

Henry Corbin's Teaching on Angels

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Dr. Avens has written a number of books, among which Imagination is Reality, The New Gnosis (both from Spring Publications) and Imaginal Body (U. Press of America)..

Henry Corbin's (1903-1978) angelology is derived from a variety of sources. While the greater part of his research focussed on Sufism, Pre-islamic, Islamic and Persian philosophy and Ismailian Shi'ism, he took pleasure in a thorough familiarity with Zoroastrian religion, Islamic Iran, the works of Emmanuel Swedenborg and Jacob Boehme, Hermeticism, Jewish Mysticism, Protestant mystics such as Frank, Paracelsus, Weigel and Oetinger and the Cambridge Platonists. Corbin opened intellectual perspectives in Islamic and Persian philosophy that were heretofore unknown or underestimated. The major characters in Persian Mysticism were the philosophers Avicenna (980-1077), Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) and the philosopher of Light, Suhrawardi (executed in 1191 for heresy) - all three in differing degrees examples of the integration of discursive thought and creative imagination.

Corbin's methodological approach to the subject of angels is based upon his conviction that our action of understanding lacks both completeness and finality. It is our lot that we always have to start at the beginning, in the deeper sense that what is understood is inseparable from who we are. The golden rule of spiritual hermeneutics is according to Corbin expressed in Swedenborg's saying: "All people accept heaven outside of them commensurate to the heaven inside of them."¹ In other words, heavenly realities, or what Swedenborg calls "true appearances" are always grasped commensurate to the spiritual situation of the person observing them. Gnostic truth is no primary or theoretical information, but a truth that I am myself, the truth made flesh. In the words of Corbin, gnosis is realized, or is a

¹Emmanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and its Wonders and Hell*. Std. ed. (New York, Swedenborg Foundation, 1978) Nr. 55. As is usual in Swedenborg Foundation references, one cites a section number.

"salvific knowledge with the power to effect one's inner transformation".²

Between believing and knowing there is a third imparting factor, the royal road of direct "inner vision", which corresponds cosmologically to an intermediate and imparting world that has been forgotten by official philosophy and theology: the imaginal world.³ This imaginal, not imaginary, world is the necessary intermediate between the hidden divinity, *deus absconditus*, and our sensible world. In short, it is the world of *deus revelatus*, revealed divinity.

Although this world exhibits some similarities with that of Plato's Ideas, it distinguishes itself from that in a decisive way. Plato saw the ideas as *universal* and independent. In Corbin's formulation however, what populates this inter world is completely individualized. It stands in a one to one relationship with the beings and things of the material world. The creatures of this archetypal world are neither logical universals nor concrete material beings but appearances, *special* forms that consist of "absolute matter", i.e. matter that has been detached from the limitations of the composite, dense and destructable matter of the sublunar world. Although for Corbin there is no form without matter, the kind of matter in which these forms are individualized is subtle matter and that belonging to the *mundus archetypus*.

In Iranian Gnosis the *mundus archetypus* is the world of the *animae coelestes*, heavenly souls, and is called *Malakut*. These heavenly souls are free of sensory observation, while in the human soul the imagination is kept prisoner by sensory capabilities.⁴ One could say that we are sleeping or unconscious in our present situation, while we are aware of the true nature of our sensory observations. We are prisoners of material facts and the situation in hell is similar to this slavery. Corbin's hell is true ignorance, a lack of consciousness and imaginal capability. On the other hand, the awaking from this slavery to exteriority and literalness is the entry into paradise.

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Paul Tillich made the observation that a meaningful way of interpreting what an angel is, is not to envision it as a specific being, but as the emanation of divine existence: "... angels are the spritual mirrors of the divine abyss ... existence in whom the divine ground expresses itself."⁵ The significance of angels "lessens to the degree that the distance between God and man increases..."⁶ Corbin says the same. Without angels and angelology there is the danger of a misunderstanding

²Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton U. Press, 1969) p. 172.

