



Some Notes on "Theosophia Perennis": Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Henry Corbin
Coomaraswamy by Roger Lipsey

Review by: Mircea Eliade

History of Religions, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Nov., 1979), pp. 167-176

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062272>

Accessed: 10/02/2013 07:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History of Religions*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

REVIEW ARTICLE

SOME NOTES ON *Theosophia perennis*: ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY AND HENRY CORBIN

Coomaraswamy. Vol. 1: *Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism*. Vol. 2: *Selected Papers: Metaphysics*. Vol. 3: *His Life and Work*. Edited by ROGER LIPSEY. Bollingen Series, no. 89. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977. Pp. xxxviii + 544; xxvi + 435; xvi + 304, illustrations.

Dr. Roger Lipsey is to be congratulated for this three-volume *summa*, sumptuously published by the Princeton University Press. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy was a prolific writer, and in the last fifteen years of his life a rather difficult one. He liked to contribute to less known or obscure periodicals in India, Portugal, France, Rumania, and Czechoslovakia. Moreover, although well known as a historian of Indian art and as an orientalist, Coomaraswamy scattered his numberless articles in journals devoted to medieval studies (*Speculum*), the history of science (*Isis*), modern languages (*Papers of Modern Languages Association*), literary criticism (*Criterion*), history of religions (*Review of Religion*; *Zalmoxis: Revue des études religieuses*), hermetism (*Études traditionnelles*), or pathological psychology (*Psychiatry*). One is tempted to think that Coomaraswamy purposely multiplied the obstacles in the path of his most faithful readers. He eventually decided to collect his papers, but he published only one volume (*Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*) and that one rather late—in 1946, one year before his death. Most of his latest and most significant essays were almost impossible to consult outside the large American university

Review Article

libraries; some of them were literally inaccessible.¹ Consequently, for more than a quarter of a century Coomaraswamy was absent from the confrontation and debates of the “living culture.”²

Although Coomaraswamy built up his reputation with his first books—*Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (1908), *Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913), and especially *Rajput Painting* (1916)—and became increasingly known and respected among the orientalists and the historians of culture after 1917 (when he was appointed Keeper of the Department of Indian Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts), he enjoyed only once being an “auteur à succès,” and it was for a wrong reason. In 1922 Madeleine Rolland brought out the French translation of *The Dance of Shiva* with a long and enthusiastic preface by Romain Rolland.³ The great prestige of the author of *Jean Christophe* made this collection of essays a best seller, and *La Danse de Shiva* was warmly discussed in all European literary weeklies from Lisbon and Rome to Athens, Bucharest, and Warsaw. By that time (1922–25), however, most of these essays scarcely represented Coomaraswamy’s new ideas and interests.

Lipsev’s well-documented and brilliantly written biography, the first to appear in any language, presents in detail the different social and cultural milieux in which Ananda Coomaraswamy evolved, from his first official position as a geologist in Ceylon (1902–5) until his settling in Newton, near Boston (1932–47). It is a fascinating story, which aids in understanding the development and characteristic traits of Coomaraswamy’s *oeuvre*.⁴ For our purpose, it suffices to say that one can distinguish three important phases in Coomaraswamy’s intellectual biography. The first one is marked by his research into the history of Indian art and handicrafts and his interpretation of their functions and meanings.⁵ Of course, Coomaraswamy’s interest in Indian art lasted until the end of his life, but the hermeneutical method was progressively deepened. In what we may call the second stage one notices a growing familiarity with some problems of the history of religions, especially the symbolism of chthonian fertility represented by the *Magna Mater*,

¹ To quote only one example: his stimulating and very learned monograph, “Svayamātrṇṇā: Janua Coeli” (*Zalmoxis* 2 [1939; actually 1940]: 3–51), printed in Bucharest during my absence and disfigured by a great number of misprints, was available in only fifteen offprints sent by me from Paris in 1945. The entire edition of *Zalmoxis*, vol. 2, was burned up in Bucharest. The original, correct text of *Svayamātrṇṇā* appeared for the first time in *Coomaraswamy*, 2:465–520 (unless otherwise stated, references are to this work).

