Esotericism and Christian Kabbalah: 1480-1520

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THREE TYPES of esotericism[1] funneled through several important scholars of the period 1480-1520:

- *Hermeticism*, in connection with Platonist writings;
- *kabbalah*, wrested from a vast array of rabbinic literature; and
- *magic*, culled from ancient and medieval compendia

This arsenal of spiritual literature was marshaled to placate the restless yearnings of Christian intellectuals to determine a *perennial philosophy*—all, however, turned to support Christian doctrine. This period also saw a shift away from Aristotelian scholasticism toward Platonic, or Neoplatonic, idealism.

These streams of knowledge did not remain distinct: they were entwined to form what has been called the "Hermetic-Cabalist" tradition,[2] a movement in thought most significantly affected, as its name suggests, by the literature attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, namely the *Corpus Hermeticum* and *Asclepius*, and the traditions of Moses, chiefly the oral tradition of the Jews, including *kabbalah*. Blended throughout were notions connected with Plato (especially as interpreted by Plotinus) and Pythagoras (the "Jewish Grandfather to Christianity"). Added to this mix was a range of magical practices derived from such works as the *Picatrix*, the compilations of Albertus Magnus, the various grimoires including the *Raziel* traditions, and the magical portions of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

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1 We must allow the conventional use of the term *esotericism* as outlined by Antoine Faivre and developed by Wouter Hanegraaff *et al.* Otherwise, we might say, for instance, that the rational philosopher Maimonides was *esoteric* in that the deepest truths which he conveyed, so he claimed, were hidden so that only the wise could discern them.

For a study of medieval philosophical notions of esotericism, in particular in Maimonides, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (London – Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952) and the first chapter of Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden – Köln: E. J. Brill, 1980; second edition Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2014), which deals with Apocalyptic and its modes of biblical interpretation.

2 Ref. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

Research activities of the period under discussion (1480-1520) were ostensibly concerned with the recovery of texts and their right interpretation and use. Alas, Renaissance impressions of the provenance and dates of the key writings were generally wrong.

Further, with regard to Hebrew literature, Jerome Friedman points out

> In 1550 a veritable wealth of Christian-Hebraica existed whereas but fifty years earlier fewer than one hundred Christians in Europe could read Hebrew and none could even imagine writing in that strange tongue.[3]

Direct contact between Christian scholars, especially those in Italy, and Jewish scholars increased greatly due to the Alhambra Decree, or Edict of Expulsion, issued by Ferdinand II and Isabella I in 1492. One would rightly infer from Friedman's statement that, in the period we are considering, Christian students were quite dependent on learned Jews for their access to Judaism and *kabbalah*.[4] Converts, too, aided the process.

While our focus is the literature of the age—both the revival and translation of old works and the creation of new ones—it is difficult to speak of esotericism and Christian *kabbalah* in this period without focusing on the literary efforts of a mere handful of major players: Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), and Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), with acknowledgement to the contributions of Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447-1500), Leone Ebreo (146?-152?), Francesco Giorgi (1467-1540), Egidio da Viterbo (1469-1532), Giulio Camillo (1480-1544), Jean Thénaud (*fl.* 1511-1523), and Paul Ricius (1506-1541), recalling that Trithemius (1462-1516) and Paracelsus (1493-1541) were also active at this time. Much of the material collected and processed in this period turned up in what is perhaps the single-most influential work in all Western occultism, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*[5] by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535).

FICINO'S RECONCILIATION OF HERMETIC ESOTERICISM & MAGIC WITH CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Under the patronage of the Medici Court, Florence became a center of intellectual and artistic activity in diverse fields. Whether it is fact or persistent fable, the commonly accepted story has it that Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464), the powerful head of the Medici dynasty, was inspired by the lectures delivered in Florence (1438) by the aged Greek Neoplatonist

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3 *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1983), page 13.

4 The debt that the early Christian kabbalists owe to Jewish teachers should not be overlooked. In a discussion of the Renaissance period, Eisig Silberschlag (*From Renaissance to Renaissance*, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973, pages 3-4), writes:

> Many outstanding teachers who taught some eminent Christians were in the forefront of their age: Mauele da S. Miniato, the erudite banker and teacher of the Florentine statesman Giannozzo Manetti; the philosophical scholars Elijah del Medigo and Yohanan Alemanno, teachers of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola; Obadiah Sforno, the physician, the commentator on the Pentateuch and the teacher of Johannes Reuchlin; Elijah Levita, the itinerant scholar, grammarian and teacher to such eminent personalities as Edigio da Viterbo, the General of the Order of the Hermits of Saint Augustine, who became cardinal in 1517, Mario Grimani, the patriarch of Aquila, George de Selve, bishop of Lavaur, Sebastian Münster, the humanist of Basle and Paul Fagius, the reformed minister; Leone Modena who taught Giovanni Vislingio, professor of anatomy in Padua, Vincenzo Noghera, the scholarly Theologian.

