



# All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings

*Tom Cheetham*

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*All the World an Icon* is the fourth book in an informal "quartet" of works by Tom Cheetham on the spirituality of Henry Corbin, a major twentieth-century scholar of Sufism and colleague of C. G. Jung, whose influence on contemporary religion and the humanities is beginning to become clear. Cheetham's books have helped spark a renewed interest in the work of this important, creative religious thinker.

Henry Corbin (1903-1978) was professor of Islamic religion at the Sorbonne in Paris and director of the department of Iranic studies at the Institut Franco-Iranien in Teheran. His wide-ranging work includes the first translations of Heidegger into French, studies in Swedenborg and Boehme, writings on the Grail and angelology, and definitive translations of Persian Islamic and Sufi texts. He introduced such seminal terms as "the imaginal realm" and "theophany" into Western thought, and his use of the Shi'ite idea of *ta'wil* or "spiritual interpretation" influenced psychologist James Hillman and the literary critic Harold Bloom. His books were read by a broad range of poets including Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, and his impact on American poetry, says Cheetham, has yet to be fully appreciated. His published titles in English include *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, and *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*.

As the religions of the Book place the divine Word at the center of creation, the importance of hermeneutics, the theory and practice of interpretation, cannot be overstated. In the theology and spirituality of Henry Corbin, the mystical heart of this tradition is to be found in the creative, active imagination; the alchemy of spiritual development is best understood as a story of the soul's search for the Lost Speech. Cheetham eloquently demonstrates Corbin's view that the living interpretation of texts, whether divine or human—or, indeed, of the world itself seen as the Text of Creation—is the primary task of spiritual life.

In his first three books on Corbin, Cheetham explores different aspects of Corbin's work, but has saved for this book his final analysis of what Corbin meant by the Arabic term *ta'wil*—perhaps the most important concept in his entire *oeuvre*. "Any consideration of how Corbin's ideas were adapted by others has to begin with a clear idea of what Corbin himself intended," writes Cheetham; "his own intellectual and spiritual cosmos is already highly complex and eclectic and a knowledge of his particular philosophical project is crucial for understanding the range and implications of his work." Cheetham lays out the implications of *ta'wil* as well as the use of language as integral part of any artistic or spiritual practice, with the view that the creative imagination is a fundamentally linguistic phenomenon for the Abrahamic religions, and, as Corbin tells us, prayer is the supreme form of creative imagination.

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