

THE VISIONARY DREAM IN ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY

by

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1. MYSTIC ETHOS AND PROPHETOLOGY

The significance of the visionary dream in Islamic spirituality can be understood only as a function of the spiritual ethos that a prophetic religion, such as Islam is in essence, develops for itself. We must then keep in mind the structure of its prophetology. This prophetology was enunciated for the first time in the teachings of the Imams of Shi'ism. It established the essential relationship between the concept of the Prophet and the concept of the Imam. In it the very concept of Shi'ism finds expression.

Unfortunately, the West still knows very little about the theology of Shi'ite Islam as a whole. Some ready-made ideas affixed to the basic concepts of Shi'ism distort it and have nothing whatever in common with the texts that preserve for us the Imams' teachings. Moreover, the concept that organically binds imamology to prophetology is the concept of , the spiritual initiation of the "men of God." This concept is an equally dominant factor in Sufism; whence the important question concerning the Shi'ite presuppositions of non-Shi'ite Sufism, a question familiar to the religious thinkers of Iran, but far less so to Orientalists in the West, since Shi'ite spiritual life has, in fact, remained hidden and ignored.

To whatever degree a man's hidden consciousness expresses itself in his dreams, and the characteristic archetypes of those dreams match those experienced in dreams by people sharing his faith and aspirations, it is necessary to differentiate between this faith and these aspirations and those of all others. What has to be kept in mind is the spiritual situation peculiar to the faithful of Islam. This spiritual situation is determined and maintained by a prophetology on which are based the various modes of a higher visionary knowledge, a *hierognosis*—a prophetic theory of knowledge which accounts for and distinguishes the visions of dreams as well as the visions of the waking state. The existential situation of the believer is profoundly different from that commonly created for his Christian counterpart. It is only possible to refer very briefly here to the broad lines of this very complex whole.

To proceed as quickly as possible, let me begin by establishing the tonality in which our remarks must be developed. I have chosen two leitmotifs that will bring out certain contrasts.

The koranic Sura of the Dawn (89:27-28) proclaims this invitation: "O soul at peace, return to your lord, accepting and accepted." If we bring closely together the meaning of this verse, as it has been meditated on by Islamic spiritual thinkers, and the motto repeated over and over since the time of the Prophet, "Whoever knows himself [his soul], knows his Lord," these two leitmotifs enable us to understand the underlying ethos that characterizes the mystic of Islam, whatever he may have in common with certain mystics of Christianity, and at the same time what does, in essence, set them apart.

What is called in Islam "esoteric" (*batin*, interior realities), as opposed to "exoteric" (*zahir*, exterior things), has given rise to forms of consciousness, to positions taken, which are only conceivable within the framework of a prophetic religion, that is, a religion essentially based on revelation—the Book—received from a prophet. Commentaries written around the koranic verse and the motto cited provide the best information on the nature of the contrast between the religion of spiritual Islam and its mystic gnosis on the one hand, and the concept of a legalistic religion, commonly called official Islam, on the other. At the same time, this contrast affords some insights into both the affinities and the differences to be found in the situations that had to be faced on the one hand by the esoteric in Islam, and on the other by what in spiritual circles marginal to the official churches appeared as Christian esoterism.

Because these differences seem to me to contain certain presuppositions indispensable to an appreciation of content and meaning of some of the visionary dreams I refer to, I broadly sketch in several of them as they appear to me after many years spent in Iran in constant contact with Shi'ite friends.

This much can be said: the phenomenon of the "unhappy consciousness," to employ the name that Hegel introduced into common usage, is perhaps peculiar to the phenomenology of the Christian conscience. (Nevertheless there exists on the horizon of all Sufic spirituality a contradiction to be overcome, a void to be filled, a spiritual combat to be endured. But the terms differ profoundly from the Christian's, at least if the search for the expressions of Christian spirituality is confined to the teaching of the official dogma.

Take, for example, some of the opposites that have become commonplace for us—sin and sanctifying grace, faith and science, believing and knowing—or the kindred opposition trivially formulated as between "mysticism" and "sensuality" because the "love of God" supposedly excludes

a certain kind of love of the creature, beauty being the demon's trap, and because traditional asceticism has become accustomed to denounce any hesitation on this point as a reawakening of "paganism." It will take much more than a "post-Christian" state of society to make these oppositions disappear. It is true, there is no more talk of "sin," but there is talk of a "guilt complex." We are always dealing with symptoms of the same disease whether it is laicized or not.

To these contradictions within our secular ethics we can add others of a more specifically intellectual order, like the opposition between the reality of historic fact and interior truth, between the object of historical faith and that spiritual reality which is not conditioned by an event accomplished within chronological time, between the literalism of a revealed dispensation and its spiritual significance, between a dogmatic conscience and a conscience that perceives all exterior revelation as symbols, and so on—these contradictions live on even after the situation that engendered them has been laicized. The burden of a "historical conscience," which has weighed so tragically on Christian consciences since Origen, has never been heavier than in post-Christian sociological philosophies. Such oppositions and presuppositions are foreign to the spiritual world wherein the verse beginning "O soul at peace . . ." and the motto "Whoever knows himself knows his Lord" resound for the Sufi. The latter motto put into practice leads the mystic to a knowledge and an awareness of the one who, before all "givens" (*data*), is the "giver of givens" (*dator datorum*).

To mark the difference, we can point out that the Sufi has in no regard the consciousness of being a sinner. He is not "diseased." He feels no need of "justification." He is an Exile, an expatriate (*gharib*), and this basic feeling makes him a member of the enduring family of Gnostics. His is not a vague nostalgia; he knows precisely whence he comes and whither to return. Sohrawardi, *shaiikh al-ishraq* (d. 587/1191), writes: "When someone says to you, 'return,' a place of previous presence is implied. And woe to you, if you understand the place of return to be Damascus, Baghdad, or some other earthly fatherland."

What the Sufi prays for from the depth of his being is a messenger, a teacher of truth, a companion and spiritual guide who points out the way home. The meaning of his existence, the only conceivable future of his existence, consists in this recovery of his place of origin, this return home. This sense of return results in a concept of history which is essentially cyclical rather than an irreversible linear evolution; the end meets the beginning (*ma'ad* and *mabda*). This return cannot be accomplished without a guide. We have in this idea of the cycle and the idea of the guide the double theme that informs prophetology as it is meditated and experienced by the *spirituales* of Islam.

More precisely, the reference is to Shi'ite prophetology. It is, as we shall see, the first of the presuppositions necessary for an understanding of visionary dreams, of which I cite certain examples.

We are dealing with prophetology as expounded by the Imams of Shi'ism, primarily the fourth Imam ('Ali Zain al-'Abidin, d. 95/714), the fifth Imam (Muhammad Baqir, d. 115/733), and the sixth Imam (Ja'far Sadiq, d. 148/765). These most ancient sources within our reach are accessible through the monumental collection of Kolaini (d. 329/940). By some as yet not fully determined route, this prophetology has, if at the price of severe mutilation, entered the metaphysics of Sufism.

This prophetology¹ classes the prophets according to a gnoseology whose criteria correspond to the

¹ Cf. H. Corbin, "De la philosophic prophetique en Islam Shi'ite," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXXI (Zurich, 1962), for the

degrees of visionary perception, from the sights and sounds of a dream to the suprasensible perception in the waking state. There is the *nabi*, or simple prophet. There is the envoy (*nabi mursal*) to a more or less numerous group. Finally, among the envoys there are the six great prophets—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad—who were charged with revealing a *shari'at*, a new law. These are the legislator prophets. Prophetic gnoseology has appointed a degree of visionary perception to each of these categories: the simple *nabi* sees or hears the angel in a dream; the envoy sees the angel while awake; the prophet charged with revealing a *shari'at* receives, while in a waking state, the dictation of the text from the angel

The prophet Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets closing the cycle of the six periods of prophecy. Nevertheless, according to a specifically Shi'ite concept, the religious history of humanity has not been closed. What is closed is legislative prophecy (*nobonwat al-tashri'*); there can be no new *shari'at*. Prophecy pure and simple continues but under a new name. Shi'ite authors profess that what before Islam was known as "simple *nobonwat*," (* So rendered at the express behest of the author. - Eds.) has as the Islamic equivalent, . a term that is not adequately translated by "sanctity"; it signifies a bestowal of divine friendship, the spiritual initiation in to the "friends of God." The name has changed, owing to Muhammad's quality as the Seal of the Prophets; but the phenomenon remains, and for this reason our sources in this case use the term "esoteric prophecy" (*nobonwat batiniya*) as well as .

