



HOW THE MODERN
OCCULT MOVEMENT
GREW OUT OF
RENAISSANCE ATTEMPTS
TO CONVERT THE JEWS

ROBERT WANG

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*The extraordinary story of how,
from the fourteenth century on,
Christian theologians used the
essence of Jewish mysticism to
prove the divinity of Christ and
how that effort resulted in
Christian Kabbalah, in Rosi-
crucianism and in all aspects
of the Western occult tradition.*

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CONTENTS

Preface, i

I. Beginnings, 1

Early Hebrew Kabbalists and the Renaissance theologians, including Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin who find in the essence of Jewish mysticism "proof" of the divinity of Christ and the means to convert the Jews.

II. After Reuchlin, 56

The period of transition when Christian Kabbalah is avidly embraced by European courts and by the Church. Agrippa and others begin to incorporate the principles of Hebrew Kabbalah into the magical rituals of a new occult movement

III. Occultism Established, 105

The Inquisition and persecution of Jews, new principles of magic in Protestant countries, and a complex philosophy created by Bruno, Kircher and the Elizabethan magicians. Christian Kabbalah becomes Rosicrucianism, which develops into what is known today as occultism.

PREFACE

Many years ago, a friend returned from Paris with a number of books in French on the topic of the “Magical Kabbalah.” I was especially struck by one illustration which showed Christ as a lamb. The figure was haloed and carried a long cross above which was, in Hebrew letters, one of the 72 names of God. Seeing these names, which are among the most sacred of all elements of Jewish mysticism, in a Christian context was odd and disconcerting. And as I skimmed this text I recalled the dry comment of one historian of modern occultism that the members of many organizations have been sworn to strictest secrecy and then entrusted with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Thus, curiosity about one illustration brought me onto a circuitous path of research which has taken almost a decade. The result is my thesis that the western occult movement grew out of medieval attempts of the Catholic

church to convert the Jews.

I wish to document the fact that the response of Christian scholars, from the twelfth century on, to their encounter with the *Kabbalah*, which is certainly the essence of Jewish mysticism, has been disingenuously, if not preposterously, self-serving.

How could it have happened, one may ask, that Jews and their religion were detested yet essential elements of their mystical tradition and language were freely embraced as embodying an immutable truth? The answer is found in a remarkable Christian claim that Jewish Kabbalah, which developed slowly out of Merkabah mysticism, from about the sixth through the thirteenth centuries, is not truly Jewish at all, but is derived from an earlier tradition that confirms the truth of Christianity. Perhaps yet more remarkable is the assertion that even the Hebrew language is not unique to the Jewish culture, but is the original language given by God to mankind. The Jews were considered to be merely caretakers of a tradition of Kabbalah and of the “original” Hebrew language (of which they spoke a distorted version), which they could never really understand because these mysteries were truly comprehensible only in terms of Christianity.

To most Medieval and Renaissance Christians the Jews were simply the hated enemy, whose conversion was a primary goal. It was no less great a Christian of the thirteenth century than Louis IX (later to be canon-

ized Saint Louis), who said that the best way for a layman to debate with a Jew was to run him through with a sword.

To Louis and to others, harassment of Jews, those held responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, was an act of sincere piety.¹ Thus it was an especially sweet victory for Renaissance Christian theologians to find in the most sacred documents of this enemy, the *Kabbalah*, not only a confirmation of the errors and blasphemy of Judaism, but a proof positive of the truth of Christianity.

Christians had tried for centuries, from the late Roman period, to find corroboration of the divinity of Jesus in the Old Testament, and they looked hopefully into every complex passage which referred to a messiah with the fresh zeal of medieval thought. But finally it was Renaissance theologians who found, in the texts of Jewish Kabbalah, “indisputable” proof of all aspects of the Christian faith.

Of course, modern historical biblical research presents a very different picture than that known to earlier Christians. Beyond its value as spiritual teaching, the Bible is no longer viewed as exact history, but rather as an assemblage of mythologies and folk tales, much of which was developed for socio-political reasons. And as Harold Blum so eloquently expressed it: “Few cultural paradoxes are so profound, or so unnerving as the process of religious canonization by which an essentially literary work becomes a sacred text.”

But as sacred texts, The Old and New Testaments were the battleground of medieval theology. Chris-

tians found in Hebrew biblical texts clear reference to a “messiah” who was to come. And since Christianity was founded in the belief that a messiah had indeed appeared, it was a logical claim that institutionalized Jewish documents such as the Torah and the Talmud, as well as new literature of the Kabbalah, which made reference to a messianic savior of Israel, were talking about Jesus of Nazareth. The Jews obviously disagreed quite passionately.

But, no matter to what extent Jews may have found offensive the appropriation of their sacred doctrines, the Christian “occult” movement today is the direct result of the manipulation, by Renaissance philosophers, of Hebrew and Greek ideas which were in a state of incubation about the time when Christianity was declared the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Renaissance thinkers believed both streams of ideas to be much earlier than they actually were, and thought that they were in the presence of truths transmitted to man by God at the dawn of civilization. The wonder of this period in history is its sense of invincibility, its faith that it had been vested with all potential for human greatness and human understanding.

The Renaissance truly believed that its achievements were ultimate, and that it had surpassed the artistic and philosophical creations of the ancient world. It was certainly this somewhat hubristic turn of thought, this assumption of a destiny to triumph, which encouraged a few Christian philosophers of the Renaissance to pursue a distortion of Jewish principles that turned into Christian Kabbalah and set the stage for later ideas. Indeed,

the primarily Christian occult movements of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries are, without apology to Jewish mysticism, dependent upon Hebrew God Names and upon invocations in a little-understood Hebrew language.

Only a few Christian Kabbalists have been experts in the Hebrew language, and even fewer have been aware of the literary sources of their beliefs. And despite the misinformation which has been promulgated by Christian theologians, the great sense of privacy, if not secrecy, which has characterized Jewish mystical experience seems to have resulted in a tacit silence on these matters from Jewish Kabbalists. Jewish historians have only recently begun to turn their attention to the relationship of Christianity and Judaism during the seminal periods of Kabbalah—the thirteenth through the sixteenth century.

The pioneering scholar of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, referred critically to the inventions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Christian Kabbalists, but he held some of the earliest Christian Kabbalists in high regard for their scholarship. More recently, however, Moshe Idel called the work of the great Christian Kabbalist and Hebrew scholar Johann Reuchlin, “historical fiction.” And the English historian Frances Yates described much of Renaissance philosophy as based upon a “huge historical error.”

It was biblical scholars of the nineteenth century who brought the sacred texts of both Christianity and Judaism into question and whose work finally eclipsed the elegant but spurious claims of Christian Kabbalists. Thus

today, few people have ever heard of Christian Kabbalah, and even fewer might be aware that there was a time when it was the preeminent philosophy of the European Courts.

The history of Western occultism is a history of attitudes about Jewish mysticism and the incorporation of these ideas into general Western culture. From the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries interest in Jewish Kabbalah had to be justified by its use to convert the Jews, or else studied secretly. But in the seventeenth century Hebrew names and invocations began to be freely, and without an excuse of proselytism, incorporated into “magical” rituals and invocations. It was during this period that a latinization and distortion of many words and names in the Hebrew language appeared, frequently to the extent that the origins of the word were almost lost.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the assimilation of Jewish Kabbalah into Western occultism was complete. There was no longer reference to conversion of the Jews; the “magical” language, its alphabet and god names, became essential to the rituals and invocations of a new occultism, most of whose practitioners today have no idea where the words come from or what they really mean in the Jewish mystical tradition.

Robert Wang
Washington D.C.

I

BEGINNINGS

The system of thought which is known today as the *Kabbalah*, and which has been often mysteriously referred to as the “hidden books” is the product of a very slow development out of a form of second and third century, B.C.E., Jewish mysticism called *Merkabah* (“Chariot”), referring to the Chariot carrying the Throne of God described by the Prophet Ezekiel. The aim of the *Merkabah* mystic was to approach (in what was called a *descent*) the heavenly Throne and to see God face to face.

Along with the literature of *Merkabah* there developed a literature of *Hekalot* (“Palaces”) mysticism. The Seven Palaces were those through which the mystic passed as he came nearer and nearer to the Throne. This was a very

complicated process in which the soul was subjected to great dangers.

At the doorway of each Palace stood a *Gatekeeper* angel, who could only be passed if the mystic held the correct seals and demonstrated an expertise in the Torah. Moreover, there were *Intercessor* angels, whose role was at once to protect the Divine Sphere from the impure, and to aid those who were worthy to enter it.

The tone and quality of Merkabah and Hekalot mysticism was very different from the Kabbalah which superceded it. There was little reference to a messiah, because the mystic who approached God was himself the chosen one. He was the emissary of Israel, a mediator between Israel and God. But magic was implicit here. At the doorway of the Seventh and final Palace, the adept had to show “the great seal and the frightful Crown,” which were essentially his magical tools.¹

Christians, generally, were not attracted to this very early form of mysticism which had as underpinning the covenant between Abraham and God for the Jewish people. But, however they may have reached the later periods, a few elements of Hekalot experience were incorporated into Christian occult practice. The idea of gatekeeper angels, for example, was a particular spark to the imagination of Christian Kabbalists who describe very formal procedures for encountering such celestial beings in a meditative state of inner travel called variously: *skrying*, *astral projection*, and *rising on the planes*. It may also be asserted that the Hekalot mystic

was a model of what the Christian Kabbalist magicians called an “Adept,” one who moved effortlessly through inner worlds.

Throughout most of the middle ages, the term Kabbalah was used to mean a general tradition, or something that was received. It was not until the thirteenth century that the word was used to mean a specific set of mystical ideas, involving complex meditations and magical invocations using to the various Hebrew names of God.

In the thirteenth century there was a virtual explosion of interest in Jewish mysticism as literally hundreds of treatises were written, very few of which have apparently survived. But literature, a recording of individual experience, based on principles written by earlier sages, was essential to Jewish mysticism. One prophet built upon the writing of another and, as Mark Verman commented: “So pervasive is this interfacing of motifs that it is virtually impossible to read a single page of any Jewish mystical text without coming upon a citation or allusion to a previous work, be it biblical or postbiblical.”²

The primary symbol of modern Kabbalah, although emphasized more by Christian than by Jewish Kabbalists, is *The Tree of Life*. This is a diagram of ten circles, called *Sefirot* connected by twenty-two lines which are called *Paths*. The Tree of Life is intended to represent the totality of creation, most of which is unseen. This composite symbol, a product of the early sixteenth century, is found in a variety of forms until a standard was established, apparently in the late eighteenth century.³

Kabbalah is rooted in a time during the late middle ages when both Christian and Jewish theologians were turning their attention to divine intricacies. While Christian priests were heatedly arguing about the number of angels that would fit on the head of a pin, Jewish rabbis were speculating on how Noah's ark was lit, and what the animals were fed. Such endeavors may today seem frivolous, but they reflect an Aristotilian state of mind which wanted to analyze and to classify everything seen and unseen. Students of philosophy must, at very least, be impressed with the extent to which the Kabbalah seems to fuse those two opposing ideological currents of the middle ages, the thought of Aristotle and of Plato. The Kabbalah defines and orders and compartmentalizes meticulously and endlessly, but at the same time its essential materials are irrational to the same degree as are those of Plato's great cosmological study, *The Timaeus*.

Primary Literature

Almost all Jewish Kabbalistic ideas in some way develop from, or derive from three books, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Bahir* and the Zohar. Christian Kabbalists amalgamated such Jewish thought with largely Platonic ideas found in a collection of Greek documents called *The Hermetica*.

Sefer Yetzirah

The earliest work of interest to Kabbalist studies is the *Sefer Yetzirah*, or *Book of Formation*. This profound and curious work, which seems to have been written by a Jew living in Palestine between the third and the sixth century, C.E.,⁴ is the earliest known Hebrew speculative text and is the cornerstone of Kabbalistic thought. It's cryptic text, which has been the subject of great curiosity over the centuries, has been explained as being everything from a book of magic to the first Hebrew grammar.⁵

French scholar Carlo Saures claims that the *Sefer Yetzirah* is one of only three books which can be taken seriously as pure Kabbalah, the other two being the Book of Genesis and the *Song of Songs*⁶. He, and some others, have been very hostile toward those works which grew out of the middle ages, such as the Zohar (and by extension, the writings of the great interpreter of that work, Isaac Luria). The later forms of Jewish mysticism are considered to impose a confusing overlay on the more pure documents of Kabbalah.

According to the cosmological scheme of The *Sefer Yetzirah*, the universe resulted through the interaction of the powers of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Here, also is introduced the idea of ten *Sefirot* as centers of energy and the thirty-two *Paths of Wisdom*

later diagramed as the “Tree of Life.”

The *Sefer Yetzirah* has often been called a textbook of magical practice, and was early believed to be the key to creation of the *Golem*, an artificial form of life.⁷ It is, ultimately, the source of all meditational and magical practices which emphasize numbers and the Hebrew letters. Its influence on theologians really began in the tenth century, as manuscripts began to circulate. But interest became widespread when in 1562 (approximately a thousand years after the book was written) the first printed edition appeared.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* begins by stating that God created the universe in thirty-two mysterious paths, through numbers, speech and writing. And it describes ten *Sefirot* as centers of energy which have dimensions, and through which result first spirit, and then water which comes from spirit, and fire which comes from water. What follows then is a complicated discussion of the nature and interaction of the Hebrew letters. The principle introduced here is that the letters are not merely symbolic of the powers of the universe, but that they actually are those powers.

Bahir

Next to the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the most influential work of early Kabbalism is *The Bahir*, meaning “brilliance,” a title taken from the first verse quoted in that text, Job 37:21 which says: “And now they do not see light it

is brilliant (bahir) in the skies.” This very brief work does not use the term Kabbalah, but rather refers to the “Working of the Chariot.”

The Bahir appeared about a century prior to the emergence of the Kabbalah in Southern France, between 1150 and 1200. It was apparently edited from documents of either Eastern or of German origin relating to Merkabah mysticism and to Jewish Gnosticism. The *Sefer Ha Bahir*, symbolically interprets the Bible, considering the Sefirot as powers of God, and presenting among other ideas, the principle of reincarnation which was vehemently opposed by many rabbis.⁸ Prior to the writing of The Zohar, *The Bahir* was the primary text of Jewish mysticism.

This book can be generally separated into five parts (1) A discussion of the first verses of Genesis and of the creation (2) The first eight letters of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph to Heth (3) The seven voices heard at Sinai (4) The Ten Sefirot and 5) The mysteries of the soul. *The Bahir* places key emphasis for the first time on the Sefirot, and introduces names for seven of them.

Among the most influential topics of *The Bahir* was its explanation of the *tohu* and *bohu* of Genesis relative to the original ten Sefirot, primeval vessels (which receive) filled with light (which gives). Tohu refers to the shattering of these original vessels which in their primitive form could not interact with each other, and which could not give. Bohu is the restored state of the vessels, in which they share something of the nature of God and can thus have the capacity for giving. This is

the key to evil, for in order to give, man must be like God in having free will and free choice, which is only possible if both good and evil exist.⁹

But the *Bahir's* most important contribution to Kabbalistic studies is the introduction of the concept of *tzimtzum*, an idea which was developed and amplified significantly in the mid-sixteenth century by Isaac Luria, the major commentator on the Zohar, from whom it was later drawn as a key principle by the Hasidim. Tzimtzum is a contraction, a self-constriction of God's Light, described in spatial terms which are understood to be entirely metaphorical. The idea is that before creation, the Supernal Light was simple, and that there was no empty space within it. It is said that when God decided to create the Universe, he constricted the light to the sides so that there was an empty space into which he drew a single thread from the infinite, and by which he produced creation.¹⁰

Zohar

It was less than 100 years after the appearance of *The Bahir* that the greatest of all books of Kabbalist thought, the Zohar was written. This work, called for centuries the "Holy Zohar" is a large and complicated anthology of texts which was for centuries accepted as the work of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, from the first half of second century C.E. Palestine. Even among those who knew

conclusively that the work was of the thirteenth century, there was a sense of awe and mystery about it. It was asserted by many that the Zohar was composed by means of magical conjurations, and that the author entered a paranormal state during which the books were dictated to him by deceased sages.¹¹

The myth of authorship was perpetuated for hundreds of years until the ground breaking work, both published and unpublished, of Gershom Scholem at the University of Jerusalem conclusively proved the Zohar to have been written by Moses de Leon in the late thirteenth century.

But the story had become so deeply ingrained that as late as 1982 an otherwise well-informed Hebrew scholar wrote:

For over a thousand years, this body of literature consisted of volumes of notes, restricted to a very small secret society. With the final disbandment of this society, the manuscripts were hidden in a vault, and were not uncovered until the thirteenth century. They finally came to the hands of Rabbi Moshe de Leon, one of the most prominent Kabbalists at that time, and he finally edited and published them in the 1290's.¹²

The Zohar is symbolic and mysterious, describing the nature of God and man, creation, the hidden worlds of angels and demons, and the truth of reincarnation. The texts are loosely woven and sometimes are self-contradictory, but the Zohar would remain an extraordinarily powerful work, even if its claims of divine revelation were set aside, and it were considered to be simply literature. The texts of the Zohar run the gamut from the impossibly complex symbolism of the individual hairs of the beard of Macroprosopus to a story about God's creation of the Hebrew alphabet charming enough to delight any child.

The fact that the Zohar has been conclusively proven to be pseudo-epigraphic, meaning that Moses de Leon falsely attributed the book to Simeon ben Yohai,¹³ in no way detracts from its importance as a mystical text, and may even make it more interesting to some. In any event the Zohar developed an extraordinary mystique and following. But what Tishby described as the Zohar's "aura of supreme sanctity" was not associated with it until many centuries after it was written. Originally the work was unknown outside of a small group of Spanish Kab-balists.¹⁴ The book attained almost universal recognition among Jews, at the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. This is of particular interest in that one of the earliest arguments among Kabbalists, continuing even into the present day, is between those who would limit such knowledge to a select few, and those who believe

that it should be available freely to everyone.¹⁵

In the thirteenth century this question became more than academic, for as rationalist Spanish Jewry declined, the esoteric doctrine of Kabbalah began to be viewed increasingly as “the last hope for the spiritual salvation of a desolated people.” Thus knowledge of the Zohar emerged from a small and closed circle of scholars, and became increasingly available to the masses. The book, accepted as being very ancient, became shrouded in mystery. Isolated and anxious Jews saw in the Zohar a light which would lead them spiritually, as well as a secure reinforcement of the idea that a messiah would soon appear, and that their suffering would thus be eased. Among the Jews, Talmud and Zohar were considered to be two aspects of divine revelation, one open to all, and the other hidden.¹⁶

It was Christians in Renaissance Italy and Germany who set the Talmud and the Zohar against each other. Christians found in the Zohar a book that embodied the most pure and spiritual teaching of Judaism which they believed was identical to Christianity. The Talmud was, on the other hand, filled with error and deception. The practical result was that in the Renaissance at the same time some Christians were ordering that the Talmud be burned, other Christians were helping to see that the Zohar was printed and widely disseminated. The book reached its greatest prominence during the sixteenth century revival of the Kabbalah in Safed and in the

school of the man often considered to be the greatest of all Kabbalist rabbis, Ari (“the Lion”) Isaac Luria.¹⁷

It was the Hasidic movement which assured the continued prominence of the Zohar. In Hasidism, Zohar and Talmud were regarded as soul and body, with the Zohar being considered the most holy. The Zohar was believed to contain the very essence, the absolute embodiment, of Judaism.”¹⁸ The books were a source of divine light; they were a key support of Israel.

Thus it was ironic, if not bizarre, that Christians found the Zohar so attractive for their own purposes, seeing in it reference to a messiah who had already appeared, as well as confirmation of the trinitarian nature of God. And in all of this, from the very beginning of the Christian appropriation of Jewish mysticism, there was a powerful intellectual give and take between Christian and Jewish thought.

Such interplay may be seen in the idea of *Shekinah*, the mysterious female spirit who is “The Bride,” the “Mother of the World,” and the consort of God who walks the earth. This *Shekinah*, who has been separated from God by emanation of the material world, and who shares the exile of Israel, is among the most powerful symbolic figures of the Zohar. There appeared an extraordinary set of stories about her activities, such as her daily ascent into the Heavens during each day, and her relationship to the angels (whom she feeds). The story is undoubtedly taken from that of Mary Magdalene appearing in *The Golden Legend*, written slightly earlier than the Zohar, and which was quite famous at

the time. In that book Mary Magalene is described as carried by angels into the sky every day.¹⁹

One must also note that the very complex iconography of Shekinah bears remarkable similarities to non-canonical symbolism being promulgated about the Virgin Mary at the same time, and in the same geographical region of Southern France and Northern Spain from which Kabbalah emerged.

The author of the Zohar, Moses de Leon, was born in Leon, Spain, a town at dead center of the pilgrimages established by the Cluniac order to the shrine of Saint James at the church of Santiago de Compostela. The Cluniac priories along the pilgrimage route in Northern Spain were deeply involved in the Cult of the Virgin which had been established by Saint Anselm and which was carried on by the Cistercian Abbot Saint Bernard in the mid-twelfth century. In the following, thirteenth, century, anyone, whether Jew, Moslem, or Christian, would have known the details of the Virgin's mythology.

It will also be noted that references in the Zohar to *Israel* are to a holy unity of which all Jews are a part, that is almost identical in principle to the *Body of Christ* of which Christians consider themselves to belong

Of course, when the Italian Renaissance philosophers turned their attention to the Zohar they applied to it, as to so many other books which they encountered, the historically naive idea, that all of the Kabbalist literature

which theologians²⁰ were translating were part and parcel of a *prisca theologica*, meaning a divine source of truth. Thus, the Kabbalistic books were equated with those of Plato, and with the *Hermetica*, works believed to be of extremely ancient Egyptian origin.

Hermetica

The collection of texts called the *Corpus Hermeticum*, books which come from Egypt bearing the name of a Greek god, can only be understood against the checkered historical background of late Egyptian culture. These texts were not written by an Ancient Egyptian priest, *Thrice Greatest Hermes*,²¹ as the Renaissance believed. Rather, they emerged from an Egypt dominated by Rome.

It was in 332 B.C.E. that Alexander the Great conquered Egypt and began to build his own city, Alexandria. On Alexander's death, his territories were divided, with Egypt and surrounding areas going to one of his generals, Ptolemy. With a flourish of arrogance, the General called himself *Ptolemy Soter* (Savior) and, declaring himself to be Egypt's King, became the first of a dynasty of Greek rulers of Egypt.

Over a period of three hundred years the Romans became more and more powerful in Egypt, and eventu-

ally were in complete control of the country. The last of the Ptolemies, Queen Cleopatra (actually Cleopatra VII), tried to maintain the independence of the country through a relationship first with Julius Caesar and then with Mark Anthony. But soon after the death of Anthony she killed herself, and in 27 B.C.E. Octavian became Emperor and declared Egypt a part of the Roman Empire. And as the Roman Empire became Christian, so did Egypt, its Coptic Christianity, and its roots in ancient Egyptian religions, exerting a very strong influence on the developing rituals and iconographies of the Early Church.

