

Hermeticism and the Christian Kabbalah

The first four segments of this course emphasized the Kabbalah's Judaic roots. Now we shall see how the power and appeal of the Kabbalah were too strong for it to be confined to its native religious environment.

Until the 14th century Christian scholars were virtually ignorant of the work of the Jewish Kabbalists in southern and northern Europe. The Kabbalah had no appreciable impact on Christian beliefs and practices or even any impact on its underlying mindset. Over the next several centuries all that would change, a "Christian Kabbalah" would emerge—to the dismay of both Christian ecclesiastical authorities and rabbinic authorities. It offered new insights into traditional Christian teachings, potential for reconciling Christianity and Judaism, and even a basis for church reform—in advance of, or in parallel with, the Protestant Reformation.

The Christian Kabbalah clearly drew upon elements of the Judaic theoretical Kabbalah, but it was strongly influenced by the parallel field of Hermeticism. For this reason we shall have to devote some time to understanding this non-Judaic system whose roots may extend back at least as far as those of the Judaic Kabbalah. Whether Hermeticism and the Kabbalah came from a common source in remote antiquity is no more than a matter of speculation. What we do know is that the two systems developed separately for the 1,500 years before the confluence of ideas in the Renaissance.

This segment is divided into the following sections:

- Early Development of Hermeticism
- Confluence of Hermeticism, Kabbalah and Christianity
- Major Concepts of the Christian Kabbalah
- Reflections, Resources, and Assignment.

Early Development of Hermeticism

Segment 2 mentioned the Hermetic texts that circulated in the Greco-Roman world in the centuries spanning the beginning of the Common Era. Those texts professed to communicate the secret wisdom of the ancient Egyptian priesthood—wisdom attributed to the Egyptian god Thoth/Hermes. Depicted in art as a man with the head of an ibis, Thoth was the scribe of the gods, his long beak suggestive of a quill. Allegedly he gave his countrymen their laws and bestowed on humanity the gifts of language and writing. Writing clearly brought great benefits, but it was not universally welcomed. Plato records King Thamus' complaint to the god: "This discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories." In ancient Greece, the Olympian god Hermes, son of Zeus, was identified with Thoth; and that merger became complete in the fourth century BCE when Egypt came under Hellenic rule. Finally the Romans identified their messenger-god Mercury with Thoth/Hermes, and the three gods were conflated into a single multicultural deity.

Most important of the Hermetic texts were the *Corpus Hermeticum* and a companion book, the *Asclepius*. Less well-known was *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*. Authorship of all three was credited to one Hermes Trismegistus ("Thrice-Great Hermes"). Much of the material was formatted as teacher-disciple dialog, chiefly between Hermes and his son Tat or his favored disciple Asclepius—who has sometimes been identified with the Egyptian

Imhotep. Hermes Trismegistus was held in high regard; for instance, one student proclaimed: “Everything is possible to you as master of the universe.” For more than 1,500 years, that Hermes was assumed to be the god Thoth/Hermes/Mercury or at least his incarnation in human form. Some accounts asserted that Hermes was Moses’ teacher, or even Abraham’s, while others suggested that he lived at the time of Noah or Zoroaster. There may have been more than one Hermes; the *Asclepius* mentions a grandfather and grandson, both so-named, and asserts that the texts were written by the grandson. Perhaps there was a triplicity of Hermeses, providing one explanation of “Trismegistus.”

The classical Hermetic texts purported to reveal new details of Egyptian religion. However, none was written in hieroglyphic, hieratic or even demotic script. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was written in Greek. The *Asclepius* has survived only in a Latin translation and an abbreviated Coptic translation, though the original version is believed to have been in Greek. Coptic and Armenian manuscripts of *The Definitions of Hermes* survive.

Another important text was the *Emerald Tablet*, believed to have been inscribed on “emerald”—or perhaps green granite or jasper—by Hermes himself. According to legend, Alexander the Great discovered the tablet in the Great Pyramid of Gizeh, supposedly Hermes’ tomb. But the earliest verifiable version, which dates from the eighth century, is on paper, in an Arabic work by the Islamic alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan. The short, cryptic text includes the famous line: “That which is Below is like that which is Above and that which is Above is like that which is Below to do the miracles of the Only Thing,” usually abbreviated to “As above, so below.”

The *Picatrix* was also written in Arabic. Its original Arabic title could be interpreted as “Goal of The Wise.” Dated from around 1000 CE, the *Picatrix* took the form of a handbook, or *grimoire*, of talismanic magic. The existence of Arabic Hermetic texts draws attention to the penetration of Hermetism into Middle Eastern as well as European cultures. In particular, the Sabians—whose descendents may be the modern Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran—are believed to have embraced beliefs similar to those of western Hermetism.

An issue of terminology needs to be addressed. Distinctions customarily are made between the *Hermetism* of late antiquity and the *Hermeticism* of the Middle Ages and beyond. The former term refers to teachings based on the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius*, and *The Definitions of Hermes*, as they were understood in the Greco-Roman world. *Hermeticism* refers to the much broader teachings that reflected medieval additions to the literature—a category that would include the *Picatrix* and possibly the *Emerald Tablet*—and the incorporation of concepts and practices from other traditions. For example, it would be accurate to speak of “Renaissance Hermeticism” or “Christian Hermeticism” but inaccurate to speak of “Renaissance Hermetism” or “Christian Hermetism.” Corresponding to Hermetism and Hermeticism are *Hermetist* and *Hermeticist*, referring to individuals who study and/or practice the respective disciplines. The adjective *Hermetic* exists in only one form and applies to both disciplines.

Classical Hermetic Teachings

The classical Hermetic literature offered a blend of philosophy, magic and astrology along with some prayers and prophecies. Magic was the most conspicuous feature in the texts, and considerable attention was paid to previously unrealized human potential.

In the *Asclepius*, Hermes made the bold statement: “Man is a great miracle, a being adored and honored.” Man is partly mortal and partly immortal, occupying a position intermediate between God and nature. By raising his consciousness, man “passes into the nature of God as though he were God... He is in the fortunate middle position: he loves those things that are below him and is beloved of the beings above.” *The Definitions of Hermes* described three levels in the human constitution: body, soul, and *nous* (Greek: “Mind”). “Nous,” it explained, “is the maker of soul,

and soul the maker of the body.” Moreover, “The body increases and reaches perfection... Every man has a body and a soul, but not every soul has nous.” Nous spans the divide between God and his creation. People with the proper disposition and who committed to the proper training could acquire nous and become effective magi. In the process they could also achieve *gnosis*, or enlightenment.

Hermetism, according to a modern commentator, “saw the entire Cosmos as one great, interconnected Being, a system based on intricate harmony, sympathy and correspondence, both spiritual and material.” The teachings affirmed the divine nature of the planets and fixed stars and their influence on human affairs. The zodiac, the backdrop for both the planets and the stellar constellations, was divided not only into the familiar 12 signs but also into 36 decans each of 10° of arc. Every decan was the domain of a powerful spirit, some of which were benevolent and others malevolent. As the vault of the heavens rotated during the 12-hour day, and during the solar year, each resident spirit held sway in turn. The planetary deities exerted influence as the planets moved in relation to the zodiac. In contrast to the malevolent disposition of some decan spirits, all seven planetary deities, or “governors,” were benevolent—though the influence of, say, Mars or Saturn was very different from that of Venus or the Sun.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* presented a creation story which differs in important ways from the Kabbalistic story, discussed in Segment 4, but which recalls the account in *Genesis*:

In the abyss was infinite darkness, water and fine intelligent spirit. By the power of God were these within the chaos. A holy light was sent forth, and the elements from the watery substance solidified under the earth... The light elements were then separated off and raised on high, and the heavy were founded firmly upon the watery sand. All was distinguished by fire, all was raised up to be supported by the breath of life. The vault of heaven appeared in seven circles, and the gods appeared in the form of stars with all their constellations, and heaven with the gods was complete in every detail. The universe was encompassed by air and sustained on its circular course by divine spirit.

Animals, plants and people were created, whereupon “men began to live and understand the destiny assigned to them by the course of the circling gods.” “Destiny” might imply the kind of determinism implied by conventional astrology, but Hermetic astrology allowed for the manipulation of planetary and zodiacal influences through magic. Man’s divine potential gave him privileges, but it also incurred some responsibility for the world. Magic also offered greater creative potential: “Just as the Father and Lord has made the eternal gods to be similar to Himself, so humanity has made... gods in the likeness of its own features.”

Hermetic magic was based largely on the invocation and manipulation of celestial influences. Based on the premise that all is One, and all is interconnected, the influence of a god or spirit could be changed by the judicious use of plants, stones, colors, fragrances, sounds, gestures, or graphic symbols. An object or activity was needed whose vibratory frequency resonated with that of the celestial entity. According to the *Asclepius*, herbs, stones and spices, which “have in themselves the power of divinity in Nature,” could be used to produce changes in the celestial influences.

