Auszug aus:

BEIRUTER TEXTE UND STUDIEN
HERAUSGEGEBEN VOM
ORIENT-INSTITUT BEIRUT
BAND 115

OIB

BIBLIOTHÈQUE IRANIENNE 72
INSTITUT FRANÇAIS DE RECHERCHE EN IRAN

Shi'i Trends and Dynamics in Modern Times
(XVIIIth-XXth centuries)
Courants et dynamiques chiites
à l'époque moderne
(XVIIIe-XXe siècles)

Edited by

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BEIRUT 2010

ERGON VERLAG WÜRZBURG
IN KOMMISSION

Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī
and the World of Images

Todd Lawson

When considering the role of Shiʿism in the modern and contemporary world, one topic of importance is infrequently broached, namely the enduring reality of a spiritual realm referred to as the World of Images (ʿālam al-mithāl). This placeless place emerges as one of the chief distinguishing features of the work of the so-called Isfahan School.[1] Taking Avicenna (d. 1037) as inspiration, Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Shaykh al-Ishrāq, established the ontic reality of a world of "apparitional forms" for subsequent Eastern philosophical discourse. In the Safavid thinkers, this world would come to occupy a permanent and essential place, helping to make philosophical (i.e. "scientific") sense out of such Twelver Shiʿi religious beliefs as the continued existence and return of the Hidden Imam. The West has long since rejected the reality of a World of Images for reasons apparently unrelated to sectarian religious beliefs. According to Corbin, the crucial event was the rejection of the Avicennan cosmological realm of celestial Soul. The result was the stranding of the human soul without readable guidance for its journey home. Since this rejection, few Western thinkers have managed to rediscover the all but forgotten realm of the imaginal. Among these, Paracelsus (d. 1541) and Swedenborg (d. 1772) have been singled out as having somehow survived spiritually and philosophically. To these may be added the artist and visionary William Blake (d. 1827) for whom the imaginal realm was most real and crucial and Carl Jung (d. 1961), for whom the imaginal powers of the human being were necessary for its psychological salvation. More recently, the influence of both Corbin and Jung on psychology has been unmistakable in the writings of

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[1]   For the history of the idea, see Henry Corbin, "Mundus imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal", *Spring* (1972), 1-19. [First published in French in the *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 6 (1964), 3-26.]; Fazlur Rahman, "Dream, Imagination and ʿĀlam al-Mithāl", in: *The Dream and Human Society*, Gustave von Grunebaum and Roger Caillois, eds., Berkeley: University of California Press 1966, 381-408; Henry Corbin, "The Visionary Dream in Islamic Spirituality", in: *The Dream and Human Society*, Gustave von Grunebaum and Roger Caillois, eds., Berkeley: University of California Press 1966, 410-419; Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, translated by Nancy Pearson, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977 [originally published as *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection: de l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran Shīʿite*, Paris: Buchet Chastel 1960]. It is also studied in John T. Walbridge, *The Science of Mystic Lights: Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī and the Illuminationist Tradition in Islamic Philosophy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1992, esp. 126ff. for an analysis of the idea in the work of Shīrāzī (d. 1311), whom the author describes as possibly the first Islamic philosopher "to have made a determined effort to work out the philosophical implications of the concept".

von Franz and Hillman, among others.[2] Finally, a recent book on mysticism has reasserted the value and reality of the imaginal realm, again influenced by Corbin.[3] It remains, however, that even though we may find here and there thinkers and artists for whom an imaginal realm is real and crucial, in the main such Western thinkers have been marginalised by the greater Western religious and philosophical tradition.

In the East, the reality of this realm has remained a theological, philosophical and mystical commonplace. From Suhrawardī and his followers to Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and his wide and deep influence, to the later Shiʿi and Sufi writers and thinkers, some form of the imaginal realm remained an essential feature of life as such: even when its ontic status would be questioned by the likes of Sirhindī (d. 1625), its usefulness for spiritual pedagogy would appear to remain unquestioned by him.[4] Here is not the place to speculate on all the possible reasons for this basic difference between East and West. The task at hand is much more focused, and perhaps by comparison, elementary.

Corbin's *Spiritual Body*, the groundbreaking study of the *ʿālam al-mithāl*, can leave a reader with the false impression that because all the numerous Eastern sages treated therein agree on the reality of the *ʿālam al-mithāl*, that they also therefore agree on all other aspects of religion or philosophy or, that whatever differences there might be are trivial. This is most certainly not the case, as the following comparison will demonstrate. By briefly discussing the serious doctrinal and philosophical differences between two Eastern scholars on the topic of the *ʿālam al-mithāl*, the axiomatic status of the doctrine will be underscored.