Theories about the origins of the Hermetica abound, some scholars insisting that they are purely Greek, while others finding in them a product of Egyptian thought. It is, however, generally accepted that the Hermetic documents are the result of a complex intermingling of three separate threads during the first two or three centuries of Christianity: Greek thought through the Ptolemaic kings, Roman thought and society, and Coptic Christianity with its unique point of view.

As Frances Yates describes, Renaissance philosophers drew from men of the second century C.E., the idea that “what is old is pure and holy” and that “the earliest thinkers walked more closely with the gods than the busy rationalists, their successors.”²² She concludes:

“So we can understand how the content of the Hermetic writings fostered the illusion of the Renaissance Magus that he had in them a mysterious and precious

account of most ancient Egyptian wisdom, philosophy, and magic. Hermes Trismegistus, a mythical name associated with a certain class of Gnostic philosophical revelations or with magical treatises and recipes, was, for the Renaissance, a real person, an Egyptian priest who had lived in times of remote antiquity and who had himself written all these works. The scraps of Greek philosophy which he found in these writings derived from the somewhat debased philosophical teaching current in the early centuries C.E., confirmed the Renaissance reader in his belief that he had here the fount of pristine wisdom whence Plato and the Greeks had derived the best that they knew.”²³

And in a model of understatement Yates remarked that “this huge historical error was to have amazing results.”²⁴ The same historical error was confirmed for posterity by no less than Augustine who, attacking Hermes in his *City of God*, stated that Hermes Trismegistus was “long before the sages and philosophers of Greece.”²⁵

This attack was the last gasp of interest in the writing of Hermes until the twelfth century Platonic revival reawakened interest in these materials, especially the *Aesclepius* in its relationship to Plato’s cosmological scheme of *The Timaeus*.²⁶

And, as was the case with Kabbalah, the Hermetica became the source of some extraordinary Christianization and speculation, with texts being twisted and interpreted according to the particular bent and whim of each

commentator. As is found in a section of the *Hermetica* called the *Suda*, which appeared briefly but was quickly suppressed, The Egyptian Wise man Hermes “was called Trismegistus on account of his praise of the trinity, saying that there is one divine nature in the trinity.”²⁷

In 1624 Isaac Causaubon, a classical scholar, declared the *Hermetica* to be of much later date than had early been thought, and from that time on interest in the books declined radically. Of course there were exceptions, including the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, who chose to ignore Causaubon’s conclusions, and who was, as will be considered, one of the great and fanciful shapers of Christian Kabbalist philosophy in the seventeenth century.²⁸

The Early Hebrew Kabbalists

The earliest Kabbalistic thought is a product of Spain, a country which for three hundred years of the middle ages fought Arab domination. But Moslem control was, ironically, instrumental in the development of Jewish mysticism. Their reign is known as a golden age for Jews, because Jews were allowed to develop their culture and literature in comparative freedom. The reason was that in the struggle between Islam and Christianity, the Jews were needed by both sides. As Christians reconquered Spanish territories held by the Moslems, they appointed many administrators from the well-educated Jewish

middle class, more or less ignoring anti-Jewish legislation always in force. And because the Jews lacked any power base, they increasingly assumed influence at the Spanish courts. All of this however, fell apart in 1492²⁹ when they were no longer needed by Christians and were expelled from Spain.

Isaac the Blind

It was Isaac the Blind, a Southern Frenchman, not a Spaniard, who in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, was the first to define the Kabbalah as a specific field of study and the first to devote his work entirely to mysticism. Isaac's philosophy derived from *The Sefer Yetzirah* and *The Bahir*.³⁰

Isaac proposed several important ideas. He referred to a God which is separate from the creator God, which is hidden and which is beyond thought, the *Ain Soph*.³¹ This idea was carried on by his student Azriel of Gerona, and appears later in the *Zohar*. Isaac also developed a theory of language, which proposed that all speech derived from the Divine Name, the *Tetragrammaton*.

Isaac's methodology was one of communion with God through intense meditation on the Sefirot of the Tree of Life as described especially in *The Bahir*. And he was the first to explain the *Sefer Yetzirah* in Kabbalistic terms and through this system of Sefirot. He was the central figure of Kabbalah during his lifetime.³² It is from his

School of Provence, and the merger of his ideas with those of Spain that all major and subsequent developments in Kabbalah happened.

Abulafia

Another early Kabbalist of major importance was Abraham Ben Samuel Abulafia. He was a significant influence on Christian Kabbalah, especially on Johannes Reuchlin. Abulafia, whose works are found early in both Latin and Italian translations, is best known for a system of meditation based on the manipulation of Hebrew letters and using the Names of God as suggested by the *Sefer Yetzirah* and by *The Bahir*. However eccentric he may have been, he sincerely believed that he was continuing the work of the philosopher Maimonides, author of the *Guide to the Perplexed*. Although not a Kabbalist, it was Maimonides who made the distinction between a philosophy which is practical and one which is theoretical, an idea ultimately defining a division between mysticism and magic.

Abulafia taught that at the highest levels of contemplation it is possible for the mystic to actually alter the laws of nature, although he was opposed to this practice, insisting that the philosopher should seek only spiritual

enlightenment.

To a large extent, Abulafia's system is a synthesis of earlier ideas, developed under some influence of Eastern meditative techniques and of the Sufi religion. He was taught by an influential commentator on the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and drew ideas from pivotal German Kabbalists, including the very brilliant Eleazar ben Judah of Worms who placed great emphasis on the Hebrew Divine Names and on esoteric combinations of letters.

Recently Abulafia's methodology has been described as "ecstatic Kabbalah," to separate it from rationalist Zoharic Kabbalism and because it infuses the mystic with divine energy in much the same way as does Yoga.

Abulafia's meditative practice includes those elements consistent with all mystical systems, regardless of *cultus*, that seem to promote a visionary and spiritual process which may result the infusion of the body with a sort of mentally malleable electrical energy which the Hindus call *shakti*. This involves: (1) A controlled use of breath (2) A sound which is "vibrated," meaning that it is felt throughout the body as pronounced and (3) an inner light brought down from above, which is modified by the imagination into images or scenes experienced or which may be circulated in the body.

The pronunciation of the Names of God was accompanied by specific head motions (such as the actual tracing of a Hebrew letter), certain hand motions, and some specific visualizations and breathing exercises similar to those of the yogin. Moreover, Abulafia taught that

the *singing* of the God Names and letters was relative to a division of years, months and days and that correct pronunciation was linked to these divisions of time.³³ Some of his meditative practices involved concentration on sexual union.

As with Eastern systems, the resulting influx of divine energy produced in Abulafia a tremendously increased sexual drive, and he confessed that he was taken to frequent masturbation. “For fifteen years,” he said “Satan was at my right hand.” And although Abulafia himself is deeply pained by the “spilling of the seed” which the Talmud likens to murder, Aryeh Kaplan points out that to the task of the Kabbalist is to use the intellect and the imagination to reach the highest level of the Divine, and that this process is disrupted when imagination is used to conjure up sexual fantasies.³⁴

Abulafia was a very colorful character who enjoyed dialog with Christian theologians, and who undoubtedly gave his Christian contemporaries some insights into Kabbalah which would be incorporated into the arguments of Christian Kabbalah. And, although he intended to make converts to Judaism, some of his readers misinterpreted his books and had themselves baptized.

The system of Abulafia is quite unique and was of profound influence on later generations of Kabbalists. He was also unusual, in a Jewish climate where mystics have tended to downplay their personal lives, in that he left a very detailed autobiography.

Abulafia describes persecution by fellow Jews for his

interpretations of Mamonides's *Guide to the Perplexed* stressing combinations of letters as well as for his peculiar statements about his intention to meet with the Pope. Such a meeting was to fulfill the demands of a vision which he experienced in 1270, at about the same time he began studies of the Kabbalah, telling him that he must meet with the Christian Pontiff. Abulafia was not discouraged by the fact that his requests to meet with the Pope had been answered with the dire threat that if he should he ever dare to appear at the Vatican he would be burned at the stake.

It was in 1280, a full decade later, that Abulafia made his well-known trip to Rome. "I had been inspired by the Lord," he wrote, "to go to Rome and there to convert Pope Nicholas III to Judaism...My plans were to look up the Pope the day before Rosh Hashana, 1280. The Pontiff, who was then in Suriano, a day's distance from Rome, upon being informed of my coming, arranged for a stake to be erected near the inner gate of the town so as to be spared the inconvenience of an audience with me." Nevertheless, Abulafia traveled to Suriano in Search of Nicholas III.

"But just as I was passing through the outer gate a herald came running toward me and announced that the Pope has died suddenly during the preceding night. Returning to Rome two days later, I was seized by some Franciscan friars and imprisoned for twenty-eight days, being finally released on the first day of Heshvan. Such are the glorious miracles that the Lord has wrought with me and his faithful servants."³⁵ One year later he was in Sicily carrying on his teaching and messianic activities.³⁶

***The Renaissance Environment
of Christian Kabbalah***

There is a certain irony in that fact that when Jewish Kabbalists expelled from Spain began to migrate to Italy they found the Italian school of Kabbalah, which had derived from their thought, to be strange and uncomfortable. One leader of the Spanish expatriots, Rabbi Isaac Mar Hayyim, sternly warned: "Do not follow the path of those scholars who base themselves upon reason and interpret the words of the Kabbalah so as to agree with philosophy."³⁷ Certainly, the Italian Humanist mentality was a powerful influence in all areas of culture. Rationalist, Humanist, philosophers stimulated a very active dialog between Jewish and Christian intellectuals.

But for all the changes wrought upon it by the Italians, Spain was the well-spring of the Kabbalist thought which flourished in fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy, and in Spain the Christian Kabbalah had been a shadowy parallel to the emerging Hebrew Kabbalah. It was, in fact Spanish Christian theologians who first advanced the remarkable assertion that the structure of the most sacred and unpronounceable name of the Jews, the YHVH, having three essential letters, was proof of the Christian Trinity. This idea began rather tentatively, but successive theologians, particularly the most anti-Jewish, developed complicated arguments based on numbers and sounds

and various other Kabbalistic analytical methods.

One must ask, however, how it could have happened that Christians were able to derive arguments against Judaism from manuscript documents written largely in complicated Mishnaic Hebrew. The answer is that the originators of this movement were Spanish Jews who had converted to the Christian faith. The first to apply the Jewish mystical tradition was Moshe Sefardi, who on being baptized about 1106 took the name Pedro Alfonso and whose *Dialogus* argued that the Trinity was inherent in the sacred name YHVH.³⁸

The effort was to convert Jews by demonstrating that the Old Law of the Prophets had properly led the way to the New Law of Jesus Christ. Even the Talmud, the core of Jewish law which was the object of extraordinary vituperation by later Christians, was claimed by thirteenth century Christian theologians to refer to Jesus Christ.

A figure of special importance in this claim was Raymond de Penaforte, head of the Dominican Order which in 1242 played a pivotal role in wholesale burnings of the Talmud. It was Father Penaforte who, concluding that the best way to convert Jews was, with their own literature, opened a number of schools to train mendicant friars in Hebrew.³⁹ Certainly Penaforte helped to create a model for arguments of the *Barcelona Disputation* of 1263, the most celebrated of all medieval debates between Jews and Christians. It was in this forum that the great Nachmanides straightforwardly asked his Christian attackers:

“Why should the Talmud be thought to contain Christian doctrine? Why did the rabbis of the Talmud remain Jews, if they were the purveyors of Christian ideas?”⁴⁰ There was no answer from the Christians.

Participating in this same famous debate, was Raymond Martin, a priest who was a disciple both of Father Penaforte and of Albertus Magnus. Using Hebrew with great skill, Martin produced a work of Spanish Christian Kabbalah which forever established the methodology of using Hebrew sacred texts against the Jews.

Martin accepted the principle that Jews could best be shown the truth of Christ, and converted, through their own literature. What he wrote was an essential manual for the conversion of Jews in late medieval Spain. His *Pugio Fidei adversus Maurus et Judaeus* (The Dagger of Faith against the Moors and the Jews) is a landmark of medieval theological writing. As finally printed in 1687, with a well-tuned seventeenth century Christian Kabbalist introduction, it is an enormous Latin work of more than a thousand pages. Almost one third of the book consists of Hebrew texts from the Bible, from the Talmud, and from the great Jewish authorities of the day. Without reference to this work it would be impossible to understand the facility with languages, the brilliant rationalizations, and the weight of sheer fervor brought against Judaism by Christian theologians of the late middle ages, or the bizarre Christianization of Hebrew mystical elements which followed.

These early Spanish developments were unknown to the Humanist philosophers of the Italian Renaissance Courts who avidly embraced the principles of Kabbalah, especially Pico della Mirandola, a man who is generally called the first Christian Kabbalist. The work of Pico and others at the Medici Court in Florence received wide circulation because of the invention of modern printing, using moveable type, at approximately this time. And although in Italy many purists were unalterably opposed to the barbarically mass-produced works, feeling that philosophy should not be spread out to the general public, the more democratic Germans turned printing into an industry which made the question of books in common hands entirely moot. And at the same time large numbers of Hebrew texts were suddenly put into the hands of Jewish readers.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain there were two primary currents in Kabbalah. First there was the Spanish Kabbalah, rooted in classical texts such as the Zohar. Then there was the emerging philosophical Kabbalah in Italy which was based in large measure on ecstatic and speculative Kabbalah of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. It was the eradication of Spanish Jewry which made possible the direct encounter of these two very different ideologies in Italy.⁴¹

There was among Jews at this time, an *esoteric* Kabbalah which was held secretly, and an *exoteric* Kabbalah which was philosophical and which was openly available to anyone. Christian Kabbalah fell into the latter catego-

ry, having been made possible by Jewish converts such as Flavius Mithridates and Paulus Riccius, who, despite violent opposition from many Jews, translated key documents from Hebrew into Latin and Italian.⁴² And, indeed, it was the Christians, not the Jews who were responsible for the wholesale publication of Jewish esoterica.

The perhaps unexpected fringe benefit of the appropriation of this sacred literature of the Jews by Christians was that many texts which would otherwise have certainly perished, have been preserved. Moreover, previously little-known texts suddenly became common among the Jews themselves. In any case, the interplay between Christian and Jew, where magic and Kabbalah are concerned, has been symbiotic although Jews have hardly been pleased with the ways in which their practices have been assumed.

For example, some Jewish scholars point with special disdain to Christian overemphasis on the manipulation of numbers and Hebrew letters by methods called *gematria*, *notarikon*, and *temurah* which they feel have been trivialized.⁴³ And there can be no question that the novelty of these techniques, which have been conveyed in great secrecy by occult fraternities (along with the Hebrew alphabet) has never quite worn off among Christian Kabbalists.

Of course, at the same time that Italian Renaissance theologians were creating a new kind of magic acceptable within a Humanist Christian framework, Jewish scholars were also studying magic. Yet the Jews had much greater freedom of thought than did the Christians

who were always being watched by authorities of the Church. The result was a kind of Jewish magic which offered a very new perspective on Jewish tradition.⁴⁴ But, generally speaking, these new thoughts about magic were not influenced by developments among the Christians.

One particular area of interchange was the influence of Neo-platonism. Translation of Plato's works during the Italian Renaissance was of tremendous significance to Christians and Jews alike. Plato's ideas became a fashionable center of European intellectual life. Jewish intellectuals who were in close contact with the Florentine philosophers, ruled that Plato's views were close to those of the Torah, in consonance with Jewish piety and, also, found in Plato's archetypal essences a parallel to the Kabbalistic Sefirot. Christians, on the other hand, coupled their interest in Neoplatonism with Kabbalah in what Idel cryptically describes as an "exotic graft onto Christian theology."⁴⁵

Marsilio Ficino

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), born in a small town near Florence, was the son of a physician who counted among his friends both Cosimo di Medici and the Archbishop of Florence. Marsilio was trained in Latin, in Greek, and in Aristotilian philosophy before he became a

priest. But he was also a physician, and thus encountered very early the many Medieval and Renaissance medical treatises which make use of Astrology.⁴⁶

It was in his position as Director of the Medici's Platonic Academy that he took magic, which had been banned by the medieval church,⁴⁷ and elevated it to the level of philosophy for the Italian Renaissance. By reference especially to late antique Neoplatonist philosophers such as Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry,⁴⁸ Ficino discovered what he called a "natural magic," based upon the attraction of good planetary and spiritual forces. Ficino's playing of his "astrological music" on an apparently violin-like instrument which he called his *lyra* or *lyra orphica*,⁴⁹ and songs to invoke the light of the Sun, were a very different matter indeed from the dark sorcery of the middle ages with its abominable concoctions found in the famous Arabic treatise on magic *Picatrix* which is known to have been one of his sources.⁵⁰

It was in 1462 that Marsilio Ficino began his elaborate plan to translate all of Plato's work into Latin. But only one year later his patron, the aging Cosimo di Medici, demanded that Ficino stop work on Plato and immediately translate a manuscript, which he had just discovered, of the Hermetica.⁵¹ Those involved believed that the Hermetic documents held the key to all knowledge.

Ficino was especially struck by the resemblance of the *Divine Pimander* to Genesis, a correspondence which really established the methodology of Pico della Miran-

dola, Reuchlin and the other originators of Christian Kabbalah. He related Hermes Trismegistus, author of the *Pimander*, to Moses. But Hermes Trismegistus was even more important than Moses, because he recognized, long before the incarnation of Christ, that the creative Word (*logos*) was the Son of God. Ficino credited the fictitious Egyptian adept as having, like Moses, prophesied Christianity.⁵²

Thus Ficino's work, practical and theoretical, was the basis of much philosophy that followed. The same standards that Ficino applied to *The Hermetica* were applied by Pico della Mirandola to the ideas of Hebrew Kabbalah, both being based upon a complete misunderstanding of history. Underscoring Ficino's system was the belief, like that held by Abulafia, that it is possible to alter physical reality. Christian Kabbalah was, from its very roots, a magical movement.

Much of the effort of the Christian Kabbalists went to the "discovery" in ancient texts of references to a secret body of knowledge handed down from Moses to Jesus Christ and his disciples who then communicated the "new law" to the world. They found this message in Paul and in Origen and in Jerome and in biblical texts such as the apocryphal book of Esdras II in which God says of Moses: "I told him of many wonders, showing him the secrets of the ages and the end of time, and instructed him in what to make known and what to conceal."⁵³ And in Paul is found the assertion that "...the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."⁵⁴

Pico della Mirandola

Count Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494) was the youngest son of Prince Giovanni Francesco Pico of the small territory of Mirandola. As a young man he demonstrated remarkable skill for philosophical studies and, being intended for the priesthood, was sent first to study canon law in Bologna, and then to study Aristotilian philosophy at Padua.

Pico was a colorful character about whom a mythology of sorts evolved, such as the story that when he was born a ball of fire appeared in his mother's room. Being only twenty-three years old when he wrote his pivotal *Conclusiones*, Pico was certainly as brash as he was brilliant. It was on May 10, 1486, that he found himself racing on horseback from the city of Arezzo. Tied tightly to his saddle was the lovely Margherita, a woman with whom he was engaged in a torrid love affair and whom he was attempting to kidnap. Behind him in frantic pursuit were Margherita's husband, Guiliano Mariotto de' Medici of Arezzo and a collection of angry guards who caught up with them, killed eighteen of Pico's men, inflicted two serious wounds on Pico himself, and returned Margherita to the palace.⁵⁵

It would appear that this unhappy man turned his attention inward, trying to lose himself in the complexities of scholarship, for shortly after this unfortunate event he took up the study of Hebrew and began an intensive

exploration of the Hebrew Kabbalah which would ultimately result in a three hundred year attempt of Christian theologians to exploit the most sacred principles of Jewish mysticism to prove the truth of Christianity. "No science," Pico was to write, "can better convince us of the Divinity of Jesus Christ than magic and the Kabbalah."⁵⁶

Pico based his version of magic on the natural magic of Ficino, although he believed that Ficino's magic was quite weak by itself, and that nothing much could really be achieved with it. It was by merging of Ficino's natural magic with that of the Kabbalah that Pico claimed to be able to create a serious magical force. And in this regard, Pico made one demand of the magician which was to influence the entire history of magic and the occult. He said that in order for a name to assume power in a magical incantation it must be in Hebrew,⁵⁷ and he is thus responsible for the fact that even today practitioners of Christian Kabbalist magic call upon gods and archangels in a language which may be meaningless to them.

As the first to unite Hermetic and Kabbalistic thought Pico may, in many respects, be considered to be not only the father of a proselytizing Christian Kabbalah, but of the entire Western "occult" movement⁵⁸ insofar as that movement is based upon Hermetic-Kabbalistic principles. Like Ficino, however, he completely rejected demonic elements of the sort which were to be developed by later writers such as Agrippa.

It was through Pico's enquiries that the documents of

Hebrew Kabbalah began to be valued, like the Hermetica, as books of divine revelation. This idea was tacitly accepted until the fairly recent development of serious research into the history of religions, such as the studies of Kabbalah instituted by Gershom Scholem in the early twentieth century.

There are three reasons that Pico's interest in the Hebrew language was unusual for the time: First, late medieval Christian scholars had a firm mistrust of the Jews, whom they accused of altering texts of the Old Testament which could have been interpreted as supportive of Christianity. Second, because of this general mistrust of the rabbis, there was virtually no official support for the study of the language of the Jews. Third, and most practical, Jews could not be persuaded to teach Gentiles the language in which the Law was written, a fact which was a matter of intense debates among the Jews themselves.⁵⁹

But the truth is that Christian Kabbalah could not have happened without the tacit cooperation of many Jews. Idel notes that such "Judaean-Christian cooperation is not evidenced by overt statements or descriptions, since the Jews were legally prohibited from disclosing the secrets of the Torah to Gentiles; this activity was done in the shadow of the studies of Christian nobles and dignitaries, but, I suppose would have been vigorously denied in public by the Jewish masters."⁶⁰

In 1486 Pico della Mirandola, the first Christian ever to embark on a study of the Hebrew language specifically

to understand the Kabbalah, stood at the beginning of what has been called a “rebirth” of classical culture, but which was actually something entirely new. When in the summer of 1486 Pico learned his first Hebrew words, Raphael was only three years old, Michelangelo at eleven could look forward to two years later being apprenticed to the great painter Ghirlandaio, and the thirty-four year old Leonardo de Vinci was stunning the court of the Duke of Milan with his immeasurable genius.

Although Pico himself is regarded as having pursued the Hebrew Kabbalah in the honest belief that these books represented a divine truth which proved the divinity of Christ, a much darker side to the development of Christian Kabbalah is found in his mentor, Mithridates.⁶¹

The man who called himself Flavius Mithridates was born in Sicily.⁶² He was Jewish by birth, but was baptized about the age of fourteen, and quickly attracted the attention of the Catholic hierarchy in sermons, at the court of Cardinal de Molfetti, demonstrating the truth of Christianity through Jewish and Arabic texts. He especially impressed Pope Sixtus IV, who appreciated Mithridates’ native pronunciation of words in difficult foreign languages.⁶³ It was on Good Friday of 1481 (five years before he produced translations of Kabbalistic documents for Pico) before the next Pope, Innocent VIII, and his Cardinals at the Vatican that Mithridates preached his famous *Sermo de Passione Domini*. In this sermon he presented evidence of a pre-Christian “Old

Talmud” which, he insisted, confirmed the mysteries of Christ’s Passion.⁶⁴ He was an extremely clever and selfish man who was not at all above inventing ancient Hebrew passages, or of modifying a translation into Latin to suit the pleasure of his Christian employers.