³Henry Corbin, "Eyes of Flesh and Eyes of Fire, Science and Gnosis". *Material for Thought*, no. 8, 1980, p. 6.

⁴Emmanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*. Std. ed. Nr. 69. New York, Swedenborg Foundation.

⁵Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*. Carl E. Braaten, ed. Simon and Schuster, 1967, p.95.

⁶Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I*. U. of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 229; cf. p. 26.

of divine transcendence as and "entirely other" concept which leads to an infinite qualitative difference between God and man, through which life in this world is left to secularization and agnosticism, or "an asceticism with all of its furies and self-accusatory denials."⁷

Corbin's contribution to angelology is based mainly on his research of the "Persian Platonists" (Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra) and his interpretation of Avicenna's visionary recitals. I am limiting myself here to the Gnosis of the Platonists whose main achievement was the understanding of the Platonic Ideas through the Zoroastrian Angels. The most important figure in this respect is Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi with his masterpiece *Oriental Theosophy*.

In unision with the basic principles of Zoroastrianism saw Suhrawardi the Light as the one sole reality, the origin of the phenomenal world and all observations of the latter. Being, or existence, is a totally bright substance of pure luminescence. As with Corbin the identification of Light and being gives rise to the representation of Light as the universal matter - *materia prima universalis*. Every level of being from the most subtle to the condition of utter density partakes of this universal material. Between spiritual and bodily or material beings there exists only a "gradual difference". There is no ontological duality: only the sole Light that is differentiated into many grades of density and subtlety. Spiritual reality is nothing abstract but pure and utter concreteness. Entirely similar convictions are found among the Cambridge Platonists (*spissitudo spiritualis*), Boehme and Swedenborg.⁸

This one Light - *Xvarnah* in Zoroastrian nomenclature - is the pre-existing and sanctifying Energy whose actual function is to individualize each and every earthly being so that a protective aura irradiates from it. This Light of Glory cannot be separated from its individual manifestation without the latter being endangered or severely hurt. *Xvarnah* is the goal, the destination, the eternal archetype, the angel of each individual thing and at the same time its guide towards its destination. It in fact is the potential angelicity of every being and every thing.

To that effect there are innumerable heavenly beings named *Fravarti*, guardian angels or heavenly archetypes, of every single being in the sensible world who are the latent individuation of each and everything in the imaginal world. Each earthly being has his *Fravarti*, a heavenly archetype or angel. Corbin calls this double structure dualitude, which has to be distinguished from any sort of dualism.

While the soul of a being and its double are one, they are separated upon entry into a body. The one, the heavenly twin or *pneuma* remains in heaven, while the other enters a body. The lot of the fallen soul is to search for its other half, the original heavenly twin, who is situated in the Orient of Light (*Xvarnah*) or the Orient of the German Romanticists. The "Orient" is *arabia felix* (Yemen), lost paradise and the goal of the spiritual pilgrimage. This is the "Self" of the gnostic

⁷Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 55.

⁸Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques III* (Gallimard, 1972), p. 243 and 238.

saying "know thyself".

Expressed philosophically, the soul is a from the organic body completely independent substance. The body serves only as a temporary dwelling place. The soul's "true, real body", its angel, is a heavenly body of "pure immaterial matter" or a "raiment of Light" that it will dress itself in again at the end. Our present lot is a passing "not-yet". We are called upon to experience an angelomorphosis, a change from "potential angelicity" to "actual angelicity".