Here, then, we are concerned with the main characteristics and function of this world as found in the writings of Mullā Muḥammad Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1680) and Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826). The first is considered the faithful bearer of the thought of his teacher and father-in-law, Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) and one of the more important authorities of post-Safavid religious teachings. The second is frequently seen as reviving an archaic pre-classical religiosity, and as a severe critic of Ṣadrian philosophical presuppositions. In this context, it is im-

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[2]   Marie Louise von Franz (d. 1998), *Alchemical Active Imagination*, Irving, Texas: Spring Publications, University of Dallas 1979, or *On Dreams and Death: A Jungian Interpretation*, trans. by Emmanuel X. Kennedy and Vernon Brooks, Boston: Shambhala 1987; James Hillman, author of numerous books and articles, many of which are concerned with "soul making," the imaginal realm, and most recently, "character". See as an example James Hillman, "Imaginal Practice: Greeting the Angel", in: *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings by James Hillman*, Thomas More, intro. and ed., New York: Harper & Row 1989, 50-70 where he wrote: "Our method has been partly described by Henry Corbin when writing of *taʾwīl*. For us, it is the conservation and exploration and vivification of the imagination and the insights derived therefrom, rather than the analysis of the unconscious, that is the main work of therapy." (Hillman, "Imaginal", 59).

[3]   Jess B. Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press 1996.

[4]   Rahman, "Dream", 419.

portant to emphasise, philosophical presuppositions take on some of the charac-
ter of religious beliefs (ʿaqāʾid). That both scholars rely on the ʿālam al-mithāl for
the solution to problems of cosmogony, cosmology, ontology, epistemology and
eschatology indicates the degree to which recourse to this realm is a common-
place, particularly in later medieval Shiʿi thought. That is to say, for both men the
world of images functions as a bridge between reason and revelation. Yet, the dif-
ferences between their respective teachings surrounding this topic are fundamen-
tal, ultimately indicating two mutually exclusive religious types.

Kāshānī is widely esteemed as one of the pillars of post-Safavid Shiʿi religious
culture. He produced a number of important books on Twelver doctrine and
practice. In addition, Fayḍ Kāshānī was the most prolific student of the great
Mullā Ṣadrā, producing two important and influential works on ḥikmat (philoso-
phy), the *Kalimāt-i maknūna* and the *Uṣūl al-maʿārif*.[5] He was also the student of
Sayyid Mājid al-Baḥrānī (d. 1657), the avid Akhbārī scholar.[6] Kāshānī's formation
combined salient features of the Akhbārī approach[7] to *fiqh* with the Ṣadrian ap-
proach to metaphysics and ontology. This also involved a further advance in the
Shiʿi domestication of the thought of Ibn ʿArabī, a process that may be seen to
have begun as early as Maytham al-Baḥrānī (d. ca. 1280).[8] These elements, there
can be no doubt, also combined with *ṭarīqa*-type Sufi influences, although appar-
ently he did not commit himself to any particular order.[9] Whatever the reality of

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[5] Mullā Muḥammad Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i maknūna min ʿulūm ahl al-ḥikma wa-l-
maʿrifa*, Tehran: n.p. 1383/1342sh./1963-64; by the same author: *Uṣūl al-maʿārif*, Jalāl al-
Dīn Āshtiyānī, ed., Mashhad: n.p. 1353sh./1974-75.

[6] See the biographical sketch in ʿAlī Ḥusayn al-Jābirī, *al-Fikr al-salafī ʿind al-shīʿa al-ithnāʾ
ʿasharī*, Beirut – Paris: n.p. 1977, 326-366. See also Etan Kohlberg, "Some Aspects of Ak-
hbārī Thought", in: *Eighteenth Century Renewal and Reform in Islam*, Nehemia Levtzion and
John O. Voll, eds., Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1987, 133-160 for a useful nuancing
of Kāshānī's particular version of Akhbarism.

[7] The complex subject of Kāshānī's Akhbārī allegiance has been recently broached in Robert
Gleave, "Two Classical Shīʿī theories of *qaḍāʾ*", in: *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts
and Traditions: in Memory of Norman Calder*, Gerald Richard Hawting, Jawid Ahmad Mo-
jaddedi and Alexander Samely, eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 105-120; An-
drew J. Newman, "Fayḍ al-Kashani and the Rejection of the Clergy/State Alliance", in: *The
Most Learned of the Shīʿa: The Institution of the* Marjaʿ Taqlid, Linda S. Walbridge, ed., New
York: Oxford University Press 2001, 34-52; and Todd Lawson, "Akhbārī Shīʿī Approaches to
tafsīr", in: *Approaches to the Qurʾan*, Gerald Richard Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef,
eds., London: Routledge 1993, 173-210, esp. 180-187.

[8] The most recent detailed discussion of this is Ali Oraibi, *Shīʿī Renaissance: A Case Study of
the Theosophical School of Bahrain in the 7th/13th century*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, McGill
University 1992.

[9] Leonard Lewisohn, "Sufism and the School of Iṣfahān: *Taṣawwuf* and ʿIrfān in Late Safavid
Iran", in: *The Heritage of Sufism* vol. 3: *Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501-1750)*, Leonard
Lewisohn and David Morgan, eds., Oxford: Oneworld 1999, 63-134. This is the most thor-
ough inquiry into the Sufism of al-Kāshānī available. See pp. 44-66 (references here are to
a typescript kindly provided by its author). See p. 48 for a discussion of Kāshānī's contro-
versial Nūrbakhshī affiliation, and Fayḍ Kāshānī's reputation in court circles for being an
authority on Sufism and *ḥikmat*.

