

KNOTS ∪ SPIRALS

NOTES ON THE EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIAN CABALA

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Presented here is a series of cautionary vignettes addressing incomplete or erroneous ideas about “The Phoenix of His Age,” “The Prince of Concordia,” “The Father of Christian Cabala”—all epithets for the short-lived Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. This essay considers the following questions: What was Pico’s attitude toward the Jews? What was Pico’s understanding of Judaism and *kabbalah*, and how accurate was it? What was the nature of Pico’s concern with “the dignity of man”?

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MARSILIO FICINO (1433-1499) was the head of the Florentine Academy, which was founded on “Post-Plotinian” Platonism, an intellectual mode in marked tension with the Church:

Plotinus (AD 204-270) had deprecated the value of religious ritual in conjunction with the philosophical life, though he did not deny that it could be efficacious for non-philosophers who were trying to liberate themselves from the material world. Partially, this was because he saw matter as anti-substantial and evil; since many aspects of religious ritual, especially theurgic ritual, involved using material things, he viewed these rituals as on a lesser plane than pure contemplation.¹

In Post-Plotinian philosophy, Plotinus’ dismissal of religious practice was moderated, as by Iamblichus (AD 24²-326), who found value in integrating religious ritual for the purpose of advancing the soul. This solution suited Ficino’s project. Even so,

[i]t is only by keeping everything on a purely intellectual level that Ficino succeeds in harmonizing so many religious and philosophical points of view; the triumph of holding in the mind all at once the views of Plato, Christ, Plotinus, the Cabala, Zoroaster, the astrologers, Hermes Trismegistus, Moses, the Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, St. Paul, and many others, is primarily an intellectual achievement.²

¹ Celenza, “The Search for Ancient Wisdom...,” page 117. [Complete citations appear in the bibliography.]

² Jayne, *Colet and Ficino*, page 59.

Implicit in Ficino's restless pursuit of ancient wisdom, as inventoried above, was a palpable discontent with the doctrine, authority, and limitations of the Church. Such discontent, however, could not be bluntly expressed, especially by a priest such as Ficino. The unquestionable truth of Christianity had to be assumed and maintained. If good Christians were to gain license to stray beyond the boundaries of sanctioned—or sanctified—literature, the best cover was to assure that their explorations yielded further evidence of the one true faith.

Thus, for Ficino and those around him,

...the primary task was to produce a justification of their faith which would include both the old justification and the new material. Much of the apparent instability of the philosophy of the period must be charged to the sincere efforts of philosophers to supply a revised rationale for Christianity while still assimilating newly rediscovered classical philosophies.³

But along with his expanded philosophical compass, Ficino incorporated “natural” magic into his scholarly Platonism, putting himself in peril of being condemned as a heretic. Far from rejecting matter as “anti-substantial and evil,” Ficino believed that material objects inherited God-granted powers which could be guided and set to specific constructive purposes by the learned operator.

The project fashioned by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) was similar to that of his mentor Ficino. Pico too added magic into his grand syncretic design, but his enterprise was singularly characterized by his use of *kabbalah* and his attempt to harmonize “all known systems of thought,”⁴ in particular, to reconcile Plato and Aristotle.

Pico was very much involved in trying to rescue the church from what he felt were the limitations of Aristotelian-Acquinian [*sic*] dogmatism; and he thought, along with Marsilio Ficino...[,] that Platonic, “inspirational” theories of creation more nearly coincide with Christian faith than the syllogistic reasonings of scholastic philosophy.⁵

While Pico is credited with being the first Christian-born scholar known to absorb *kabbalah* into his philosophical/religious view, it is probably a mistake to call Pico and his descendants, e.g., Johannes Reuchlin, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, etc., “Christian cabalists,” for “...Pico, Reuchlin, and Agrippa used cabala to support other more fundamental beliefs” (—Lesley, “Jews at the Time of the Renaissance”). Joseph L. Blau's formula, “Christian interpreters of the *cabala*,” is probably more accurate.

If we survey Pico's nine hundred *Conclusiones* it strikes us that *kabbalah* is far from playing a prominent role.⁶



³ Blau, *Cabala in the Renaissance*, page 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 20.