5 Book 1 – Paris: 1531; Books 1-3 – Cologne: 1533. Although published in the 'thirties, *De occulta philosophia* was, for the most part, composed in the 'teens.

Pletho (Georgius Gemistus, 1355?-1452?), known as the "second Plato."[6] Pletho's compendium of the lectures which Cosimo found so compelling, *De differentiis* [ON THE DIFFERENCES OF ARISTOTLE FROM PLATO], argues against Aristotelian scholasticism in favor of Platonic idealism, which lays more power in God as Creator, and this, Pletho would claim, made Plato—at least on this point—consonant with Christian doctrine. The fact that the ancient pagan Plato was the source of such ideas enlivened the notion of a *perennial philosophy*, a doctrine inspired by God granted to a few enlightened individuals[7] which would reflect the truths and deepest messages of Christianity even though received and written before mankind had the benefit of Christ's incarnation. Pletho's celebration of the sympathies of Plato and Christianity fit the agenda to revitalize the Church by steering the emerging syncretic movement into rallying its discoveries from outside the Canon toward the enhancement of Christian doctrine. Cosimo, motivated by this providential method of bolstering the Church with ancient philosophy, chartered Marsilio Ficino, a young scholar chaffing to shed stiff and dry scholasticism, to administer the revival of the Platonic Academy.

Ficino, who is best known for composing the first complete translation of the works of Plato in Latin and for his lengthy commentaries on them, also translated the writings of the third- and fourth-century Neoplatonists and, most significant in the present context, the esoteric *Corpus Hermeticum*. So important did Cosimo feel the *Hermetica* were that he enjoined Ficino to interrupt his translation of Plato—or so another popular account would have us believe.[8] These texts, ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, legendary contemporary of Moses, were placed, in the minds of our Renaissance scholars, among the most remote of the Egyptian antiquities. They were thought to represent the *philosophia perennis*, perennial philosophy, or *prisca theologia*, ancient theology, which predicted the true Christian message. The *Hermetica* were actually compiled, if not written, in the second or third century of the Common Era.

Ficino's project not only made available a vast pool of pagan philosophy and esotericism but also developed through his own writings into an attempt to reconcile the doctrines within this literature with those of the Church. Along with his expanded philosophical compass, Ficino incorporated astrological and "natural" magic into his scholarly Platonism.

Ficino penned a cornerstone text on magic, *De vita coelitus comparanda*,[9] but, in this, he put himself in peril of being condemned as a heretic; Ficino was, after all, a priest. But, as Sears R. Jayne observes, only by "keeping everything on a purely intellectual level"[10] was Ficino able to integrate such a broad inventory of religious, philosophical, and magical elements into his ultimate attempt to reconcile faith and reason. So, while his endeavor certainly incorporated the *esoteric*, it was not fundamentally *mystical* in the sense of striving for ecstatic union with God or rapturous journeys into heaven, though this was an occasional motif for

6 The writings of Ficino mention these lectures delivered by Pletho which inspired the patriarch of the Medici court to revive the Platonic academy under Ficino's leadership.

7 Namely Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, and Pythagoras.

8 Ficino's translation of the first fourteen sections of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was published in 1471, whereas his translation of Plato was not published until 1484.

9 *De vita coelitus comparanda* was the third volume of Ficino's *De triplici vita*, published in 1489.

10 Sears R. Jayne, *John Colet and Marsilio Ficino* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1963), page 59.

Ficino.[11] Nor was it *gnostic* in the sense of seeing the universe as sharply divided into good and evil with progress toward end times as a war between the two. Ficino's approach was, rather, the precursor of what has become today's *holistic* or *universalist* approach, which is marked as much by its eclecticism as its esotericism.