Kāshānī's true Sufi allegiances, he has become known in later scholarship as the "Ghazālī" of post-Safavid Twelver Shiʿism.[10] Kāshānī's teaching on the imaginal realm may be schematised as follows:[11]

1) That the realm exists.

2) That it begins at the convex surface of the ninth sphere.

3) It is known by several names: *barzakh*, *hūrqalyā*, the 8th clime beyond Mt. Kāf.

4) Figures reflected in clear water and mirrors or any reflecting medium are of the *ʿālam al-mithāl*.

5) "It is through this world that the truth is confirmed of the accounts of the Prophet's assumption to Heaven which mention that, in the manner of an eyewitness, he has a vision of the angels and prophets."[12]

6) It is in this intermediate world that the Holy Imāms are present when they appear before a dying person, as related in so many traditional accounts.

7) This is the world in which the interrogation of the tomb takes place, with its delights and its torments.

8) This is the world in which departed spirits will recognise and associate with each other, as has been mentioned in the Traditions. It is where, for example, the believer may visit those closest to him after death.

9) The Shiʿi doctrine of Return and Resurrection depends upon the reality of this world. Here also would be included the "descent of Jesus", which will occur during the Return.[13]

The master of the Shaykhiyya, or the Kashfiyya as its adherents preferred to be designated, was Shaykh Aḥmad b. Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsāʾī. He was born in 1753 in a small village in Bahrain, apparently of pure Arab lineage. His family had been followers of the Shiʿi version of orthodoxy for five generations. From his early childhood, it was clear that Shaykh Aḥmad was strongly predisposed to the study of religious texts and traditions. By the age of five, he could read the Qurʾān.

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[10] Lewisohn, "Sufism and the School of Iṣfahān", p. 114. Lewisohn is quoting ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīnkūb, *Dunbalā-yi Justujū-yi dar taṣawwuf-i Īrān* (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr 1362 sh./1983-84, p. 257). For Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī there is absolutely no doubt that Kāshānī's religious vision shares much in common with Ghazālī's, but for Aḥsāʾī, this is no commendation or point of honor. See Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī, *Sharḥ Risāla fī ʿIlm Allāh*, recently published in Muḥammad ʿAlī Isbir, ed., *al-ʿAllāma al-Jalīl Aḥmad bin Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsāʾī fī Dāʾirat al-Ḍawʾ*, Beirut: n.p. 1413/1993, 149-278, specifically 209, 223. Hereafter reference to this work will be as *Risāla*.

[11] This summary is taken from his *Kalimāt-i maknūna*, 70-73. This section has been translated by Corbin in *Spiritual*, 176-179.

[12] Corbin, *Spiritual*, 178, Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i maknūna*, 72.

[13] It should be noted that the Kāshānī's language here is quite striking, he speaks of Jesus' return "after his death" (Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i maknūna*, 72). Does this indicate a creative reading of the famous "non-crucifixion" verse (Qurʾān IV : 156) more in line with standard Christianity? If so, there can be no question that this reading relies on the reality of the Imaginal Realm. East and West, in this instance, may be seen to be brought closer together through the agency of the spiritual imagination.

During the remainder of his primary education, he studied Arabic grammar and became exposed to the mystical and theosophical expressions of Ibn ʿArabī and the less well known Ibn Abī Jumhūr (d. after 1501), author of the *Kitāb al-mujlī*.[14] His teachers in his homeland included the Dhahabī Sufi, Quṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, through whom he possibly gained his first (negative?) exposure to the work of Ibn ʿArabī.[15] In 1772-3, Shaykh Aḥmad left his home to pursue advanced religious studies in the ʿatabāt shrine cities of Kāẓimayn, Najaf, and Karbalā.[16] In 1209/1794-5, he received his first *ijāza* from the renowned scholar Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdī Ibn Murtaḍā l-Ṭabāṭabāʾī Baḥr al-ʿUlūm (d. 1212/1797), and eventually six others from various recognised teachers.[17]

In 1793, at the age of forty-six, Shaykh Aḥmad took up residence in Basra, seeking refuge from the Wahhābi attack on his native al-Aḥsāʾ. From this time on, Shaykh Aḥmad remained in either the region of ʿatabāt or in Iran. He travelled widely and gained the respect of the Iranian religious and political elite. From 1807 to 1813, he lived mainly in Yazd. It was during this period that he was invited to visit the ruling Qajar monarch, Fatḥ ʿAlī Shāh (r. 1797-1834). In 1813 he moved from Yazd to Kirmānshāh where he lived until 1816. At this time he went to Mecca on pilgrimage after which he returned to the ʿatabāt. He eventually moved back to Kirmānshāh where he remained, except for a few visits to other Iranian centers, from 1818 until he departed for another pilgrimage to

