

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

The spiritual, mystical, and esoteric doctrines and practices of Islam, which may be conveniently, if not quite satisfactorily, labeled as Sufism, have been among the main avenues of the understanding of this religion in Western academic circles, and possibly among Western audiences in general. This stems from a number of reasons, not the least of which is a diffuse sense that Sufism has provided irreplaceable keys for reaching the core of Muslim identity over the centuries, while providing the most adequate responses to contemporary disfigurements of the Islamic tradition. It is in this context that we propose, in the current book, to show how the works of those whom Pierre Lory has called the “mystical ambassadors of Islam”¹ may shed light on the oft-neglected availability of a profound and integral apprehension of Islam, thereby helping to dispel some problematic assumptions feeding many misconceptions of it. The four authors whom we propose to study have introduced Islam to the West through the perspective of the spiritual dimension that they themselves unveiled in the Islamic tradition. These authors were mystical “ambassadors” of Islam in the sense that their scholarly work was intimately connected to an inner call for the spiritual depth of Islam, the latter enabling them to introduce that religion to Western audiences in a fresh and substantive way. It may be helpful to add, in order to dispel any possible oversimplifications, that these authors should not be considered as representatives of Islam in the literal sense of one who has converted to that religion and become one of its spokesmen.² None of these four “ambassadors” was in fact Muslim in the conventional, external, and exclusive sense of the word, even though two of them did attach themselves formally to the Islamic tradition in view of an affiliation to Sufism, in Arabic *tasawwuf*. The four of them experienced, at any rate, the spiritual influence of Islam in a very direct, profound, and powerful manner.

By contrast with some other areas of Western scholarly discourse on Islam, most of the greatest works of French Islamic Studies have been informed by an inquiry into the inner dimensions of Islam.³ These terms cover a diverse range of phenomena, from popular *tasawwuf* to Shī’ite theosophy, but they

all point to an understanding of Islam that breaks away from the reductionist view of that religion as a strictly legal, moral, and political reality. This may prima facie come as a surprise in light of the French and French-speaking intellectual and academic climate, one that has been most often characterized by its rationalist and secular bent, but most of the seminal contributions to the field published in the French language have tended to take the road of an inquiry into the supra-legal and supra-rational aspects of Islam, whether this be as a reaction against the rationalist and positivist ambience of French academia, or as a result of a residual but enduring influence of the Christian spiritual heritage. In this context, the current study focuses on two intellectual lineages within the domain of Islamic studies: One ran from the seminal and “revolutionary” contribution of Louis Massignon (1883–1962) to Islamic Studies and was continued, along a significantly different line—more gnostic than mystical, more centered on Shī’ism than on Sunni Islam—by his student Henry Corbin (1903–1978); the second originated with the works of René Guénon (1886–1951) in metaphysics and the study of symbols, and was pursued in a distinct way by the religious philosopher Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), whose notions of esoterism and tradition have played an influential role in redefining the nature of religious intellectuality among a significant number of contemporary Islamic and non-Islamic scholars. One of the theses put forward in the present book is that these two intellectual lineages are complementary in more than one way: On the one hand, Massignon and Corbin were both deeply rooted in the Christian tradition (Catholic in the former, Protestant in the latter) while being intensely involved in a scholarly redefinition of the academic study of Islam; on the other hand, both Guénon and Schuon developed their works outside of academic institutions and protocols, and were able to illuminate central facets of the Islamic tradition from the point of view of an actual participation in its spiritual economy. This book aims at introducing these four major figures to the English-speaking world by concentrating on their parallel and complementary contributions to a wider and deeper understanding of Islam as an intellectual and spiritual reality. Such a task is all the more important in that most of Massignon’s work has not yet been translated, just as some important books by Corbin—such as his monumental *En islam iranien*, are not accessible in English. As for the books of Schuon, they are now widely available in English, but his correspondence and some of his unpublished writings are not, and his work has yet to give rise to a wide spectrum of in-depth studies. Finally, while most of Guénon’s writings were recently or less recently translated, they remain poorly distributed in the English-speaking world.⁴

Our previous works have focused upon the role of Sufism, Shī’ite *‘irfān*, gnosis or spiritual knowledge, and spiritual hermeneutics in the redefinition of Islam propounded by Massignon and Schuon.⁵ This inquiry extends to the works of Corbin and Guénon to shed light on such central questions as the complex relationship between Sufism and Christianity, the spiritual dimension

of Quranic hermeneutics, the role of the feminine in Islamic spirituality, the spiritual implications of the concept of *jihād*, or striving, and the universal horizon of Islam as most directly manifested in the Schuonian notion of the “transcendent unity of religions.” What has been stated so far indicates clearly that the current study addresses pressing questions that are most relevant to our present-day international predicament since studies in Sufism and Islamic spirituality have been widely recognized as most conducive to bridging the gap between Islam and the West, opening the way to fruitful dialogue between Islam and the Christian traditions, reconnecting a section of the younger Islamic intelligentsia with its own spiritual heritage, and providing original answers to the challenges of modernization and fundamentalism by unveiling and explaining the inner and universal dimension of Islam.

Before we engage in a brief introduction to the life and works of these four figures whom we have deemed most directly representative of an “inner Islam,” we would like to point out the main reasons for this choice, thereby outlining some of the guiding principles of our current inquiry. First, one must bear in mind that all the writers under consideration were Westerners born within the religious fold of Christianity. As a result, they envisaged Islam a priori from the outside, or rather independently from the social and cultural determinations that weigh upon most Muslim-born faithful and scholars. This situation, which could be *prima facie* envisaged as defective, or prejudicial to their understanding of the religion, has provided them, in fact, with a number of opportunities and advantages that we would like to analyze in the following lines.