⁵ Beitchman, *Alchemy*, page 65.

⁶ Reichert, “Christian Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century,” page 133.

Within the writings of Pico della Mirandola appear remnant assumptions similar to and likely derived from Dominican Friar Raymundus Martini's handbook for missionizers, *Pugio fidei* (DAGGER OF FAITH), composed ca. 1280, some two-hundred years before Pico's time.⁷ In this once-popular manual, which had become not so well known by the late fifteenth century,⁸ Martini displays an impressive knowledge of Hebrew literature, wherein he discerns intentional alterations and distortions designed to suppress the revelation that Jesus had been proclaimed the Son of God, the Messiah. Interestingly, while drawing on a wide range of Jewish writings to evince a Christian interpretation, Martini does not cite any kabbalistic works.

As Gershom Scholem points out, it is astounding that Martini did not exhibit any awareness of kabbalistic literature given that

...he lived in Catalonia at the end of the twelfth and well into the thirteenth century, the precise location and period during which a group of kabbalists, led by Nachmanides, began consolidating kabbalist literature (1194-1270). Despite Martini's physical proximity, and the fact that his missionary zeal resulted in a general confiscation of books belonging to Catalonian Jewish communities, he was not aware of the existence of the kabbalah.⁹

If Pico did not come by the notions in *Pugio fidei* directly, they may well have been introduced to him by his translator and mentor in matters kabbalistic, the Sicilian convert Flavius Mithridates. We know about the influence of Martini's manual on Mithridates from a sermon which he delivered before Pope Sixtus IV on Good Friday of 1481, five years before he began his ambitious translation program for Pico. In the introduction to his edition of Mithridates' *Sermo de passione Domini*, Chaim Wirszubski has shown that the sermon is rife with unacknowledged reiterations of the *Pugio*. Mithridates' tone, however, shifts from Martini's bold refutation of the Jews to a sermon "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."¹⁰ Still, in that the *Sermo* was so thoroughly based on Martini, the "ancient, esoteric doctrine" cited by Mithridates was not *kabbalah*.

Whatever the trajectory of the influence, Pico shared Martini's idea that an esoteric, or suppressed, Judaism supported and provided insight into Christianity, more specifically Catholicism. While Pico sought to bolster the prevailing faith with what he incorrectly assumed to be ancient sources, he did not seem to have been quite as zealous about converting the Jews as Martini or, for that matter, other notable so-called "Christian cabalists" (Ramon Llull and Guillaume Postel spring to mind). While there are anti-Jewish statements in his writings, these are fairly belied by the fact that

... Pico gratefully acknowledged the enormous erudition of the Jewish kabbalists, used their help extensively, was encouraged by Jews to publish his theses and concluded his theses with the famous proposition: 'As true astrology teaches us to read in the Book of God, kabbalah teaches us to read the Book of Law.'¹¹

⁷ Earlier in his career, Martini wrote *Capistrum Indaeorum* (ca.1267). See Robles Sierra

⁸ "It may not be superfluous to add that the *Pugio Fidei* was at that time a forgotten book"—Wirszubski, *Sermo...*, page 19.

⁹ Scholem, "Beginnings...", page 18.

¹⁰ Wirszubski, *Sermo...*, page 28.

¹¹ von Stuckrad, "Christian Kabbalah...", page 4.

Several of Pico's principal mentors were Jews, albeit of markedly different stripes.

