

# The Quran, Scriptures and Hermeneutics: The Lessons of the Ambassadors of Mystical Islam.

Patrick Laude

The contemporary renewal of religions bears witness to a quest for criteria of certainty in a world that is bereft of absolute bench marks and appears increasingly inclined to accommodate a wide relativistic consensus as a guardrail against tyrannies and brutal exploitation. This need for certainty has been primarily focused on sacred Scriptures conceived as repositories of ultimate truth. The fact is that contemporary religious discourse can hardly rely on anything else than the bedrock objectivity of the revealed word since all other sources of religious knowledge have been made unavailable by the decline or collapse of what could be called the great civilizations of the sacred. Theological dogmas have been discarded by most in the name of individual critical inquiry. The religious *magisterium* has lost much of its authority and power on account of democratic concepts. Tradition has virtually collapsed under the onslaught of a pervasive spirit of reformation and adaptation to contemporary and circumstantial norms and practices. As for sanctity, or the summit of human realization of religious ideals that used to inspire and nurture the communities of faithful, it has become a purely moral ideal, while the old figure of the “man of God” has receded from the sphere of reality to enter that of nostalgic legend. Neither the saint nor the holy sage remain familiar references in a world that is more intent on emphasizing the realm of action and worldly endeavors than the inner domain of self-transformation and self-transcendence. In fact, the perception of saintly sages has been obscured by the appearance of the type of the self-styled *guru* on the contemporary stage; at best, sanctity is equated to admirable heights of humanitarian and selfless service to mankind or tireless work for world peace and cross-cultural understanding, sometimes informed by religious faith.

By contrast with those receding principles and phenomena, the sacred text remains at the center of the religious stage, both because of its linguistic and literal

objectivity and because its accessibility makes it an immediate reference and support for all those who want to buttress their faith or find a firm foundation upon which their quest for meaning may grow. Let us add that Scriptures are almost as central to the argument of secular discontents of religious revival and opponents of its social influence as they are to the faith of religious movements and individuals themselves. Most intellectual and social critiques of religion are based upon historical or linguistic deconstructions of Scriptures, while most inter-religious debates and polemics center on the “word of God” and its interpretations.

The irruption of militant and political Islam on the contemporary stage has illustrated in a most direct fashion this power of the Book. Political and social objectives of various kinds have been supported by Quranic references and quotations. Scriptural arguments and counter-arguments have been propounded by jurists, polemicists and analysts to justify or condemn acts of political and religious violence. In Christianity as well, the renewal of Evangelism and the spread of so-called fundamentalist movements have been predicated on a culture of the Book. Much of the inspiration that animates the Christian upsurge in North America is associated to personal reading, meditation and commentary on Scriptures and public preaching of them.

In the present essay, we propose to show how the works of those whom Pierre Lory has called the “mystical ambassadors of Islam”<sup>1</sup> may shed light on the oft-neglected availability of a profound and integral apprehension of Scriptures, thereby helping to dispel some problematic assumptions and practices that lie at the core of the contemporary religious recourses to the Book. These authors have introduced Islam to the West in the perspective of the spiritual dimension that they have themselves discovered in the Islamic tradition. They were mystical ambassadors of Islam in the sense that their scholarly work was intimately connected to an inner call for the spiritual depth of Islam, the latter enabling them to introduce that religion to Western audiences in a fresh and substantive way. This does not mean that they should be considered as representatives of Islam in the literal sense of one who has converted to that religion and become one of its spokesmen. None of these three “ambassadors” was Muslim in the conventional and

---

<sup>1</sup> “Les ambassadeurs mystiques de l’islam,” in Numéro spécial sur « Le retour des religions », *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

external sense of the word, even though all three undoubtedly experienced the spiritual influence of Islam in a very direct, profound and powerful manner.

Massignon (1883-1962) was born a Catholic and died a Catholic, following a complex inner itinerary that led him through an early period of agnosticism, a phase of “sympathizing” proximity to Islam and a final “re-conversion” to the Church that was ultimately crowned by his being ordained in the Melkite Church during his later years, thereby reconciling his utmost fidelity to Rome and his no less profound devotion to the Arabic language, in which he was able, till his last days, to say the Mass.<sup>2</sup> The intimacy of Massignon with Islam was such that, during his audience with Pope Pius XI in 1934, the Holy Pontiff playfully teased the French scholar by calling him a “Catholic Muslim”.<sup>3</sup> Massignon has been hailed as the first European Islamicist to have supported and evinced the specifically Quranic roots of Sufism, *tasawwuf*, the inner or spiritual dimension of Islam. In doing so, he not only dispelled the early academic bias according to which Sufism should be considered as extraneous to Islam, i.e. an accretion of borrowings from Hinduism and Christianity, but also, correlatively, provided scholarly evidence for the presence of an authentically spiritual dimension of Islam, contrary to the reductionist view of this religion that had been prevalent theretofore.

In the wake of Massignon’s renewal of Islamic studies in France, his student Henry Corbin (1903-1978) vocationally delved into the hitherto uncharted territories of Shî’ite theosophy and hermeneutics. His intellectual background as an expert in German phenomenology and the philosophy of Heidegger paved the way for his discovery of Shî’ite epistemology and ontology –a discovery of which Massignon was the initial catalyst.<sup>4</sup> The main thrust of his contribution appertains to a prophetology and an

---

<sup>2</sup> The Melkite church originated when bishops from the oriental churches, who were excommunicated in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, took side with Marcian, the Roman Emperor of the East. Following the reaffirmation of the union of the church with Rome in 1724 and the consequent division of the Melkite church into two branches, the “Melkite Catholic patriarch of Antioch and of All the East” was established.