Magic of course is purposeful; the magus embarks on the process with a particular intent. In Hermetic magic that intent was reinforced by the use of talismans. Talismans were inscribed on parchment, wood, metal, stone, or some other appropriate material with a text or image—especially a celestial image—that established resonance with the power to be invoked. Efficacy was enhanced by making the talisman at an astrologically auspicious time. It could also be enhanced by embedding in it gemstones of the appropriate vibration. The talisman might be worn as a ring or amulet; it could be set up in a sacred space, as the backdrop for an invocatory ritual;

or it could be placed where the desired results were to be obtained. The medieval *Picatrix* offered detailed instructions for constructing and using talismans. For example:

Fashion an image of the purest silver in the hour of Venus, with the Moon being placed in the Ascendant, fourth, seventh or tenth house and aspecting Venus with a good aspect; and the lord of the sixth house should aspect a fortune with a trine or opposite aspect, and the lord of the 8th house should be in square aspect to Mercury. And beware that Mercury not be retrograde nor combust, nor receiving any aspect from an infortune. And this image should be fashioned in the final hour of the lord of the day, and the lord of the hour should be placed in the tenth house from the Ascendant. And when this image has been fashioned in this manner, the aforesaid infirmities will be driven away.

Other talismans were designed to “to gain dignity from a lord or king,” to secure lasting love, and to catch many fish.

In some cases magical activity assumed larger proportions. The *Asclepius* explained that priests—presumably in the temples of ancient Egypt—fashioned statues and invoked divine energy to bring them to life. Those “terrestrial gods” were “delighted by frequent sacrifices, hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with the celestial harmony.” In return, they “helped us as though they were loving parents... or they foretold the future through lot and divination.” Inspired by the divine force that flowed into them, the statues healed the sick and prophesied. It was no accident that Asclepius, Hermes’s closest disciple, was the grandson and namesake of the famous god of medicine in Greek mythology.

Alchemy was probably of interest in ancient Egypt, and we know that it survived there in late antiquity because, in 296 CE, the Emperor Diocletian ordered that all Egyptian works on the subject be burned. The very word “alchemy,” which is Arabic in origin, indicates that the craft flourished in the Middle East, and the work of Jabir ibn Hayyan has already been mentioned. In due course alchemy made its way to *Al-Andalus* (Moorish Spain) and the rest of Europe. Alchemy’s basic goal was the transmutation of metals, but it was approached in a context which drew no sharp divisions between the physical and the nonphysical, the seen and the unseen worlds, or the inanimate and the animate.

Hermes Trismegistus has traditionally been regarded as the father of alchemy. Certainly the correspondence between the divine Mercury and the alchemical mercury was not lost on the ancients. In the words of a modern writer, “‘Mercurius’... being the transformative principle itself, may not only ‘fly’... between the two worlds, but also alchemically join them.”

However the classical Hermetic texts never discussed the subject, and the *Emerald Tablet* only addressed it obliquely: “Separate the Earth from the Fire, the subtle from the gross, sweetly with great industry... By this means you shall have the glory of the whole world and thereby all obscurity shall fly from you.” Numerous alchemical texts appeared later; but their connection—even by attribution—with Hermes is unclear. A text of uncertain origin, the *Aureus*, or *Golden Tractate of Hermes*, was only published in the 19th century. Alchemy should, perhaps, be considered part of Hermeticism but not of Hermetism.

The Hermetic teachings were believed to preserve the ancient Egyptian religion in its purest form. Judaic religion which flowed through Moses, and Greek philosophy which flowed through Pythagoras, Plato and the Stoics, were both derivative. They had considerable intrinsic value, but they were imperfect forms of the original revelation. After the Renaissance a few Christians wondered aloud whether their faith might also be a degenerate form of the pristine Egyptian religion.

Confluence of Hermeticism, Kabbalah and Christianity

Early and Medieval Christianity

Hermetic teachings influenced both orthodox and gnostic Christianity. The second-century Clement of Alexandria, whose work bridged the two, was aware of the Hermetic texts and claimed that Hermes Trismegistus had written 42 books. Three Coptic texts, including parts of the *Asclepius*, were found in the Nag Hammadi Library whose contents were buried in the fourth century CE and discovered after World War II. The devotional content of those particular texts suggests that they may have served liturgical as well as other purposes among gnostic Christians.

In orthodox Christianity, apologist Lucius Lactantius (c.260–340 CE) and church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430) believed that Hermes Trismegistus was a contemporary of Moses. Augustine was less complementary of Hermes than Lactantius was, and he condemned Hermes' magical practices. But both men testified to the Hermetic texts' antiquity and were convinced that the teachings formed the foundation on which Judeo-Christian religion and western philosophy rested.

Several aspects of the Hermetic teachings piqued the church fathers' interest. One was the creation story, mentioned earlier, which took a more positive attitude to the Fall than did *Genesis*. The *Corpus Hermeticum* described man's very willing descent into matter, motivated by his love of Nature—a love that was eagerly reciprocated. “Hermes” also spoke of the decline of Egyptian religion and culture but prophesied a great reawakening; perhaps that could be associated with the coming of Christ. The *Corpus Hermeticum* contained a passage reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount:

O powers within me, sing to the One and All... Temperance, sing with me. Justice, through me praise what is just. Generosity, through me praise the All. Truth, sing of the Truth. Good, praise the Good. Life and Light, from you comes the praise and to you it returns.

The *Corpus* and the *Asclepius* even referred to a “Son of God,” begotten by the Father. Those references, coming from someone thought to have lived in early biblical times, earned Hermes the appellation “the Gentile prophet,” or “the Egyptian Moses.” To be sure, Hermes' teachings were not all valued by Christian apologists, and some gaps had to be filled to reconcile them with Christian teachings; for example, he did not speak of a third person of the Trinity. Some Christian Hermeticists inserted the *Anima Mundi*, or World Soul, of the Neoplatonists. That suggestion might have appeal, but it created difficulties with respect to the doctrine of coequal persons of the Trinity decreed by the Council of Nicaea. The Neoplatonic view of the Trinity, which is consistent with Kabbalistic teachings, considered cascading emanations from the Godhead, placing the *Anima Mundi* at a lower level than the Monad. Also, Hermes' references to magic either had to be reconciled with Christian religious practice or had to be explained away as interpolations in the original texts.

Hermetic concepts found their way into the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius, the unknown Neoplatonic scholar who lived in sixth century or thereabouts—long confused with the Areopagite mentioned in *Acts* and with St. Denis of Paris. For example:

Of the many colored varieties of stones, the white represents that which is luminous, and the red corresponds to fire, yellow to gold, and green to youth and vigor. Thus corresponding to each figure you will find a mystical interpretation which relates these symbolical images to the things above.

The Pseudo-Dionysius' most important contribution, included in the same work, was his angelic hierarchy divided into nine "choirs." His choirs of angels would eventually be absorbed into a larger Hermetic hierarchy that also included the seven planetary spirits.

Hermetic concepts were known to other prominent western Christian personages, including Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Meister Eckhart, and Nicolas of Cusa. Dominican friar Albertus Magnus (c.1200–1280) made important contributions to magic, and we know that he took an interest in alchemy. He criticized "demonic magic" but approved of celestial, or astrological, magic, even when it was used for destructive purposes. Celestial magic, he wrote, "gets its powers from the arrangement of the Heavens; as if there was made an image for the destruction of a particular thing in a particular place." Albertus proceeded to explain how a talismanic image should be used:

When the image has been made according to these and other conditions, it should be buried in the middle of the place from which you wish to expel the particular thing, placing earth from the four corners of the place in the belly of the image. If, on the other hand, you wish to make an image for joy and success, make it at a time contrary to what we have said, additionally the image should be made at a time that has been elected, and it will have its effects according to the powers of the Heavens by the command of God.

In another work, whose ostensible purpose was to explore the properties of minerals, Albertus presented further discussion of talismans and their uses; for instance:

Andromeda is the image of a girl turned sideways, seated upon a rock, with straining hands. And this image, engraved upon gems that are by nature conciliating in love... brings about lasting love between man and wife; indeed it is said to reconcile even those who have been adulterous. Cassiopeia is a maiden sitting in an armchair, with her arms uplifted and bent; and this sort of engraving upon gems that bring sleep and restore the members is said to give rest after toil and to strengthen weakened bodies.

Interestingly, Albertus Magnus' interest in Hermeticism did not deter the Church of Rome from declaring him a saint and honoring him with numerous accolades, including "Doctor of the Universal Church." Aside from these notable exceptions, the study of Hermeticism was limited until the latter part of the Middle Ages. Educated westerners were aware that the church fathers had discussed the classical Hermetic texts, but few people had access to the ancient manuscripts and even fewer could read the Greek or Semitic languages in which most of the texts were written.

