

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

*THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY*¹

by

Henry Corbin

A Lecture to the Faculty of Letters, University of Teheran, December 1974

Translated from the French by Peter Russell

This edition first
printed and published by
Golgonooza Press
3 Cambridge Drive
Ipswich IP2 9EP
© Golgonooza Press 1981

I Comparative Philosophy and Phenomenology

The term 'comparative philosophy' is appealed to often enough nowadays. In spite of this, if one bears in mind the scope of numerous comparative disciplines—comparative grammar, comparative literature, comparative aesthetics, etc.—one has to admit that comparative philosophy is still only in its infancy. This late start is hardly to be wondered at. There is the difficulty of constituting a method which can safeguard itself against mere arbitrariness, for not all things are comparable with one another. Thus we face the difficult art of defining the field of comparative research in satisfactory terms. At the very heart of this difficult problem is the fact that there are today all too few philosophers capable of simultaneously grasping several complete cultural unities and sufficiently prepared linguistically to be able to cope with the texts at first hand.

As far as I know, the concept of comparative philosophy was first explicitly formulated back in the early 'twenties of this century in a doctoral dissertation presented under that title at the Sorbonne by Paul Masson-Oursel, who was subsequently to occupy the chair of Indian religion of the *Section des Sciences religieuses* in our *École des Hautes Études*. Masson-Oursel applied himself to the task of defining as strictly as possible the aim and purport of a comparative philosophy. He saw it as consisting essentially in disentangling not so much likenesses in terms which are more or less deceptive, but rather analogies of relationship (of the type $a/b = c/d$).

But his analysis remained perhaps too subservient to the unique perspective of the history of philosophy as history, in subordination to the chronological succession and the hypo-, tetical laws of historical causality. Certainly one should not exclude this type of research: there is the right time and place for it. But it is not primarily or in essence the object of a comparative philosophy, one of the first investigations of which must be to enquire into the form, here and there, of time lived, and thus of the advent of the concept of something like a history, and so of a history of philosophy.

Consequently, what a comparative philosophy must strive for in the different sectors of a defined

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

field of comparison, is above all that which is called in German *Wesensschau*, the intuitive perception of an essence. This term belongs to the vocabulary of phenomenology, but let us say to Husserl's phenomenology of strict observance rather than to the existential phenomenology (above all let us not say existentialist) of Heidegger. And it seems to me that it is precisely the appearance of phenomenology that has seen to it that an effort like that of Masson-Oursel must find itself from now onwards to have been overtaken. The tasks postulated by the intuitive perception of an essence are quite different from those set for itself by a historical approach anxious to determine the genetic causes, currents, influences, etc, which make themselves felt at such and such a date, in order to deduce from them certain *processus*, in the belief that it is possible to compare them among themselves. We must therefore very briefly once more recall the sense of the word phenomenology.

I have already had occasion to define this term elsewhere (Note 2). There is also a sense of it independent of every particular phenomenological school. Let us not attempt to translate the word into Persian by a mere dictionary equivalent. Let us look rather at the course of action which phenomenological enquiry accomplishes. It is connected essentially with the motto of Greek science: *sozēin to. phainomena*, saving the appearances. What does this mean? The phenomenon is that which shows itself, that which is apparent and which in its appearance shows forth something which can reveal itself therein only by remaining concealed beneath the appearance. Something shows itself in the phenomenon and can show itself there only by remaining hidden. In the philosophical and religious sciences the phenomenon presents itself in those technical terms in which the element '-phany' from the Greek, figures: *epiphany, theophany, hierophany*, etc. The phenomenon, the Greek phenomenon, is the *zâbir*, the apparent, the external, the exoteric. What shows itself within this *zâbir*, while itself remaining concealed, is the *bâtin*, the interior, the esoteric. Phenomenology consists in 'saving the appearance', saving the phenomenon, while disengaging or unveiling the hidden which shows itself beneath this appearance. The *Logos* or principle of the phenomenon, phenomenology, is thus to tell the hidden, the invisible present beneath the visible. It is to make the phenomenon show itself forth such as it shows itself to the subject to whom it reveals itself. It is thus an altogether different course from that of the history of philosophy or historical criticism.

Is not then phenomenological research what our old mystical treatises design as *kashf al-mahjub*, the unveiling or revealing of that which is hidden? Is it not also what is designed by the term *ta'wîl*, so fundamental in the spiritual hermeneutic of the Quran? *Ta'wîl* is the process of tracing something to its origin, to its archetype (Persian: *chizi-ra be-asl-e Khwod rasanidan*). In the course of taking it back to its origin, it is made to pass through level after level of being, and it is in this manner that the structure of an essence is released (which does not in any sense mean structuralism). Structure in this sense means the *tartib al-mazâbir*, the system of the forms of manifestation of a given essence.

This approximately is what 'phenomenology' means and this is what we have to do in order to put to good effect the task of a comparative philosophy, understood as quite distinct from that of the history of philosophy. Let us also say that phenomenology is able rather to preserve us from the perils of history. The awareness of these perils has become acute on the part of certain Western philosophers in our time. In order to understand this, and at the same time in order to help us conceive the task of our comparative philosophy, let us turn back to the distinguished philosopher with whom rests the priority in the use of the word phenomenology. I am of course thinking of Hegel and his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. It is the fate of the Western philosopher of our time to be unable to avoid referring, one way or another, to Hegel. We also shall do so, certainly not in order to accept the incumbency of the Hegelian programme upon us, but rather in order to rid ourselves of it. For only then shall we know clearly why we have to deal with different forms of the post-

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Hegelian historical dialectic and what it is that we have to oppose against historicism, which is a form without hope, in order to 'save the appearances' without in any way having recourse to any dialectic whatever.

We shall have to face up squarely to the problem of why what one calls historicism is the result of the decomposition or of the explosion of the Hegelian system. We shall have to ask ourselves what is the place of history? Where is it enacted? Just what is it that the historicity of man consists of and what does it not consist of? Then the way will be open for us to attempt to extract from the philosophy that has been pursued in Iran three exemplary themes with a view to comparative research. That will permit us to finish up by distantly envisaging not only the meaning of the Occidental enterprise but also that of the adventure of the Occidentalisation of the world. Two aspects of the same phenomenon, but aspects which we cannot afford to let ourselves confuse with one another. This double enterprise will teach us to understand how if there are any 'Orientals' left in the world today, that is in the sense in which Sohrawardi understood that word, they do not belong exclusively to either the geographical East or West of our world.

II. How do we extricate ourselves from historicism?

The 'phenomenology of the Spirit' as Hegel conceived it is without any doubt a unique monument in Western philosophy. I speak of it here in order to make a statement which is in no way a personal one and which comes down to this: it is not positive science, as one might have believed, that has exploded the Hegelian system, the very summit of which was the phenomenology of the Spirit; it is History that has done so. What precisely do we mean by this?