One such mentor was the scholastically-minded Averroist, Elijah (or Elia) del Medigo, who was critical not only of Pico's brand of syncretism but of *kabbalah* itself. Even with his openly declared disagreements with Pico, del Medigo translated a range of philosophical works for him. Some of these translations formed the basis of Pico's FORTY-ONE CONCLUSIONS ACCORDING TO AVERROES, which are among the first 400 (actually 402) "Historical theses" within his *900 Theses* (Farmer, pages 250-263). In his article, "Elijah del Medigo's Averroist Response to the Kabbalah of Fifteenth-Century Jewry and Pico della Mirandola," Kalman Bland discusses del Medigo's critical remarks on *kabbalah* and its adherents as found in four of his works, one of which, a commentary to Averroes' *De substantia orbis*, was one of two works composed by del Medigo in Latin for Pico's benefit, the other being *Annotationes*, "a work on Averroes's teachings about the *Physics* of Aristotle."¹²

In spite of his objections to *kabbalah*, del Medigo provided Pico with an astutely chosen list of kabbalistic texts, which included "the *Zohar*, Yishaq of Acco's *Me'irov 'enayim*, Yosef Gikatilla's *Sa'are orah*, the *Commentary to the Torah* by Menahem Recanati, the *Ma'areket ha-Elohut*, and one (or more) unspecified *Commentaries to the Sefer yesirah*. These are very reasonable choices, intended to offer a substantial knowledge of kabbalistic thought, the most evident omission being Avraham Abulafia's works, which Del Medigo probably disliked because of their paradoxical nature. It is clear that this list of works is meant to offer a first overview on the kabbalah and to direct somebody who begins his studies in a new field."¹³

Another of Pico's mentors was Yohanan Alemanno, who was both a philosopher and a kabbalist. In that Alemanno was quite eclectic in his interests, which included alchemy, astrology, and magic, he too was the target of del Medigo's criticisms.

Alemanno helped to shape the "Prince of Concordia's" [*i.e.*, Pico's] philosophy of concordance through his own syncretic tendencies to combine various forms of diverse thought, such as philosophical rationalism, Jewish mysticism, and Hermetic magic.¹⁴

Pico's oft-quoted 900th conclusion (cited above in the quote from von Stuckrad, "As true astrology teaches us to read in the Book of God, kabbalah teaches us to read the Book of Law") repeats Alemanno's concept of the analogous relationship of astrology and *kabbalah*.¹⁵

Other influential Jews in Pico's circle were the philosopher/exegete/financier Isaac Abrabanel (or Abravanel) and scholar/copyist/geographer Abraham Farissol.

Mithridates, by contrast, was a convert and something of a reprobate, who, in the end, turned agnostic. The prevailing impression that he persistently altered his translations to insinuate Christian readings (as Wirszubski's *Encounter...* suggests) or that he "salted the kabbalistic texts with the trinitarian clues that he knew his student wanted to find" (—Copenhaver/Monfasani in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, page 311) has been found not to be the case through the close work being done on THE KABBALISTIC LIBRARY OF

¹² Mahoney, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Elia del Medigo...", page 131.

¹³ Busi, "Who Does Not Wonder...", pages 172-173.

¹⁴ Ogren, *Renaissance*, page 185.

¹⁵ Alemanno's (and Pico's) "conjugation of the astrological with the Kabbalistic" is discussed in APPENDIX 6, "Book of God"/"Book of Law," of Moshe Idel's *Absorbing Perfections* (especially § III. COSMIC BOOK AND ASTROLOGY IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE, pages 487-8, and § IV. THE MAGICAL INTERPRETATION OF KABBALAH AND PICO'S VIEW OF "BOOKS," pages 489-92).

GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, a project under the editorship of Giulio Busi. In his article, “Toward a New Evaluation of Pico’s Kabbalistic Sources,” Busi amends Wirszubski’s impression of Mithridates while presenting an expanded view of “Pico’s Jewish network.”¹⁶

Yet, for all his contact with Jewish intellectuals and kabbalists, Pico maintained an anti-Jewish position in his writings. Indeed, Pico does a manner of missionizing in his *Theses* in a section with the accessory title, CABALISTIC CONCLUSIONS CONFIRMING THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION; for example,¹⁷

11>5. Every Hebrew cabalist, following the principles and sayings of the science of the Cabala, is inevitably forced to concede, without addition, omission, or variation, precisely what the Catholic faith of Christians maintains concerning the Trinity and every divine Person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

11>7. No Hebrew Cabalist can deny that the name of Jesus, if we interpret it following the method and principles of the Cabala, signifies precisely all this and nothing else, that is: *God the Son of God and the Wisdom of the Father, united to human nature in the unity of the assumption through the third Person of God, who is the most ardent fire of love.*

11>20: If the Cabalists turn their interpretation to the word, <ἦν az>, which signifies *then*, they will be greatly illuminated concerning the mystery of the Trinity.