² The sad story of the editorial preparation of *Selected Papers* is discretely told by Roger Lipsey (3: v ff.).

³ See my article, “Ananda Coomaraswamy,” *Revista fundațiilor regale* 4 (1937): 183–89, reprinted in *Insula lui Euthananius* (Bucharest, 1943), pp. 265–75.

⁴ See also the stimulating review by one of Coomaraswamy’s disciples: Schuyler Camman, “Remembering Again,” *Parabola* 3, no. 2 (May 1978): 84–91.

⁵ One must keep in mind Coomaraswamy’s relations with the Indian Nationalist movements and the influences of William Morris and of the Tagore Circle in Calcutta (see vol. 3, chaps. 5, 7, 9, 17).

History of Religions

and the aquatic cosmogonies, rituals, and mythologies.⁶ Finally, about 1932, the third and the most creative period began, in which he concentrated exclusively on the task of illustrating the different expressions of the *philosophia perennis*, the primordial and universal tradition present in every authentic nonacculturated civilization.⁷

Now, it is well known that there has been a long and important tradition of the *philosophia perennis* which enjoyed a certain prestige, especially from the Italian Renaissance to Leibniz.⁸ Further, beginning with *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (Paris, 1921), René Guénon wrote all his books from the perspective of the perennial tradition, and in 1932 he became the director of *Études traditionnelles*, to which Coomaraswamy contributed several articles. We will not discuss "perennial philosophy" here, nor the problem of "tradition." However, contrary to René Guénon or other contemporary "esotericists," Coomaraswamy developed his exegesis without surrendering the tools and methods of philology, archaeology, art history, ethnology, folklore, and history of religions. Like Henry Corbin, he approached spiritual documents—myths, symbols, divine figures, rituals, and theological systems—both as a scholar and as a philosopher. One can agree or disagree with his methodological presuppositions and hermeneutical investigation, as one can agree or disagree with other contemporary orientations: sociological, psychological, phenomenological, structuralist, or historicist. But, in the final analysis, Coomaraswamy as well as Henry Corbin and other authors (e.g., Gilbert Durand, S. H. Nasr, Jean Servier, Elemire Zolla, Antoine Faivre, etc.) belong to the same international community of scholars dedicated to the study and interpretation of all aspects of religious realities.

The thousand-odd pages of the first two volumes of this work (*Selected Papers*, 1 and 2) illustrate Coomaraswamy's intentions and method.⁹ Lipsey remarks that Coomaraswamy "devoted no single essay

⁶ See his *Yakṣas*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1928, 1931); "Archaic Indian Terracottas," *Jahrbuch für prähistorische und ethnographische Kunst (IPEK)* (1928), pp. 64–76; "The Tree of Jesse and Indian Parallels of Sources," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 11 (1929), etc.

⁷ Most of the writings collected in the two volumes of *Selected Papers* belong to this period.

⁸ See, inter alia, Charles B. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 505–32, esp. 507–11 (Marsilio Ficino), and 511–13 (Pico della Mirandola). "The program of Cusanus, Ficino and Pico, with its roots in Plutarch, Neoplatonism, the Fathers and other ancient writers on religion, comes to full realization in Steuco" (*ibid.*, p. 515). Agostino Steuco published his *De perenni philosophia* in 1540 (see also D. P. Walker, "Orpheus the Theologian," in *The Ancient Theology* [London, 1972], pp. 22–41).

⁹ Some of the essays are extremely important. To quote only a few: "A Figure of Speech or a Figure of Thought?" (1:13–42); "The Philosophy of Mediaeval and Oriental Art" (1:43–70); "The Symbolism of the Dome" (1:415–64); "Symplegades" (1:521–44); "Recollection, Indian and Platonic" (2:49–65); "Ākimcañña: Self-Naughting" (2:88–106); "Vedic Exemplarism" (2:177–97).