Political jargon transplanted into philosophy has in the first generation caused people to talk of a Hegelian right and a Hegelian left. The Hegelian right was represented by those theologians who were known as 'speculative' in the technical sense of that word (derived from the Latin *speculum*, a mirror) and who read Hegel in the same way as they read the great mystical theosophists like Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, for whom Hegel himself had a deep admiration. Unfortunately it is not this manner of reading Hegel which has prevailed, and the Hegelianism which it represented has been clipped away to the profit of a totally different and unilateral interpretation, whose virulence has made itself felt down through the 19th century into our own time. There has been from the start an ambiguity weighing upon the whole system. We shall have to go more deeply into its origins in the light of a comparative philosophy which has new perspectives at its disposal, perspectives still unknown or at least ignored in the time of Hegel. The fact remains that it is this original ambiguity which has with justice permitted History to explode the Hegelian system.

What in the end, in effect, is the situation of 'phenomenology'? The Absolute Spirit has found its own feet. The times are fulfilled. History has been accomplished. Its *eschaton*, its final term, has come to pass. What is called *eschatology* in the language of theology in order to designate the events of the end, has already caught up with us. Certainly, if a mystical theosophist reads these things and understands them as an event accomplishing itself in the *Malakut*—the world of the Subtle Earth, the World of the Soul—and not in the world of the empirical earth or of historical objectivity, he will in no way be surprised or blocked in his perceptions. Unfortunately, in the Hegelian context it's very much a matter of events passing in this world, and of an eschatology fulfilled in these events (the figure of Napoleon, the Prussian monarchy). History ought to have come to a stop.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Unfortunately, History has gone on, but it could continue only because it had already overtaken an eschatology which up to then had oriented it in giving it its direction. Deprived of this eschatology, since henceforth it has it behind it instead of having it before it, History can only be disoriented, seeking desperately for a direction it can no longer find. Continuing on past its eschatology, History, in losing its direction, has become mad (I am also echoing a phrase of Chesterton's declaring that in our time the world is full of Christian ideas gone mad). We recognise all too vividly the drama of the laicising or secularisation of a theological system which was founded on the eschatological perspective, on essential and continual expectation. To cut off this expectation is to deliver eschatology up to the perils of history. There is now only a pseudo-eschatology, which makes a pseudo-mythology of the 'sense of history' weigh down our consciousness. For how can we discover a sense of history, a direction, in the absence of any landmark beyond history, any point at which history immobilises itself or rather demobilises itself? This means: without a meta-history, without a transhistoric dimension.

It is important for us to have our eyes on this drama, for eschatology, the eschatological expectation, is rooted in the depths of the consciousness of all us *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book), and it is this which makes it possible not to succumb to the perils of history. If we are not on our guard against this, if we entertain a certain complacency towards what is in fact the negation of ourselves, we shall find ourselves threatened with being engulfed. Certainly, the mystery of this cosmic dramaturgy, deprived of its sense because its *eschaton*, its ultimate perspective is no longer envisaged, would invite us to trace it back to its theological sources, of which all our ideological and socio-political systems in the West in the 19th century are only laicised variations. Where does the notion of an Absolute Spirit of which humanity is the seat and the organ come from in the works of a philosopher like Hegel?

I have indicated elsewhere, such as it has seemed to me, the contrast with this figure of the Holy Spirit whom our traditional philosophers identify with their Active Intelligence and who is the Angel of Humanity, at once the Angel of Understanding (*connaissance*) and the Angel of Revelation. The acts of understanding, the bringing forth of the cognitive forms of the active power by this Holy Spirit Angel, also have as their seat this humanity whose Angel he is. But this Holy Spirit is not the Absolute Spirit in Hegel's sense, whose idea can all too easily give humanity a sense of intoxication from his apotheosis, not to say vertigo from his catastrophes. From time to time I have caught a glimpse at least, in a fugitive light, of what a phenomenology of the spirit might be, if it were rethought and reconstructed as a function of this Holy Spirit, who according to the Islamic gnosis is the simultaneous inspiration of Prophets and Philosophers alike. I shall not insist upon this for the moment. It is one of the tasks of a comparative philosophy to come, which one cannot attempt to formulate without 'fear and trembling'.

It is better at this stage to apply ourselves to the essential theme of this study: how can our comparative philosophy face up to its tasks by freeing itself from the perils of history by a phenomenological method which no longer leaves itself open to the catastrophe of Hegelianism? There is perhaps a link between the disappearance on the one hand of eschatology, involving a fall into a history without end or limit, and archaeology, 'protology' even, let us call it, that is to say the search for, nay the passion for all that is ancient, original or first, (the *archeon*, the *proton*, as the pole of the *eschaton*, the final). The eschatological perspective, that of an *apocatastasis* (as in Zoroastrianism), that is to say a final restoration and reintegration of all things in their original purity after the fulfillment of the drama of this world—this perspective was sufficient guarantee against all

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

the menaces of death. Once this guarantee has vanished, everything happens as though a battle had been engaged against death, not just to weep over the vestiges of encampments that have disappeared, but in order to save the extinct civilisations from death and oblivion. What magnificent works and what backbreaking struggles have not been undertaken by the West over the past century throughout the world in order to speed what we might call this redemption of vanished civilisations! The West can truly be proud of its undertaking; it is a labour without precedent. But at the very heart of these triumphs we experience the same distress. Can the rediscovery of the ages of vanished humanity compensate us for the loss of our sense of the eschatological? Can it open the gates on to a future that flows out beyond this world, when it is we ourselves who have closed these gates against ourselves?

Archaeologists and prehistorians spare no pains in arranging the vestiges that they have brought to light once more, in chronological schemata the precision of which often leaves wide margins of doubt or disagreement. But when we have succeeded in this chronological description, just what shall we really have gained? Will the *archeon* of archaeology permit us to rediscover the *eschaton* of eschatology? Who would dare boast that much? Certainly not a philosophy of history, since this can be perfectly agnostic and content itself with the institution of causal principles, be they of whatever kind, but whose efficacy is infinitely vulnerable. In fact it is extremely rare that this kind of explanation holds up for more than a single generation. It is remarkable how the great encyclopaedic collections of historical synthesis have to be rethought and made all over again just about every thirty years.

And amongst all the principles of explanation which people make do with at little enough profit to themselves, there is this dogma on a pseudo-causality, as though every ideology were nothing but a superstructure raised on a socio-economic infrastructure, a dogma arbitrarily transformed into a principle of explanation which itself remains unexplained, since it is no less admissible that everything happens in exactly the opposite sense: does not man organise this world, his economic and political office in this world, as a function of the sense he gives to his own presence in the world, to his coming into and his going out of this world, in short, according to his vision of another world, without which one seeks in vain for a direction in this one? In this case, it is sheer illusion to transform socio-economic evolution into an explanatory principle when it itself is to be explained in as far as it is under the jurisdiction of a superior process. Everything will depend in fact on the vigorous flight or the decadence of metaphysic. An agnostic humanity cannot organise the world by giving itself the same goals as does a humanity whose effort goes into projecting an arc the far side of which penetrates beyond this world of ours, a humanity which escapes the perils of history gone mad from losing direction.

