

## Article

# The Possibility and Nature of Visionary Geography: An Inquiry into the Thought of Dariush Shayegan

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## Abstract

This article explores spiritual unity beyond physical boundaries through the theme of the “geography of the soul,” conceptualized by Dariush Shayegan (1925–2018) as “visionary geography”. This study criticizes the quantitative world perception that emerged following the post-Galilean reduction of nature to a mathematical object, as well as a modernity that imprisons humanity within the coordinates of meridians and parallels. It discusses how the mystical partnership, interrupted by the imposition of scientific positivism in the modern era, has driven the human condition into a state of fragmentation. Within the theoretical framework, the possibility of a visionary and spiritual world woven with symbols is questioned in the face of both the real/physical and the technological/virtual worlds. According to Shayegan, the world of the soul exists on a transcendent plane that surpasses the contingent world with its own mountains, rivers, and continents. The article argues that while geographical differences in the classical period did not hinder spiritual convergence, the modern Western lifestyle has weakened this ontological bond. Utilizing a qualitative research method, this study analyzes visionary geography, the perception of space, and the unifying spiritual elements in Shayegan’s works through literature and document analysis.

**Keywords:** intuitive geography; Dariush Shayegan; mysticism; spiritual world; place

## 1. Introduction: The Intellectual Evolution of Shayegan

Born to a Georgian aristocratic Sunni mother and an Azerbaijani Shiite businessman, Dariush Shayegan was raised in a multilingual and multicultural environment from early childhood. As a result, he attained advanced proficiency in Azerbaijani, Persian, and French. His upbringing in a setting defined by diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds—including a Russian nanny, an Armenian music teacher, a Zoroastrian family doctor, a Syriac driver, and Jewish and Greek neighbors—was a decisive factor in his intellectual formation (Shayegan 2013, pp. 106–7). He completed his primary education at the Saint Louis French School in Tehran; following his secondary education in England, he pursued higher education in comparative philosophy, Sanskrit, and literature in Geneva. Upon returning to Tehran in the early 1960s, Shayegan was introduced through Seyyed Hossein Nasr to Seyyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai (1903–1981) and the French philosopher Henry Corbin (1903–1978), individuals to whom he would remain devoted with profound respect throughout his life (Jahanbegloo 2018, p. 817). Corbin, with his seminal works on the Iranian mystical tradition and Ismaili thought, played a central role in Shayegan’s intellectual trajectory. The reflections of this influence manifest themselves in his work concerning Corbin’s intellectual legacy (Shayegan 1990). Corbin—an expert on Iranian and



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Islamic traditions who also introduced Heidegger's works to French readers, developed a unique interpretation of the Iranian understanding of Islam (which he termed 'Spiritual Islam'), and was a member of the Christian anti-modernist movement—deeply influenced Nasr and Shayegan in particular with this multifaceted and pluralistic stance. The fact that Shayegan was one of Corbin's most brilliant doctoral students and subsequently his colleague strengthened the bond between them, deeply influencing both Shia-Ismaili studies and the intellectual background of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. Unlike Corbin, Shayegan was a cultural studies scholar and an Indologist in addition to his philosophical dimension. For Shayegan, who received training in comparative religion and philosophy and focused his early works particularly on the philosophical parallels between Hinduism and Sufism, Corbin was not merely a teacher but also an intellectual patron. In addition to these figures, his interactions with thinkers and clerics such as Emil Mihai Cioran, Abulhasan Rafiei Kazvini, Mehdi Elahi Ghomshei, and Seyyed Jalaluddin Ashtiani shaped his mental world (Shayegan 2013, p. 52).

Shayegan's intellectual foundations span a broad spectrum: in the West, he was inspired by Gilles Deleuze's ontological pluralism and Carl Gustav Jung's theories of the collective unconscious and ethnic memory. Furthermore, he was significantly influenced by names such as M. Heidegger, R. M. Rilke, Max Scheler, F. Nietzsche, and K. Jaspers, as well as critics of modernity like Paul Tillich, René Guénon, and José Ortega y Gasset. Analyzing Western thought through the critical tools provided by the West's own tradition of self-critique (philosophy, psychoanalysis, phenomenology), he sought to demonstrate the spiritual heritage of the East to the modern world, generating solutions for the East while simultaneously critiquing Western modernity. After completing his doctoral studies in Paris, Shayegan taught Sanskrit and Comparative Philosophy at Tehran University. From the 1970s onwards, he turned his focus toward intercultural interaction, and in 1976, he founded and directed the Iranian Center for the Study of Civilizations. As previously noted, from the 1970s onward, Shayegan studied Eastern civilizations at Tehran University, emphasizing the importance of these civilizations and the Western world benefiting from each other's experiences. In opposition to the clash of civilizations thesis, he sought to explain how inter-civilizational relations could be established through a dialectical process based on communication, dialogue, and empathy. As an advocate of cultural hybridity and inter-civilizational exchange, he believed in the universality of the harmonious synthesis of certain values and cultures, viewing them as deeply interconnected. Reintroducing the concept of dialogue among civilizations in 1976, Shayegan formulated its philosophical theory by introducing the term while living in Iran. His cultural studies in this field served as a source that nourished his philosophical and literary works across various domains, such as the relationship between anthropology, religion, and politics. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who co-founded the center with him and years later became the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, sought to bring the concept of the dialogue of civilizations into the realm of international politics. Opposing a mathematical equalization of cultures and cultural racism, Shayegan regards this issue as one of the core principles that can ground human relations on a solid and positive foundation in today's world; viewing this as a matter above local politics, he emphasizes that it must be addressed without being turned into a tool for political exploitation between the East and the West. The author presented a practical application of this approach in his work *Asya der Beraber-i Garb* (*Asia Before the West*).