<sup>3</sup> This is told by Massignon himself in the brief notes that he wrote in the very evening of his audience with the Pope. In addition, the Pope asked Massignon how long he had been a Muslim, to which Massignon responded, in a characteristic fashion: “I was merely a sympathizer, after having become an unbeliever; I did not say the *shahadah* (the testimony of Islamic faith).” Cf. “Annexe D” in Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d’Abraham*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1997, p.192.

<sup>4</sup> Corbin tells the story, which took place in 1927-8, in the following terms: “I spoke to him of the reasons that had led me, as a philosopher, to undertake the study of Arabic. (...) Then Massignon had an inspiration from Heaven. He had brought back from a trip to Iran a lithographed edition of Suhrawardi’s major work ,

imamology that transcend the exclusive province of the Law by tracing the spiritual lineaments of an inner, esoteric, reading of Islam independent from the strictures of collective religion. For Corbin, the esoteric reading of the prophetic and spiritual lineage is intimately bound to the concept of a theophanic vision, that is a perception of the Divine in the visible realm. This theophanic vision is parallel, moreover, to a knowledge of oneself in God and God in oneself. Beauty as theophany, as a formal manifestation of God in this world, becomes the mirror in which the self perceives both its own reality in God's intention, and God in the "most beautiful form." Such a transmutation of the experience of beauty as self-knowledge cannot be actualized without the mediation of the inner guidance of the *verus propheta*, the true prophet who is immanent to the soul. For Corbin, Shī'ite imamology is none other than the most direct expression of this esoteric prophetology, in the sense that it corresponds to the most radical stage in its interiorization and the concomitant liberation of the prophetic mediation from its association with the domain of the Law.<sup>5</sup>

As for Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), a metaphysician and a spiritual teacher<sup>6</sup> who always remained distant from academic institutions and protocols, his perspective on Islam derived from gnosis, i.e. a spiritual and supra-rational "heart-knowledge" that finds its most direct expression in the primordial and universal wisdom referred to as *sophia perennis*. For Schuon, the manifold manifestations of this "sacred science" points ultimately to a "transcendent unity of religions". In this perspective, a true understanding of Islam could not but flow from the foundational ground of a universal *scientia sacra*. Islam is no more and no less than the final manifestation of the "Ancient Religion" (*dīn*

---

*Hikmat al-Ishrâq*. (...) –Take it, he says, I believe there is something for you in this book." Cf. Henry Corbin, *L'Imâm caché*, Paris, 2003, pp.219-220.

<sup>5</sup> "(The metaphysical Reality of Prophecy) includes an exoteric dimension or a dimension *ad extra*, that is a manifestation of the person of the prophet, and an esoteric dimension manifested in the person of each of the Twelve Imâms who, as a whole, constitute a single and same essence (...)" *L'Imâm caché*, Paris, 2003, p.31.

<sup>6</sup> Born a Lutheran, Schuon entered the Catholic church in his youth. Intellectually confirmed by René Guénon's critique in his own early rejection of the modern world and experiencing a profound affinity with the metaphysical perspective of the *Baghavad Gîtâ* and Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, he became a disciple of the Algerian Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawî, his entering Islam being prompted by his quest for an authentic initiation and for a religious framework consonant with his innate sense of universality and his inner rejection of the modern West. He was later on invested as a Sufi Shaykh himself, in the continuity of the spiritual lineage of the Shaykh al-'Alawî, while expressing the esoteric dimension of this lineage in a decidedly more direct and supra-confessional way, remaining thereby faithful both to the traditional integrity of forms and to the primacy of their esoteric core and their universal horizon.

*al-qayyûm*) which quintessentially consists in a discernment between what is absolutely real and what is only relatively so, and a concomitant concentration, both spiritual and moral, on the former. Schuon's intellectual background was firmly rooted in Shankaracharya's *Advaita Vedanta* while the formal context of his traditional affiliation and spiritual function was Islam, for reasons that pertain primarily to the universal and esoteric horizon of that religion and to a variety of circumstantial factors, the first of which being the existence of an unbroken line of initiatic transmission in the world of *tasawwuf*.

While drawing the attention of our readers on the contributions of these three masters of French islamology <sup>7</sup> we willingly acknowledge that the contemporary situation of Islam is, by and large, far removed from the metaphysical heights and mystical dimension that characterize their works. However, it is not unreasonable to think that a meditation on these "mystical ambassadors of Islam" may help reframe the perception of the Islamic tradition as a whole, at least among those perplexed but unjaundiced observers whose understanding has been primarily informed by the most outward and advertised aspects of the contemporary avatars of this religion. We will argue that such is especially the case with respect to the role of Scriptures in religious consciousness and practice.

\*

Massignon's islamology, and Massignon's thought in general, lies at the junction of the eternal and the historical, the personal and the collective. This accounts for the extraordinary scope of his works on Islam, which touch upon virtually all the aspects of the Islamic civilization, from economic practices and popular folklore, to ritual practices and the heights of mysticism. Massignon could write about the use of constellations for orientation in Medieval Arab seafaring as well as refer to the theological debates of Baghdad under the Abbasids; he could also relate those two topics to the spiritual development of a mystical figure like Mansûr al-Hallâj. Such ability to relate seemingly disparate realities is not only the expression of an intellectual virtuosity on the part of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Schuon wrote in French and lived part of his early life in France while his cultural background and sensibility was primarily Germanic.

scholar, it is also, and above all, a manifestation of the intellectual and spiritual outlook of a profound and complex thinker.