Although the assimilation of the principles and practices of any given religion through familial and social conditioning has been universally a normative process, we would like to suggest that the particular conditions prevalent in the modern world in the last few centuries, and even more so in the last decades, have been far from facilitating an access to the spiritual fruits of the tradition. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that, in Islam, the inner realities of the religious universe have become considerably more difficult, if not impossible, to access through this normative channel. As we will see, this has been by and large a result of an increased “ideologization” of Islam. By contrast, in a traditional setting such as was prevalent at the time of classical Islam the entire society and the educational structures were set in such a way as to preserve and promote an organic hierarchy of knowledge and action that integrated the whole array of human endeavors and culminated in the spiritual sphere of inner realization. In fact, the civilizational structures of Islam lead to contemplation since, as Schuon has written, “one of the reasons for Islam is precisely the possibility of a ‘monastery-society,’ if one may express it so: That is, Islam aims to carry the contemplative isolation in the very midst of the activities of the world.”⁶ In underlining the spiritual

entelechy of the Islamic tradition, we do not intend to paint an idealized picture of traditional Islamic societies, which, like any other society, entailed flaws, disruptions, and disorders, but we merely wish to stress the principle of a general cohesiveness of vision and purpose that was widely recognized as finding its ultimate goal and achievement in *wilāyah* and *hikmah*, sanctity and wisdom. This socioreligious order was therefore innervated by a sense of transcendence, and each of its facets was, at least normatively, a stage on the path of realization of the highest religious knowledge, or a component thereof. Spiritual education was therefore gradual and integrative: Access to the highest spiritual realms presupposed one had acquired a sure footing in the preliminary stages of religious training. Sufi hagiography is replete with anecdotes that highlight the legal, moral, and social preconditions for the spiritual path. Thus, for example, in the eighteenth century, a Sufi Shaykh like Mūlay al-‘Arabī ad-Darqāwī could set the outer knowledge of the *sharī‘ah*, or Islamic law, as a precondition for any further advancement, while at the same time emphasizing a need to focus on the essentials of this external domain.⁷ In the same order of consideration, Michel Chodkiewicz has emphasized the extent to which one of the greatest gnostics of Islam, Ibn ‘Arabī, “establishes (. . .) an exact correlation between spiritual realization (*tahaqquq*) and humble, painstaking submission to the *sharī‘ah*.”⁸ Let us mention, finally, that some of the greatest spiritual figures of Islam, the so-called *malāmatiyyah*, or people of the “way of blame,” cultivated the study of exoteric sciences, the *sharī‘ah* and *adab* (conformity to social and religious usages) as an inner discipline of perfection and a way to dissimulate their inner station in order to preserve their spiritual sincerity.⁹ All of the preceding examples highlight the traditional connection and organic cohesiveness between the more or less external dimensions of the Islamic context and its innermost spiritual goal and content.

The contemporary situation is different on two counts at least. First, the integrality of the hierarchy of knowledge is far from being guaranteed, if only because spirituality, or Sufism as spiritual training, has tended to recede, in most sectors, from religious pre-eminence, or because it has been forcefully eradicated and expelled. Second, the irruption of Western modes of thinking, and the introduction of heterogeneous educational structures, has upset the balance of religious life and called into question some of the basic requirements of the traditional approach, beginning with the understanding of the nature and status of religious and spiritual authority. In one sense, the field of religious knowledge has been spiritually decapitated, in another it has been corroded by epistemological premises that are foreign to it. This is epitomized by the intellectual disorientation of many Muslim scholars, whose anchoring in the traditional notion of *tawhīd*, or doctrine of Unity, has become more and more superficial and tenuous, and certainly not central to their primary philosophical concerns. Such a corrosion has been far from being limited to modernist circles but has in fact characterized, in an even more direct manner, the so-called “fundamentalist” quarters that, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr

judiciously pointed out, “outwardly oppose things Western while at the same time allowing modern ideas to fill the vacuum created in their mind and soul as a result of the rejection of the Islamic intellectual tradition.”¹⁰ Such a state of affairs leaves most sociocultural structures and living representatives of Islam hardly able to provide nourishment to intellectual and spiritual seekers. The socioreligious and cultural apparatus of the religion is torn, as it were, between a literalist crispation on a mostly external comprehension of the Islamic path and an utter surrender to the ideological trends of modernity, the former attitude not being necessarily exclusive of the latter. This is what has been rightfully described as an “ideologization” of Islam, whether it proceeds from a desire to “adapt” Islam to the circumstantial norms and directions of the modern world and dilute it into a secular contemporary ethos of humanitarian and democratic values, or to extol its message as a rigid and proselytizing sociopolitical agenda that would withstand and ultimately overcome “globalization” perceived as a Trojan horse for Western politico-economic interests and secular goals. It has been revealingly noted that, in both camps, the emphasis of religious discourse and concern has shifted from God to Islam, if one may say so. In other words, the path has become the end, precisely because it is upon the path that worldly interests of power and counter-power converge, together with the collective passions that are their vehicle and their fuel. This paradoxical commonality of focus between “modernist” and “fundamentalist” forces manifests itself through an indifference to metaphysics, mysticism, the science of virtues, and the arts. These aspects of religious expression, which defined for centuries the very language of the tradition, have been abandoned or neglected as “irrelevant” to the interests of the modern world. Instead, wide segments of the Muslim liberal intelligentsia and leadership have busied themselves discussing how to dissolve Islam into modernity in order to allow Muslims to enjoy the worldly fruits of the latter, or, in “fundamentalist” circles, how to “submit” the modern world to “Islam” by expelling or annihilating any kind of alterity and diversity from the “perfect” restoration or realization of an “Islamic society.” Such is by and large the situation of contemporary Islam. In a striking paradox, it must be suggested that those who have been exposed to a religious ambience may be the most incapacitated in their ability to recognize, and even envision, the inner, spiritual sap of their faith. The social, cultural, and familial circles that used to be potential ways of access to the core of the tradition have nearly, if not utterly, become an obstacle to spiritual fruition.

By contrast, the preliminary status of “outsider,” which has characterized the Western seeker and scholar, guarantees a strong measure of independence vis-à-vis the limitations and deviations of the contemporary community of believers, or *Ummah*.¹¹ It fosters a fresh intellectual outlook that is unhindered by sociopsychological conventions. As Latifa Ben Mansour has cogently noted, an access to the spiritual treasures of Islam that would have remained buried under the rubble of conventional religion and narrow, or ideological,