The vision of the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), founded in London by Aga Khan IV in 1977, was largely built upon Corbin's method and philosophical legacy. However, Corbin passed away in 1978, and the administration of the institute's Paris branch was entrusted to Shayegan. Instead of treating Islamic thought as an isolated topic in the history of religion, Shayegan—much like Corbin—saw Ismaili cosmology as a universal

philosophical school linked to Western Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Indian philosophy. Furthermore, Shayegan shared Corbin's view that the esoteric and gnostic traditions of the Islamic world must be reinterpreted against the spiritual barrenness of modernity. One of the core principles shaping the IIS's founding philosophy—the objective to present Islam's intellectual and spiritual heritage to the modern world in a rational and philosophical language—can be seen as a reflection of both Corbin's and Shayegan's thought (Walker 2004, p. 164). In 1980, Shayegan moved to Paris, where he spent his most productive years heading the Institute of Ismaili Studies. Numerous researchers within the IIS, including Dr. Farhad Daftary, who served as the head of the institute's London headquarters for many years, have followed the path cleared by Corbin and Shayegan, producing a massive body of literature based on the manuscripts they cataloged. Today, the IIS continues to function as a center where the most intensive research on the history of Islamic culture is produced through a comparative and interdisciplinary approach. He also briefly served as the editor-in-chief of the Washington-based journal *Iran Nameh* before returning to Iran in 1992. The many years he spent in Western countries granted him the ability to observe the Islamic world with the dual rigor of both an insider and an outsider. Shayegan's intellectual phases and, consequently, his intellectual identity underwent significant transformations throughout his career. His thought, which experienced radical shifts during his lifetime, can be categorized into four main periods based on his scholarly output (Ayooobi et al. 2023, p. 181).

**First Period:** Parallel to the Sanskrit courses he conducted in Iran following his doctorate, Shayegan examined Indian philosophy, Far Eastern religions, and the mystical conceptions involving the painful encounters of Asian civilizations with the modern West. His theories regarding identity, self-understanding, and cultural encounters between traditional civilizations and modernity were linked to his idea of the 'dialogue of civilizations.' These early works form the foundation of his reputation as a cultural theorist (Fazeli and Nazari 2019, p. 343; Nazari and Chenarouiyeh 2024, p. 128).

**Second Period:** During his years in Paris as the head of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, the primary focus of his work was the problematic modernization processes in Iran and the Third World, alongside his critical stance toward the Iranian Revolution. However, it should be kept in mind that Shayegan, who views Islamism as a political failure, bases this thesis on the example of the Iranian Islamic Revolution (Dabashi 2000, pp. 517–18).

**Third Period:** In this phase, he addressed themes such as globalization, the problem of contemporary ontology, and the diminishing significance of the dichotomous opposition between the West and 'the others.'

**Fourth Period:** This can be described as a poetic and aesthetic phase; his works from this period reveal a nostalgic orientation toward Persian poetry and French literature, themes whose initial forms he had actually addressed in his earlier years (Jahanbegloo 2018, p. 818).

In describing the trauma experienced by the Islamic world in the face of modernization through the concepts of Cultural Schizophrenia or the Mutilated Consciousness—which depict minds caught between two worlds, intellectually belonging fully neither to the East nor to the West—Shayegan most likely viewed himself as someone remaining within this very realm. Indeed, Shayegan's only published novel, *Terre de Mirages*, reads like a novelized version of this thought. Depicting an Iranian man and a French woman—one in Tehran, the other in Paris—who communicate through letters, the novel portrays two lovers who, despite their spatial separation, live in each other's worlds as if existing in two different temporalities (Shayegan 2004). In this respect, the novel simultaneously validates both Shayegan's life experience and his intellectual output.