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[14] See al-Aḥsāʾī, *Risāla*, 226, where Shaykh Aḥmad directly quotes from Ibn Abī Jumhūr, specifically his book *al-Mujlī*, a *ḥadīth* on the authority of the Prophet: "All existents appeared from the bāʾ of the *basmala* (*ẓaharat al-mawjūdāt min bāʾ bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*)." Aḥsāʾī adds that this is a coded symbol (*ramz*) for the Preserved Tablet, *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ* [cf. Qurʾān, LXXXV : 22]. See Lawson, "Ebn Abi Jumhūr", in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 7, New York: Routledge, 662-663 where this *ḥadīth* is discussed. See now, Sabine Schmidtke, *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölferschiitischen Islam des 9./15. Jahrhunderts: die Gedankenwelten des Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾīs (um 838/1434-35-nach 906/1501)*, Leiden: Brill 2000, 30-31, note 93, for references to other discussions of traces of Ibn Abī Jumhūr's influence on Shaykh Aḥmad, such as those in works by Murtaḍā Mudarrisī Chahārdihī, Corbin, Juan Ricardo I. Cole and Idris Samawi Hamid. The similarities between several specific formulations in *al-Mujlī* to the language of the writings of both al-Aḥsāʾī and Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī (d. 1259/1843) are presented in Todd Lawson, *The Qurʾān Commentary of Sayyid ʿAlī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, the Bab*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, [forthcoming in revised form as *Islamic Apocalyptic: the Literary Beginnings of the Babi Movement*, London: Routledge] McGill University 1987, 67, 118-120, 189-191, 205-206, 332. See also Vahid Rafati, *The Development of Shaykhī Thought in Shīʿī Islam*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California Los Angeles 1979, 22, 40.

[15] Rafati, "Development", 40, although he could have become acquainted with him through the works of Ibn Abī Jumhūr.

[16] Dennis MacEoin, *From Shaykhism to Bābism: A Study in Charismatic Renewal in Shīʿī Islam*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University 1979, 58 citing Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī, *Dalīl al-mutaḥayyarīn*, n.p.: n.p. 1276/1859-60, 12.

[17] For the names of those who issued the several *ijāzāt* to Shaykh Aḥmad see Rafati, "Development", 41. See also the relevant chapters in Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: the Making of the Babi Movement in Iran 1844-1850*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press 1989, and MacEoin, "Charismatic".

Mecca. It was during this journey that Shaykh Aḥmad died, not far from Mecca, in 1241/1826. He was buried in the Baqīʿ cemetery in Medina.[18]

For Aḥsāʾī, who would appear to subscribe to most if not all of the points listed above as constituting Kāshānī's teaching, the imaginal realm is further distinguished by its place in an overall cosmic design. Here one of Aḥsāʾī's more distinctive doctrines comes into play. In order to appreciate this doctrine and the implications it has for the present discussion, we must digress briefly. The doctrine is not found explicitly articulated in the passages selected for Corbin's Spiritual Body, but among the many places where it is expressed, one is particularly suited to the present discussion. This would be Aḥsāʾī's prolonged critique and unequivocal condemnation of Kāshānī's position on the topic of God's knowledge, or more accurately God's knowing.[19]

Aḥsāʾī's unrelenting rejection of Kāshānī's attachment to *waḥdat al-wujūd* is perhaps the most prominent feature of his critique. *Waḥdat al-wujūd*, existential monism, is understood by him to violate the utterly transcendent essence (*dhāt*) of God. This perhaps reflects faithfully a strong wariness – particularly amongst the Shiʿa of the ʿatabāt – about common interpretations of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that were seen as tainting the otherwise laudable – if not indispensable œuvre of Fayḍ al-Kāshānī.[20] Aḥsāʾī quotes as follows against those who profess *waḥdat al-wujūd*: "It is rather as our Imām, the Commander of the Faithful, a.s., has said: 'The created thing ends only in its likeness and the resort of the quest is only in its likeness. The road [to the Essence] is forever blocked, and the search for it is eternally barred.'"[21]

According to Aḥsāʾī, both Kāshānī and his teacher Mullā Ṣadrā had strayed from the true teachings of religion in that they had allowed the transcendence of the divine essence to be violated. For Aḥsāʾī, the cosmos or creation is, by very definition, everything other than God.

Here we must direct attention to a speculation touching upon the nature of Aḥsāʾī's spiritual and intellectual genealogy made by Hermann Landolt over

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[18] Rafati, "Development", 44-45. According to Amanat, *Resurrection*, 67, Aḥsāʾī's departure from Iran and ʿatabāt was precipitated by the enmity of a growing number of ranking Shiʿi ulama.

[19] See above note 10 for the bibliographic details for this work, *Risāla fī ʿilm Allāh*. Corbin does not refer to this work in his *Spiritual Body*. He characterizes Aḥsāʾī's originality as being equally at odds with the philosophers and the theologians (Corbin, *Spiritual*, 324, n. 57). What we are emphasizing here is that, on the basis of such texts as *Risāla fī ʿilm Allāh* (and passages of Aḥsāʾī's *Sharḥ ḥikmat ʿarshiyya* not highlighted by Corbin in his *Spiritual Body*) we see that for Aḥsāʾī, at least, the gulf separating him and Kāshānī (and his master) was unbridgeable.