interpretations of the creed, is now most often opened through the works of Western intellectuals sympathetic to Islam such as Arberry, Nicholson, Massignon, Goldziher, Berque, and Corbin.¹² Their cultural and social exteriority vis-à-vis Muslim structures has provided the most spiritually inspired Western scholars with the freedom to encounter Islam on the highest reaches of its spiritual territory. As a result, whereas “fear” used to be the initial step leading to knowledge—in the sense that elementary notions and fundamental religious discipline and training would be the first steps on the way to spiritual realization, it is now spiritual knowledge, or at least knowledge concerning spirituality, that may give access, downstream as it were and by way of spiritual consequence, to the whole realm of religious “fear.” In other words, a theoretical recognition, or intimations, of the spiritual goal of the religious tradition has become the primary key to an understanding of the need for the whole gamut of mental structures and practices that define Islam as an institutional set of prescriptions and proscriptions. This anomalous situation bears witness to the breakdown, or radical impoverishment, of traditional authorities and structures, while at the same time providing unprecedented opportunities in terms of access to the core metaphysical and mystical substance of Islam. This explains why and how a French Catholic scholar such as Massignon, nourished by the mystical trends of Christianity, found himself in a more advantageous position than most of his Muslim counterparts to rediscover the towering figure of Mansūr al-Hallāj, and Henry Corbin, hailing as he did from the study of German phenomenology, was more acutely prepared to understand the *kashf al-mahjūb*, a process of unveiling of meaning through spiritual intuition, of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Islam and Shī’ite gnosis (it is also the title of a major Sufi treatise by the eleventh-century mystic Hujwīrī) than the Muslim academics whom Daryush Shayegan has analyzed as victims of a tragic “cultural schizophrenia.” Shayegan has made a forceful case against the “grafting” of Westernization and neo-Islamization on contemporary Muslim minds and societies. For him, these artificial graftings result from a “mutilated outlook,” that is to say, an incomplete contextualization and integration of tradition and modernity on the part of individuals and societies that claim to pursue either, or both, of them.¹³ This lack of intellectual integration is a major obstacle to a thorough and balanced understanding of the Islamic spiritual tradition, while at the same time obstructing a lucid understanding of the modern world. Such a dysfunctional ideological context allows one to better understand why it is not uncommon for Muslim intellectuals to rediscover their own spiritual heritage, or at least recognized why and how it should be taken seriously, through Western secondary sources and interpretations.

The case of Seyyed Hossein Nasr is quite eloquently representative in this respect. While Nasr was born in Iran and fed from his earliest age on the spiritual nourishment of the *‘irfānī* tradition through the twin channels of the Persian poetic tradition and his intellectual family heritage, his destiny was

to move to the West, where he studied modern physics and lost for a time his spiritual bearings before gaining a new, deeper grounding in Islamic spirituality and world mysticism through the later discovery of the works of Western interpreters of the Islamic tradition such as Guénon, Schuon, and Corbin. As a student at MIT he was soon to realize that the study of modern physics “could not provide ultimate knowledge of the physical world” and the question then came to his mind, “if not modern physics, then what kind of science could provide such an answer?”¹⁴ Focusing then on philosophy, Nasr was introduced to the works of René Guénon by the Italian philosopher Giorgio di Santillana, and turned to “traditional cosmologies from the Pythagorean and Platonic (. . .) to Aristotelian physics, to the *Sāṃkhya* in Hinduism, to Chinese philosophies of nature found in Taoism and Neo-Confucianism.”¹⁵ It is through contact with the writings of Guénon, and later those of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Schuon, that Nasr was able to settle his intellectual and spiritual crisis. A number of Muslim intellectuals, mostly among those trained in the West, have experienced a similar itinerary through the mediation of interpretations issued from outside the cultural terrain of Islam. It may be that the often-quoted *hadīth*, or Prophetic tradition, “Islam began in exile and will return to exile”¹⁶ is not without relevance in this context, by suggesting the need for a “spiritual exile” as a precondition to a deeper interiorization of the message of that religion.

With regard to the religious predispositions of our four “mystical ambassadors” to enter the world of spiritual Islam, it must even be suggested that an a priori familiarity with the Christian emphasis on an inner, extra-legal, definition of religion may have been for them a fertile ground to become attuned to the manifestations of an inner Islam. While this very aspect has been taken by some Muslim intellectuals as conducive to a distorting bias on the part of Christian-born Islamicists, it can be retorted that this argument may be returned against its proponent. To wit, a measure of Christian “ex-centricity” may constitute a further qualification when it comes to an intuition of the diversity of degrees and modes of manifestation of Islam. A religion is neither absolutely unique in all respects, nor a “spiritual island” isolated from interactions and cross-fertilization with other faiths. While it is undeniable that Massignon’s Catholic outlook may have sometimes amounted to a sort of “Christianization” of Islam, it also endowed him with a spiritual sensibility that facilitated his understanding of the Christic or *‘isawī* aspects and traditions of this religion. Moreover, it thereby provided a bridge from Christianity to Islam by making use of some elements of the Christian outlook as particularly consonant ways of “entering” the world of Islam and sympathizing with it. By contrast, while Islam is prima facie a law, an exclusive, socially conditioned, consideration of this fact may obstruct one’s perception of the deeper, more hidden, reaches of Muslim spirituality.

As a complement to the apprehension of Islam from outside the realm of an a priori cultural assimilation of its message, we would like to emphasize the

fact that all of the four figures that we propose to study have nourished their meditations through the direct transmission of a knowledge imparted to them by living and authoritative representatives of the intellectual and spiritual traditions of Islam. In fact the a priori outsider's perspective of these scholars would have had less or little value and impact had it not been informed by a living, authentic connection with some of the highest living authorities of Islam. In all four cases, intellectual and mystical intuitions were either catalyzed or sustained by direct contact with Sufi and "ʿirfanī scholars and masters. The case of Massignon was in that respect somewhat distinct in the sense that his primary Islamic contact was with al-Hallāj, a tenth-century mystic of Baghdad who was put to death for having voiced publicly a state of inner union in ecstatic terms. If Massignon devoted a major part of his scholarly career to the study of this figure, which lies at the center of his magnum opus in four volumes, the *Passion of al-Hallāj*, it would be insufficient to categorize his relationship with the Muslim mystic as a mere scholarly rapport. In point of fact, Massignon considered his discovery of Hallāj to be a spiritually seminal, intimately personal and life-altering encounter that pertains more to the realm of living relationships than to that of archival study. Besides, Hallāj was not the only "living" source for Massignon's inquiry into Islam. His familiarity with the world of spiritual Islam was primarily predicated on personal contacts and tireless traveling, and meeting with Muslims of all walks of life, through the lands of *dār al-islām*. One of the greatest spiritual lessons that Massignon confessed having learnt harks back, in fact, to his personal bond of friendship with the Alusi family of Baghdad, in a context in which his life was endangered and he was most needful of human guarantors and protectors.¹⁷ As for Henry Corbin, it must be noted that from 1954 till his death in 1978, the French philosopher spent half of each year in Tehran. He considered Iran to be his "elective homeland" ("*ma patrie d'élection*") and was privy to the philosophical and theological conversation of traditional and sapiential authorities among whom Allāma Tabātabā'ī, a master of theoretical gnosis, Sayyid Muhammad Kāzīm 'Assār, a great authority in the fields of law and philosophy, and Jawād Nurbakhsh, Sufi Shaykh of the *Ni'matullāhī* order. He was considered by these masters of gnosis and philosophy to be one of them. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that by the time of his death in 1978, Corbin had become one of the important intellectual figures of the spiritual landscape of Iran, and he continues to be well-known in religious circles devoted to esoteric religious knowledge.¹⁸