In its esoteric aspects, Ficino's approach required a sympathetic universe in which celestial powers could be directed through the right use of physical objects and activity. The link is the reciprocal affinity between the World-Soul and each individual's soul:

> The World-Soul generates the forms of natural things through seminal reasons [*rationes seminales*], which remain in touch with the ideas; hence, Soul touches the matter that she had originally formed through *rationes*. When the magus manipulates matter specified by forms associated with *rationes* of a given kind, he gains access though such *rationes* to higher powers of the same kind.[12]

This all fit well into the image of the cosmos formed by Ficino's drawing on Plotinus' *Enneads*, but tempered to suit a general Christian assumption. At the head of Ficino's universe was an amalgam of Plato's highest form, the *Good*, and Aristotle's *prime mover*. The next level was the *Angelic Soul*, followed by the *Rational Soul*, with which humans could engage. Between the *Rational Soul* and the final stage, *matter*, was *Quality*, a medium which binds the spiritual world with the physical. Far from rejecting matter as "anti-substantial and evil," Ficino believed that within material objects dwelled God-granted powers which could be guided and set to specific constructive purposes by the learned operator. Ficino based his organization of sympathies on the correspondence which exists between powers manifest as planets and all objects under their rule. Thus, with a knowledge of what natural manifestations were ruled by which star, Man could control both his universe and his own destiny, for sympathies in the universe allow influence, if not control, by proxy *via* emblems. Since Man is the microcosm, he contains all in potential within himself, ready to be conjured and commanded.[13]

ANTECEDENTS: THE FIRST CHRISTIAN KABBALISTS AND JEWISH *KABBALAH*

The project fashioned by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was similar to that of his mentor Ficino. Pico too incorporated magic into his grand syncretic design, but his enterprise was singularly characterized by the addition of *kabbalah* into his attempt to harmonize "all known systems of thought,"[14] in particular, to reconcile Plato and Aristotle.

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11 For instance, refer to Ficino's premise of a double light of intelligence, one "natural and innate," the other "divine and infused"—ref. Tamara Albertini (citing Ficino's *Commentaire sur le Banquet*, IV.4, p. 172) in "Intellect and Will in Marsilio Ficino: Two Correlatives of a Renaissance Concept of the Mind," in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, edited by Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees with Martin Davies (Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2001) pp. 203-227.

12 Brian Copenhaver, "Renaissance Magic and Neoplatonic Philosophy: « *Ennead* » 4.3-5 in Ficino's « *De vita coelitus comparanda* »," in *Marcilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, edited by G. C. Garfagnini (L. S. Olschki: Firenze, 1986).

13 One important Hermetic work, *Asclepius*, discusses the art of "making gods," that is, summoning gods to animate statues. It is interesting to note that Moshe Idel makes a compelling argument for identifying Hermes with Enoch through showing the influence of the Hebrew Book of Enoch (*Sefer ha-Hekhalot* [BOOK OF THE HEKHALOT], known as 3 Enoch), a text of the *hekhalot* tradition, on *Asclepius*. See Idel's "Hermeticism and Judaism," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: Folger Books, 1988), pages 59-76.

14 Joseph L. Blau, *Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), page 20.

With a more extensive direct knowledge of Hebrew and *kabbalah* than that of Pico—surely enhanced by attaining such knowledge from the texts in their original language—German Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin too sought to pool the wealth of classical philosophy, the traditions of Orpheus, and especially the teachings of Pythagoras, with the range of rabbinic writings, all in support of the pure and true *esoteric* message of Christianity.

With Pico and Reuchlin, we must confront the term "Christian Kabbalah," which is somewhat problematic—and even more so is reference to "Christian kabbalists." Indeed, one might read informed accounts of both Pico and Reuchlin only to discover little or no mention of *kabbalah*.

If a definition of *kabbalah* within a Jewish context is limited to the movement begun among certain Jewish mystics and esotericists of the late twelfth[15] and early thirteenth centuries[16], then, in one respect, so-called Christian kabbalists had too broad a concept of what *kabbalah* was, while, in another respect, they developed only a portion of the contemporary kabbalistic doctrine. Our early Christian kabbalists assumed that (Jewish) *kabbalah* was as ancient as the *Torah*, if not more so (certainly Mosaic—if not Adamic), even as they had assumed the remote antiquity of the Hermetic writings. With all this, they considered *kabbalah* to be the Oral Law in its entirety according to the legend of its inception as proffered in the account of 4 Ezra (II Esdras) 14:42-48; this would include the *Talmud*, various *Midrashim*, and other rabbinic writings. For Pico, this Oral Tradition, or *cabala*, even included Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides.[17]