Review Article

to the idea of Tradition.”¹⁰ However, in the last chapter of volume 3 (“Tradition: An Introduction to the Later Writings”) Lipsey brings together a number of quotations from different essays and summarizes Coomaraswamy’s understanding of “tradition.” One should come back to this chapter after reading a few of the papers listed in footnote 9. It is significant that Coomaraswamy “never fabricated anything like an abstract of all traditional expressions of a given idea, which he believed could lead only to ‘a mechanical and lifeless monstrosity . . . a sort of religious Esperanto.’ Rather he progressed by a comparative method, collating the formulae of one tradition with another, which kept in view the likelihood that all religions have a common source.”¹¹ Coomaraswamy was never concerned “to prove any doctrine whatever dialectically, but only to exhibit its consistency and therewith intelligibility. The consistency of the *Philosophia Perennis* is indeed good ground for ‘faith’ (i.e., confidence, as distinguished from mere belief): but as this ‘Philosophy’ is neither a ‘system’ nor a ‘philosophy,’ it cannot be argued for or against.”¹²

One can easily multiply such quotations, illustrating the decisive importance of the “first principles” in Coomaraswamy’s understanding and interpretation of religious realities. “There is a science of theology, of which Jewish, Christian, Hindu and Muslim theology are only special applications. It is just as if we were to discuss mathematics with an Oriental scholar; we should not have in mind the mathematics of white or colored man as such, but only mathematics itself. In the same way, it is not about your God or his God that you must learn to talk with the Oriental theologian, but about God himself.”¹³ One can decipher in such formulations the growing influence of Guénon’s rigid rationalism. The comparison of theological constructions with mathematical thought is, to say the least, rather simplistic. The historian of religions is, on the contrary, fascinated by the multiplicity and variety of the ideas about God’s unique mode of being, elaborated in the course of the millennia, for every theological structure represents a new spiritual creation, a fresh insight and a more adequate grasp of the ultimate reality.

As we are not discussing the modern interpretations of tradition, we will not insist on the ambivalence of this term. It is well known that tradition was somehow incorrectly identified with reactionary political ideologies, antimodernism, depreciation of “history,” exaltation of the past, pessimism, etc. One can recognize some of these traits in Coomaraswamy’s life and writings. However, one is hesitant to consider him a “pessimist.” In any case, pessimism no longer characterizes just adepts of the tradition. The last decades have been marked by rapidly growing

¹⁰ 3:273.

¹¹ 3:277.

¹² “*Ākimcañña*: Self-Naughting,” 2:90n.

¹³ “A Lecture on Comparative Religion” (1944, unpublished), quoted in 3:276.

History of Religions

pessimism and nihilism. One can almost say that, with the exception of Marxism and Teilhard's theology, the "posthistoric era" is unfolding under the sign of pessimism.

There are many impediments in the process of understanding and assimilating Coomaraswamy's writings. If one can accept his excessive accumulation of quotations and textual and bibliographical references, one is somehow bewildered by their place in the texture of his writings. One has only to remember notes 22, 24, and 41—respectively of six, five, and eight pages—in his 1942 *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government*. The fifteen pages of *Svayamātr̥ṇā* are followed by thirty-six pages of notes. It is to be hoped that one day someone will prepare a "didactic" edition of at least his most important papers. It is also to be hoped that an edition of the complete works of Coomaraswamy will appear in the near future.