But now, if as phenomenologists and philosophers we rise up against this conception which can no longer envisage things except according to their chronological genesis and which calls itself historicism, what are we to say?

1 Certainly it's not a matter of giving up historical studies! A humanity which stopped studying more and more deeply its history would be a humanity suffering from amnesia; it would be just like a person who had lost his memory. Even today perhaps there is danger in delay; if not, how is it possible that certain declarations or decisions which involve directly or indirectly the fate of all humanity very often betray an unbelievable ignorance of history? And when the young and even the not so young declare that they do not want to know anything about the past they ignore the fact that among men of science, geologists and mineralogists on the contrary know extremely well just how

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

far back in the past the object of their scientific search lies. After all, where are the sources of that energy there is so much talk about in our time, if not in the most distant past of our Earth? Where is the future of a river? Is it at its mouth where it begins to lose itself in the ocean, or is it rather at its source? May our human sciences not forget this!

No, it's not in any way with this kind of simplistic view that the protestation of the philosophers against what one calls historicism is related. What they have in mind is this:

2 They level their sights precisely on this conception which manifested itself with the disorientation of historic conscientiousness itself and which claims to restrict the meaning and range of a philosophic system to the age which saw it appear, as if this age alone was the explanation of it. Always the same mania. The state of society is held to be the primary datum, when in fact it merely results from a perception of the world which precedes every empirical state of affairs. The perspective of religious studies has been completely falsified by it. People say of a philosopher that he was 'very much of his time' but this explanation simply ignores the fact that a philosopher is from the very first himself his own time; for if he is truly a philosopher, he rises above what is by convention abusively known as his time, for in fact this time is not in the least his, since it is the anonymous time of the whole world.

Here we run up against the great failing of so-called modern thought, which is relentlessly set upon closing up all the outlets which could lead out beyond this world. This is what is known as agnosticism. It has utilised for its purposes sociology, historicism, psychoanalysis and even linguistics. Instead of saving the phenomena it has well and truly dispelled them, refusing them any transcendent meaning, in order to enact upon false security the impossibility from now on of formulating a valid metaphysics. But why should we bend before this decree? Should it be on the idle pretext of espousing our age? In this case, if we are able to see things after the manner of Sohrawardi, our Oriental Shaikh, (*Shaykh al-Israq*), we shall hasten to pronounce the divorce.

For our Oriental Shaikh there were, for instance, the observations of the astronomers; they continued to be valid even when receiving increasing precision, and all those who were not astronomers themselves had confidence in them. And there were the observations of the philosophers and spirituals who had penetrated into the *Malakut*, that is to say into the invisible subtle world, the world of the Soul. Their observations merited the same confidence as that of the astronomers, and those who themselves had not penetrated into the *Malakut* had only to be guided by them. Of what value in effect were the criticisms directed against those who themselves had seen, eye-witnesses in fact, by people who had never seen anything and never would? The position was a bold one, I know. But I believe that the situation of our time is such that the philosopher, conscious of his responsibility, must make this Sohrawardian intrepidity his own.

What I have just referred to as *Wesensschau* we can, with Sohrawardi, call vision of things in the *Malakut*. The date at which a philosopher formulated his vision is a landmark and nothing more. What makes for the truth of the 'oriental theosophy' of Sohrawardi is not the fact that it was formulated in 582/1187. For it is not in this world that the vision of these things occurs, but in the *Malakut*; not in the time of this world but in the time of the *Malakut*. Not to accept this vision at its face value, to refuse or to subvert its content, is quite simply to destroy the phenomenon. This perhaps is just what rationalist historical criticism does. Certainly it is not the purpose of phenomenology.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

3 Arising out of this fundamental criticism which we are leveling at the historicist reduction of metaphysical perceptions, there follows another which is only one aspect of the preceding one. It rises up against the claim to restrict the notion of event to the events of this world, perceptibly by empirical means, verifiable by everybody, registered in the archives. No, there are other events which in all truth have full right to the status of event, but which are not subject to the norms of empirical events. These are 'events in Heaven, in the *Malakut*, as in the Prologue and Finale of the second part of Faust. The great weakness of this age is to be no longer able to conceive the reality of events of this type. This is why it shuts itself up in the false dilemma of 'myth or history?'. Anything that it cannot establish undeniably as historical in the empirical sense of the word, it calls myth, which is as much as to say unreal. And it falls into that mocking snare, so strong in our days: so-called 'demythologisation'—because it no longer has any presentiment of an order of events which are neither myth nor history.

Let us go at it by the shortest way. The dominant conception of our days is to represent man as being in history. This is the conception of history as external, exoteric, which succumbs to the mirage of a historical causality which it introduces there itself. Against this view a basic contrary conception is counterposed, a conception without which that of an exterior history, of 'historical phenomena', is deprived of its very foundation. This opposite view considers that it is history that is *in man*. It is only with man that something like history begins, and this is why man essentially brings with him something which is always anterior to history, something which never ceases to accompany him and which will be his recourse against exterior history. It is then a matter of interior history, esoteric in the etymological sense of the word, subtle history whose events do not take place in the exterior world of objects, but in the subtle world of lived states, events in the *Malakut*, in the world of the Soul, in the 'Heaven' or the 'Hell' which man carries within himself.

This history which he carries within himself, this Heaven and this Hell within him, objectivise themselves in the web of exterior facts which result on each occasion of the intermingling of human wills. They objectify themselves equally in a history whose events in reality still have for their theatre the *Malakut*, even if actions and exploits fit into a scenario which is apparently of this world. But in fact these events are only perceptible and recognisable by an organ of perception other than that of empirical, physical or historical knowledge. These are the events of heroic epic (of the *Avesta* and of the *Shah-Nameh*, for example, or of our own Grail Cycle). Once again, it is the events of secret, interior history, which inspire the genius of parables, the truest of all stories. More broadly speaking, these are the events which make up sacred history, hierohistory, and if we wish to avoid all confusion with empirical history, let us say simply the events of the hierologies.