The final point of the prophetic cycle was at the same time the initial point of the cycle of the *walayyat* in its pure form, that is, a *walayyat* that is not paving the way for a new *shari'at*. In Twelver Shi'ite terms, it is the Cycle of the Imamatus which is dominated by twelve figures, the twelfth being the Hidden Imam, the Imam of our time, which is the time of his occultation. This figure holds a pivotal position in the spirituality of Shi'ism as well as in the speculations of its theosophists (a better word than "theologian" or "philosopher," *hikmat ilahiya* being the exact equivalent of the Greek *theosophia*). Just as the Prophet of Islam was the Seal of law-giving prophecy, so the Imamatus, the *pleroma* (fullness) of the Twelve, is the Seal of the *walayyat*: the Seal of the universal *walayyat* in the person of the first Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi Ta'lib; The Seal of the Muhammadan *walayyat* in the person of the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi. The parousia of the "Imam to come," who is present in both past and future, will announce the end of the cycle of our aeon.

But in Islam, since *walayyat* (the quality of the *awliya'*, the friends or men of God) is the name of what in times preceding the Seal of the Prophets was called simple* prophecy, it goes without saying that any gnoseology concerning this simple* prophecy must refer to *walayyat* as well. It is precisely in these terms that the traditions from which we learn the teachings of the Imams of Shi'ism describe whatever differentiates the knowledge of the envoys from that of the Imam, and therefore from that of all those who participate in the *walayyat* of the Imam. The envoy receives the *vision* of the angel in a waking state, while the Imam *bears* the angel in a dream (which differentiates *wahy*, divine communication by the angel, from *ilham*, inspiration). From the point of view of hierognosis, our traditional texts treat the case of the Imam (the spiritual guide) in the same category as the *nabi* or simple prophet.

prophetological contents of Imamic traditions as recorded in the great collection by Muhammad ibn Ya'qub Kolaini; "Le combat spirituel du shi'isme," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXX (Zurich, 1961), on the problem of the relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism as expounded by the Shi'ite theologian Haidar Amoli (eighth/fourteenth century); *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Vol. I, *Idées*, vol. 38 (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

We may say, then, that the spirituality of the cycle of the *walayat* is directed toward a kind of suprasensible knowledge with the Imam as guide, since he is in essence the initiator into the hidden meaning of the divine revelations, and since on understanding this meaning depends the spiritual birth (*wiladat rubaniya*) of the adept. We can, therefore, understand how and why the figure of the guide, preeminently one or the other of the twelve Imams, dominates the visionary dreams of our *spirituales*, and why these dreams generally have the character of initiatory dreams. The same fact also affords us an understanding of why this search for and the encounter with the personal guide, with the individuation this implies, resolve some of the contradictions previously discussed.

The currently accepted opposition between prophetic religion and mystic religion does not exist for the Sufi, Shi'ite, or non-Shi'ite. Mystic religion is the truth, the true meaning (*haqiqat*) of prophetic religion, prophetic experience (the *mi'raj*) being the very prototype of mystic experience. Thereby disappears as well the conflict that in Christianity presents itself as the opposition between historical exegesis, that of the natural sense of scriptural revelation, and the exegesis of the spiritual meaning (which is unfortunately often confused with the allegorical meaning). There is no choice to be made, nor any merely edifying superstructure to be tolerated; there is simply a transition to accomplish, that transition upon which the spiritual birth of the adept depends (*ta'wil* as spiritual exegesis is *exegesis*, exodus, return).

Last, the phenomenon "Church" has remained foreign to Islam. A Sufi could never understand that he was to receive his faith and hence eternal life from anything like a church. Therefore, too, he disposes of resources of his own to face the restrictive norms of the collective conscience. What is essential is the individual, personal bond between the initiate and the initiator, a bond with the guide, *shaiikh* or *pir*, who can be a visible human person like the person he guides, but who can also be, as in the case of the Owaisi order, an invisible personal guide. In Shi'ism, this individual relationship is particularly typified by a bond of personal devotion with one or the other of the twelve Imams, preeminently with the Hidden Imam, "hidden from the world and the senses but present in the hearts of his adepts." Stories of a visionary meeting with the Imam abound in Shi'ite literature. They represent, preeminently, the archetype of an individuated and individuating relationship with a personal heavenly guide. Avicenna calls this guide Hayy ibn Yaqzan.² Sohrawardi describes him, with the esotericism of the Arab tongue, as "Perfect Nature," the "angel of the philosopher." Najmoddin Kobra calls him the "invisible master" (shaiikh al-ghaib), the "witness in Heaven" (shahid fi 's-sama'). Semnani shows us that the mystic's relationship with him is like that of the Prophet with the angel of revelation, his Holy Spirit, because the guide is "the Gabriel of his being." This is the figure who appears on the horizon of his dreams, be he awake or asleep.

This figure is the guarantee of the final attainment of spiritual individuality. Certainly that individuality has nothing to do with the empiric ego represented by the idea of *nafs ammara* (the domineering soul in disorder), but with what our sources describe as the Holy Spirit in man, a superior preexistential ego whose closeness must be recaptured. All spiritual combat is directed toward this transformation of *nafs ammara* into *nafs motma'inna*, the quiet "soul at peace" addressed by the koranic verses we cited at the outset, because in it the motto has been realized: "He who knows his soul, knows his Lord." Such a soul engages in a kind of spiritual combat which takes on,

² H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard K. Trask, Bollingen Series, no. 66 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961).

especially in Iranian Sufism, a markedly different character than that envisaged by traditional Christian asceticism. We shall find evidence for this in a first series of visionary experiences, chosen in the work of Ruzbehan of Shiraz.

2. RUZBEHAN BAQLI of SHIRAZ (d. 606/1209)

Ruzbehan is certainly one of Iran's greatest mystics. His doctrine is characterized by a complete asceticism of love which puts an end to the opposition established by traditional asceticism between human love and divine love. For Ruzbehan there is but one love, but one text, the meaning of which must be learned. In his beautiful book, entitled *Jasmin of Love's Faithful*,³ Ruzbehan expressly distinguishes between those he calls the "pious devotees," whose spiritual experience did not have its origin in human love, and those he calls the "intimates," the faithful of love (*khawass al-mahabbat*), who have been initiated by a human love that was for them the beginning of the spiritual way. Let it be especially noted that no "conversion" is involved here, no passing from a human object to a divine object (God is not an object), but that a transformation takes place within the loving subject: the unity of the Contemplator and the Contemplated announces itself in the ecstatic agitation of the soul when it is exposed to human beauty experienced as the mystery of a supreme theophany, that is to say, in the ecstasy of the soul that perceives the prophetic meaning of beauty.

We can mention here only one of the other works by Ruzbehan, his voluminous *Commentary of the Paradoxes of the Mystics*, which is a veritable *summa* of the Sufism of his times. Ruzbehan wrote a preliminary sketch in Arabic, then at the request of his disciples he wrote a much expanded Persian version.⁴ Last, we should take note of an invaluable work, a unique document called the *Kashf al-asrar* (*Uncovering of Secrets*), Ruzbehan's diary of visions; the only comparable work in the West, I believe, is Swedenborg's *Spiritual Diary*. A friend asked him to put the material together when Ruzbehan was fifty-five years old; his first visionary experiences dated from his fifteenth year. Here we take several of the stories related to events that occurred at about that age. They bear particularly the character of visions or dreams of initiation; they form a series of decisive inner experiences whose narration attests to a personal spiritual initiation that Ruzbehan owed to no earthly master.