There is no doubt that Ananda Coomaraswamy was one of the most learned and creative scholars of the century. I need not recall his decisive role in the understanding and valorization of the Indian art. He was, moreover, the first to substantiate the continuity between the pre-Aryan India, Vedism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. The number and excellence of the extra-Indian parallels which he discusses in his exegeses are always enriching and illuminating. For the historian of religions, as well as the orientalist and the art historian, Coomaraswamy's hermeneutical analysis of traditional images, symbols, and myths is perhaps even more stimulating than his implicit or explicit reformulation of perennial philosophy. A close reading of any important article is always rewarding. Usually buried under a mass of quotations and textual references there lay many profound, subtle, and illuminating interpretations; if they were discovered and assimilated at the time of their publication, some of the old and irritating misunderstandings that periodically haunt certain historians of religions would have been duly resolved.

* * *

Henry Corbin (1903–78) won his scientific prestige by a series of critical editions of great but neglected, and sometimes totally ignored, Islamic philosophers and theosophs, the most important of which were his editions of Sohrawardī, Abu Ya'qûl Sejestani, and Rûzbehân Baqlī Shīrâzi.¹⁴ From the very beginning, however, Corbin was attracted to philosophy,¹⁵ and his first book was a translation of Heidegger, the first to appear (in 1939) in French: *Qu'est-ce que la Métaphysique?* After 1946, when he was appointed director of the Département d'Iranologie

¹⁴ See the bibliography published in *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin* (Teheran, 1977), nos. 20, 23, 28, 61; see our obituary, "Henry Corbin," *History of Religions* 18, no. 4 (May 1979): 293–95.

¹⁵ See "La Théologie dialectique et l'histoire," *Recherches philosophiques* 3 (1934): 250–84; "Transcendental et existentiel," *Travaux du 9e Congrès International de Philosophie* (Paris, 1937), 8:24–31.

Review Article

de l'Institut Franco-Iranien in Teheran, a position which he held until 1970, Henry Corbin increasingly enlarged the areas of his researches and writings. While continuing the scholarly editions, translations, and interpretations of his favorite Iranian authors, Corbin inaugurated in 1949 his annual contributions at the *Eranos* meetings in Ascona, where he lectured until 1977. In the first years he discussed such problems as initiation and hermetism in Iran, the alchemy of Jabir ibn Hayyan, the Sabian ritual and Ismaeli exegesis, cyclical time in Mazdeism and Ismaelism, and Celestial Earth and Spiritual body in Iranian traditions.¹⁶

In 1954 his first important book appeared,¹⁷ and in the same year he was nominated Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes (Section des Sciences Religieuses). The *Eranos* lectures were eventually developed and articulated in a series of volumes.¹⁸ Among his other works special mention should be made of *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, vol. 1, *Des Origines jusqu'à la mort d'Averroes*, published in Paris in 1964 in collaboration with S. H. Nasr and Osman Yahya, and the abundantly annotated translation of fifteen texts of Sohrawardi: *L'Archange empourpré*, published in Paris in 1976.

As Ananda Coomaraswamy reinterpreted and revalorized the Indian arts, Corbin revealed to the scholarly world a little-known and insufficiently understood Islamic philosophical tradition: Ismaelism and the esoteric trends in ancient and medieval Iran. Like Coomaraswamy as well, Corbin progressively enlarged the area of his investigations: gnosis, hermetism, Jewish theology and mysticism, prophetology, Christian origins, medieval initiatory traditions, Swedenborg, etc. But the immense labor of deciphering, editing, translating, and interpreting a considerable number of manuscripts did not allow him the leisure to study other religious traditions. Unlike Coomaraswamy, Corbin did not include in his "recherche spirituelle comparée" documents from India, Tibet, China, Japan, "primitive religions," and folklore.

¹⁶ See *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 17 (1950): 121–87 and 18:44–114; 19 (1951): 181–246; 20 (1952): 149–217; 22 (1954): 97–194. For some later *Eranos* lectures, see n. 19 below.

¹⁷ Henry Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*, 2 vols. (Paris-Teheran: Avicenna, 1954), translated by Willard R. Trask as *The Visionary Recital*, Bollingen Series, no. 66 (New York, 1960).