The same cannot quite be said of René Guénon in relation to Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁹ Although at his death in 1954 a number of prominent Cairene personalities bore witness to his intellectual fame, especially in the Francophone milieu of Egypt,²⁰ it appears that the relationships between the Shaykh 'Abd al-Wāhid Yahyā and the Islamic society that surrounded him were in fact minimal, and confined to his family circle and some attendance at Sufi gatherings. The somewhat retiring life of Guénon and his non-affiliation

with academic institutions or social organizations were no doubt the primary reasons of this state of affairs. Actually one of the main concerns of Guénon from the time he settled in Cairo in 1930 was to preserve his privacy and tranquility against unwelcome visitors from the press and the world. His main intellectual contact with the traditional Egyptian elite was through the major figure of the Shaykh ‘Abd al-Halīm Mahmūd, an authority in both the fields of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence and *tasawwuf*. ‘Abd al-Halīm Mahmūd was actually to become the Shaykh al-Azhar between 1973 and 1978. He authored a book on Guénon that was published in 1954 under the title *al-Faylasuf al-Muslim: René Guénon ‘Abd al-Wāhid Yahyā*, which was to be expanded in a segment of a book devoted to the *Madrasa Shādhiliyyah* published in 1968 and in which Guénon is referred to as “*al-‘arīf bi-Llāh*” (“the knower by God.”).²¹ Before settling in Cairo, Guénon had established contact with the Shaykh ‘Ilaysh al-Kabīr through the intermediary of a *muqaddam* (representative) of this Shaykh, the Swedish painter Ivan Agueli (‘Abd al-Hādī). ‘Ilaysh al-Kabīr belonged to a Moroccan family settled in Egypt and occupied a position of authority both in the exoteric field of the Mālikī juridical *madhhab* and the esoteric domain of his Sufi order, the *Tarīqah Shādhiliyyah*. Guénon had been corresponding with him before World War I, and he entered the Islamic tradition in 1912 as a result of this contact. He dedicated his book *The Symbolism of the Cross*, published in 1931, to this *Shaykh* with the following words: “To the venerated memory of al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Ilaysh al-Kabīr al-‘Ālim al-Mālikī al-Maghribī, to whom I owe the first idea of this book.”²² It is important to stress that Guénon wrote a book devoted to the central symbol of Christianity at the suggestion of a Sufi figure while envisaging his topic from the point of view of universal, supra-confessional, metaphysics. Two elements of the relationship between Guénon and the Shaykh ‘Ilaysh deserve to be emphasized, as they appear to have borne upon Guénon’s understanding of the relationship between tradition and esoterism. First, the Shaykh ‘Ilaysh was a continuator of the school of Ibn ‘Arabī, which was to remain the main source of metaphysical inspiration in Islam for Guénon, as well as for his main continuators such as Michel Vālsan and Michel Chodkiewicz. Second, the double function of Guénon’s traditional mentor as Shaykh Mālikī and Shaykh al-Shādhilī, that is, an authority in both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of Islam, may have provided a model for the way in which Guénon envisaged the necessary connection between the *zāhir* and the *bātin*, the outward and inward sciences of Islam. In other words, it is likely that the Shaykh ‘Ilaysh provided a human exemplar for understanding this connection. As we will see, one of the fundamental features of Guénon’s concept of Islam is the emphasis placed by him on the necessary complementarity between the legal, religious domain, and the esoteric, spiritual dimension.

Schouon’s contact with traditional authorities was initiated during his trip to Algeria in late 1932 and early 1933.²³ His intention was to meet circles of *tasawwuf* and particularly the widely venerated Sufi Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alāwī.

Prior to this travel, Schuon had learned Arabic at the Paris Mosque. Through various circumstances and encounters, Schuon was led toward Mostaghanem where he met the old Shaykh who was sixty-three at the time. Schuon was initiated in the *Tarīqah Shādhiliyyah ‘Alāwiyyah* by the Shaykh himself in 1933, and was made *muqaddam* of the *Tarīqah Shādhiliyyah ‘Alāwiyyah* for Europe by the successor of the Shaykh al-‘Alāwī, Shaykh ‘Adda Bin-Tūnis.²⁴ His relationship with the brotherhood, the *tarīqah* in Mostaghanem became somewhat more distant with time, as there appeared differences of views concerning the function of the *tarīqah* and Schuon’s vocation. The Shaykh Mahdī, who succeeded the Shaykh ‘Adda at the helm of the brotherhood, understood the function of the *tarīqah* in the West in a more outward, public, way than did Schuon, for whom the order was primarily to exercise an inner “action of presence” in Europe without associating with any outer *da’wah* or “invitation” to Islam. Notwithstanding, it is clear that the young ‘Isa Nū- ad-Dīn (as Schuon came to be known in Islam) had found in the Shaykh al-‘Alāwī, not only a *murshid* or a spiritual guide of the highest rank but also a spiritual figure whose notion of Islam was predicated on a universalist leaning and a methodical emphasis upon the “remembrance of God” (*dhikrullāh*) as defining the essence of religion. This universalist and essentialist orientation, which was not without being misunderstood by some of his early disciples better disposed toward a more strictly confessional outlook, did not prevent Schuon from continuing to seek the benefits of the traditional *barakah* (blessing) of Islam, as illustrated by his frequent visits to Morocco almost every year between 1965 and 1975. On these occasions, he met with a number of Sufi authorities, such as Shaykh Hassan in Chaouen, who testified to his being rooted in the deepest layers of Islamic spirituality.

As it has been intimated in the previous paragraphs, what differentiates further our four authors from most other Islamicists is the fact that their writings, whether “inspired” scholarship or intellectual insights, cannot be disassociated from a spiritual assimilation or actualization of the content of their object of study, or from the substance of their metaphysical exposition. This is a most important characteristic of their life and work: In them, intellectuality and spirituality are intimately wedded. This feature has been sometimes criticized by proponents of a “scientific objectivity” who consider inner “distance” vis-à-vis the object of inquiry as a prerequisite for any adequate perception, presentation, and interpretation of religious objects. Such a critique presupposes, as a kind of epistemological axiom, a dualistic separation between a thinking subject and a reified object of study. The phenomenological approach has provided a potent epistemological antidote against such illusions of scientific extra-territoriality by stressing the intentionality of the object, whether religious or other. Corbin, in particular, has equated phenomenology both to the Sufi concept of *kashf al-mahjūb*, a process of unveiling of meaning through spiritual intuition, and a “saving of phenomena” (*sozein ta phenomena*) in the sense of giving the phenomenon

a true ontological status by grounding it in its essence. The “phenomenon,” and particularly the religious phenomenon, is “that which appears,” thereby testifying to a depth of meaning, an essence that can be “unveiled” only through the intentionality of a spiritual insight. The religious object is, in that sense, revealed in and by the subject, and conversely. In such a perspective, which is no less than the traditional outlook on religious knowledge, the “scientific objectivity” boasted by some scholars is in actuality a major impediment to any real understanding of religious realities. In fact, it symbolically amounts to the epistemological illusion of being able to reach a better understanding of a given text by studying the shape of the letters that form its external appearance under a microscope.