Any discussion of Massignon's meditation on sacred Scriptures must begin, I think, with his profound conviction that the inner faith and commitment of a person –and particularly that of a spiritually exceptional person, is bound to the collective destinies of a whole group, nay of the whole of mankind. However, such a relationship is neither static nor horizontal, neither purely “economic” nor strictly human and terrestrial. In fact, Massignon asserts that the person and the social collectivity to which he or she belongs intersect at the point of resolution of historical aporias or crises. These knots are untied in and through the “real person” who acts as the conductor of a supernatural consciousness of “divine grace in us.” A true person is therefore much more than an individual, a true person is a guest: the guest of a “foreign” presence accepted as messenger of the One who alone “can say truly *I*, in us.”<sup>8</sup>

If one were to propose a definition of Scriptures in Massignon's outlook one could suggest that they are like the sacred traces of this visitation. Bearing testimony to this irruption of the transcendent crystallized in the sacred text –but in itself free to blow where it lists, the true person is a witness of grace and a sacrificial intercessor whose “isolated heroic act ... possesses a trans-social axial value.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the receptivity to the Spirit that translates into heroic witnessing frees the spiritual person from historical conditioning while contributing to resolve the aporias of collective history. Such heroic testimony is understood by Massignon as the *fiat* –let it be!-- of the soul that consents to the divine visitation, in the image of the perfect submission of the Virgin to the Word. Spiritual consentment is therefore the very ground of the most authentic forms of action since it delivers the soul's doing from the intricacies and oppositions that imprison mankind, while inspiring it with a pure, surging, and uncompromising quality.

The parallel between the scriptural text and human history manifests itself most clearly in the context of transcendence. Disconnected from the latter, both fail to teach their ultimate and truly real lesson. For Massignon, it is as true to say that history cannot

---

<sup>8</sup> “Valeur de la parole humaine en tant que témoignage”, 1951, in *Sur l'islam*, Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1995, P.77.

<sup>9</sup> *Sur l'islam*, p. 56.

be thought independently from a “finalist structural continuity” as it is evident that “linguistic facts” can be explained only “phonologically” and not merely “phonetically.”

<sup>10</sup> Historical finality must become “inwardly” intelligible in and through the spiritual continuum that it projects, which means that it requires true persons –such as defined above-- to extract the meaning of the common trial staged by history. An individual is no more than “a differentiated element that is dependant upon a social group that remains its natural end”, <sup>11</sup> whereas a true person is like a supernatural eclosion out of the collective destiny, the meaning of which he or she delivers, in both senses of revealing and setting free.

Analogically, linguistic facts must be understood in the context of the whole function and finality of language. But this finality is ordinarily obscured by the adscititious aspects of words, such as their communicative and rhetorical character. What sets scriptural language –and perhaps exceptional occurrences of mystical language-- apart from other linguistic phenomena is that, like the Quran, it “opens a perspective on the ultimate ends of language.” <sup>12</sup>

The paradox of this linguistic opening of a trans-linguistic perspective is intimately connected, in Massignon’s thought, to a privilege of Semitic languages, and particularly Arabic, as fostering a specific “mode of recollection.” This spiritual eminence of Semitic languages flows from some of their morphological and syntactic characters, beginning with the importance of the tri-consonantic root. Massignon refers to the Sufi notion of *tadmîn*, that conveys a semantic implicitness, insertion and involution -- what the French islamologist translates as “germinative burying”, to allude to this self-enclosed seed of meaning that is productive of spiritual understanding by implication, but less akin to hermeneutic exteriorization than to secret conception, like in the archetypical

---

<sup>10</sup> “One can only think a human ‘history’ --since the duration in which we live is oriented, by postulating a finalist structural continuity (against a fortuitous discontinuity); one can only write such a history by explaining linguistic facts phonologically (and not phonetically), and explaining psychic facts by means of a ‘psychology of form’ (against associationist empiricism). Historical finality must become ‘inwardly’ intelligible, for it concerns the person who extracts by herself the meaning of the common trial (and not the individual, i.e. a differentiated element who depends on the social group which remains its natural end.)”

*Sur l’islam*, Paris, 1995, p.55.

<sup>11</sup> *Sur l’islam*, p.55.

<sup>12</sup> *Sur l’islam*, p.12.

instance of Mary conceiving the Word.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, when relating to Scriptures the matter is not to decipher analytically, nor even to apply verses as moral *formulae*, but to bury a mystical seed within the soil of the soul. This seed is an image of the “foreign host” that the soul must welcome in inner hospitality.

What are the characters of the Arabic and Quranic language that invite such a meaningful receptivity and recollection? Massignon defines Arabic as being “hard”, “coagulated”, “condensed”, “metallic”, “crystalline”, “silex-like”, “dense.” Arabic “coagulates and condenses... the idea it wants to express ... without bending under the grip of the individual speaking it.”<sup>14</sup> It is characterized by an intensely expressive power of resistance and irreducible objectivity. It resists the need for explicitness and explications. This resistance is expressed, in the Quran, by the fixity of a consonantic body that is immovable, while a only small measure of leeway is consented, in some rare instances, to vocalization. By observing the linguistic phenomenon of an objective resistance to human instrumentalization on the part of the Quran, Massignon can emphasize that the Book is not merely an object of communication and “commerce,” nor a poetical work, nor an intellectual treatise. Far and high above these reductions of its literality to immediate ends, the Quran “can have a grasp on Reality”<sup>15</sup>, it can “allow us to access Reality, for it contains an anagogic meaning, a harpoon designed to draw the soul to God.”<sup>16</sup> Massignon oddly makes use of the French verb “*gauchir*”, to twist, to suggest the way in which the language of the Quran works on Arabic syntax to prompt its reader to “take off” from earth. In other words, the Quran does not leave the ordinary syntax unaffected: it uses it in order to operate a change of perspective. Its language is not a confirmation or a justification of terrestrial, literal, formal existence. It takes us beyond words by “twisting” the customary order of language. Massignon recognition of

---

<sup>13</sup> In grammar, the “communicative meaning (...) of *tadmîn* is to allow one word to indicate, or to convey, the import or meaning of two words ...” Adrian Gully, *Grammar and Semantics in Medieval Arabic*, Routledge (UK), 1995, p.43.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Massignon, *Testimonies and Reflections*, selected and introduced by Herbert Mason, University of Notre Dame Press, 1989, p.70.