Since his early period, Shayegan has been perceived as an original, influential, and brilliant philosopher, yet also as a conservative, elitist, and traditionalist figure. Like any dynamic thinker, he was in a constant state of search and adaptation to change, pursuing his quest for truth throughout his life (Hoodashtian 2018, p. 171). Focusing on the ontological differences between European civilization and his own country, Shayegan sought to rediscover both individual and collective identity based on Iran's historical position (Ayooobi et al. 2021, pp. 114–15). The fundamental characteristic that distinguishes him from his contemporaries is the multi-layered structure of his thought system, which draws from both the humanities and natural sciences. This structure exhibits an eclectic and encompassing quality rather than a one-dimensional or ideological character.

Having been introduced to Heideggerian thought by attending the Fardidiyya meetings in Iran, Shayegan's East–West analyses were nourished more by Henry Corbin's interpretations of Heidegger than by Ahmad Fardid (Shayegan 2013, pp. 61–66). Indeed, in the later stages of his intellectual journey, he distanced himself from Fardid's anti-modernist and Heideggerian views (Ayooobi et al. 2021, pp. 112–13). With a hybrid mode of thought that could be described as “semi-traditional/semi-modern” or “semi-Eastern/semi-Western,” Shayegan attempted to reveal the metaphysical differences between both systems (Ayooobi et al. 2023, p. 181). According to him, while Western thought carries the risk of falling into the trap of nihilism on a practical level, Eastern thought possesses a depth woven with spirituality and mysticism.

Defining modernity as a transition from a traditional to a modern lifestyle, Shayegan argues that traditional civilizations protected themselves from the fragmentation created by modernity by clinging to an ‘invisible center’—the constitutive focus of the spiritual human (Shayegan 2016, p. 29). Accordingly, nihilism is not merely a philosophical problem but a spiritual malaise defined as the ‘ideologization of tradition’ or ‘schizophrenia’ (Fallah 2026, p. 113).

According to Shayegan's philosophical approach, modernity has achieved undeniable successes such as critical thinking, the rule of law, civil responsibility, and individual rights. Rather than having an impact on the internal and spiritual dimensions of human existence, modernity has primarily concerned the political, economic, and legal spheres of life. This dual nature necessitates addressing modernity from both positive and negative perspectives: while the creation of a spiritual and mental void constitutes its negative aspect, its establishment of a holistic perspective—based on a rational foundation rather than an ethnic or religious one such as faith, identity, or nationality—represents its positive side (Fazeli and Nazari 2019, p. 348). However, despite his respect for these modern achievements, Shayegan emphasizes the vital necessity of returning to the spiritual essence of Eastern culture. He defines his own existence as a structure whose “soul follows the emotional rhythm of the East, while the mind and work discipline are Western.” Although he describes the mismatch between his cool-headed, rational stance and the spontaneous nature of the East as a ‘wounded consciousness’ (cultural schizophrenia), he states that he could restrain this tension through an intellectual synthesis.

Linking the fate of Western thought to nihilism, as seen in Nietzsche and Heidegger, Shayegan reads the trajectory of modern civilization as a process of decline (Khalilzand 2019). For him, this process is a loss of altitude moving from intellect to instinct, from intuitive contemplation to a technical worldview, from “resurrection theology” to historicism, and from the absolute toward technical extremism against nature. Characterizing the manifestations of this situation as ‘Westernization’ and ‘alienation,’ Shayegan views them as two facets of a ‘double illusion.’ He evaluates Westernization as an inevitable consequence of history and nihilism as a logical output of technical reason. The nihilistic

reflections of technical thought lead to the gradual rejection of the ancient belief systems of the East.

In a sense, according to Shayegan, the prioritization of rational reason alone by Western philosophers, instead of discovery and intuition, has detached them from metaphysical values. Arguing that the West lost its spiritual confidence by substituting civil society for the religious system since the 16th century, the thinker maintains that mystical Asian philosophies are based on “revelation and salvation”, whereas Western thought remains limited to the complete secularization of knowledge. Consequently, he displays a pessimistic attitude toward the optimistic worldview of the Enlightenment (Ayooobi et al. 2021, pp. 118–19). For Shayegan, what must be done is to establish a balance in both the internal and external life of the modern human.

#### *Intellectual Foundations: Jung, Eliade*

Carl Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade are two prominent figures in the 20th-century intellectual world who sought to understand the origins of the human mind, myths, and religions. The relationship between them was based on both a personal friendship and a powerful, interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. The paths of Eliade and Jung crossed from 1933 onward at the Eranos Conferences held in Switzerland, to which Shayegan was also later invited. These conferences became an intellectual center where historians of religion, psychologists, anthropologists, and philosophers gathered to discuss the depths of human experience (Wasserstrom 1999).