[20] Idris Samawi Hamid, *The Metaphysics and Cosmology of Process According to Shaykh ʾAḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī: Critical Edition, Translation and Analysis of "Observations in Wisdom"*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo 1998, 22, 30-31.

[21] al-Aḥsāʾī, *Risāla*, 217. Incidentally, this happens to be a suggestive Arabic paraphrase of the Greek idea contained in the word *aporia* (i.e. "path strewn with obstacles").

thirty years ago. Landolt observed an intriguing similarity between the influential Iranian Sufi, ʿAlā l-Dawla Simnānī (d.1336) and Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī: both heavily criticised *waḥdat al-wujūd* and sought to replace it with a dynamic view of the divine Act (*fiʿl*), even as both were accused of having misunderstood *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the first place. In some ways, it is even more suggestive that both shared, as Landolt points out, similar views about a "subtle body".[22] It may be that Aḥsāʾī was directly influenced by Simnānī on these characteristic subjects.[23] It may be that both authors, one from the 14th, the other from the 19th centuries were ultimately indebted to the Ismāʿīlī tradition for their ontological views, since they appear to have so much in common with them. It has recently been observed that "the figures who come closest to prefiguring Simnānī's cosmological scheme are the Ismāʿīlī philosophers […] as-Sijistānī (d. between 996 and 1003) and Ḥāmid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 1020)."[24] Simnānī's distinctive attachment to the Family of the Prophet[25] may represent nothing more than *tashayyuʿ ḥasan* (good Shiʿism). Could it be that the same theological elan that characterised so much of Simnānī's influential legacy and great popularity contributed to Aḥsāʾī's fall from grace as the "philosopher of the age"?

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[22] Hermann Landolt, "Der Briefwechsel zwischen Kāshānī und Simnānī über Waḥdat al-Wuǧūd", in: *Der Islam* 50 (1973), 29-81, esp. 62-63. See also Hermann Landolt, "Simnānī on Waḥdat al-Wujūd", in: *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, Mehdi Mohaghegh and Hermann Landolt, eds., Tehran: The Institute of Islamic Studies McGill University, Tehran Branch 1971, 91-114, esp. 109-110. In 1985 Josef van Ess, "ʿAlā-al-Dawla Semnānī", in: *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 1, London-New York: Routledge-Kegan Paul, 774b-77a, citing Landolt, discussed further this problem. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols., Paris: Gallimard 1971-1972, vol. 4, 102, n. 133 compares Simnānī's *jism maḥshūr* with Ṣadrā's. Details on Simnānī's idea of the resurrection body in Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, 312-318.

[23] Even though the original sources are now better accessible than they were thirty years ago, still no one it seems has taken up Landolt's original suggestion to pursue a comparative study of terminology and thought shared by Simnānī and the Shaykhīs (Landolt, "Der Briefwechsel", 63). One exception may be noticed here, although there is no indication in his remarks that he is aware of Landolt's much earlier work: Hamid, *Metaphysics*, 49, points out that although it is difficult to determine any direct influence, Aḥsāʾī approvingly quotes a series of ontological technical terms from Simnānī in the course of his commentary on the ʿ*Arshiyya*. This statement of Hamid's seems, on the face of it, to be self-contradictory.

[24] Jamal J. Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God: the Life and Thought of ʿAlā ad-dawla as-Simnānī*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1995, 153-154.

[25] His veneration of the *ahl al-kiswa*, his spiritual pedigree through the Imams from ʿAlī b. Riḍā to the Prophet (skipping al-Ḥasan Ibn ʿAlī!), his citation of the *Nahj al-balāgha*, certainly do not need to mean more than this. Cf. Hartwig Cordt, *Die Sitzungen des ʿAlā ad-Dawla as-Simnānī*, Zurich: Juris 1977, 232-239. That one of his students, Shaykh Khalīfa Māzandarānī, is the founder of the radical Shiʿi Sarbadārī movement may mean nothing in this context but is nonetheless an interesting fact. See Elias, *Throne*, 51-53. A focused study on the question of Simnānī's real attitude to Shiʿism is perhaps needed. An earlier discussion is Marijan Molé, "Les Kubrawiya entre sunnisme et shiisme aux huitième et neuvième siècles de l'hégire", *Revue des Études Islamiques* 29 (1961), 61-142.

However this may be, when Aḥsāʾī says that the ʿālam al-mithāl occurs between the divine Acting (fiʿl) and the Acted Upon (mafʿūl),[26] his language is indicative of the wide gulf he saw separating him and Kāshānī. That the imaginal realm represents a "transitional stage" between fiʿl and mafʿūl is quite characteristic of Aḥsāʾī's thought. He raises this and related points repeatedly during his many condemnations of waḥdat al-wujūd and those, like Kāshānī, who propagate it. The point to be made by drawing attention to this incompatibility is to underscore the fact that in the East, unlike the West, the imaginal realm was such an unquestioned feature of religion and philosophy that even two such otherwise incompatible religious types had no choice but to uphold it.

