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Intervista al Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr

a cura di Fabio Tiddia

L'intervista raccolta al telefono si incentra sulla ricostruzione storico-filosofica degli incontri che nell'arco di tempo tra il 1958 e il 1977 si svolsero in Iran tra il filosofo francese Henry Corbin e il sapiente, filosofo e commentatore coranico Seyyed 'Allāmah Muḥammad Ḥussein Ṭabāṭabā'ī. Al tema in questione è stato dedicato a Bologna (Dipartimento di Lingue letterature e culture moderne, 17 Dicembre 2018), il seminario "Il carteggio Henry Corbin-'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī", del Dott. Fabio Tiddia (centro di ricerca "Hekmat va falsafe-ye Iran" di Tehran), promosso nell'ambito delle attività del Progetto internazionale IDA (Immagini e deformazioni dell'Altro).

F.T.: What was these meetings' contribution – that you actually define “the most important level from the twelfth century” – to comparative philosophy? Do you think that Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī might have had a project for Corbin?

S.H.N.: It depends on the question of project. What Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī wanted to do, to learn more about western thought and western philosophy, [was clear] already at the end of the Second World War, when the communists had taken over Azerbaijan, and Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī had had to leave, in fact to flee, to run away from Tabriz because of this, and came to Tehran, and from Tehran to Qom. He had carried out a number of dialogues or conversations with Persian

Marxists, the members of the Tudeh Party, and that came out later on in his famous book, *Osūl-e falsafe va ravesh-e re'ālistm* (The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism). He used the word "realism" as contrasted to "dialectical materialism" in the Marxist sense. Allāmah had some knowledge of Marxism, and the German 19th century philosophy which led to Marxism, although he had not studied Hegel, the philosophical background of Marx, but he knew something about his essays of the 19th century western philosophy, ideology.

He was interested also in the larger picture of western philosophy, about which he did not have any knowledge, and so [he had a chance to close the gap] when the situation of Corbin came along, and Corbin came to Iran, after having discovered Suhrawardī, after having spent several years in Istanbul during the second World War by force (he couldn't get back to France because of the War) and therefore deepening himself in knowledge of Ishrāqī philosophy and the text of Suhrawardī (the libraries of Istanbul are very rich in texts of Suhrawardī, which Corbin was using).

He came to Iran as land of Shī'a and Islamic philosophy, looking for someone to be able to dialogue with, and it just happens that this took place, that is the meeting with Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī. The meetings began in the house of another man also called Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Zho'l-Majd Ṭabāṭabā'ī, in Villa Street, a big house, I don't know what it is called now, and had a big garden. He was a lawyer very much interested in Islamic Philosophy, and they began to meet there, and these meetings lasted for many many years.

I returned to Iran in 1958. I had read Corbin while I was at Harvard University during my Ph.D. thesis and so Corbin and I met immediately, and he was then at *Institut Franco-Iranian*, in which he was the head of the research department, and he would spend the fall, from September to December every year in Iran. So September of 1958 I met him and we became close friends, we had differences of view on certain matters but nevertheless became close friends, and very soon I met Mr. Zho'l-Majd Ṭabāṭabā'ī through a different channel, a completely different channel, Sayyid Muḥammad Kāzīm 'Aṣṣār. The great philosopher, my own teacher, who I'd known from my childhood. He told me one day: "I want to take you to a place where there are a number of people interested in Islamic philosophy. I want you to meet them." So he took me to the house of Mr. Zho'l-Majd, where there were six or seven people present, and they were studying Islamic Philosophy and Sufism with the great master Sayyid Allāmah Kāzīm 'Aṣṣār. And the master invited me to attend, and the next 15, 16 years, there were three times a week the lessons, in that garden with Āghā-ye 'Aṣṣār.

After a couple of weeks, Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the owner of the house, told me that there's a very important person who comes from Qom here, and I want you to meet him. And that was Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī. So very soon I met Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and a very profound bond was created between us. He was my teacher for the next twenty years. He was very very close to me. He, Āghā-ye 'Aṣṣār and Qazvinī were my great traditional teachers. At that time the talk came about these sessions with Henry Corbin that would be instituted; one or two had been held before I had even met Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, just the beginning of it.