What made the Eranos Conferences unique was that topics such as esotericism, mysticism, alchemy, theosophy, and Eastern religions—which were regarded as taboos or superstitions in academia—were addressed by some of the leading scientists of the period, who sought to understand how these structures reflected the existential truth of humanity. In this sense, the Eranos Conferences transformed into a realm where humanity, in a way, rediscovered its ancient, timeless, and sacred dimensions. Apart from Jung, who was a founding and central figure of Eranos, other notable attendees included Eliade, Gershom Scholem, and Corbin (For the significance of these conferences and Jung’s recollections, see Jung 1989; Hakl 2013).

Eliade was invited to Eranos in 1949, where he began presenting papers. The presentations he delivered there and his deep conversations with Jung played a major role in establishing Eliade’s international recognition and maturing his ideas. Although Eliade and Jung agreed that humanity produces shared symbols, their approaches differed structurally by discipline: Jung used the term “archetype” to describe universal symbolic patterns that exist structurally within the depths of the human mind and are transmitted through heredity. For Eliade, however, an archetype signified a transcendent, celestial, and timeless sacred model rather than a psychological structure. While Jung attributed similar myths across different cultures to humanity’s shared biological/psychological past (For Mount Meru, see Jung 1959, p. 377), Eliade argued that these similarities stemmed from the objective and structural relationship human beings establish with the universe—that is, from the sacred manifesting itself in similar ways everywhere.

Jung interpreted the circular geometric shapes (mandalas) observed in dreams and Eastern art as the soul’s effort toward integration and its desire to reach the center. Eliade, on the other hand, examined this phenomenon geographically and architecturally, demonstrating why temples, sacred mountains, and cities were always constructed as a “Center of the World” (Axis Mundi).

Eliade rejected the reduction of religious phenomena merely to psychology. According to him, religion was not a psychological projection but a reality existing in its own right (*sui generis*). While Jung viewed myths as a tool to heal and understand the human

mind, Eliade, conversely, accepted the human mind as a tool to understand myths. The relationship between Jung and Eliade constitutes an immense bridge built between the inner world of the human psyche and humanity's historical and cosmic quest. Jung utilized myths while mapping the human mind, whereas Eliade traced the universal symbolism discovered by Jung while examining the history of religions.

In the history of religions, the “phenomenon of participation in the same reality” is generally expressed in two distinct ways: the first is Platonic participation (*methexis*), and the second is the Jungian collective unconscious, with a very fine line existing between them. The meeting of immaterial souls manifests in these two ways; however, when visionary archetypes are concerned, the situation is formulated more as a “simultaneous participation in the same transcendent reality”. Visionary archetypes should not be dismissed as mere fantasies; for they are expressions of structured cosmic symbols deeply transcending the psychology of the individual. When two different souls commune with the same archetype, they connect to the singular, transcendent source independent of time and space, which Eliade termed the “Center”.

Eliade's phenomenology of religion employs three fundamental concepts to explain this ontology created by visionary archetypes:

**Hierophany (Manifestation of the Sacred):** The manifestation of the sacred through an object, symbol, or vision in the world.

**Illud Tempus (The Primordial Time):** The capacity of myths and rituals to transport human beings back to that first “time before time,” the mythical beginning.

**Axis Mundi (Center of the World/The Cosmic Center):** The center that connects heaven and earth—that is, the sacred and the profane (the non-sacred), such as sacred mountains, cities, rivers, and temples (Eliade 1959, pp. 5, 8, 10, 12–17).

According to Eliade, space is secured by being transformed into a transcendent center, while concrete time is secured by being transformed into a mythological time. The sacred, by its very essence, manifests in a place entirely distinct from profane space and, simultaneously, within a sacred time (Eliade 1959, pp. 20–21). In the meeting of immaterial souls, the shared visionary archetype itself functions as an Axis Mundi. In short, from the perspective of Eliade's phenomenology of religion, this process is one where souls living in a chaotic, profane world orient themselves toward the cosmic center (Axis Mundi) through visionary archetypes (hierophanies) and jointly participate in a timeless reality (Illud Tempus).

