significant for the French reception of Kierkegaard… and in many ways it created the portrait of Kierkegaard that was subsequently accepted amongst French existentialists" (G. Pattison, "Reading Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky together," in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. G. Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 239. In a letter to Shestov on July 17, 1931, Corbin wrote: "Grâce à vous, j'ai pu encore accentuer cette décision intérieure, qui, acceptant la solitude, tragique peut-être, y trouve la force de surgir au-dessus des plaines bien gardées de tout rationalisme: paradoxe foncier, volonté de miracle. Il est bon de trouver un guide dans ces régions de brumes et de flammes. Plus que jamais d'ailleurs je suis orienté dans cette direction spirituelle. Débordant le cadre d'un travail sur un mystique persan, c'est l'essence même de la pensée mystique qu'il me faudrait affronter. Avec [Sébastien] Franck et Weigel, c'est jusqu'à Böhme, Blake, Swedenborg, que je suis allé. Il me faut revenir et approfondir tout cela en contenant une fougue de jeunesse, et continuer de me nourrir de Kierkegaard, de Barth, etc. Ah ! Que de choses à vous dire et à vous demander, cher Monsieur… N'aurons-nous pas en français un écho de votre leçon sur Kierkegaard et Dostoïevski?" (cited in Nathalie Baranoff-Chestov, *Vie de Léon Chestov. II: Les Dernières Années, 1928-1938*, trans. Blanche Bronstein-Vinaver [Paris: La Différence, 1993], 87-88). I owe this reference to the kindness of Dr. Michael Finkenthal. See Finkenthal, *Lev Shestov: Existentialist Philosopher and Religious Thinker* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010). Cf. A. Arjakovsky, "Léon Chestov et Nicolas Berdiaev: Une Amitié Orageuse," *Cahiers de l'Émigration Russe* 3 (1996), 141-153.

III) "Les porteurs de la vague barthienne [étaient]...de grands lecteurs de Kierkegaard et de Dostoïevski, mais aussi de Nicolas Berdiaev: les thèmes qu'il venait de développer dans *Un nouveau moyen âge* étaient propres entre tous à faire mouche sur cette génération-là.... En lisant les articles de ces jeunes barthiens, on acquiert même la conviction qu'ils ont découvert simultanément Barth et ces autres penseurs" (Bernard Reymond, *Théologien ou Prophète*: Les *Francophones et Karl Barth avant 1945* [Lausanne: l'Age d'Homme, 1985], 26). The following remarks by the pastor Roland de Pury—one of the collaborators of the Barthian periodical Hic et Nunc which Corbin co-founded in 1931—eloquently illustrate how the young French Barthians viewed Berdyaev. With regard to Berdyaev's book *The New Middle Ages*, de Pury writes: "[J]e ne crois pas avoir lu de considérations sur la société et l'histoire qui partent d'un point de vue aussi uniquement et vraiment spirituel. Il ne s'agit que de la Vérité.... [T]out y est vrai, tout vous pénètre peu à peu et s'impose avec certitude. Quoi qu'il regarde, le royaume de Dieu seul est pris en considération. Il y a d'ailleurs des pages sur l'humanisme et la démocratie, sur l'homme sans Dieu qui cesse d'être homme, qui sont à tel point ce que j'aurais voulu dire, que c'en est dépitant" (Pury, *Lettres d'Europe*, 80-81). One of the first publishers of Berdyaev's works in French was the publisher "Je Sers," whose literary director beginning in 1931 was Denis de Rougemont, one of the founders of *Hic et Nunc*. The same firm was simultaneously publishing Barth, Kierkegaard, Ortega y Gasset, Heidegger, and was responsible for printing the issues of *Hic et Nunc* (John Hellman, *The Communitarian Third Way: Alexandre Marc's Ordre Nouveau, 1930-2000* [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002], 32).

IV) "Among Karl Barth's colleagues was Fritz Lieb, a touching figure in his mystical love for Orthodox Russia, a love so unlimited that he seemed to have never realised that Holy Orthodox Russia had for the moment…went back up to the sky…. Our link was our mutual friendship with Nicolas Berdyaev…. I am citing Fritz Lieb as a representative case: he was at once an adept of Karl Barth and a lover of [Valentin] Weigel, Paracelsus, and the Sophiology of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. More than once I asked him: 'How do you reconcile this with that, my dear Lieb?' 'Oh, it's difficult, it's difficult,' he would answer me. And he had tears in his eyes" ("Post-Scriptum Biographique," 43). Cf. "Among the friends I made during my exile in the West I must also mention the Swiss theologian and leading socialist Lieb, of whom I think with great affection. He had a first love to which he remained for ever faithful—Russia and the Russians. He liked to be called Fyodor Ivanovich, although his real first name was Fritz! This, a certain tendency to dishevelment, and an enormous Russian library were the only Russian things about him. He had a heart of gold and a nature entirely free of conventions. I greatly valued his friendship, as well as his immense erudition and intellectual keenness. He lived on, and was torn by, the horns of a somewhat unusual dilemma: Barthianism and Russian religious ideas, for which he developed a touching attachment. I do not think I ever had such a loyal friend among non-Russians" (Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 276-277). See also Erich Bryner, "Berdjajew und die Schweiz," *Stimme der Orthodoxie* 3 (1996), 47-49; Klaus Bambauer, "Die Zeitschrift 'Orient und Occident,'" http://www.borisogleb.de/orient.html.