Phenomenology versus Historicism: The Case of Imamate

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that phenomenological approaches, which include the significance of constructed meanings and symbolic values of events and personalities in their understanding, cannot be reconciled with historicism and positivist accounts of history. Phenomenological accounts of religious issues are imbued with metaphysical significance and are sensitive to discursive constructions of reality and history. To the practitioners of this perspective the beliefs and values of the subject are as important as the sequence of events in history. Indeed, for them, the very idea of history is dependent on the way the subject envisions it.

The historicists on the other hand see history itself as the driving force behind social constructions of meanings and seek to identify objective forces in order to account for the emergence of beliefs and meanings. Thus, while phenomenologists use values to "understand" history, historicists use history to "explain" values. This paper posits that the significant difference in the treatment of "subjectivity" and its impact on religious beliefs and practices in these two approaches cannot be reconciled. This paper also examines Mircea Eliade's contention that these two approaches can be reconciled and finds that claim does not stand up to the case at hand.

In order to contrast the differences in the phenomenological and historicist accounts and also to test Eliade's contentions, this paper employs the Shi'i idea of Imamate as a case study. The findings of this paper are germane to all religious issues, such as Muslim beliefs about the divine nature of the Qur'an and the miracles performed by Prophets. At a basic level the discussion in this paper deals with the fundamental challenge

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that all Muslim scholars, particularly social scientists, face when they try to understand social phenomenon without disregarding their Islamic beliefs. How can we claim that our accounts of history and social reality is knowledge and not opinion, given that we are not setting aside our belief in Islam? It is hoped that this paper will offer a humble contribution, constructive and critical, to this enormous task of building an Islamic approach to knowledge by underscoring the exclusivity of phenomenology and historicism in religious studies.

In this essay we define "phenomenology" and "historicism" as follows. Phenomenology relates purely to the meaning, whether conscious or unconscious, of a believer's religious idea; historicism relates to the operation of the idea in history and its connection to sociohistorical forces (including psychological forces that have sociohistorical effects).

Combining these aspects, Mircea Eliade (d. 1986) developed an integrative approach toward the study of religious phenomena.[1] He believed that the meaning of a religious idea and its development in time and context should be studied together.

Henry Corbin (d. 1978) and W. Montgomery Watt have adopted phenomenological and historicist approaches, respectively, in their studies of the Shi'i concept of Imamate.[2] It is suggestive to see approaches as highlighting different aspects of the same phenomenon. Eliade's framework, in a much more sophisticated way, incorporates this perception. But are Corbin's and Watt's studies amenable to such integration?

In this essay we focus upon the notion of causality as it relates to the Imamate and argue that these approaches cannot be integrated into Eliade's framework. With reference to the content of Corbin's and Watt's expositions at the empirical and conceptual levels I show that these approaches are mutually exclusive and cannot be conceptually integrated into Eliade's framework. The components of this framework will be discussed to substantiate this latter argument.

Two Contemporary Approaches to the Study of the Imamate

W. Montgomery Watt an Englishman, and Henri Corbin, a Frenchman are famous scholars of Islamic tradition who have approached the study of the Imamate in Ithna 'Ashari or Imami Shi'ism from different perspectives.[3] Watt relates the issue to the social and political milieu of the time, while Corbin studies the Imamate on its own epistemological and ontological suppositions.

Watt argues that the political upheaval of the Umayyad period created fertile conditions for the rise of a charismatic leader:

> In a time of change, insecurity, and crisis men tend to look for salvation through the thing in their past experience that has proved most

fundamental and satisfying. . . . It appears to be a fact that some men
believe that salvation (or attainment of the supreme end of human life)
is to be found in following a leader who is endowed with more than
human qualities. . . . It is convenient to use the sociological term
"charismatic" and to speak of a "charismatic leader."[4]

He substantiates such a specific response by referring to the composi-
tion of Ali's contemporary followers, nearly all of whom were former
nomadic tribesmen who had to adapt from their previous lifestyle to
being the superior military caste of a large empire.[5] A large proportion
of them belonged to Yemeni tribes as opposed to tribes of the north who
were under the influence of the Kharijis.[6] The Yemenis had a long tradi-
tion of divine kingship, which must have facilitated the image of a
charismatic Imam.[7] Similarly, the spread of Shi'a ideas among the
Mawali (or clients of the Arabs), especially those of Aramaean (Iraqi)
stock (another society with ancient traditions of divine kingship), mani-
fested a form of discontent.[8]

Watt also adopts a skeptical view toward the Imami Shi'a sources:

> The special difficulty consists in the fact that the Imami or Ithna
> 'Ashari form of Shi'ism puts out propaganda in which it insisted on a
> version of events during the first two Islamic centuries which support-
> ed its doctrinal position but was not necessarily in accordance with the
> facts.[9]

According to the Imami belief, one of the descendants of Al-Husayn
has been recognized since the time of Kerbala as the Imam and head of
the Prophet's family.[10] Watt argues that initially there was only a belief
in the personal worthiness of Ali, but with the prevalence of Persian and
Aramaean elements the idea came to be accepted that members of the
Hashim clan have supernatural powers.[11] Further, it was only later that
the belief in such "charismata" was restricted to the line of Al-Husayn.
Initially, another son of Ali, Muhammad ibn Al-Hanafiyyah, and his son;
Abi Hashim, attracted the most attention among the early writers, both
being recognized as Imams.[12] Muhammad Al-Hanafiyya was also the
Imam in one of the earliest proto-Shi'a groups, the Kaysania, and mes-
sianic ideas were apparently first attached to his name.[13]

Watt then speculates about the reason that ultimately only those of a
certain lineage were recognized as Imams:

> The most serious problem was perhaps to prevent the dissipation of a
> potentially significant political force into many small insurrectionary
> movements headed by almost any member of the clan of Hashim or
> indeed anyone claiming to be the agent of a member. One of the meth-
> ods adopted to counter this loss of effectiveness was to propound the
> idea that there was only one processor of Hashimi charismata in the

full sense at any one time, and that this person appointed or designat-
ed (*nassa*) a successor.[14]

These political machinations helped Imami Shi'ism achieve a distinct
status by the tenth century of the Christian era.[15] There were also other,
ostensibly theological concerns that were, in Watt's view, deliberate
political acts. Here he refers to the notions of lesser and greater occulta-
tion—the first occurring after the "disappearance" of the Imam in
approximately 875 C.E. and the latter after the death of this Imam's fourth
and final *wakil* (trustee) in 940 C.E.[16]

The lesser occultation offered the prospect of a united movement
instead of the infighting of rival claimants and supporters. It also
removed control of this movement from the usually politically naive
Imams and deposited it into the hands of those seasoned in public
affairs.[17] The greater occultation had the advantage of the Shi'as tacitly
supporting the governors, who were the actual rulers of the empire at that
time, because the decline in the caliph's power meant a corollary loss of
power for the associated office of the *wakil*.[18]

This summary of Watt's views clearly shows that he believes the office
of Imamate was linked to psychosocial, social, and political factors. Yet
it was more than just linked; Watt's reference to the development of the
"charismata" concept and the material factors that it served indicate that
he views these factors as the *cause* of the Imamate issue. In fact, he is
explicit about this:

> The history of early Shi'ism, and indeed of much later Shi'ism also, is
> that of a pathetic quest for individuals to whom the dignity of Imam
> may be attached. Most of those accepted as Imam belied the hopes set
> on them; and yet the quest went on.[19]

This view of the Imam as a fundamentally human, historical product is
contrasted by the spiritual interpretation of Henri Corbin. According to
him Shi'ism is the religion of *walayah* or spiritual love.[20] This *walayah*
is objectified in the Imam.[21] The initiate into Shi'a spirituality under-
stands that love of God is impossible without love of the Imam.[22] The
concept of *walayah* frames the whole horizon of the Shi'a worldview:

> . . . it is by virtue of the premises and implications that emerge from
> Islam professed as religion of love that the concept and figure of the
> Imam appear to us in their ineluctable necessity.[23]

Such a necessity implies that if the Imam is lost then the meaning of rev-
elation is lost.[24]

The *walayah* manifests itself both exoterically and esoterically.
Exoterically, the Imams have to be understood within the context of a
hiero-history, a history that takes into account the different spiritual

dimensions and different concepts of time they embody. Corbin quotes a hadith attributed to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, the sixth Imam, who addressed a disciple:

> Dost thou not know that God Most-High sent His Messenger, a Spirit the Logos-Prophet, to the prophets, themselves Spirits who were created 2000 years before the creation of creatures? Dost thou know that this Spirit called them to the triple Attestation (i.e., God, the Prophet and the Imam)?[25]

The prophets were consequently aware of God's love for the Imam. The Imam had a "right" on God, being the object of his love.[26] Because of this right, the prophets invoked the cause of the Imam when confronted with trying circumstances. Corbin quotes another hadith, attributed to the eighth Imam, Ali Rida:

> When Noah was in danger of being inundated , he invoked God by invoking our cause (or our rights), and God saved him from inundation. When Abraham was cast into the fire, he invoked God by invoking our cause, and God caused the fire to become a harmless coolness. When Moses opened a path into the sea, he invoked God by invoking our cause, and God made the sea dry land. And when the Jews wanted to kill Jesus, he invoked God by invoking our cause; then God saved him from death and raised him up to Himself (Qur'an, IV, 158).[27]

The Imam's decisive historical influence did not end with the prophets. In fact, as each Imam is the *qutb* (axis of the world) of his era (the *qutb* of the present era being the twelfth Imam), it is impossible for the world to function without them:

> . . . this kingship [of the Imam] neither results from nor depends on political considerations that would make the Imam a mere rival of the Ummayids and Abbasids. It has to do with something other than what is treated by social history, for it is a kingship that by its very essence implies neither the necessity nor even the idea of temporal political success, still less the idea that majorities are always right, under the pretext that they "make" history. Instead it pertains to a history that is "made" without their knowledge; a spiritual kingship above the visible world that operates incognito.[28]

In this view, it is inherently impossible for the Imam, who causes history, to be *subjected* to history as in Watt's analysis.

Esoterically, Corbin sees the necessity of an Imam expressing itself in a Platonic evolutionary scheme, in which the lower being is transformed into the higher one.[29] The human can only find fulfillment in the degree of supreme perfection, which is the stage of the Imamate.[30] To know his own self man must know the Imam. The Imam is also the *a'raf* (the mys-

terious rampart erected between Paradise and Hell).[31] Employing Mulla
Sadra's analysis of this station, Corbin argues that the Imam is seen as
the gateway not only by which man knows God, but also by which God
knows man.[32] The Imam is esoterically necessary for both God and man.

In Corbin's view, then, the meaning and cause of the Imamate should
be seen in accordance with the primordial conception of reality at both
esoteric and exoteric levels, not in terms of historicism:

> . . . the disjunction of the before and after, the law of irreversibility,
> concerns only the order of succession in our historical time . . . not the
> simultaneous order of events that endure permanently in the world of
> the Spirit.[33]

The approaches of Watt and Corbin have their intellectual precedents
in specific traditions of the historicist and phenomenological schools,
respectively. Watt explicitly ascribes to the sociological view that theo-
logical and philosophical ideas have a political and social reference.[34] In
the actual development of his methodology, at least with regard to the
Imamate, this "reference" assumes the character of "determiner" and the
idea becomes a product of the context. Further, Watt's view of "charis-
mata," noted earlier as a fundamentally human product, implicitly denies
the Shi'a belief concerning the divine nature of the Imam. In contrast,
Corbin implicitly ascribes an independent reality to the idea. These
ideas—in this case that of the primordial Imam—determine the contexts.
Most importantly, Corbin assumes the Imamate to be of divine origin
and character. Naturally, this means that reality is seen from an idealized
Imami perspective.

These approaches, therefore, do not emphasize different aspects of the
same reality. They conceive of different and mutually exclusive realities:
To say that the Imamate was a historical product is opposite to viewing
the Imamate as a primordial, metahistorical phenomenon; to implicitly
deny the divine character of the Imamate is opposite to its acceptance.
There is clearly a clash of perspectives on what *caused* the Imamate. To
accept Watt's view is to deny Corbin's, and vice versa.

Can such conflicting notions be reconciled in an integrative approach,
combining phenomenology and historicism, such as that of Eliade's? We
now address this conceptual issue.

Mircea Eliade's Approach
to Religious Phenomena

Eliade recognizes the tension between the historicist and phenomeno-
logical approaches but suggests that they are not mutually exclusive.[35]
Eliade discerns the roots of historicism in the intellectual impact of the
"discovery" of the unconscious by Freud.[36] The origin of man was not a

biological fact but a historical event, i.e., the murder of the father by his elder son.[37] Eliade adds the caveat that even if this is not understood literally, it is important for the projection of the concept of "event." Consequently, *history* replaced *nature* as the focal point for a *verstehen* of humanity. This is seen in the works of Marx, Nietzche, and others of their period, as well as later in the pessimistic relativism of the existentialist school:

> But it must be admitted that from a certain point of view the understanding of man as first and foremost a historical being implies a profound humiliation for the Western consciousness. Western man considered himself successively God's creature and the possessor of a unique revelation. . . . Now he discovered himself on the same level with every other man, that is to say, conditioned by the unconscious as well as by history.[38]

But this pessimism had two positive results. First, it helped put an end to idealism: Man belongs to this world and is not a spirit encased in matter.[39] Second, the doctrine provided a new kind of universalism:

> If man makes himself through history, then everything man did in the past is important for everyone of us.[40]

This means that provincial history is replaced by universal history in Western consciousness. The implications for those who conceive of a pure, unconditioned, religious phenomenon is clear—there is nothing like this:

> A religious phenomenon is always also a social, an economic, a psychological phenomenon, and, of course, a historical one, because it takes place in historical time and it is conditioned by everything which had happened before.[41]

There is, then, a place for phenomenology and history in Eliade's schemata. However, would one explanation exclude the other? Eliade does not think so and insists that an integrative approach is possible. The basis of this approach asserts that the meaning changes along with the manifestation.[42] He says:

> If the phenomenologists are interested in the meanings of religious data, the historians, on their side, attempt to show how these meanings have been experienced and lived in the various cultures and historical moments, how they have been transformed, enriched or impoverished in the course of history.[43]

The words "transformed," "enriched," and "impoverished" indicate an empirical attitude that may have a significant bearing on the static and idealized account of the function of the Imam in the worldview of the

believing Shi'a. It is counterbalanced by an empirical account of what that belief might have meant in a historical context.

Such an approach, though, would not *necessarily* mean that the causal exclusivity of these methodologies will be overcome. In fact, Eliade alludes to this by acknowledging that their value in the state of religious studies (in 1969) was not in any integrative reflections, but in "the hermeneutical advance they help bring forth."[44]

Despite the caveat, Eliade's approach still presents problems regarding divine and historical causes with reference to the Imamate. While we may certainly discern historical transformations and changes in the phenomenological perspective employed by Corbin, these have no independent reality for they are themselves caused by the Imam. (Remember that the Imam makes history.) The history of meaning is not to be studied as a contribution to a universal culture, as in Eliade's perspective, but only as it relates to the Imam.

There is also a problem from the historical perspective. With his distinction between the historicism of a religious experience and the meaning of that experience, Eliade implicitly tells the historicist to become a historian; i.e., he should study facts without the preconceived metaphysics of positivism. But once facts are assembled (and Corbin, too, like Watt, assembles facts, though of a different nature), these facts have to be arranged. The historian—unless he becomes a phenomenologist—has to arrange them in a cause and effect sequence (and consequently he has to remain, in part, a historicist). If Watt detects a causal relation between sociopolitical discontent and the emergence of the Imamate, to compel him, simultaneously, to integrate this with its meaning in the believers, perspective would mean a contradictory account of causality. Watt cannot be both a historicist and a phenomenologist simultaneously.

Eliade's approach is also a metaphysic. His vision is of discerning, in the unravelling of history, the meanings of cultures. This, he states, would provide a new perspective to Western thought.[45] This "history of the Spirit"—a usage employed by Eliade—is problematic from the perspective of both Corbin's and Watt's approaches.

In Shi'a belief, the Imam is the cause of history; therefore, the other manifestations of the Spirit are only effects and may even be considered spurious.[46] Studying the history of cultural meanings without relation to the Imamate would be of negligible value in terms of Shi'a "truth." Historicists, for their part, can acknowledge and believe, if they wish, in the Spirit. But to conceive of history as the manifestation of this Spirit would compel them to become phenomenologists: Historical discourse is defined by giving event and structure primacy over meaning and essence.[47]

In short, the approaches of Corbin and Watt cannot be integrated in Eliade's metaphysic. Such an integration would hold incompatible accounts of causality.

Conclusion

Implicit in this essay is the suggestion that either history should be seen as being contained in the meaning of the phenomenon, or its meaning should be seen in historical terms. Intermediate positions such as Eliade's cannot satisfy either criterion, at least as far as this issue is concerned.

This either/or position is necessitated by the claim of the phenomenon studied, namely, that it explains reality. One can only implicitly or explicitly accept or deny this claim. As we have seen, Corbin accepts it while Watt does not. While Eliade would certainly see it as a manifestation of the sacred in history, this is itself a metaphysic and excludes the acceptance of the Imamate, one that claims to cause history.

The clash of these metaphysical positions reflect not only the prior orientation of the scholar studying the phenomenon but ultimately and (I feel more importantly) his answer to the question: Should I believe in this phenomenon?