The clear consequence of this is that every action and every event in this world must be lead back to the person of the angel. The being of all things must be lead back to *each of their persons*. Everything happens as if the question "What is it?" is replaced by "Who is it?" That a things is determined solely by naming a person. Elsewhere Corbin formulates this basic thought as follows: "...every creature consists of an earthly component and a heavenly counterpart, its archetype or angel. That is why it is possible to discover in every reality a person, that is to say, to understand this reality *as* and *in* its heavenly personality".⁹

The angel is the inner spiritual guide, the true Self, the "invisible Master", reserved for everyone who is called to a direct and immediate contact with the divine world¹⁰, i.e. to a direct, personal and immediate relationship with the godhead. The question that has to be posed at this point is whether we are dealing here with an archetype or a real person. Corbin's answer is: neither – or rather, more than that. To be a disciple of the angel means phenomenologically speaking, that her presence is experienced at the same time as an archetype and as a person, that is to say, as an "person-archetype". Only such a union of archetype and identity fits the entire concrete case. In other words, what makes it possible to be at once her own person and an archetype is her ability "to appear in as many instances as she has disciples."¹¹

The Angel does not lead all of its disciples in a uniform way to the same goal. Each disciple is led to his own "eternal individuality" according to "his own heaven" or his specific form of self-manifestation. The underlying idea here is that God is not limited to a specific form of self-manifestation. In his essence as *deus absconditus* God transcends all forms. However, as *deus revelatus* God is inseparable from forms, from a specific place in time and space. It follows therefore that the god who desires adoration on the part of an individual, must not be adored by another individual whose God can take on another form of appearance.

On the other hand Corbin expressly emphasizes that the denial of the existence of angels and the necessity of their realm has serious consequences. Someone without

⁹Corbin, "Cyclical Time in Mazdaism and Ismailism." In *Man and Time; Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (Princeton U. Press, 1957), p. 167 and 137.

¹⁰Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 55.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 60.



Figure 1: The togetherness (*unus-ambo*) of the individual and the angel that belongs to her is represented in "The Androgenous One" from Salomon Trismosin, *Splendor Solis*, Plate 9, 16th c.

her Angel is "delivered over to an absolute undifferentiated power from whom everyone is equidistant, lost in a religious or social collectivism". When this happens each separate person tends to interchange *his* Lord "... with the divine being as such and want to impose him upon everyone ... after the loss of a connection to a specific Lord-archetype (i.e. the loss of the knowledge of oneself) each I is abandoned to a hypertrophy which can easily lead to spiritual "imperialism".¹²

Zoroastro-Suhrawardian angelology as religious form cannot be reduced to an abstract and monolithic type of monotheism. According to Corbin angelology goes hand in hand with what he calls kathenotheism or "mystical kathenotheism".¹³ The soul's highest mode of existence "does not culminate in its isolation, nor in a uniformly specifiable divine presence, but in a rigorous and irreplaceable individuation (*kathena, singulatum*) of precisely this divine presence".¹⁴ The divine being appears in the heart of the faithful in accordance to the receptivity or capacity of this heart. God can exist completely in each individuation without losing any of his universality. The fundamental property of kathenotheism is "the presence of the totality in each of its parts..."¹⁵ The Lord is not the quitesential divinity, but God in one of his innumerable names, the God made manifest in the soul of his faithful. After Sufi teaching, each concrete being has its origin in a special divine name, that leaves its presence in it and who is its specific Lord. This is the Lord that the Sufi reaches through self-knowledge or fails to achieve through ignorance.

Otherwise expressed: in a gnostic context it is indispensable to become aware of the fact that another person is attached to our entirety beyond the ego-personality, a transcendent counterpart, our "eternal individuality" (*Fravarti*), the a priori of our being. Ibn 'Arabi, one of the greatest masters of Sufism, sees in the angels the latent archetypes of being, the latent individuation of each being in the world of mystery.¹⁶ However, this invisible and spiritual presence can only be experienced in a *con-spiracy* or *sympathy* – a reciprocal and simultaneous attraction between the empirical person and the alter ego. The sympathy that we are dealing with here (*unio sympathetica*) is compared by the Neoplatonist Proklos to the sunflower, the plant that with its motion follows the movement of the sun.¹⁷ Sympathy is itself the proof of what is at stake here. Islamic theosophers are unanimous in their opinion that God cannot be proven except by God. In other words, divine things (*res divinae*) are only assimilated by divine revelation or inspiration.