While we have just suggested how the works of Massignon, Corbin, and Schuon have functioned as secondary sources in the rediscovery of a spiritual Islam, it could be argued that some of their texts have become authentic primary sources in their own right when it comes to understanding Sufism and Islamic theosophy. It is no exaggeration to write that some of Corbin’s and Schuon’s writings, for example, by participating in the very spirit of the tradition that they prolong, are to be placed among primary treasures of Islamic spirituality. Corbin was not merely a commentator of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, he was also himself a participant in the very creative life of the intellectual tradition of Persian Shī’ism.²⁵ Analogously, some of the work of Schuon, such as his classic *Understanding Islam*, are not simply secondary descriptions of Islam but texts in which he demonstrates his spiritual capacity to “explain why Muslims believe in Islam,” thereby participating directly in the living spirit of the tradition.²⁶

Louis Massignon (1883–1962) was born a Catholic and died a Catholic, following a complex inner itinerary that led him through an early period of agnosticism, a phase of “sympathizing” proximity to Islam, and a final “re-conversion” to the Church that was ultimately crowned by his being ordained in the Melkite Church during his later years, thereby reconciling his utmost fidelity to Rome and his no less profound devotion to the Arabic language, in which he was able, till his last days, to say the Mass.²⁷ The intimacy of Massignon with Islam was such that, during his audience with Pope Pius XI in 1934, the Holy Pontiff playfully teased the French scholar by calling him a “Catholic Muslim.”²⁸ As mentioned above, Massignon has been hailed as the first European Islamicist to have supported and evinced the specifically Quranic roots of Sufism. In doing so, he not only dispelled the early academic bias according to which Sufism should be considered as extraneous to Islam, that is, an accretion of borrowings from Hinduism and Christianity, but also, correlatively, provided scholarly evidence for the presence of an authentically spiritual dimension of Islam, contrary to the reductionist view of this religion that had been prevalent theretofore.

The first significant contact of Massignon with Islam dates back to his traveling to Iraq on an archeological mission in 1907, although he had previously visited Algeria and Morocco, the latter in the context of the preparation of an academic thesis on the geographer Leo Africanus. It was in Iraq that Massignon was to experience a mystical epiphany that led him to recover a deep faith in Christ and the teachings of the Catholic tradition, as well as to become aware of his vocation as a friend, scholar, and Christian apologist of the spiritual and human values of Islam. This experience came in the allusive form of the “visitation of a Stranger” that confronted him with the sinful miseries of his early life and revealed to him the debt of spiritual gratitude that he owed both to those he came to know as his intercessors, and to the hospitality of Muslims.²⁹ In the wake of this growing inner and outer familiarity with the Islamic world, Massignon was directly involved in the activities of the official organs of French intelligence and diplomacy in the Middle East, and was assigned to the 1917 Sykes-Picot Agreement mission—the Franco-British “sharing” of the Middle East in the expectation of the upcoming fall of the Ottoman empire—in his capacity as an expert in Arab and Islamic affairs. Following World War I, Massignon further asserted his academic authority as witnessed by the publication of his four volumes on Hallāj in 1922, and his appointment to the Chair of Muslim Sociology at the Collège de France less than four years later. The convergence of his spiritual, academic, and political engagements were further confirmed in the fifties and sixties when he became a faithful, and later a priest, of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, reached the pinnacle of his career as an internationally acclaimed Arabist and Islamicist capable of broaching upon virtually any aspect of the Islamic civilization, and also became very actively involved in political fights for justice and peace in the context of the Palestinian question, the French colonial rule of Morocco, and the Algerian war.

In the wake of Massignon’s renewal of Islamic studies in France, his student Henry Corbin (1903–1978) vocationally delved into the hitherto uncharted territories of Shī‘ite theosophy and hermeneutics. His intellectual background as an expert in German phenomenology and the philosophy of Heidegger paved the way for his discovery of Shī‘ite epistemology and ontology—a discovery of which Massignon was the initial catalyst.³⁰ Corbin’s life was much more exclusively devoted to academic pursuits than Massignon’s, and it is not nearly as rich in upheavals and adventures as the latter’s. The early stages of his intellectual and spiritual development saw him meditate, assimilate, and translate some of the foundational works of Protestant theology and German philosophy, such as Luther, Karl Barth, and Martin Heidegger. His first contact with the Islamic world took place during the Second World War when he studied in Istanbul, before becoming a professor at Tehran University following the war. He was to succeed Massignon in 1954 at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études, and continued spending half a year in Paris, half a year in Iran, a country he considered to be his spiritual home. The latter part of his

life saw him closely associated with the yearly academic meetings of Eranos, where gathered such experts in mysticism and symbolism as Mircea Eliade and Gershom Scholem. Four years before his death in 1978 he founded the Centre international de recherche spirituelle comparée de l'Université Saint-Jean de Jérusalem, an institution that he conceived of as an intellectual and initiatory ark for academic representatives of the three monotheistic religions engaged in “comparative spiritual research,” to use his own terms.