Whatever answer is adopted, it has to admit of an exclusive notion of causality in relation to the other. The inquiry, in common with many others concerning religious phenomena, is, more fundamentally than its intellectual aspects, an existential concern.[48]

Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), especially chapters 1-4. I discuss his views in detail in the second part of this essay.
2. Henry Corbin, "The Meaning of the Imam for Shi'a Spirituality," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, ed., *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), especially chapters 2, 3, and 9. Also his *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 1985), chapters 3, 9, 16, and 19.
3. We follow Watt's usage in using these terms synonomously. See Watt, *Formative Period*, 274. (The Ithna 'Ashari are also called the Twelvers, due to their belief in twelve Imams.)
4. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 3.
5. Watt, *Formative Period*, 41–42.
6. Ibid., 43.
7. Ibid., 43–44.
8. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 14–15.
9. Watt, *Formative Period*, 41–42.
10. Ibid., 55.
11. Ibid., 54.
12. Ibid., 54–55.
13. Ibid., 55–56. Watt uses the term "proto-Shi'a" because he does not see a Shi'ism proper prior to the ninth century.
14. Ibid., 56.
15. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy*, 60.

16. Ibid., 60–61.
17. Ibid., 61.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. Corbin, "Meaning of the Imam," 168.
21. Ibid. Cf. to another of his statements: "And the whole secret of Shi'ism, its *raison d'etre*. . . this secret is first and foremost that there were minds that postulated the form of theophany constitutive of Imamology." In Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi,* tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).
22. Corbin, "Meaning of the Imam," 168.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 170.
25. Ibid., 172.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 179.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. Cf. to this his statement in *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital,* tr. by Willard R. Trask (Dallas: Spring Publications Inc., 1980), 253: "The goal of sophianic Knowledge (*'ulum hikmiya*) is, by virtue of the sacred Intelligibles, to actualize in the soul a perfection that abides through the soul's own perennity. To refer to the Imam as to that Intelligible means that the Imam is both the supreme goal and original goal (maqsad asli) by virtue of which the perfect soul becomes perennial."
31. Corbin, "The Meaning of the Imam," 180.
32. Ibid., 181.
33. Ibid., 173. Cf. to his statement in *Creative Imagination,* p. 84: "The theophanic idea [i.e., the idea of theophany in Human Form, as with the Imamate]. . . will call for a celestial assumption of man, the return to a time that is not the time of history and its chronology."
34. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy,* 1.
35. Eliade, *The Quest,* 8. Although *The Quest,* upon which we chiefly rely, was written in 1975, his views expressed here were substantially the same until his death in 1986. We may refer to Joseph M. Kitagawa's "Eliade, Mircea" in M. Eliade, Editor-in-chief, *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) in this connection.
36. Eliade, *The Quest,* 50.
37. Ibid., 51.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 8.
43. Ibid., 9. Divorcing history from phenomenological meaning is reflective of the nihilistic consciousness which has despaired of finding any ultimate meaning in existence. This leads to what Eliade calls the "terror of history." See Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet,* trans. by Derek Coltman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).
44. Ibid., 36. Indeed, Eliade explicitly refers to Henry Corbin's work in this respect: "one may not share Henry Corbin's 'anti-historicism,' but one cannot deny that thanks to this conception, Corbin has succeeded in disclosing a significant dimension of Islamic mystical philosophy previously almost ignored by Western scholarship."
45. Ibid., 63.
46. Even within the Islamic tradition, the first three caliphs who are given the status of "rightly-guided" leaders in Sunni Islam are considered usurpers by most Shi'a.
47. In fact, critics have expressed substantial dissatisfaction with Eliade's attempts to integrate these perspectives. Edmund Leach, the noted British anthropologist, has accused him of being a mystic who glosses over the data to support his position. Robert D. Baird, similarly, questions his historicity: "It (Eliade's methodology) is not historically falsifiable. Since it is an historical approach, however legitimate that might be in itself, when it enters into historical deliberation it becomes a barrier to the attainment of authentic religio-historical understanding." Quoted in Guilford Dudley, *Religion on Trial:*

Mircea Eliade and his Critics (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), 40. See also p. 38 for the Leach reference and pp. 37–42 for the general discussion.

48.   Karl Barth, the neo-orthodox Christian theologian, was acutely aware of the existential nature of this problem. He reacted against nineteenth-century Protestantism's liberal views on other religions—permitted by their notion of *religio naturalis*—and their receptiveness to dialogue with these traditions, by criticisms of the humanistic, as opposed to divine, perspective that informed their views. He also reaffirmed traditional Christianity's view of Jesus in the unique role of savior, to the exclusion of other major religious personalities and deities. Guilford Dudley comments: "Methodologically, a follower of Barth is forced at the outset to choose either to study the science of religions or to be an absolutely uncompromising Christian theologian" (Dudley, *Religion on Trial*, 8. See also pp. 7–12 for discussion).