Of course, the effort to find support for Christian doctrine in Jewish sources begins with the *New Testament*'s peering back into the *Old Testament* for predictions of Christ. Through the ages, numerous Christian scholars combed the range of rabbinic literature for Christian arguments, as, for example, the convert Petrus Alfonsi (12th century) and his *Dialogi contra Iudaeos* (written around 1110) in which Petrus debates his own erstwhile Jewish persona. More important to the current discussion is *Pugio fidei*, a handbook for missionizers composed around 1280 by Dominican Friar Raymundus Martini. This text is significant to us here because there is clear evidence that *Pugio fidei* was the basis of a sermon delivered before Pope Sixtus IV in 1481 by the Sicilian convert Flavius Mithridates (*fl.* late 15th century) just a few years before he started translating a formidable mass of texts, largely kabbalistic, from Hebrew to Latin for Pico.

The purpose of Petrus' *Dialogi* and Martini's *Pugio* was to demonstrate how blind and stubborn the Jews were not to realize the Christian message within their own writings and, hence, to lead them toward conversion. The tone of Mithridates' sermon, however, shifts from Martini's bold refutation of the Jews to a disquisition "in which he set out to prove the mysteries of the Christian faith by means of what he presented as an ancient, esoteric doctrine of the Jews."[18]

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15 The work conventionally considered the earliest kabbalistic text, the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, dates from approximately 1185.

16 The earliest kabbalistic text for which there is a known author is the commentary on *Sefer Yezirah* of Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham, called Isaac the Blind, from the beginning of the thirteenth century.

17 Pico's mistaken ideas regarding Maimonides were reinforced by Abraham Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah* (SECRETS OF THE TORAH), which is a commentary on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, a text which Abulafia treated as kabbalistic. *Sitrei Torah* is among the texts that Flavius Mithridates translated into Latin at Pico's behest.

18 Flavius Mithridates, *Sermo de Passione Domini*, edited with notes and commentary by Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1963), page 28. In that the sermon was so thoroughly based on Martini, the "ancient, esoteric doctrine" cited by Mithridates was not *kabbalah*.

While mention of the presumed blindness and stubbornness of the Jews is not absent from the writings of the Christian kabbalists,[19] they allow that certain aspects of Jewish lore and literature contribute to, and even bolster, the Christian experience. However, the *kabbalah* which the most influential early Christian kabbalists appropriated was but a sliver, omitting or marginalizing many of the doctrines which were considered central in the then-contemporary Jewish *kabbalah*, namely the mystical rationales for the *mitzvoth*, treatment of the *shekhinah* (the "presence" of God, in *kabbalah* cast as God's feminine counterpart) with its erotic symbolism, the grand division of the universe into good and evil, and, most notably, the doctrine of the *sefirot* (the kabbalistic system of ten stages through which the infinite unknowable God reveals Himself). Mystical works of the Ashkenazi Hasidim (*fl.* 12th and 13th centuries), which represent a movement distinct from *kabbalah*, and Abraham Abulafia (1249-1291?), a mystic who falls outside of the mainstream of *kabbalah*, were important sources to Christian kabbalists, whereas the *Zohar*, by far the most important and most extensive kabbalistic text, was consulted very little save through commentaries, such as those of Menahem Recanati (1250-1310).

THE *KABBALAH* OF PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA

Pico's extravagant and cumbersome *900 Theses*, or *Conclusions*, delivered for the purpose of inaugurating a public debate in 1486, is not dominated by *kabbalah*. Indeed, its first 402 tenets offer wisdom drawn from "The Latins" (*e.g.*, Thomas Aquinas and John [Duns] Scotus), "The Arabs" (*e.g.*, Averroes, Avicenna, and Moses of Egypt, namely Maimonides), "The Greek Peripatetics" (*e.g.*, Theophrastus and Ammonius), "The Platonists" (*e.g.*, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus), "Pythagorean mathematics," "Chaldean theologians," "Mercury Trismegistus the Egyptian," and then, finally, "Hebrew Cabalist wisemen."[20] Pico then presents 500 theses "according to His Own Opinion" attempting to reconcile Plato and Aristotle, "dissenting from the common [scholastic] philosophy," "introducing new doctrines in philosophy," criticizing St. Thomas, treating the doctrine of Plato, and presenting conclusions on numerology, magic, and Christian religion.[21] It is in these very last entries that we find Pico's version of *cabala* set to the task of "strongly confirming Christian religion using the Hebrew wisemen's own principles."[22]