In order to perceive these events one has to belong oneself one way or another to this sacred history such as it comes to pass in the *Malakut*, that is to say, in the interior man. The proof is that those who do not belong to it vehemently deny the reality *sui generis* of these events when in fact they are by no means totally indifferent in their regard. We all know the Quaranic episode of the question posed to the whole of humanity present in the form of the primordial Man: *A-lasto bi-rabbi-kom? Am I not your Lord?* Certainly this is not history in the current sense of the word, for the episode occurs before the time of this world. But it is not myth either, in the ordinary sense of the word. I could multiply examples taken from the Bible, the Kabbala, the Quran, the *hadith*. These events are of a totally different order from those of the campaigns of Julius Ceasar or the reign of Napoleon, which can be recorded in the manuals of history. To give their due to these events, to do justice to them, means recognizing the reality proper to them in an intermediary world which was the special object of the investigations of our Iranian philosophers: the '*alam al-mithal*', the *mundus imaginalis*, that

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

imaginal world which is not imaginary at all, but the *barzakb*, (Note 3) the space between, the intermediary between the sensible and the intelligible.

Now you can see it: whether it's a matter of establishing the phenomena of exterior history as grounded in the interior history of man, or those of the intermediary world which are the visionary manifestation of this interior world of man, to understand the sense, to save the reality, demands the same procedure: *kashf al-mahjub*, to detach, to unveil that which reveals itself while remaining hidden in the *phainomenon*. I said just now that this is what phenomenology is, and that it is also precisely this that the *ta'wil* (Note 4) does in the works of our mystical theosophists. It's not a matter of any dialectical construction: It's a matter of leading the observer to a point where he allows himself to see what it is that lies hidden. This essentially is what hermeneutic is. It is worth noting that among the three great families of the *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book), this proceeding has theological origins.

4 We are now in a better position to conceive the task of a comparative philosophy, to see how it is not concerned with the chronological schemata of the history of philosophy, not with the purpose of constructing a philosophy of history. I will give an example which will touch us in Iran with a familiar note, since I shall refer once again to Sohrawardi. If our *Shaiikh al-Isbraq* had believed, as he would have been informed in our time, that a philosophy is no more than a superstructure which simply reflects the state of a society in a given moment, a superstructure which is immediately outmoded by the succeeding one, he would never have been the resurrector in Iran of the Philosophy of Light professed by the Sages of ancient Persia. His resolute decision was sufficient for the chronological hiatus to be abolished. From his time on, the *Khosrovani-yun* of ancient Iran have been the precursors of the *Isbraqiyyun*, the 'Platonists of Persia'. For the historian of materialist positivism this is perhaps a view of the spirit. For the phenomenologist it is in its own right a validly established spiritual fact, with all the consequences that must follow from it.

This viewpoint once grasped, I shall now put forward three examples, three themes which from the very first will show us the role which the work of the Iranian philosophers can assume among the tasks of comparative philosophy. I have skirted two other comparative themes in the observations made earlier: on the one hand, a metaphysic of the Spirit based on the identification of the *intellectus agens* of the philosophers and the Holy Spirit of Revelation; on the other hand a metaphysic of the Imagination, taking up the phenomenology of the *barzakb*, the world of the Imaginal. I have already dealt with these themes in my books. That is why I would prefer to fix your attention on three themes of comparative research which for me are still at a programmatic stage. Do not therefore expect precise conclusions but rather the assurance of further inquests along these lines in the future.

III Three model comparative themes

The task of comparison here is firmly based since the themes that offer themselves to it have a common root in the mystical theosophy professed by the Sages of the three great communities of the Abrahamic tradition. The Iranian participation at this point adds to it this note of its own which we owe to Sohrawardi, and which results from the incorporation of the Zoroastrian prophetic tradition of ancient Iran into the prophetic tradition of the Bible and the Quran. Any comparative

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

philosophy which intends to proceed along phenomenological lines must act with great discrimination. Comparison is not concerned uniquely with resemblances but to also take careful note of differences. It may well be that these resemblances and differences take on still more meaning by their several relationship to something else they have in common. We therefore require a common and quite definitely assured point of departure. I think this is the case for the three themes which I am now going to offer you, and which are concerned with: (1) the Platonic Ideas; (2) the doctrine of the intensifications of being; (3) the periodisation of sacred history, of hierohistory.

1 The Platonic Ideas (*mothol aflatuniya*) or the archetypes of light (*mothol nunya*) are the dominant theme of the philosophy of the *Isbraqiyyun*, our 'Platonists of Persia'. Let us reread a few lines of Plato which amongst many others may revive our memories of certain essential traits of his philosophy. The Ideas make up a collection of entities "which have an unmovable form, which are neither born nor perish, which do not admit in themselves any foreign element, which do not ever transform themselves into anything else, which are not perceptible either to the sight or to any other sense, and which give themselves to the intellect alone" (*Timaeus* 52A). It was the personal innovation of Sohrawardi to interpret the Idea-archetypes conceived by Plato, in terms of Zoroastrian angelology. The Ideas become the Angels or Lords of the elements or kinds existing in this world. At the same time, there is the whole cosmology of Zoroastrianism incorporated into neo-Platonism.

More still. Above the world of the Idea-archetypes the *Shaikh al-Isbraq* conceived a world of primordial entities of light, the 'world of the Mothers', which may perhaps be compared structurally with the world of the *Sefirot* in the Hebrew Kabbala. It seems to me now that the progress of Sohrawardian studies once again makes relevant to us today a suggestion put out many years ago by James Darmesteter, that learned man who remains the signal honour of French Iranology at the end of the last century and the beginning of this. In commenting on his own translation of the Avesta, the Holy Book of the Zoroastrians, Darmesteter compared the concept of the Zoroastrian Archangels (the Amahraspands, the Immortal Holy Ones) and the concept of the Divine Powers (the *Dunameis*) in Philo of Alexandria, whose influence on Western religious thought is amply recognised. Since there have hardly been any philosophers up to now among the ranks of the Iranologists, Darmesteter's suggestion never bore any fruit, but I have the feeling that Sohrawardi would have applauded it with enthusiasm. A broad trail lies open before us here for comparative study.

To add to this, you will find in volume II of the *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens*, a monumental work which we owe to the labours of my friend and colleague Professor Sayyed Jalaloddin Ashtiyani, the French part of which I am responsible for, a long chapter dedicated to one of our philosophes who up to now has remained quite unknown: Ibn Aghajani. He was a student of Molla Sadra of Shiraz in the XVIIth century. He has left us a monumental commentary on the 'Book of the Burning Coals' (*Qubasat*) of Mir Damad, the great philosopher and master of the school of Isfahan in the Safavid period. I shall not go over the story of the appearance, disappearance and subsequent rediscovery of the autograph manuscript again at the moment. The whole episode is one more example of this kind of detective story which is far from infrequent in the surprising annals of scientific research (Note 6). Mir Damad, the master of Ibn Aghajani, was certainly not an *Isbraqi* in the strict sense. His position in regard to the Platonic Ideas fluctuated in the course of his career. The fact remains that in his great book he designated them by a strange term which I had come across elsewhere without being able to elucidate its exact meaning, but which Ibn Aghajani's work, once it had come to light again, at last gives us the key to.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Mir Damad asks his reader: 'Has there come to you that which is attributed to the Imam of Wisdom (*Imam al-hikmat*), the divine Plato and his master Socrates?' The question posed refers to the doctrine of the Platonic Ideas but Mir Damad calls them by the odd name of 'apostolic natures', literally, natures sent out, (*taba'i morsala*), or even 'substances sent out' (*jawahir morsala*). Thanks to Ibn Aghajani we can no longer have any doubts that this term refers to the Platonic Ideas. What is so striking is the qualification of 'apostolic, sent out' (*morsal*), given in this way to the Platonic Ideas, the archetypes of light. For this term *morsal* is one which is characteristic of the vocabulary of prophetology. The *nabi morsal* is a prophet sent to a people, a city, a community; it must be distinguished from the *nabi rasul* who is an apostle charged with the revelation of a new book. Now one of the problems considered as among the most difficult in Platonic philosophy is to know how to harmonise the immanence of the Idea and the transcendence of the Idea. The Idea must be immanent otherwise the sensible object would not be what it is. But at the same time the Idea must remain radically transcendent. The Idea is not subject to change, birth, corruption or death. The relationship between the archetypal Ideas of the intelligible world and the realities of the sensible world is such as to suggest the Platonic term *methexis*, participation.