So these sessions began between Corbin and Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and about a dozen people were invited to the lessons. Some of them were 'ulamā', Āghā-ye Moṭahharī, Managhebī, the son in law of Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, a few other people, even Ayatollah Shīrāzī used to come once in a while, but a few of them were professors at Tehran University like 'Isā Sepahbodī, who also did some translation. He was the Professor of French at Tehran University. And I brought Dāryūsh Shāyegān who was my protégé friend at that time, with me later on to the sessions. He was present, and became a good friend of Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī. And I did also translations after Sepahbodī did the first year. After that I and then sometimes Shāyegān would do the translation between the two men. So you there was the flexible presence of ten, fifteen people, I mentioned a few of them, who would be present, but the core of them were these six or seven persons who were always present. And these sessions were really unique.

F.T.: What was the particular influence of these meetings on the thought of Henry Corbin and on Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī's? Was Allāmah familiar with the Western thought before meeting Corbin?

S.H.N.: Now we come to your question. Before answering your question one has to answer the question: "why both men were interested in this?". Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī was interested because he saw in this an opening to the European philosophical world by a man who had a spiritual and metaphysical view of philosophy, not by some atheist rationalist, you know, from Germany or France. That is Corbin shared a spiritual vision of reality with Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī at the same time he was a Frenchman, not only an orientalist but a philosopher who knew all the schools of French philosophy and European Philosophy quite well. He had translated Heidegger from German to French¹ and so on and so forth, that you have probably investigated, and he had a philosophical mind he was not just a scholar, so Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī saw in him a bridge to understand better ideas of European philosophy. Especially, this is a very important sentence, Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī was interested in what philosophical discussions were taking place in Europe at the time. Let's say if it was 1970, in 1970, not in 1945, that is the contemporary issues that were being discussed. That's why oftentimes Corbin would bring quotations and so forth from some contemporary European philosophers especially from France, and that would be the beginning of discussions. Now Corbin on the other side, of course, saw Iran as a land of Islamic philosophy and illumination, and he saw in Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī a treasure, a treasure of traditional Islamic knowledge, both in Sufism, and in philosophy and theology, all three. And so each man saw something in the other which he wanted to master and wanted to know and a very good and happy dialogue took place between them. Both respected each other greatly, and it was not easy because Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, of course, did not know French. The French of Corbin was very very difficult because he was deaf and the way he pronounced words, no matter how well you knew French, it wasn't easy to understand, and it was philosophical.

¹ Martin Heidegger, « Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique? Leçon inaugurale donnée à l'Université de Fribourg-en-Brisgau le 24 juillet 1929 », trad. par Henry Corbin, dans *Bifur*, vol. 8, 1931, p. 9-27; Idem, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique ? Suivi d'extraits sur l'être et le temps et d'une conférence sur Hölderlin*, trad. par Henry CORBIN, Paris, Gallimard, 1938, p. 254.

F.T.: Did not Corbin speak Persian?

S.H.N.: No, he knew Persian, but he could not speak. Probably he would mention an Arabic or Persian word or phrase, but he would not speak in Persian, no, but any way, as I said he was hard of hearing and so it was not easy. He also spoke French with the words that were very archaic French, and you had to know 16th, 17th century French to understand his philosophical discourse. Even contemporary Frenchmen had trouble reading him for that reason. He writes French beautifully but he had difficulty articulating, pronouncing. Dialogue was not so easy, and so myself, Dr. Shāyegān, Dr. Sepahbodī, these are the three basic people, had to translate back and forth between the two.

F.T.: Why Corbin devotes very few and sparse notes in these meetings? I would like his explanation from you, by hypothesis. How much have the meetings with Corbin influenced the work of Allāmah? In which work may we see the effects?