To Pico, *kabbalah* aligns with Plato, Pythagoras, and Paul, expressing the same esoteric tradition which underlies the depths of the Christian message. It is interesting to note that Pico was cautious of the word *kabbalah* and the variety of meanings it had already assumed in his day. To him, the core of *kabbalah* was in the pre-patristic lore: the true Oral Law spoken of in Esdras II, as distinct from the Talmud and the later philosophers. Pico acknowledged the association of the term *kabbalah* with anything mystical or magical, predicting the sense that was to cling to "*cabala*" after the appearance of the compendious *De occulta philosophia* (Cologne: 1533) of the German Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. Yet, in his *900 Theses*, Pico interlaces *kabbalah* and magic, stating that no magical operation can possess any efficacy unless coordinated with its corresponding *kabbalah*. Further, no names or words used in

19 As in Pico's *900 Theses* and *Heptaplus* and Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*.

20 Refer to S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998), pages 204-205.

21 *Ibid.*, pages 206-207.

22 *Ibid.*, page 517.

magical works contain any power unless they are Hebrew or, at very least, derived from Hebrew.[23]

All of this *kabbalah* was surely esoteric, not just to the mainstream of Catholicism but even to the intellectual circles around Pico. The *900 Theses* were banned by Pope Innocent VIII, and, in composing his *Heptaplus*, a commentary on the creation story which showed that a narrative could convey more than one level of meaning, Pico eliminated the word *cabala* from what was, in large measure, a kabbalistic interpretation.[24]

JOHANNES REUCHLIN: THE FIRST "TRUE" CHRISTIAN KABBALIST

Johannes Reuchlin actually learned enough Hebrew that he could encounter kabbalistic texts first-hand. His main sources for *kabbalah* were the writings of Menachem Recanati (*Commentary on the Torah*, *Commentary on the Daily Prayers*), Joseph Gikatilla (*Sha'are Orah*, *Ginnat 'Egoz*), and Abraham Abulafia, apparently as described by Pico. Reuchlin should be considered the first true Christian kabbalist, for no one before him in Christendom worked with a selection of genuine, *i.e.* Jewish, kabbalistic concepts chosen from the original texts—in the original language—in much the same manner as Jewish kabbalists.

Reuchlin wrote two treatises on *cabala*. The first, *De verbo mirifico* (1494), is a dialogue in which Reuchlin's own voice, as Capnion, is the final authority over the Epicurean Sidonius and the Jew Baruchias. Capnion speaks of the "wonder-working word," YHShVH, the miraculous name of Jesus derived from the *tetragrammaton* of the Old Testament, YHVH, with the letter *shin* added in its midst,[25] demonstrating that the ultimate truth is of a Christian, albeit esoteric, nature. This innovation proved significant. However, this early work betrays but a superficial understanding—along with some misunderstanding—of kabbalistic doctrine.

The second book, *De arte cabalistica* (1517), is a broader, far more informed excursion into various kabbalistic concerns.[26] As with Reuchlin's first kabbalistic effort, *De arte cabalistica* takes the form of a discussion, here among representatives of three camps: Marranus, a Muslim; Simon, a kabbalistic Jew; and Philolaus, a Christian-Pythagorean. Within the dialogue, *kabbalah* finds its place as the wellspring of wisdom, not only of doctrine in support of Christianity but of Pythagorean tenets. In this, Reuchlin was more interested in number, language, and symbols through a nexus of Pythagorean *kabbalah*[27] than in the theosophical system outlined by the *sefirot*, which receives only perfunctory mention in this dialogue.

Ultimately, what Reuchlin—and the other Christian kabbalists—developed was an optimistic Christianity which set the power of salvation in the hands of each individual, although in

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23 The notion that magic gained efficacy through *kabbalah* was developed by Agrippa as well.

24 Refer to Crofton Black, *Pico's* HEPTAPLUS *and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2006).

25 On this, see Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann's "History and Prehistory of the Cabala of JHSVH," in *Hebrew to Latin, Latin to Hebrew: The Mirroring of Two Cultures in the Age of Humanism* [BERLIN STUDIES IN JUDAISM, 1], edited by Giulio Busi (Berlin: Institut für Judaistik, Freie Universität Berlin – Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2006).