He was a teacher of oriental languages and a brilliant, though arbitrary, translator into Latin of Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew. Without the instruction of Mithridates, and the translations of Kabbalistic documents which he did for Pico between May and November of 1486, the Christian Kabbalah might never have happened. It was perhaps Mithridates who brought to Pico the idea, then beginning to appear, that the Kabbalah was the perfect support for Christian doctrine.

But Mithridates was anything but an objective scholar. He was erratic and self-serving, and the translations into Latin which he prepared for Pico from Hebrew texts always represented his own point of view.⁶⁵ So Pico’s understanding of Kabbalah was largely determined by Mithridates’ interpretations. The margins of his translations were filled with hostile comments about almost every writer on Kabbalah. Moreover, he went to considerable lengths to see to it that Pico was completely dependent upon him, and that Pico accepted the idea that he could not function without his mentor. Mithridates carefully manipulated Pico, at one time openly and freely providing anything which Pico needed for his studies, and at other times withdrawing support and refusing to work.

Mithridates did not fit the mold of a remote and holy

man delving into the sacred principles of the universe. He was a professed and open pedophile who invented his own version of Kabbalah whenever it pleased him. He found in the Kabbalah a principle of *the boy*, which he related to “*tahat*” a word meaning “below,” but which in non-literary Hebrew also meant anal orifice. And Mithridates referred frequently to the “favorite spear.”⁶⁶ Knowing this it is perhaps not surprising to learn that, having persuaded Pico of his indispensability, he had no qualms about laying down some specific terms for his cooperation. In return for teaching Pico the Chaldean language (Aramaic), he made two demands. First he sanctimoniously insisted that Pico must swear an oath never to teach this language to anyone else. Second, he demanded that Pico provide him with a certain attractive young man who had caught his attention.⁶⁷

Although history does not record the specific arrangements made between Pico and his teacher, during the six month period between Pico’s disastrous relationship with Margherita and Pico’s publication of his 900 Kabbalistic Theses, Mithridates translated a vast number of documents. He was, in fact, the first person to translate Kabbalistic documents on a large scale.

Among the manuscripts which he translated for Pico were works by the greatest innovators of Jewish Kabbalah, including Azriel, Eleazor of Worms, Gikatilla, Recanati, and Abulafia. He also referred to the *Sefer Ha Bahir*, and to the *Sefer Yetzirah*.⁶⁸ Such works were assessed in light of Raymond Martin’s *Pugio Fidei*

which had, two hundred years earlier, set the tone for all approach by Christian intellectuals to Jewish traditions.

With youthful enthusiasm, and an audacity matching his attempted kidnapping of the wife of a powerful Medici Prince, Pico published, in his *Conclusiones*, the assertion that Magic and Kabbalah proved the truth of Christianity.

These claims were received by Pope Innocent VIII with great consternation, and he appointed a commission to carefully study the strange new propositions. The result was that thirteen of Pico's *Theses* were condemned including that which said that "nothing so proves the divinity of Christ as does magic and the Kabbalah." ⁶⁹ The reason for the condemnation of this particular passage is that the Council believed that it set magic and Kabbalah above the evidence of the Gospels.⁶⁹ In any event, when Pico audaciously published a defense of the condemned thirteen theses, the Pope condemned all 900. In fear, Pico fled to France, where he was arrested in 1488. But with the intervention of some princes, the Pope relented, and allowed Pico to return to Florence, where he spent the remainder of his short life, and where he was in constant communication with Ficino and the Platonic Academy. It was, finally, in 1492, that Innocent VIII died and Cardinal Borja was elected Alexander VI. The new Pope, while never actually contradicting the judgment of his predecessor, was deeply interested in magic and the occult. He steadfastly encouraged Pico's studies predecessor., and pardoned him for the transgression of the *Conclusiones*.⁷⁰

That which was passed on by Pico della Mirandola to history, and to his disciple Johann Reuchlin, is encapsulated in his words from the *Heptaplus* (1489, an interpretation of the first verses of Genesis) in which he concludes remarkably that Jewish mysticism is a virtual repository of Catholic theology. In Kabbalah he finds “not so much the Mosaic as the Christian religion. There is the mystery of the Trinity, there is the Incarnation of the Word, there is the divinity of the Messiah; there I have read about original sin, its expiation through Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, the fall of the devils, the orders of the angels, purgatory and the punishment of hell, the same things that we read daily in Paul and Dionysius, in Jerome and Augustine.”⁷¹

Pico felt that by means of their own literature the Jews could be made to see the error of their ways and come into the Christian fold. It was generally accepted at the time that the Jews had brought great suffering upon themselves by having rejected Christ and the Gospels.

could be made to see the error of their ways and come into the Christian fold. It was generally accepted at the time that the Jews had brought great suffering upon themselves by having rejected Christ and the Gospels.

It was with Pico della Mirandola that Christian Kab-balah took shape as a specific philosophical movement. The most important principle of this movement was that the Kabbalah was a divinely inspired and ancient tradition. Pico and other Christian Kabbalists believed that the Kabbalah had been provided by God, to Moses on Mount Sinai, as a means of return to the pristine heavenly condition. Following Ficino’s lead, Pico

believed that Moses had been schooled in the secret doctrine of the Egyptians and that, in fact, all of the great Greek philosophers, especially Pythagoras, had been taught by Egyptian masters.⁷²

As opposed to the Tablets of the Law, Kabbalah and its magic, was perceived to be a secret part of the Law handed down only through an oral tradition, although supposedly edited into 70 books during the time of Esdras. When Pico wrote his 900 Theses, he believed that he had recovered the materials of the 70 original books.⁷³ And he accepted the Jewish principle that all true tradition is orally transmitted or divinely revealed oral law. In this regard, it was a short leap for Pico's followers to claim that Jesus Christ and his disciples were recipients of the oral tradition begun with Moses and were, thus, Kabbalists. Later Christian Kabbalists asserted absolutely that the miracles of Christ were performed through Kabbalah.

Pico never went quite that far, but repeated again and again that in Kabbalah he had found a religion more Christian than Jewish and in it, additionally, he found Platonism and Pythagoreanism.⁷⁴ Similarities between Kabbalah and certain Christian Biblical texts, such as those of John and of Paul were used to imply not only that Kabbalah was the precursor of Christianity, but that the Apostles were familiar with its principles.⁷⁵

It was Mithridates, of course, the master of self-serving interpretation, who found clever and useful similarities of ideas, such as the opposite natures of God described by the Neo-Platonic Christian theologian, Nicolas of Cusa, and by the Kabbalist Azriel of Gerona, the most

important disciple of Isaac the Blind. But Mithridates did not invent the idea that the founders of Christianity were Kabbalists. Some Jews believed that Jesus and his disciples were actually Kabbalists, but that their work was filled with errors.⁷⁶ And prior to Mithridates there were Jewish converts to Christianity who turned to Kabbalah as a confirmation of their new faith, and interpretation of Jewish texts in Christian terms was nothing new.⁷⁷ On the other hand, prior to Pico della Mirandola, there were no Jewish elements in Christian philosophy.

Johann Reuchlin

Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) was born at Sforzheim in the German Black Forest where his father was an official of the Dominican monastery. His first studies, especially in Latin, were at the monastery school, from which he briefly moved on to the University of Freiburg. From there he entered the service of the Prince of Baden and accompanied the young Prince Frederick to the University of Paris, where Johann learned Greek—a language in which he became quite proficient.

In 1478 he began to study law at Orleans, and successfully completed his licentiate in July of 1481. Returning to Germany he held some very important posts at the Court of Württemberg.

It was in 1490, in Italy, that he met Pico della Mirandola, who intrigued him with conversation about the proof of Christianity through Kabbalah, and who persuaded him to intensely pursue the study of the Hebrew language

upon which he had casually embarked a few years earlier. By 1494, when Reuchlin published his *De Verbo Mirifico*, he was viewed as a rising star of Renaissance Italy, widely admired for his analytic and linguistic abilities. Reuchlin has been called the founder of modern Christian Kabbalistic studies,⁷⁸ and second in importance only to Marsilio Ficino in the history of Renaissance philosophy. He was one of the first Christians to study original documents of Hebrew Kabbalah, and was especially influenced by Gikatilla's *Gates of Light* which was published in 1516.

Not the least of Reuchlin's credits is having created widespread interest in the Hebrew language among Christian scholars, which continued through the nineteenth century. It was Reuchlin, author of the first Hebrew grammar, who established the principle that the Christian scholar must be competent not only in Latin and in Greek, but also in the language of the Old Testament. Moreover, Reuchlin was almost single-handedly responsible for having preserved major Hebrew texts at a time when there was a very powerful movement to destroy all texts of the hated Jewish religion.

There was, of course, a certain risk in Reuchlin's pursuit. In the 16th century those who devoted too much attention to Hebrew were suspect, and those who turned to Jewish tradition to explain the Old Testament were called "Judaizers."⁷⁹ And Reuchlin was bitterly persecuted by those who misunderstood his Christian mission. But Reuchlin's interest in Jewish mysticism, and in the Hebrew language, was as a devout Christian.

To him both the Old and the New Testaments related to Christ. “The whole of sacred scripture,” he said, “is about Christ.”⁸⁰

Following in the footsteps of Pico della Mirandola, Reuchlin placed great emphasis on the Greeks, and especially on Pythagoras, whom he considered to have taken his philosophy from Jewish sources.⁸¹

His first book, *De verbo mirifico* (The Wonder Working Word) takes the Platonic form of a dialog. It is a discussion between an Epicurean, a Jew and a Christian. His second work, one considerably less sympathetic to Jews than the first, was *De Arte Cabalistica* (On the Art of the Kabbalah). This was, again, a dialog—this time between a Jew, a Moslem, and a young Pythagorean philosopher. Like others of his day, Reuchlin made no distinction between the Neo-Platonists and the Pythagoreans. His primary concern was to show that their writings were a product of Kabbalist thought. “If I declare,” he said “that Kabbalah and Pythagoreanism are of the same stuff, I will not be departing from the facts.”⁸² Thus, the works of Pythagoras and other Greeks were held to embody the same truths of Christianity.

Reuchlin attempted to reconcile many schools of thought which had very little in common. He put together materials from radically different Kabbalistic schools and attempted to show them as all belonging to one type of thought, which Idel criticizes as being “artificial and highly eclectic.”⁸³ In this regard, Idel points out also that “...the possible cultural image of the learned Spanish Kabbalist who would converse with non-Jewish persons

on the most esoteric Jewish topics is characteristically Italian.”⁸⁴ Unquestionably, this attempt at synthesis is part and parcel of the Italian Renaissance mentality, which sought universally applicable principles in all things. But beyond this, there is in Reuchlin’s work a sense of inspired mission, a divine war of words driven by a Jesuit-like feeling that the end most certainly justifies the means.

Reuchlin’s “wonder working word” was not the Hebrew Divine Name of God, the YHVH. It was the name of Jesus, “Yeheshua” proposed by Pico della Mirandola in his fourteenth Kabbalistic principle. Pico added the Hebrew letter *Shin* (ש) to the unpronounceable name of God, *Yod Heh Vau Heh* (יהוה).⁸⁵ The argument for the addition of the Shin is extremely complicated, but Reuchlin believed that this was the lost original and ancient spelling of the name of the Messiah, the “Son of David.” He thought that the ancients had written the YHS in error.⁸⁶ Reuchlin amplified Pico’s proposal, arguing that since Christians are a part of the Body of Christ, and since only one who is of the nature of God can pronounce the name, addition of the *Shin* to the *Tetragrammaton* makes it possible for Christians to enter into the presence of God when Jews could not. Theoretically, only one who is of the nature of God can “pronounce” the name, meaning to take full part in its divinity.

This remarkable argument must rank as one of the most brilliantly perverse in the history of philosophy. Its essential framework is the idea that although Judaism established the groundwork with the YHVH, only through the Messianic activity of Christ, is salvation possible.

What Reuchlin did was to amplify and “prove” the arguments of Pico by turning the mystical texts of Judaism against the Jews. Reuchlin’s *On the Art of the Kabbalah* of 1516, which has been called “the Bible of Christian Kabbalah,” lays the groundwork for all later developments, both in philosophy and in practical magic. Its place in history was correctly defined by Reuchlin, himself, who in dedicating the work to the Son of Lorenzo (“the Magnificent”) de’ Medici, Pope Leo X, cited the “heros” Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and others as his precursors. In their day “nothing,” Reuchlin wrote, “flourished as did Florence then; all those dead arts were then reborn; no aspect of language or literature was left untouched by those celebrated men.”⁸⁷ Reuchlin’s stated aim was to join in the company of these ideological leaders through the rediscovery of Pythagorean philosophy which, he told the Pope, he had “only been able to glean from the Hebrew Kabbalists, since it derives its origins from the teachers of Kabbalah, and then was lost to our ancestors, disappearing from Southern Italy into the Kabbalistic writings.”⁸⁸ *De Arte Cabalistica* begins on a mundane note as, Philolaus, a young follower of Pythagoras and, Marranus, a Moslem, come independently to an inn in Frankfurt to meet with Simon, a Jew knowledgeable in Kabbalah. Being astonished by the drunken raucousness around them at dinner together in the tavern, they retire and begin to converse. Marranus immediately presents the credentials that Reuchlin considers most important: his abilities in Greek, Hebrew, Latin and Arabic. The Pythagorean, Philolaus, also as-

serts his abilities in languages and notes that most of the ideas of Pythagoras were derived from Jewish Kabbalah.⁸⁹

As this very strange philosophical treatise opens, one might find in the Moslem Marranus, who declares that he has been both circumcised and baptized and is thus able to speak from both the Jewish and the Christian points of view, an especially curious character.⁹⁰ But *De Arte* is an inherently Italian Renaissance document which, in a search for an elusive absolute truth, attempts to bring all thought together, no matter how far the stretch. In *De Arte*, Reuchlin sets the stage for a Christian Kabbalistic movement.

The Jewish Kabbalist, Simon, whose reputation is so strong that the two have sought him out, naturally also understands Greek and shows how Greek and Hebrew ideas are similar. This Italianate Rabbi states that to know the Kabbalah one must study mathematics, physics, Arabic, Greek, and Latin,⁹¹ a notion which would never have occurred to the earlier Spanish Kabbalists, and which many Jewish Kabbalists would have found a repulsive intrusion upon their cultural integrity. Reuchlin constructed his pseudo-history with great precision, first through the words of the rabbi: "Our fathers' teachers," says Simon, "were famous angels. Ratziel was Adam's." And he quickly establishes the absolute authority of the Kabbalah, stating that "By the will of God this angel showed him the path to atonement. He gave Adam divine words, to be interpreted allegorically, in the way of Kabbalah. No word, no letter, however trifling, not even the pronunciation, was without significance."⁹²

With sweeping Catholicity Reuchlin argues that God intended that a savior appear whose self-sacrifice would bring the means of forgiveness for “original sin,” the somewhat dubious principle established by Augustine (who asserted that only through the Church of Christ could original sin be forgiven). We are told that the Angel Ratziel said to Adam: “The primal sin will be purged in this way: from your seed will be born a just man, a hero whose name will in pity contain these four letters *yod, heh, vau, heh* and through his upright trustfulness and peaceable sacrifice will put out his hand, and take from the Tree of Life, and the fruit of that Tree will be salvation to all who hope for it.”⁹³

As Adam was taught by an angel, so were the prophets who followed. The teacher of Abraham was the angel Zadkiel and that of Moses was the Archangel Meta-tron who plays such a pivotal role in the *Zohar*. The truths revealed to Moses are ultimately handed down to Pythagoras, whom Reuchlin calls “the father of philosophy,”⁹⁴ while acknowledging that all knowledge ultimately comes from the Jews.“

“All of the Jewish traditions and discoveries,” Reuchlin explains, “have been popularized by non-Jewish plagiarists, first in Greek and then in Latin: there is nothing in our philosophy that was not first developed by the Jews, although by this time they do not get the recognition they deserve and everyone now despises Jews and anything associated with them.”⁹⁵ And accord-

ing to Reuchlin, Pythagoras is the middle man: “All of this comes to us from Pythagoras, who himself got it partly from the Egyptians, partly from the Hebrews and Chaldees, partly from the deeply learned Persian Magicians. Handed down to posterity by him it has been recorded by some very distinguished authors.” Among those distinguished authors Reuchlin includes Plato, Plotinus, Cicero, and Hermes Trismegistus.⁹⁶ The truth is that almost nothing is known with certainty about Pythagoras, although there are some textual suggestions that Plato was connected to his school. So Reuchlin essentially invented a history which was accepted by centuries of Christian Kabbalists as the factual basis of their beliefs.

In the final book of *De Arte*, Reuchlin gives specific names for each of the thirty-two Paths of Wisdom, beginning with “Miraculous Understanding.”⁹⁷ He quotes from the *Sefer Yetzirah* and other key works, establishing the essential framework of Christian Kabbalah which remains unchanged today. He names all of the ten Sephirot on the Tree of Life, falling beneath the Ain Soph, the no-thingness from which creation emerges.

And although he was not the first Christian to do so⁹⁸ Reuchlin placed great emphasis on the Seventy-Two Names of God as he found them described in Recanati’s commentary on Genesis. These names of three letters each, derived from Exodus (14: 19-21) were of particular significance in the meditative practice of Abulafia.

Reuchlin explained that “by these symbols, the angels are summoned and bring help to men, to the praise and glory of the ineffable God.”⁹⁹

Despite the fact that all of this is based in the Hebrew language and on the Hebrew tradition, and despite the fact that Reuchlin contends that all enlightenment springs from a Jewish source, *De Arte* demonstrates both misunderstanding and a callous misappropriation of Jewish thought. But there were no rules, and Reuchlin was certainly not criticized for making his point by inventing a Jewish rabbi who speaks with the greatest respect of Jews who have converted to Christianity. And of the Christian scholars this invented rabbi says: “Like a spy in an alien camp, I, though a Jew, have read with pleasure much of their work,”¹⁰⁰ and then proceeds to sanctimoniously quote Gregory the Great.

Notes

1. The development of pre-Kabbalah Jewish mysticism has been excellently addressed by Peter Schäfer in his *The Hidden and Manifest God*, Albany 1992. Schäfer contends that Scholem's evaluation of Hekalot mysticism was "distorted," and did not give a complete picture of the movement, 9. See generally pp.33-43.

2. Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources*, Albany 1992, 8.

3. The fact that much of work within both Jewish and Christian Kabbalah has been in secrecy imposes a special complexity on the dating of materials. However, the use of this diagram was apparently not common in 1516 when *De Arte* appeared.

4. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York 1974, 29.

5. See Phineas Mordell *The Origin of Letters & Numerals According to the Sefer Yetzirah*, originally appearing in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, April 1912; reprint New York, 1975, 6

6. Saures disagrees specifically with those who consider The Zohar to be the primary document of Kabbalism. "I do not agree with the saying," he wrote, that "the Qabala is Zohar. I consider that the three great cabalistic works are *Genesis*, *The Song of Songs* and *The Sefer Yetsira*" Carlo Saures, *The Sepher Yetsira*, Boulder and London, 1976.

7. The idea of *Golem* has been heavily romanticized over the centuries. Originally this artificial life form was considered to appear as a result of the ecstatic consciousness of the mystic, especially one who was working the "magic" of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. The Golem was thought to last only as long as did the ecstatic state of the philosopher. In later versions of the Golem stories, however, the figure was independent. See: Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1977, 99.

8. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 42-43

9. Aryeh Kaplan, *The Bahir*, New York, 1979, 88.

10. Kaplan, *Bahir*; xiv-xv.

11. Verman, 29.

12. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Maine, 1982, 28.

13. The *pseudoepigrapha*, (meaning things falsely ascribed)

are non-canonical Christian and Hebrew texts for which false authorship and date have been claimed. Such “deceptions,” however, were often social necessity. By the third century B.C.E. in the Hebrew world, it was accepted that the Pentateuch of Moses was the final revealed word, and that any persons claiming new and different revelations should be put to death as a false prophet. So there developed a whole class of literature where writers ascribed their own personal experience to figures of the past, such as Enoch, Moses, Jeremiah, Baruch, or Isaiah.

14. Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, v.I, Oxford, 1991, 23.

15. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 50.

16. Tishby, v.I, 26.

17. Tishby, v.I, 25.

18. Tishby, v.I, 29-30.

19. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, New York 1941, 361. The Latin original is from the mid-thirteenth century.

20. It must be pointed out that most of the Renaissance “philosophers” were Catholic priests.

21. Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, Cambridge, 1992. *Trismegistos*, xiv.

22. Frances A. Yates, *Giorgio Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago, 1964, 5.

23. Yates, *Giorgio Bruno*, 6.

24. Yates, *Giorgio Bruno*, 6.

25. Yates, *Giorgio Bruno*, 11.

26. Copenhaver, xlv.

27. Walter Scott, *Hermetica*, Boston, 235; Copenhaver, xli.

28. Copenhaver, l.

29. *Judaism on Trial*, 40.

30. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 45-46

31. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88-90.

32. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 45-46.

33. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Maine, 1982, 79

34. Kaplan, 63-4.

35. Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, *The Path of the Names*:

Writings by Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, Ed. David Meltzer, Berkeley/London 1976, 13-14.

36. Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, New York 1988, 2-3.

37. Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, New York 1992, 109.

38. Catherine Swietlicki, *Spanish Christian Cabala*, Missouri, 1986, 4.

39. Jeremy Cohen, "Scholarship and Intolerance in the Medieval Academy: The Study and Evaluation of Judaism in European Christendom," *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict—From Late Antiquity to Reformation*, New York, 1991, 326.

40. Using the Old Testament to prove the truth of Christianity had gone on since the earliest Christian centuries. But it was at the *Barcelona Disputation* of 1263, a debate between Jews and Christians that the Talmud was suggested as a source of Christian truth. This idea was developed twenty years later in Raymund Martini's work *Pugio Fidei*. The Christian argument was based on certain early Talmudic material on the nature of the coming Messiah. *Judaism on Trial*, 41-42. See also Catherine Swietlicki, *Spanish Christian Cabala*, Missouri, 1986, 5-9.

41. Moshe Idel, "Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah, 1480-1650," *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, New York, 1992. 326-27.

42. Moshe Idel, "Particularism and Universalism," 328-29.

43. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven, 1988, 263.

44. Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, New York, 1992.

45. Moshe Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman, Albany, 1992, 322-23.

46. Ficino himself wrote on medicine: *Libri de Vita*.

47. D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, London, 1975. Walker proposes that the key to the opposition of the medieval Church to magic was the *transubstantiation*. "This, I would suggest, is a fundamental influence on all medieval and Renaissance magic, and a fundamental reason for the Church's condemnation of all magical practices. The church has hew own magic and there is no room for any other." p.36.