The Kabbalah first came to the attention of Christian scholars through the conversion to Christianity of important Jewish scholars. For example, the Spanish scholar Moses Sephardi (1062–1110), who took the new name Petrus Alphonsi, created a glyph relating the Tetragrammaton to the Christian Trinity (Figure 1). His glyph anticipated by five centuries the Tree of Life constructed by the Safed Kabbalists. Another convert to Christianity was the 15th-century Samuel ben Nissim Abulfaraj, an Italian Jewish humanist scholar who wrote under the pseudonym Flavius Mithridates. He is best known for his Latin translations of 3,500 pages of Hebrew mystical works, including the *Biblioteca Cabbalistica*, a large compilation of Kabbalistic literature. Yet another convert was Dactylus Hebraeus, who also contributed ideas concerning the Trinity. Dactylus was mentioned by Giovanni Pico, whose work will be discussed shortly, but we know little else about him.

Much later, at the end of the 17th century, the Jewish Kabbalist Moshe ben Aharon of Krakow converted to Christianity, allegedly disappointed by the Sabbatean fiasco. He moved to Uppsala, Sweden where he taught Hebrew. While there he wrote the three-volume *The Staff of Moses*, in

which he attempted to show that the *Zohar* contained the doctrine of the Trinity. He may also have tutored Emanuel Swedenborg in Hebrew.

Figure 1. Petrus Alphonsi's Glyph of the Trinity



Converts' expertise was viewed as useful for evangelical and, more importantly, polemical purposes. Converts were often used as the church's official spokespersons at the "disputations" with practicing Jews. The disputation in Barcelona, that Moses Nachmanides unexpectedly won, was mentioned in an earlier segment of this course.

The Kabbalah also came to the attention of Christian scholars through contacts with Jewish scholars who were dispersed throughout Europe. Individual contacts were fairly common, despite a prevailing climate of anti-Semitism and antagonism from ecclesiastical authorities. The Italian Rabbi Menahem ben Benjamin Recanati whose life spanned the end of the 13th century and the early part of the 14th devoted a major part of his work to the Kabbalah. Two centuries later, the Jewish humanist scholar Yohanan Alemanno (c.1435–1505), who settled in Florence, combined Hebraic and Kabbalistic studies with interests in Neoplatonism. Also we should not forget that Abraham Abulafia, whose work was discussed in Segment 3, traveled widely throughout the Mediterranean region, and visited Rome. However, his ecstatic Kabbalah played no role in the development of the Christian Kabbalah.

The Florentine Renaissance

When a mid-15th-century Florentine proclaimed "*mi pare renascere*" ("I seem to be reborn"), he unwittingly gave birth to the term "Renaissance" by which we refer to the cultural and intellectual rebirth that had begun a few decades earlier. Impediments to the confluence of Hermeticism, Kabbalah and Christianity soon eroded. "Lost" manuscripts were rediscovered, scholars began to learn Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, and the esoteric literature was translated into Latin. Aristotelian philosophy, whose ascendancy had marked the scholastic era, was replaced by Neoplatonism as the guiding mindset of the age. Great interest was expressed in exotic religious and philosophical traditions.

The Renaissance was driven by a desire to recover the greatness of classical Greece and Rome, and an economic boom in Florence made such a goal more attainable. The new wealth enabled leading families to support scholarship and the arts. Foremost among those families were the Medicis, particularly the three generations represented by Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), his sickly son Piero; and his grandson Lorenzo, "the Magnificent."

Among many other things Cosimo de' Medici established a library that soon became the largest in the world since the Ptolemaic library in Alexandria. Dispatched on just one of his book-buying sprees, Lorenzo's agent Giovanni Lascaris returned from the east with more than 200 ancient manuscripts. The library's collection became a treasure trove of religious, philosophical and esoteric manuscripts that attracted leading scholars to Florence. And the broad range of languages in which they were written further stimulated linguistic studies.

In addition to the library, Cosimo de' Medici founded the Florentine Academy, or Society for Eloquence, in 1541. The Academy competed, but also contrasted, with the great centers of learning like the Universities of Paris and Cologne. Whereas the latter preserved the Aristotelian mindset of 13th-century scholasticism, the Florentine Academy saw a return to Plato as its guiding influence; indeed the Academy was viewed as a recreation of Plato's school in Athens. Study of Plato and Neoplatonism was accompanied by a synthesis of ideas from other exoteric and esoteric sources. The latter acquired a special mystique because of a widely held belief during the Renaissance that wisdom came from the east, perhaps from sources predating both Hebrew and Greek traditions. The notion that *Matthew's* three wise men came from the east played into that belief.

To head the Florentine Academy, Cosimo chose Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), a priest, physician, and linguistic scholar. Ficino's first charge was to translate the entire works of Plato into Latin, but Cosimo reassigned him to translate the *Corpus Hermeticum* from its original Greek. Fourteen treatises of the *Corpus* had been compiled into a single volume by Byzantine editors and brought to Florence by a monk from Macedonia; a 15th treatise became available later. Ficino's translation and accompanying commentary were published in 1463 and reprinted more than 20 times over the next 150 years. Based on Lactantius' and Augustine's testimony, Ficino and his contemporaries were convinced that the *Corpus Hermeticum* had been written by a real, very ancient, Hermes Trismegistus.

Ficino also held the firm belief that Hermeticism—the work of the “Egyptian Moses”—could support and illuminate Christian theology. But his fascination for magic was equally strong, and he envisioned ways in which magical rites could be incorporated into religious practice. As historian Frances Yates observes, his magic was more refined, more elegant, and in many ways more “spiritual” than that of the Hermetic texts. His talismans were not modeled on the crude imagery of the *Picatrix* but were works of art based on classical themes, and his incantations were sung to the accompaniment of the best musical instruments of the time. Following Albertus Magnus, he distinguished between what he termed “natural magic,” which drew its power from the divine order present in nature, from demonic magic which involved the conjuration of unwholesome entities. Through his rejection of any involvement of devils he hoped to allay fears that his magic would threaten the institutional church. Unfortunately, as we shall see, his efforts were only partially successful.

As the Byzantine Empire went into decline, many Eastern Orthodox scholars came to the west. Among them was the 15th-century Greek philosopher and esotericist Georgius Gemistos, also known as Plethon. Cosimo de' Medici persuaded him to settle in Florence. Gemistos had studied at the Islamic School of Theology at Brusa, in northwestern Turkey, and was an authority on Zoroaster and Plato. He also promoted an esoteric version of Christianity with Neoplatonic leanings. The scholars from Constantinople brought with them collections of rare manuscripts in Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, including works on Hermeticism and the Kabbalah.

Emergence of the Christian Kabbalah

Marsilio Ficino's student, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), is regarded as the first true Christian Kabbalist. Born into a noble family, he became one of the most influential scholars of the early Renaissance. He was also an intellectual prodigy who had studied in Padua and

Rome before moving to Florence. Pico boldly claimed: “I have ranged through all the masters of philosophy, examined all their works, become acquainted with all schools.” Claims that Pico knew 22 languages may have been colored by the esoteric significance of that number—there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and 22 *netivot* in the Tree of Life—but we do know that he was tutored in Aramaic by Samuel ben Nissim Abulfaraj. Pico accepted the claims of Jewish mystics that the Kabbalah represented an unbroken oral tradition dating back to Moses and Mount Sinai.

At the young age of 24 Pico drew up a list of 900 theses on philosophy, the Kabbalah, magic and theology and challenged anyone to a debate on their merits before a papal audience. In an accompanying *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico defended his bold challenge:

[I] have dared... to offer a disputation concerning the lofty mysteries of Christian theology, the highest topics of philosophy and unfamiliar branches of knowledge, in so famous a city, before so great an assembly of very learned men, in the presence of the apostolic senate.

The debate never took place, but the effect on contemporary thought was profound. His work stimulated interest in the Kabbalah and other aspects of Judaism throughout Christian Europe. One of Pico’s best-known later works, dedicated to Lorenzo de’ Medici, was *Heptaplus*, a sevenfold cosmological commentary on *Genesis*.

Pico would leave it to Cornelius Agrippa, several decades later, to integrate Kabbalistic doctrine firmly into Hermeticism. But, he insisted that the Kabbalah contained the keys to Hermetic magic. The new form of magic, which involved the invocation of divine names, would be more powerful and more ethical. Indeed, it represented “nothing else than the utter perfection of natural philosophy.” However his interest in magic was mainly theoretical; Pico was a philosopher and mystic, not a magus; and he denounced the use of astrology for purposes of divination.

A number of prominent churchmen became interested in the Kabbalah. Cardinal Egidio Antonini da Viterbo (c.1465–1532), also known as “Giles of Viterbo,” was prior-general of the Augustinian Order and later Latin patriarch of Constantinople. A humanist scholar, he believed that Hebrew was the only true sacred language and searched the Hebrew scriptures for esoteric meanings. Egidio was also proficient in several other ancient languages and studied the *Qur’an* in the original Arabic. He may have met Martin Luther when the latter was an Augustinian monk. The Venetian Franciscan friar Francesco Giorgi Veneto (1466–1540), also known as Zorzi, wrote the influential book *On the Harmony of the Universe* and dedicated the work to Pope Clement VII. Giorgi’s book presented a comprehensive picture of creation, drawing upon Platonic, Kabbalistic and Hermetic concepts.