In order to fully grasp the subject, one must properly analyze how Jung defines the concept of the anima. The anima is not a soul in the dogmatic sense, nor is it the rational anima found in philosophy. Rather, in its essence, it corresponds to a natural archetype that summarizes all manifestations of the unconscious, the archaic mind, and the history of language and religion. As an a priori element always present in human moods, reactions, drives, and everything that manifests spontaneously in psychic life, the anima is a self-existing life force. It is that which makes us alive, sits behind consciousness, remains impossible to fully integrate with it, and serves as the very source from which consciousness arises. Ultimately, psychic life refers to an unconscious existence that surrounds consciousness on every side (Jung 1959, p. 27). Modern psychology treats the products of unconscious activity as statements made by the unconscious psyche about itself. Counterparts to these fantasy images are found in mythological motifs. Therefore, it is assumed that these motifs correspond generally to specific collective structural elements of the human psyche and are inherited just like the morphological elements of the human body. There are numerous cases that cannot be explained otherwise and force us to accept the hypothesis of an indigenous (individual) revival. These cases are so frequent that we are obliged to admit the existence of a collective psychic substratum; Jung termed this the ‘collective unconscious’. These elements resemble and are directly related to the structural

types encountered in myths and fairy tales. (Jung 1959, p. 155). Jung noted that from the standpoint of their approach to the subject, the perspectives of psychiatry and the history of religions differ. Accordingly, within the field of psychiatric observation, cases characterized by the production of archetypal symbols are frequently encountered. However, since the observing clinician lacks the necessary historical knowledge, they are not in a position to perceive the parallelism between their own observations and the findings of anthropology and the human sciences in general. Conversely, the expert in mythology and comparative religion is unaware that mythological motifs remain fresh and alive in the hidden corners of our personal lives—such as dreams and visions—which must by no means be scientifically dissected. Consequently, archetypal material remains a great unknown, and collecting such material requires special study and preparation (Jung 1959, p. 189). Jung notes that intuition is a phenomenon that possesses an extremely complex nature and develops in dependence on unconscious processes, defining it as ‘perception via the unconscious’. Some people do not accept that certain dreams and visions can originate from an unconscious psyche. Yet, this psyche, which is termed ‘higher consciousness’ in Indian philosophy, corresponds to the concept of the ‘unconscious’ in Western thought. Nevertheless, certain dreams, visions, and mystical experiences indicate that a consciousness also exists within the unconscious itself. However, no consciousness can exist without a subject—that is, an ego; for consciousness requires a center, an ego, that is aware of things (Jung 1959, pp. 282–83).

While the influence of Jung’s ideas on Shayegan can be directly measured through the citations he makes, the complete absence of Eliade’s name in his texts is a striking phenomenon. This is because, although Shayegan utilized Eliade’s ideas as a theoretical foundation, he appears to have avoided mentioning him by name directly.

## 2. The Geography of Distinct Souls

Arguing that a new conceptual framework is necessary to make sense of contemporary phenomena, Shayegan developed original concepts such as ‘double illusion’, ‘fundamental rift’, ‘unconscious Westernization’, ‘being caught between the agony and the death of the gods’, and the ‘ideologization of tradition’ (Shayegan 2013, pp. 40, 45–46; 2016, p. 11). The perceptions of individuals living within traditional or modern paradigms produce different conceptions of the universe based on their respective ontological grounds. This differentiation in the mental world transforms both objective reality and spiritual images.

According to Shayegan, this situation represents two distinct faces of human existence in the world and two different historical experiences. While a critical confrontation between these two worlds requires sensitivity toward differences in understanding, it also makes culture shock inevitable (Shayegan 2017, p. 9). Shayegan maintains that without understanding the origins of these historical divergences that pit the East against the West, a true dialogue of civilizations—free from clichés and capable of ensuring lasting peace—cannot be established (Shayegan 2016, p. 11).

The traditional “cycle of descent and ascent” (Kavis-i Nuzūl and Kavis-i Uruc), the tripartite division of faculties as “body–soul–mind,” and the symbolic language have all undergone a profound destruction with the advent of the scientific and technical era since the 15th century, giving way to the dichotomous structures of ideologies. While traditional structures resemble mirrors that purely reflect the light of Absolute Being, the new forms emerging with modernity have become “broken mirrors” that deform the earthly light. For Shayegan, the immutable archetypes of tradition—such as Being (God), the cyclical perception of time, and the nature–human unity—shape the mythical and poetic vision of the human who interprets the world through intuitive perception (the eye of the heart). Although these structures continue to condition the consciousness of a

segment of humanity, in post-industrial societies, the culture of dialogue has been replaced by monologue. The way of sensing the world characteristic of the pre-Galilean person of faith has been supplanted by the ‘lack of dialogue’ of the modern Westerner, who imposes planetary dominance over all societies. This situation signifies a disconnection of the human from their own soul and the essence of Being (Shayegan 2016, pp. 10, 15–17).