At the age of fifteen, then, we can see awakening in his conscience the aspiration characteristic of Sufism: to verify by a personal mystical experience the testimony of prophetic experience, to resolve the contradiction between the refusal given by God to Moses ("Thou wilt not see me" [Koran 7:139]), and the paradoxical attestation of the Prophet ("I have seen my God in the most beautiful of forms"). In Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of theophany, the paradox is resolved by an assertion that theophany (*tajalli*), divine manifestation, can never occur except when it corresponds to the form of the aptitude of the person to whom it reveals itself. (* So rendered at the express behest of author. *) Otherwise it would be impossible. What the visionary sees (*al-motajalla labo*) is his own form in "the mirror of God." All the mystics held to this, and the thesis was already outlined in a teaching of the eighth Imam, 'Ali Reza (d. 203/818).

³ Ruzbehan Baqli Shirazi, *Le Jasmin des fideles d'amour I'Abhar al-'ashiqin*, ed. H. Corbin and Moh. Mo'in, Bibliotheque iranienne, vol. 8 (Tehran and Paris, 1958), a Sufic treatise in Persian; cf. also H. Corbin, "Soufisme de Ruzbehan," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*. XXVII (Zurich, 1958).

⁴ Ruzbehan Baqli Shirazi, *Commentaire sur les Paradoxes des Soufis (Sharh-e Shathiyat)*, Persian text with introduction and notes ed. H. Corbin, Bibliotheque iranienne, vol. 12 (Tehran and Paris, 1966).

At this moment, then, in his life, an inner voice tells the adolescent Ruzbehan that he is a *nabi*, a prophet, certainly not a prophet-envoy (*nabi mursal*) and still less a prophet charged with revealing a *shari'at*, but a mere *nabi* (that is, a *wali*; see the prophetology sketched in the preceding section). He resists, thinking that the state of *nabi* is incompatible with the weakness of mortal flesh. The decisive inner experience of his entire life is already in evidence. It should be noted that at that age the young Ruzbehan was as yet ignorant of all the theological difficulties that had accumulated around the *tawhid*, the profession of faith pronouncing the concept of monotheism. He was as yet incapable of explaining the differences between exoteric *tawhid*, the monotheism as understood by official and legalistic religion, and esoteric *tawhid*, the "theomonism" as understood experientially by the theosophy of Sufism. Nevertheless, because he had already found the road of his personal secret, his guide, the "soul of his soul," the decisive experience presented itself as the first confrontation with this formidable problem.

One evening after dinner he left his home and turned toward a certain place in the desert around Shiraz with the intention of making his ablution for prayer. He writes: "Suddenly I heard the sound of a sweet voice. My innermost conscience [*sirr*] and an ardent longing [*shauq*] were stirred. I cried: 'Oh, man of the voice, wait for me.' I climbed a nearby hill and found myself in the presence of a person of great beauty who had the appearance of a Sufi sheikh. I was unable to say a word. He spoke several words to me about the *tawhid*. I did not understand, but I experienced simultaneously deep distress and an overwhelming love." The young man stayed in the desert part of the night in this enraptured state. Then he went home where he remained "until morning a prey to agitation and disquietude, to sighs and tears . . . then I felt relief. It seemed to have lasted hours and hours." He remained seated for another hour, meditating. Then, giving in to the violence of his emotions, he got up, made a bundle of his effects which he threw into a corner, and went into the desert. "I remained in this state for a year and a half, nostalgic, stupefied, carried away by emotion. Every day was marked by tremendous ecstatic visions, and by sudden visitations from invisible worlds. During these visions, the heavens and the earth, the mountains, the deserts, the plants, everything seemed to me to be pure light. Then, I felt a kind of relief."

In describing the first stages that followed, Ruzbehan's spiritual journal reveals for us the archetypal figures that force themselves on the consciousness of an Iranian Sufi:

This time, I seemed to be in my vision on the mountain of the east, and I saw there a great group of angels. From the east to the west stretched a vast sea. There was nothing else to be seen. Then the angels said to me, "Enter the sea and swim to the west." I entered the sea and began to swim. When I arrived at the place of the setting sun as it was going down, I saw a group of angels on the mountain of the west; they were illuminated by the light of the setting sun. They called to me, "You, down below, swim and have no fear." When I at last reached the mountain, they said to me, "No one has crossed this sea except 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and you after him."

There are two striking features in the events of this initiatory vision. First, the reference to the first Imam of Shi'ism who appears here as the exemplary hero of the new initiate. Second, the scene itself. The dangerous crossing to the setting sun, the region of darkness, this is the theme of the Source of Life. Two great archetypal figures dominate the legend: Alexander and Khidr, the mysterious prophet who is sometimes associated with Elias and sometimes identified with him. Khidr is superior to the lawgiving prophets (he is the initiator of Moses [Sura 18]). He has an

extraordinary role in Sufism. Century after century his presence reaches down from the world of Mystery. He is the master of all those who have had neither a worldly master nor a worldly initiator. Such is the case of the Sufi who, before any contact with a human master, before any of the historical affiliations on this earth which are passed through successive human generations, receives his affiliation directly from the one recognized as master by all those "without a master." The personal guide is preeminently manifest in the person of Khidr, and it is profoundly significant that a large group of Shi'ites should have identified him with the Twelfth Imam, the Hidden Imam.

There are indeed two stories of visions which tell us successively of a meeting by Ruzbehan with Khidr in person, then with two sheikhs who are the very "image" of the mystic pilgrim and who reveal to him the esoteric rank he has now attained. Having reached the western region of darkness, Ruzbehan, like Khidr, finds there the light (the vision of the angels enfolded in the light of the setting sun) and the Source of Life in the form of a Sea of Light. The initiation received directly from Khidr took here the shape of eating a piece of fruit. Ruzbehan wrote: "At that time I knew nothing of the higher theosophical science, and behold I saw Khidr. He gave me an apple, an apple from which I took a bite. 'Eat it all,' he said, 'as I have eaten it all.' It seemed to me that there was an immense sea stretching from the Throne to the Pleiades, and I could see nothing else. It was like the irradiation of the sun. Then, without my willing it, my mouth opened and this whole sea of light entered, not a drop remained unabsorbed."

This initiation is confirmed by another dream vision whose symbolic figures indicate with all the precision of an archetype the degree of spiritual plenitude attained. All created beings are revealed to the visionary as enclosed in a house; numerous lamps provide a brilliant light, but a wall keeps him from entering. So he climbs onto the roof of his own lodging, where he finds two very beautiful people in whom he recognizes his own image. They appear to be Sufis and smile at him affectionately. He notices a hanging pot under which a delicate and pure fire is burning without smoke and fed by sweet-smelling herbs. At this moment one of the visitors unfolds a cloth, and brings forth from it a bowl of very beautiful form and several loaves of pure wheat. He breaks one of the loaves into the bowl and pours over it the contents of the pot, an oil so fine as to appear a spiritual substance. Then the three together eat a kind of communion meal. Ruzbehan continues:

Then one of them asked me, "Do you know what was in the pot?" "No," I answered, "I know nothing about it." "It was oil of the Great Bear which we gathered for you."

When the vision was over, I meditated on it, but it was not until some time later that I realized that this was an allusion to the Seven Poles in the heavenly pleroma (malakut) and that God had bestowed upon me the pure substance of their mystic grade, that is, the rank of the Seven who are invisibly spread over the surface of the world. I then turned my attention to the Great Bear. I noticed that it formed seven openings, through all of which God showed himself (*tajalli*) to me. "My God," I cried, "what is this?" He said to me, "These are the seven orifices of the Throne."⁵

It is impossible here to pursue and comment on the hundreds of visions related by Ruzbehan in the pages of his spiritual diary. What they reveal to us is the secret of his passionate love of beauty, his

⁵ Cf. Corbin "Soufisme dec Ruzbehan," pp. 65-67. I hope I'll find an edition of the diary (i.e., *Kashf al-asrar*) will follow that of the *Shathiyat*.

ecstatic adoration of the faces of beauty which he knows he has previously contemplated in another world. Out of this secret, there grew in him the sense of the amphibology (*iltibas*) of visible things, the multiplication of symbols which he interpreted without falling into the snare. It could be said that he lived in constant intimacy with a heavenly world of sumptuous splendor, revealing to him the magnificence of benign beings invisible to ordinary perception. His universe can only be described in the terms he uses himself: in the pages of his diary there appears an endless succession of angels whose beauty is both delicate and superhuman, of prophets, of houris, of gardens, and of celestial music. Remarkably dominant are the often repeated splendors of flaming dawns and the profusion of rose gardens, white roses and red roses, shadowed rose bowers, the divine presence shining forth in the splendor of a red rose.