The study of Jewish esotericism soon spread beyond northern Italy. Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522), one of the first early Christian Kabbalists outside Italy, was born at Pforzheim in the Black Forest region of Germany. Reuchlin studied Greek and Hebrew in Basel and Paris, and also met Giovanni Pico during a visit to Florence. In due course Reuchlin taught at the University of Tübingen, and his reputation attracted students from across the Holy Roman Empire. Reuchlin’s growing mastery of Kabbalah led to the publication of *De Arte Cabalistica* (“On the Art of the Kabbalah”) in 1517.

Several prominent Kabbalists were diplomats. The German diplomat, humanist and philologist Johann Albrecht Widmannstetter (1506–1557) had studied at Tübingen. Some of his Kabbalistic writings appeared under the pseudonym “Lucretius.” Widmannstetter’s close contemporary Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) was a French diplomat and linguist. Sent as an interpreter by King Francis I to the French embassy to the Turkish sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in

Constantinople, Postel gathered interesting Eastern manuscripts for the royal library. For many years he worked on Latin translations of the *Bahir*, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and the *Zohar*.

The Christian Kabbalists of the 15th and 16th centuries had only the medieval Kabbalah as their source of inspiration. Postel's translation of the *Zohar*, which was published 1552, made their work much easier. Six years later the first printed copy of the *Zohar*—in Hebrew—appeared in Mantua, Italy. By the end of the 16th century, the work of the Safed Kabbalists was reaching Christian Europe and was put to good use by later scholars, including several Protestants.

One of them was the Lutheran Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) who was born in Görlitz, Silesia. On Trinity Sunday 1600 he had a spiritual experience that launched him onto a lifelong quest for *gnosis*. Böhme found himself part of a group devoted to the work of Paracelsus, whose work will be discussed shortly. Böhme's formal education may have been limited, but he became interested in medicine, the Kabbalah, and the Hermetic arts. He may also have read the writings of Dominican friar Meister Eckhart (c.1260–c.1328), with whom he shared important beliefs. Böhme had little interest in promoting his ideas, and records of his studies were kept mainly for personal reference. The books we have were compiled and published by his followers, in some cases without his knowledge or consent. However several long letters to friends, presenting his ideas, have survived.

Another German, this time a Jesuit priest, was Athanasius Kirchner (1602–1680). Kirchner studied topics ranging from geology and medicine to Sinology. He also became an early Egyptologist, and those studies persuaded him that Adam and Eve spoke the Egyptian language. He believed that hieroglyphics—which Hermes, the inventor of language, must have designed—were sacred talismans. He also claimed that Hermes Trismegistus was none other than the Old Testament Moses. In his *Egyptian Oedipus*, published in 1653, Kirchner provided a Tree of Life that closely resembled one proposed by the Safed scholar Moses Cordovero.

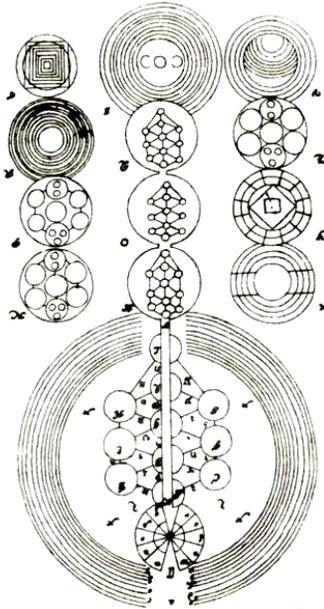
Yet another 17th-century German of interest was Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1631–1689), the son of a Protestant minister. He was influenced by fellow-Silesian Jakob Böhme. Von Rosenroth studied at the universities of Wittenberg and Leipzig and traveled through Holland, France, and England. He became an expert in Oriental languages, especially Hebrew. Originally he planned to produce a complete Latin translation of the *Zohar*, but he settled on the four-volume *Kabbala Denudata* (“Kabbalah Unveiled”) which contained excerpts from the *Zohar*. Among other things he offered a Tree of Life (Figure 2) that drew heavily on the work of Isaac Luria. His glyph illustrated the complexity that could result when each sefirah is considered to be a model of the whole Tree.

In England Kabbalistic teachings influenced the Cambridge Platonists, a group of 17th-century academic theologians that included Benjamin Whichcote, Henry More, and Countess Anne Conway (1630–1679). In France, the Kabbalah influenced the Martinist movement, named after Louis Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803).

Golden Age of the Hermetic Kabbalah

The most important contribution to Renaissance Hermeticism was made by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), a German government official, military strategist, and court physician. Agrippa authored numerous works on Hermeticism, the best-known being his *Three Books on Occult Philosophy*. The first was devoted to natural magic, the second to celestial magic, and the third to ceremonial magic. Written in about 1510 and published in a single volume 23 years later, the *Occult Philosophy* provided an encyclopedic reference source for Hermetic theory and practice. It offered, according to a modern introduction to the book, a “host of names, associations and uses of spirits, occult characters and alphabets, sigils, herbs,

Figure 2. Von Rosenroth's Tree of Life



stones, symbols, colors, fumes, numbers, prayers, stars, beasts and other elements employed magically.” Agrippa left no doubt as to his high regard for magic:

Magic is a faculty of wonderful virtue, full of most high mysteries, containing the most profound contemplation of most secret things... [It] is the most perfect, and chief science, that sacred, and sublimer kind of philosophy... the most absolute perfection of all most excellent philosophy.

Agrippa's magic, in the Hermetic tradition, had an astrological focus. The planets had distinctive characteristics, and invocation produced distinctive benefits. For example, he offered this description of the Sun:

It sits as king in the middle of other planets, excelling all in light, greatness, fairness, enlightening all, distributing virtue to them so dispose inferior bodies, and regulating and disposing of their motions.

Invoking the Sun in a magical ritual brought “nobility of mind, perspicuity of imagination, the nature of knowledge and opinion, maturity, counsel, zeal, light of justice, reason and judgment distinguishing right from wrong, purging light from the darkness of ignorance, the glory of truth found out and charity the queen of all virtues.” Invocation could include the use of minerals, talismanic images, letters, numbers, and musical tones and intervals. Recalling the depiction of the Sun as a king, cited above, Agrippa urged that it be represented on talismans by “a king crowned, sitting in a chair, having a raven in his bosom, and under his feet a globe; he is clothed in saffron colored clothes.” With regard to musical intervals, Agrippa related the Sun to the octave or double octave. By contrast, Mercury corresponded to the perfect fourth and Jupiter to the fifth.

Agrippa saw little difference between ceremonial magic and religious ritual. Both should begin with an attitude of adoration and humble supplication: “In the first place implore God the Father... that thou also mayest be one worthy of his favor.” After warning worshippers to avoid “menstruous women” and “her who hath the hemorrhoids,” Agrippa instructed his audience:

“Thou shalt wash and anoint, and perfume thyself, and shalt offer sacrifices.” He went on to explain: “Perfumes, sacrifices, and unction penetrate all things, and open the gates of the elements and of the heavens, that through them a man can see the secrets of God, heavenly things, and those which descend from the heavens, as angels, and spirits of deep pits.”

Influenced by Giovanni Pico, Agrippa sought to integrate the theoretical Kabbalah into Hermeticism. From his time onward, the two disciplines tended to be conflated into a single esoteric system in the eyes of Christian scholars—though not in the eyes of Jewish authorities who were outraged by the contamination of their sacred tradition.

Further work to integrate the two disciplines was undertaken by the English physician and astrologer Robert Fludd (1574–1637). Between them, Agrippa and Fludd offered a remarkable aggregation of the celestial entities of Hermetic astrology, Hebrew divine names, and the Pseudo-Dionysian choirs of angels, providing a rich inventory of power-names for magical invocation. Furthermore, their cosmos had a threefold structure: the “elemental world;” the “celestial world;” and the “supercelestial,” “angelic” or “intellectual world.” Magic involving the celestial world had always been suspect because of demons among the fixed stars, but now beneficent angelic influences from the outer supercelestial world would protect against demonic influence.

Robert Fludd’s monumental *Utriusque Cosmi... Historia* (“Metaphysical, Physical, and Technical History”) recorded his thoughts on everything from mechanics to military science to astrology. The broad range of topics spanned the microcosm and the macrocosm whose mutual interaction was the basis of Hermetic magic. Figure 3 shows two illustrations from the book. The first shows a geocentric cosmos in which the Earth is surrounded by 22 concentric spheres. The outermost sphere (#1), labeled *Mens* (Latin: “Mind”), was regarded as the highest attribute comprehensible to man; God himself resided outside that sphere. Within the outer sphere lay the nine choirs of angels (#2-10). The dome of the fixed stars (#11) separated the angels from the planets (#12-18) and the four elements (#19-22). Choice of 22 as the total number of spheres suggests Kabbalistic influence. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, each of which has a numerical equivalent.

