



***The Key to Unlocking Scripture:  
Reflections on Swedenborg, Corbin, and Esoteric Islam***

by Colin Amato



My first exposure to the theological ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg was in the words of two essays written by Henry Corbin, published by the Swedenborg Foundation as *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*. The reading of this book came at a very critical time in the history of my spiritual development. I was at the time, still considering myself a Muslim, but my religious identity had drastically changed from the Sunni form of Islam that I had embraced as a young convert.

When I converted to Islam in 2007 the only Muslims I knew in person, save for one non-practicing agnostic styled Shia, were Sunnis. I was told by an online Muslim community that I belonged to that I would need to figure out what school of thought I would follow in terms of exoteric practice. After doing some research, I concluded that I would follow the Shafi'i Fiqh, mainly because I admired the great scholar Sheikh Imam Ghazali. It was through the read of Ghazali that I found a traditional of identity in the history of classical Sunnism. Many Muslims not only follow a particular school of fiqh (legal exoteric practice), but a school of theology and Sufism (spirituality.) I decided to follow the Ashari school of theology and the Mevlevi Order (the famous whirling dervishes) in terms of Sufism. I had been exposed to Islam and indeed Sufism when I was in high school with my reading of the poetry by the Muslim mystic and scholar Rumi.

It was also around this time that I stumbled upon the writings of Henry Corbin. His academic works focused mainly on the Shia form of Islam, as well as discussions on Ibn Arabi. I was attracted to the works about Ibn Arabi, but I largely ignored the Shia text. During the period of 2011-2012 I found myself experiencing a crisis in faith in Sunni Islam and a crisis in identity. I was struggling with the acceptance of specific doctrines that Sunni Islam values very highly, and I also struggled with aligning my sexuality with my religion. I began to study other forms of Islam outside of the traditional orthodox paradigm. This led me to study the rich philosophical thought of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, as well as the various schools of fiqh that existed outside of the orthodox four: Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Hanafi. I became interested in the words of the Zahari Fiqh scholar Ibn Hazm, the sufism of Ibn Arabi, and the philosophical school of thought presented by the Mu'tazila and Ibn Rushd. While the acceptance of these positions worked for me, as I was very far from the normal Sunni perspectives, I found that I was very isolated and

alone. There aren't any mosques that fit the identity I had crafted, and so I had lost a spiritual community. Through this period of isolation, my doubts began to rise and in 2012 I abandoned my identity as a Muslim. I was still spiritually hungry and also craved a new community, one that perhaps would best align my sexual identity with my religious one. At this time I was introduced to the small book by Henry Corbin, which is the center of this reflection.

The second essay entitled: "Comparative Spiritual Hermeneutics," struck me like a lightning bolt. I had already been thinking of scripture in the context of psychological symbolism, specifically from the vantage points of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, but I had not read anything that took the power of symbolism and applied it to spiritual formation and metaphysics. For many years I paid close attention to the reading and understanding of sacred scripture. In fact, the vast majority of my online and in person debates and conversations revolved around this question: what was the Bible and Qur'an actually saying, and how might we best understand these two texts? Corbin's essay spoke to these passions of mine, namely: a psycho-spiritual approach to sacred scripture, and also the importance of the message(s) of the text. One of the primary reasons I began to lose faith in Islam, was the literal way I read the Qur'an. To be clear, the text itself does mention that it will use allegory to illustrate specific messages, and that believers of a particular merit might glean something from such texts. However, in my personal experience, the vast majority of Muslims I spoke to in person and also online, approached the stories of Adam, Eve, Noah, Moses, and David (to only mention a few) in a very literal fashion.

The idea that these stories did not in the historical sense, would be considered to be a gross error or even a blasphemy. When I was confronted with the fact that reading the story of The Exodus as a historical narrative, as presented in both the Qur'an and the Bible, was leading to archeological and physical dead-ends, I was frustrated and also confused. Even in that moment, probably because of my reading of Jung and Campbell, I did not feel that I should drop the narratives of sacred scripture just because there was no corresponding physical or historical evidence. There was something potent and special about these stories that I was sure had spiritual and symbolic significance. I was to find out that correspondences were indeed the most important element to reading these sacred stories. Corbin's book introduced a way of reading and

understanding scripture that I had never been exposed to before. While I was familiar with the different levels of reading that was first introduced by the Jewish scholars, Corbin illustrates something that is altogether different. He uses the theological writings of Swedenborg and the Shia interpretations of the Qur'an to help with this illustration. These two traditions highlight the importance of understanding scripture as teaching psychological and spiritual development over the course of the life span. The Fall from the Garden of Eden is seen as the passage from infancy to maturity. Noah and The Flood is the ending of an era or a church, and the beginning of a new age.

These interpretations provide a personal view that is engaging in both a psychological and spiritual context. Rather than providing a foundation for a strong literal approach, this is a reading that can help people understand the deeper parts of their psyche and find value in scripture that might otherwise be ignored or repulsed by those who have issues with faith traditions that are founded on such a limited hermeneutic style.