<sup>15</sup> *Sur l’islam*, p.12.

<sup>16</sup> *Les trois prières d’Abraham*, Paris: Le Cerf, p.85.



an “anagogic meaning”<sup>17</sup> in the Quran makes it plain that, for him, this Book cannot be classified among human works or mere personal inspiration.

The “transcending” and “liberating” function of Quranic language is also evident in the two forms of “originality” that Massignon highlights as being representative of the Book’s mode of expression. First, there is a freedom from the magic rhythm of poetry. So it is because the latter pertains to a technique that is still plainly akin to the realm of nature. The “liberty” of the Quran vis-à-vis prosody is in that sense the symptom of an irruption of grace that breaks the mould of human techniques, notwithstanding the fact that meters and harmonies are reflections of an ontological order that transcends mankind’s terrestrial condition. Secondly, the Quran is *maknûn*, “well-guarded” (Yusuf Ali) or “kept hidden” (Marmaduke Pickthall), and therefore can be touched only by *al-mutahharûn*, the “purified ones” (LVI, 77-78). For Massignon, that is to say that the Quran is not a means of union with God: the Book keeps man at a distance from God, as it were, while obviously dispensing its teachings, or divine signs, to him:

Single bearing upheld between the Creator and the creature, the Quran does not trace a sign of union, but one of separation, the seal of forbiddance, a formal and permanent intellectual miracle perceived by a direct illumination of reason, each single verse being an integral proof of God.<sup>18</sup>

In this, Massignon undoubtedly reveals the spiritual preferences stemming from his own confessional outlook, by reserving the divine and sacramental privilege of union to the redemptive mediation of Christ. While acknowledging the analogy that associates the relationship between the Prophet and the Quran with the bond relating the Virgin Mary and Christ, Massignon downplays the immanent “divinity” of the Book. In doing so, Massignon is in no way unfaithful to the Islamic overemphasis upon God’s transcendence –as expressed most emphatically by the *Mu’tazilite* rejection of the notion of an uncreated Quran, but he may tend to omit or underestimate, at least in this particular context, the theurgic and transformative dimension of the Quran in Islamic life and practices and its immanent divinity within the soul. Massignon is keen on introducing the

---

<sup>17</sup> This anagogic meaning, one of the four meanings assigned to the Bible in Christian hermeneutics, is both an evidence of the divine origin of the Book and the seed of Islamic mysticism.

<sup>18</sup> *Les trois prières d’Abraham*, Paris, 1997, p.89.

Quran in terms of its exalted transcendence and supreme incomparability --*ijâz al-Quran*, not only because of the Islamic insistence upon these aspects of the Book, but also because he preserves thereby the exclusiveness of the sacramental economy of Christ's Redemption. The paradox is that Massignon's reading of the Quran may burke any sense of sacramental union by highlighting its emphasis on the transcendence of the Divine, while elevating the Book to the selfsame forbidding realm as God himself. In this view, the Quran draws its transcendent divinity from its function as an inspiring but prohibitive gateway to Divinity.

\*

If Henry Corbin departs from his teacher Massignon, it is precisely –among other important aspects of his work—inasmuch as he emphasizes the participative and unitive dimension of the Quran, and its hermeneutics. The starting point of Corbin's meditation on the hermeneutics of the Quran is undoubtedly encapsulated in his remark that “the mode of understanding (of the Book) is conditioned by the mode of being of him who understands.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, one cannot understand the Book unless one already *knows* what it means. There is a profound correlation between the semantic latency of scriptural meaning and the spiritual virtuality of the soul for “the believer's whole inner ethos derives from his mode of understanding.”<sup>20</sup> Spiritual hermeneutics is a reciprocal and gradual actualization of the unfathomable depth of scriptural meaning and the spiritual consciousness of the reader. More specifically, a meditative contact with the Quran discloses its own true nature to the soul, by actualizing its relationship with its Lord, that is the aspect of the Divine that “faces” the soul and constitutes its deepest ontological and spiritual ground. In reverse, the believer, through *lectio divina*, actualizes layers and aspects of the sacred text that lie within its inexhaustible wealth of meaning. Reading Scripture means to reconduct inward what is outward, i.e. to operate a kind of inner “re-conversion” of the linguistic form of the Scripture. Such an inward reversion is precisely possible because the letter of the Quran is none other than the analytic and

---

<sup>19</sup> *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Kegan Paul International, London and New York, 1993, p. 1. *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p.14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

external manifestation of the *haqîqah*, the true meaning of the text.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, while being exoterically a guarded book the Quran is esoterically an open book in the sense that each of its verses corresponds to a state of being or a state of consciousness. The literal meaning of the Book is not discarded, since its negation would amount to depriving the esoteric from a symbolic foundation –i.e. the exoteric letter, from which to gain access, through *ta'wîl*, to its arcanum. The literal meaning of the text is like a body to a soul, or a protective container to a content.<sup>22</sup> It is by virtue of this correspondence between the two that *ta'wîl* may occur: *ta'wîl* consists in reconducting what has been received, i.e. the scriptural *sacratum*, to the very source from which its descent, *tanzîl*, originated. Spiritual hermeneutics pertains to levels of meaning that are also levels of being.