Certainly we are far from the phenomenon of "unhappy consciousness." There is not even an equivalent to be found in the feeling shown by the mystic to have left behind him the *tawhid* professed according to the norms of common exoteric consciousness and of legalistic religion. This feeling appears in the consciousness of every Sufi, but only to turn, precisely at this point, into a feeling that all contradiction has been resolved. Here again, to bring to an end the case of Ruzbehan, is the story of a particularly eloquent visionary dream. Ruzbehan was aware that in order to remain faithful to the presence of his inner God, he might have to be thought a mangy sheep by the conventional Muslim. Such was the case of those called the *malamati*. Hafiz of Shiraz, the mystic poet and compatriot of Ruzbehan, was later to be one of them. Ruzbehan reveals their affinity in one of the visions in which to him the contradiction between the One and the Many is resolved, a contradiction that exoteric theology refuses to face and is, therefore, powerless to overcome. He writes:

When I was young I had a sheikh who was a man of great mystic knowledge. He was a *malamati* sheikh whose true character was hidden from ordinary people. One night, I was looking upon a vast plain in the Plains of Mystery, and behold I saw God in the guise of this sheikh at the entrance to this plain. As I approached him, he made a gesture showing me another plain. I went toward this other plain and again I saw a sheikh like him, and again this sheikh was God. Once more he gestured showing me another plain; and so forth until he had shown me seventy thousand plains, and each time at the approach to each plain I saw a figure like the one I had seen at the first. I said to myself: God is nevertheless unique, one, undivided, transcending numbers, great or small, as well as sameness, contradiction, and similarity. Then I was told: "Such are the theophanies of the eternal attributes, since they are limitless." At that moment I felt the grip of the esoteric realities of the *tawhid* from the sea of magnificence.

3. MUHYI 'd-DIN IBN 'ARABI (d. 638/1240)

In connection with the initiatory dreams of Ruzbehan, it is fitting to refer to evidence afforded by Ibn 'Arabi, one of the greatest theosophists and visionary mystics of all time (born at Murcia, in Andalusia, in 560/1165, died in Damascus in 638/1240). Having treated at length elsewhere the visionary experiences that marked the whole of this great sheikh's life and work,⁶ I limit myself here to two references. Both disclose a life of intimacy with a mysterious heavenly beloved and would

⁶ *H. Corbin, *l'Imagination creatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958).

lend themselves to comparison with the narratives in Ruzbehan's diary. Ibn 'Arabi declared: "In whomsoever active imagination does not operate, never will he reach the heart of the question." Not only has he himself provided a far-reaching theory of imaginative cognition (which profoundly influenced Molla Sadra of Shiraz in the sixteenth century), but, by his own testimony, he had received a full measure of this visualizing or visionary imagination; and he made use of it with remarkable lucidity of consciousness. He confessed:

This power of the active imagination developed in me to the point that it presents my mystic beloved to me visually in a bodily, objective, extra-mental figure just as the Angel Gabriel appeared bodily to the eyes of the Prophet. At first, I did not feel strong enough to look at this figure. It spoke to me. I heard and understood. These apparitions left me in such a state that for many days I could not take any nourishment. Each time I went to the table, the figure was standing at the table's end, looking at me and saying in a language I could hear with my ears: "Will you eat while contemplating me?" It was impossible for me to eat, but I did not feel hunger! I was so full of my vision that I stuffed myself and became drunken in contemplating the figure to the point that this contemplation took the place of all nourishment. My good appearance astonished my friends who knew of my total abstinence. The fact is that I continued for a long time without tasting a bit of food, not experiencing either hunger or thirst. All the while this figure was never out of my sight whether I was standing or sitting, moving or resting.⁷

This visionary event forms both the prelude and the source of the colossal work *al-Fotubat al-Makkiya* (*The Spiritual Conquests of Mecca*). This prelude, which is actually the product of long spiritual maturation, is presented as an extraordinarily lucid dialogue, at the border of conscious and transconscious, between the human ego and his divine alter ego. Ibn 'Arabi was in the process of finishing his turns around the Ka'ba when behold, in front of the Black Stone he met the mysterious being whom he recognized and described as "the evanescent young man, the Silent-Speaker, who is neither living nor dead, the simple-complex, the embracing-embraced," all terms with alchemical overtones, amassed to symbolize the *coincidentia oppositorum*. At this moment, doubt overtakes the visionary: Perhaps this procession is nothing but a living man's ritual prayer over a corpse (the Ka'ba)? "Behold the secret of the temple," the mystic young man said to him, "lest it escape you." The visionary suddenly saw the temple of stone become a living being. He then understood the true spiritual rank of his visitor. Kissing his visitor's right hand, he asked to become his disciple, to learn from him all his secrets. He would teach nothing else. But the visitor spoke only in symbols, his eloquence but riddles. At a mystic sign of recognition, the visionary was overtaken by so powerful a love that he lost consciousness. When he was himself again, his visitor revealed to him, "I am Knowledge, I am He who knows, and I am He who is known."⁸

4. NAJMODDIN KOBRA (d. 618/1221)

A converging movement of primary importance in the history of Islamic spirituality took place at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Ibn 'Arabi emigrated from Andalusia toward Syria. The disciples of Najmoddin Kobra from Khwarezm in central Asia fled before the oncoming Mongols

⁷ Ibid., p. 277.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 208, 278ff.

toward Iran and Anatolia. Both masters have, by their influence, left a decisive imprint on the theosophy of Sufism. We spoke earlier of the expressions "invisible guide," "witness in Heaven," as characteristic of Najm Kobra's vocabulary. What they convey is a spiritual experience of the same type we have come to know through the visionary tales of Ruzbehan and Ibn 'Arabi.

Najm Kobra seems to have been the first of the masters of Sufism to fix his attention on the phenomena of color, the colored-light sensation the mystic may perceive in his spiritual states (sensible optical perception is not involved). He set about describing and interpreting these colored lights as indications of the mystic's state and the degree of his spiritual advancement. His influence has made itself felt in his direct and indirect disciples: Najm Daya Razi, 'Ala' ud-Daula Semnani, and others. His work, known to us now in an edition by Fritz Meier, is immensely rich.⁹

In relation to the theme of this Colloquium, this is essential: what the mystic ardently seeks and experiences is not a collective relationship with a god who is the same for all, a relationship shared by all in like manner. On the contrary, it is always a matter of a unique, individual relationship of the lover and the beloved which cannot be shared; the mystic has no part in a religion of a "common father"; the relationship he experiences is not "filial" but "uxorial" [In French the opposites are *filialité* and *uxorité*- trans.] (whence the symbolism common to all types of mysticism). The individuation of an unshared relationship cannot be manifested, shaped, or expressed except by means of a figure that bears witness to the presence of the alone with the alone and for the alone, in the dialogue of their *unus-ambo*. The figure of the "witness in Heaven," of the "personal suprasensible guide," bears witness precisely to this relationship. It is so much the hallmark of a theophany perceived by love alone, responding to the feeling of an "uxorial" tie, that its most characteristic manifestations, the flaming-light phenomena, bearing witness to the rejoining of "like with like," appear whenever a state of love reaches paroxysm. The mystic experience described by Najm Kobra thus rejoins the forms and experiences of celestial love characteristic of Iranian Sufism. We refer here to two texts. The sheikh wrote:

When the circle of the face has become pure, it gives off light like a spring emptying water, so that the mystic has a feeling [by his awareness of the suprasensible] of flashing lights irradiating from his face. This flashing appears between the eyes and the eyebrows. It continues until it covers the whole face. When this happens, there appears before you, facing your face, another Face, equally of light. It also radiates light, while behind its transparent veil a sun becomes visible which appears to be animated by oscillation. Actually this Face is your own face, and the sun is the sun of the Spirit who comes and goes in your body. Later, purity submerges all your person, and behold you see before you a person of light [*shahks min nur*] from which lights also irradiate. The mystic notices these lights proceeding from his entire person. Often the veil falls revealing the whole reality of the person, and it is then that you perceive all with the whole of your body. The opening of interior vision [*basira*], the vision's organ of light, begins with the eyes, continues to the face, followed by the breast, finally by the entire body. It is this person of light before you who is called the suprasensible guide [*moqaddam al-ghaib*] in Sufic terminology. He is also called the suprasensible "personal master" [*shaiikh al-ghaib*]; or "spiritual balance of the suprasensible"

⁹ Fritz Meier, *Die Fawa'id al-Gamal wa-fawatih al-Galal des Nagm ad-din al-Kubra*, Mainzer Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission, Bd. JX (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1957); cf. H. Corbin, *Physiologie de l'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien*. Academie septen-trionale, Ombre et Lumière, Vol. 1 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961).