The main thrust of Corbin's contribution pertains to a prophetology and an imamology that outreach the exclusive province of the Law by tracing the spiritual lineaments of an inner, esoteric reading of Islam that transcends the strictures of collective religion. For Corbin, the esoteric reading of the prophetic and spiritual lineage is intimately bound to the concept of a theophanic vision, that is, a perception of the Divine in the visible realm. This theophanic vision is parallel, moreover, to a knowledge of oneself in God and God in oneself. Beauty as theophany, as a formal manifestation of God in this world, becomes the mirror in which the self perceives both its own reality in God's intention, and God in the “most beautiful form” (*ahsana taqwīm*). The external theophany and internal autology, or the contemplation of God in the beauty of the world and in the depth of the soul, are the two faces of esoteric knowledge. Such a transmutation of the experience of beauty as self-knowledge cannot be actualized without the mediation of the inner guidance of the *verus propheta*, the true prophet who is immanent to the soul. For Corbin, Shī'ite imamology is none other than the most direct expression of this esoteric prophetology, in the sense that it corresponds to the most radical stage in its interiorization and the concomitant liberation of the prophetic mediation from its association with the domain of the Law.³¹

Notwithstanding their atypical and original intellectual personalities and scientific contributions, Massignon and Corbin belonged to the academic establishment of the French university, and it is in this institutional framework that they primarily received recognition. Guénon and Schuon belonged, by contrast, to a radically different intellectual realm, one that remained distant from official institutions of learning, even though their respective positions vis-à-vis academia happened to be, in fact, distinct and even divergent on more than one count.³² Guénon (1886–1951) is known as one of the seminal figures of what has come to be known in North America as the “Perennialist School.” He hailed from a Catholic, bourgeois family and received a classical education—his primary early academic focus was in mathematics and philosophy—before he immersed himself in the spiritualist milieu of the first years of the twentieth century in search of an authentic initiation. He was to verify the little spiritual weight of the various occult and initiatory organizations to which he affiliated himself while establishing contacts with some Eastern forms of spirituality, namely Hinduism, through unidentified Brahmin informants, Taoism, through Albert de Pourville (alias Matgioi), who was himself initiated into a Taoist secret society in Vietnam, and Sufism

through the figures of Albert Champrenaud ('Abd al-Haqq) and Ivan Agueli ('Abd al-Hādī), the latter having transmitted to him a *Shādhilī* initiation. His first works, *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines, East and West, Man and His Becoming according to the Vedānta*, and *The Crisis of the Modern World*, published in the 1920s, set the tone for his further works, which culminated, by the mid-forties, with *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* and *The Great Triad*. These works are essentially composed of three elements, that is, the exposition of universal metaphysics, the definition of esoterism in contradistinction to exoterism, and the analysis of a wealth of universal symbols. To these three elements one must add, especially in his early years, a rigorous critique of the modern world and the various forms of pseudo-spirituality that it fosters, and particularly in the later part of his work, considerations on the requirements and modalities of spiritual initiation. His penetrating critique of the modern world and his emphasis on tradition led Guénon, in his early years, to envisage the role of the Catholic Church as the only viable response to the unprecedented spiritual crisis at work in the West. Soon enough, though, his aborted contacts with neo-Thomist circles and the negative response of such Catholic intellectuals as Jacques Maritain to some of his major themes led him to seriously doubt the possibility of a restoration of sacred intellectuality and spirituality in the context of the Roman Church.

Even though he affiliated himself with Sufism as early as 1912, it is only during the last twenty years of his life that Guénon formally adhered to the outer and constitutive elements of Islamic practice. He moved to Cairo, first with the mere intention of completing some research on editing a manuscript there, before deciding to settle in Egypt. The remaining years of his life were spent in Egypt, where he became known as Shaykh 'Abd al-Wāhid Yahyā. He married a daughter of a Sufi *Shaykh* and had four children with her. He resided in the suburban neighborhood of Duqqi³³ until his death in 1951. Even though, as we have indicated earlier, his contacts with the Muslim milieu of Cairo were limited to some circles of *tasawwuf*, which hardly made him a public figure of Islam—a role that he would have rejected out of hand as incompatible with his purely esoteric function—he led the life of a traditional Egyptian scholar, while continuing his work and keeping up a generous correspondence with numerous seekers and readers the world over.

As for Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), a metaphysician and a spiritual teacher who, like Guénon, always remained distant from academic institutions and protocols, his perspective on Islam derived from gnosis, that is, a spiritual and supra-rational “heart-knowledge” that finds its most direct expression in the primordial and universal wisdom referred to as *sophia perennis*. Born a Lutheran, Schuon entered the Catholic Church in his youth. Intellectually confirmed by René Guénon's critique in his own early rejection of the modern world and experiencing a profound affinity with the metaphysical perspective of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Shankara's *Advaita Vedānta*, he became a disciple of the Algerian Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alāwī, as indicated earlier. He

was later invested as a Sufi Shaykh himself,³⁴ in the continuity of the spiritual lineage of the Shaykh al-‘Alāwī, while expressing the esoteric dimension of this lineage in a decidedly more direct and supra-confessional way, remaining thereby faithful both to the traditional integrity of forms and to the primacy of their esoteric core and their universal horizon. His entering Islam was prompted by his quest for an authentic initiation and for a religious framework consonant with his innate sense of universality and his inner rejection of the modern West. For Schuon, the manifold manifestations of this “sacred science” point ultimately to a “transcendent unity of religions” and it is from this perspective that a profound understanding of Islam could not but flow from the foundational ground of a universal *scientia sacra*. Islam is no more and no less than the final manifestation of the “Ancient Religion” (*dīn al-qayyim*),³⁵ which quintessentially consists in a discernment between what is absolutely real and what is only relatively so, and a concomitant concentration, both spiritual and moral, on the former. Discernment corresponds to doctrinal exposition, whereas concentration, together with moral conformity, pertains to method. As expressed in the bedrock principle of discernment between the Real (*Atman*) and the illusory (*Māyā*)—this term not to be taken literally as meaning “nonexistent” but simply to point to the fact that *Māyā* has no reality independently from *Atman*—Schuon’s intellectual background was firmly rooted in Shankaracharya’s discriminative doctrine of *Advaita Vedānta* while the formal context of his traditional affiliation and spiritual function was Islam, for reasons that pertain primarily to the universal and esoteric horizon of that religion and to a variety of circumstantial factors, the first of which is the existence of an unbroken line of initiatory transmission in the world of *tasawwuf*. Schuon’s attachment to Islam did not imply, in his view, an intrinsic preeminence of the religion of the Prophet over other integral faiths, although it certainly raises the question of the specificity of Islam with respect to its ability to serve as a vehicle of the *sophia perennis* understood as an underlying, universal wisdom common to all civilizations of the sacred. As such Islam can be considered as the “religion-synthesis” or the “religion-quintessence” that encompasses the doctrine of the one Absolute, the universal Law, the “essence of salvation” through the recognition of the Absolute, and the “link between the Absolute and the contingent” through the Messengers.³⁶