26 *De arte cabalistica* appeared in English (translated by Martin and Sarah Goodman) in 1983 (New York: Abaris Books, Inc.); this translation was reprinted with a new introduction by Moshe Idel in 1993 (Lincoln: Bison Books, University of Nebraska Press) as *On the Art of the Kabbalah*.

27 Compare Pico's *Heptaplus* with Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica*. To Reuchlin, Pythagoreanism and *kabbalah* were fundamentally the same.

true esoteric (or perhaps *elite*) fashion, for this power was bestowed upon only those with the wisdom to receive the truth. What differed among the various Christian interpreters of *kabbalah* were details of method. Thus, for Reuchlin, the route was by way of the *kabbalistic* understanding of holy names, in particular the name of the Messiah. And in many aspects Reuchlin's *kabbalah* was the absolute; by the writing of *De arte cabalistica*, his development was such that Reuchlin consistently gives Simon, the Jew in the three-way dialogue, the "last word." Indeed, in Book II, in which Simon is absent due to its being his Sabbath—which his colleagues deem a nuisance and "a waste of time"—Philolaus, recounting Simon's points from their previous discussion, concludes, "[T]here 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."[28] It is important to note that *De arte cabalistica* was released into an "anti-Judaizing" environment personified, somewhat ironically, by the convert Johannes Pfefferkorn, a vociferous campaigner against the Jews and their literature, the Talmud in particular. For Reuchlin to place so much authority in the Jews and their spokesman put him in peril of being declared a heretic.

One might expect that, with Reuchlin's eclectic approach and eagerness to synthesize a combination of Christian, Jewish, *and* pagan ideas, he would be a natural for the emerging Protestant movement. In fact, Reuchlin remained loyal to the Roman Catholic Church; he ultimately turned *kabbalah* into proof of the Christian, namely *Catholic*, secret.

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS TO EARLY CHRISTIAN *KABBALAH*

There are several other authors and works that we should mention as examples of the induction of *kabbalah* into the philosophical and theological discussions of the times:

- Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447-1500) wove kabbalistic ideas into his Christian-hermetic work, *Crater Hermetis* (1505), making reference to the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zohar*, though some of the quotes he attributes to these works do not come from them.[29]
- Francesco Giorgi (*or* Zorzi, 1467-1540) presents a "Pythagorean explanation of the world's divine harmony"[30] in his major work, *De harmonia mundi* (Venice: 1525).
- Learned convert Paul Ricius [or Ricci] (*fl.* 1506-1541) translated Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orah* (Rabbi Josephi Castiliensis *Porta Lucis*, Augsburg: 1516) and thus offered to Christian Europe for the first time a full and detailed excursus on the kabbalistic *sefirot*.
- Franciscan Jean Thénaud (*fl.* 1511-1523), "voyager and cabalist," was the author of *La Saincte et trescrestienne cabale* (THE HOLY AND VERY CHRISTIAN CABALA, 1519, also called *La cabale métrifée*) and *Traité* (or *Traicté*) *de la cabale* (TREATISE ON THE CABALA, 1521).[31]

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28 *De arte cabalistica*, Goodman translation, page 131.

29 Refer to *Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447-1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents*, Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Ruud M. Bouthoorn [MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE TEXTS AND STUDIES, Volume 281] (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

30 Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis* [INTERNATIONAL ARCHIVES, 189] (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), CHAPTER 6, § 8, GIORGIO VENETO'S (1460-1540) *HARMONIA MUNDI*, page 306.

31 Six-hundred lines of the *Traité*, in French, comprise APPENDIX D of J. L. Blau's *Christian Interpretation of the Cabala*. Thenaud's "The Very Christian Cabala" is discussed in Blau's CHAPTER VII.

DEVELOPMENT AND COMPLETION OF THE FIRST WAVE OF HERMETIC-KABBALISTS

Four authors in particular produced works which developed the Hermetic-Cabalist stream in most significant ways:

Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo (1469–1532) penned two kabbalistic works: *Libellus de litteris hebraicis* ("On the Hebrew Letters") and *Scechina*, published together in 1530.[32]

"On the Hebrew Letters" summarizes *Sefer ha-Temunah*, BOOK OF THE FIGURE (*i.e.*, the *figure*, or *shape*, of the Hebrew letters), a treatise often cited by the early Gerona circle of pre-*Zohar* Jewish kabbalists.

