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

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BEIRUT 2010

ERGON VERLAG WÜRZBURG
IN KOMMISSION
Cover picture: Gulzar Calligraphic panel by Husayn Zarrin Qalam, 13th/18th century: prayers directed to God, the Prophet Muhammad, and his son-in-law ʿAlī (Library of Congress, African and Middle Eastern Division, Washington, D.C. 20540).

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

ISBN 978-3-89913-808-5
ISSN 0067-4931

ISBN 978-2-909961-48-4

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Ergon-Verlag GmbH
Keesburgstr. 11, D-97074 Würzburg

Druck: PBtisk, Pribram
Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier
Shaykh ʿAlī mad al-ʿAhsāʾī

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. 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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von Franz and Hillman, among others. Finally, a recent book on mysticism has reasserted the value and reality of the imaginal realm, again influenced by Corbin. 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 Suhrawardi and his followers to Ibn ʿArabi (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. 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-Aḥṣāʾī (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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important to emphasise, philosophical presuppositions take on some of the character of religious beliefs (‘aqa‘i‘d). 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 commonplace, particularly in later medieval Shi‘i thought. That is to say, for both men the world of images functions as a bridge between reason and revelation. Yet, the differences between their respective teachings surrounding this topic are fundamental, ultimately indicating two mutually exclusive religious types.

Kāshānī is widely esteemed as one of the pillars of post-Safavid Shi‘i 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 (philosophy), the Kalimat-i makhnuṭa and the Uṣūl al-ma‘ārif. He was also the student of Sayyid Mājīd al-Bahrānī (d. 1657), the avid Akhbārī scholar. Kāshānī’s formation combined salient features of the Akhbārī approach to fiqh with the Ṣadrīan approach to metaphysics and ontology. This also involved a further advance in the Shi‘i domestication of the thought of Ibn ʿArabi, a process that may be seen to have begun as early as Maytham al-Bahrānī (d. ca. 1280). These elements, there can be no doubt, also combined with ṣūratqa-type Sufi influences, although apparently he did not commit himself to any particular order. Whatever the reality of


9 Leonard Lewisohn, “Sufism and the School of Ḥefān: Ṭasaawwuf and ‘Īsfān 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 thorough 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 controversial Nūrbakhshi 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 Shi‘ism. 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 Shi‘i 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 Shi‘i 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 Qurʿān.

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 (Qurʿān 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 ‘Arabi and the less well known Ibn Abi Jumhūr (d. after 1501), author of the Kitāb al-muḫlī. His teachers in his homeland included the Dhahabi Sufi, Qutb al-Dīn Muhammad Shīrāzī, through whom he possibly gained his first (negative?) exposure to the work of Ibn ‘Arabi. In 1772-3, Shaykh Ahmad left his home to pursue advanced religious studies in the ṣaḥāḥāt shrine cities of Kāẓīmayn, Najaf, and Karbalā. In 1209/1794-5, he received his first ijāza from the renowned scholar Sayyid Muhammad Mahdī Ibn Murtada l-Ṭabāṭaba’ī Bahr al-ʿUlūm (d. 1212/1797), and eventually six others from various recognised teachers.

In 1793, at the age of forty-six, Shaykh Ahmad took up residence in Basra, seeking refuge from the Wāḥābī attack on his native al-ʿAḥsāʾ. From this time on, Shaykh Ahmad remained in either the region of ṣaḥāḥāt 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, Fath ʿAlī Shāh (r. 1797-1834). In 1813 he moved from Yazd to Kīrmānshāh where he lived until 1816. At this time he went to Mecca on pilgrimage after which he returned to the ṣaḥāḥāt. He eventually moved back to Kīrmānshāh where he remained, except for a few visits to other Iranian centers, from 1818 until he departed for another pilgrimage to Mecca.

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15 Rafati, “Development”, 40, although he could have become acquainted with him through the works of Ibn Abi Jumhūr.


17 For the names of those who issued the several ijāzāt to Shaykh Ahmad 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 Ahmad died, not far from Mecca, in 1241/1826. He was buried in the Baqī‘ cemetery in Medina.18

For Aḥsā‘ī, 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 Aḥsā‘ī’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 Aḥsā‘ī’s prolonged critique and unequivocal condemnation of Kāshānī’s position on the topic of God’s knowledge, or more accurately God’s knowing.19

Aḥsā‘ī’s unrelenting rejection of Kāshānī’s attachment to wahdat al-wujūd is perhaps the most prominent feature of his critique. Wahdat 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 Shi‘a of the ‘atabāt – about common interpretations of wahdat al-wujūd that were seen as tainting the otherwise laudable – if not indispensable – œuvre of Fāyḍ al-Kāshānī.20 Aḥsā‘ī quotes as follows against those who profess wahdat 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 Aḥsā‘ī, 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 Aḥsā‘ī, 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 Aḥsā‘ī’s spiritual and intellectual genealogy made by Hermann Landolt over

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18 Rafati, “Development”, 44-45. According to Amanat, Resurrection, 67, Aḥsā‘ī’s departure from Iran and ‘atabāt was precipitated by the enmity of a growing number of ranking Shi‘i ulama.