48. See George Luk, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Baltimore, 1985, 45. These Neoplatonists from the third century C.E. were the most ardent of supporters of ritual magic and theurgy, which Luk feels may have been part of a last effort to suppress Christianity. See also Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago, 1964. The interest of Ficino and others in magic, and the new status which it achieved, was due primarily to an influx of magically-oriented texts from Byzantium from the Early Christian/Late Antique period. The Neo-Platonists did not condemn magic as the realm of the ignorant as did the medieval Church. P.17.

49. This is in reference to Orpheus, who in most Renaissance representations is shown playing a *lira da braccio* or less often a treble viol or violin. See: D.P. Walker, 19.

50. D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, London 1975, 36. Other sources for Ficino were Peter of Albano, Roger Bacon, Alkindi, and Avicenna.

51. Copenhagen, Ficino translated 14 of the 17 books under the title *Pimander*. These were printed in 1471, two years after the first edition of *Asclepius*.

52. Yates, *Bruno*, 26.

53. 2Esdras: 14.5.

54. Romans 3:2.

55. Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, Cambridge, 1989, 5.

56. Pico never went so far as to claim that the wonderful works of Christ were accomplished through the Kabbala. In fact, he emphatically stated that this was not the case. It was later writers who came to this conclusion. It should additionally be noted that Span-

ish Christian writers of the fifteenth century used Kabbalah in their efforts to convert the Jew. But Pico was not aware of this, and believed that he was the first to recognize the value of Kabbalah as a proof of Christianity. See: Swietlicki, 6.

57. Yates, *Bruno*, 91.

58. Yates makes an interesting observation, comparing the status of the Renaissance magician and artist. She said: "We begin to perceive here an extraordinary change in the status of the magician... There is a change in status almost comparable to the change in status of the artist from the mere merchants of the Middle Ages to the learned and refined companion of Princes of the Renaissance." *Bruno*, 107.

59. Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, Nebraska, 1993, from the introduction by C. Lloyd Jones, 8. After the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, expediency undoubtedly motivated many Jews to teach the language to interested Christians.

60. Moshe Idel, "Particularism and Universalism, 329.

61. Although emphasis is usually placed on Mithridates as the teacher of Pico della Mirandola, Moshe Idel mentions a meeting between Pico and Rabbi Yohanan Alemanno in Florence in 1488. If, he says, this is the first meeting of the two, Pico's work of 1486-88 must be considered to be independent. But Idel speculates that if they had met before 1488, the influence of Alemanno on Pico (and on the origins of Christian Kabbalah) would have been as strong as that of Mithridates. Moshe Idel "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, New York, 1992, 111. Another strong influence on Pico was Paul de Heredia, whose ideas were also important to the development of Christian Kabbalah. He was a scholar of Arabic, Greek and Hebrew who converted from Judaism to Christianity in his old age. He wrote *L'Épître des Secrets* and *La Couronne du Roi*, both of which use the term "Kabbalah." Secret, 25-27.

62. At birth Mithridates was given the ponderous name of Juda Samuel ben Nissim Abdul Farag de Girenti. Upon conversion

to Christianity he took the name of his Godfather, Guglielmo Ramonda Moncada, which is the way he signed his famous sermon dedicated to Sixtus VI. Secret, 25.

63. Secret, 24.

64. Wirszubski, 106.

65. Wirszubski, 76.

66. Wirszubski, 115 The importance of “boy” appears very early in Jewish mysticism and is related to the Archangel Metatron. In the Babylonian Talmud he is the head of the Celestial Academy. In Merkabah mysticism he is considered to be the guide and protector of the soul as it ascends into the celestial realms, as well as the teacher of the hidden mysteries. Metatron is a cyclic principle which grows old and is rejuvenated periodically as the *boy*. The Archangel is described by the Zohar as the very source of good and evil. Tishby, v.II, 626-28.

67. Wirszubski, 73.

68. Wirszubski, 55-64

69. Wirszubski, 123.

70. Swietlicki, 9-10.

71. *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. E. Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, J.H. Randall, Jr., Chicago 1948, “Oration on the dignity of man,” 252.

72. Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, xii.

73. François Secret, *Les Kabbalistes Chrétiens de la Renaissance*, Paris, 1964, 2-4.

74. Wirszubski, 121.

75. Wirszubski, 109.

76. This is discussed by Gershom Scholem in his essay “Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der Christlichen Kabbala,” p.177.

77. Wirszubski, 109-110.

78. It should be noted that Reuchlin has had a profound effect even on modern research into the Kabbalah. In his introduction to an edition of Reuchlin’s *De Arte*, Moshe Idel says: “Is Scholem’s own remark that would he believe in metempsychosis, he would perhaps see Reuchlin’s soul as having transmigrated into himself as a mere metaphor? Or does Scholem disclose some-

thing more profound: that the line of research in modern Jewish studies does not only start with Reuchlin, but also still follows his conceptual vision, at least insofar as Kabbalah is concerned? Reuchlin's influence is conspicuous in Scholem's, and his followers' overemphasis on the paramount importance of the symbolic language and thought as representative of and essential to the Kabbalah," xvi.

79. Reuchlin, 12ff.

80. Reuchlin, *In septem psalmos*, preface.

81. This idea was not entirely new. Long before Reuchlin the idea was being passed around the Pythagoras himself was actually Jewish. *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, xi.

82. Reuchlin, 147.

83. Reuchlin, viii.

84. Reuchlin, xi.

85. Wirszubski, 165.

86. Secret, 52.

87. Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah* (reprint of Latin original *De Arte Cabalistica* with English translation), Nebraska, 1983.

88. Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 39

89. Reuchlin, 43.

90. Reuchlin, 41.

91. Reuchlin, 53.

92. Reuchlin, 69

93. Reuchlin, 7394.

94. Reuchlin, 127

95. Reuchlin, 131

96. Reuchlin, 213.

97. Reuchlin, 257-59.95.

98. Christians began to deal with the Hebrew Divine Names in the early 13th century. By the end of the century Arnold of Villanova had written a treatise on them.

99. Reuchlin 261.

100. Reuchlin, 293.

II

AFTER REUCHLIN

The Sixteenth Century Theorists

By the sixteenth century the royal courts, as well as the great European universities, were swept by the brilliance and novelty of the new Christian Kabbalah. At this time, when the authority of the Catholic Church was being challenged by Protestant reformers, Christian Kabbalah appeared as a counter-reformation tool offering “proof” that true salvation was possible only through Christ and through his representative on earth, the Pope.

Through the fifteen hundreds Christian Kabbalah was centered in Italy and in France. It did not take root easily in Protestant Germany where the Bible was viewed in very literal terms, and where there was a growing disdain for the study of languages and for rabbinical commentaries.

England, too, was a moderate participant in the movement, for although Henry VIII broke with the Pope and, in 1527 formed his own church, the Catholic temperament for obtuse theology and hermeneutics remained. Later, however, England and Germany were to emerge as major centers of a more practical, a more magical, sort of Christian Kabbalah than had been imagined by its Italian founders.

In the early sixteenth century the previously obscure texts of Jewish mysticism, including *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Bahir* and *Zohar* were quoted regularly to demonstrate that at the very core of the Hebrew religion was the essence of its downfall. This argument was, ironically, stimulated and encouraged by the development of printing and by the new Jewish publishing houses which made important Kabbalist texts commonly available for the first time.¹

The Kabbalah had enormous appeal in the Humanist, syncretistic, world of the Renaissance. *L'uomo universale* of scholarship—the Christian doctor expert in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic became a star performer on the intellectual world stage. And as more and more diverse elements were brought into play, the less the reference to the original Hebrew sources. In fact, by the time Christian Kabbalah was played out in the nineteenth century, “magical” rituals were being performed with Hebrew God Names and strange composite invocations of Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and even Arabic by persons whose only knowledge of the Hebrew language was generally the sequence of twenty-two letters.

Paul Ricci: Kabbalah as a Way of Life

Like Mithridates, the teacher of Pico della Mirandola who came before him, Ricci was a Jewish convert to Christianity whose writings are so intensely anti-Jewish that one must question his motivation—particularly in light of knowledge that without the cooperation of many brilliant Jewish scholars, Christian Kabbalah could not have happened. So why did Ricci and others cooperate?

It is clear that there were two sorts of Jewish converts: those who were actually persuaded to the Christian arguments, and those who, like Mithridates, were inveterate and self-serving survivalists in an essentially hostile environment which blamed all Jews for the death of Christ.² Beginning in the eleventh century stories were circulated about the ritual murder of Christian children by Jews, about their desecration of the eucharistic host, of their poisoning wells, bewitching animals, and ruining crops.³

Nor did the Reformation bring with it a more gentle attitude toward the Jews. And although Martin Luther did call for kindness toward Jews at a personal level, he had no sympathy whatsoever for the Jewish religion and published, in 1543, a treatise entitled *On the Jews and their Lies*

In a continuing effort to convert them, it was not

at all unusual for an entire Jewish community to be brought into church where they would be subjected to a long sermon by a bishop or by some visiting friar. The sermons invariably included questions such as: “Why has your God forsaken you?” and “Why have you been in exile and suffered for so many years?” There were those who were actually convinced and converted of their own free will. But others were baptized by force and could not return to Judaism without severe penalties for apostasy.⁴

For whatever reason he did so (and assuming that he truly believed what he was writing), Paul Ricci made a profound contribution to Christian Kabbalah. Following in the footsteps of Reuchlin, he was the first to organize and unify many scattered Kabbalist doctrines, which he presented, for the first time, as a Christian way of life. Here was a mystical path by which, through the Law of Moses (in which all principles of Christianity were hidden), association with the Divine would provide *individual* salvation. And it was this idea of individual salvation for the Christian Kabbalist which Ricci claimed set his ideas apart.

“Jewish mysticism,” he wrote, “is not a mysticism of individual salvation; it is rooted not in the life history of individuals, but in the world history of the race.”⁵ Ricci argued that although the Jewish mystic might experience the ecstasy common to all true encounter of the Divine, Jewish interpretation of this experience was social, or racial, as opposed to that of the Christian which was

entirely personal. With his sacrifice Christ had brought a personal salvation not possible to the Jewish mystic.

Ricci was baptized a Christian in 1505 and by 1507 had begun to publish a very influential series of works, dedicated to King Louis XII, the purpose of which was to “protect the holy religion against the calumnies of the Jews, with the help of the Spirit, and to confirm this through the intelligence of the Kabbalah.”⁶

Ricci was among the new wave of champions of Christianity who drew their ammunition from Torah, from Talmud, and from rabbinical commentaries. He became particularly influential in 1514 with his appointment as physician to the Emperor Maximilian in whose court Christian Kabbalah was well recognized as a tool for converting the Jews.⁷ In 1521 his genius was rewarded with a Professorship of Greek and Hebrew at the University of Pavia where he knew Erasmus, a man who was anything but a Kabbalist, but who, unlike Martin Luther, at least expressed tolerance for these ideas.

In 1530 Ricci was made Baron of Sparzenstein. He died in 1541, soon after publishing his major work, *De coelesti agricultura*,⁸ in which one character in his dialogue says: “I sincerely hope that this little work of yours will be read by the Jews for in it they will find that the Mystery of Christ is included in the Law.” Many Jews were outraged by Ricci’s accusation that Jews persisted stubbornly in their ignorance, and by his frequent quotations from the Torah to supposedly prove various

points of Christian doctrine.

Christians were, on the other hand, delighted with Ricci's philosophies and with his conclusion, based on both Old and New Testaments, that the coming of the Messiah has taken place and that Jesus is that Messiah. The quintessential Jewish convert to Christianity, Ricci ultimately insisted that every Jew is compelled by the fundamentals of his own faith to admit that only the believer in Christ will participate in the Kingdom of Heaven.⁹

Of course, the idea that the principle of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was imbedded in all Hebrew literature was essential to the Christian Kabbalist argument. And like Pico della Mirandola, Ricci found every aspect of Christian dogma in the mystical Hebrew Kabbalah. He wrote that the Kabbalah provides explanation for: "The mystery of the Three united, the eternal rebirth of the Son, original sin, by which death entered the world, redemption through the Passion and the blood of the Messiah, His resurrection, the Holy Virgin, queen of the Sky, the mystical body of the Church, the Saints which are the temple of God and the members of Christ, judgment and the end of the world, repentance and the remission of sins, resurrection of the dead, the gift of prophesy, science and wisdom..."¹⁰

Ricci's organization and codification of disparate ideas brought Christian Kabbalistic thought to a new and very practical level. At the theoretical level his most significant contribution was to assert that Adam had clear knowledge of all Ten Sephirot before he ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and was

expelled from heaven.¹¹ The result was original sin,¹² which Ricci calls “the venom of the serpent” and the limitation of Adam’s knowledge to the seven lower Sephiroth. So from that point on, the goal of Adam was recapturing knowledge of the three Upper Sephiroth, which is possible only when “the venom of the Serpent is removed.” This process happens through following the Law of Moses which is, as we have seen, actually covering up the true Law of Christ.

In terms of Christian versus Jewish dogma, the removal of original sin, the Serpent’s venom, produces an extraordinary effect, for when this happens, the Law (*Torah*) itself stops, and salvation is granted by Christ, who is the redeemer of the world.¹³ Ricci’s work was especially influential to Postel and to the seventeenth century Jesuit writer, Athanasius Kircher.

Giustiniani: Including the Arabs

Standing out among other Italians important to the development of Christian Kabbalah in the early sixteenth century was Augustin Giustiniani (1470-1536). Born in Genoa to a noble family (his cousin was a cardinal), he entered the Dominican order at the age of fourteen and after some basic studies went to Padua where, with the Dominicans, he studied languages and biblical questions. His expertise in these areas brought him to Bologna where he taught for two years.

In 1513 Giustiniani published what he called *A Simple Prayer of Piety to Almighty God Composed of 72 Divine Names in Latin and in Hebrew*. The text as given in Latin, in Greek, and in Hebrew, was in itself unique. But the addition of a translation into Arabic had profound implications.¹⁴

The role played by this Psalter was considerable for the development of Arab studies, deemed of particular importance by later Kabbalists such as Kircher who, publishing texts in Arabic, demonstrated an Arabic Kabbalah beside that of the Hebrew.

What is found with Giustiniani, and with others who refer broadly to a Kabbalah of many languages and cultures, is a claim to a universality of the Kabbalah which separates it from its specifically Jewish roots.

To assert that a Kabbalah and its literary tracks exists cross-culturally, lays the foundation for the claim that the Hebrew Kabbalah is only a part of a greater picture which is ultimately Christian. The more the Sephiroth and the Paths on the Tree of Life are shown to have emerged in different cultural settings, the weaker the claim of the Jews to uniqueness in their mystical system. Thus, as time progressed, the Christian Kabbalah grew farther and farther away from its original Hebrew origins and began to be peppered with disparate elements.

Galatin and The AGLA Formula

Pierre Galatin (1460-1540) was a distinguished Franciscan Doctor of Philosophy and of Theology who, like

so many others after Reuchlin, produced a work which unified many diverse threads of Christian Kabbalah and which began to point the way toward modern Western Occultism. His *De arcanis catholicae veritas*, (Secrets of Catholic Truth), published by Gerson Soncino, became the most widely distributed work of the Renaissance. It was accepted even by those most opposed to Kabbalah because it contained so much ammunition against the Jews.¹⁵

De arcanis drew heavily upon the *Pugio Fides* and upon ideas developed earlier by Paul Heredia. And, despite criticism leveled at Galatin for outright plagiarism, his work was extremely influential and was widely copied.

Among the most influential principles which Galatin published was that of the name AGLA. This name, actually a formula, became an essential part of Christian Kabbalist talisman construction and of occult ritual practices from the seventeenth century to the present. Of course, the biblical phrase from which it was derived, "You are the eternally powerful Lord," was commonly used in the Bible. But Galatin gave its use new meaning within the perspective of practical Christian Kabbalah.

He wrote: "I wish you to know that the name of God Agla means nothing other than the eternal and infinite power of God." He explained the derivation of the name AGLA from Hebrew: A (*atta*, Thou art), G (*Gibor*, Powerful), L (*le olam*, forever), A (*Adonai*, Lord).¹⁶

Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo: Hierarchical Approval

The inclusion of a Prince of the Church among the most prominent Kabbalists of the early sixteenth century serves to demonstrate the extent to which Christian Kabbalah had quickly gained acceptance at the highest levels of sacred and secular society. Egidio was the General of the Augustinian Order at the time of Luther's revolt. And, in 1517 (one year after the publication of Reuchlin's *On the Art of the Kabbalah*), he was made a cardinal. By that time he was well-versed in Plato and in Aristotle, and had recognized the importance of eastern languages both for Bible study and to fight against the Turks. He was a truly excellent scholar who, besides the usual Latin and Greek, also knew Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic.¹⁷

Earlier, as Augustinian General, Egidio had welcomed into his house some Jewish-convert scholars, including Elia Levita who became Egidio's teacher in the Kabbalah and who had to defend himself constantly against those who said that he was betraying the Jews by teaching Kabbalah to the Christians. Throughout the early development of Christian Kabbalah, the fact that Jews, whether converts or not, teaching Christians the Hebrew language and introducing them to principles of Jewish mysticism, provoked tremendous frustration and hostility among many Jewish scholars who thought themselves absolutely betrayed.

But Levita was unconcerned as he conveyed the cardinal principles of Kabbalah, many of which were

quite contrary to those of Christian dogma, such as that of reincarnation (*Gilgul*), an idea accepted as an integral concept of Kabbalah since the philosophy was first codified in *The Bahir*. Based on Job, Levita taught that each human soul is created three times that is, in the body of three persons. He calls *Gilgul* “revolution.”¹⁸

Although Egidio published nothing in his lifetime, he had a vast library of Kabbalistic texts,¹⁹ and wrote several manuscript treatises, including one against the Jews based upon Paul de Heredia. He was particularly interested in the Kabbalistic interpretation of numbers, letters, and the names of God, and was very influenced by the *Zohar*, a work which he quoted freely in Latin, and which he attempted to translate.

And as evidence of the importance given to the Kabbalah at this time, one of Egidio’s manuscript books was dedicated to Pope Clement VII, and another to Pope Leo X which had the inscription: “Receive the mystery ignored before your time by the Christians, and known to a Hebrew elite.” He believed that the mystical History of the Church could not be understood without the Kabbalah. And it was in acceptance of this idea as true fact that, toward the end of his life, Egidio was instructed by the Pope to reveal the secrets of the Kabbalah to Emperor Charles V himself.²⁰

Egidio went through a complicated process of number symbols to demonstrate “the victory of Christ, through Kabbalah. As did all later Christian Kabbalists, he related the Messiah to Tiphareth, the Sixth Sefhira on the Tree

of Life, and claimed absurdly that this was all known even to Augustine. “My Augustine,” he wrote, “knew all the secrets of the Kabbalah.”²¹

Egidio da Viterbo’s work represents the most complete assimilation of the Kabbalah into the world of Christian Humanists. With him Kabbalah received absolute respectability and the firm imprimatur of the Church.

***Francesco Giorgio of Venice:
Seeking Unity in Diversity***

Among the early theorists who played key roles in diffusion of Christian Kabbalah was Francesco Giorgio (1466-1540). He was born in Venice, and joined the Franciscan order at a young age, although little is known about his early life. Venice at the time was a bustling center of Jewish intellectualism. After the expulsion of Jews from Spain, Jewish scholars and Kabbalist writings began to pour into the Italian city with its developing art and its fairy tale waterways. It became the preeminent city of great publishers of Hebrew literature, the home of Bomberg and Soncino. Venice was also the city where Postel translated the Zohar.

It was from Italian Renaissance Humanism and the Florentine Neoplatonic movement of Pico Della Mirandola that Giorgio drew inspiration. He was a Hebrew Scholar who found correspondences between Hebrew Gnosticism, the works of Hermes Trismegistus, and the

tradition of Pythagorean-Platonic numerology. Giorgio was one of the first to mix Kabbalist speculation with a “natural magic” of the stars.

Giorgio, like Galatin and others, laid the foundation for seventeenth-century esotericists such as Kircher, who viewed Kabbalah not in terms of its pure Hebrew roots, but as repository of universal principles, based upon correspondences between various religious systems.

Giorgio was a syncretist, who brought together, under Christian Kabbalah, such diverse philosophical directions as Platonism, Hermeticism, Astral Cosmology, Orphism, and the principles of Francis of Assisi, Plotinus and Augustine.²² The structural underpinning of his system was number and the premise that the cosmos was created with a perfectly proportioned geometry which can be understood by the enlightened person.

Giorgio's *De Harmonia Mundi Totius* (1525) and his *Scripturum Sacram Problemata* (1536) were, along with the works of Pico della Mirandola, Reuchlin, and Galatin, the principle sources of the of Christian Kabbalah for the sixteenth century.

De Harmonia, a massive work, established Giorgio as one of the most important philosophers of the Italian Renaissance. His theories of proportions and of Neo-Platonic geometry were profoundly influential to the emerging architecture of that period.²³ His view of universal harmony was represented by the well-known figure of a man within a square, within a circle, and as one architectural historian expressed it: “With the Renaissance

revival of the Greek mathematical interpretation of God and the world, an invigorated Christian belief that man as the image of God embodied the harmonies of the Universe, the Vitruvian figure inscribed in a square and a circle became a symbol of the mathematical symmetry between microcosm and macrocosm.”²⁴

Giorgio emphasized this relationship between Man and God and developed ideas on the attraction of favorable influences from the Heavens, based largely upon Plotinus and Ptolemy. He saw stars as closely connected to angels which he considered to be intelligences that move the celestial spheres. Giorgio’s Christianization of ancient astrology, his correspondence between angels and planets was, although of no particular influence to later philosophers, very consistent with Kabbalist thought and methodology.

Here two points must be underscored in the development of Christian Kabbalah. The first is that those involved in the early movement were, without exception, broadly intellectually based. The second point is that as the Christian Kabbalist movement matured, it moved farther and farther away from its Hebrew roots and was increasingly merged with Hermeticism, astrology, neo-Platonism, alchemy, and other disparate ideas. Giorgio established a framework for considering Kabbalah, and the Sephirot on the Tree of Life, as a reference point for corresponding ideas, and to demonstrate the ultimate harmony of the cosmos.

His *De Harmonia* was of particular influence in Eliza-

bethan England, where it found a place in the Library of The Queen's Magus, John Dee. It was also profoundly influential to the French Renaissance.²⁵

Giorgio had attracted much attention, in *De Harmonia*, with his claim that he converted a well-known rabbi to Christianity by proving to him that the holy *Shekinah* abandoned the Jews at the destruction of the Temple.²⁶ This argument was a particularly venomous intellectual attack against the Jews, who were consoled by the Zohar and its promise that God's *Shekinah* shares exile with the them: She is their support when all else fails; she is the affirmation of the continuing covenant between God and the group consciousness which is Israel.