It is also interesting to observe that both Kāshānī and Aḥsāʾī see the imaginal realm as the world where meetings with the Hidden Imām and the rest of the Fourteen Pure Ones occur. Kāshānī says: "It is in this intermediate world that the Holy Imams are present when they appear before a dying person, as related in so many traditional accounts."[27] But note that he does not speak about a person visiting the Imams apart from the circumstances of morbidity. In contrast, Shaykh Aḥmad speaks frequently about an ecstatic (ḥāl) encounter with the Imams in the imaginal realm. It was in this world that Shaykh Aḥmad received his ability to "understand" directly from the Imams themselves.[28] The reality of the imaginal realm for him is reflected in the strength of his own considerable certitude, whether applied to his reading of the Qurʾān or akhbār (statements in ḥadīth form that are traced to one of the 14 chahārdah maʿṣūmāt, or Sinless Ones – Muhammad, his daughter Fāṭima and the 12 Imams) or his critique of what he considered to be erroneous philosophical speculations. The source of this certitude is experiential – not logical[29] – namely, the ʿālam al-mithāl and his encounters with it. Such a function appears to be absent in Kāshānī's schema. That is to say, on the basis of the brief text we have on the topic, as well as scattered references in his other writings, Kāshānī does not speak of the ʿālam al-mithāl in the context of a type of ecstasy or spiritual encounter with the Imām resulting from individual spiritual discipline, sulūk.[30]

For Aḥsāʾī, the imaginal realm was also an essential stage in the development of the individual believer's "resurrection body". He speaks about this process in dizzying detail, whereas Kāshānī speaks only in very brief and general terms about the same problem in *Kalimāt-i maknūna*. It may be, of course, that Kāshānī's teachings about the imaginal realm represent in this instance a foundation for the

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[26] al-Aḥsāʾī, *Risāla*, 274-275.
[27] Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i maknūna*, 72.
[28] Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī, *Sīrat al-shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī*, Husayn ʿAlī, ed., Maḥfūẓ, Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-Maʿārif 1957/1372, 14-17.
[29] See Simnānī's dismissal of logic, noted in Landolt, "Simnānī", 96.
[30] In addition to Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i maknūna*, cf. his *ʿIlm al-yaqīn fī uṣūl al-dīn*, 2 vols., Muḥsin Bīdārfar, ed., Qum: Bīdār 1418/1997-98, vol. 2, 1060-1088.

later, very complex theories of Aḥsāʾī.[31] In such a case, Aḥsāʾī's theories may represent an example of "scientific progress", building upon, and working out the details of the insights, however general, of earlier scholars and making reasonable, by recourse to alchemy and appropriate support from the Qurʾān and *akhbār*, such categorical statements as the one by Kāshānī that the imaginal realm is where spirits are embodied and bodies are spiritualised.[32] It falls to Aḥsāʾī to offer the highly complex and somewhat baroque array of details explaining the operation left mysterious by Kāshānī, even though they both agree that this is where Resurrection truly occurs.

The main point here is that the Resurrection body is "made" by the believer as a result of his moral and ethical decisions and actions, his response to the primordial covenant and obedience to the *sharīʿat*. The example given by Aḥsāʾī, based on a specific theme found in the Qurʾān and *akhbār*, is of the individual who was created "according to what he was" at the time of the covenant (Qurʾān, VII : 172). In many cases, such individuals may have outwardly responded correctly to the divine question: "Am I not your Lord?", but inwardly their response was insufficient. The result, according to Aḥsāʾī, is that:

> [A]t the very moment when his secret thought was contradicting his answer, his "clay", that is, the consubstantial matter of his being, was molded by his thought in the likeness of an animal […] So when he descended to this world, […]and when he had consummated his choice by repetition and by applying his effort to what he had already undertaken in the world of seminal reasons [*ʿālam al-dharr*] what had existed in his secret thoughts was revealed in the light of day and he manifested the works of his animal nature. That is also why he is resurrected in the animal state.[33]

Aḥsāʾī's certitude that he understood the nature of God's knowledge and knowing as perfectly as possible in this sub-lunar realm was utterly unshakeable, even though (or perhaps because) such certitude is based ultimately on the aporia of