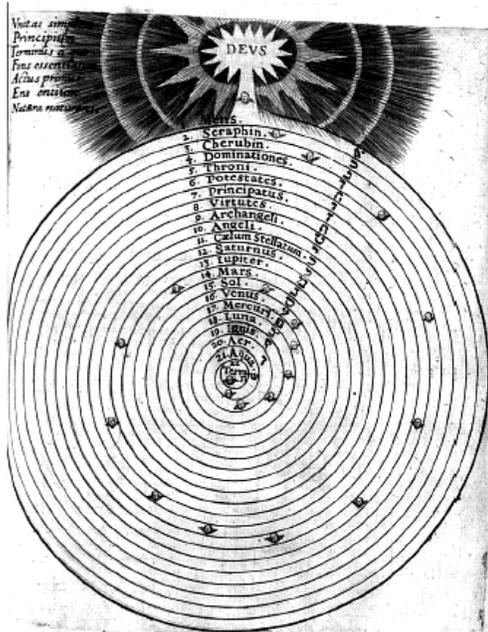
The second illustration shows the spheres with corresponding “divine numbers” from 1 to 10,000. One through nine, considered fundamental, are associated with God. The remaining numbers, in tens, hundreds and thousands, are created from them—just as God created the spheres. Numbers provided a powerful way to access and influence the supercelestial world, the domain of the angelic hierarchies. Both illustrations are typical of the spiritual geography that underlay medieval and Renaissance esotericism. Dante Alighieri’s *Paradiso*, published in the early 14th century, assumed a similar spherical structure.

Fludd’s geocentric universe might raise some eyebrows, considering that Nicolaus Copernicus’ work on the heliocentric solar system had been published more than 70 years earlier. Perhaps Fludd lived in the past; however, we must bear in mind that his goal was not to calculate planetary orbits but to explore celestial influences on the Earth and humanity. In contrast, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), who was a quarter-century older than Fludd, was intrigued by heliocentrism. Frances Yates points out that the Italian philosopher and former Dominican friar viewed the Copernican theory not just as a physical model but as a truth of profound metaphysical significance. In his view, locating the Sun at the center of the universe validated the Hermetic notion that it was the source of all magical power. Bruno believed that the planets were alive and moving under their own volition.

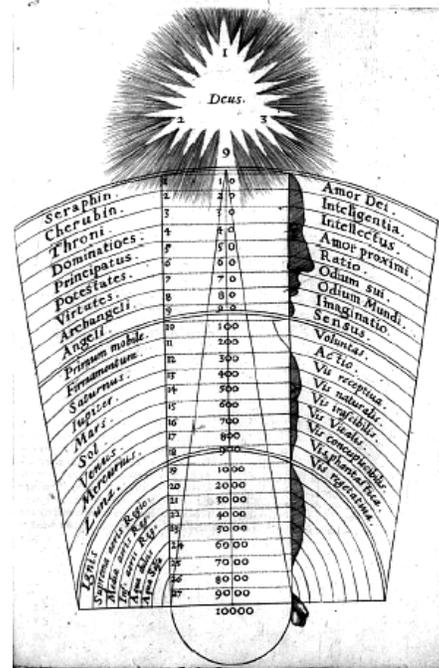
Hermeticism attracted the attention of many Christian scholars and even churchmen during the 16th century, and they tried to incorporate it into the beliefs and practices of the Roman church. In some cases, to appease ecclesiastical sensitivities, the magical elements were played down,

Figure 3. Hermetic Cosmology
(after Robert Fludd)

(a) Cosmos of Concentric Spheres



(b) The Spheres and Divine



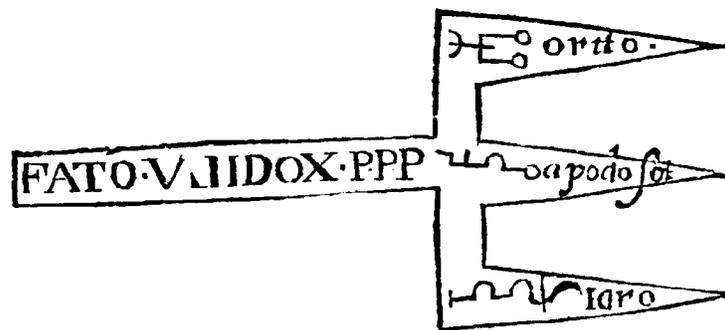
leaving Hermeticism primarily as a philosophical system and a source of prophecy. Among other things, that meant paying less attention to the *Asclepius*. The strategy was popular in France, and Philippe du Plessis Mornay (1549–1623) became a leading exponent. Other individuals and groups presented the magical elements boldly, and that was easier outside France and Italy where the Inquisition was constantly inquiring into questionable activities.

Giordano Bruno made no concessions to ecclesiastical sensitivities. He promoted more primitive forms of magic, taken from the *Picatrix* and elsewhere, and rejected key Christian doctrines. Moreover, he was fascinated by the *Corpus Hermeticum*'s prophecy that Egyptian religion would enjoy a resurrection. However that resurrection, in Bruno's opinion, was not associated with the coming of Christ but would be accomplished in his own time. Indeed as a Christian magus, he, Bruno, might well be equipped to play a leading role. Bruno believed that the restoration of Egyptian religion, promised by Hermeticism, would be the basis for a major reformation of Christianity. This was not the Reformation spearheaded by Martin Luther. Bruno was critical of Catholicism, but he believed that a reformed Catholicism offered greater potential than Protestantism. Unfortunately, Bruno's arrogance and his lack of diplomatic skills antagonized powerful individuals in almost every country he visited. Moreover, a showdown with the church became inevitable.

While Ficino, Agrippa, Fludd and Bruno approached Hermeticism as a broad, all-encompassing field, a number of Renaissance scholars focused on specific applications. One of them was the Austrian nobleman "Paracelsus" (1493–1541), whose full name was Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus Von Hohenheim. A close contemporary of Agrippa, Paracelsus applied

Hermeticism to medicine. Paracelsus prescribed mineral and herbal remedies, laying important groundwork for modern pharmacology, but he also devoted much time and energy to what we might call “alternative therapies.” He created astrological talismans for curing a variety of physical and psychological maladies. A whole chapter in *The Archidoxes* was devoted to remedies for impotence, one of whose causes, in his view, was witchcraft. To ward off such attacks the patient should “take a piece of horseshoe found in the highway, of which let there be made a trident-fork on the day of Venus and the hour of Saturn.” The suitably inscribed trident talisman is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Talismanic Image for Combating Assaults on Potency (after Paracelsus)



Like Agrippa, Paracelsus also invented an alphabet, which he called the “Alphabet of the Magi,” for engraving angelic names on talismans. Interestingly, neither Agrippa nor Paracelsus felt that Hebrew was a suitable language for that purpose.

Paracelsus regarded magic as an indispensable ingredient in healing work. Comparing his own methods to those of the clergy, he asked: “What Divine that is ignorant of magic... can heal the sick, or administer any other help to him by his faith alone?” He was scathing in his criticism of the medical establishment, which he regarded as incompetent; as a result, Paracelsus was continually persecuted fellow physicians. Nevertheless his work had lasting influence. He is mentioned by name in the *Fama Fraternitatis*, the first of the Rosicrucian Manifestos. Among his later admirers was the German esotericist Jakob Böhme, whose work will be discussed in due course.

Response from Institutional Christianity

Ecclesiastical authorities, who looked back with nostalgia to the power and glory of the medieval church, were cautious in their response to the Renaissance. Among their many fears, revival of the Greek and Roman classics represented a return to paganism, and humanism posed a threat to the theocratic social order. Growing interest in sophisticated forms of magic was an issue of grave concern.

Despite the involvement of prominent churchmen, the authorities were suspicious of the emerging interest in Hermeticism and the Kabbalah. Ficino’s work on Hermeticism led to accusations of heresy by the church, and he was forced to defend his orthodoxy. His student Pico was also questioned by the Inquisition, and 13 of his *Theses* were condemned as heretical. After fleeing to France, Pico was eventually allowed to return to Florence and was placed in the

Medicis' custody. Ironically, when Pope Alexander VI was elected to office in 1492, he not only exonerated Pico from suspicion but offered his strong support. Unfortunately, Pico was nearing the end of his days. He died at the early age of 31—poisoned, according to some reports, by his own secretary. Ficino outlived Pico by another five years.