Giorgio summed up the general knowledge of Kabbalah, presenting the thirty-two Paths of Wisdom and the ten Sefirot. He had a special interest in the value of letters. And, following the direction of Heredia, devoted particular attention to Hebrew texts, such as Genesis 49, and showing how these embody the name of Jesus.²⁷

In the *Problemata*, which abounds in themes drawn from the Zohar,²⁸ and in which manuscript material from the Zohar was used in a Christian work for the first time.²⁹ Here Giorgio follows up on ideas presented in the *Harmonia* and presents magical and esoteric principles which were to be of profound influence on the developing Western Occult tradition. He focuses on the invocation of Divine Names, demonstrating more of a correlation between Hebrew and Christian angelic systems than had Pico.

Giorgio's lists of corresponding animals, minerals and their planetary associations is an early precursor of MacGregor Mathers' and Aleister Crowley's early twentieth century collection of Christian Kabbalist correspondences called *777*, and was a great influence on Agrippa as well as on the Rosicrucianism of Robert Fludd.³⁰

One of the particularly interesting things about the emerging Christian Kabbalah (like early Christianity itself) is the extent to which it's progress was linked to socio-political developments. Every aspect of the study involves patronage by rulers of the sacred and secular societies. Thus one may not be surprised to discover that Friar Giorgio, who was from the patrician family of Zorza, was connected at the ruling levels of Venetian society and was often entrusted with important diplomatic missions.

In this regard it would appear that the great fame resulting to Giorgio in England from his Kabbalist writings made him a strangely central figure in one of religious history's most pivotal events—the attempt of Henry VII to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, which eventually led him to break with the Pope and to form his own Church.

At the end of 1529, and apparently on the suggestion of Thomas Cranmer, later to become the Archbishop of Canterbury, an envoy named Richard Croke was sent to Venice to secretly consult with key Jewish rabbis and with the Kabbalist scholar Giorgio on a matter of

biblical principle. The future archbishop advised the King to consult with canon lawyers and with Jewish rabbis on the hope that they would find his marriage to his brother's widow disallowable on the basis of the text in Leviticus which prohibits such marriages. There was a conflict, however, in that the book of Deuteronomy permits marriage to a brother's widow if there are no children from the first marriage.

Giorgio was sent scores of documents having to do with the King's proposed divorce which he studied carefully and about which he offered his advice to the King. There are letters from Henry thanking Giorgio for his help, although it was ultimately of no avail. The Pope was unimpressed by any arguments presented to him and refused to annul the marriage. In retaliation Henry VIII declared himself the leader of a Church of England which bore no allegiance to the Pope.³¹

The Kabbalah in France: Keeping Pace with the Italians

Giorgio's books were most influential for the development of Christian Kabbalah in Paris, which was to become a major center of occult studies. His Latin work, *Harmonia mundi*, was translated into French in 1578 by Nicolas Le Fèvre de la Boderie, disciple of Postel, the leading figure in French Kabbalah and a translator of the Zohar.³²

French interest in Kabbalah began in the early sixteenth century. An early reference to Kabbalah in France was fairly casual one in a book of 1508 (recalling that Reuchlin's first book, *De Verbo Mirifico* had appeared in 1494) dedicated to Francis of Valois,³³ who seven years later was to be crowned Francis I (1515-1547).

As king, Francis followed with special interest the work of Symphorien Champier (1471-c.1539), a Lyonnais physician who was the first Frenchman to avidly espouse the ideas in Reuchlin's *De Arte Cabalistica* and to define Kabbalah using the terms of Pico della Mirandola and Paul Ricci. No doubt, also, the King was well aware of the interest of the popes in Christian Kabbalah, and of the fact that it was a topic of great concern in the Court of his enemy, Emperor Charles V.³⁴

The French King was, in fact, so intrigued by these new ideas that he attempted to bring Paul Ricci to France. Failing this, he brought Augustin Giustiniani from Italy to teach the Eastern languages and to explain the mysteries of Kabbalah. Francis asked the special help of Jean Thénaud, a Franciscan monk who, Master of Arts and Doctor of Theology, was considered to be one of the most brilliant intellectual lights of the court of Angoulême.

Inexplicably, and perhaps attempting to underscore the mysterious nature of Kabbalah (or his own mastery of the sublime), Thénaud delivered an obscure tract, written entirely in verse, entitled *The Holy and Very Christian Kabbalah*. When it was presented to him, King Francis was completely taken back by this odd

work, and confessed that he had not the slightest idea what Thénau was talking about. Being so advised, the monk hastened to produce another and more organized work, based partly upon Reuchlin, which he called simply *The Treatise on Kabbalah*. The revised work did, in fact, provide His Majesty with a fairly clear description of Christian Kabbalist principles,³⁵ and helped serve to root the ideas of Christian Kabbalah in France.

As will be seen, each country in which the Christian Kabbalah appeared gave it a national flavor. And whereas the Italian Renaissance humanist philosophers tended to be very theoretical, the French (as well as the Germans) turned Kabbalah in the direction that was to become practical occultism—the Western magical tradition.

The Abbot Trithemius

Trithemius (1462-1516), Abbot of Sponheim and one of the great scholars of the Renaissance period, was a key figure in the incorporation of Kabbalah into a Western magical system, although Kabbalah was not his primary interest. His vast library attracted the greatest philosophers and scholars of his day including Agrippa of Nettesheim, for whom he was the most significant influence.

Trithemius was the author of a manuscript called *Stenographia* (not published until 1606) which he claimed to have received psychically and which became the

center of a heated controversy.

As the story goes, among the crowds who routinely visited Trithemius was a Charles de Bovelles, who in 1509 wrote a treatise describing the Abbot's *Stenographia* with shocked contempt, saying that it was a work of demonic magic. The abbot emphatically denied this, insisting that this was a book of cryptography and that invocations of spirits were actually used to keep its system from the profane.³⁶ One of the results of the ensuing scandal seems to have been that it piqued the interest of the young Agrippa and eventually led to his collaboration with Trithemius.

Agrippa: "The Father of Western Occultism"

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) is among the most colorful figures in history and one who, despite his unique and remarkable contributions, remained unfilled and unhappy for most of his life. Although widely-known and passionately followed by a few, he never received the financial security or intellectual approbation which he felt he deserved. Agrippa lived the life of a wanderer, moving through France, Spain, England, Italy, Switzerland and the Low Countries, always on the outer fringes of the great and powerful, never gaining a serious court influence.³⁷ And even today he is perhaps best remembered as having been the model for the sorcerer who made a pact with the Devil in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

The least that can be said is that Agrippa's anti-intellectual, anti-Renaissance humanism and his search for an ancient magic, resulted in a framework of ideas which would be built upon by generations who followed. He can certainly be called the most significant non-priest of the Hermetic-Kabbalist movement.

It is Agrippa who, while using the arguments of Reuchlin and others, moved the essential focus of Christian Kabbalah from attack on the Jews and proof of the truth of Christianity to a magic existing almost for its own sake. He was the turning point toward modern occultism.

Agrippa was apparently born in Cologne where he attended the university and received a licenciate in arts in 1502. And although no supporting records remain, he claimed to have received doctorates in canon and civil law as, well as in medicine and was unquestionably knowledgeable in these disciplines.³⁸ As his biographer Charles Nauert said: "Like Faust, he mastered all fields of learning and found all of them equally dissatisfying."³⁹ Agrippa had a reputation for speaking "every language," and definitely knew several. His native language was German and in addition he knew French, Italian, Spanish, English and Latin, as well as some Greek and Hebrew.⁴⁰

In 1507, as a student at the University of Paris, Agrippa set his most significant course. There he formed a secret magical society of which he was the central

figure,⁴¹ a group of friends with whom he was in touch for the rest of his life. It is likely that his closest friend in this group was Symphorien Champier, later to be a part of the French Humanist school led by Lefèvre d'Étaples, and an important contributor to the history of occultism in France.⁴²

The group dedicated itself to the study of magic, astrology (which Agrippa said had been taught to him by his parents), and Kabbalah. Moreover, they were all very serious alchemists, and one must assume that they were also practicing group rituals.

Agrippa's major work *De occulta philosophia* was a product of this brotherhood. It set a standard for incorporation of astrology and alchemy with ideas which had previously been among the most sacred of Jewish mysticism, such as the manipulation of letters and numbers through Gematria, Notarikon and Temurah which Scholem described as "popularly supposed to represent the heart and core of Kabbalism."⁴³

In his early years, Agrippa established a pattern for five hundred years of secret occult societies, especially those which flourished in England and in France at the end of the nineteenth century. His contribution was to interweave a variety of mystical and occult traditions into one practical and synthetic whole.

As Agrippa became increasingly well-known he was, in 1509, invited to deliver a course of lectures on Johannes Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*, at the University

of Dôle.⁴⁴ Some followed him with great admiration. But in others his positions provoked extraordinary hostility. He was accused of being “a judaizing heretic, who has introduced into Christian Schools the criminal, condemned, and prohibited art of Kabbalah who, despising the holy fathers and Catholic doctors, prefer the Rabbis of the Jews, and bend sacred letters to heretical arts and the Talmud of the Jews.”⁴⁵

Such blanket condemnation was undoubtedly discouraging to a young man still growing as a scholar and whose philosophy was not entirely formed. Thus his encouragement by the great Abbot Trithemius at this time must have been doubly meaningful.

Toward the end of 1509, or early in 1510, Agrippa made his famous visit to Trithemius of Spondheim at the monastery of St. James at Würzburg. Over several days of intense conversation Trithemius persuaded Agrippa to produce a work which would bring together the many aspects of an ancient magic, purged of those dark superstitions which had supposedly been grafted onto a pristine stream of ideas during the middle ages⁴⁶

After this meeting, which was pivotal to the history of occultism, the ideas which Agrippa had originally developed with his secret Paris group were expanded significantly in an early version of *De occulta philosophia* sent to Trithemius. In dedicating his book to the scholarly abbot, Agrippa referred to their discussions of “chemistry, magic, and Kabbalah, and others things which as yet lie hid in secret sciences,” and the key question which they asked each other: “why magic, whereas

it was accounted by all ancient philosophers the chiefest science, and by the ancient wise men, and priests was always held in great veneration, came at last after the Catholic Church to be always odious to, and suspected by the holy Fathers...Hence it is that this name of magic, formerly honorable, is now in these days become most odious to good and honest men, and accounted a capital crime.”⁴⁷

In response to receipt of this early version of the manuscript, Trithemius replied that with “how much pleasure I received it, no mortal tongue can ever express, nor the pen of any write.” And he warned gravely: “Yet this one rule I advise you to observe, that you communicate vulgar secrets to vulgar friends, but higher and secret to higher and secret friends only.”⁴⁸ This comment was to be the inspiration for the secrecy and social structure, especially, of the Rosicrucian brotherhood to appear one hundred years later. The book circulated in manuscript until the printing of Book One in 1531. It did not appear in full until 1533.

Although Agrippa came originally to Italy for military service to the Emperor Maximilian, it is unclear what he did in that country. He claimed grandly to have been knighted in battle, and indeed may have been used for some diplomatic service, but probably spent most of his time studying and teaching.⁴⁹

In Italy he knew Paolo Ricci, a converted Jew who had translated Gikatilla’s *Gates of Light*, and who by 1516 had been appointed physician to the Emperor Maximilian.

ian. In any event, it not surprising that Agrippa, who surrounded himself with such scholars of the occult, acquired a considerable reputation in Italy and formed a secret society.

He taught a course at Pavia on the Hermetic book *Divine Pymander*: believing that the Hermetic and Kabbalistic books which had been “newly discovered” by Ficino, and the work of which was continued by Reuchlin and by Paolo Ricci, would restore a pure and holy theology. He ascribed completely to the idea that when God gave the law to Moses he also conveyed a secret interpretation of it, never to be seen by the masses, a secret which was eventually written down as Jewish Kabbalah. Contacts with ancient Egypt supposedly explained why the same truths are found in the Hermetic documents.

Among the most important principles espoused by Agrippa was that those few who were enlightened through the Hermetic-Kabbalah regained magical powers over nature lost to Adam through original sin.⁵⁰

In 1522 Agrippa moved to Geneva where he practiced medicine (an art then considered to be very close to astrology). In Switzerland he became a leader of a relatively avant garde group of scholars interested in restoring the truths of antiquity and in addressing the corruption of the Church by which the magical abilities of the original Apostles had been lost to all who came after them.⁵¹

It was perhaps inevitable that Agrippa and his group should be viewed as precursors of the Reformation

movement which took place under John Calvin in Geneva.

Calvin was a Frenchman who belonged to a secret assembly of Protestants in France, and who fled to Switzerland when Francis I began to burn heretics at the stake. By the late 1530's Calvin's grip on the religious politics of Switzerland was absolute. No deviation from the Reformation was permitted in Switzerland. Priests who said mass in secret were imprisoned and Councillors who refused to attend Protestant services were expelled from the city. Calvin's iron-handed approach made Geneva a Protestant fortress for hundreds of years.⁵²

Certainly, in the 1520's, Agrippa and his friends followed the career of Martin Luther very closely, and with considerable sympathy. In fact, those of Agrippa's group who survived into the 1530's became champions of the Reformation.

Nevertheless, and especially because the relationship between Agrippa and the Reformation movement has been so often cited, it must be understood that Agrippa and his Swiss group never thought of themselves as precursors of Luther, of Calvin, or of any reform movement,⁵³ and that the Protestant Reformation is only a footnote to the early Western occultism.

Agrippa, who had struggled for years to attain the financial support of a royal court, was very encouraged to receive an appointment by Francis I, presumably as a physician and as an astrological predictor of political events.

But soon, in France, Agrippa's work fell into disfavor, and he became seriously depressed and bitter. He called the environment of Francis I "the court from hell." This center of the French Renaissance was, at very least, a minefield of extraordinary personalities, ideas, and byzantine politics.

Agrippa's downfall came as he refused the Queen Mother's request for an astrological prediction for her son the King, and as Agrippa informed his friends that the Queen could put him to better use than for "astrological superstition." Nevertheless, Agrippa made the very serious mistake of letting it be known that the stars predicted the death of Francis I in six months. During this period prediction of a King's death was not tolerated and was in England even considered treasonous. The reason was that astrological predictions were often used for propaganda purposes by government.⁵⁴

Of course, Agrippa's reputation as a religious radical could not have endeared him to a court which was so decisively opposed to Protestant reform. He did attempt to regain favor by attempting to interest Francis I in a treatise about war machines, but nothing came of this. For the rest of his life Agrippa expressed hostility toward the French Court.

After the French disaster, Agrippa fared no less well in the Low Countries where, although initially welcomed, his works came to be considered not merely controversial but actually impious. For some unknown reason he returned to France where Francis I had him arrested

for writing contemptuous statements about himself and about the king's by then dead mother. Mercifully, some of Agrippa's friends secured his release, but the writer died a few months afterwards.⁵⁵

Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*

From the earliest tentative version to this book's ultimate publication, the text was being revised and developed by Agrippa. But, although *De occulta philosophia* is primarily the work of Agrippa, evidence suggests that it emerged from collaboration with Christian Kabbalists who believed in its principles but who did not wish to be identified as such. Moreover, it appears that Agrippa's work had the confidential approval of many who would not like it to be generally known because of the then bad reputation of magic. To be a Christian Kabbalist was to follow a high philosophical road, one which opposed the Jews on their own territory. But magic was another thing entirely.

But *De occulta* made an indelible mark, and the biographer Charles Nauert succinctly states that it "... became and long remained the most comprehensive, the most widely used and respected of all books on the magical arts. What really makes Agrippa important in this history of Renaissance occultism is that he represents the conjunction of the older medieval traditions with the new magical sources added by Renaissance scholarship. [*De occulta*]...represents the decisive moment—and

the foredoomed failure—of the Renaissance attempt to purge the older magic of its demonic, unorthodox, and fatalistic character by the introduction of a broader, more thoroughly Neoplatonic philosophical outlook.”⁵⁶

Agrippa’s ideas about the effects of the magus on reality are in contrast to many of the philosophies, such as that of Ficino, which influenced him. Ficino, and in fact, most of the early Hebrew Kabbalists, were concerned not with any magical changes in the world, but in true knowledge of God. Thus, with Agrippa comes a distinction between the *mystic*, who seeks knowledge on a path of return to God, and the *magus*, who uses this same knowledge for magical purposes. The mystic is unconcerned with this world; the magus is a master of power who could make things happen in the here and now.⁵⁷

It is not until the last chapter of *Book One* that Agrippa begins to explore Kabbalist materials and in which he asserts that certain original and “natural” words of power were given in Hebrew and in which he calls the twenty-two letters “the foundation of the world.” At the same time he establishes correspondences of these letters between Greek letters, Latin letters, astrological signs, and the signs of Chiromancy. Nevertheless he explains that as all wise men know “the Hebrew letters are the most efficacious of all, because they have the greatest similitude with celestials, and the world.” Moreover, and depending upon Reuchlin, he asserts that “if there be any original, whose words have a natural signification,

it is manifest that this is the Hebrew.”⁵⁸

The Second Book of Occult Philosophy presents a series of charts showing the significance of numbers one through twelve: The number one shows all that is singular such as Yod, the World Soul, the Heart and the Philosopher’s Stone. The number twelve charts the twelve months, the twelve apostles, the twelve signs of the zodiac and many arbitrary categories added up to twelve.

Logically, key attributes of the Tree of Life are given with the number ten. Agrippa includes Sephirot, God Names, Archangels, related animals, and counterparts in the infernal world. Later chapters present a good overview of Kabbalist principles, including the scriptural derivation of the Seventy Two Names, the use of numbers, and chart upon chart of combinations of Hebrew letters and names.

Agrippa wrote that he did not have a very good grasp of either Hebrew or Greek and that he wished he had time to study these languages adequately.⁵⁹ And insofar as Agrippa could not refer to the original Kabbalist sources in Hebrew, but was dependent the works of Reuchlin and others, he is a second generation Christian Kabbalist. Although many in his time, such as Ricci, retained a point of reference in Jewish mysticism, Agrippa’s perverts the sacred Hebrew God Names and Angelic Names into practices which have little to do with the original intentions of the Hebrew mystics. His temperament, as opposed to the Jewish converts who espoused Christian

Kabbalah, was entirely Latin. In his compendium of magical philosophy the elements of Hebrew Kabbalah are grafted onto a kind of Christian Hermeticism rooted in the natural magic of Ficino.

De occulta philosophia must be read with critical attention because it is filled with cautious hints about the practical application of the principles in question.

In many respects the key to Agrippa's synthesis of ideas is a reader's continual asking of the question "How are these ideas about correspondences and how are the God Names actually used? What are the component parts of the rituals to which he cautiously alludes?"

In *Book Two* Agrippa begins to provide answers and makes it very clear that there are some secret practices, revealed to a select few, by which the materials of his book are actually brought into play. His mention, for example of "some images" is certainly to visions produced by what Carl Jung called "active imagination," and by what some modern occultists call "rising on the planes." Agrippa says, essentially, that the readers are going to have to find out for themselves how to use such images, and cautions that "such images work nothing, unless they be so vivified that either a natural, or celestial, or heroical, or animastical, or demonical, or angelical virtue be in them, or assistant to them."⁶⁰ In other words, the exact process is a secret, but it can generally be known that in order to make magic, images are called up and something is invoked. Increasingly at this time, following Reuchlin, the "words of power" were Hebrew names

of God and of Angels.

Chapter III of *Book Three* makes it clear that Agrippa had a secret society into which initiates were taken. He said that the process of religion “is perfected by certain religious ceremonies, expiations, consecrations and holy rites proceeding from him whose spirit the public religion hath consecrated.”⁶¹ The “public religion” of the Catholic Church was essential prelude to secret ceremonies which were supposedly “revivals” of the more ancient and pure religion sought by Agrippa. There can be no doubt that the Tree of Life and the Kabbalistic Names of Power referred to very casually in the first two books, were essential in these secret rituals. Thus some of the most secret aspects of Jewish mysticism, kept from public view for centuries, were incorporated into a Christian framework.

In Chapter 10 of *Book Three* Agrippa develops the complete system of the Tree of Life, its Sephirot and its God Names, as is accepted even in the present day by practicing Christian Kabbalists. And, in the following chapter, he explains the power and virtues of the Hebrew Divine Names, describing them as “ancient and barbaric” and stating absolutely that “we may not for any reason change them.”⁶² Here he cites the authority of Plato, of Zoroaster and of Origen on the importance of such names, which are the essence of practical magic. Of these Divine Names he says:

“Therefore the creatures above fear them, those below tremble at them, the angels reverence, the devils

are affrightened, every creature doth honor and every religion adore them; the religious observation whereof, and devout invocation with fear and trembling, doth yield us great virtue, and even defies the union, and gives a power to work wonderful things above nature.”⁶³

And Agrippa hints at the way in which these Divine Names are used, referring to the magician “who sings forth sacred words,”⁶⁴ a reference to the way in which such “vibrated” words of power, a sort of deep and full sound much like a musical note, are used. This is one of the consistencies between the practices of some Hebrew Kabbalists and the Christian Kabbalist magicians. The practical requirement of either system involves the vibration of these Hebrew words together with visualization. Rituals, including prayers and entreaties of one sort or another, tie together these words which are believed to do the real work

On the other hand, as will be discussed, some rabbis taught that any exercise of practical Kabbalah, and its use of God Names, was completely forbidden.

A Rebirth of Jewish Mysticism

While many Jews were escaping Spain into Italy and other Western countries, and were accused of “selling out” by teaching Kabbalah and the Hebrew language to Christians, other Spanish Jews were migrating toward the East and were establishing a new center of Jewish

Kabbalist activity. Perhaps ironically, expatriate Spanish mystics and scholars created the greatest center of Kabbalist learning at Safed, in the Galilee area where Jesus, the founder of Christianity, had taught most actively.

Galilee had a long and difficult development, having been the place of some of the most important events in early Jewish history. At one point it belonged to the Assyrian empire, which needed it for agricultural revenue.

Eventually Galilee became Jewish territory and, under pressure from Egyptian and Roman invaders, its people became very nationalistic and protective of their cultural identity. And as this national spirit developed, Galilee became as intense a center of Jewish life as was Jerusalem.⁶⁵ It was, therefore, not so surprising that Safed should become a key center of Jewish mysticism.

There was, in sixteenth century Safed, an attempt to revive the atmosphere of the earlier period in which the Zohar originally developed. In this, and perhaps most important, was the fact that Safed was truly believed to be the place of origin of the Zohar, and the holy place of the tomb of its supposed fourth century C.E. author, Simeon ben Yohai.⁶⁶

In this period two great mystics appeared whose work changed the face of studies in the Kabbalah. They were Moses Cordovero and, his follower, who has come to be known as the greatest interpreter of the Zohar, Isaac Luria.

Their activity was geographically and philosophically

removed from the developments in Christian Kabbalah concurrently going on in the Western countries. And ideas emanating from Safed were of a totally different scheme and pattern of complexity than anything known to Christian Kabbalah. Cordoverian and Lurianic Kabbalah were, in many respects, an absolute reclaiming of Jewish mysticism by Jews.