In his commentary of an anonymous treatise from seventeenth-century Persia on the seven esoteric meanings of the Quran, Corbin refers to the letter of the Book as a mirror that reflects the Divine Reality itself.<sup>23</sup> More precisely, this Reality is at it were modulated along a plurality of spiritual levels in a gradation that ranges from the ascetic and dualistic meaning of *mujâhada*, or spiritual warfare, to the ultimate and plenary station of *wâsil*, “the one who has gained access to God.” To deny this stratified polysemy of the Book amounts to denying both the “divine” depth of Scripture, by flattening its meaning and the infinity of its facets which are as many “revelations” within the myriad of human mirrors. It therefore amounts to denying the metaphysical infinitude of the Divine since each soulish crystallization is like a projection in the play of the innumerable divine aspects that lie in the inexhaustible Divine Treasure. On the highest spiritual level, the human soul is a perfect mirror of “the modalities in which is realized the epiphany of Divine Attributes.”<sup>24</sup> This supreme degree of both autology and

---

<sup>21</sup> “La situation vécue est essentiellement une *situation herméneutique*, c’est-à-dire la situation où pour le croyant éclôt le *sens vrai*, lequel du même coup rend son existence vraie. Cette vérité du sens, corrélatrice de la vérité de l’être, vérité qui est réelle, réalité qui est vraie, c’est tout cela qui s’exprime dans un des termes-clefs du vocabulaire philosophique: le mot *haqîqat*.” Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “(The literal sense) is the containant, the basis, and the protection to such a degree that in the absence of this natural literal sense, the celestial sense and the spiritual sense would not be the Word, but would be like spirit and life without body, or like a temple with many sanctuaries and a Holy of Holies at its center, but lacking a roof and walls, so that the temple would be exposed to the depredations of thieves and wild beast.” Henry Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1995, p.61.

<sup>23</sup> “...l’ésotérique (*bâtin*), la profondeur cachée du Qorân, est cette Vraie Réalité, le Verbe divin, qui subsiste éternellement avec et par l’Ipséité divine, et qui se manifeste dans le corps de la lettre et du sens littéral, comme l’image dans un miroir.” *En islam iranien*, III, Paris, 1972, p.225.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.231.

“theology” corresponds to the inner reality to which Henry Corbin likes to refer by quoting the *hadīth* “he who knows himself knows his Lord.” On that level the soul understands itself as being both created and, in its essence, uncreated.

Conversely this prophetic *logion* could also be paraphrased as “he who knows himself knows his Quran,” thereby bringing to the fore the coincidence between the created appearance of the Quran in the consciousness of the faithful and its supreme identity with the Word. Such an understanding transcends the terms of the theological debate over the created versus uncreate nature of the Book. It is the best antidote against an abstract, literalist and totalitarian perception of the Book as “absolute otherness” by a strong affirmation of its dimension of immanence, while undercutting, at the same time, the facile relativism of contemporary religious discourses that reduce the Book to matters of private opinions or feelings. In fact, there is perhaps no better way to suggest this mysterious paradox than by referring to Corbin’s commentary on Ibn ‘Arabī’s statement, “No one will understand what we have just said except for him who is himself, in his person (*fī nafsihi*) a ‘Koran.’ ”<sup>25</sup>

The meaning of “being a Quran” is profoundly connected to the fundamental function of Sacred Scripture in Islamic mysticism, that of *dhikr*, or remembrance of God, and to the highest stages of spiritual realization, i.e. *fanâ’* –extinction or disappearance, and *baqâ’* –subsistence or permanence. The former is often described in terms of a “dissolution of self”, an “annihilation”, which one would be mistaken though to understand literally. Sometimes *fanâ’* is related to *baqâ’* as the disappearance of the servant’s qualities are related to the establishment of God’s attributes. Corbin’s commentary on Ibn ‘Arabī is primarily focused on highlighting the crucial fact that *fanâ’* amounts to a kind of metaphysical indistinction –since the self has “disappeared”, whereas *baqâ’* is characterized by a restoration of the servant in his metaphysical relationship to his Lord. This restoration is not equivalent to the stage preceding *fanâ’* but it takes place, on the contrary, on the very basis and the very context of this extinction.

The respective terms used by Ibn ‘Arabī to refer to these two states of being are Quran and *furqân*, the latter being one of the names of the Quran forged on the Arabic

---

<sup>25</sup> *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, translated from the French by Ralph Manheim, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1969, p.211.

root FRQ that implies the idea of splitting, separating and dividing, whereas the root of Quran, QRH which means reading, indicates by contrast the idea of gathering and reuniting. By contrast with Massignon's perspective, Corbin demonstrates that the Quran is indeed unifying, but that it is also discriminative –as *furqân*-- on the basis of this “unification” –*tawhîd*, and therefore “instorative” of the true self as it relates to his Lord. The analogy woven by Ibn ‘Arabî allows one to understand what could be called the two natures of the Book, first as a source of human disappearance in its “sea of wisdom”, i.e. union with God, and second as a means of true permanence since the Quran as *furqân* allows one to recover oneself in one's relationship with God as he “speaks” to us.

One of Henry Corbin's main contributions to the comparative study of Western and Islamic philosophy hinged upon a critique of the obstructions to spiritual hermeneutics in Christian Europe, and their potential spread within the Islamic world. The two main points of contention lie in the role of the *magisterium*, on the one hand, and the historicist perspective that has dominated Biblical exegesis, on the other hand. The first obstacle is perceived by Corbin as an institutional interference that tends to freeze the fluid relationship between the faithful and his God. For Corbin, whose Reformed religious background is seminal, the light of the relationship between the soul and its Lord has been offuscated, in the West, by the darkness of an inquisitorial *magisterium*, since as early a period as the second century of the Church history.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, Islam, and especially Shî'ism, is perceived by Corbin as free from the limitations and pressures of an external hermeneutic authority. This situation has been a boon for spiritual hermeneutics, which has manifested itself through “prophetic” lineage without being unduly covered by the thick sediment of dogmatic fixation. For Corbin, Shî'ite prophetology and imamology offer avenues of access to a “hiero-history” that is out of reach from institutional reductionism. Quoting Semnânî's distinction between *zamân âfâqî*, the objective and quantitative time, and *zamân anfosî*, the subjective and qualitative time, Corbin objects the historicist bent of most Western exegesis by affirming that “there are events which are perfectly *real* without having the reality of events of empirical