Elsewhere Corbin expresses the connection between self-knowledge and the

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 223; cf. also p. 121 and p. 302.

¹⁴Corbin, "Cyclical Time in Mazdaism and Ismailianism", p. 139.

¹⁵Corbin, "Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis," in *Man and Time; Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (Princeton U. Press, 1957), p. 155.

¹⁶Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 210.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 105-107.



Figure 2: The Angel as person and archetype is distinguished by its capability to appear in as many forms as it has disciples – William Blake, The Jacobs Ladder, Drawing, 19th c., British Museum, London

knowledge of God as follows: "*Your* God is the mysterious figure that appears as *your* "horizon", your *hadd* (witness), who is your boundary and also your guide to initiation. *Your* angel is the angel of this theophany of yours, who is the measure of your being".¹⁸ This further signifies that the relationship between the soul and its Lord is not of a collective or identical type between one and the same object that occurs to all without distinction, but a singular and unique individual bi-unity (1x1), i.e. a marital relationship: "that can only be manifested, represented and expressed by a figure who *attests* to the real presence of one alone to one alone and for one alone, in a dialog *unus-ambo*".¹⁹ In gnostic terminology this means that the relationship of bi-unity is based upon the idea that the one seeking is itself a particle of Light sought. In the words of another theosopher is the mystery of mystical kateontheism as follows: "Each time *a light rises up from you, a light comes down towards you*, and each time a flame rises up from you, a corresponding flame comes down towards you".²⁰

In amplifying upon this theme, Corbin suggests that the gnostic representation of bi-unity (implying a homology between each individual and the all) forms the basis for a strict ethic, which makes us entirely responsible for ourselves. If it is so that "the form of your love (for any of your brothers) ... is equivalent to what you are," then it follows that "you must first treat yourself right; everything else follows from that." In other words "you are responsible for, i.e. *you answer to the vision* that is given you by God; the form of your vision and your worship are like the form of your love equivalent to what you are. Precisely this priority of *being* over behavior depicts the basis for the reciprocity ... ".²¹

Everything depends on the quality of the Light in us. This naturally signifies a complete overthrow of the social perspective that has seized modern religious consciousness. The question of our gnostics is not: "what have you done for your *brothers*", but "what have you done *with* and *for yourself*." In particular where the canonical text (Mat.25:35-46) reads: "What you have done for the least of my brothers, that you have done for me", the Gnostic version has: "The Lord shall gather the just and the unjust ... The just shall ask him: When were you hungry and thirsty, when were you in prison ... And the Lord shall say to them: You speak correctly, but everything that you have done *for your selves* (or 'for your self', 'for your own soul') that you have done *for me* (or 'for my self')." ²²

Corbin sees presented therein the priority of the subjective situation. "Finally therefore, no one can have peace with his brother, ... who is not first at peace with himself. ... your love is only worth what *you* are."²³ Elsewhere we read the follow-

¹⁸Corbin, *Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis*, p. 148.

¹⁹Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, Boulder & London, Shambala, 1978, p. 84.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 73.

²¹Corbin, *Divine Epiphany and Spiritual Birth in Ismailian Gnosis*, p. 152.

²²Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismailian Gnosis*, London, Kegan Paul International, 1983, p. 162-63.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 164.

ing: "Your contemplation is worth whatever your being is worth; your God is the God you deserve; He bears witness to your being of Light or to your darkness."²⁴ In angelological terms this means that your Angel (the heavenly Witness) contemplates you with the same *angelological* look as you contemplate her. This is the case of a "mystical reciprocity: the contemplated one is the contemplating one and vice versa."²⁵ The basis for this is that "the witness can only respond to you in the correspondence of a co-response."²⁶ In a word, "all depends upon whether our *ability to comprehend*, our *hermeneutics*, has or has not sufficient dimensions at its disposal."²⁷