S.H.N.: I read what you've said. I think there are several reasons combined together. First of all, you should know that when he went back to the EPHE (École Pratique des Hautes Etudes) and started teaching from the January on to the end of the Spring, the second half of the year, he would often mention the sessions with Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī with the students, and there Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī was known to all the students who were studying with Corbin. In his writings, however, Corbin did the same with me. I did a lot of things with Corbin together. The book *Histoire de la philosophie Islamique*, we wrote together. He wrote about half of it; I wrote about a little more than half with Osman Yaḥyā. His name is on the cover and our names are inside with little lettering somewhere. And many of the things which I did with Henry Corbin he never mentioned even in the footnotes. He was a great scholar and everybody knew that he was a friend of Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī. There was this sort of tradition, but he did not do any mutual scholarly work with Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī as he did with Ashtiyānī, that's the difference. When they decided to bring out the several volumes of *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens*, I introduced Ashtiyānī to Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and I knew them exactly from the very beginning. Corbin spoke to us about this project with Ashtiyānī and so I was in on it from the very very beginning. In fact there's no mention of me as if I had nothing to do with it. So this is not unique to Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī. But they did a lot of prose writing together with Ashtiyānī so of course he mentioned *Ashtiyānī* much more. And he also wrote some introductions to some of Ashtiyānī's books. As you know, I wrote an introduction to almost every book of Ashtiyānī in English, sometimes English and Persian both. Corbin also wrote one or two, and so from the point of western scholarship he had to quote and mention Ashtiyānī, from the point of western scholarship which is not based on oral exchange between two great teachers, you know, not academic you might say. It was not academic, but on the Persian side of course a two volume work came out on the dialogues of Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Corbin in Qom,² you must have seen that, and it became very well-known. Allāmah was a very humble man, he didn't need to have

² Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Shī'a: Majmū'a-yi mudhākīrāt bā Professor Henry Corbin*, Qom 1397/1977.

his name mentioned but everybody knew it was between Corbin and Allāmeḥ, but in a sense of course Corbin was much better known in Iran than Allāmeḥ was known in France.

F.T.: From Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī what came to the work of Henry Corbin?

S.H.N.: I mean for example Corbin had been studying Ḥaydar Āmolī's texts for many years. He even edited his books with Osman Yaḥyā. But what came from with Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī was a lot of authentic Shī'ite ideas, which then Corbin went and found in various texts. You cannot deny that Corbin did read a lot of texts, but he also got a lot of ideas from Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī. Yes. Definitely.

F.T.: In your opinion which works of Corbin clearly owe a debt to these meetings and testify to the fundamental contribution of Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī?

S.H.N.: From Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī there's something in all of them, about Shī'ism. I don't mean medieval chivalry or something like that because Allāmah didn't know anything about that. But in the books which deal with Islam and Shī'ism there's always something of the discussions with Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī in it. No verbatim speech of Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī which Corbin quoted in his book. It's not like that.

F.T.: You wrote in your book that «Corbin would usually pose some pertinent philosophical questions which had been discussed at the Eranos meetings in Switzerland or in philosophical circles in Paris the year before». Do you suppose that exchanges with other thoughts and religions have had any detectable influence on Eranos circle?

S.H.N.: Not in Eranos as far as I know. Scholars who were at Eranos, active in the field of Islamic studies were Massignon, later on Schuon and people like that.³ They had read Corbin, but not something particularly with Eranos of course. I don't see any influence there but of course there's a lot of influence among his students in France, that's something else. Including some Arab students. A couple of Algerian students were very much interested in Islamic Philosophy and Shī'ite thought because of Corbin's influence. A lot of impact upon North Africa where in fact there is no Shī'ism. Everything is Sunni. Although Corbin was, even much more than myself anti Sunni-Shī'ite fight, but he disregarded that Sunni world, even looked upon Ibn 'Arabī as if he were a Shī'ite, when Ibn 'Arabī was in fact a Sunni. And Suhrawardī was also. But Corbin despite that view had a number of students in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and other places in North Africa and in Syria before the disasters started, who were very much interested in his thought.

³ [In the Islamic field were present at Eranos: Izutsu, Landolt, Massignon, Meier, ed.]

F.T: Why in your opinion Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī answered the question put to him by Corbin about Ismailism negatively? I have heard two antithetical hypotheses. One linked to the will of Allāmah to soften the enthusiasm of Corbin, made by Dr. Dīnānī; the other given to me by Dr. A'vanī, according to which Ṭabāṭabā'ī's knowledge of Ismailism, as thought and history, was well below that of Corbin. What is your opinion?