[*mizān*].¹⁰

Najm Kobra lavished other names on it: "sun of the heart," "sun of certainty," "sun of faith," "sun of knowledge," "spiritual sun of the spirit." Even more explicitly, the sheikh declares: "Know that the mystic has a (witness [*shahid*] who is called the personal master in the suprasensible world. He raises the mystic to Heaven and it is in Heaven that he appears."¹¹

It is significant that the personal guide in the suprasensible world should thus be expressly identified with the *shahid*, the "witness of contemplation," the central figure in the meditations of those whom Ruzbehan describes as the "faithful of love." The idea of the *shahid* enters into a mystic doctrine of a love that binds the beloved of this world to a "witness in Heaven" in his manifestation as the "guide of light" because of an epiphanic relationship between them. We learn this from the following confession, in which, naturally, the phenomena depend on a physiology of "suprasensible perception." Najm Kobra writes:

Behold, while living in Egypt, in a river village on the Nile, I was taken by a passionate love for a young girl. Day-in, day-out, I hardly ate or drank, so that the fire of my love became extraordinarily intense. I breathed in flames of fire. Each time I sent forth such a flame, behold from Heaven someone also breathed in a flame that came to meet my own breath. The two flames came together between Heaven and me. For a long time, I did not know who was in the place where the two flames met. At last I understood that it was my witness in Heaven.¹²

Elsewhere, to illustrate the motif of the rejoining of "like with like" Najm Kobra said: "Each time a flame goes up from you, behold a flame descends from Heaven toward you."¹³

5. SHAMSODD'IN LAHIJI (d. 912/1506)

In the fifteenth century, in 877/1473, Shamsoddin Lahiji wrote, in Persian, a summary of Shi'ite Sufism as a commentary on a long poem, also in Persian, *Golhan-e Raḡ* (*The Rose Garden of Mystery*), which had been composed in the preceding century by a famous mystic from Azerbaijan, Mahmud Shabestari (who died in 720/1317 at the age of thirty-three). This long poem has remained a *vade mecum* for all Iranian Sufis. Interspersed throughout Lahiji's commentary itself are memorabilia that afford precious witness to mystic experience. We offer here three of these ecstatic confessions. The first tells of a vision during which all being is heard by the mystic in a song of ecstasy, "Ego sum Deus." One detail (the snare holding the foot) is somewhat reminiscent of the opening of Avicenna's "Tale of the Bird." The two others introduce the motif of the Black Light (*nur-e siyah*).

Shamsoddin Lahiji writes:

One night, after prayers were finished and the liturgical recitation prescribed for the nocturnal

¹⁰ Meier, op. cit., sec. 66, p. 31 of Arabic text.

¹¹ Ibid., sec. 69, p. 32 of Arabic text.

¹² Ibid., sec. 83, p. 39 of Arabic text.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 206-210.

hours, I continued to meditate. Absorbed in ecstasy, I had a vision. There was a *kebanqab* [a Sufi lodge], extremely lofty. It was open, and I was inside the *kebanqab*. Suddenly I saw that I was outside. I saw that the entire universe, in the structure it presents, consists of light. Everything had become one color [*yak-rang*], and all the atoms of all the beings proclaimed "Ego sum Deus" [*Ana 'l-Haqq*] each in the manner proper to its being and with the force particular to each. I was unable to interpret properly what manner of being had made them proclaim this. Having seen these things in my vision, an intoxication and an exaltation, a desire and an extraordinary delectation were born within me. I wanted to fly in the air, but I saw that there was something resembling a piece of wood at my feet which prevented my taking flight. With violent emotion, I kicked the ground in every possible manner until this piece of wood let go. Like an arrow shooting forth from the bow, but a hundred times stronger, I rose and moved into the distance. When I arrived at the first Heaven, I saw that the moon had split, and I passed through the moon. Then returning from this state and absence [*ghaibat*], I found myself again present.

These last lines are an allusion to the koranic verse on the splitting of the moon. Of course, the reference is not to that heavenly body's physical mass, but to *batin al-falak*, the esoteric Heaven of the Moon, the attainment of which constitutes the first step of mystic ascension.¹⁴

Two other memorabilia report in gripping terms two perceptions of the Black Light, which is beyond the perception of the rational intellect. We do not dwell here on this notion of the Black Light in the spiritual experience of Sufism,¹⁵ but simply insert a translation of Lahiji's Persian text. It involves a visionary experience in a dream, either during sleep, or in a state halfway between sleep and wakefulness. Lahiji writes:

I saw that the Black Light covered the entire universe, so completely that everything had the color of this light. Intoxicated and lightheaded, I was submerged in this light. Rays of this light joined in me, and rapidly pulled the whole of my being upward. It is impossible for me to describe how with each pull I was raised up several millennia so that I was given access to the first Heaven and saw there many strange and wonderful things. From there, another pull, and I was lifted to the second Heaven. And so it continued, each new pull leading me from Heaven to Heaven. In each Heaven I saw an infinite number of marvels. Finally I reached the Heaven of the Throne [*'arsh*, the Sphere of Spheres]. There, without quantity, quality, or dimension, the light of the theophany [*nur-e tajalli-ye*

Haqq] shone upon me. I saw the Divine Majesty without modality. During this theophany I was completely annihilated to myself [*fani motlaq*] and without consciousness [*bi sho'ur*]. Then I came back to myself in this world. Once again the Divine Being appeared to me. Once again I was annihilated to myself and placed outside all limitations. Everything happened as if I no longer existed, then I came back to myself in this world. Then the Divine Being reappeared, and I again ceased to exist. But once I had found my superexistence in God, I saw that this absolute light [*nur-e motlaq*], was I [*man-am*]. Whatever fills the universe is I; other than myself there is nothing. The eternal being, the demiurge of the universe is I. Everything is subsistent in me. In this mystic state, strange and wonderful theosophical knowledge was imparted to me concerning

¹⁴ Cf. H. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne*, Bibliothèque iranienne, vol. 9 (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1961), p. 121 n. 157.

¹⁵ On the concept of the black Light, cf. Corbin, *Physiologie de l'homme de lumière*, pp. 219-237, and *Trilogie ismaélienne*, pp. 154 ff.

the inner being of the universe; for example, the theosophic understanding of these questions: Why the Throne [*'arsh*, the Ninth Heaven] is so crystalline as to have no star in it? Why the totality of fixed stars is in the eighth Heaven? What is the reason for a different star in each of the other Heavens? Why do angelic beings not show themselves visibly in the world of the elements? and other similar questions which cannot be expressed as they ought to be, and which only the mystic who has experienced them can understand.¹⁶

Since it contains all the great themes of mystic experience, so complete an ecstatic confession would require a long commentary. Moreover, Shamsoddin Lahiji has left us still another account of the Black Light experience. This time there is a difference of tonality in the visionary dream.