What is happening here is the identification of the Zoroastrian angels with the Platonic ideas. In Corbin's opinion it is this identification that is the main "spiritual fact" of Suhrawardi's Oriental Theosophy. This is not the result of a superficial syncretism but of an immediate personal vision, from which followed an angelological interpretation of the Platonic world of ideas.²⁸

In Suhrawardi's theosophy every species of being (e.g. of the genus of plants) has a guardian angel, who adopts this species and is called "the Lord of the species". The difficulty with which one is faced here is the understanding of the ontological participation (*methexis*) that takes place between the Lord of the species and individual exemplifications. The Lord of the species is nothing like a collective being, not the universal of the species in which the individuals participate. For Suhrawardi the Angel is neither a logical general concept, nor a personified abstraction (allegory) or a concrete individual that exists in the sensible world, but "is a spiritual form and as such there is nothing like it among the essences of an individual. For example one could speak of the "socraticity" of Socrates that is neither a logical universal that others can participate in, nor the individual Socrates from the sensible world. *Socraticity* is not one of the logical universals; it is the spiritual form of an individual being, a principle of individuation that is not matter, as in Aristotelian Thomism, but the form."²⁹

What Corbin is driving at here, and what is always stressed in all of his works, is that we should not limit the concept of the *concrete* to the sensible world, but that there are also *spiritual concrete beings* that possess their own unity of species and their own specific "concrete" determinations. These specific "unities" are what Suhrawardi means by "angels" and the only way to understand them as such is to posit the imaginal world as a *sui generis* ontological reality which is the theater (*mazhar*) of their [the angels] appearances. The tragedy of our culture according to Corbin consists in the inability to perceive essences in any other way than logical universals. One can write a theoretic philosophical treatise wherein logical general

²⁴Corbin, *The Man of Light*, p. 92.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p.106.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁸Corbin, *En Islam Iranien II*, p. 114.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 234.

concepts are treated or on the other hand one can write history (or a novel) wherein one deals with concrete instances. However, one writes a mystical epic or visionary recital (e.g. like Swedenborg or Avicenna) only by means of metaphysical concepts, i.e. essences, that are manifested on the level of the *mundus imaginalis*.³⁰

An "angel" is a "metaphysical concept", or better yet, a "spiritual individuality", existing in and for itself, an intelligence that belongs to the world of Lights and as such cannot be made immanent (incarnated) in the world of matter. It is equally improper to think of the angel as a model that exists for the sake of those below it. The angel is a person-archetype and a model in that sense, but that does not mean that the angel *needs* the species, the individuals. The angel does not exist because of the species that is governed by her, but in reverse: the species exists because of its Angel. It is the Angel that governs the finality of the governed species, while the Angel *in persona* is the completion of the latter. The species is the theurgy, the icon, or the image of the Angel. It is significant that Suhrawardi calls the angels "the mothers of the species", under whose care falls equally the entire species and also each of its members. The Angel appears each time to each member of the species concerned, while it individuates itself as the Perfect Nature of each individual member.

Thus the Angel of Humanity (the *intellectus agens* of Avicennan cosmology and the Holy Spirit of the Angel Gabriel of the theologians) individuates her relationship with each human being as the *Perfect Nature* of this person, since "the infinite price attached to spiritual individuality makes it inconceivable that salvation should consist in an absorption into a totality, even a mystical one."³¹ It might be of interest that the homology of the Perfect Nature in the Upanishads is called *sakshin*, "Man in Man", who likewise is one's witness, who watches one without however being drawn into the deeds and inner situation of a person or being stained by that. "Two friends with beautiful wings tightly embracing each other while holding the same tree, one eating the sweet fruit, the other not, but only watching".³²

The purpose of the *Perfect Nature* is to individuate the relationship of each gnostic with *his own* angel, since our human structure is one of *dualitude*, an *unus-ambo*. This shows an identity of being, without confusion of persons. From another perspective, what takes place between a person and her Perfect Nature is a *communicatio idiomatum*, an exchange of attributes. A similar idea is found in Buddhism, where the Buddha individuates his relationship with everyone and each who follows the Middle Path. The Japanese scholar Keiji Nishitani speaks of a reciprocal interpenetration of "mutual dependence of the part and the whole". This is best exemplified by a hall of mirrors, in which "each mirror (each individual) reflects (or "contains") the Buddha image in the middle as well as each other mirror in the

³⁰Ibid., p. 236.