But here in the vocabulary of Mir Damad this relationship is expressed not in terms of immanence or incarnation but in terms of prophetology and prophetic mission. Mir Damad invites us to conceive the Platonic Ideas in the style of apostolic prophets in this world. The prophetic philosophy of Shi'ism invites us here to a prophetological conception of the Platonic philosophy, as different from Christian Platonism for example, as a prophetic religion of theophanies (*tajalliyat*) can be from a religion of incarnation (*tajassom*). The function of the prophet is to effect a meeting between Heaven and Earth, but it is a visionary meeting, a theophanic encounter, in the space-between, the '*alam al-mithal*' (the exemplary or *imaginal* world). This conception, without any doubt, harmonizes, I believe, with that of Sohrawardi. These two conceptions taken together place the lineage of the Platonists of Persia for us, each at their own age and time. It seems to me that faced with the multiple interpretations given to Platonism in the course of the centuries, we have here a royal road, which though very rarely taken before, lies open now to the investigations of comparative philosophy.

2 Another theme which yields nothing in importance to the foregoing, is one which originates from the work of Molla Sadra of Shiraz (ob. 1050/1640), the most celebrated pupil of Mir Damad, and whose genius and monumental work has dominated Iranian philosophy for the past four centuries. Molla Sadra effected a revolution in the metaphysic of being (Note 7), in reversing the order of priority taught by the professors of the venerable metaphysic of essences up to his time. This latter considered the essences or quiddities of things as prior and immutable. Existence could be superinduced or not, as the case might be, it changed nothing in the constitution of these essences. Molla Sadra on the other hand gives the priority to existence. Thus it is the act and the mode of existing that determine the nature of an essence. The act of existing is in effect capable of a multitude of degrees of intensification or of degradation. For the metaphysic of essences, the constitution of man, for example, or the constitution of the body, are constants. For the existential metaphysic of Molla Sadra, being a man involves a multitude of degrees, from that of the human-faced demons to the sublime state of the Perfect Man. What one calls the body passes through a multitude of states, from that of the corruptible body of this world to the state of the subtle body, and even the divine body (*jism ilahi*). On each occasion, these exaltations depend on the intensification or attenuation, on the degradation of existence, on the act of existing. Molla Sadra is the philosopher of metamorphoses and palingeneses. The idea of the intensifications of being entailing that of the forms of being, that is of the essences, is one of the great characteristics of his metaphysic. By its very nature it prepares the way for a phenomenology of the act of existing.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

This is a matter which occupied a large part of Latin scholastic philosophy in the XIVth century. It is the theme which is enunciated in Latin as *De intensions et remissions formarum*. of the intensity and attenuation or remission of forms. The idea supposes that there is an interval, a field of variation in the limits of which the variations of qualitative intensity have play. It is this interval, this field of variation, which was defined as *latitudo formarum*, 'latitude of forms'. The names of certain philosophers, whose fecundity equals the extraordinary subtlety of their ideas, are still connected with the deeper research into this theme, in particular that of Jean de Ripa. an Italian Franciscan of the XIVth century, whose work is still far from being published in its entirety. He too, just like Molla Sadra two centuries and a half later, had to combat philosophers lacking in subtlety who believed they could maintain the essences secure from these variations of intensity and degradation of the act of existing.

But dominating the whole question, the epoch even, we have the name of Nicholas Oresme, a Norman philosopher who was Master at the College de Navarre and later Bishop of Lisieux (Note 8). Nicolas Oresme's genius inspired in him a completely new procedure the purport of which can hardly be sufficiently appreciated. He undertook to provide a graphic representation of qualitative variations. Let this be understood: it is not a matter of transposing into numbers, as we currently do nowadays, factors which are already quantitative, such as, for example, numbers and statistics. Not at all. It was a matter of Oresme's arranging in correspondence, in coordinates, data which were irreducibly and fundamentally qualitative, and a quantitative representation of these data through the medium not of numbers but of geometric figures (triangle, circumference, trapezoid, etc). Certainly these figures, but their nature as figures, themselves conceal a certain qualitative element; this we should not forget. The striking thing is that the point of departure for these researches was theological. The theologians were asking whether charity could increase or decrease in a man. Theology, to which it is the fashion today to deny all practical efficacy, is thus found to be at the origin of a problem on which the 'physicists' (physiciens) of the University of Paris exerted themselves throughout the XIVth century.

On the other hand of course it had to be asked, for example, just what, qualitatively, the intensification of a sound or of a colour consisted in. Did it consist in the disappearance of an earlier form or in the addition of a new form to the old one? They enquired into the question whether the accidents of the soul could intensify or grow less intense. Whether the assent given to a proposition or a belief could be intensified or attenuated. What then did growth and diminution consist in?

Here we are in the presence of the same motif which in the work of Molla Sadra is concerned with the intensifications and degradations of being. This motif however took on in Nicholas Oresme a development which was quite different from that in Molla Sadra. We may say that Nicholas Oresme undertook to configurate qualitative variations by means of geometrical representations, representations that is, then, of qualities and movements in beings. He represented the extension of qualities and movements by the longitude of his figures, and the intensities of these movements and qualities by the latitude of his figures. In doing this, he represented geometrically the spaces passed through by a variable in a changing movement (note here that it is not simply a matter of local movement but also of the qualitative progress of alteration). The interest of this enterprise is all the most fascinating in that an Iranian contemporary with Nicholas Oresme, Haydar Amolj. a man of that same XIVth century, distinguished himself for his taste and his skill in the diagramatic art by means of which he gave a geometrical representation of suprasensible spaces. Only the norm of these diagrams is not a correspondence controlled by the structure of geometrical shapes but rather

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

one established by the connections determined by that philosophical algebra known as the 'science of letters' (*ilm al horuf*). As far as I know, no comparative study has yet been dedicated to this theme.