Writes the sheikh: "I saw myself present in the world of light. Mountains and deserts were a rainbow of colored light, red, yellow, white, blue. I experienced an overwhelming nostalgia for them. I became as though struck by madness and was carried outside myself by the violence of the presence and of the deep emotion I experienced. Suddenly I saw that the Black Light had enveloped the entire universe. Heaven and earth, and everything in them, had all become Black Light and now I submerged myself totally in this light, losing consciousness."¹⁷

Here, the Black Light reveals the very secret of being, which can only "be" as "made to be." All being has a double face, a face of light and a face that is black. The average man sees only the face of light, the face of day without understanding it—the apparent evidence of his act of existence. His black face, seen by the mystic, is his poverty. He lacks whatever it takes to be; he is incapable of providing for himself in order to be what he has to be. This is the inessence of his essence. The totality of his being is the face of day and the face of night; the face of light is the shaping of his inessence into an essence by the absolute subject. The vision of Black Light in Lahiji has something in common with the second of the ecstatic confessions of Mir Damad which we discuss next: the "great hidden outcry of the beings," the "silent outcry" of their metaphysical anguish.

6. MIR DAMAD (d. 1041/1631)

Mir Damad is one of the most powerful spiritual figures in the Safavid renaissance in Iran, one of the principal masters of what is called the School of Ispahan, and master of thought for several generations of Shi'ite philosophers and theosophists. Molla Sadra Shirazi, his most famous student, and many others with him, prove how false it would be to speak of a paralysis in Islamic thought because of rigid, exclusive Aristotelianism. There is no doubt that the phenomenon of this philosophical renaissance is peculiar to Iran, and, again no doubt, it was specifically stimulated by the problems that the Shi'ite prophetology presented. In any event, there is here neither paralysis nor exclusive Aristotelianism. A type of *isbraqi* philosophy predominates; that is, it brought together, according to the wish of Sohrawardi, the deepened philosophical formation of a metaphysician and the spiritual experience of the mystic. Mir Damad is a difficult author. He has a solid reputation as an abstruse philosopher, but he has at the same time the vibrant soul of the emotive mystic.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 172-173.

¹⁷ Cf. Corbin, *Physiologie de l'homme de lumière*, p. 231.

¹⁸ Cf. H. Corbin, "Confessions extatiques de Mir Damad, maître de théologie à Ispahan (d. 1041/1631)," in *Mélanges Louis Massignon* (Institut Français de Damas, 1956), I, 331-378.

He has left us two ecstatic confessions. The first is particularly characteristic of Shi'ite spirituality, in the sense that the motif of the personal guide, which we have met in several guises, assumes here first and foremost the form of the Imam, which literally means the "guide." We saw that in Twelver Shi'ism, one or more of the twelve Imams could be involved. In this case, it will be specifically the first Imam who teaches the visionary how mentally to surround himself with the presence of the Fourteen All-Pure: the Prophet, Fatima the Radiant (his daughter, from whom the line of Imams takes its origin), and the twelve Imams.

This confession, which illustrates so well the outlines of Shi'ite consciousness, is dated from the month of Ramadan in 1011/1602 (Mir Damad must have been then a little more than thiriy years old). The dream took place in the mosque of the holy city of Qomm (88 miles southwest of Tehran). After his afternoon prayer, Mir Damad remained seated on his heels, facing, as always, the Qibla. Soon he was overcome by a certain drowsiness; he experienced a kind of rapture. He saw before him two figures of light; and he knew them to be the Prophet and the first Imam. Then the Imam laught him a "prayer of protection." It consists of these affirmations: the Prophet is before me; Fatima the Radiant is above me, guarding my head; the first Imam is at my right; the eleven other Imams are at my left; behind me are the five Companions.¹⁹

The mental iconography is characteristic. The four groups are placed as in a mandala. (It should be noted here that the same archetypal disposition may be found in Najmoddin Kobra, in a Jewish prayer, and in a figure illustrating the Robert Fludd edition of the *Summum Bonum*.)²⁰

The presence of Fatima is very significant: in the center and overarching the visionary's field of consciousness (she corresponds here to Sophia-Anima). The Shi'ite consciousness of this prayer is so well revealed that it came into common usage and appears in the collections of prayer (*euchologia*). All the conditions determining the "symbolism of the center" seem united to indicate to us the bearing of this ecstatic dream.

This bearing we can understand provided we consider all the levels embraced by Shi'ite imamology. The *pleroma* of the Fourteen All-Pure (*chabardeb ma'sum*) is meditated and understood not only in the ephemeral earthly apparition of the persons composing it, but rather in the reality of these persons considered as precosmic eternal entities manifesting themselves to and on all the levels of the universe. Their eternal birth takes place in the world of the *lahut* (Godhead) where they are, as primordial theophanies, the divine Names and Attributes. They are all that our knowledge and devotion can attain of divinity, avoiding both agnosticism (*ta't'il*) and anthropomorphism (*tashbih*). They are consequently the very referents of all conceivable relationship between the hidden deity, the *absconditum*, and ourselves. They are the operant operations of the divinity, the agents of cosmogony, while in their preeternal substance they assume a mode of being analogous to the *aiones* of the Valentinian gnosis, with the result that this imamology assumes in Shi'ite theosophy a role homologous to that of Christology in a theology of gnostic character. Here we can understand what was indicated above in section 1. The appearance of the Imams was the source of the *walayah*; as such, it is the principle of the continuation of an esoteric prophetology until the end of our aion. Likewise we understand why these figures dominate Shi'ite consciousness as much in its speculative life as in its visionary dreams.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 356-358; the complete text of this prayer is the account of initiation in a dream.

²⁰ Cf. Corbin, *Physiologie de l'homme de lumiere*. p. 202 n. 81, and "Confessions ecstatiqes," p. 358 n. 2.

The second ecstatic confession of Mir Damad relates to an event that did in fact occur some twelve years later (1023/1614). The circumstances differ. Mir Damad has become a teacher, his interior experience has deepened. The vision no longer takes place in a mosque, but in a solitary place, a private retreat. Even its date affords an indication that connects it specifically to the Shi'ite mental universe, and thereby even to the first of his visionary dreams. Indeed this date is actually the 14 Sha'ban in 1023. It is during the night of the 14 to the 15 Sha'ban that the anniversary of the birth, in 255/869, of the Imam of our times, the Twelfth, Hidden Imam, is celebrated by special rituals and spiritual exercises. The vision was brought on for Mir Damad by the recitation of a *dhikr* using the double divine name of al-Ghani, He who suffices unto himself, al-Moghni, He who satisfies, He who makes suffice, who gives being. Fashioned by this meditation, the vision resembles the experience of the Black Light discussed in dealing with Shamsoddin Lahiji. The image implied in the double divine name brings into sudden and intense dramatic vision the Avicennian theory of the world. That Iranian Avicennism should bring forth such spiritual experiences is one of the best answers for those who would deny Avicenna any mystic qualities. No doubt they have not read him in the same manner as Mir Damad read his predecessors and students. As for us, we have but to retain their testimony.

The text of this ecstatic confession of Mir Damad cannot be reproduced here.²¹ The language is beautiful and difficult, and rigorously precise; the richness of its visual and sonorous images is particularly striking ("the great silent clamor of beings"). The text is reminiscent of Avicenna's "Tale of the Bird," and of the narrative of Plotinus' ecstasy which inspired so many *spirituales* in Islam. "Often I awoke to myself in escaping from my body a stranger to all else, seeing in the inner depths of myself a beauty as marvelous as possible" (Enneads IV.8, i). The vocabulary of the Arabic version of Plotinus recurs in Mir Damad, but there is this difference: The Plotinus version is an ecstasy of triumphant joy, the ecstasy of Mir Damad culminates in a paroxysm of sadness, evoked by the visual and auditive experience of total anguish. Nevertheless, when he was himself again, and had awakened from his visionary dream, he retained a nostalgic desire for it because ultimately his visions strengthened one another. Together they communicate the Shi'ite ethos which could not be better characterized than by Luther's paradox, *desperado fiducialis*.²² This despair, which harbors an unshakeable confidence toward and despite everything, is that same mood we sense in masters of one school in modern Shi'ism, the Shaikhi.