³¹Corbin, *The Man of Light*, p. 16.

³²"Svetasvatara Upanishad", in *The Principal Upanishads*. Radhakrishnan ed., London, George Allen & Unwin, 1953, p. 733.

hall".³³

We can summarize the principal themes of the Oriental Theosophy as follows. First there is the dictum to know oneself. Analysis of this precept leads to a basic distinction between "I", the knowing subject, and the Self, who is the known or recognized object. The former is the I of our normal experience. The latter is the real, the authentic and permanent Self, the eternal archetype, the "personal angel", the "perfect nature" (Suhrawardi), "witness in heaven" (Sufism), "Man of Light" (Gospel of Thomas), personal guide.

Secondly we have the saying "He who knows himself (his soul), knows his Lord." Self-recognition leads to a reunion between the apparent "I" and the transcendental "I". To know oneself means to become (again) what one is (potentially) and has never ceased being. Reunion is a "return" to the heavenly "I", whose reality is that of a *mirror* that faces me, in whom I recognize myself, my real face. To break this mirror is to disturb the reunion. In Suhrawardi's recitals the relationship between the "I" and the Self is pictured by the two wings of the angel Gabriel, the angel-archetype of humanity. The right wing is of clear absolute light that forms the *Nous*, the Perfect Nature. The left wing is turned towards nothingness, has the dark purple hue of a shadow that signifies the earthly soul and the world of deception and illusion.³⁴

To know oneself then means to know the giver of forms, *Dator Formarum*, and to do so is to practice the basic maxim of Islamic spirituals: He who knows himself, knows his Lord.³⁵

Finally we have the theme of the *spiritual ascent*. Gnosis is a salvific knowledge in the sense that redemption is effected through the unveiling of our *origin*: there exists a reciprocal connection, in fact an identity, between the recognition of *who we are* and the recognition of the place, the "from", where we come from, our place of origin. This is the idea of history as an each moment opening and closing again circle. Our existence is only an episode "between two eternities", or better yet, we are passing from one eternity to another.³⁶ The outcome of these maxims is that the real being of our soul is not one of solitude, but of *dualitude*. A verse from the Koran says: "Of each thing we have created pairs." Furthermore dualitude implies a pre-existence of the soul. The soul of the gnostic has a "history": she is not begotten through her coming into this sensible world, but has "descended" from the *mundus imaginalis*. In gnostic terminology is the "descent" the result of a split, a fission of the original wholeness. The permanent structure or completeness of the human being is duality, which as we have seen Corbin distinguishes from dualism. Duality (dualitude) is a unity of being without comingling of persons and the symbolic form par excellence of this kind of unity is $1 \times 1 = 1$: unity multiplied by unity. What this

³³Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, Jan Van Bragt, trans., Berkeley, U. of California Press, 1982, p. xi-xii.

³⁴Corbin, *En Islam Iranien II*, p. 191.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 211.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 265.

symbol signifies is not pseudo-mystical monism, nor abstract monotheism which isolates personal divinity from the believer. Dualitude does not mean two unique beings who are *added* so that they are *two*, but two unique beings who are multiplied by each other and again yield uniqueness.³⁷

When all is said and done is the reply of the esotericist to the exoteric theologian the same as that of the Spanish writer Eugenio d'Ors to St. Theresa: "No, it isn't true at all that only God suffices."³⁸

Translated from English into German by W. Giegerich.

Translated from German into English by the Oaxacan agent.

³⁷Ibid., p. 214.

³⁸Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, William R. Trask, trans., Irving, Texas, Spring Publications Inc., 1980, p. 122.