It is of course true that certain historians of science have seen in this method of expressing qualitative phenomena in quantitative terms as we find it in Nicholas Oresme something like the first beginnings of what was later to become modern physics. One further point must be born in mind. What Nicholas Oresme wished to make possible was a spatial intuition, an imaginative contemplation, thanks to geometrical figures, of qualitative phenomena which by their intrinsic nature elude dimensional representation. In so doing he had once more caught up with the metaphysic of the Imagination which is immanent in the great commentary of Proclus on Euclid's *Elements*. Speaking phenomenologically however, what we have here is not the transition from a qualitative science to a quantitative one like that of our time. I myself consider that the historians of science have been too far from the mark in their efforts to make of Nicholas Oresme a precursor of analytical geometry. The idea of substituting his geometrical figures with algebraic relations never occurred to him. Such a procedure would have ruined the direction of his exertions, exertions which tend in the end to demonstrate to us how time becomes space. This is why I would say rather that Nicholas Oresme was trying to realize a type of science which is still waiting for its true development. Certainly, the *status quaestionis* as left by Nicholas Oresme could orient seekers of the truth other than himself towards a new direction. But it is not possible to deduce a logical necessity for the passage from the one to the other. In order that analytical geometry should come into being Descartes was needed, and he remains the first and last explanation of that phenomenon. There is no logical necessity which permits us to deduce Descartes' ideas from those of Nicholas Oresme. Thus we shall apply ourselves rather to the exploration as a phenomenologist of the whole domain opened up for us by the intuitive genius of Nicholas Oresme. And it is immense.

Effectively, one can represent the subject in which qualitative variations are taking place by a line; latitude and longitude are then the two coordinates which represent graphically these variations and which taken together establish a surface. But one can also represent this subject from the outset by a plane surface, and then study the quality informing each of the points of this surface. Instead of a linear quality one now has a surface quality. Latitude here will be projected on a surface constituting a third dimension. But this surface quality does not exhaust our notion of quality. The subject informed by this quality is in fact neither a line nor a surface, but well and truly a solid body. It is with a corporeal quality that we are now concerned. But if one now represents from the outset the subject of these qualitative variations by a three-dimensional solid, one thus extends the figurative mode of representation initially employed for linear and superficial qualities to three-dimensional corporeal qualities. But if it is now a three-dimensional representation which takes on the role played by longitude in the previous cases, in order to represent what here would be latitude, a fourth dimension of space would be required. Unfortunately, we do not have at our disposal any such fourth dimension.

But here once again Nicholas Oresme had an intuition of genius. He considers the corporeal quality as being made up of a double corporeality. There is the one resulting from the extension of the subject in the three dimensions of space, and there is another which is only imaged (*imaginée*) and which results from the intensity of the quality multiplied by the multiplicity of surfaces which one can detect in the inner nature of a subject. I have just spoken of this as an intuition of genius because from it it emerges that the whole notion of corporeality, from the very fact that it supposes a fourth dimension, completes itself in the *mundus imaginalis* to which it thus attests at the same time as it postulates it. Now it is just this *imaginal* world of the subtle body which Henry More, one of the

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Cambridge Platonists in the XVIIth century, designated as the *quarta dimensio*. And it is this same subtle *imaginal* world which the metaphysic of Imagination, transmuted in the thought of Molla Sadra of Shiraz into a purely spiritual faculty, postulates and explores. Here too, Molla Sadra satisfies the same postulate of a corporeality which is not complete in the empirical world of the three-dimensional. Here too the motif of archetypal celestial temples, for instance, is rooted. An earthly temple is not finished or complete by its construction in sensible three-dimensional space. It is completed in its totality only in the invisible which one can only imagine. An Iranian philosopher like Qazi Sa'id Qommi in the XVIIth century has developed the motif of the celestial archetype of the cubical temple of the Ka'ba in an admirable manner. This is the motif which corresponds in Islamic gnosis to that of the celestial Temple of Jerusalem as archetype of the earthly Temple at Jerusalem.

I have already referred elsewhere to a more essential bond between the Platonists of Persia and the Cambridge Platonists than their mere chronological date, from which we see that they were contemporaries. In the light of Nicholas Oresme's researches, we can see a field of comparative research opening up for us, so new and so extensive that it induces a certain vertigo. I shall not insist on it here since it is a theme which I am only beginning to explore. But I consider that here is the right place and time to draw attention to it if only fugitively and provisionally.

3 Lastly, there is a third theme, which I have been able to investigate in greater detail elsewhere, and which consequently is already more or less ripe for comparative philosophical study. I can therefore be brief. As far as I can see, it is to Zoroastrianism that we owe the first attempt at what we might call a periodisation of the Ages of the world: creation (*bundahishn*), blending (*mélange, gumecishn*), separation (*vicarishri*). The Ages of the world are thus divided into the three acts of the cosmic dramaturgy, pitting one against the other the Ohrmazdian powers of light and the Ahrimanian powers of darkness. These three acts are spread out over twelve millennia, the value of which is arithmosophic not arithmetical, and at the end of which the epiphany of the Saoshyant is realized, preparing the transfiguration of the world (*frashkart*) and the resurrection.

Here we encounter a striking parallel. A Shi'ite *hadith* describes for us the descent of the Mohammadic light (*Nur mohammadi*) into this world as a beam coming down through Twelve Veils of light, which themselves are the Twelve Imams, who typify the twelve Ages of the World. The twelfth of these millennia is the Imam of the Resurrection, (*Qa'im al-Qiyamat*) (Note 9). Shi'ite consciousness thus has also codified a periodisation of the Ages of the World in a dodecadic scheme.

More is to come yet. The cycle of legislative prophecy once closed, there succeeds to it the cycle of *walayyat*, the cycle of the 'Friends of God' or of spiritual initiation, the denouement of which is realised with the *parousia* of the expected Imam, (the Twelfth or Hidden Imam). I have drawn attention elsewhere to the parallelism of this representation of the Ages of the World with that which made its debut in the Western World in the XIIth century in the works of Joachim of Fiori. This latter also is divided into three acts but they correspond to the divine Triad. The Third Kingdom is that of the Holy Spirit, of the Eternal Gospel, the Paraclete. Here once again, Haydar Amoli can act as a guide for us in our research, when he states that He whom the Shi'ites designate as the expected Imam is the same as the figure designated by the Christians as the Paraclete.

However our comparative phenomenology must pay attention here to an essential point. For whom does this periodisation of history have a value and in what field of vision is it to be placed? Certainly

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

not (we return here to the distinction made just now) in that field in which man is conceived as being in history; unless this periodisation should impose itself upon everybody as do facts like the reign of Caesar or Napoleon. And that is far from being the case! The meaning of this periodisation applies essentially to that field of consciousness in which it is history which is experienced as being in man. Thus we are dealing here with sacred history, hierohistory, whose events are accomplished in the interior consciousness of man and whose hidden sense is to be found in the *ta'wil*, by a spiritual hermeneutic, a phenomenology, let us call it, which is *kashf al-mahjub*, unveiling of the hidden secret.