Kocku von Stuckrad cites some even more pointed comments from Pico’s *Heptaplus* which seem to echo the *Pugio Fidei*:

‘Against the stony hearts of the Hebrews it [i.e., Pico’s interpretations] will provide you with powerful weapons drawn from their own arsenals’. And after having used evidence from Jewish sources, particularly from the Talmud, Pico concludes: ‘If they [i.e., the Jews] continue impudently and stubbornly to deny this, let them listen to their own Talmudists, who strongly support our opinion.’¹⁸



Ficino’s and Pico’s genealogy of knowledge through pagan sources to Plato eventually led them to an even earlier era, that of the Hebrew Bible and the Mosaic tradition. By universalizing all religious knowledge, Ficino and Pico fashioned an open and more tolerant theology of Christianity, in searching for the source of universal truth in ancient cultural and religious settings, they came to appreciate the centrality and priority of Hebraic culture in Western civilization.¹⁹

Pico believed that the revelation granted Moses—or a significant part of it—was the founding revelation of *cabala*, which he viewed as proto-Christian.

Wirszubski notes²⁰

The idea that the true interpretation of the Law is descended from Sinai can be picked up anywhere in Hebrew literature; and the idea that Kabbala is the interpretation of the mysteries of

¹⁶ Busi, “Toward a New Evaluation...,” page 178.

¹⁷ Farmer’s translation, *900 Theses*, page 523.

¹⁸ “Christian Kabbalah...,” page 3 [von Stuckrad’s brackets].

¹⁹ Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science*, page 141.

²⁰ *Encounter...*, page 129; parenthetical additions are Wirszubski’s.

the Law can be found in a variety of Kabbalistic books. In Abulafia's *De Secretis Legis*²¹ (and in no other book which Pico is known to have read before he wrote his *Apology*) those two ideas²² are coupled with two other ideas of capital importance for the interpretation of Pico's theses, namely that the mysteries of the Law are concealed in the divine names, and that one can unravel the mysteries through combinations of letters.

Following Abulafia, Pico considered Maimonides (1137?-1204) a kabbalist. Of course, Abulafia's kabbalistic take on Maimonides is rather incongruous given that Maimonides formulated a rational Aristotelian reading of Judaism which he hoped would salvage it from the "occult" Judaism around him.

Maimonides' failure to purify Judaism is, ironically, further demonstrated by the fact that it was his project which apparently brought about the crystallization of everything which he opposed in the form of kabbalah.²³

From the early Neoplatonists to Ficino, philosophers, including Maimonides, tended to believe that the best reading of the Old Testament was an allegorical one, allowing it to clothe the *ancient theology* in histories and moral tales, which, in their literal reading, were useful only to the hoi polloi. But for Pico, it was more than just a matter of interpretation (literal *vs* allegorical); it was a matter of both privilege and method. Pico's *Oration* (quoted below) cites Ezra, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Dionysius, and Origen concerning the two types of wisdom handed down through the generations: (1) that allowed to the masses and (2) that reserved for the worthy.

The legend of the transmission of this presumed *kabbalah* starts with Moses' revelation. According to the *Mishnah*,²⁴

Moses received the Law from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets committed it to the men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgement, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Law.

The last clause was read as a reference to the *oral* Law, namely *kabbalah*, reserved for and protected by the few, as opposed to the *written* Law, appropriate for the many ("raise up many disciples"). This, of course, represents a misconception which Pico shared, for within Judaism the Oral Law was—and is—understood as the day-to-day Law followed by all Jews, *i.e.*, all works interpreting The Law (*Torah*), starting with the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*—not, or not necessarily, *kabbalah*.