7. SHAIKH AHMAD AHSA'I (d. 1241/1826) AND THE SHAIKHI SCHOOL

Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i was born to a Shi'ite Arab family in 1166/ 1753 at al-Ahsa', in Bahrein, on the eastern part of the Arabian coastal peninsula in the Persian Gulf (a region famous at one time for the tiny "socialist" Qarmatian state established there and visited by Naser-e Khos-raw in the fifth/eleventh century). Shaikh Ahmad lived in Persia for more than fifteen years. Were it not for the enthusiasm he found there, there would never have been what is now called Shaikhism (from Shaikh Ahmad, as shaikh par excellence). I can find no better way to characterize this movement, which is very much alive today (with its principal center at Kerman), except to say that at that time it was a movement of "reawakening." It was not a reformation movement in the modern sense of the

²¹ Ibid., pp. 365-371, Arab text and Trench translation.

²² Cf. Corbin, the studies cited in n. 1 above; "L'Imam cache et la renovation de l'homme en ideologie shi'ite," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXV111 (Zurich, 1960); "Pour une morphologie de la spiritualite shi'ite," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXIX (1961).

term, but a restoration of the entire Twelver Shi'ite theosophy in a flowering of all the teachings of the holy Imams. Nevertheless, as a classical example of the refusal to allow theology to be degraded to pure jurisprudence, the Shaikh's school was a rupture with what may be called official Shi'ism. It continues the great tradition of Shi'ite gnosis (*'irfan-e shi'i*).

The work accomplished by Shaikh Ahmad and his five successors down to our own time is considerable. It includes more than a thousand titles in Arabic and Persian.²³ It can be said of Shaikh Ahmad that he summarizes and epitomizes in his person the fundamental *imami* consciousness that is the source of all doctrine. In a short autobiography intended for his son, he relates ten or twelve visionary dreams that took place during his adolescence, their appearance having been prefaced by a number of premonitory dreams.

There was first the vision of a young man, holding a book, who taught the visionary an admirable *ta'wil* (a spiritual exegesis) of two koranic verses (87:2-3) condensing elevated philosophic teachings. After this the young Ahmad reacts with radical distaste to taking the study of grammar and pure philosophy as an end in itself. He begins to associate with several sheikhs, but none is able to teach him anything resembling what he had learned in the dream.

At the same time "he absented himself" more and more; he was present to his family only "physically." "I saw then so many things that it is impossible for me to relate them." Among "these things" there is a motif that returns many times: it involves climbing to the terrace of the house (as, it will be remembered, Ruzbehān did) or climbing to the summit of some high mountain. From Heaven there descended a mysterious, intangible, unreal object that he was to catch. Then one night, in a visionary state, he saw himself entering a mosque: he found himself in the presence of three people who, he was to learn, were the second Imam (Hasan ibn 'Alī), the fourth Imam ('Alī Zayn al-'Abidin), and the fifth Imam (Muhammad Baqir). A whole series of dreams of personal initiation began with this vision, and this first encounter calls to mind many of the features of Mir Damad's vision in the mosque of Qom (cf. sec. 6, above). Ahmad asked the Imam to teach him a prayer or poem, the recitation of which would thereafter suffice to provoke another apparition. A text was given, which we can read since he transcribed it in full. But afterward, even though assiduously recited, the prayer produced no vision. Finally he understood that it had been the Imam's intention to lead him to shape his interior being according to the spiritual meaning hidden in the poem. As he himself would explain later, it was this conformation of his being, this "perfect agreement," which made possible another sequence of visions. They inaugurated a lifetime of intimacy with each of the Fourteen All-Pure: the Prophet, Fatima, each of the twelve Imams, down to the Hidden Imam. "In the Heavens, in Paradise, in a suprasensible world, and in the barzakh, I saw strange and wonderful dreams, figures and colors which dazzle the intelligence."

These dreams can be very exactly described as "initiatory": which they are to the point that doctrines later developed in many writings are inseparable from the teachings thus received in dreams. These visionary experiences reached their high point when Shaikh Ahmad saw the tenth Imam ('Alī Naqī) in a dream holding a bundle of papers. These were the *ijazat* (authorizations to teach) which each of the twelve Imams bestowed on him.²⁴ The spiritual fact can only be recorded, seeking not so much what explains it as what it implies. The experiences of a Shaikh Ahmad, like those of all the great

²³ Cf. H. Corbin, "L'école shaykīe en théologie shi'ite," *Annuaire de l'École pratique des Hautes-Études, Section des sciences religieuses* (1960-1961), pp. 1-59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

visionaries, have the characteristics of a basic phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) as irreducible as the perception of sound or color. The phenomenology of religious experience ought neither to deduce it from something else, nor to reduce it to something else by illusory causal explanations. It ought to discover what form of consciousness is presupposed by the perceptions of events and worlds inaccessible to the common consciousness. On their part, the ontology and cosmology of the Shaikhs insist on a mode of existence for an intermediate world (the *mundus imaginalis*, cf. sec. 8, below) which authenticates and guarantees validity of visionary perception.

Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i's first successor was his most intimate disciple, Sayyed Kazem Reshti (d. 1259/1843).²⁵ We particularly note the fact that it was Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet and the pole of Shi'ite devotion, who in a dream revealed Shaikh Ahmad's existence to the young Kazem, his rank, and that he could be found in Yazd in southeast Iran. Sayyed Kazem was then fifteen years of age; he lived at Resht in northwest Iran. In one way or another, and against the will of his family, he succeeded in reaching Yazd and became the sheikh's inseparable companion. The body of his own work is also considerable.

The same spiritual traits appear again in another extraordinarily powerful personality, Mohammad Kerim Khan Kermani (d. 1268/1870), who was the second successor of Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i.²⁶ He belonged by birth to the imperial Qajar family. As early as his adolescence, he had embarked on a program of studies comparable to that of Pico della Mirandola. He left an enormous number of writings (260 volumes) encompassing the totality of knowledge, including such scientific preoccupations as the theory of color, making him something of an Iranian Goethe.

We can only touch here on certain characteristics of the visionary forms which marked the dreams of his adolescence as they had in previous cases. These we know from a very brief autobiography. His mother had had, since before his birth, symbolic and premonitory dreams, and we have the impression that the visionary perceptions of her son form a kind of sequel to them. The autobiography relates one dream in which the young man saw a strange machine rising to the highest Heavens; there were steps, but most of the people preferred to find a seat and sit down. One of his companions tried to reach the top without success. He knew by one of those intuitions that come in dreams that whoever reached the summit would make the apparatus work and would become a guide for the others. In fact he was successful and took control of the rudder.

If we look for the source of the spiritual courage disclosed by this visionary dream, it is to be found once again in a direct relationship with the suprasensible world of the holy Imams. The autobiography relates, among others, two dreams. The first was a presentation of the eighth Imam, 'Ali Reza, whose sanctuary at Mashhad was the center of Iranian devotion. The second was a visitation by the ninth Imam, Muhammad Javad, which assumed the aspect of a true personal initiation after which the sheikh announced that he had made a resolution he formulated as follows: "Thereafter I was careful to scrutinize hidden things; I had the mental perception, the interior vision of the holy Imams and felt myself guided by them. Thereafter I had direct recourse to them, and no one else, for knowledge. I profess nothing that is not based on them. I acquiesce [*taqlid*] to no one else. All my understanding results from my interior vision, from the doctrine of the

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 25-28.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 28-34.

Imams who guide my spiritual seeking. Nothing else.²⁷

So it is that the Shaikhi school fastened on to a philosophy wherein the enormous corpus of traditions (*ahadith* and *akbbar*) extending back to the holy Imams bore fruit and was itself extended to the whole range of knowledge. We have only started to study this unique phenomenon.

This account of the visionary dream in Islamic spirituality is incomplete because to render it complete we should have had to gather several dreams that attest to the extraordinary importance in the most intimate life of Shi'ite consciousness of the so-called Hidden or Awaited Imam. As a child five years old, he disappeared on the very day his father, the eleventh Imam, Hasan 'Askari, died (260/873). The "minor occultation" began then. In 330/941, the "major occultation" began—it still continues—when the last *na'ib* or representative of the Imam, having received from him an order not to name a successor, died with these words: "Now the matter belongs to God alone." These words well define the Shi'ite ethos.