The Safed school was a tacit declaration of the sanctity of Jewish mysticism as Jewish Kabbalah became cloaked in a secrecy heretofore unknown, which has been carried down into the present day by Hasidics.⁶⁷ Here one must underscore that the only reason these ideas were ever made accessible to Christians was that some brilliant Jewish scholars, driven from Spain, entered a survival mode by teaching the Hebrew language and the tenets of Jewish Kabbalism to Christian scholars who were eager to use these materials in their battle against Judaism.

However it may have come about, it was in the sixteenth century that Jewish and Christian Kabbalah really began to crystallize as separate systems with very different points of view. Christian Kabbalah headed toward magic and what we know as the “occult,” while Jewish mystics developed meditative practices such as the visualization and vocalization of Hebrew letters. Many of the Jewish laws of behavior linked to mystical practice, such as, for example, the cutting of fingernails in honor of the Sabbath,⁶⁸ or the practice of weeping as a means of obtaining revelation⁶⁹ would have seemed peculiar if not obsessive-compulsive to those who were not a part of Jewish mystical experience.

Moses Cordovero

Joseph ben Jacob Cordovero, whose family immigrated to Safed from the town of Cordovero to escape the Spanish Inquisition, was born in 1522. He was one of the greatest of Kabbalistic mystics and a follower of the principles of the Zohar, who set the stage for modern Kabbalist thought. Very little is known about him, but on his death in 1570, he left behind a wife and an eight year old son, Gedaliah, who was later responsible for printing some of his father's work.⁷⁰

It is known also that at the age of twenty, Cordovero was receiving training in mystical Kabbalah from his wife's brother, Solomon Alkabetz, and that at the age of twenty-seven he finished his first brilliantly systematic work on the Kabbalah, *Pardes Rimmonim*. Ten years later he issued another book including a lengthy commentary on the Zohar. In perhaps as many of thirty books (most of which have been lost), he produced, what Scholem called a "summary and a development of the different trends in Kabbalah up to his time."⁷¹ Cordovero, who based his theology on the Zohar, pulled together a great many threads, and clarified some waters that had been muddy

Perhaps the greatest influence on Cordovero was the meditative technique of Abulafia, which he taught to his students. And although he was a powerful advocate

of the Zohar, he considered the ecstatic Abulafian type of Kabbalah, which visualized colors and letters, to be superior to that of what has been called the “theosophical-theurgical” vision of the Zohar.⁷² It is with this thought in mind that one approaches Luria, who referred to Cordovero as his master and teacher,⁷³ and who might well be described as the father of modern Jewish mysticism.

Cordovero created a mystic brotherhood governed by strong rules or austerity and piety to purify them for engaging in Kabbalistic studies. His followers were admonished to avoid anger and hostility, to speak only the truth, never to speak evil of anyone and to avoid all excesses. A small amount of wine was acceptable in the evenings, if it was appropriately diluted. With one another brothers would speak only Hebrew.⁷⁴

As with many key figures in the history of religious philosophy, Cordovero was the subject of a romantic mythology. One story asserted that he was the reincarnation of Eliazar, the servant of Abraham, and that at his death a pillar of fire appeared in front of his bier, an event supposedly witnessed by Isaac Luria.⁷⁵ The story, however apocryphal, tends to underscore the belief of the Kabbalist system in the “transmigration of souls.” Indeed, few people are aware that the principle of reincarnation is at the very heart of Jewish mysticism.

One particular problem of the reincarnation of souls brought Cordovero into inner conflict. The Zohar stated unequivocally that all souls had been created by the time

of the creation of the world. It describes Adam as being shown all of the souls that were to enter the world. This was certainly what a Psychology I class would describe as “cognitive dissonance.” But Cordovero came to an eloquent resolution of the problem. He reasoned that Adam was shown the 600,000 souls which came out of bondage from Egypt, and that these were the “root souls” of Israel. The remaining souls were destined to enter the world through divine intercourse.⁷⁶ This is a good example of the differences in thought processes between Jewish Kabbalah and its offshoot, Christian Kabbalah. The “root souls of Israel” were of absolutely no interest to the Christians, but a very supportive idea to Jews who had been brutally suppressed and who needed to underscore their cultural and racial identity.

Christian Kabbalah always remained more “magical” than mystical because it had at base and as a sort of perfect example, the magical effect of the transubstantiation in the Eucharist.

One of the more interesting of Cordovero’s practices was the visiting of the graves of supposed ancient Kabbalists around Safed. Often he and his followers, would make excursions to grave sites where they would meditate in a search for truth and spiritual power, and Cordovero kept very careful notes of the discussions which resulted from these mystical adventures.

The practices of Cordovero and his group, were definitely known to many sixteenth century European Jews, a few of whom, it may be assumed, explained these

principles to Christians.

Cordovero's fame beyond Safed was such that on his death, one famous Italian Talmudist and Kabbalist offered to buy all of his papers from his widow.⁷⁷ And it is also significant that Cordovero was later to be an important influence on the Dutch Jewish philosopher Spinoza (1632-1677) who was profoundly moved by Cordovero's assertion that God is in all.

Isaac Luria

Unquestionably, the legendary sixteenth century mystic Isaac Luria (1534-1572), was the greatest figure in the history of Kabbalistic studies. His interpretations of the Zohar and his program of moral behavior formed the core doctrines of Kabbalist studies for all who came after him. It was Jewish Kabbalists in late fifteenth century Italy who added to the luster of his mythology by calling him "The Lion,"⁷⁸ (Ari) a title of profound respect by which he is often referred. Luria was an Ashkenazic Jew (meaning that his origins were in Germany or perhaps Poland, as opposed to the Sephardics, who were from Spain⁷⁹). It is known that his father died when he was a child and that his mother took the boy to live with her wealthy tax-farmer brother in Egypt.

There is a great deal of mystery attached to Luria's years in Egypt, where he began his esoteric studies while carrying on a trade in pepper and in grain. As the rather romantic story goes, for seven years he withdrew to an island of the Nile, near Cairo, which was owned by his uncle. There he studied the Zohar and the works of earlier Kabbalists, especially Cordovero, and is said to have been an outstanding student of rabbinical literature and of the law. So it is perhaps not surprising that in 1569, having by then married his uncle's daughter, he moved to Safed with the intention of becoming Cordovero's student.⁸⁰

In Safed Luria did, indeed, study with Cordovero for a short time. He also became close to another of Cordovero's followers, Hayyim Vital, who was eventually Luria's own student. In fact, it is said that upon meeting, Luria announced to Vital that the primary reason that he had immigrated to Safed was to become Vital's teacher⁸¹ and that this was one of the most important tasks of his life. Ultimately it was Vital who transcribed Luria's teachings into a dozen large volumes.

A magical history developed about Luria. For example, it was asserted by a rabbi in seventeenth century Prague that Luria had revealed to his disciples that he was the reincarnation of Simeon ben Yohai (for whom authorship of the Zohar was incorrectly claimed), and that his followers were all reincarnations of Yohai's disciples.⁸² Among the more colorful of Luria's practices was that of *metoposcopy*, a form of divination well-known

in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which included the reading of lines on the palm and the shapes of faces, that was associated with astrology. It is said that, using a variation of this system, Luria was able to see Hebrew letters which appeared on a person's forehead. They could be many or single; they could appear in different colors; they could be big or little; they could be right side up or upside down.⁸³ Through this method, Luria supposedly diagnosed the condition of a person's soul and its moral status. It was also said that Luria could command souls, whether living, dead, or yet to be, to appear before him, and to tell him about the future and about secret mysteries.⁸⁴ Description of such activities might lead to the assumption that Luria was a "magician," but he was not in the occult Western sense of the word. And this is one point at which Jewish Kabbalah and the emerging occult movement separate.

Whereas the West was developing a magical system of the sort formulated in Barrett's profoundly influential eighteenth century book, *The Magus*, there was a tacit prohibition against "practical Kabbalah" in all later Jewish Kabbalist texts. The reason given was that practical Kabbalah involves the use of Holy Names which later mystics are forbidden to use because they cannot adequately purify themselves as was possible in ancient times.⁸⁵ The Western occult, on the other hand, of whom Agrippa was the leading early figure, has had no qualms whatsoever about using these same Hebrew God names in operations intended to do everything from vanquish

ing an enemy to producing great wealth.

In this regard it is observed that magical texts attributed to Jewish authors, such as *The Book of Abraham the Mage*, or *The Key of Solomon the King* (both of questionable antiquity) have been espoused largely by quasi-magicians in the Christian Kabbalist tradition. There is a considerable difference between the use of Hebrew God Names in a meditative system of self-development, and for purposes of changing the nature of reality. In any event, Luria is responsible for the clear separation of methodology and of intent between the Jewish Kabbalist and the emerging Western occultist.

The essence of his system, which firmly moved Jewish Kabbalah into the realm of the theoretical, was his stress on what he called “unifications” (*Yichudim*). After appropriate purifications, the mind is quieted and emptied, and Hebrew letters are seen as huge solid bodies. Then two or more of these letters are unified. This is perhaps the most complicated meditative system ever invented, allowing as it does, for an almost infinite variety of combinations and permutations of letters which are not approached as symbolic but, rather, are inscrutably considered to be the forces themselves. Of this type of meditation Aryeh Kaplan, author of the first serious work comparing Jewish Kabbalist meditative techniques says: “Yehudim can produce very high meditative states and channel powerful currents of spiritual energy. If improperly used they can produce effects that are both traumatic and dangerous. Even someone so spiritually

advanced as Rabbi Chaim Vital was often overwhelmed by these experiences.”⁸⁶

The Spread of Lurianic Kabbalah

Isaac Luria, who considered himself to be an innovator and a “chosen one” kept his system very secret, and did not permit its dissemination. Moreover, he acknowledged that his approach to Kabbalah was relatively amorphous, and did not lend itself to systematization. So Luria, who died after only two short years in Safed, might have been distressed to see his work spread out widely through the work of his disciple Hayyim Vital.

After 1590 Lurianic Kabbalah in several versions was propagated in Italy and in other European countries as well as in North Africa and in Turkey.⁸⁷

Of course, Luria’s work was only of use to, and understood by, a very small elite. Few Europeans studied this extraordinarily complex Jewish system that was then developing in parallel to a Western system of magic. Ultimately, however, Lurianic Kabbalah would be the basis for key principles of Hasidism.

Notes

1. See: Joseph Bloch, *Venetian Printers of Hebrew Books*, New York, 1932; D.W. Amram, *The Makers of Hebrew Books in Italy*, Philadelphia, 1909. The great publishers included Bomberg and Sonscino.

2. Mark U. Edwards, Jr., "Against the Jews," *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict*, New York, 1991, 348. Hatred of Jews became especially strong in the period of the Crusades. Many thought that before they marched to destroy the Infidel in the Holy Lands, they should remove the enemy in their own midst. Thus, despite the protest of local bishops and of the Pope in Rome, crusaders began their journey with the killing of thousands of Jews in the Rhineland and along the route of the march.

3. Edwards, 348, 350.

4. Edwards, 348.

5. Blau, 74.

6. Secret 87.

7. Interestingly enough, there was a certain degree of infighting among those who claimed to be Kabbalists. Ricci had to defend himself against the charge of a priest named Stephanus, that he was not a true Kabbalist "because he gives to this doctrine a meaning other than that of Pico della Mirandola." Secret , 89

8. Mention should be made here of Pistorius and of his *Artis cabalisticæ scriptores*, published in Basel, 1587. This was a major anthology of Christian Kabbalist writers of which half is devoted to Ricci. He republished in its entirety Ricci's lengthy *Dialogue*, as well as the complete *De coelesti agricultura* in four books, along with a few smaller tracts, including an abridged translation of Gikatilla's *Gates of Light*—a work well-known to Reuchlin.

9. Blau, 66.

10. Secret, 89. Among the earliest of those developing the Trinitarian argument was Augustinus Ricius (no relation to Paul, although Galatin thought they they were brothers) who in a work of 1521, *De incertitudine scientiarum*, said that the existence of

God in three forms is affirmed by the three upper Sephirot in the Tree of Life. He also claimed that the Hebrews were the inventors of astronomy.

11. Secret, 92.

12. It is of some significance that Ricci stresses the question of original sin which, since the time of Augustine was understood to be a stain upon mankind, from individual birth, which could only be removed by Christ. Thus the Church assumed special importance, because only through it could humanity be saved. And although Ricci expands this principle with the Tree of Life, the core idea of Christ bringing forgiveness for original sin remains. In this regard, as has been indicated, Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo made the absurd claim that Augustine was himself familiar with the secrets of the Kabbalah.

13. Blau, 74.

14. Secret 99-101.

15. Secret 102.

16. Secret, 104.

17. Secret, 107.

18. Secret, 107-8

19. Perhaps the major contribution of Cardinal Egidio was his correlating ideas from a rapidly growing literature. He and the scholars in his circle provided something of a focal point for a Christian Kabbalist movement then believed to hold a new key to the mysteries of Christianity. Frances A. Yeats, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, London, 1979, 30.

20. Secret, 113.

21. Secret, 114.

22. Yeats, *Occult Philosophy*, 29ff.

23. Rudolph Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, New York, 1962, 102. Giorgio was commissioned by the Doge of Venice to offer suggestions on the proportions of a new church designed by Jacopo Sanvovino, S. Francesco della Vigna at Venice, to be attached to the monastery in which Giorgio lived.

24. Wittkower, 16. This idea of the universal harmony between

the microcosm and the macrocosm was nothing new and had been held throughout the middle ages. It was a prominent feature of the musical theory of Boethius which was fully developed during the Renaissance. Giorgio attached Kabbalistic complexities to the basic analogy of *musica mundana, humana and instrumentalis*. See Peiter J. French, *John Dee: the World of an Elizabethan Magus*, London, 1972, 58, 139.

25. Yeats, *Occult Philosophy*, 32.

26. Secret, 127.

27. This had also been done by Galatin.

28. Charles G. Nauert, Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*, 130.

29. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 199.

30. Yeats, *Occult Philosophy*, 36. Yeats suggests that the Giorgian type of Christian Kabbalah may be a source of Rosicrucianism.

31. Yeats, *Occult Philosophy*, 31.

32. Secret, 139, note 18.

33. The book was written by François Tissard, who taught Greek and who had written a grammar of that language. Secret, 151.

34. During his rule (1515-1547) Francis I was in almost continuous war with Charles V., concerning territorial rights in Milan and elsewhere. Francis and Charles were at war 1521-1526, 1527-1529, 1536-1538, and 1542-1544.

35. Secret, 153-156.

36. D.P Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella*, Notre Dame, 1975, 86-89. There is a controversy about the real subject of the *Stenographia* about which Walker gives an opinion. "I believe," he writes, that Trithemius' *Stenographia* is partly a treatise on cryptography in which the methods are disguised as demonic magic, and partly a treatise on demonic magic."

37. Charles G. Nauert, Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*, Urbana, 1965, 9.

38. Nauert, 10.

39. Nauert, 11. In the late nineteenth century MacGregor

Mathers probably saw himself as following in the footsteps of Agrippa. As Agrippa was a model for Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, Mathers was the model for the magician in Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni*.

40. Nauert, 118. Latin was the language of scholars at the time.

41. Nauert, 17-19.

42. Nauert, 23.

43. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 100. His reference is to the German Hasidics.

44. Reuchlin is certainly the primary authority for Agrippa's assertion of the importance of Hebrew as the "magical language."

45. Nauert 28, original in *Expostulatio*, Opera II, 509.

46. Nauert, 30-32. The "dark superstitions" in question were certainly a reference to the *Picatrix*, a source for both Trithemius and Agrippa which had been of great interest to Albertus Magnus.

47. Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, St. Paul 1995, liii-lvii.

48. Agrippa, *Three Books*, lvii.

49. Nauert, 38,42.

50. Nauert, 45-47.

51. Nauert, 73.

52. Wilhelm Oechsli, *History of Switzerland*, Cambridge 1922, 152-54.

53. Nauert, 74.

54. Nauert, 95. Francis I lived another 20 years after Agrippa's prediction of his death.

55. Nauert, 114.

56. Nauert, 229.

57. This is not really a new distinction. It is an amplification of the monastic distinction between *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa*. Agrippa would have given his *De occulta philosophia* the title *De magia* were it not for the bad reputation of magic in his time. Nauert, 261.

58. Agrippa, *Three Books*, Book One, Chapter LXXIV, 224.

59. Nauert, 199.

60. Agrippa, *Three Books*, Book Two, Chapter L, 404.

61. Agrippa, *Three Books*, Book Three, Chapter III, 448.

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62. Agrippa *Three Books*, Chapter 11, 475
63. Agrippa, *Three Books*, Book Three, Chapter XI, 475
64. Agrippa, *Three Books*, Book Three, Chapter XXXII, 566.
65. James Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, "Galilee," New York, 1963, 314.
66. Arthur Green, "The Zohar: Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Spain," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, "Laurence Fine, ed., 294.
67. The orders for strict secrecy, particularly, in the school of Luria, was the result both of the printing of the Zohar, and the dissemination of the Kabbalah to Christians. See: Idel, *Kabbalah, New Perspectives*, 257/
68. Elliot K. Ginsberg, "Mystical Techniques," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, New York 1995.
69. In his article "Mystical Techniques" in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, New York, 1995, 439-454, Moshe Idel carefully traces the use of weeping to evoke spiritual experience which is a practice that has been used for more than two thousand years by Jewish mystics. It might be mentioned parenthetically that in a Christian context, and although it is not cited as a specific technique evocative of inner experience, the diaries of Ignatius Loyola attest to his frequent and intense weeping as a result of meditative practice. Loyola was contemporary with Cordovero and Luria. See *Ignatius Loyola, Powers of Imagining*, New York, 1986, passim.
70. Moses Cordovero, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, New York 1974, trans. Louis Jacobs, Introduction, 9.
- 71.
- Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem, 1974, 401.
72. Moshe Idel, "Mystical Techniques," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, New York, 1995, 467.
73. Cordovero, *Palm Tree of Deborah*, 12.
74. Moses Cordovero, *Palm Tree of Deborah*, Introduction, 11.
75. Cordovero, *Palm Tree of Deborah*, Introduction, 14.
76. Isaiah Tishby, "The Doctrine of Man in the Zohar," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*.
77. Cordovero, *Palm Tree of Deborah*, 14.

78. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 420.

79. The Ashkenazic Jews are the Jews of France, Germany and Eastern Europe. The word “Ashkenazic” is derived from the Hebrew word for Germany. The Sephardic Jews are from Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East. The word “Sephardic” is derived from the Hebrew word for Spain.

80. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 421.

81. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, New York 1982, 204.

82. Kaplan, 208.

83.

Laurence Fine, “The Art of Metoposcopy,” *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, 317, 321.

84. Fine, 317.

85. Kaplan, 231.

86. Kaplan, 219.

87. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 425-6.

III

OCCULTISM ESTABLISHED

The Inquisition

At this point it is necessary to backtrack a few centuries to appreciate the unbridled wrath that began to be focused against the emerging Kabbalah-based occultism and its magicians.

In 1215 a Church Council which took place at the Lateran (known as the “Fourth Lateran Council”) was primarily dedicated to a reform of the Church which Pope Innocent III hoped would help to shift power from the kings and secular authorities to the Church. The real problem was that the Church was losing control over the laity because of people’s absolute disgust with the behavior of the clergy. So Innocent stated that he intended this

Council, among other things: “to eradicate vices and to plant virtues, to correct faults and to reform morals, to remove heretics and to strengthen faith.”¹ The language of the Council was potent. It decreed that:

“We excommunicate and anathematize every heresy raising itself up against this holy and catholic faith... We condemn all heretics, whatever names they may go under...Let those condemned be handed over to the secular authorities present, or to their bailiffs, for due punishment.”²

Being “handed over to civil authority” then became a much feared euphemism for execution in horrible ways. But it was never the intention of the Church to promote a wholesale bloodbath and torture of so-called heretics.

In the second quarter of the century the attack on heresies was directed by a new ecclesiastical tribunal, the *Inquisition*, and the search for heretics was entrusted by the Pope to Dominicans and to Franciscans who set up an elaborate order for detecting and trying supposed heretics.

Jews were main targets, and by the fourteenth century the Inquisition was granted special jurisdiction over them. During a period of particular antisemitism having to do with widespread famine and with the black death, Jews were accused of sorcery, of poisoning wells, of trying to destroy Christian society and, not incidentally, of trying to bring Jews converted to Christianity back into the Jewish fold. Of course, beyond a generalized fear of Jewish treachery, there were undoubtedly those

who had the sincere motive of “saving a soul,” as a Jew was not infrequently dragged writhing and kicking to a baptismal font, and turned into a Christian.³

There were Kafkaesque secret charges and long interrogations with the aim of bringing the wanderer back to the true path. Most of the time the accused would quickly recant and be given some form of penance. But in unusual cases, where the heretic refused to recant, the person was handed over the secular authority and summarily executed..

It was on order of the Catholic Kings of Spain that the Inquisition assumed proportions so dark and sinister that even today the words “Spanish Inquisition” strike a note of fear. The worst of all was the *auto-da-fé*, a mass burning at the stake, lasting for hours, which served the purpose of terrible entertainment and also of warning to those who did not cooperate with the masters of the Inquisition

Three hundred years after Innocent III had attempted to cleanse the Church, with little success, the Spanish kings began to use the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council as a means to bring about religious unity in their country, and to combat the hated Jews. So they declared that all Jews would either be baptized or would be expelled from Spain. The Ordinance of 1492 told Jews that they had four months to convert or to leave the country.⁴

It is not certain how many Jews actually did convert, but it was certainly a majority.⁵ And this brought about

another perhaps unanticipated problem: Jews who were only pretending to follow the Catholic faith, and who secretly practiced Judaism. They were known as “Judaizers,” and were not easily distinguished within the community of newly converted Christians, the *Marraños*.

In fact, there was widespread distrust and jealousy of all converted Jews, many of whom, as Christians, were now able to assume great political power, and who even numbered bishops among their ranks. And so the Catholic kings at Castille established a special Tribunal of the Inquisition against heretics (especially Judaizers), as had existed in Aragon since the 13th century. But there was a significant difference in that in Aragon the Inquisition was under control of the Church, whereas in Castille it was controlled by the kings independent of the bishops. This arrangement was soon generally accepted in the Catholic world, and the Inquisition was presided over by a Grand Inquisitor at first appointed by the King, and then by the Pope.⁶

A hundred years later, the search for heretics combined with the fight against the Protestant movement, as well as the backlash against Renaissance Humanism and free thought. So-called “sorcerers and magicians” were routinely burned at the stake in the seventeenth century for expressing free-thinking philosophies that were perfectly acceptable in the sixteenth. Thus, although Christian Kabbalah was a widespread and accepted movement within the Catholic world, it was in Protestant countries

that the new occultism gained its footing.

The anti-magic power of the Catholic Inquisition was nowhere expressed with greater fury than in the case of Giordano Bruno, one of history's great advocates of the Egyptian religion. But before considering his contributions, it is necessary to see how it happened that a romantic notion of Egypt and its magic has intrigued other societies for three thousand years, and how, in concert with Hebrew mysticism, erroneous ideas about Egyptian magic have played such a significant part in the development of Western occultism.