---

<sup>26</sup> This is linked by Corbin to the anathema against Montanus and his followers. The Montanists were an ecstatic Christian movement of the second century, first known as Phrygians. The movement was founded by Montanus himself and two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla. Tertullian was the most famous Montanist. The ecstatic and prophetic nature of Montanism represented a challenge to the fledgling magisterium Church, whence the final excommunication of Montanus and his followers.

history.”<sup>27</sup> In the Christian West, however, dogmatic exegesis has tended to espouse the historic dimension to the gradual exclusion of the symbolic and theophanic meaning of Scriptures. The traditional association of *littera* –the letter of Scripture-- with *sensus historicus* already points to an impoverishment of exegetic potentialities on the part of mainstream Christianity.

Now this is precisely what has become a pressing danger in Islam, given the neo-puritanical and modernist exclusive consideration for the historical “letter” of the Quranic text. In this context, a confusion between “symbol” and “allegory” has tended to deplete the reading of the Quran from its esoteric wealth of meaning. Allegorical readings dispense with the ontological and spiritual strata of Scriptures by flattening our understanding of symbolic expression into a merely conventional and artificial exercise. Only a clear apprehension of religion as symbol may give access to the esoteric layer of meaning and reality that is “symbolized.” In the Quran as in other similar Scriptures, the religious textuality that is literally spelled out is the symbol of the hidden reality or archetype that is symbolized and lies as true and re-integrating meaning. The latter frees one from the strictures of historical consciousness whereas the former imprisons one in it; in the words of Nâsir-e Khosraw, “the exoteric is in perpetual flux along cycles and periods of the world; the esoteric is a divine Energy that is not subjected to becoming.”<sup>28</sup> So, far from being the solid and unmoving ground that neo-literalists and fundamentalists desperately strive to protect, the external and literal meaning of Scriptures is constantly subjected to transformation. This is the paradox weighing upon those who try to fix the exoteric irrespective of its essential relationship to the esoteric: unable to reach the tuff of the sacrum, they offer its surface to the historical and ideological whims of the moment.

\*

While Corbin’s understanding of esoterism is a priori hermeneutic in nature, as well as being finalized by an emphatic affirmation of the primacy of the relationship of the soul with its Lord, Schuon’s esoteric perspective is akin to the Advaitin principle that “only *Atman* is real” and “everything is *Atman*”, thereby highlighting the function of all

---

<sup>27</sup> *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London and New York, 1993, P.11.

<sup>28</sup> *Histoire*, p.17.

sacred forms, including Scriptures, as *upâyâ* or “saving mirages”, a Buddhist concept that has key implications in Schuon’s metaphysical and spiritual lexicon. As *upâyâ*, Scriptures are absolute with regard to the essence of their message, but relative in their form, their essence being none other than the very immanence of the Self, the language of which is diversified and crystallized in and through them. Accordingly, Schuon refers to the revelation of Islam, i.e. the Quran, as the outer and formal manifestation of the divine Intellect, which is none other than the “Uncreated Quran” posited by Ash’arî and most of the Sunni *Kalâm* but rejected by Mu’tazilite theology.<sup>29</sup> For Schuon, the linguistic Quran is the formal objectivation of Divine Intelligence while the human reflection of the latter is like the subjective revelation of the Book.<sup>30</sup> This means that the Book is an instrument of discernment –whence its name of *furqân*, distinction or separation--<sup>31</sup> between absolute Reality and relative reality on the one hand, and a means of union with Reality on the other hand. The content, or the message, of the Quran is a relentless reminder of the absolute primacy of God, with all its eschatological consequences, while its linguistic form, both visual and phonetic, is the vehicle of a saving and transformative grace actualized, primarily within the framework of the canonical prayer, by the daily reciting and psalmody of its verses.

To use two terms that are recurrent in Schuon’s vocabulary, it could be said that the Quran is both Truth and Presence, the capital letters being used here to indicate that these two aspects are to be understood as divine modes, and not merely as human concepts. The element of Truth (*al-Haqq*, the Truth, is a divine Name in Islam) is akin to doctrine as a crystallization of the teachings included in the Book. This doctrinal dimension of the Quran as Truth is foundational with respect to the whole tradition, but it must be irrigated, as it were, by the element of Presence without which it would fossilize into formalism, or even harden into fanatic literalism. Presence is akin to sanctity and the sense of the sacred, it is in a sense the very ambience of tradition as a whole. When this

---

<sup>29</sup> Cf. F. E. Peters, *Islam: A Guide for Jews and Christians*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003, p.123.

<sup>30</sup> “(...) the uncreated Quran –the Logos– is the Divine Intellect, which crystallizes in the form of the earthly Quran and answers objectively to that other immanent and subjective revelation which is the human intellect.” *Understanding Islam*, Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 1998, p.57.

<sup>31</sup> “God’s revelation in the Quran distinguishes (*faraqa*) right from wrong and also differentiates (*faraqa*) the Muslims from the unScriptured and from the recipients of earlier revelations.” *Qur'an's Self-Image*, Daniel Madigan, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001, p.127.

perfume of Presence is lost or forgotten, scriptural words tend to dry up and they can even become the vehicles of political passions that coalesce with the residue of formal religion, particularly in the modern world when ideologies have become substitutes for a genuine sense of the absolute.

As for Presence, it must be envisaged within the framework of Truth in order to be able to radiate in all aspects of traditional life as well as to dispense its blessings over the course of time. Moreover, Presence does not guarantee in and of itself the possibility of misinterpretations and wanderings, nor is it immune to the dangers of degeneracy in superstition. This explains why the Quran is much more than a doctrinal book –being a theurgic and transformative sacred text, but also why its content needs to be unfolded through the diversity of authoritative and explicit commentaries. With respect to the question of Scriptures the esoteric and traditionalist sides of Schuon’s metaphysical position cannot be separated.