The later *Scechina* offers a greater development of a wider range of kabbalistic themes. Indeed, *Scechina* engages topics not taken up by Pico and Reuchlin, not the least of which being the namesake of the work: the *shekhinah*. In Egidio's work, Mary is equated with the *shekhinah* and thus given a place within the deific realm. Clearly drawing on the *Zohar*, *Scechina* stresses that human activity influences the divine. In particular, through "divine marriage" masculine and feminine aspects within the divine, as symbolized by the *sefirot*, can be reunited. This and other deeds—prayer, charity, piety, etc.—bring harmony within God, which is all very close to the *Zohar* and its rationale for performing the *mitzvot*.

Giulio Camillo (148?-1544), colorful alchemist and philosopher, was both praised and scorned in his day. He is most noted for his work on Memory Theatre, *L'idea del theatro* (Florence: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1550), which serves as a window into the intellectual and spiritual urgencies of our period of concern, for Camillo engages the full gamut of the "Hermetic-Cabalist" tradition.

Camillo's Memory Theatre was constructed to both reveal and conceal the hidden structure of *reality* in a manner that shows the clear influence of both Ficino and Pico. The expansion of the mind afforded by learning and applying this Theatre formed a conduit to the inner soul where archetypal images were stored—images thought to reflect the universal *ideals*. Using forty-nine *loci*, *i.e.*, a seven-by-seven grid, Camillo set up stages of sympathy, or correspondence, under an essentially astrological system, that is, the organization rests on the qualities of the seven planets. Important to our discussion is that Camillo adapted the procession of kabbalistic *sefirot*—and their corresponding archangels—to fit his seven-fold scheme:

PLANET	SEFIRAH	ARCHANGEL
Saturn	*binah*	Zaphkiel
Jupiter	*chesed*	Zadkiel
Mars	*gevurah*	Camael
Sun	*tiferet*	Raphael
Venus	*hod/netzach*	Haniel
Mercury	*yesod*	Michael
Moon (Diana)	*malkuth*	Gabriel

32 Ref. Egidio da Viterbo, *Scechina e Libellus de Litteris Hebraicis*: Testo critico latino con e inediti a cura di François Secret, two volumes (Roma: Centro Internazionale di studi Umanistici, 1959), and Secret's article, "Le symbolisme de la Kabbale chrétienne dans la 'Scechina' de Egidio da Viterbo," in *Archivo di Filosofia* [UMANESIMO E SIMBOLISMO] (Rome: Instituto di Studi Filosofia, 1958), pp. 131-154.

Camillo justified omitting the uppermost *sefirot*, *keter* and *hokhmah*, as these were considered beyond the human intellect.[33]

Consonant with the basic assumption of a sympathetic universe, Camillo advanced that calculated actions could operate at several levels, *i.e.,* physical (alchemy), mental (eloquence), spiritual (deification).

Another striking epitome of the philosophical concerns of the period under discussion is the *Dialoghi d'amore* [DIALOGUES OF LOVE] written by Yehudah Abravanel (146?-152?), called Leone Ebreo. The work was composed around 1500. Whether it was originally composed in Hebrew or Italian is an open question, as are a number of other points about this well-circulated, oft-translated tract.[34] Indeed, in his recent book (2009), *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb*,[35] Giuseppe Veltri queries,

> Was Leone a philosopher, a Jewish philosopher, or simply a writer with a philosophical background? That question remains open to debate.

Composed in three dialogues between Philo, the eager "lover," and Sophia, the reluctant "beloved," concerning all aspects of love, desire, and beauty, the *Dialoghi* weave kabbalistic ideas into a fabric of mythology, astrology, Platonism and Neoplatonism, mixed with Jewish philosophy, all on an apparent scholastic foundation of Avicenna and Averroes—although the work is generally treated as Neoplatonic. The founding concept of *reality* is summarized in Philo's statement, which appears well into the third dialogue:

> You know that the corporeal world proceeds from the incorporeal as the true effect from its cause and creator. None the less the corporeal does not inherit the perfection of the spiritual, and you may see how defective is the body compared with the mind. And if you find many imperfections in the body such as dimension, division and, in certain cases, mutation and corruption, you must not therefore conclude that these defects pre-exist in the intellectual causes, but that they are in the effect only in so far as it falls short of the cause. Do not, therefore, believe that the plurality, division and diversity in earthly things pre-exists in the Ideal knowledge of them, for that which is one and indivisible in the divine intellect is multiplied ideally relative to the parts of the world produced by it, and in relation to these parts the Ideas are many, although one and indivisible with the divine intellect.[36]