Take note! When a man lets himself be thrown into history he can go through all the philosophies of history he likes, he can legislate in the name of a historical causality which ignores all metaphysic, he can behave like a complete agnostic. This is no longer possible when history is interiorised, integrated into man's consciousness. The events are the events of the soul; they have a transcendental dimension. One can no longer play at whatever agnostic philosophy of history you like. Only that which theosophists like Franz von Baader or Schelling have so rightly named 'historiosophy' can now be pursued. I think the three themes I have presented to you are truly three exemplary comparative approaches.

IV The Western venture and the adventure of Westernisation

To conclude our talk, it seems to me that there are themes of this sort which can put us on the way towards a culminating point when a comparative philosophy to come invites us to make a first ascent. From this culminating point, maybe we can catch a glimpse in a new light, of the data of that problem which we can no longer avert from the horizon before us, that is to say the problem of the confrontation of the respective destinies of East and West. And I know only too well that in the present state of affairs, with the general process of Westernisation so widespread, these words no longer have the same sense of contrast as they had a matter of only one or two generations ago.

On the other hand, the concept of the 'Orient' in a Sohrawardi and in all his followers (*ishraq, mashriq*) is not that of an Orient which one can set up as a mark on our maps. The word in his work has neither a geographical nor an ethnic sense, but essentially a metaphysical sense. He is describing the spiritual world as that greater Orient towards which the pure intelligible sun rises, and the 'Orientaux' are those whose inner dwelling receives the fire of this eternal dawn. There are still without any doubt a few of these 'Orientals' in the East as well as in the geographical West of our world, neither of whom has any preeminence over the other. But when we speak of the respective destinies of the East and the West, it is in their ordinary current sense that we understand these words, when one comes to enquire into the consequences of the disappearance of what were the traditional civilizations.

We must thus start by differentiating in depth that which I shall call on the one hand the Western venture and on the other the adventure of the Westernisation of the East. This latter is not simply the extension or prolongation of the former. There was a moment, let us say for example in the XIIIth century, when Avicenna was translated into Latin in Toledo, a moment when our cultures in East and West corresponded to the same type, a moment when the concept of science was inseparable from its spiritual context. I am thinking for example of those alchemists for whom the

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

operation undertaken in the laboratory only attained its end if it was accompanied by an interior transmutation of the man, that is to say, only if it effected the interior birth of the spiritual man. Of course there were also chemists who, knowing nothing of this spiritual aim, or simply ignoring it, busied themselves at their furnaces in the hope of realizing material ambitions which were always to be dashed. These of course were the people known as the 'puffers' or the 'charcoal-burners' (charbonneux cf. the '*carbonari*' in Italy—tr). Certain of the results attained by them can without doubt contribute towards a precursory chapter for a study of modern chemistry. Against this, what is quite certain is that alchemy as a means of support for the spiritual science (I am thinking here as much of a Jaldaki as of a Jacob Boehme) can have nothing whatever to do with a preliminary chapter intended as a prehistory of modern chemistry. There is a discontinuity here, a hiatus, a passing from one world to another. It is the precise point of this hiatus, of the moment of transition, which we must grasp in order to understand our respective destinies.

But is there in fact a precise moment? A moment in time after which a divergent and continuous movement is to be envisaged? What appeared to us after the event as a continuity was in fact only a succession of discontinuous leaps, of new points of departure each time unforeseeable. That is why just now you suddenly saw me become so reserved about Nicholas Oresme, whose idea of the intensification of forms I wished to compare with the same motif in Molla Sadra. I have the feeling that the geometrical configuration of qualitative forms in Nicholas Oresme is not, in the proper sense of the word, any more a preliminary chapter to analytical geometry, than alchemy is the prehistory of modern chemistry. In order to have this last, as we have said, Descartes was necessary. But there was no necessity that there should be a Descartes after a Nicholas Oresme. Descartes' appearance was a new event, a discontinuity. Unfortunately we always have the tendency to see things in the way that images in a film come one after another. The *post hoc* is not necessarily a *propter hoc* as logicians know all too well. But those who talk of the 'main currents' of history don't perhaps always know it.

This once said, I would like to make the following observation. What we call the Western venture is the application of the intelligence to the scientific investigation of a nature that has been desacralised, which must be violated in order to find out its laws and to subject its forces to the human will. It has brought us to where we are now: a prodigious technical impetus which has transformed the conditions of our life, there's no denying; the whole world has been benefited by it. But at the same time also it has brought us to a situation which we shall call antidemiurgic, in the sense in which it is the negation of the creative work, since it puts earthly humanity into a position of destroying, of annihilating his *habitatulum*, this Earth from which it takes its name and its subsistence. A work of nothingness and of death which must be looked in the face if it is to be denounced, in the way in which the Sages of Ancient Persia, who were the first if not the only ones to do so, looked into the eyes of the atrocious Ahriman.

Let us emphasise this too. Behind the prodigious of Western science there is at the same time a spiritual *askesis*. Let us but think of the number of human lives whose sacrifice Western discoveries have demanded. When we take our seats in comfort on an airplane, whether with a sense of security or no, let us think of all those who in the earlier years of this century sacrificed their lives in order that we might arrive at our destination (I would refer you here to the touching Night Flight of Saint-Exupery). Let us think of the unmeasurable amount of intellectual capital invested in all the machinery which little by little is covering our earth. What's the good of vituperating the West when in any case you are forced to imitate it, even to become like it? But the confidence with which the West at the beginning of this century still believed that in developing technology it was going

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

forward to happiness and paradise regained gives us an idea, if we look at it again, of the measure of its despair today. There has been deceit and delusion. Science the liberator has created an instrument of death. But it is my conviction that this despair conceals within itself the redemption of the West. 'Only the weapon that made it will ever cure the wound' says Parzifal in Wagner's drama. I have confidence that there are in the West enough 'Orientaux' in the Sohrawardian sense of the word, to envisage this salvation. And the quite different situation created by the Westernisation of the East in the geographical sense of the word this time), appears to me in much the same light. It is one thing to obtain, to utilise, to adopt. To discover oneself is quite another matter. I was recalling just now that the West's socio-political ideologies are laicisations and secularisations of earlier theological systems. Once again we are experiencing the redoubtable efficacy of the philosophical and theological sciences, which the fashion of our time has attempted to deprive of all practical value. So redoubtably efficacious on the contrary that they give us, if not the key, at least one of the principal keys to the situation. Thus all of us, we *Ahl al-Kitab*, people of the 'communities of the Book', have to take into consideration together our theological past. Our sacred Books, the Bible and the Quran, in order to be understood, set us the same problems. I was recalling just now the theological origin of the concept of hermeneutics, of which so much use is being made today. And here too a critical fact obtrudes itself. If I draw attention to the events of that spiritual world of which I have more than a passing knowledge, that of the mystical Shi'ite gnosis or theosophy, '*erfdn-e shi'i*', I have to report the fact that on each occasion that the same problems have cropped up, the solutions chosen were precisely those rejected by the decisions of official Christianity in the West.