The Hold of Egyptian Magic on The West

In the third century C.E., the early Christian father Arnobius expressed dismay and hostility toward those whom he claimed had leveled "slanderous and childish charges" that Jesus was a sorcerer who had stolen the secrets of his magical arts from the Egyptians.⁷ The idea is, of course, pure fantasy but typical of the "fairy tale" overview of Egyptian culture which has existed for more than two thousand years.

Indeed, romantic and often highly creative ideas about ancient Egyptian magicians permeate modern occultism. Today, despite the sober scientific and historical model provided by Egyptology, many insist on applying the same imaginative overview to Egyptian society as did the ancient Greeks, who were intrigued and inspired, but

were badly informed.

It is with the Greeks that the incorporation of Egyptian magic into the Western consciousness began. In Egypt the Greeks discovered a sophisticated, age-old, civilization that deeply challenged their insular sense of cultural superiority. Moreover, this advanced Egyptian society was at odds with their idea of all foreign societies as inherently primitive.⁸ Thus many Greeks, including Plato himself, traveled to Egypt and returned with some profoundly influential ideas about science, art, and religion.

Nothing so attracted the Greeks, and indeed all who followed, as did the Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were a complete mystery. The very word “hieroglyph,” in fact, comes from the Greek *hieroglyphikà grámatta*, meaning “holy letters,” reflecting the belief that these symbols were used only for religious purposes, which was not entirely true.⁹

As the Egyptologist Erik Iverson explains: “None of the classical writers knew what they were writing about as far as hieroglyphics were concerned; none of the Greek writers had any first hand knowledge of the hiero-glyphs...their reports on writing of the Egyptians were based on more or less superficial hearsay evidence.”¹⁰ And he describes the later hieroglyphic theories of the Renaissance as “illusions based on Neoplatonic speculations and an entirely erroneous conception of the script.”¹¹ The same was true for all of those involved in the development of Western occultism. No one, from

Reuchlin to John Dee, knew what these figures really meant, and all things Egyptian were viewed as dark secrets and mysteries.

Today we understand hieroglyphics as an important part of the history of writing, but until their decipherment in the nineteenth century¹² they were thought to be ideograms, i.e., magical pictures. Some hieroglyphs are actual letters, but many represent words.¹³

Two thousand years after the Greeks, the interest in Egyptian religion which they initiated was picked up by Renaissance neoclassicists. Thus, Italian Humanists added another layer of romantic luster to the mystique surrounding Egypt, and handed their creative guesswork on to future generations.

Renaissance Neo-Platonists, such as Marsilio Ficino, swayed by the Greeks' admiration for the Egyptians, came to the conclusion that all mystical knowledge and truth (prior, of course, to the Christian mysteries) was known to these ancients. And the belief that the Egyptians held the secrets of the universe was certainly amplified by their amazing system of apparently religious picture symbols.

From the 15th century on there was a new conception of ancient Egypt and its relationship to Western culture of which Ficino was in the forefront. It was he who claimed that Hermes Trismegistus was an ancient Egyptian adept—perhaps even a contemporary of Moses. And, although the *Hermetica* were eventually discredited and discovered not to be ancient at all, the supposedly

Egyptian Hermes was, for hundreds of years, viewed as the very source of the greatest of ancient philosophers.¹⁴ Renaissance art¹⁵, music, and ideas were based on a classicism which, it was believed, was ultimately rooted in ancient Egypt.

The seventeenth century extended the Egyptian idiom, and the belief that hieroglyphs were a kind of magical shorthand. A discursis on Egyptian symbolism was becoming an integral part of any occult program and thus the Rosicrucian alchemist Michael Maier (d.1622) devoted an entire volume of his work to hieroglyphic problems. The synthesis of ideas was brought to a fine art in this period as Egyptian symbolism, Hermeticism (supposedly Egyptian), Greek classicism, and Hebrew Kab-balah were fused together for all time in the consciousness of would-be modern magicians.

The Eighteenth century was the age of archaeology, focused by the excavations at Pompeii, a complete Roman city buried with the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 C.E. The effect of the century's perception of new spiritual closeness to the ancient world cannot be overstated. There was vast interest in Egyptian architecture and decoration, and as ancient cultures assumed great popular significance, the collection of Egyptian and other antiquities became a passion.

But the story of this wave of interest in all things Egyptian and its relationship to the development of the occult would not be complete without mention of the colorfully infamous Count Cagliostro (1743-95). One of the greatest confidence men in the history of Western

occultism, he specialized in magic powders, in seances, and in promoting himself as the most powerful of all magicians. Scores of people believed his every word.

Claiming that a spirit whom he called the “Grand Copht,” had ordered him to reorganize the Masons under a new Egyptian rite, Cagliostro founded a temple in Paris and declared himself to be a high priest. He was very charismatic, and attracted money and persons of great influence (although some saw through him—such as Catherine the Great, who refused to see him when he visited Russia).

A career of remarkable charlatanry lasted until 1789 when his tricks caught up with him. He was arrested in Rome and sentenced to death for heresy. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and he died in prison.¹⁶

What is notable here is that the facility with which Cagliostro could so easily deceive had much to do with a widespread sense of awe, and certainly a willing suspension of disbelief, about anything related to the occult secrets of ancient Egypt. It is this same eighteenth-century mentality which created the fantastic idea that tarot cards were invented by ancient Egyptian priests, or that there was some original correspondence between those cards and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The significance of quasi-Egyptian ideas for the development of modern occultism was considerable. There was a remarkable intermingling of imaginary histories which gave birth to a new mystical and magical culture.

In many respects, the story of occultism is the story of how respected Greek and Egyptian ideas were inextricably merged with mystical principles of the hated Jews from the fourteenth century to the present.

Giordano Bruno and the Egyptian Gods

One of the great ironies of the assimilation of Jewish mysticism into a developing Christian occultism was the absolute contempt in which the originators of this system were held. Tremendous rational effort was expended in the effort to separate the Jews from their own mysticism by “proving” that the original Kabbalah was not Jewish at all, and that Jewish Kabbalah was merely a shallow expression of some more pure ancient mysteries.

Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake by the Inquisition, primarily for supporting the Copernican idea that the earth rotated around the sun, was one of the most antisemitic of those manipulators of Kabbalah who helped to develop Western occultism as we know it today.

Bruno wrote: “The Jews are without doubt the excrement of Egypt, and no one could ever pretend with any degree of probability that the Egyptians borrowed any principle, good or bad, from the Hebrews.”¹⁷

Bruno was born at Nola in the foothills of Vesuvius in 1548 and entered the Dominican order in 1563. But thirteen years later he was accused of heresy, and fled

from the monastery and began a life of wandering around Europe. Eventually he reached Paris, where his brilliantly seductive public lectures soon attracted King Henri III.¹⁸

Bruno was a Hermetic whose contribution was to espouse principles of Renaissance magic while abandoning the earlier simplicity and Christian references of Ficino. With Agrippa as his source, he became a master of talisman creation, and was considered an expert in magical imagery. Moreover, with the intellectual curiosity of an early psychologist, he sought to develop a technique which would control all emotions based on sexual attraction.¹⁹ His work was, in many respects a precursor to Carl Jung's principle of "active imagination."

Bruno cultivated an inner life and imaginative visions which gave power to symbols.²⁰ The same methodology of "charging talismans" is used today, and is described as "charging an object with the power which it is intended to represent."

For example, to create a Mars talisman a "magician" might carve a coin with appropriate symbols and words, and then visualize the coin in a red light while either imagining or intoning Hebrew God and Archangelic names appropriate to the planet. Bruno was one of those instrumental in combining astrological images of the planets with Hebrew "names of power."

Inner visualization was not new. It was, in fact, an essential in the Kabbalistic techniques of Abulafia and of others. But Bruno's correspondence of graphic images

and words, coupled with the power of imagination, made him a precursor of modern occult practice.

But a use of imagination was not the only principle which profoundly affected the emerging Western occult movement. It was Bruno who, more than anyone else, established Egyptian religion as the supposed and fanciful cornerstone of the occult.

He openly proclaimed the magical Egyptian religion to be superior to the Christianity, and went so far as to propose that the Christian cross was actually an Egyptian sacred sign, an idea which was, obviously, during the period of Inquisition, very challenging to the Christian establishment.

An earlier generation had made Hermeticism acceptable by incorporating its ideas into a Christian Humanist context. But Bruno could not concur in this, and boldly proclaimed a form of Hermeticism that was based entirely upon the Egyptians. He completely abandoned the earlier trinitarian interpretation of the *Hermetica*, although to him Christ remained a kind and good magician.²¹ Obviously, this was a message that the Church did not want to hear. Publicly combining his revolutionary ideas about dechristianizing Renaissance Hermetic studies with the “heretic” Copernican point of view about the universe was courting disaster. Moreover, like many who were caught up in the extreme political complexities of the Inquisition, Bruno may have been a victim of a diplomatic agreement between the Pope and Spain.²²

In any event, and despite an abrasive posture, Bruno

sincerely wished to bring about reform in the Church. “He thought,” comments Frances Yates, “that his ‘Egyptianism,’ though unchristian, could still be the basis of a reform within the Church, so also he would retain in it something of Kabbalah, of the inferior Jewish revelation and magic.”²³

Bruno knew little Hebrew, although he used the alphabet and Hebrew names in some diagrams, depending upon Agrippa for names of the Sefirot and of the complex Kabbalistic orders of angels. He knew the *Steganographia* of Trithemius, the works of Pico Della Mirandola, and possibly Reuchlin’s *De Arte Cabalistica*. He may even have known something about the Zohar. In any event, he wrote a book on Kabbalah which was published in England in 1585 and in which, in one wave, he rejects with hostility the “metaphysics” of the Kabbalist system of Sephirot, he wipes away the Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchies of the Renaissance, and he turns away from the framework of the Christian magician while asserting the primacy of Egyptian religion and philosophy.²⁴

Athanasius Kircher and His Anachronisms

Although today known primarily to students of the seventeenth century, Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) was one of the greatest scholars of his age and a man of profound influence. As a scientist of considerable genius, he was admired by Protestants and Catholics

alike. And, during the formative “Golden Age” of the Jesuits, he is described by one art historian as “undoubtedly the most famous Jesuit of the seventeenth century, in whose prolific writings virtually the whole complex of Hermeticism makes its appearance.”²⁵

Kircher is best understood in terms of the Renaissance quest for the *prisca theologia* as proposed by philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino. This meant “pristine theology,” or ancient wisdom which is the source of all true wisdom. And, of course, to the Renaissance philosopher, the key source of the *prisca theologia* was Hermes Trismegistus.²⁶

Kircher’s enormous collection of antiquities became the basis for the Museo Kircherianum at Rome. His writings filled 44 folio volumes and included an autobiography.

He was a master of many languages and of many sciences. Mathematician, biologist, physicist, archaeologist, student of Hieroglyphics, and called by many the “father of geology,”²⁷ Kircher is an essential player in what might be called the “second phase” of the absorption of Jewish mysticism into an occult movement, developing just as Christian Kabbalah was being smothered by the Counter-Reformation.

Kircher was a true Renaissance Man. Like Leonardo, he mastered all aspects of the art, literature, and science of his day. And from the standpoint of Hebrew Kabbalah it was he, more than any other person who made canonical the appropriation, and “watering down,” of Hebrew mysticism into the broader field of occult studies. He

denied to Jews not only the cultural integrity of the Kabbalah which had grown slowly out of late antique Merkabah Mysticism, and which was an important focal point of Jewish spirituality, but remarkably, as will be shown, the very exclusivity of their Hebrew language.

Two important points are a framework for considering this man's contribution. The first is that Kircher was functioning within the dangerous and anti-magic world of the Counter Reformation. Every contribution which he made to modern occultism was couched in terms of the ultimate truth of Christianity. He was, above all, a Catholic priest, answering to the power of Rome. The second point is that Kircher was one of the earliest in a long line of those who blissfully ignored clear historical evidence and insisted that the Hermetic documents were the work of an ancient Egyptian priest, and inventor of Hieroglyphics, named Hermes Trismegistus.

Kircher did, of course, feel that he was on firm ground in his rejection of Causaubon's scholarly assertion that the *Hermetica* were either fakes or from a much later period than was believed. Kircher relied on tradition, believing the church authorities who had affirmed the existence of an ancient Egyptian priest, Hermes Trismegistus. These included certain Fathers of the Church, Clement of Alexandria, Lactantius, Justin the Martyr, Augustine and Cardinal Baronius.

In any event, Kircher, however brilliant, can only be understood as an anachronistic follower of the brilliant Renaissance tradition, a man who was completely out

of step with modern developments of his time. In this regard, Kircher set the stage for generations of occultists who simply ignore historical fact and believe what they want to believe.

Kircher's philosophy is usefully compared to that of his seventeenth century English contemporary, Robert Fludd, a leading proponent of the (Protestant) Rosicrucian movement then looking forward in full swing while the backwards-looking Kircher was dealing with occultism in a way acceptable to the Jesuit powers of the Counter Reformation.

Kircher was born on May 2, 1602, on the feast of St. Athanasius,²⁸ at Geisa in Germany. His father, who had an enormous library, was a doctor of divinity and taught at a nearby Benedictine monastery. He was pivotal in forming the interests of his brilliant young son, Athanasius, who proved early to be good at languages, and who learned Hebrew from a rabbi at an early age.

Becoming Jesuit, Kircher was ordained a priest, and was called to the court of the Archbishop of Mainz. At this time Germany was a dangerous place for a Jesuit, the order being hated and priests often being physically attacked by hostile Protestants.²⁹ But Kircher was known for traveling fearlessly in his very conspicuous Jesuit cassock.

Kircher believed those classical writers who had taught that the esoteric knowledge of the Egyptians was imbedded in their hieroglyphs, and that each hieroglyph represented a specific philosophic concept. He believed that the Egyptians alone had devised a system of symbols

by which to express fundamental and absolute truths. And he believed that the true meaning of hieroglyphics could be known only through divine inspiration.³⁰

Kircher's huge books, covering hundreds of pages, in Latin and in other languages, overflowing with curious and seductive diagrams, were extraordinarily influential and gained the approval of prelates, of princes, and even of the Pope. His ideas about Egypt dominated the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Perhaps the most important of his works was his *Oedipus Aegypticus* of 1652-1654 which demonstrated the origins of Hebrew Kabbalah in Egyptian magic, and showed the spread of these ideas into other cultures. His section on Hebrew Kabbalah carefully relates this mystical philosophy to that which he found imbedded in Egyptian hieroglyphics.³¹

Kircher, who had great interest in the origins of language, believed that Hebrew was the language in which God originally gave man the gift of speech, and that it was especially revered because spoken by Jesus Christ. Moreover, as all languages derived from Hebrew and had something in common, so did the written language. This was Kircher's essential point of departure for his studies of Hieroglyphs.

Thus, the Catholic priest, Kircher, in effect, denied to Jews the cultural uniqueness of their mystical tradition and, although conversion of Jews was no longer the primary goal, argued that the Hebrew language was not exclusive to the Jews, and that the mystical principles which it carried were only truly applicable within the

context of Christianity.

In fact Kircher is, more than Agrippa, an intellectual architect of a system which combines elements of Hebrew Kabbalah, of Hermeticism and of Christianity, and which when merged with astrology, rituals of invocation, evocation, and initiation, led to the modern Western occult.

Kircher was more significant to the modern occult movement than is generally understood. One book, in particular, which was very popular in its day, and which has the appearance of nonsense if Kircher's hieroglyphics-Hebrew connection is not appreciated, is Fabre d'Olivet's *The Hebraic Tongue Restored* of 1815. The book claims to go back to the very origins of speech and to the "primitive and hieroglyphic Hebrew," from which all languages supposedly derive and which is supposedly the source of Egyptian hieroglyphics.³² Kircher's influence here is profound, especially in the reference to multiple languages in the work—from Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic to words in the language of the Chaldeans and Samaritans, which gives this curious work a certain face validity.

D'Olivet's work undoubtedly led to Lacour's very popular *Essai sur Hieroglyphes* of 1821. Following in the footsteps of Father Kircher and of D'Olivet, Lacour insisted grandly that at the time of Moses, the language spoken in Egypt was actually Hebrew and that the Egyptian hieroglyphs had been derived from Hebrew letters which were, also, the basis of the Greek alphabet.³³

As the claim of an earlier form of Hebrew than that known to Jews, a language of great purity and of divinity, was increasingly advanced, it is perhaps not so surprising that this “divine language” was incorporated with impunity into a largely Christian occult movement. The God Names, and “Names of Power” in the Hebrew alphabet were considered to be universal rather than Jewish.

An Elizabethan Magician: John Dee

Born in 1527, the son of an official at the court of Henry VIII, John Dee studied Greek and Mathematics at Cambridge, where he became known for his most ingenious mechanical stage effects. He left the university, and after traveling to the Netherlands and lecturing on Geometry at the University of Paris, he returned to England in 1551 and became tutor to the children of the Duke of Northumberland.

From the earliest years of his life it seemed as if John Dee was fated to be at the center of controversy. And perhaps the most dangerous scrape of his life happened when Protestant Dee was accused of trying to bewitch Catholic Queen Mary by casting her horoscope, and was imprisoned. But before being tried, and after his cell mate had been burned at the stake, he was released and when Queen Elizabeth I was crowned in 1558, it was Dee who consulted the stars to determine the best day for her coronation and who soon became her scientific,

astrological and magical advisor.³⁴

Dee had a magnificent estate and a library which was the largest in England, and which was often visited by the Queen herself. Dee was most generous in allowing scholars the use of his books, and became an internationally influential scholar. It is because of his unique position at the Elizabethan court that his ideas were so widely circulated and that he was so important to the development of the modern occult.

Dee was a Christian Kabbalist, rooted in the Renaissance search for a *Prisca Theologica*, but seems to have been very cautious about promulgating many of his most serious concerns. Dee published several important books, but retained a body of handwritten works which were passed from one person to another and never committed to print.

His primary sources included Pico della Mirandola, Reuchlin, Giorgio, but most of all Agrippa, of whose *De occulta philosophia* he owned several copies.³⁵ Agrippa's thought is very much in evidence in Dee's known books. But in terms of Kabbalah, what may be his most important work has been lost. One can only speculate about the contents of a book, to which he alludes in his list of manuscript books as "*Cabala Hebraicae compendiosa tabella, anno 1562.*"³⁶

Dee was a noted magician at a time when the Catholic church (from which England withdrew under Henry VIII) was increasingly opposed to Renaissance Neo-Platonism and occult philosophy, and whose Inquisition

was pursuing horrible persecution of those who followed the magical arts.

Among the most important of Dee's contributions was, through his rather unethical partner in occult studies, Edward Kelly,³⁷ the merging of alchemy into an occult movement which had already incorporated Neo-Platonism, supposedly Egyptian-based Hermeticism, and the pantheon of god forms and angels of Jewish Kabbalah. Dee's biographer, Peter French describes Dee as something of a bridge between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century who "combined *magia* with the Kabbalah, joining the Hermetic natural magic introduced by Ficino with the contemplative Kabbalah (which also had its practical side) established by Pico"³⁸

Dee and Kelly worked together to develop a system of entrance into unseen worlds using Kabbalist angel magic. One might here refer back to the practical Kabbalist exercises of Abulafia, which, with none of the complexity of Dee and Kelly's approach, brought the visionary into contact with archangels of the Seventy Two Divine Names through meditation on the Hebrew letters of a name. Dee's system also connected celestial hierarchies with orders of demons which, although resulting in accusations of sorcery on his part, were integral to Hebrew Kabbalah, which established dualities of good and evil at all levels of creation except that of the absolute source, the "Crown" of existence.

Of all of Dee's work, his most influential to Western occultism, a remarkable and evocative work, has been

A True and Faithful Relation,³⁹ in which he records the interaction between himself and Edward Kelly with spiritual beings. The book expounds a system using a supposed “Enochian language” with its own alphabet, grammar and vocabulary which was incorporated into some schools of nineteenth century occultism. The “Enochian system” is claimed by many, even today, to be one of enormous potency and (though readily available in libraries) is transmitted in some occult groups with the greatest of secrecy.

Dee accepted that the Kabbalah was the oral part of God’s revelation to Moses, and believed that the powers of the universe could be contacted through the Hebrew Divine Names. Thus, as in Hebrew Kabbalah, contact with all of hidden creation was seen as possible through complex permutations of Hebrew letters forming the Divine Names of God. Among the systems pursued by Dee was *Gematria*, in which numerical values were derived from Hebrew words. In all of this, Dee referred constantly to Agrippa’s *Third Book of Occult Philosophy*.⁴⁰

It was through the dubious mediumship of Kelly, that Dee believed he had contacted spirits. In fact, there are some who suggest that Kelly may have been mentally ill, and that he actually saw what he claimed to see. In any event, Dee never explicitly wrote that he has himself seen these visions. Demons addressed Kelly, who reported the encounters to Dee.⁴¹

Although accused of consorting with the Devil, Dee

was a profoundly religious man, who approached these matters with a respect equal to that of any Hebrew Kabbalist. His operations, meditative and practical, were preceded by days of prayer, by bathing, and by withdrawal completely consistent with that of a Jewish Kabbalist seeking to approach the same divine powers.

Dee was deeply committed to reuniting Protestants and Catholics into a renewed universal church, and believed that he could do so through a *Priscis Theologia*⁴² and through Kabbalah. And unlike many others influential to the development of the Western occult movement, Dee could not be called antisemitic. Rather, he had a sincere hope to draw all peoples together and writes in his *Monas Hieroglyphica* of his desire to convince the Hebrew Kabbalist that “without regard to person, the same most benevolent God is not only of the Jews, but of all peoples, nations, and languages.”⁴³

Thus, a history is clear: Cornelius Agrippa set the stage by pursuing Alchemy as a part of the new magic. His innovations were picked by John Dee, who was the precursor of seventeenth century Rosicrucianism, a philosophy that embodied all of the key principles of the modern occult.

Dee's thought was still rooted in Christianity. But with Protestants, Dee and the Rosicrucians, the original aim of converting the Jews through Christian Kabbalah was forgotten. Conversion of Jews always remained an issue, but as the Catholic Church was split apart, its primary energy went to countering the efforts of the heretic Protestants.

In any event, the reasoning of an attempt to convert the Jews, and of a subtle excuse for some fascinated scholars to delve into the Hebrew language and Hebrew mysticism, was, by the late seventeenth century, no longer a philosophical issue. The modern mentality which could, without explanation or apology to Jewish mysticism, take a picture of Christ as the Lamb of God and place a traditional Hebrew God name above it, was born.

John Dee's life ended sadly. He had fallen from being one of the most celebrated men of his age, protected by the Queen from all enemies, to being accused as a conjurer of the Devil, isolated and shunned by everyone, including his beloved Queen and her advisors. Although he petitioned Elizabeth's successor for a trial on the charges against him, the request was never granted. He was never cleared of charges of sorcery, and died alone and in extreme poverty in 1608.⁴⁴

Christian Kabbalah becomes Rosicrucianism

The chronology of the Western occult movement is clear when it is understood that the Christian Kabbalah, which was the basis of Elizabethan occultism, turned into Rosicrucianism (against the background of the international Reformation and Counter-Reformation movements), and that Rosicrucianism became modern occultism.