The *Dialoghi* evince knowledge of Ficino's translations and syntheses of Neoplatonic texts, and Leone is reported to have met Pico.[37] Pico's direct influence is not evident in the *Dialoghi*; however, indirect influence might be discerned in Abravanel's sexual imagery, the

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33 Lina Bolzoni, "Giulio Camillo's Memory Theatre and the Kabbalah," in *Hebraic Aspects of the Renaissance: Sources and Encounters*, edited by I. Zinguer, A. Melamed, and Z. Shalev (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2011), and Lu Beery Wenneker, AN EXAMINATION OF *L'IDEA DEL THEATRO* OF GIULIO CAMILLO, INCLUDING AN ANNOTATED TRANSLATION, WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO HIS INFLUENCE ON EMBLEM LITERATURE AND ICONOGRAPHY (Ph.D. dissertation—Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1970).

34 See Addendum D: "The Problem of Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi*," within my paper "The Study of Christian Cabala in English: ADDENDA," at *Hermetic Kabbalah*, edited by Colin Low:
http://www.digital-brilliance.com/contributed/Karr/Biblios/ccineb.pdf

35 Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2009, p. 61.

36 Leone Ebreo, *The Philosophy of Love (Dialoghi d'Amore)*, translated into English by F. Friedberg-Seeley and Jean H. Barnes, with an introduction by Cecil Roth (London: The Soncino Press, 1937), p. 406.

37 Ref. Bernard McGinn, "Cabalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 17-18.

inspiration for which may be the *Zohar* by way of the commentaries of Menahem Recanati, a known source of *kabbalah* for Pico.[38]

If the Renaissance—and thence the modern—notion of an "occult philosophy" was initiated by Ficino, the culmination of the "Hermetic-Cabalist" first wave was the compendium of esoteric material gathered by a remarkable student of Trithemius, namely Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa in *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (*Three Books of Occult Philosophy*). What this book contained—and omitted—determined the image of magic and *kabbalah* for generations; it is still considered authoritative among today's practicing magicians.

In hierarchical succession, *De occulta philosophia* treats the elemental, celestial, and intellectual (super-celestial, or divine) realms, and their corresponding forms of magic. Thus, Agrippa treats natural magic in Book I, distinguishing between the qualities and virtues of the elements and the "*occult* virtues…infused into several kinds of things by Ideas."[39] Book II, along with number symbolism and systems of harmonies, discusses various aspects of astrology. Book III, covering ceremonial magic, is founded by-and-large upon the names of God (as in the names of the kabbalistic *sefirot*) and the names and seals of angels and sundry spirits and powers, etc. Chapters toward the end of Book III cover soothsaying, "phrensy," oracles, *etc.*, and finally, observances necessary for magic.

Everything finds its place within a sympathetic whole, all fully in line with the Neoplatonic concept of magic established by Ficino and developed by Pico and Reuchlin. Like Pico, Agrippa suggests that the right use of magic is safeguarded by binding its practice with *kabbalah*. Further, Agrippa appears to have taken a prompt from Lazzarelli regarding the importance of mystical ecstasy in glimpsing the world from a divine perspective.[40]

> For there is in our minds a certain perspicuous power, and capable of all things, but encumbered and hindered by the darkness of the body and mortality, but after death it having acquired immortality, but being freed from the body, it hath full and perfect knowledge.[41]

Ultimately—and Agrippa reiterates this throughout his *Three Books*—the highest truths are revealed by God alone and won through Christian faith, and miracles are wrought through the mysterious name of Jesus.

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38 See Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), and *Menahem Recanati – Commentary on the Daily Prayers: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, edited with introduction and notes by Giacomo Corazzol [THE KABBALISTIC LIBRARY OF GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA 3 – Giulio Busi, general editor] (Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2008).

39 My italics. Refer to *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, Tyson, ed., chapter 11.

40 One of the few scholars to note this is Kocku von Stuckrad in *Western Esotericism* (London – Oakville: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2005), page 67. Something like this idea could have been derived, however, from Ficino. See note 11 above.

41 *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, Tyson, ed., p. 630.

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