Johann Reuchlin dedicated *De Arte Cabalistica* to Pope Leo X, but that gesture did not insulate him from ecclesiastical disfavor. When the Inquisitors of Cologne proposed to burn all Jewish books in the Holy Roman Empire, Reuchlin stepped in to oppose them, arguing that the books were a sacred and intellectual heritage. Angered by that opposition, the Inquisition sent Reuchlin to Rome and, despite Cardinal Egidio's support, he was fined for heresy. Later, like Martin Luther, Reuchlin secured the protection of a German prince. Reuchlin supported the Protestant cause and became a consultant to the reformers. He is often referred to as the "Father of the Reformation."

Guillaume Postel's books were placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1555. When he appeared before the Inquisition, he was judged to be insane rather than heretical. Notwithstanding, he was imprisoned in Rome for four years. Upon release, he returned to France and continued to preach, only to be placed under house arrest by parliament for disturbing the peace. Postel spent the last eleven years of his life in the monastery of St. Martin des Champs and died there in 1581.

Church attitudes to the Christian Kabbalah were colored by negative attitudes to Judaism. Anti-Semitism, long prevalent in northern Europe, had increased in intensity since the First Crusade, and it spread to southern Europe after the conquest of the Moors in Spain. The whole Jewish race, accused of "deicide," was marginalized in Christian society, and Jewish communities were often subjected to violent pogroms. In that climate of intolerance, Kabbalistic studies, and even the study of Hebrew, by Christian scholars raised questions in the minds of the Inquisitors. On the one hand there was the hope that Jewish studies might help win Jews to Christianity. On the other, there was fear that such studies might undermine Christian faith; Christian scholars might be tempted to convert to Judaism or persuade others to do so. Hopes, expressed by certain individuals, that the Kabbalah could provide the key to reconciliation between Christianity and Judaism were met with deep concern by Christian—and no less by Jewish—authorities.

Attitudes toward Hermeticism also hardened. During Cornelius Agrippa's tempestuous career he was denounced by secular and ecclesiastical authorities throughout Europe. His interest in magic was a major issue. Also his assertion that the Kabbalah could be linked to Gnosticism alarmed ecclesiastics who were fond of quoting the church fathers' diatribes against leading Gnostics. Agrippa was forced to move from place to place, and several times he only narrowly avoided arrest. Interestingly, one of his few loyal protectors was Hermann von Wied, archbishop of Cologne, and the *Occult Philosophy* was published in the archbishop's jurisdiction. Finally, under pressure from the Inquisition, Agrippa was forced to renounce the study of magic. He spent the last years of his life in quiet piety and died in France in 1535.

The outspoken Giordano Bruno, whose diplomatic skills never matched his intellectual gifts, became a major target of the institutional church. In a terrible reenactment of the betrayal of Jan Hus by the Council of Constance, Bruno was lured to Rome on a treacherous promise of safe conduct and arrested. After long imprisonment and interrogation by the Inquisition, he was burned at the stake in 1600. More fortunate was the English poet John Donne (1572–1631). Born a Catholic, he avoided persecution in Elizabethan England by converting to Anglicanism, whereupon he was appointed dean of St Paul's Cathedral.

Athanasius Kirchner's situation provides an interesting case-study. He was heavily involved in studies of the Kabbalah and Hermeticism. Yet he was also a member of the Society of Jesus, which was founded to spearhead the Counter-Reformation, whose goals included the eradication

of esotericism within the church. He was never persecuted by Rome, but he was nearly killed by an advancing army of Protestants to whom Jesuits were anathema.

Hostility to Kabbalistic studies extended to the Protestant churches. Jakob Böhme always considered himself a devout Lutheran, but he was critical of institutional Christianity and its warring sects, comparing them to “Babel and the Antichrist.” Böhme’s anticlericalism and unconventional theological views drew continual fire from Lutheran authorities. Not surprisingly, the church reacted negatively to suggestions that evil should be addressed by resolving pairs of opposites. Traditional moral theology, with its strong emphasis on sin, judgment and hell, gave the church valuable power over people’s lives. Silenced for several years, Böhme began writing again in secrecy. His nemesis, the chief pastor of Görlitz, Gregory Richter, denounced Böhme from the pulpit and inflamed public opinion against him. On his deathbed Böhme is reported to have said “Now I go hence into Paradise.” But his grave was desecrated by a mob.

Major Concepts of the Christian Kabbalah

The Judaic Kabbalah was never a unified system of mysticism, occultism or philosophy; different teachers pursued their own visions and offered their own perspectives. Correspondingly, it would be unrealistic to look for a high degree of coherence within the Christian Kabbalah. Nevertheless certain recurrent themes occupied the minds of prominent Christian scholars.

New World Religion?

Exploration of the Kabbalah and Hermeticism was motivated to a large degree by the hope of discovering the timeless foundations of all world religions. To discover those foundations could not only strengthen Christianity but might provide new doctrinal insights. Giovanni Pico sought to integrate the newly available Kabbalistic and Hermetic teachings with Christianity. Claiming that Christianity was founded largely on Kabbalistic teachings, he stated in one of his theses: “No science can better convince us of the divinity of Jesus Christ than magic and the Kabbalah.” And in *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico asserted that the Kabbalah is full of implicitly Christian doctrine. Johann Reuchlin made a similar claim, arguing in his *On the Art of the Kabbalah* that works of Jewish mysticism reflected classical traditions and supported Christian doctrine. Reuchlin also asserted that “without [the Kabbalah] none can achieve something as elusive, as difficult, as the divine.”

To discover universal religious foundations also had evangelical or ecumenical potential. Certain scholars dreamed of building an all-embracing theology that could either bring Jews and Muslims into the Christian fold or unify Christianity, Judaism and Islam in an all-embracing world religion. Christianity was already viewed as an outgrowth and fulfillment of Judaism; and, if indeed the roots of Kabbalah and Hermeticism extended back to Abraham, all three Abrahamic religions might be able to find common ground.

One of the first individuals to explore the prospects for reconciliation was the Catalan philosopher and mystic, Raymon Lull (1232–c.1316). His circumstances certainly encouraged ecumenical visions, and his vision was suitably broad. Although Catalan was by that time predominantly Catholic, Muslims and Jews continued to play important roles in its politics and culture, as they had previously done in Moorish Spain. Lull identified nine *Dignities*, or *Dignitaries*, which he claimed transcended religious boundaries: *Bonitas* (Goodness), *Magnitudo* (Greatness), *Eternitas* (Eternity), *Potestas* (Power), *Sapientia* (Wisdom), *Voluntas* (Will), *Virtus* (Virtue), *Veritas* (Truth), and *Gloria* (Glory). Later Kabbalists would correlate these dignitaries with the first nine sefirot.

During the Renaissance Egidio Antonini da Viterbo helped bridge the gap between Christianity and other major religions. With his deep knowledge of Hebrew he was in an ideal position to reach out to Jews. In England John Donne believed that the Kabbalah offered a way to reconcile Judaism and Christianity. Giordano Bruno, by contrast, antagonized ecclesiastical authorities by his strident claim that Egyptian religion eclipsed both Christianity and Judaism in importance.

Efforts to synthesize Judaism and Christianity were opposed as strongly by Jewish authorities as by Christian ecclesiastical authorities. However the work of Christian Kabbalists was not totally rejected by Jewish scholars. In particular, the work of the German philosopher Franz Josef Molitor (1779–1860) has won the admiration from Jewish historians. Gershom Scholem judged his work to be “far superior to that of most Jewish scholars of his time.”

The Nature of God

A topic of particular interest to the Renaissance Kabbalists was the Trinity. The three “sefiroth,” depicted in Petrus Alphonsi’s glyph, mentioned earlier, corresponded to Chokmah, Binah/Tabun and Daath which were mentioned in *Exodus* 31:3. On the other hand, Dactylus Hebraeus asserted that the first three sefiroth: Kether, Chokmah and Binah, corresponded to the Trinity. The 17th-century Christian von Rosenroth came to the same conclusion. He also saw connections between the prototypical man Adam Kadmon, who featured in the Kabbalistic creation story, and Christ. The 18th-century English diarist Ambrose Serle also explored the correspondence between the first three sefiroth and the Trinity. Trinities can be extracted from the Tree of Life in many ways, all of them revealing important correspondences, but none completely satisfying in its symbolism. The various options will be explored in a later segment of this course.

The third-century CE Neoplatonist Plotinus had taught that all manifest reality, including the trinitarian aspects, resulted from an emanation from the Godhead. This same doctrine became central to the Kabbalistic model: the divine light streamed down into the sefiroth from the *Ain Sof*. Plotinus also asserted that the universe represented a further emanation. Kabbalistic teachings strongly affirmed that principle, declaring that even lowest of the sefiroth, *Malkuth* which corresponded to our world, was divine. Indeed, *Malkuth* was commonly identified with the *Shekinah*, the indwelling presence of God in the world.

Presumably the Christian Kabbalists recognized that the Neoplatonic model implied that the Trinity is hierarchical and that the world is divine. However official Christian doctrine insisted that the trinitarian persons are co-equal and the universe was created *ex nihilo*, “from nothing.” The universe, according to the church, was certainly not divine; it was corrupt, even evil. Furthermore, official Christianity did not admit the existence of a Godhead distinct from or overshadowing the Trinity. In Christian theology God the Father plays the *de-facto* role of a Godhead, with the unfortunate implication that the highest level of divinity is masculine.