S.H.N.: There are two types of writings of Ismailism. One is like the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* or Ḥamīd Kermānī's work which were known actually to Shī'ite philosophers who studied philosophy and then there are works which are specifically Ismaili and not much attention was paid to them. There's then the single figure of Nāṣir-i Khusraw, one of the greatest Persian poets who was an Ismaili *dā'ī*, you know. Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī knew his writings well, but he was not particularly interested in all of these other works that Corbin was.

There's a big difference that you have to understand, between the outward and the inward, the esoteric and exoteric, the *bāṭin* and the *zāhir*. Corbin was always interested in the *bāṭin*, was always attracted to the *bāṭin*, to the inward, and Ismailism in a sense breaks the balance between the outward and the inward in the direction of the inward, whereas twelve-imam Shī'ism tries to preserve a balance between the two while the external Sufism, that is the exoteric Sufism, tips the balance in favor of the outward. There is Sufism that rebalances the Sunni world. So, Corbin was attracted to Ismailism as a kind of source for Islamic inward esoteric teachings, the *bāṭinī* teachings, and Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī was very much opposed to them because he saw that as coming from the imams, and therefore not very specifically Ismaili, although the first six Shī'ite Imams are the six Ismaili Imāms and of course are the same: at Ismā'īl, the son of Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, they separated. So, there's also a theological difference between them. At the same time Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī knew a lot more about Ismailism than meets the eye, and his little book on Shī'ism has a summary of other schools of Shī'ism, but the part on Ismailism is very short, is very succinct and very clear although based on very exact knowledge.⁴

F.T.: Is it true that Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī had warned Corbin about welcoming the Shaykhi philosophy too enthusiastically? I'm relying, in this case, on a statement made to me by Dr. Dīnānī.

S.H.N.: Exactly. Shaykhi is the extreme form of it. But the Shaykhis emphasized the Imām at the expense of the Prophet in a certain sense, and of God even. It is an excessive accentuation upon the Imām, and therefore they are still within Shī'ism, but they are almost heretics according to many twelve-imam Shī'ite '*ulamā'*' because they belittles *shari'a* and so forth. Babism and Bahatism grew out of such a very iffy thing, and so Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī was not at all happy with Corbin's interest in Shaykhism.⁵

⁴ Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Shī'ite Islam*, trad. S. H. Nasr, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975, pp. 68-77.

⁵ Corbin did warning about babism as outside of shī'ism. Cfr. *En islam iranien*, t.4, p. 283.

F.T.: Could it have had something to do with the interpretation given by this school concerning the thought of Mullā Ṣadrā?

S.H.N.: It is incorrect trying to say that Shaykhi is derived from Mollā Ṣadrā because Moḥammad Anṣārī wrote a commentary on the books of Mollā Ṣadrā, so forth and so on. That was against it, not for it. And Mollā Ṣadrā had done his due with the Shaykhi or Babi movement in the 19th century.

F.T.: Could an influence of Protestantism be seen in this Corbin's predilection for "interiorism"?

S.H.N.: No. That's a very complicated matter, because if you look at the history of Christianity in the last five hundred years Protestantism has been much less interested in mysticism, the interior, than Catholicism. Nevertheless you've had William Laud, the puritans of England, the protestant movements in the 16th century in Germany, and actually Corbin's real interest in Protestantism was for people like Jacob Böhme, Hamann, people like that, German theosophy and not the rationalistic Protestantism or secular Protestantism at all. And he converted from Catholicism to Protestantism to free himself and study mysticism. The people with whom he studied were against it. And he told me that. It's a first account story. He said: "Because it gave me the freedom to study philosophical movements in Germany I was so interested in it". He always was interested in that. He wrote a book on Hamann.⁶

So Protestantism in the case of Corbin since even the French Huguenots, was a very conservative one, that must be distinguished from the Protestantism let's say in America, or in Germany or in England.

⁶ H. Corbin, *Hamann philosophe du luthérianisme*, Paris, L'île verte-Berg international, 1985.