According to Shayegan, the ideologization of thought has led to a deep rift between the mind and the soul, creating an ontological disconnection that is difficult to compensate for. However, in certain Eastern geographies such as India, the mind/reason has not established a central hegemony capable of dominating or completely detaching from the faculties of the soul, as seen in the West (Shayegan 2012, p. 186). By constructing the human as a type of being reducible solely to the mind, the West built the concept of the intellectual only upon this rational ground. This divergence has not only severed philosophy from religion, subject from object, and soul from mind but has also initiated the process of deconstructing the ontological integrity between human and the universe. As a result of this ontological rupture, the human mode of interpreting the universe and the self has undergone transformation along four primary axes:

Regression from Visionary/Intuitive (Shuhūdī) thought to technical thought, or the transition from a mystical view to a technical worldview: The world’s loss of its sacred meaning.

Regression from Essential (Jawharī) thought to mechanical thought, or the transition from substantial forms to mechanical and mathematical concepts: The transformation of qualitative existence into quantitative data.

Regression from Spiritual Essence (Jawhar-i rūhānī) to egoism (nafsānī), or the transition from spiritual substances to primitive impulses: The surrender of metaphysical depth to psychological/biological reductionism.

Regression from the thought of the hereafter (ākhirah) to history-worship (tārikh-parastī), or the transition from an eschatological perspective to historicism: The replacement of the transcendent perception of time with linear and mundane history (Shayegan 2012, pp. 49–50).

This process, which can be characterized in Max Weber’s terms as the ‘disenchantment of the world’ (Lassman and Velody 1989, p. 12), has resulted in the instrumentalization of thought, the mathematization of nature, the termination of the myth of time, and the emergence of a spiritual void. This overwhelming success of Western thought in the technical sphere has rendered a true dialogue between civilizations impossible.

According to Shayegan, knowing the spiritual world necessitates a hermeneutics that enables the transition from symbolized forms to the primary principles that produce those symbols. This situation is an effort to re-establish the ontological correspondence between the “inner universe” (microcosm) and the “outer universe” (macrocosm), in the words of Paracelsus. The transition from a religious world-conception to the modern world requires not only a critical stance or a dialectical comprehension but also a radical epistemological rupture and an ontological deconstruction.

When examining the foundations of the realm of similarities—the universal archetypes—the visionary experiences of mystics, the spiritual journeying (sayr-u suluk) of Sufis, and the symbolic world of ancient narratives exhibit striking structural similarities across different cultural geographies. From Hindu India to Zoroastrian Iran, and throughout the entirety of the Islamic world, one encounters universal archetypes symbolizing the same truth. These archetypes represent a plane of pure being, purified from the fluctuating conditions of the relative world. Despite their formal differences, all these images are nourished by a mysterious center from which everything emanates and to which everything ultimately

returns. This center is an ontological intersection where different layers of reality come into contact with one another.

Shayegan maintains that when traditions such as Hinduism, Islamic Sufism, and Taoism are examined comparatively, a shared understanding of a “visionary community” comes to light. For instance, the doctrinal similarities between Hinduism and Islam can be substantiated through the following technical correspondences:

Love (Ashq) in Islamic Sufism corresponds to the driving force behind overcoming Maya (cosmic illusion) in Hinduism.

Resurrection (Hashr) corresponds to Pralaya (cosmic dissolution and rebirth).

The Four Realms (Alams) correspond to the four states of Atman.

The Three Archangels correspond to the Trimurti (three divine powers).

Dhikr (Hu Allah) corresponds to the Hamsa mantra.

The Age of Gabriel corresponds to the Age of Brahma.

These spiritual disciplines are ancient methods that enable the realization of the soul’s independence by liberating the human from ontological bondage (Shayegan 2016, p. 30). Indeed, the experiences of “ascent and descent” (sudûr and urûc) within the framework of negative theology (via negativa) occupy a central place not only in the East but also in the Neoplatonic Christian tradition, beginning with Plotinus and continuing through Pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus Erigena, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa. While Shayegan occasionally criticizes the ‘false dichotomies’ constructed between East and West, he nonetheless continues to depict these two worlds as two distinct poles that are ontologically severed from one another. This is particularly evident in his coding of the West as technical and the East as intuitive, a stance that leads him to perceive modernity as a “totalized block” (Moulid 2025, p. 30).

Within this context of universal continuity, the world may be born from a lotus rising from Vishnu’s navel at the beginning of time, or it may manifest through the dismemberment of the cosmic giant Prajapati (Shayegan 2016, pp. 33, 36). Although narrated through different symbols, both accounts express the transformation of unity (wahdat) into multiplicity (kathrat) and the sacred origin of existence.