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[31] Certainly it is the case that many of these details are articulated in dialogue with Kāshānī's teacher, Mullā Ṣadrā. See the excerpts from Aḥsāʾī's *Shaḥr ḥikmat al-ʿarshiyya*, translated in Corbin, *Spiritual*, 203-221. It was in connection with his critique of the ʿ*Arshiyya*, for example, that charges of Aḥsāʾī's lack of philosophical sophistication were perhaps first voiced and recorded. See, for example, the remarks quoted from Mullā ʿAlī l-Nūrī in Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn al-Ḥusaynī l-ʿĀmilī, *Aʿyān al-Shīʿa*, 11 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Taʿāruf, 1406/1985-86, vol. 2, 591. For an extensive and invaluable study of this critique see Henry Corbin, *Mollā Sadrā Shīrāzī (980/1572-1050/1640) Le livre des pénétrations métaphysiques (Kitāb al-Mashāʾir)* Texte arabe publié avec la version persane de Badīʿol-Molk Mīrzā ʿEmad-oddawleh, traduction française et annotations, Tehran – Paris: Institut Français d'Iranologie de Téhéran & Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient A. Maisonneuve 1964) [reprinted Paris: Lagrasse 1981 without the Arabic and Persian texts] the reference here is to the original edition], s.v. index "Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (Shaykh)". For Corbin, the accusations against Shaykh Aḥmad are beneath contempt. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, 212-213.

[32] Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i maknūna*, 71. As Kāshānī says: "Through and in this world, ways of being and moral behaviour are personalized, and supersensory realities are manifested in the forms and figures with which they symbolize" (see Corbin, *Spiritual*, 177).

[33] Corbin, *Spiritual*, 220, extract from Aḥsāʾī's *Sharḥ ḥikmat al-ʿarshiyya*.

God's absolute unknowable Essence.[34] An example of the certitude I am speaking of is exemplified in Shaykh Aḥmad's response to those who charged him with relying upon strange and unsound *akhbār* to support his ideas. He serenely responded that he could distinguish a sound *ḥadīth* from a weak one through its "fragrance".[35] Such a response ultimately implies a rejection of *taqlīd* which is then not merely "imitation" but "blind imitation", in matters religious.[36]

For Aḥsāʾī, the imaginal realm would seem to be more a part of a process while for Kāshānī it is more of a place. This difference is in harmony with their respective and profoundly conflicting views on ontology. If we take the similar differences noted by Landolt in Simnānī's critique of Ibn ʿArabī as a model, for Kāshānī, absolute existence is "static" being, while for Aḥsāʾī, absolute existence is "dynamic" – God's Act, or more accurately, God's Acting. Such Acting issues somehow from the divine essence which remains separate, inaccessible and utterly ineffable. One of the ways in which Aḥsāʾī preserved this essence was through a complicated theory of temporal modes. In descending order, these are called *azal*, *sarmad*, *dahr* and *zamān*. The first is identified with the divine essence, and there is no more to be said. From this, however, issues the other three temporal stages. While there is no space here to explore this in any detail, it is interesting to note that while Aḥsāʾī locates the imaginal realm between the cosmogonic stages of *fiʿl* and *mafʿūl*, he also says that it is located between *dahr* and *zamān*.[37] Such speculations also seem to be absent from Kāshānī's work. And such details also empha-

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[34] See, e.g., Henry Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, Paris: Editions de l'Herne 1981; Corbin has elsewhere quoted Shaykh Aḥmad's own summation of the existential predicament as follows: "C'est pourquoi, dit Shaykh Ahmad, c'est bien vers l'Essence inaccessible que l'homme se tourne, bien qu'à tout jamais il ne puisse la trouver; et cependant il ne cesse de la trouver, alors même qu'à tout jamais elle lui reste inaccessible". (Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, 194).

[35] Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, 259.

[36] So vehement was his repudiation of *taqlīd* that several scholars have seen him as a democrat, hardly beyond the domain of "secular humanism". Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran: from Zoroaster to Bahaʾullah* [originally published as *Persia religiosa da Zaratustra a Bahāʾuʾllāh*, Milan: Il Saggiatore 1959], New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press 2000, 340-34, offers an alternate characterization: "Generally speaking, Shaikhism contains a stronger theological "impetus" and is more purely "religious" than philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā were. Iqbāl's statement that Shaikh Aḥmad was an enthusiastic reader of Mullā Ṣadrā's works is based on a misunderstanding: the Shaikhīs studied Mullā Ṣadrā but did not always approve of what he said; in fact, on some points (for example questions concerning the knowledge of God) they returned to less philosophical and more religious positions. If the complex theological position of the Shaikhīs could be summed up in a few words I would say that it is based on two points, one deeply religious and the other with rational tendencies to symbolic explanations (which sometimes go beyond the realistic symbolism of Ṣadrā) to enter into a truly rationalist allegory of the miraculous aspect of traditional theological legends. Everything is easily resolved by transposing the historical reality of the facts of revelation onto metahistorical planes (Muḥammad, ʿAlī, etc. = First Creature): it is here, and not in a humanistic rationalism, that the secret of Shaikhī symbolism lies."

[37] al-Aḥsāʾī, *Risāla*, 274.

sise the idea of process "through" time over place "in" space. Ultimately, Aḥsāʾī's critique of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and its later theoreticians such as Fayḍ Kāshānī is more purely experiential and theological than it is philosophical.