I cannot even outline here the hagiography of the Hidden Imam, which is practically unknown outside the Shi'ite world.²⁸ But I do say this: The secret history of the Twelfth Imam, which begins with the "minor occultation," is a history of real events, but it is not a reality open to critical history. For more than ten centuries the figure of the Hidden Imam dominates all Shi'ite religious consciousness; it is indeed the history of that consciousness for the more than ten centuries that Shi'ism has lived in the company of the mysterious Twelfth Imam, lived in the secret of a passionate devotion, in the secret of an eschatological expectation that has never been trapped by imposture. The Hidden Imam resides in Hurqalya, one of the mystic cities of the *mundus imaginalis* (*'alam al-mithal*). He is to be seen only in visionary dreams; if he has been encountered it is realized only after the event. Stories abound, filling volumes.

Elsewhere²⁹ I have given a long account of a dream experienced by one of my young Iranian friends about which he very willingly told me. The case is particularly typical, as the dreamer, a man of less than thirty, had brilliantly completed studies in Europe and so had been exposed to all the conditions of a spiritual uprooting. The dream in question bears all the characteristics of an initiation dream. After having surmounted redoubtable obstacles, the dreamer becomes aware of the house of the Imam and understands that the distance that separates him from it is at the same time the measure and the meaning of his life on earth. Yet this dream, along with many another, is irrefutable testimony to the ineradicable presence at the heart of Shi'ite consciousness of the "Awaited Imam." There is no better answer to give those who would ask what all our stories mean for our times than the testimony of this young "modern" Shi'ite in modern Iran.

8. MUNDUS IMAGINALIS ('ALAM AL-MITHAL)

To bring this paper to a close, I wish simply to return to the prophetic gnoseology that makes prophetology itself the basis for the categories of a superior, suprasensible knowledge, a *hierognosis*.

²⁷ Cf. Corbin, "Pour une morphologie," p. 79.

²⁸ Cf. Corbin, "l'Imam cache."

²⁹ Cf. Corbin, "De la philosophie prophetique en islam shi'ite," pp. 104-105.

This gnoseology provides the visionary with precise criteria for avoiding going astray. Hence the remarkable coherence of the dreams we have been reading. This aptitude for inner vision (*basira*) is a charisma of Islamic spirituality which it behooves us to keep in mind.

If we wish to understand, and understand in depth, the meaning of these visions, we do not perhaps need to be visionaries ourselves, but at least we must follow the direction of this "gesture" and work toward whatever it is they are pointing to, rather than merely to concentrate on the materiality of their gesture. We must look at whatever their finger is pointing to, rather than be content with having seen the finger point.

Our *spirititules* have been remarkably conscious of this themselves. Several times, notably in speaking of the mysterious world in which the Hidden Imam resides, we have used the words '*alam al-mithal*. In order to establish the meaning or the noetic value of their visionary dreams, and of their suprasensible perceptions in general, our *spirituales* have been led to develop the ontology of a third world halfway between the world of sensible perception and the world of intelligibility.

Our authors identify this third world as the "eighth clime" (outside and beyond the "seven climes" of classical geography), or as the '*alam al-mithal*, the *mundus imaginialis*, the imaginal world. We must avoid here at all costs the word "imaginary" which to us indicates something unreal, a qualification that presupposes the total degradation of the imaginative perception.

We are not dealing here with irreality. The *mundus imaginialis* is a world of autonomous forms and images (*mo'allaqa*, "in suspense," that is, not inherent in a material substratum like the color black in a black table, but "in suspense" in the place of their appearance, in the imagination, for example, like an image "suspended" in a mirror). It is a perfectly real world preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state. The existence of this world presupposes that it is possible to leave the sensible state without leaving physical extension. It could be described as a *quarta dimensio* and related to the expression *spissitudo spirititualitas* used by Henry Moore, the Cambridge Platonist, to describe something similar. Sohrawardi (d. 587/1191) was the first in Islam to establish organically the ontology of this *mundus imaginialis* which became very important for 'Ibn Arabi, for Molla Sadra Shirazi, and for all their disciples.³⁰

Neither the physical senses nor the pure intellect are the organs apprehending this world; it is grasped by "suprasensible senses," essentially an imaginative consciousness. As we have said, we must be careful not to confuse this imaginative power with "fantasy," or imaginal reality with the imaginary. In the West, Paracelsus already remarked, the fantasy is only a mental game without basis in nature; it is "the cornerstone [*Eckstein*] of the fools." We, on the contrary, must posit that "the imagination is the incarnation of thought in image and the placing of the image in being" For this reason, imaginal knowledge apprehends its proper object with as much right and validity as the senses and the intellect do theirs.

Our writers—'Ibn Arabi, Molla Sadra Shirazi, in particular—have developed considerably the theory of an imagining power (*imaginatrice*), stating carefully the criteria that permit discrimination between true imagination and what we would call hallucination. Moreover, Molla Sadra returns frequently in his books to a thesis dear to him: active imagination is like the intellect, a purely spiritual faculty

³⁰ On the '*alam al-mithal*, cf. H. Corbin, *Terre celeste et corps de resurrection: de l'Iran mazdeen a l'Iran shi'ite* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1961), containing the translation of many texts.

whose existence is not conditioned by the physical organism.³¹

This theory of imaginative knowledge is basic. On it, in fact, rests the validity of suprasensible perceptions, visionary dreams, and therefore, of prophetic visions without which there would be no prophetic religions. Last, it is on this third world as the realm of "subtle bodies" that these writers base their philosophy or physics of resurrection.

It is clear that the analysis of visionary dreams involves a complex of themes from which they are impossible to separate. Here we have had to limit ourselves to a few indications trying to compensate for brevity by references to earlier studies.

I close with these lines of Sohrawardi: "When you learn in the treatises of the ancient sages that there exists a world with dimensions and extension other than this world of the senses and other than the pleroma of the intelligibles, a world of innumerable cities ... do not hastily cry 'lie,' because this world the pilgrims of the spirit succeed in contemplating and they find there every object of their desire."

That this affirmation by our *spirituales* of the existence of a *mundus imaginalis* is sometimes explained as "flight" from what one has agreed to term reality, is symptomatic of the metaphysical impotence of our time. For if one takes the trouble to analyze this concept of "reality," the rejection of the *mundus imaginalis* on its part appears very much like a flight into external reality. In fact, all the rationalistic explanations by causal reduction originate in a "poor man's philosophy" on which there is no need to dwell further. The ontology of the *mundus imaginalis* and the theory of the active imagination in Molla Sadra remind us that the human being has powers that our Western civilization has perhaps paralyzed or atrophied.

We have just heard Sohrawardi denounce those who refuse all noetic and ontological value to visionary dreams. This reaction is not then simply a so-called "modern" attitude. What the coherence of the discussion does impose is, however, a recognition that this negation proceeds from certain philosophical presuppositions.

From the beginning, a frank explanation of these presuppositions is in order. Very quickly, then, it comes out that on both sides irreducible positions have been taken which precede, and therefore exceed, all rational motivations. It is best to admit this honestly. For one reason or another, the causal reduction of visionary dreams to an explanation anchored in psychology, sociology, or history proceeds from agnosticism. We have spoken here of the "Islamic gnostics." Can a gnostic be really understood by an agnostic?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Dr. G. E. von Grunebaum has kindly called my attention to a study (that appeared after my text was written, which noted that dream visions as phases and tools of spiritual progress were already recorded for the early mystic, al-Hakim at-Tirmidhi (d. probably 898). An angel would appear to his wife in a dream and ask her to communicate various injunctions or certain

³¹ Ibid.; H. Corbin, "La place de Molla Sadra Shirazi (ca. 1050/1640) dans la philosophie iranienne," *Studia Islamica*, XV111 (1962), 81-113; "Mundus imaginalis' on l'Imaginaire ou l'imaginal," *Cahiers internationale de symbolisme*, 6 (1965), 1-26.

esoteric information, for instance, regarding the meaning of the ninety nine names of God, to her husband. A good many of these dreams, in which the language used by the angel appears to have been Persian, were preserved by at-Tirmidhi in his autobiographical statement known as *Budumw Sha'n*; cf. M. K. Masud, "al-Hakim al Tirmidhi's *Budumw Sha'n*," *Islamic Studies* (Karachi), IV (1965), 315-343 (where, p. 325, some literature is listed and the full text is edited on pp. 331-343).