One of the more interesting facts about the history of

the Western occult is that whereas the Counter-Reformation Catholic church very violently suppressed all forms of magic, the same philosophies were increasingly espoused by the Protestant countries. England, especially, became a cradle for a new occultism, and a visit by John Dee to Germany was the inspiration for the secret and influential Rosicrucian movement.

John Dee's trip though Germany in 1589, on his way back to England from Bohemia, was a sensation in those regions from which Rosicrucianism was later to emerge. In fact, Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphia*, a merging of Kabbalah, magic, and Alchemy, published in 1564, was the direct source of a tract included in one of the Rosicrucian manifestos published in early seventeenth-century Germany.⁴⁵

Working backwards, Frances Yates concludes that Giorgi's *De harmonia mundi* is the source of Dee's *Monas*. And she asserts succinctly that: "Giorgi is a source for Dee, who is the source of the Rosicrucian manifestos."⁴⁶

The "Rosicrucian Manifestos" are two short pamphlets which were published in Cassel, Germany in 1614 and 1615. They were: *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*, using the marriage theme as symbolic of the alchemical process, and *The Fame and Confession of the Rose Cross*. The hero of *Fame* is a mythical Father C.R.C., who was described as the founder of a secret Order being revived, and which these manifestos invite others to join..

The teenage author of the *Chemical Wedding* (who

later said that it had all been a joke) was Johann Valentin Andreae, born in Württemberg, in 1586, a Lutheran state whose ruling Duke, Frederick I, was an enthusiastic occultist with a passion for English culture. Queen Elizabeth called him “Cousin Mumpellgart” and allowing him to be elected to the Order of the Garter, cemented an English alliance with the German Protestant powers.⁴⁷ So from the late sixteenth century on, Germans looked to England as a role model in its development of modern occultism.

The Rosicrucian “manifestos” are creative fantasies, admitted to have been lightheartedly offered, and with little thought that they might be taken as serious history. Certainly no such person as Christian Rosencreutz, or a group calling themselves “Rosicrucians” even existed. But these documents contained so much accepted occult symbolism that they became the basis for many modern occult fraternities making claims of direct descent from the mythical Christian Rosencreutz himself.

Some modern occultists have creatively amplified the stories of the manifestos, such as that of the magical vault in which the preserved body of Christian Rosencreutz was said to have been found, or the supposed existence of earlier languages, such as that used by Dee and referred to as “Enochian.” It is not possible to understate the extent to which the entire western occult movement, however profound, is built upon a framework of historical inaccuracies and romantic inventions.

From the earliest period of their dissemination, there was an attempt to surround the Rosicrucian documents

with an air of secrecy and antiquity. Much like the claims of antique roots of many occult fraternities today, the 1616 Strasburg edition of the *Chemical Wedding* appeared with a date of 1459 on its cover page.

The Chemical Wedding is a very eloquent and complicated description of alchemical processes, whereas the *Fama Fraternitas* is a supposed history of the Rosicrucian order. Emerging from Germany, it was English enthusiasts such as Robert Fludd who guaranteed that the movement would be taken seriously.

The Fama Fraternitas

This manifesto, subtitled *The Discovery of the Fraternity of the Most Noble Order of the Rosy Cross*, translated into English in 1652, is a story not unlike the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*. It is the story of “a most godly and highly illuminated Father, our brother, C.R., a German, the chief and original of our order.” At five years of age, C.R. entered a monastery where he learned Greek and Latin, and where he made up his mind to go to the Holy Land.

In Damascus he acquired skills in the Arabic language and in magical arts which he later amplified with medical arts and with mathematics.

From Damascus he went to the city of Fez, in Egypt, where he found that “their Kaballah was defiled with their religion.” And after two years in Egypt he went to

Spain, where he supposedly showed Spanish Kabbalists not only how the errors of their arts might be corrected, but “how the faults of the Church and the whole *Philosophia Moralis* was to be amended.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, however, in his travels he found none worthy of being enlightened by him and is described as having offered “fruitless true instructions” In any event, the author of the *Fama* clearly points toward a reformation or renovation of occult arts as heretofore known. Presumably this meant an application of the modern, and enlightened, point of view expressed by John Dee and the English occultists.

The implication that C.R. was a great magician was amplified by the statement that he “made many fine instruments,” which may have been a reference to scientific tools, but was more likely to the sorts of magical tools to be later described in Barrett’s *The Magus*.

In any event, C.R. was joined by three others whom he caused to swear to be “faithful, diligent, and secret,” forever bachelors and virgins (in the priestly tradition), and with whom he formed the original Rosicrucian brotherhood. There is also, in this manifesto, mention of a large dictionary of the “Magical Language,” to which the members referred daily, and which was presumably Hebrew. In any event, there is today a tradition calling Hebrew “the magical language.”

It was agreed, among other things, that the brothers would devote themselves primarily to the care of the sick, and that this would be gratis. Moreover secrecy,

to an extent apparently never before demanded of such a group, was to be maintained.

One story of the *Fama* which was especially influential to modern occultism describes the secret tomb of Father Christian Rosencreutz, opened 120 years after his death. The *Fama* says that:

“...we opened the door, and there appeared to our sights a Vault of seven sides and corners, every side five foot broad and the height of eight feet...in the midst, instead of a Tomb-stone, was a round Altar covering with a plate of brass, and thereon this engraven: *A.C.R.C. Hoc universi compendium vivus mili sepulchrum feci* [This compendium of the universe I made in my lifetime to be my tomb].”⁴⁹

Moreover, there is a central inscription affirming the Christian nature of the movement: “*Jesus mihi omnia,*” [Jesus is everything to me.] The text continues with a very specific and complex description of the tomb and of the things found in it. A “Book T,” called “next to the Bible our greatest treasure,” was interpreted by at least one modern occult fraternity to be the tarot. It is of course, improbable that such a reference was ever intended in the seventeenth century, but this is a good indicator of the ways in which the images of the *Fama* have been

imaginatively interpreted by later occultists.

Of course, no such vault ever existed but its actual creation is of primary significance to some modern occult groups who base their authority on a claim of direct descent from Father R.C. In the Vault, an integral part of an initiatory process for many modern Rosicrucian candidates, and despite the assertion that “Jesus is all,” Jewish mysticism remains a clear symbolic cornerstone.

The *Fama* mentions “Characters and Letters, as God hath here and there incorporated them into the holy scripture, the *Bible*, so hath he imprinted them most apparently into the Wonderful Creation of Heaven and Earth, yea in all Beasts.” And the text continues to speak of “From the which Characters or Letters we have borrowed our Magic writing.”⁵⁰ There is, again, a certain amount of guesswork here, but it would certainly appear that the language in question is Hebrew. And although reference to Kabbalah, an essential of Rosicrucianism, is limited in the tomb description, the vaults of modern occult groups prominently incorporate Hebrew letters.

In this regard, the Christian occult movement today accepts the idea clearly suggested by these texts, that a Hebrew letter is not merely a letter of an alphabet, or even a symbol, but that it is a living and magical force in itself. In such terms, thus, as Christian occultism has appropriated Hebrew God and angelic names to its own use, it has taken the very life breath and energy of Jewish mysticism without reference or apology to Judaism.

The most sacred of Hebrew words, only whispered

by reverent Jewish mystics, are often intoned by Christian occultists with little clear appreciation of the Hebrew Kabbalist meanings of what are called “words of power.”

Robert Fludd

Robert Fludd (1574-1637) was a physician who, perhaps more than anyone, was responsible for the perpetuation and realization of the Rosicrucian romantic myth. He was certainly the greatest of the early English philosophers who called themselves Rosicrucians.

In 1596 Fludd graduated with a Bachelors degree from Oxford, with a special interest in music. And in 1598 he earned a Master of Arts and left England. He traveled for six years in France, Spain, Italy and Germany, being supported both by his father and by tutoring the children of aristocratic families.⁵¹ He is known at this time to have been interested in divination, in horary Astrology, and in geomancy, a method involving thrown pebbles still used today.

During his wanderings Fludd developed a significant interest in the occult and especially in the kind of medicine practiced by Paracelsus. This type of medicine was actually a very enlightened holistic system using herbs and chemicals, in contrast to that of most seventeenth century physicians, who interpreted illness in terms of the four humors described by Galen.

On his return to England, Fludd entered Christ Church, Oxford, and received a Doctorate of Medicine in 1605. But soon he angered the medical establishment for his adherence to principles of Paracelsian medicine, and his right to practice was revoked. He was undoubtedly a very brash and self-assured young man, who was at very least a considerable embarrassment to his distinguished father.

It was only after three more examinations, and after having “conducted himself so insolently as to offend everyone,” that he made peace with the medical establishment and was finally, in 1609, admitted as a Fellow in good standing.⁵² Fludd opened a medical practice in London and was apparently quite successful, amplifying his herbal and chemical remedies and diagnosis with astrological data on each patient and techniques of psychic healing. Earlier problems with the College of Physicians were smoothed out, to the point that he frequently acted as their examiner.⁵³

For Fludd, the Rosicrucian documents struck a nerve, for even before his fateful encounter with Rosicrucian principles, his ideas were very much in line with that philosophy. He prided himself on remaining a virgin and believed that sexual desire was the reason for the Fall. And beside the Rosicrucian manifesto’s demand for absolute virtue, healing of the sick was the declared primary life work of the brotherhood. Fludd began to officially call himself a Rosicrucian in 1616, although it is impossible to say that anyone in the era was specifically

a member of a Rosicrucian order. It is quite unknown whether a secret society actually existed, but the Rosicrucianism promoted by the manifestos was essentially a philosophy of religious reform, the primary aim of which was knowledge of God.

Fludd's version of Rosicrucian philosophy was a direct source of nineteenth century Theosophy and other movements related to eastern religions. And as a practical occult path, incorporating Kabbalah, astrology, Alchemy, and other practical methodologies, it was also the direct source of all modern occult systems of magic. Moreover, Fludd may be credited with popularizing the imbedding of occult principles into complex drawings, a trend which undoubtedly led to increased interest in the tarot and its symbolic pictures.

As one of Fludd's biographers points out: "His greatest inspirations lie not so much in his words as in the illustrations which he designed to accompany them... Fludd's gift for summarizing lengthy explanations in diagrammatic form makes it possible to understand much of his philosophy from his engravings alone."⁵⁴

Much like the medieval "Bible of the Poor" which presented illiterate peasants with pictures of Bible stories, Fludd distilled his belief in complex and harmonious interrelationships between man and the universe into a remarkable series of diagrams. Similar drawings had been done earlier by the alchemists, but never with such doctrinal clarity and complexity.⁵⁵

In Fludd's diagrams, elements of Jewish Kabbalah

effortlessly integrated into alchemical and Hermetic pat-terns, underscoring repeatedly that Kabbalah is one of the key principles of the Rosicrucians. To Fludd, the absolute God was the unpronounceable Hebrew YHVH. This was the source point from which all aspects of his illustrations began. And a synchronist rooted in a Christian society, Fludd described the Kabbalistic YHVH as the very “soul of The Messiah.”⁵⁶

Rejected Jews

The history of the appropriation of Jewish mysticism into Western occultism, happening in historical parallel to the Inquisition, is sad because it is so completely based upon the tragedy of antisemitism in European countries. As has been extensively discussed, Christian Kabbalah became possible initially as Jewish scholars, forced from Spain, and settling especially in Italy, survived by teaching Hebrew and principles of Kabbalah to some Christian scholars of great power and influence.

The Jews had been expelled from England long before they were expelled from Spain, although for centuries they had been protected by the English kings as an important source of loans. But public opinion turned against the Jews and in 1290 Edward I demanded that they leave the country. Of course, some did secretly stay, and the often stated idea that there were no Jews in England from the late thirteenth century on, is incorrect.

In 1306 the Jews were arrested and expelled from

France; in 1492 Jews (perhaps as many as 200,000) were expelled from Spain, and in 1496 the Jews were expelled from Portugal, primarily to please Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain and a Pope who now implied that the only basis for tolerating Jews at all was their progress toward conversion.⁵⁷

Some countries were friendlier to Jews than were others, and a large population of Jews migrated to Amsterdam, where their attitudes were typical of expatriate Jews. As Yosef Kaplan points out:

“In their new home...they continued to use Spanish and Portuguese, and not only did their interest in everything that took place in the spiritual world of their country of origin persist, but they themselves also continued to take an active part in the literary trends current there; their philosophical, theological, and scientific speculations were closely bound up with creative intellectual development in the Iberian world.”⁵⁸

At about the same time, many Jews went to Italy and to France, where they were more or less tolerated, but could not openly profess their religion. But most Jewish exiles went to Turkey where they flourished and where the practice of Judaism was permitted.

Certainly, as Jews brought with them their native language and Hebrew culture, they carried the essence of their mysticism, a religious refuge in terrible times. And there can be no doubt that the absorption of Jews into various European cultures had some effect of reinforcing the emerging consciousness of a modern (Christian)

occultism based in large measure upon Jewish mysticism.

One can speculate that in many countries, as in fifteenth-century Italy where the tracks are most clear, Jewish scholars conveyed principles of Hebrew language and of Kabbalah to those who could help them to survive, despite the outrage of many rabbis who considered these teachers to be traitors.

Expulsions and forced conversions were a deeply disturbing process, and a great deal of vernacular literature arose describing the suffering of the converts and incorporating the Jewish experience into the language and culture of the new "host nation." This was especially true as offspring of those originally expelled found themselves in more liberal climates which would allow them to return to Judaism, but who knew little or no Hebrew. The literature of these Marranos included many prayers which were transliterated from Hebrew into the Roman alphabet for their benefit.⁵⁹ Thus, any interaction between Christian theologians and scholars of Jewish mysticism must have taken place in an initial phase of transplantation, as second generation descendants lacked the Hebrew language skills for these studies.

There is, obviously, a considerable amount of guesswork involved here, particularly since serious scholars are only beginning to turn their attention to the Christian appropriation of Kabbalah which occurred at the same time as the Inquisition.

The abuse and harassment of Jews during that In-

tion raises a number of questions about the practice and dissemination of Christian Kabbalah. In countries where Jews were not permitted to openly follow their own religion, for example, did some espouse Christian Kabbalah to mask their true beliefs? Moreover, it seems that the Jewish point of view about conversion to Christianity has not been widely considered. Among Jews there is the question of whether it is indeed possible to renounce Judaism at all.

Many insist that Judaism is an inherent racial (and spiritual) condition about which there can be no choice, and that, consequently, true conversion to another religion is not possible. No doubt there were many who believed this, and who felt that as a response to pressures put upon them to convert, only “lip service” could be given. Another aspect of Jewish mentality, which has rarely been stated openly, is that for a Jew to “trick or cheat” a Christian may be an acceptable retribution for centuries of oppression. So the other side of the coin is that Jews were not suffering forced conversions lightly, and must have taken great delight as many acquired real political power as Christian converts, some even becoming Bishops.

Perhaps, indeed, there were many “secret Jews,” for whom the deeply meditative Christian Kabbalah may have been a compromise. In this regard, Henry Kamen suggests that many Jewish converts to Christianity may have been seeking to somehow “reject formal Catholicism by interiorizing their religion.”⁶⁰ And assum-

ing that these *conversos* expatriates were greatly drawn toward mystical experience, one may ask to what extent they (whose knowledge of Hebrew would have been impressive to proselytizing Christian Kabbalists) helped to strengthen and popularize Christian Kabbalah and to lay a foundation for modern occultism.

Whatever may have been the inner response of Jews to this tragic situation, they were faced with profound distrust of their supposed conversion to Christianity. Especially in Portugal, all converted Jews were suspected of secretly practicing Judaism and, in fact, the main thrust of the Inquisition in Spain, as established in 1408, was the prosecution of disingenuous converts.

In fifteenth century Spain hostility toward the *Marraños* reached a boiling point as riots developed in protest against the hated class, and there were powerful attempts to isolate the *conversos* by portraying them as “heretics.” It was with the Spanish Inquisition, that the argument of “purity of blood,” which became the essence of anti-semitism in modern Germany and France, first appeared.⁶¹

Pressure on Jews throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century was greater than at any time in previous history, and it was being applied against a supremely ironic background created by Christian scholars. For even as Judaism was being calumnized and ridiculed, prominent Christian theologians were justifying the free absorption of essential elements of the Jewish mystical tradition into an occult movement; while Jews were being attacked

priated to Christian use.

The very worst of symbolic Christian attacks occurred in the Fall of 1553 when, by decree of the Roman Inquisition, the Talmud was publicly burned at Rome, in the belief that the destruction of such Jewish literature would facilitate conversions. In 1555 a Jesuit wrote concerning the supposed lies of the Talmud that: “when the tradition of insanity of the Jewish fables, and of the commentaries—has been blotted from memory, they will easily understand the mysteries of Christ...Are the Jews not insane enough by themselves, and are the Jews not blind enough, that you have to allow them that which teaches them insanity?”⁶²

All things considered, it may seem inconceivable that their own sacred mystical principles were turned against the Jewish peoples by proselytizing Christian theologians, and that the effort ultimately resulted in the belief systems now known as “occultism.” But those are the indisputable facts.

To sum up: using brilliantly complex arguments as intellectual ammunition in an attempt to completely eliminate the Jews through cultural absorption, Christian theologians advanced the dubious claim that Hebrew God Names, Names of Angels, traditions of Kabbalistic mysticism and even the Hebrew language itself, were not really Jewish at all. Thus, so stripped of the integrity of their culture, Jews could be perceived as little more than a tribe of peripatetic money lenders responsible for the death of Christ.

Notes

1. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 1990, vol.2, 227. Complete text of the Council: 228-277.
2. *Decrees*, vol. 2, 233.
3. Edward Peters, *Inquisition*, Los Angeles, 1989, 80.
4. Historians often speak of the regionalization of the Latin Church taking place at this time, with the Spanish Inquisition being a particularly good example. See: Peters, *Inquisition*, 75ff.
5. Altamira, Raphael, "Spain, 1412-1516," *The Cambridge Medieval History*, 501.
6. Altamira, 502. It is clear that one of the most serious effects of expelling the Jews was on Spanish commerce. Rich Jewish merchants who left Spain gave assistance to other countries that competed with Spain in the economic development of the American colonies.
7. Arnobius, *The Seven Books of Arnobius Against the Heathen*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol.VI, 245.
8. Iverson, Erik, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition*, Princeton, 1993, 38.
9. Diring, David, *Writing*, New York 1962, 46.
10. Iverson, 41.
11. Iverson, 88.
12. In 1799, a Captain in Napoleon's Army of the Nile, found the inscribed stone known today as the *Rosetta Stone*. This is a priestly decree in honor of Ptolemy V, written in Egyptian hieroglyphics, in demotic (an Egyptian script) and Greek. The stone was badly damaged, but parallel texts laid the groundwork for ultimate decipherment of the hieroglyphics by Champollion in 1822. His work was the beginning of modern Egyptology. Diring, 53.
13. For example, the vulture which can mean *mother* (because there were thought to be no male vultures), or it can represent a sound like the Hebrew "aleph." A picture of a foot is pronounced like "b" in "bad," and a snake is something like a "g." Iverson, 16
14. Iverson, 59-60.

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15. Renaissance artists drew their inspiration about Egypt primarily from Egyptianizing Roman sculpture.
 16. Iverson, 122-23.
 17. Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 223.
 18. Yates, 190.
 19. D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, Notre Dame, 1975.
 20. Yates, *Bruno*, 308.
 21. Yates, *Bruno*, 273
 22. Edward Peters, *Inquisition*, 244.
 23. Yates, *Bruno*, 257.
 24. Yates, *Bruno*, 259.
 25. Rudolph Wittkower and Irma B. Jaffe, eds., *Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution*, René Taylor, "Hermetism and Mystical Architecture in the Society of Jesus," 66.
 26. Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 212.
 27. Iverson, 89.
 28. St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, was one of the leaders at the Council of Nicea of 325.C.E., where the teaching of Arius was condemned. The council declared that Jesus was the Son of God, and of the same substance as the Father.
 29. Godwin Jocelyn, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge*, London, 1979, 9-11. This book is a very brief and entertaining essay about Kircher with some useful illustrations. Unfortunately, the author loses credibility as she imposes a personal belief system with comments such as that referring to "knowledge of man's prehistory as revealed by H.P. Blavatsky, Rudolph Steiner and others." 27.
 30. Iverson, 95,98.
 31. Kircher, Athanasius, *Oedipus Aegypticus*, vol. I, Rome, 1652. See vol. II, 209-285, "Cabala Hebraeorum, 1653."
 32. Fabre d'Olivet, *The Hebraic Tongue Restored*, original 1815, reprint New York, 1976. Passim.
 33. Iverson, 131.
 34. John Dee, *A True and Faithful Relation of What Passed*

for *Many Years between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits: Tending (had it succeeded) to a General Alteration of Most States and Kingdom of the World*. Original London, 1659. Reprinted North Wales, 1974. Essay following text by E.C.W.,

35. Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy on the Elizabethan Age*, London 1979, 80.

36. Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 86.

37. See *The Alchemical Writings of Edward Kelly*, original Hamburg, 1676, reprint with preface by A.E. Waite, London 1970, passim. Waite describes Kelly as “a sordid impostor who duped the immeasurable credulity of the learned Doctor Dee, and subsequently involved his victim in transactions which have permanently degraded an otherwise great name.” ix-i.

38. Peter French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus*, London 1972, 87.

39. See note 31.

40. Peter French, 111-13.

41. Peter French, 114.

42. This was an idea widely embraced at the time.

43. John Dee, *Monas Hieroglyphica*, Ed. C.H. Josten, *Journal of the Society for the Study of Alchemy and Early Chemistry*, XI, (1964), 133.

44. Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 89, 92.

45. Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 88.

46. Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, 170.

47. Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, London 1972, 32.

48. *A Christian Rosenkreutz Anthology*, “The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity of the R.C.,” New York, 1968, 166-67.

49. *A Christian Rosenkreutz Anthology*, 173.

50. *A Christian Rosenkreutz Anthology*, 186.

51. Jocelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd: Hermetic Philosopher and Surveyor of Two Worlds*, Boulder, 1979, 6.

52. Godwin, 7.53. Godwin, 8.

54. Godwin, 12-13..

asserts that Fludd's illustrations are not just illustrations of the complex written texts, but that "...they are ways of *knowing, demonstrating and remembering*," which, he says "aid the beholder to direct the self back to inner unity with the creator," 59.

56. Robert Fludd, *Philosophia Moysaica*, Gouda, 1638, 304.

57. Jeremy Cohen, Introduction to *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict*, New York 1991, 26.

58. Yosef Kaplan, "The Travels of Portuguese Jews from Amsterdam to the 'Lands of Idolotry,' (1664-1724)," in *Jews and Conversos*, proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1981), 1985, Jerusalem, 197.

59. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos*, New York 1974, 322.

60. Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, New Haven, 1997, 87.

61. Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, Wisconsin, 1995, 114-115.

62. Kenneth R. Stow, "The Burning of the Talmud in 1553, in Light of Sixteenth Century Catholic Attitudes toward the Talmud," *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict, From Late*