Finally, the considerable influence that these four authors have already exercised upon the intellectual life of their time must be commented upon, as well as their spiritual impact both within the field of Islamic studies and beyond. It is undeniable that their works have inspired a number of intellectuals in the French-speaking world, in Islamic countries as well as in Europe and North America. Beginning with Louis Massignon, although he cannot be said to have left a school of thought *stricto sensu* behind him, he can be considered as having “fathered” a fresh way of approaching Islamic studies, while having also initiated a new manner of understanding Islam from a Catholic point of view. It must therefore be stressed that his influence has been ponderous not

only, or primarily, because he trained some Christian and Muslim scholars of the first rank, but also, and more importantly, to the extent that he contributed to informing the vision of the Roman Catholic Church in relation to Islam. It must be granted that the forcefully original, independent, and heroic personality of Massignon, as well as the idiosyncratic character of his mode of speaking and writing, did not lend themselves to leave him with a large following of disciples walking in his steps. However, a number of eminent and influential scholars were able to receive the imprint of his scholarly genius: Let us mention, among the most important, Louis Gardet, George Anawati, Roger Arnaldez, Jean-Marie Abd-al-Jalil, Vincent Monteil, Henry Corbin, Herbert Mason, ‘Abd al-Halīm Mahmūd, and ‘Abd ar-Rahmān Badawī. He has instilled in these scholars, in various degrees and modes, a new outlook on the study of religion and Islam: With him, religious and Islamic studies participate in an existential dynamics that is inseparable from the inspiration of faith. Spiritual empathy must be understood as an integral part of envisaging religious objects of study. Scholarship and existential engagement, whether of a spiritual, moral, or even political kind, are intimately intertwined, and this close association must be the ferment of penetrating and creative insights. The old scientific presuppositions of *Religionwissenschaft* have to be critically examined and the validity of the light of faith in academic pursuits must not be discarded. Besides this “revolutionary” way of envisioning religious studies, Massignon has marked the twentieth century by altering the ways in which Christians can approach, and often have since then approached, the realm of Islam. His sympathetic apprehension of Islam, based both on a personal experience of its *barakah*, and an extensive familiarity with its sources, was to bear most significant and lasting fruits in the Catholic Church, mostly due to his influence at the Roman Curia and his friendship with the future Pope Paul VI, Monsignor Montini. Although Massignon did not take part in the deliberations of the Council Vatican II, his influence was to be felt in the dogmatic constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*,³⁷ which includes Muslims in the economy of salvation by referring to their Abrahamic ancestry, a theme that is quite prevalent in Massignon’s work. As for the segment of the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*”³⁸ devoted to Islam, it clearly bears the imprint of Massignon’s spirit in its full recognition of the spiritual and moral values of Islam. These texts manifest most directly the spiritual legacy of Massignon in the wake of his death in 1962. This extension of his life and work was also expressed in the further development of interfaith engagement in the West, of which he was a pioneer. In this respect, one of his most enduring and symbolically meaningful legacies is the yearly Islamo-Christian encounter of Vieux Marché in Brittany, which he attended in 1953, and which has combined, since then, the offering of the Mass and the psalmody of the *Sūrah Al-Kahf*.

Henry Corbin’s intellectual legacy manifested mainly in two areas: the restoration of a supra-rational concept of philosophy that breaks away from

the philosophical mainstream of the post-Cartesian and post-Kantian Western thought, and, concurrently, the rehabilitation of imagination as an ontological and cognitive realm without which there could be no relation between the realm of the intelligible and that of the sensory. In the first respect, Corbin was to influence a small number of philosophers who have been intellectually sustained by the inspiration they derived from his works. The generation of the so-called *Nouveaux Philosophes* (New Philosophers), which emerged in the seventies, although extremely diverse and contradictory in its characters and aspirations, was partly shaped by Corbin's intellectual outlook. Mention must be made, in particular, of Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau, who, hailing from Maoist philosophy in the sixties, rallied to a spiritualist philosophy that they conceived as the only serious antidote against the totalitarianism of the Gulag. Christian Jambet has been, since then, a major academic contributor to the diffusion of Shī'ite theosophy through his most recent published works and his editorial role at the *Editions Verdier*. As for the second dimension, it manifested itself primarily through the channel of the Eranos annual meetings, in which Corbin participated with a number of prominent experts in religious studies, philosophy, psychology, and social sciences, such as Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Carl Gustav Jung, Jean Brun, Pierre Hadot, and Kathleen Raine. His revivification of the concept of imagination by contact with Shī'ite and Sufi visionary gnosis has been instrumental in the works of two major theorists of imagination, namely the French anthropologist Gilbert Durand and the American psychologist James Hillman. Durand is the author of the magisterial *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, which constitutes an authentic *Summa* of the imaginal realm as manifested in religion, myth, literature, and psychology. The *Centre de Recherches sur l'Imaginaire* (CRI) at the University of Grenoble has been, under his leadership, a laboratory of study of the imagination as a central means of knowledge and creation. As for Hillman, his "acorn theory" of the development of the self and his "polytheistic" psychology may be deemed to have roots in Corbin's rehabilitation of the imaginal. The latter counters both the dogmatic and rationalist constructs of modernity by asserting the need for nonconceptual modes of knowledge through a cultivation of the world of imagination and myth. As for Hillman's "acorn theory," it contradicts the social determinism of many social scientists by referring to a kind of personal "archetype," or inner soul, the development of which is fundamentally independent from outer constraints such as parental influence. It appears through these various examples that Corbin has opened the way to reevaluations and reinterpretations of a host of intellectual premises inherited from the positivist presuppositions of modernity.

René Guénon's influence on the literary and intellectual life of his time has been recently documented in an impressive 1,200-page book by Xavier Accart, *Guénon ou le renversement des clartés*, which spans fifty years of French history and demonstrates the pervasive, if sometimes subterranean and implicit, impact of the works of the French metaphysician on personalities as diverse

as André Gide, Simone Weil, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, and Henri Bosco.³⁹ Upon going through the pages of Accart's impressive volume, one is literally astounded by the breadth, and sometimes the depth, of Guénon's presence in the intellectual landscape of France between 1920 and 1970, a presence that a cursory, conventional consideration of the French intellectual history of the time would not betray. Who would suspect *prima facie* that Guénon's works have been known and appreciated by personalities as diverse as André Breton and Charles de Gaulle? It must be noted, however, that the influence of Guénon outside of France, including in the Arab and Islamic world, although not negligible by any means, has not been as pervasive, perhaps due in part to a mode of exposition that has been sometimes defined as akin to Descartes'. Notwithstanding, Guénon may be said to have exercised an important influence upon his contemporaries on two different levels. On the one hand, his works have had an impact on a large number of prominent academic and literary figures. In academia such an influence has been for the most part implicit or extremely discrete. The case of the foremost historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, whose central intellectual concerns have an unmistakably Guénonian flavor, such as in his classic *The Sacred and the Profane*, is quite representative of this mode of presence. In the social sciences, the impact of Guénon on Louis Dumont's sociological studies of the Indian caste system was seminal.⁴⁰ Aside from this subtle, and often unacknowledged, presence of Guénon in academia, we find that elements of Guénon's traditionalist perspective have sometimes been integrated into the intellectual and artistic search of figures whose works are far from being strictly congruent with its principles, like Raymond Queneau, the painter Albert Gleizes, and Antonin Artaud. This shows that Guénon's work may be read in a variety of ways that do not necessarily do justice, to say the least, to the integrality of his traditional perspective.⁴¹