The manifestations of inner landscapes and visionary geography have been articulated in various ways by different figures throughout the history of the Islamic world. The conception of an “inner nature” with its own landscapes, lands, and cities has directed the individual toward a visionary geography rich in symbolism. In this regard, Alaeddawla Simnani (d. 1336) described the spiritual journey across the continents of the soul by “turning the inner sky into the outer sky.” Similarly, Suhrawardi (d. 1191), in his Illuminationist (Ishraqi) tales, emphasizes the ontological unity of the internal and external earth through the principle of the like rising to its like while describing the quest to reach the ‘Emerald Rock’ on the mystical Mount Sinai. The renowned poet Hafez (d. 1390), who speaks of worlds of discovery and intuition within a kind of geography of being, suggests that for some, the essence of love is the melancholy of remaining in this world after departing from the original homeland (alam-i arvah) (Shayegan 2024, pp. 45, 91). Furthermore, Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d. 1428) grounds the relationship the individual establishes with all existential realities within their own being (the doctrine of the Insan-i Kamil) through these elements.

All these approaches represent a synthesis of the Creator’s Names and Attributes (Asma-i Husna) within the human soul (Shayegan 2016, pp. 39–40). An examination of the texts belonging to these traditions reveals that, despite emerging in diverse geographies, they contain the fundamental schemas of a “universal spiritual perspective.” This indicates that, notwithstanding physical distances, souls meet within the same visionary geography.

### 3. The Modern Era: Ontological Shocks and Disenchantment

In the pre-modern era, the realm of existence possessed a hierarchical order; at the pinnacle of this structure was God, followed by angels, souls, and the physical world. However, modernity has shattered this hierarchical integrity and impoverished the ancient spiritual-symbolic universe of humanity. One of the primary factors underlying this transformation is the evolution of the human being—who once looked through the “eye of the heart”—into a “visual human” under the dominance of images, largely driven by the influence of the media. Another factor is the erosion of spiritual values as scientific progress advances (Shayegan 2016, pp. 20–22).

This process has been shaped by a series of “cosmogonic blows/shocks” to the central position of the human in the universe: the historical-spiritual blow with Hegel; the biological with Darwin; the socio-economic with Marx; and the psychological with Freud. According to Shayegan, as a result of these tremors, the world has entered a process of “disenchantment,” rendering the sky and the universe soulless (Shayegan 2013, pp. 24–25). For the “visual human” living in Gutenberg’s disenchanted galaxy, objects are no longer mystical signs but mere mathematical data (Shayegan 2017, p. 121).

On the other hand, Shayegan points to the inevitable gains of this jarring transformation. Without secularization and the liquidation of symbols, secular democracy would not have been possible; similarly, without the objectification and Galilean mathematization of nature, modern sciences could not have been attained. The dark corridors of the unconscious could only be explored through this “psychological blow.” These shocks, which constitute the consciousness of the Western individual, can be likened to an “update” process that occurred at the expense of losing spiritual richness. The fundamental tragicomic situation here is that the human has blunted their inner world in the very pursuit of liberation.

Referencing Jung’s definition of religion, Shayegan argues that the greatest obstacle to the soul’s creative capacity is reductive and totalitarian ideologies. Ideologies destroy the symbolic world of religion, transforming it into a technical and economic tool; this leads to the “ideologization of tradition.” In a globalizing world, it is no longer possible to present religion—with its emotional structure—as a “closed tribal system.” Consequently, Shayegan emphasizes the impossibility of a simple “synthesis” between modern scientific reason and mystical heritage. According to him, any attempt at unification that does not pass through a critical hermeneutic filter will create a hybrid “ideological monster”—neither religious nor philosophical—caught between the two. This represents the second great rupture in human history, necessitating a redefinition of values and the human’s place in the universe (Shayegan 2016, pp. 23–26).

In the present day, ideology has become almost the only possible form of communication between civilizations. However, since every ideology inherently harbors a “false consciousness,” an excessive proliferation occurs in modes of language and thought. According to Shayegan, both the East and the West have constructed the very elements that threaten their existence through their own intellectual processes (Shayegan 2016, p. 22). Searching for the roots of this process in the historical tension between Avicenna (Ibn Sînâ) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Shayegan views both philosophers as symbols of the different futures awaiting the East and the West.

Drawing heavily on the analysis of Henry Corbin (Corbin 1986, p. 246), Shayegan argues that Averroes’ rigid Aristotelian cosmology bypassed Avicenna’s celestial hierarchy founded on “angelology.” While Averroes remained strictly committed to Aristotelianism, Avicenna did not abandon the poetic-mythical dimension of thought alongside Aristotelianism, which ultimately gave rise to “Eastern philosophy” (hikmat al-ishraq). The theory of “double truth” in Latin Averroism, which emerged in the West through Averroes’ in-

terpretations, brought about the separation of faith from knowledge and religion from philosophy (Shayegan 2013, p. 49).