¹⁸ *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn-Arabi* (Paris, 1958), translated by Ralph Mannheim as *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn-Arabi*, Bollingen Series, no. 91 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969); *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection: De l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shi'ite* (Paris, 1961), translated by Nancy Pearson as *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, Bollingen Series, no. 91, pt. 2 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977); and finally, in 1971 and 1973, the four volumes of *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard). See the competent but somehow inhibited review of Earle Waugh ("En Islam iranien," *History of Religions* 14 [May 1975]: 322–44). In order to balance Waugh's critical approach, one should also read the comments on Corbin's interpretation of such variously oriented Islamic scholars as G. Vajda, Alessandro Bausani, or Anne-Marie Schimmel.

History of Religions

It is not our intention to present or evaluate the vast and fascinating *oeuvre* of Henry Corbin. We will limit our remarks to his understanding and reinterpretation of the *theosophia perennis*. From a certain moment on, about 1950, Corbin insisted more and more on Islamic hermetic esoterism (*sh'ia* and Sufism),¹⁹ emphasizing the continuity between the old Iranian traditions of Ismaelism and Sufism, and bringing out analogies with some Western medieval myths, symbols, initiatory patterns, and secret organizations (what Corbin called the “*chevalerie spirituelle*”).²⁰ It is significant that such an interest in hermeticism and initiatory traditions was “synchronic” with the discovery and publication of secret gnostic and Essenian texts and with a growing interest among scholars of different disciplines in initiation rituals and symbols.²¹

Like Coomaraswamy, Corbin continually criticized the reductionistic fallacy of many orientalists, sociologists, and historians of culture. But unlike Coomaraswamy, he thought that scholars and philosophers who do not share in this fallacy ought to abandon their eagerly accepted subaltern positions in contemporary academia and rebel against the academic and cultural dictatorship of “scientism,” “historicism,” and “sociologism.” Accordingly, they should reassemble and constitute, not a new type of “Theosophical Society,” but a new type of university, whose members—faculty, students, and auditors—ought to have a scholarly preparation comparable with that which, until recently, characterized the European universities. For this reason, and with the collaboration of some thirty university professors, most of them from France and Germany, Corbin founded, in 1974, the Centre International de Recherche Spirituelle Comparée. The annual conferences were held in Cambraï (Abbaye de Vaucelles) and, lately, Paris. Following the model of *Eranos*, the lectures were published annually under the title *Cahiers de l'Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*. So far four volumes have appeared: 1, *Sciences traditionnelles et Sciences Profanes* (1974); 2,

¹⁹ See, inter alia, the following articles in *Eranos-Jahrbuch*: “Epiphanie divine et Naissance spirituelle dans la Gnose ismaélienne,” 23 (1955): 141–249; “Sympathie et théopathie chez les ‘Fidèles d’Amour’ en Islam,” 24 (1956): 199–301; “L’Intériorisation du sens en herméneutique soufie iranienne,” 26 (1958): 57–187; “Quiétude et inquiétude de l’âme dans le soufisme de Rûzbehân Baqlî de Shîrâz,” 27 (1959): 51–194; “L’Imâm caché et la Rénovation de l’Homme en Théologie Shî’ite,” 28 (1960): 47–108; “Le Combat spirituel du Shî’isme,” 30 (1962): 69–126.

²⁰ See, inter alia, “De la Gnose antique à la Gnose ismaélienne,” *Atti del XII Congresso Volta. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* (Roma, 1961); “Herméneutique spirituelle comparée. I. Swedenborg, II. Gnose ismaélienne,” *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 33 (1965): 71–176; “De l’Épopée héroïque à l’Épopée mystique,” *ibid.*, 35 (1967): 177–240; “L’Initiation ismaélienne ou l’esotérisme et le Verbe,” *ibid.*, 39 (1970): 41–140; “Juvénilité et chevalerie en Islam iranien,” *ibid.*, 40 (1971): 311–53; “Une liturgie shî’ite du Graal,” *Mélanges H. C. Puech* (Paris, 1974), pp. 81–99.