There is, however, a more rigorous "Guénonian" influence exercised over a number of intellectuals, mostly French, who have followed in the footsteps of Guénon in entering Islam and affiliated themselves to *tasawwuf* in the strict continuity of his teachings. Michel Vâlsan is undoubtedly first among those scholars of Islam and Sufism who have been profoundly marked by Guénon's teachings. In addition to his meditations of Guénon's works, Vâlsan became known as a translator and commentator of Ibn 'Arabî. Besides Vâlsan, one can mention Michel Chodkiewicz, Roger Deladrière, Denis Gril, Maurice Gloton, Charles-André Gilis, and Bruno Guiderdoni, who have all contributed to studies in traditional Sufism. In that sense Guénon's most immediate function has been to inform the scholarly and spiritual search of contemporary scholars in the field of esoteric Islam, most often on the margins of the official institutions of learning, but nevertheless with a rigor of their own, thereby injecting into this field of study a spirit radically distinct from that of mainstream scholarly endeavors.

Frithjof Schuon is undoubtedly the least widely known figure among our four authors, at least in the French-speaking world, even though his work has

reached a considerable audience in the English-speaking world, as testified to by the high regard in which his work was, and has been, held by prominent figures such as T.S. Eliot and Sir John Taverer. In the United States, the academic fame of two prominent scholars who had a close association with Schuon, namely Huston Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, also contributed to widening his intellectual reputation in the English-speaking world. Nasr was actually the editor of the *Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, first published in 1991.⁴² As for the Islamic world, the works of Schuon have had an impact on a number of scholars and readers in countries such as Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia. It must be noted that this influence has often been indirect in the sense of being imparted through the mediation of public Muslim scholars close to Schuon, first among whom are Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Sirāj-ad-Dīn) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The decidedly universalist and supra-confessional thrust of Schuon's works makes it at times difficult to access for readers and seekers whose religious sensibility has been profoundly molded by an exclusive confessional outlook. It may therefore require a measure of "translation" in religious terms more immediately familiar to its audience. In the Arab world by contrast, the works of Schuon have remained particularly little known, in spite of his *Understanding Islam* being published in Arabic translation in Beirut in 1980 under the title *Hatta Nafhama al-Islam*.

But the most direct legacy of Schuon remains the existence of the *Tarīqah Maryamiyyah*, which he founded in the lineage of the *Shādhiliyyah 'Alāwiyyah* order, and which has continued after his death in 1998, following his wishes, through independent branches sharing in the same fundamental spiritual teachings. This Sufi order, the appearance of which was saluted by Guénon in the thirties as the most direct means of access to an authentic initiatic path in the West, has been receiving spiritual seekers in many parts of the globe, including the Muslim world. Although Schuon asserted that his spiritual perspective was primarily a response to the needs of Westerners and Westernized Easterners, the degree to which the Muslim world has been "Westernized," in terms of a loss of metaphysical and spiritual bearings, has made a number of educated Muslims receptive to the themes presented by Schuon. However, because Schuon's teachings can be defined as both traditional and esoteric, they necessarily give rise to interpretations that emphasize either the former or the latter dimension of his work. On the one hand, Schuon's work is a defense of the sacred prerogatives of traditional religions, on the other hand it points to a "transcendent unity" of traditional forms the metaphysical and spiritual content of which cannot but remain independent from confessional limitations. This means that, referring to Schuon's intellectual legacy, one can speak of a universalist and primordialist pole and an Islamic and Sufi pole, without attaching to this distinction the implication of an exclusiveness that would dispense with either aspect. In point of fact, Schuon's opus has continued and widened Guénon's work in a way that articulates more explicitly the central concept of the so-called Perennialist School, that is, the transcendent

unity of religions, while providing his readers with a most profound and comprehensive defense of religious orthodoxies, including Islam. The complexity of Schuon's perspective, as we will see, calls for an ability to distinguish between different planes and aspects of reality as well as a willingness to take heed of the multiplicity of human perspectives.

As we have indicated, the four intellectual figures who will be the focus of our study have provided French-speaking and Western audiences with intriguing, seminal, and challenging new ways of addressing the *res islamica* or Islamic matters that may be instrumental in unveiling, questioning, and correcting the stifling and dangerous assumptions and ready-made formulas that have encumbered the chaotic market of ideas about Islam in the West. As for the Islamic world itself, beyond the temptations of dismissing or belittling as un-Islamic whatever might not be compatible with a sociological or political reduction of the religious reality, these works may help some Muslims to reframe the definition of their own faith by unveiling the profound connection that link our authors' inspiration to a long and deep tradition that reaches back to the spiritual impetus of the Prophetic mission. This could be the best antidote to the philosophical disarray, intellectual poverty, and spiritual pathology that characterize too many sectors of Islamic thought and practice. There are obviously many ways to approach such a rich and manifold universe as that of Islamic spirituality: Historical and sociological methods have had, among others, much to offer in terms of promoting a more accurate understanding of the external motivations of inner Islam. However, it is our conviction, hopefully communicated to the reader in the following pages and chapters, that no integral understanding of Islam can be reached without a clear and profound awareness of the spiritual intentionality and modes of interiorization that lie at the core of Islam as an inner and lived reality. At the risk of attracting to themselves the routine academic rebuke of "essentializing" what many can only perceive as historical constructs, the works of our four "ambassadors" of mystical Islam remain an invitation to delve into a depth and wealth of symbolic and conceptual representations that provide irreplaceable, and in fact today nearly indispensable, keys to an integral approach to Islam.

Before engaging in an attempt to define with some degree of specificity what we have in view when we refer to "inner Islam," let us from the outset acknowledge that introducing this concept amounts to encountering likely objections and resistances on the part of some, perhaps even many, potential readers. These a priori doubts, reservations, or even outright oppositions would fall under distinct headings that provide, in a sense, an overall picture of the ideological debates about Islam in the contemporary world. First of all, some analysts and commentators would flatly deny the existence of such