This is why it is essential for us both to investigate in detail and as a unity our theological and philosophical history. What evolved in the West into laicised ideology is simply not found here in the East. How then should the options and decisions arising out of this secularization in the West be transformed in the East without doing violence to it, without destroying it? Here we have, as I see it, an entirely new light in which to envisage the devastating impact of the West on what was the traditional East. Here we can no longer say: that which secreted the poison will itself secrete the antidote—since it was not here that the poison was secreted. What then will emerge? We are still at the heart of the process; it is still too early to understand it and to give an answer. But it is not too early to try to forestall the dreaded catastrophe. I would say that the heavy responsibility of the effort to comprehend and to ward off the situation is in a large measure incumbent on comparative philosophy, even if it is not yet well enough equipped to face up squarely to its task.

What kind of men will assume this responsibility? There is a type of man in this country who has been the ornament of this traditional culture. These are known as the '*orafā*', the mystical theosophists in whom high learning is indissociable from high spirituality and high morality. To this type of man there corresponded in Western tradition those who were equally the pillars of tradition until the '*trahison des clercs*' was proclaimed. When the clerics betray, there remains the sort of man who emerges from modern desacralised culture, whom we commonly call the 'intellectual' and for whom most often the word spirituality no longer has any meaning, because agnosticism has destroyed the inner man within him. This means that in him there is a dissociation between thought and being, between being and action. This dissociation was precisely what Sohrawardi wished to forestall when he advocated his idea of the perfect Sage who must equally accumulate philosophical knowledge and spiritual experience since neither can be brought to perfection without the other. Such are the Sages which a celebrated hadith calls the successors of the prophets.

One of the striking characteristics of Shi'ite philosophy in Iran, especially during the past four centuries, has been the insistence on the common vocation of the philosopher and the prophet. The

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

prophet of course is not someone who predicts the future. He is one who utters the language of the invisible. In order that the Sages should appear like the successors of the prophets their philosophy must in its essence be a prophetic philosophy. Still on this point, I believe that all the '*orafā*', all the mystical philosophers belonging to the Abrahamic tradition have one trait in common. This would have to be the subject of yet another occasion, something to be held in reserve for the programme of our future comparative philosophy. That is, it is only these Sages who are capable of facing the consequences of the desacralisation of a universe that has been profaned. And it is to them that the First Imam alludes in a celebrated interview with his disciple Komayl ibn Ziyad (Note 10). They belong as much to the West as to the East in this world. They will never be more than a handful of men, unknown to the great mass of people, because they will have renounced the ambitions of this world, and that because they will be aware, like their predecessors, of the moral and human responsibility of men of learning. The fact is that it is not enough to be a man of learning or a philosopher *tout court* if a man is to be one of the sons of the prophets.

Mohsen Fayz, who was undoubtedly the most brilliant pupil of Molla Sadra, ends up the Preface to one of his books (Note 11) with a prayer which is at one and the same time a programme and a profession of faith. He prays that his book will bring light and peace to the hearts of those who are seekers. He considers it as a treasure which will be waiting for him at the meeting-place of the Resurrection. But, because he knows the true weight of his secrets, he asks God to keep it from contact with demons and 'not to choose for tombs of his secrets any but the hearts of men well born' (Note 12). *Wa'l-salam*.

NOTES

1. A lecture delivered in December 1974 at the Faculty of Letters, University of Tehran, and printed in *Sophia Perennis*, The Bulletin of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, Vol. I No. 1, Tehran 1976. The present translation has been made from the revised text printed in Henry Corbin, *Philosophie Iranienne et Philosophie Comparee*, Tehran, Academie Imperiale Iranienne de Philosophie, 1977. The translator and publisher wish to express their heartfelt thanks to Mme Stella Corbin for her invaluable assistance, and for permission to make this English language version.
2. Corbin, Henry, *En Islam Iranien: aspects spirituelles et philo-sophiques*, 4 vols. Paris, Gallimard, 1971-73 (repr. 1978) Prologue to Vol. I.
3. **Translator's note:** Of Arabic origin, the word *barzakh* is unusual in having no verbal root. In the Quran it means an interstice, partition, the abode of departed spirits, that is, Hades. In modern Arabic it means an interval, gap, break, obstruction; an isthmus. In Sufi terminology it has the meaning of the interval between death and the resurrection. In Persian, in addition to the Arabic meanings it can also mean a picture of the imagination, a whim or fancy: even, one in love with a woman.
4. **Translator's note:** *ta'wil* is a noun of action connected with the Arabic '*awwal*', meaning 'first', i.e. tracing something to its origin.
5. Corbin, op. cit.. Vol. 2. '*Sobrawardi et les Platoniciens de Perse*.'
6. *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens depuis le XVIIe siecle jusqu'a nos jours*, vol. II. Textes choisis et presentes par S. J. Ashtiyani. Introduction analytique par H. Corbin (Bibliotheque Iranienne, Vo. 19). Teheran-Paris, Adrien-Masonneuve, 1975: chapter X of the French language part for the history of the manuscript and for the theory of the Platonic Ideas.
7. cf. *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens* . . . Vol. I, pp 48 a 97 of the French language part, and *En Islam iranien* . . . Vol. IV, general index s.v. *etre, existence, metaphysique*.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

8. On the intensifications of being, see *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens . . .* Vol. II, Introduction II, chapter VIII, pp 16ff and chapter X, pp 64ff. On Nicholas Oresme and the question of *De latitudinibus formarum*, see Pierre Duhem, *Le Systeme du monde . . . de Platan a Copernic*, Vol. VII. Paris 1956, pp 480-550.
9. Cf. *En Islam Iranien . . .* Vol. IV, pp 145-148 and 183-186.
10. See *En Islam iranien . . .* Vol. IV, index under Komayl ibn Ziyad.
11. Cf. *Anthologie des philosophes- iraniens . . .* Vol. II, Introduction II, chapter IX, pp 38ff. The book by Mohsen Fayz to which we refer here is entitled *Osul al-ma'arif*. M. Ashtiyani gives a partial edition of it in this volume of the *Anthologie*.
12. **Translator's note:** To a public largely governed by Demos this may seem 'undemocratic' and even objectionable. In fact, democracy or 'equality' are totally irrelevant concepts here. As with the *cor gentil* in the poetry of the *Dolce Stil Novo* it is a matter of the heart become noble by reason of a spiritual initiation or illumination.