²¹ See M. Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 47 ff. We should also point out that in the last decade a number of chairs in French universities have been devoted to the study of esoteric traditions.

Review Article

Jérusalem la Cité Spirituelle (1975); 3, *La Foi prophétique et le Sacré* (1976); and 4, *Les Pèlerins de l'Orient et les Vagabonds de l'Occident* (1977).²²

The goal of the university is the restoration and the revivification of the study of traditional sciences in the West.

Le caractère spécifique de cette Association est marqué dans sa désignation même: elle fait du concept de "chevalerie spirituelle" la norme de ses recherches et de ses activités, et elle fait de Jérusalem le "symbole" mystique des rencontres et des regroupements dont elle espère être le lieu. Les autocritiques de l'Occident aussi bien que les accusations portées contre lui, ne tiennent en général jamais compte, parce qu'elles les ignorent, des traditions spirituelles de notre monde occidental. La cause première en est qu'à la différence des grands systèmes théologiques entretenus par les Ordres religieux, ou à la différence des systèmes philosophiques professés dans les Universités, le trésor des sciences spirituelles, que l'on peut grouper sous le terme plus ou moins heureux et adéquat d' "ésotérisme," s'est trouvé livré à l'abandon. On pourrait tout aussi bien parler d'un étouffement par l'esprit canonique et juridique. Le résultat, c'est que ce trésor est resté enseveli dans les bibliothèques, objet parfois de la curiosité d'érudits bien intentionnés, mais le plus souvent la proie d'improvisateurs sans discernement. D'où le foisonnement de pseudo-ésotérismes. Il importe donc de constituer enfin un foyer de ces hautes sciences dont l'abandon et l'oubli sont à la fois la cause et le symptôme de la crise de notre civilisation. A cette fin nous ne pouvons séparer histoire de la philosophie, histoire des sciences, histoire de la spiritualité. Mais il n'est possible de ne pas les séparer que par une "renaissance" présupposant un plan de permanence transhistorique. Tel est le sens que nous donnons à une restauration des sciences et des études traditionnelles en Occident. Cette restauration pré-suppose la conjonction nécessaire des exigences de la vie spirituelle et des rigueurs de l'investigation scientifique, telle que des universitaires sont habitués à la conduire.²³

In the inaugural lecture of the first meeting, "Science traditionnelle et renaissance spirituelle,"²⁴ Henry Corbin makes some precise statements regarding the scope of this International Center of Comparative Spiritual Researches. First, investigations are limited to the small group of the three "Religions of the Book." Such a delimitation is certainly comprehensible; nevertheless, one regrets the absence of Indian and other Asiatic religions. Second, Corbin states that the "spiritual meaning," which is the secret, esoteric meaning of the Sacred Word, is common to the three religions. "Confronter 'Histoire et Tradition,' c'est en premier lieu affronter le phénomène de la Parole devenue 'Livre Saint.'"²⁵ In the third place, he summarizes his views on history and spiritual traditions:

²² These volumes, respectively of 142, 180, 218, and 220 pages are published, by Berg International, Editeurs, Paris. The fifth volume is in press.

²³ This text was certainly written by Corbin, but the program is shared by all the contributors of the *Cahiers*, among whom we may cite Ernst Benz, Gilbert Durand, Antoine Faivre, Bernard Gorceix, Jean Servier, Richard Stauffer, and Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron.