19 See above note 10 for the bibliographic details for this work, Risāla fī ‘ilm Allāh. Corbin does not refer to this work in his Spiritual Body. He characterizes Aḥsā‘ī’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 ‘ilm Allāh (and passages of Aḥsā‘ī’s Shahr hikmat ‘arshiyya not highlighted by Corbin in his Spiritual Body) we see that for Aḥsā‘ī, at least, the gulf separating him and Kāshānī (and his master) was unbridgeable.


21 al-Aḥsā‘ī, 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, ʿAlāʾ b-Dawla Simnānī (d.1336) and Aḥmad al-Aḥṣāʾī: both heavily criticised wahdat al-wujūd and sought to replace it with a dynamic view of the divine Act (fīʿ), even as both were accused of having misunderstood wahdat 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 Aḥṣāʾī 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 Hāmid al-Din al-Kirmānī (d. after 1020).”24 Simnānī’s distinctive attachment to the Family of the Prophet25 may represent nothing more than tashbīyūṭ hasan (good Shiʿism). Could it be that the same theological elan that characterised so much of Simnānī’s influential legacy and great popularity contributed to Aḥṣāʾī’s fall from grace as the “philosopher of the age”?


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 Shaykhis (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, Aḥṣāʾī approvingly quotes a series of ontological technical terms from Simnānī in the course of his commentary on the ʿArshīyya. This statement of Hamid’s seems, on the face of it, to be self-contradictory.


25 His veneration of the ahl al-kiswa, his spiritual pedigree through the Imams from ʿAli b. Ṭāhā 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 ʿAlāʾ ad-Dawla as-Simnānī, Zurich: Juris 1977, 232-239. That one of his students, Shaykh Khalīfa Māzandarānī, is the founder of the radical Shiʿī 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 ‘ālam al-mithāl occurs between the divine Acting (fīl) and the Acted Upon (maʿfūl), his language is indicative of the wide gulf he saw separating him and Kāshānī. That the imaginal realm represents a “transitional stage” between fīl and maʿfūl is quite characteristic of Aḥsāʾī’s thought. He raises this and related points repeatedly during his many condemnations of wahdat 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.” 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. 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 hadīth form that are traced to one of the 14 chabārdah maṣūmāt, or Sinless Ones – Muḥammad, 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 – namely, the ‘ālam 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 ‘ālam al-mithāl in the context of a type of ecstasy or spiritual encounter with the Imām resulting from individual spiritual discipline, suluk.

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

27 Kāshānī, Kalimāt-i maknūna, 72.
29 See Simnānī’s dismissal of logic, noted in Landolt, “Simnānī”, 96.
later, very complex theories of Aḥšāʾī.\(^{31}\) In such a case, Aḥšāʾī’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 Aḥšāʾī 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 *šarīʿat*. The example given by Aḥšāʾī, 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 Aḥšāʾī, 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.\(^{33}\)

Aḥšāʾī’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 Aḥšāʾī’s *Shabr ʾikmat al-ʿarshiyya*, translated in Corbin, *Spiritual*, 203-221. It was in connection with his critique of the ‘ʿArshiyya, for example, that charges of Aḥšāʾī’s lack of philosophical sophistication were perhaps first voiced and recorded. See, for example, the remarks quoted from Mullā ‘Ali l-Nūrī in Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amin al-Ḥusayni l-ʿĀmilī, *Aʿyān al-ʾShīʿa*, 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 (Kiṭāb al-Mashāʾir)* Texte arabe publié avec la version persane de Bādiʿol-Molk Ṣadrā ‘Emadoddawleh, 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 “ʿĀhad al-Aḥšāʾī (Shaykh)”. For Corbin, the accusations against Shaykh Ahmad are beneath contempt. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 4, 212-213.

\(^{32}\) Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i māknūna*, 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 Aḥšāʾī’s *Shahr ʾikmat al-ʿarshiyya*. 
God’s absolute unknowable Essence. 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”. Such a response ultimately implies a rejection of taqlīd which is then not merely “imitation” but “blind imitation”, in matters religious.

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 ʿArabi 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. Such speculations also seem to be absent from Kāshānī’s work. And such details also empha-

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 Baha’u’llah [originally published as Persia religiosa da Zaratustra a Baha’u’llah, 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. Iqābī’s statement that Shaikh Ahmad was an enthusiastic reader of Mullā Ṣadrā’s works is based on a misunderstanding: the Shaikhis 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 Shaikhis 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 metaphistorical planes (Muḥammad, ʿAlī, etc. = First Creature): it is here, and not in a humanistic rationalism, that the secret of Shaikh symbolism lies.”

37 al-Aḥṣāʾī, Risāla, 274.
sise the idea of process “through” time over place “in” space. Ultimately, Aḥsāʾī’s critique of ṭawḥat 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 Shiʿī 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.”

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 uninter rupted circuit without reference or circumference. […]

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:

[\textit{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


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.

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.