In closing this brief comparison of two modern Shiʿi theoreticians of the world of images, I would like to revisit the question of the absence of the imaginal realm from serious philosophical discourse and speculation in the West. Corbin traced this absence to the rejection of Avicennan angelology by Averroes, leaving only two, instead of three, worlds: the sensible and the intellectual. Rahman suggested, on the other hand, that one of the factors determining the extended life of the imaginal realm in the East was that thinkers and Sufis "in a milieu of political uncertainty, socioeconomic imbalance, and general external deterioration – sought refuge in a realm that was more satisfying and certainly more liquid and amenable to imaginative powers."[38]

For those who did maintain its ontic (i.e. scientific, philosophic) reality, however, it remained possible also to maintain the validity of such otherwise "irrational" religious doctrines as bodily resurrection, the ascension of the prophet and so on. Post-Enlightenment European religious discourse, as we know, wasted no time in demonstrating the falseness, not to mention the "spiritually" pernicious nature, of such beliefs. On the other hand, the Imagination itself remained of interest to certain rare thinkers in psychology (Jung), philosophy (Langer) and art (Blake, et al.). It is as if in the West the imaginative realm also somehow became more real than what the medieval scholars call the sensible realm. But it also became fully "secularised". Apart from such Westerners as Swedenborg and Blake, the major religious discussions ignored the imaginal realm, transferring whatever interest there might have been to areas of hermeneutics and philology, among other of the auxiliary theological sciences. The imaginal realm continues to have virtually no place in "serious" philosophical discussions. Quite to the contrary, recent condemnations by philosophers of "the image" have acquired the features of a near-phobic polemic:

> Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model, as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: That a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning, and that something could guarantee this exchange – God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. […]

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38   Rahman, "Dream", 419. He also suggests here that the suppression of the arts in the East may be partly responsible.

This would be the successive phases of the image:
it is the reflection of a basic reality.
it masks and perverts a basic reality.
it masks the absence of a basic reality.
it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.[39]

One imagines that Corbin himself might have predicted such extreme invective against the image. On the other hand, we occasionally find a validation of the imaginal in contemporary intellectual discourse. Thus Castoriadis:

> [P]hilosophers almost always start by saying: "I want to see what being is, what reality is. Now, here is a table; what does this table show to me as characteristic of a real being?" No philosopher ever started by saying: "I want to see what being is, what reality is. Now, here is my memory of my dream of last night; what does this show me as characteristic of a real being?" No philosopher ever starts by saying "Let the Requiem of Mozart be a paradigm of being", and seeing in the physical world a deficient mode of being, instead of looking at things the other way around, instead of seeing in the imaginary, i.e., human mode of existence, a deficient or secondary mode of being.[40]

Needless to say, the philosophers mentioned here are not our Eastern sages. Yet this passage seems quite remarkable as an example of the transposition, cum secularisation, of the ideas we have been speaking about.

The world today is in serious travail, this no one denies. Those who value the realm of the imaginal tend to agree that one of the reasons for our current predicament is precisely the denial of that world. Here it is impossible to forbear mentioning that of the numerous methods of entering or encountering the imaginal realm discussed by our authors (i.e., the dream, visions, spiritual ecstasy) there is one that seems to stand out as particularly emblematic for us, whether in the East or the West. Most of our Eastern theoreticians of the imaginal realm agree that one of the most ready means of encounter is none other than pure clear water, on whose luminous surface images from that realm may appear to us as guides and teachers. Thus we are asked to bear in mind that while the earth's most valuable natural resource is absolutely necessary for biological life, it is equally necessary for the life of the soul. Indeed, it is at the "problem" of water where soul and body meet today. It may therefore be fitting to close with a few words from one of the more serious modern students and theoreticians of the imagination, the American poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) who long ago told

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[39] Jean Baudrillard, "The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra", in: *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Thomas Docherty, ed., New York: Columbia University Press 1993, 194.

[40] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Imaginary Creation in the Social Historical Domain", in: *Disorder and Order: Proceedings of the Stanford International Symposium (Sept. 14-16, 1981)*, Edward P. Livingston, ed., Saratoga: Anma Libri 1984, 146-161, this is from p. 148. See also Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, David Ames Curtis, ed. and trans., Stanford, California: Stanford University Press 1997 [originally published as *Les carrefours du labyrinthe, tome 3: le monde morcelé* Paris: Seuil 1990].

us that the "imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos."[41] His poem, entitled "Exercise for Professor X"[42] was written between the years 1913-15 and leaves us with the congenial images of water and light – and maybe even hope.

> I see a camel in my mind.
> I do not say to myself, in English,
> "There is a camel."
> I do not talk to myself.
> On the contrary, I watch
> And a camel passes in my mind.
> This might happen to a Persian.
> My mind and a Persian's
> Are as much alike, then,
> As moonlight on the Atlantic
> Is like moonlight on the Pacific.

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[41] Wallace Stevens, chap. "Imagination as Value", *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination,* New York: Knopf 1951, 153. It is perhaps unnecessary to observe that neither of our eastern authors would have much patience with such modern ideas as chaos.

[42] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, New York: Library of America 1997, 519.