²⁴ *Cahiers de l'Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*, 1:25-51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

History of Religions

“L’Homme, Adam, l’*Anthrôpos*, a été créé quelque part ailleurs, disons dans le Plérôme, et est ‘descendu’ en ce monde-ci. Avec lui, la Parole, le Verbe, est descendu en ce monde. C’est avec cette descente que commence l’Histoire. L’Homme et la Parole ont été faits captifs dans ou sous une enveloppe terrestre. Sinon, ils n’auraient pas été manifestés en ce monde-ci et l’Histoire n’aurait jamais commencé. Ils seraient restés à l’état d’étincelles de lumière non perceptibles. Cependant, sous l’enveloppe terrestre, grâce à laquelle nous pouvons voir et entendre, grâce à laquelle nous pouvons donner une forme à quelque chose comme l’Histoire, vit cette étincelle de lumière qui appartient à un autre monde. A tel point qu’une histoire n’est vraiment comprise que si l’homme perçoit la trace de cette étincelle et la reconnaît [. . .]. Lorsqu’il l’a reconnue, lorsqu’il s’est ressouvenu (*anamnêsis*) de cette étincelle, l’homme expérimente l’état de ‘celui qui sait,’ la *gnôsis* du gnostique, au sens rigoureux du mot *gnose* [. . .]. On dit alors que l’étincelle de lumière, *exilée* sous l’enveloppe terrestre, est désormais *sauvée*. Et tel est le sens profond du mot *gnose*: une connaissance salvatrice parce qu’elle n’est pas une connaissance théorique, mais qu’elle opère une transmutation de l’homme intérieur. Elle est la naissance de l’homme vrai, le *Verus homo*.”²⁶

One recognizes in these lines the central gnostic myth which played an important role in Corbin’s late writings along with his docetism as well as his reevaluation of *Christos Angelos* and his superbly articulated angeology. Very likely he speaks exclusively for himself; there is no evidence that all his colleagues shared the same theology.

Afterward, Corbin developed his understanding of “science traditionnelle,” acknowledging a debt to his two Iranian masters. In brief, there are three sources of knowledge: (1) the intellectual activity (*noûs*, *intellectus*); (2) the corpus of traditions (*hadîth*), transmitted from the time of Mohammad and the Imâms and which constitutes the substance of positive theology; (3) finally, the inner revelation, the visionary perception, the divination by “active imagination,” whose content is the supersensible, the hidden, the esoteric. All these sources of knowledge are valid, and they articulate the three disciplines of philosophy, theology, and theosophy.²⁷ In sum, for Corbin, *theosophia perennis* is primarily the visionary perception of the intermediary world “que l’on désigne en arabe comme ‘*alâm al-mithâl*, qu’il m’a fallu traduire par *mundus imaginâlis*, le monde *imaginal*, pour bien le différencier de l’*imaginâire*.”²⁸

In the “Spiritual Jerusalem” the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition live together, and Jerusalem is consequently “le lieu spirituel, esotérique, de l’oecuménisme abrahamique.”²⁹ Moreover, argues Corbin, certain Johannite traditions substitute a relation of friendship for the relation of servitude between man and God. “Désormais le rapport entre l’homme et son Dieu est celui d’un service chevaleresque. A la limite, ce rapport produit la métamorphose de la chevalerie guerrière

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Review Article

en chevalerie mystique.”³⁰ Corbin concludes: “Je viens d’essayer de dégager le type de savant qui, dans la mesure où il correspond à l’idée de l’héritier légitime [i.e., of the esoteric abrahamic tradition], peut assumer la vocation de chevalier spirituel. Parce que celui-ci est à la fois homme de savoir et homme de désir, parce que pour lui la vie et la recherche intellectuelles ne sauraient jamais être isolées de la vie et de la recherche spirituelle, il offre un puissant contraste avec le type d’homme chez qui l’intellectualité se développe dans l’ignorance de toute spiritualité.”³¹

There is no space to discuss here the contributions of other authors, and of Corbin himself, in the four volumes of the *Cahiers de l’Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*. What interests the historian of religions the most is the resurgence of a certain esoteric tradition among a number of European scholars and thinkers who represent many illustrious universities. One is reminded of analogous events in the scholarly and academic milieux of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³²

MIRCEA ELIADE

University of Chicago

³⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

³¹ Ibid., p. 49.

³² See M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 226 ff.