The Quran contains all that needs to be known and all that saves, at least virtually. This does not mean, however, that its content is immediately and obviously available to all of its readers. First of all, there is undoubtedly an immense gap between the divine Scripture and human understanding. In his chapter “Keys to the Bible,” included in *Lights on the Ancient Worlds*, Schuon specifies that the literal meaning of a sacred text like the Bible or the Quran is almost never sufficient onto itself to make sense. There is in this remark, when it is really understood, a solid protection against the well-intentioned illusions of contemporary individualism in scriptural matters. In this connection, Schuon is particularly sensitive to the paradoxes, obscurities and allusiveness of the Quran, and his work provides us with several examples of esoteric exegesis.<sup>32</sup> The unfathomable and at times unsettling dimension of Scriptures stem from the fact that they cannot simply be defined by the themes they address, nor by the way they address them, but rather by the ontological source of their manifestation. The essence of the Book is neither a matter of content nor one of style, it is a matter of ontological origin. This origin determines both the content and the style, but not in a way that is *outwardly* evident to the reader. Speaking of the Quran, Schuon has no qualms acknowledging the fact that its immediate

---

<sup>32</sup> This is particularly the case in *Sufism, veil and quintessence*, in which he debunks the confessional exaggerations and abuses of Islamic exegesis.



content is neither always sublime nor even without incoherence, and the same holds true for the Bible. The Quran deals with a wide spectrum of realities, from the legal realm to the eschatological dimension, and not a few of its passages are a challenge to commonsensical understanding. It is precisely, and paradoxically, in this unevenness and abruptcy that the very identity of the text as sacred is revealed. This disproportion must dispose both to a sense of awe --a sense of the sacred, and to a reliance on traditional exegesis, without which much of Scriptures remains an enigma.<sup>33</sup> In a sense, the disproportion between the Divine origin and the human text is such that it makes it impossible for the supernatural to manifest itself in a direct, clear, absolute manner in the terrestrial stuff of the Book.

This should serve as a reminder of the fact that one cannot approach Scriptures as one would approach a human text, however sublime and inspired it may be. The notion of Revelation, without which the very idea of Scripture becomes moot, entails a totally different relationship with the text, not that the latter be endowed with a transparent authority resulting from the words themselves, but rather on account of that which, beneath and between the words, bears witness to a Reality that cannot be confined within the nets of grammatical and historical determinations. The relationship with the Book partakes in the general sense of the sacred which, according to Schuon, may best be defined as the sense of “the Center within the periphery.” God is mysteriously present in the Book, and the obscurity and incoherence that we may encounter in it, far from being reasons for dismissing its message, are the best evidence of the transcendence of its origin. A clear awareness of the symbolic nature of the Book flows from that sense of mystery. Schuon, like Corbin, distinguishes the symbolic from the allegoric, the latter being a mere indirect figuration, whereas the former involves an essential identity between the symbol and the symbolized. The symbol, and the Book as such, is not one element within a mental correlation but the emergence of an ontological unity. Any verse from the Book is in that sense the very appearance of the divine Word. This amounts to

---

<sup>33</sup> “When approaching Scripture, one should always pay the greatest attention to rabbinical and cabalistic commentaries and—in Christianity—to the patristic and mystical commentaries; then will it be seen how the word-for-word meaning practically never suffices by itself and how apparent naiveties, inconsistencies and contradictions resolve themselves in a dimension of profundity for which one must possess the key.” *Lights on the Ancient Worlds*, Bloomington, 2005, p.115.

saying that, from a subjective point of view, the Book is the language of the Self which is mysteriously immanent to the soul.

As we have mentioned above, Schuon conceives of the Book as the outward Intellect, whereas intellection is like a subjective revelation.<sup>34</sup> As such, the Book is a projection of the universal Intellect, or a manifestation of the Logos. Its reality cannot be separated from the human manifestation of the Logos; which is expressed by the fact that A'ishah, when asked about the Prophet, answered that his nature (*khuluq*) was like the Quran. The Book is, in that sense, a mold into which all faithful are summoned to enter. The sacred text is first of all a spiritual reality, a spiritual perfume as it were; in the absence of a sensitivity to that perfume, any approach of the scriptural literality is fraught with dangers and “risks engendering grave doctrinal, psychological and historical errors.” For Schuon the molding and informing quality of the Quran is like a flux adapted to the needs of the rhythm of the soul:

The soul, which is accustomed to the flux of phenomena, yields to this flux without resistance; it lives in phenomena and is by them divided and dispersed — even more than that, it actually becomes what it thinks and does. The revealed Discourse has the virtue of accepting this tendency while reversing its movement thanks to the celestial nature of the content and the language, so that the fishes of the soul swim without distrust and with their habitual rhythm into the divine net.