This transformation effectively erased the world of the soul, symbolic language, and consequently, visionary geography from the ontological plane. Averroes rationalized and subsequently rejected the bridge that Avicenna had established between the philosopher's mind and the Angel of Revelation—namely, the possibility of visionary perception. This rupture resulted in the replacement of imaginal forms of knowledge and intuitive narratives by a new, sovereignty-oriented political science that rose in parallel with the technical and industrial development of bourgeois society.

While Averroist thought reached its conclusion in both the East and the West, the Avicennan tradition was synthesized in Iran with the theoretical Sufism of Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi, ultimately giving rise to Mulla Sadra. Subsequently, although it nourished an intuitive vein leading to sacred knowledge through the School of Isfahan and 19th-century movements like Shaykhism, this vein was largely severed under the rationalist and positivist pressures of the modern age (Shayegan 2016, pp. 96–98; 2013, pp. 50–51). The absence of an organic continuity in this ancient narrative tradition today is the most conspicuous evidence of the ontological void that Shayegan defines as “wounded consciousness.”

According to Shayegan, the common essence of spiritual experience in Asian civilizations within the realm of ontological unity and intuitive illumination rests upon an unshakable integrity between the origin, human, and nature. In contrast, the fundamental element in Western thought that led to the sharp separation of sciences is dualistic approaches such as religion–philosophy and body–soul. Due to this ontological fragmentation, Western rationalism failed to establish a structural continuity in the face of the East's “love of unity” (*unio mystica*) (Shayegan 2012, p. 186). The “experience of the origin” mentioned here is a primordial and eternal experience based on an internal sense. For Shayegan, this situation represents a true illumination. The intuition at the center of this illumination consists of vanishing within an absolute radiance that renders everything transient and relative null and void.

Consequently, visionary geography represents a spiritual ground where the human transcends their limited self within this divine radiance and returns to the essence of being (Shayegan 2012, p. 189). By addressing the theme he describes as “the lost country of the soul,” Shayegan attempts to remind us of and reconstruct the role of the neglected soul in our current disenchanted and demystified world (Fazeli and Nazari 2019, p. 347).

#### 4. Conclusions

In the thought system of Shayegan, the world of the soul possesses its own unique ontological realm and a “visionary geography.” The existence of this geography is grounded in the experiences of mystics, ancient parables, and epic narratives. Comprehending this “legendary” structure and its associated supernatural order necessitates the decoding of a symbolic language—specifically through *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation) and hermeneutics. Within this context, it is perceived that archetypes across different traditions exhibit a structural similarity. For instance, Mount Meru as the center of the universe in Hindu mythology, Mount Alborz in Zoroastrianism, and Mount Qaf in Islamic geography are all manifestations of the “sacred center” archetype, independent of their physical locations.

These imaginal centers are positioned not according to the spatial coordinates of the factual world, but according to the vertical ascent of the soul. According to Shayegan, being integrated into this center means participating in a timeless and mysterious mode of existence that transcends the temporal and spatial constraints of the contingent world. Although this method does not align with the rational standards of modern science, the

human “nostalgia for the origin” and the quest for salvation render this spiritual orientation essential.

Shayegan argues that if the world is perceived through the “eyes of the soul,” a relationship can be established between the esoteric (bātin) and exoteric (zāhir) aspects of things, enabling the possibility of ta’wil (spiritual interpretation). From this perspective, a simultaneous causal link is forged between the mysterious time of coincidences and the mechanical operation of quantitative space. Thus, the “inner sky” and the “outer sky” become two different manifestations of the same reality. This new level of consciousness represents the ontological transformation of the human being. While concepts may change names across Hindu, Chinese, and Islamic traditions, the original forms (archetypes) are preserved, and the sacred charge carried by the symbols remains unchanged. For instance, the legendary world of “Vara” in Zoroastrian cosmology exhibits a structural equivalence with the “Eighth Climate” (al-iqlīm al-thāmin) in Islamic Sufism. According to Shayegan, these shared elements are the products not of doctrinal religions, but of a spiritual geography.

Tracing the roots of the intellectual rupture in the Western world back to the Middle Ages, Shayegan identifies the separation of faith–knowledge and philosophy–religion—beginning with “Latin Averroism”—as the inception of contemporary nihilistic movements. In this process, the world of the soul has been replaced by “historicism,” and specialized/qualitative space has been supplanted by “geometric/homogeneous extension.” In the post-colonial era, Eastern civilizations, swept up in the wave of Westernization, distanced themselves from their own conceptual universes and adopted Western terminology; this, in turn, caused the severance of the ancient communication between Islamic, Indian, and Chinese civilizations. Shayegan’s approach to intuitive geography acquires an extremely enlightening quality, particularly when positioned within the unique history of Eastern mystical thought and the cultural landscape shaped accordingly. Shayegan’s personal circumstances and educational background, coupled with his deistic approach, heavily shaped the way he contextualized and made sense of the issues at hand.

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