The Dominican friar and scholar Meister Eckhart (c.1260–c.1328) never mentioned the Kabbalah, but he leaned toward the concept of emanation from an undifferentiated Godhead resembling the *Ain Sof*. For that and other views he came under suspicion of heresy. However, over the next several centuries, the confluence of Neoplatonic and Kabbalistic teachings almost guaranteed that other Christian scholars would find similar notions of emanation appealing.

One was Jakob Böhme, who was influenced both by Eckhart and by the Kabbalah. He was fascinated by the passage in *John*: “The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” [John 1:5], and he interpreted it to mean that the Godhead is unknowable but immanent. He referred to the Godhead as the *Ungrund*, the “Void.” A similar notion would be promoted by the 20th-century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. Böhme also argued that the Godhead emanates first as a trinity and then as a septenary, foreshadowing modern esoteric teachings on the seven rays. In the *Sefer Yetzirah*, emanation in Three and then in Seven was related

symbolically to the three mother letters and seven double letters in the Hebrew alphabet. François Mercurio van Helmont (1618–1699), physician to the Electress of Pfalz and acquaintance of Gottfried Leibniz, identified the seven lower sefirot with the Seven Spirits before the Throne mentioned in *Revelation* 1:4.

Christ and the Eucharist

The suggestion that the name “Jesus” could be related to the Jewish Tetragrammaton may have come originally from church father Jerome. But it was the German Kabbalist Johann Reuchlin who is remembered for exploring that notion. Specifically, Reuchlin noted that the Hebrew name of Jesus, *Yehoshuah* (YHShVH) consisted of the Tetragrammaton (YHVH) augmented at its midpoint by the letter *shin* (Sh). Later work on the same lines was done by Francesco Giorgi. Reuchlin proceeded to suggest that God had revealed himself in three stages, each of which corresponded to a particular divine name. During the world epoch which began with Abraham, God revealed himself through the three-letter name Shaddai (ShDY). In the second epoch, ushered in by Moses, he revealed himself through the four-letter Tetragrammaton. In the present, messianic epoch, initiated by Jesus Christ, he reveals himself through the five-letter *Yehoshuah* (YHShVH). Thus, Jesus fulfilled and extended the Jewish covenant by completing the divine name.

Association of the name of Jesus with the Tetragrammaton had the potential to link the invocatory power of the Judaic and Christian traditions. The 17th-century Franciscan friar Chrysostomus à Capranica suggested that the emperor Ferdinand II invoke the name *Yehoshuah* to ensure success in a military campaign against the Turks. The name of Jesus, long considered of value in devotional practice, took on occult power. Correspondences between the names also had symbolic significance. For example, *shin* resembled and indeed symbolized “fire;” accordingly, Jesus’ name could be interpreted as “the Fire of God.” Reuchlin also noted that the Tetragrammaton was a divine father figure, while *shin* is a “mother letter;” from that perspective “Jesus” can be interpreted as the son of the Father and Mother. It was significant, he argued, that, in the messianic epoch, God had incarnated through a woman. The very name “Jesus” captured in symbolic form the doctrine of the virgin birth.

Christian Kabbalists identified the sefirah *Tifareth*, the mediator between *Kether* and *Malkuth*, with Jesus Christ. The Jewish Kabbalists had insisted that *Malkuth* was associated with the feminine Shekinah, lending further support to the notion that Christ was born from the Father (Kether) and the woman (Malkuth). Christ was the Logos, the restorer of harmony after the disruption of the fall of Adam. It should be noted that originally *Logos* connoted “mediator” or “bringer of harmony”; its interpretation as “the Word” was a late development, popularized by the 17th-century King James Bible. The divine essence poured down on humanity through Christ. In response, through Christ we must seek “redemption” in the form of union with God. Humanity might be estranged from God but was potentially divine and capable of a different kind of redemption from the one customarily taught by the church. That new view of redemption had much in common with the Eastern Orthodox notion of *theosis*, or “deification.” Meister Eckhart had found that concept appealing.

Hermetic Kabbalists associated Tifareth symbolically with gold and Malkuth with lead. Those associations naturally prompted the deduction that the spiritual path from Malkuth to Tifareth must be equivalent to alchemical transformation. Central to the alchemical process was production of the “philosopher’s stone.” Even small quantities of the stone were believed to be capable of transmuting base metals into gold—or, alternatively, to procure healings and restore lost youth. The philosopher’s stone was often compared with Christ.

In turn, Hermeticists schooled in Catholic doctrine compared alchemical transmutation with transubstantiation in the Eucharist. Transubstantiation, according to the Church of Rome,

involves the transformation of the elements into the body and blood of Christ. An audacious attempt to relate the Eucharist to alchemy was made by the early 16th-century Nicholas Melchior of Hermannstadt, Romania. Melchior's instructions for the alchemical process were formatted to resemble the liturgy of the Mass. For example, in place of the usual *Kyrie Eleison...* ("Lord have mercy on us..."), Melchior offered: *Kyrie, Ignis Divine...* ("Lord, divine fire, help our hearts, that we may be able, to your praise, to expand the sacrament of the art, have mercy"). Although no explicit reference was made to the consecration, modern psychologist Carl Jung judged the work to be in bad taste.

Eucharistic transubstantiation differed from the transmutation of metals in the important respect that the "accidents," or outward appearance, of the elements remained unchanged, while the inner "substance" was believed to be changed into Christ's body and blood. So far as is known, no alchemist ever claimed to have transmuted only the "substance" of the lead into gold; nor would such a claim have been received well by skeptics. But if alchemy commanded less faith than did the Eucharist, the rare successes were all the more impressive. The few individuals who reportedly succeeded in transmuting lead into gold seem to have transmuted the accidents as well as the substance.

Mary

Plotinus asserted that the third aspect of the Trinity was dual in function: looking up to the divine Monad and down to the created universe. The two functions could correspond to the Holy Spirit and the created world. However, Christian Kabbalists suggested that they might correspond to the Holy Spirit and Mary, the mother of Christ. Certainly the notion, captured by the creed, that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary suggests a close relationship between the two.

Binah's feminine characteristics give it obvious potential for representing Mary. Or Mary can be associated with Malkuth. In either case, geometric patterns within the Tree of Life offer profound insights into the relationships among Christ, Mary, and the Holy Spirit. Christ and Mary take the place of the divine son and daughter/bride in the Judaic Kabbalah.

Mary and the Holy Spirit correspond to the lower and higher aspects of the Shekinah, the indwelling glory of God. Paracelsus viewed Mary as the embodiment of a divine feminine principle that, together with God the Father, gave birth to the divine Son. Presumably the traditional role of the Holy Spirit was absorbed into that feminine principle.

Dualism, Good and Evil

The power of the Kabbalah to model the juxtaposition and resolution of polarities persuaded Guillaume Postel that God manifested in both masculine and feminine form. Over time this belief took on more than theoretical interest. In 1547 Postel met a Venetian prophetess named Joanna, whom he believed to be a female incarnation of Christ. He is quoted as saying: "The Word has been made man, but the world will only be saved when the Word shall be made woman."

The human and cosmic aspects of gender also fascinated Jakob Böhme: "The masculine principle is predominantly anthropomorphic and creative, whereas the feminine principle is predominantly cosmic and birth-giving." Echoing a theory usually attributed to Plato's Aristophanes, Böhme asserted that Adam initially was androgynous and virginal. In Plato's *Symposium* Aristophanes declared that man was originally androgynous but was cut in two by Zeus to curb his pride. Ever since, man has sought his female half, and vice versa. That virginity was embodied in Sophia: "not a female, but a chasteness and purity without a blemish." Sophia was the direct Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Chokmah*. Adam lost his primeval virginity through the fall, and

Sophia's place was taken by his earthly companion Eve. Thereafter, according to Böhme, man remained in an incomplete state, yearning for his primeval wholeness. The solution lay not in withdrawal into ascetic celibacy, as the church urged, but in a spiritual reunion of the masculine and feminine. Through woman man could once again find his primeval Sophia. The masculine-feminine tension was just one expression of the fundamental juxtaposition and resolution of pairs of opposites. The tension might be the source of much suffering, but it provided an environment in which our spiritual potential could be realized.

Another aspect of the pairs of opposites explored in the Kabbalah was good and evil. Kabbalistic teachings took a more sensitive attitude to those polarities than did orthodox Christianity. Kabbalists viewed morality less as an absolute than as a question of balance. Certain actions produce imbalance and call for complementary actions to restore balance. For example, severity, represented by *Geburah*, needs to be balanced by kindness and generosity, represented by *Chesed/Gedulah*; otherwise it harms the actor as well as others. On the other hand, excessive generosity may need to be balanced by prudent withholding of bounty so that recipients can develop a sense of values. The resolution of opposites would be illustrated well in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* by Dame Concord and her twin sons Love and Hate.