As the *Sunna* of the Prophet consists in a multiplicity of actions and attitudes that serve as an exemplar and a mold for the entire life of the faithful, so does the Quran espouse the plurality of the soul's needs, as it were. In fact, the *Sunna* and the Quran converge in the multiplicity of the Islamic *formulae* stemming from the *âyât* and the customs and actions of the Prophet. These formulas, such as *subhana Allâh* (Glory to God), *in shâ'Allah* (God willing), *al-hamdu li'LLâh* (Praise to God) etc, weave the entire Muslim existence. In all cases, however, there lies a unity of essence behind the multiplicity that mercifully envelops the diversity of human existence. As there is an essential *Sunna* that consists in the fundamental virtues of the Prophet, there is a sense in

---

<sup>34</sup> “Pure intellect is the “immanent Quran”; the uncreated Quran — the Logos — is the Divine Intellect, which crystallizes in the form of the earthly Quran and answers objectively to that other immanent and subjective revelation which is the human intellect.” *Understanding Islam*, Bloomington, 1998, p.57.

which the whole Quran is absorbed into the essential unity of the Divine Name. For Schuon, the Name *Allâh* is the “quintessence of all the Quranic formulas” and it contains, therefore, the whole Book,<sup>35</sup> which is another way of saying, methodically speaking, that the remembrance of God that is crystallized by the utterance of this Name is “greater” (*wa lâ dhikru’Llâh akbar*), and recapitulates in fact the whole religion. The Name is the essence of the Book and it is, as such, mysteriously indistinguishable from the Self. In Schuon’s integral perspective, which reconciles the devotional depth of the *Psalms* and the metaphysical principles of the *Advaita Vedanta*, the Book is *a priori* the very sign of God’s transcendence vis-à-vis mankind but also *a posteriori*, and above all, the sacramental symbol of His deepest immanence.

\*

The metaphysical, mystical and hermeneutic principles that Massignon, Corbin and Schuon highlighted provide us with a background that makes it possible to address some of the problematic concepts and practices of Quranic reading that have emerged during the last decades. The lessons that we draw from these works are also valid, *mutatis mutandis*, for contemporary Christian hermeneutics and Bible reading.

There is first of all, a sense in which our “mystical ambassadors” caution contemporary readers against the dangers of linguistic trivialization and abusive historicization of the Quran and Scriptures in general. Whether it be a question of perceiving the Quran as a verbal exteriorization of the Intellect, a supra-historic realm of archetypal layers or an engulfment in the instantaneity of the transcendent, it needs be stressed that the function of the Book is to take us above our relative conditioning instead of confirming us into our horizontal ways. Scriptures are not intended to reinforce our attachment to terrestrial biases and ideological leanings by giving this attachment a seal of sublimity, as it were. Scriptures should contribute to dissolve our egotic subjectivity, not harden it by a misleading identification of our passions and habits with the absoluteness of their message. Massignon’s *fiat* inspires an attitude of humility and

---

<sup>35</sup> In Kabbalah, the Torah is considered as the first creation of God and, as such, the intelligible design of the whole cosmos. The Divine Name which is with God encapsulates its whole reality. The essence of the Torah is the Name.

receptivity toward the Book, and the disproportion, highlighted by Schuon, between the Divine meanings and the human words that are their means of expression should also infuse one's relationship to the Book with a sense of awe and humility.

As an expression of the divine "otherness", the Arabic substance of the Quran –with the whole wealth of its semantic and symbolic associations-- must be fully taken into consideration when one wishes to apply specific verses to current situations, whether apologetically or critically. There is much danger in taking Scriptures down to the level of linguistic familiarity, if not triviality, thereby bypassing the symbolic wealth of their raw language and the devotional sense of mystery that it inspires. Moreover, the "objective hardness" of the sacred text, if one may say so, should guard one from any facile instrumentalization of isolated verses for the sake of individualistic whims or ideological causes. The type of inner "recollection" that Massignon associates with the semitic core of the Book is moreover incompatible with an excessively analytic conceptualization. It is also deeply incompatible with the kind of discussant activism and democratic debating that informs the spirit of contemporary Bible groups and Bible readings. A sort of "virginity" is required on the part of the reader, for only such a *vacare Libro* can bear authentic spiritual fruits. A sacred Book is not a source of ideological and moral recipes, if one may say so, but rather an urging invitation to live our lives in God's terms.

Corbin's emphasis on spiritual hermeneutics reminds us that Scriptures are not to be apprehended as mere literary or philosophical texts for they demand from us a latent intuition of the realities to which they point. Reading should be neither a forced limitation nor a sterile reification of Scriptures. In fact, apprehending Scriptures independently from the metaphysical and spiritual context that they presuppose is like trying to read the letters and characters of a text without knowing the language in which it is written: one may describe the shape of letters, or even identify these letters, but any real understanding of the meaning of the text is nonetheless precluded by one's fundamental *inadequation* to the language and context in which it makes sense. Consequently, an alert and humble sensitivity to the depth of meaning of the Book is intimately bound to any degree of awareness of and receptivity to its subjective, transformative and unifying function. A lack of contemplative attention to the Book, or

an ignorance of the exegetic traditions that foster an indirect participation into that contemplative awareness, may lead to hasty literalism and open thereby onto fanatic blindness and religious “idiocy.” In fact, Corbin teaches us that such a reductive approach confines the reader to no more than a religious type of idolatry. Such idolatry has always been latent, or even at times manifest, in religious history, but the contemporary context makes it all the more dangerous in that it sets it perilously free from all traditional and spiritual guardrails. Literalism is an unfortunate limitation, but an ideological reading of literal meaning is more than that: it is a betrayal of the very spirit of the text by means of a kind of hijacking of its literality.

Such unfortunate –and not infrequent-- inclinations are but a caricature of the recognition of the Book as Revelation that Schuon emphasizes as a precondition for any understanding of scriptural ends. Moreover, a clear awareness of the symbolic dimension of Scriptures, which is at the same time the complement, the consequence and the evidence of their revelatory status, makes the reader unlikely to indulge in a flat and one-sided reduction of the text. The main lesson we may draw from Schuon is that a real contact with the Book amounts, first of all, to an awakening of the Intellect which, at the very source of our intelligence, binds us to Reality. The Intellect is as if unveiled by the Book and this is, in return, a promise of future unveilings of the Book itself by means of an intellective contemplation and meditation of its verses. Ultimately, the scriptural text leads to contemplative prayer because it is essentially none other than the Word as crystallized in the Divine Name, the quintessential distillation of the entire Book that avers the immanent reality of the Self.