The tale of the transcription of this pure and secret revelation flows from 4 Ezra (II Esdras) 14: 42-48.²⁵

And the Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in character which they did not know. They sat forty days, and wrote during the daytime, and ate their bread at night. As for me, I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. So during forty days ninety-four books were written. And when the forty days were ended, the Most

²¹ *De Secretis Legis* is the Latin name of Abulafia's *Sitrei Torah*, SECRETS OF THE TORAH, a commentary on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, which Abulafia considered kabbalistic.

²² The "two ideas" being that the oral Law was revealed to Moses at Sinai along with the written Law and that this oral Law, at least in part, constituted the mysteries of the Law, *i.e.*, *kabbalah*.

²³ Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Jewish Mysticism*, page 18.

²⁴ *Aboth* 1:1, Herbert Danby's translation.

²⁵ *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha*, pages 57-8.

High spoke to me, saying, “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people. For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.” And I did so.

The twenty-four books for the public constitute the Old Testament. The seventy books were assumed to contain the *kabbalah*, which had been handed down *mouth to ear*, in true esoteric fashion. Again, this all addresses not only what the means of transmission was but also who the rightful recipients of this guarded wisdom were.

In his *Oration*, Pico reviews the story of 4 Ezra after noting those venerable sages who divided between revealed and concealed.²⁶

The ancient philosophers observed this custom scrupulously. Pythagoras wrote only the few little phrases that he trusted to his daughter Dama as he died. The sphinxes carved on the temples of the Egyptians warned them to use intricate riddles to keep the mystic dogmas secure from the vulgar crowd. Plato, writing to Dionysius about the highest substances, says that ‘I must speak in riddles so that no one else may understand what I write to you, in case my letter falls into another’s hands.’ Aristotle used to say that the books of the *Metaphysics* that deal with theology were published and not published. What more to add? Origen claims that the master of life, Jesus Christ, revealed many things to his disciples that they decided not to write down in order to keep them from becoming common knowledge. Dionysius the Areopagite confirms this best of all: he says that the founders of our religion transmitted the more secret mysteries *ek nou eis noun dia meson logou*, from mind to mind by means of speech, with nothing in writing.

Since the true interpretation of the law divinely bestowed on Moses was revealed by God’s command in just the same way, it was called *Cabala*, which is the Hebrew for our word ‘reception’; this is because one person would ‘receive’ that teaching from another not through literary records but from a regular succession of revelations, as if by right of inheritance. But after Cyrus let the Hebrews return from captivity in Babylon and the temple was restored under Zorobabel, they turned their attention to recovering the law. Esdras, who was leader of the assembly at the time, corrected the book of Moses, and he saw clearly that after exiles, massacres, escapes, and the captivity of the people of Israel, the custom of passing the law from person to person could not be kept as the elders had established it. Realizing also that the secrets of heavenly doctrine divinely granted to the elders would perish, since the memory of them could last no longer without the support of written texts, Esdras arranged for the sages who then survived to be called together and for each to contribute what he remembered of the mysteries of the law, and scribes were brought in to compile these contributions in seventy volumes (for that was roughly the number of sages in the Sanhedrin).

A similar thrust appears in a more succinct form in Pico’s 63rd CABALISTIC CONCLUSION,²⁷ drawing the issue of exoteric *vs* esoteric right up to Maimonides:

Just as Aristotle disguised and concealed the more divine philosophy, which the ancient philosophers veiled under tales and fables, under the mask of philosophical speculation and in the brevity of words, so Rabbi Moses the Egyptian, in the book the Latins call the *Guide of the Perplexed*, while in the superficial shell of words appears to move with the philosophers, in hidden insights of a profound sense enfold the mysteries of the Cabala.

Interestingly, Pico draws a distinction not only between public and secret revelation but also between references to the true *kabbalah* of Moses and the broad use of “cabala” to refer to

²⁶ Copenhaver’s translation, §§ 60-61.

²⁷ Farmer’s translation, page 547.

esoteric knowledge in general, predicting the popular use of the term after the circulation of Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, which was "already far removed from Pico's concept of magic."²⁸ Certainly, to the followers of Agrippa, all esoteria was *cabala*.