A relatively late contribution to the Christian Kabbalah was made by the French philosopher and occultist Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803), who wrote under the pseudonym “The Unknown Philosopher.” Saint-Martin, who was influenced by Böhme and whose followers, the Martinists, became famous in 19th-century France, affirmed that Christ was the repairer of the universe, echoing a concept explored in the creation story of the Safed Kabbalists. Through Christ, an individual—or perhaps humanity as a whole—could return to the primeval state of the Garden of Eden.

The subject of polarities in the Kabbalah will be explored in more detail in a later segment of the course.

Reflections

The emergence of the Christian Kabbalah was a tribute to timeless and universal value— theological, cosmological, social and psychological—of its Judaic antecedent. It was also a tribute to the vision of Renaissance scholars who recognized the Kabbalah's potential to describe and explore Christian beliefs about God, the universe, society and the individual. If we look for one man whose contribution to the Christian Kabbalah was pivotal, he would have to be Giovanni Pico of Florence. Pico popularized the study of Hebraic texts, which would give Christian scholarship a broader focus than it had had in medieval times. He gave Kabbalistic studies legitimacy in Christian circles. Moreover, he promoted the view that use of the intellect enabled man to ascend the chain of being—or equivalently the sefiroth—and approach the angelic realm, even the divine realm. Neglect of the intellect, by contrast, reduced man to a vegetative or animal level.

Later generations of Christian scholars built upon Pico's work and offered new insights into important areas of Christian doctrine. Those areas included the Godhead, the Trinity, the Eucharist, the name of Jesus, and the nature of good and evil. But despite the enthusiasm of its proponents and the success of their work, the Christian Kabbalah never became part of mainstream Christianity beliefs or practices. Interest was confined to a handful of intellectuals, mystics, and eccentric churchmen.

Our examination of the Christian Kabbalah forced us to study the parallel esoteric system of Hermeticism, which itself is of considerable merit. Moreover, Hermeticism influenced Christianity before the Kabbalah did, and it was the fascination with Hermeticism that helped generate interest in the Kabbalah among Christian scholars. On the other hand, Hermeticism

steered the Kabbalah away from its mystical and intellectual roots toward a preoccupation with magic. Assertions, some of them lacking in diplomacy, that the Kabbalah and Hermeticism held the keys to reform of Christianity could scarcely be expected to win over traditionalists in the church. Ecclesiastical authorities became increasingly suspicious of anything with occult associations, and, as we have seen, prominent scholars were persecuted, imprisoned or executed.

Hostility to the Kabbalah was also motivated by anti-Semitism and by fears that it was a “Trojan horse” that could undermine Christian orthodoxy. Ironically, fears that the Kabbalah was becoming “Christianized” discredited it in the eyes of Jewish authorities and contributed to the decline of the Judaic Kabbalah in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Even within esoteric circles, the contribution of Christian Kabbalists was not always recognized in their own time. For example, Jakob Böhme’s work did not win acclaim until several decades after his death, when it inspired the Philadelphian Society, an esoteric group formed in England in 1670. Eventually Böhme’s work influenced Friedrich Hegel, William Blake, and psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. Böhme was also held in high regard in 19th-century Russia, where mystics and even ordinary people referred to him as “the holy Jakob Böhme among our fathers.”

The decline of Hermeticism had multiple causes. Ecclesiastical attitudes were always mixed, the Scientific Revolution challenged the worldview on which Hermeticism was based, and 18th-century Enlightenment intellectuals depicted Hermeticism—along with major elements of traditional Christianity—as superstition. Since that time, magicians have been ridiculed by the scientific community as much as they have been condemned by the church.

By then, Hermeticism had already suffered a major setback. In 1614 the Swiss classical scholar and philologist Isaac Casaubon demonstrated that the classical Hermetic texts were not nearly so old as previously believed. The vocabulary used in the texts was relatively modern, and the texts referred to events in the early Christian era. The “prophecies,” which so fascinated the church fathers were not prophecies at all; they were written by people familiar with emerging Christian doctrine. We now know that the texts were probably written in the first three centuries CE and even the title “Trismegistus” was itself comparatively modern. Realization that the Pseudo-Hermes was not the “Gentile Prophet” of Old-Testament times destroyed any expectation that the Hermetic teachings might have something valuable to contribute to Christianity. It gave orthodox elements of the Counter-Reformation the momentum to stifle what influence Hermeticism still had in upper echelons of the Roman church.

The Protestant churches, whose negative attitude to magic extended even to the Eucharist, were even more hostile to the Kabbalah and Hermeticism. Nevertheless, individual Protestants like Jakob Böhme, Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, and Emanuel Swedenborg actively engaged in esoteric studies. Moreover the Rosicrucian movement was entirely Protestant in its outlook. Perhaps the very demystification of Protestant beliefs and practices spurred compensatory interest among those with a hunger for mystery. The longer-term impact of the 17th-century hostility was to drive esoteric studies underground. Whereas the Kabbalah and Hermeticism had been topics of open discourse, they retreated more and more behind the closed doors of private salons or occult societies. Some of them eventually evolved into Masonic or Rosicrucian lodges.

Resources

- Ernst Cassirer et al. *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948. (eds.)
- Tobias Churton *The Magus of Freemasonry*. Inner Traditions, 2004.
- Dion Fortune. *The Mystical Qabalah*, revised edition. Weiser Books, 1935/2000.

- Adolphe Franck *The Kabbalah: The Religious Philosophy of the Hebrews.* Bell Publishing Co., 1843/1940.
- S. L. MacGregor Mathers *The Kabbalah Unveiled.* Arkana, 1926.
- Paracelsus *The Archidoxes of Magic.* Ibis Press, 1656/1975.
- Clement Salaman *Asclepius: the Perfect Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus.* Duckworth, 2007.
- Clement Salaman, et al. *The Way of Hermes.* Inner Traditions, 2000.
- Gershom Scholem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism.* Schocken Books, 1946/1954.
- Arthur E. Waite. *The Holy Kabbalah.* Citadel Press, 1929.
- Frances Yates *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition.* Vintage Books, 1964.
The Rosicrucian Enlightenment, Routledge, 1972.
The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age. Routledge, 1979.

Journal Articles:

- John F. Nash “Service Ideals in the Rosicrucian Movement.” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Winter 2005, pp. 33-42.
- “Origins of the Christian Kabbalah.” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Spring 2008, pp. 43-58.
- “Esoteric Perspectives on the Eucharist.” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Summer 2008, pp. 34-56.
- “Hermeticism: Rise and Fall of an Esoteric System.” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Part I: Winter 2009, pp. 39-51; Part II: Spring 2009, pp. 33-44.
- “Mary: Blessed Virgin and World Mother.” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Winter 2010, pp. 19-39.

Assignment

Instructions for preparing your report are provided below. Your report should be headed SES Kabbalah Course, Segment 5, and should include your name, email address, and date of submittal. Send your report to seselectives@gmail.com.

- Following are a number of issues raised in this segment of the course. Write a paper discussing two of the issues in depth, or all of them more briefly.
 - (a) Why were Christian scholars so interested in the classical Hermetic texts (a) in the Middle Ages, and (b) during the Renaissance? Did it really matter that the authenticity of the Hermetic texts was successfully challenged in the 17th century?

- (b) Do you feel that Christian authorities' negative response to the Hermetic/Christian Kabbalah was justified? Why was official Christianity suspicious, even though leading churchmen were personally—and in some cases deeply—involved?
 - (c) List areas in which the Hermetic/Christian Kabbalah has claimed to shed light on traditional Christian doctrine. Choose two areas for detailed discussion. Do you feel that the Kabbalah's contribution to Christian teachings is potentially significant?
 - (d) Explore the similarities and differences in the relationships between the Zeir Anpin/Holy One and Nukvah/Shekinah, in the Judaic Kabbalah, and between Christ and Mary—both in the Christian Kabbalah and in traditional Christian teachings. Comment on Christianity's reluctance to attribute divine status to Christ's mother, whereas esoteric Judaism happily gives the Holy One two divine parents.
 - (e) Do you think the so-called "Christian Kabbalah" of the Renaissance and later was really just Hermeticism with a thin Kabbalistic gloss? Some modern writers have even claimed that there really is no "Christian Kabbalah." Comment.
 - (f) Based on what you have learned in Segments 4 and 5, discuss the assertion that "evil" has no objective basis, and that morality should be viewed simply as the search for balance between pairs of opposites.
 - (g) How should "magic" be interpreted in the 21st century? Identify areas in which higher power can legitimately be channeled to bring about changes on the physical plane.
- Do you have any questions or comments about this segment of the course?

The instructor will critique the report, respond to questions, offer suggestions for further study, and provide encouragement in your subsequent work in the course.