Having cordoned off the proper *kabbalah*, Pico bisects it into the practical and the speculative, namely "the science of the *sefirot* and *shemot* (NAMES)."²⁹ These two he divides further.

Practical *kabbalah* "practices all formal metaphysics and inferior theology."³⁰

Speculative *kabbalah* has four parts: The first is "the science of the revolution of the alphabet" (as in the rotation of letter combinations in the *Sefer Yezirah* tradition, Llullian-style *ars combinatoria*, or Abulafian "prophetic" techniques), and the second, third, and fourth are the "threefold *merkabah* (CHARIOT), corresponding to the three parts of particular philosophy, concerning divine, middle, and sensible natures"—matching the three triads of *sefirot* on the kabbalistic Tree of Life.

Prompted by Abulafia's notion that "the mysteries of the Law are concealed in the divine names," Pico's conceptual frame reverses that of standard Jewish *kabbalah*, where the practical *kabbalah*, whether magical or ecstatic, is associated with names and "the revolution of the alphabet," whereas the speculative, or theosophical, *kabbalah*, epitomized by the *Zohar*, is associated with the *sefirot*. Ultimately however, Pico applied the manipulation of Hebrew letters to the process of unlocking the mysteries of the *sefirot*, effectively merging the two.



One of the central elements in Pico's thesis was the traditional belief that the deepest meanings of sacred texts transcended their outer sense and indeed might extend to the isolated shapes of letters. Thus in Pico's first or historical set of Cabalistic theses, we find that there is no letter or even part of a letter in the Torah that does not conceal divine secrets; in his second set, presented "according to his own opinion," Pico was prepared to unveil the Christian truths that Moses hid in the Law in the order of otherwise trivial words (like the Hebrew word for "then"), or even in single strokes of single letters (as in the closed form of the letter *mem*). Every stroke of every letter in the Torah contains Christian secrets—supplying ammunition "against the rude slander of the Hebrews," "leaving them no corner in which to hide."³¹

While exhibiting something of a conversion motive, Pico consistently acknowledged that the Jews could claim much of sacred value, the greatest being their language. Hebrew was "the primal tongue," and its alphabet offered a set of signs which were at the same time letters, numbers, and ideograms. Pico's 33rd thesis among those of THE HEBREW CABALIST WISEMEN reads³²

28.33. There are no letters in the whole Law which in their forms, conjunctions, separations, crookedness, straightness, defect, excess, smallness, largeness, crowning, closure, openness, and order, do not reveal the secrets of the ten numerations [*i.e.*, the ten *sefirot*].

²⁸ Scholem, *Alchemy*, page 86, quoted more fully below.

²⁹ *900 Theses: CABBALISTIC CONCLUSION 11>1*, Farmer, page 519.

³⁰ All quotes in the following paragraphs are from Farmer's translation, page 521.

³¹ Farmer, "Establishing the Christian Kabbalah," page 1.

³² Farmer, page 359; my brackets—DK.

Perspective on Pico's notions of the magical power of a Hebrew-based *cabala* can be gained from theses among his MAGICAL CONCLUSIONS,³³

9>15. No magical operation can be of any efficacy unless it has annexed to it a work of Cabala, explicit or implicit.

9>22. No names that mean something, insofar as those names are singular and taken per se, can have power in a magical work, unless they are Hebrew names, or closely derived from Hebrew.

9>25. Just as characters ("magical words"—Farmer's note) are proper to a magical work, so numbers are proper to a work of Cabala, with a medium existing between the two, appropriable by declination between the extremes through the use of letters.

A cardinal Christian aspect is brought into the MAGICAL CONCLUSIONS as well:

9>7. The works of Christ could not have been performed through either the way of magic or the way of Cabala.

9>8. The miracles of Christ are the most certain argument of his divinity, not because of the things that he did, but because of the way in which he did them.

9>9. There is no science that assures us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala.

The last of these three, § 9>9, is most startling when cited alone—which it recurrently is—for it is most often read to mean that confirmation of Christ's divinity lies in the guarded secrets of magic and *kabbalah* and that the most compelling proof is manifest by working these methods. However, taken all together, §§ 9>7—9>9 suggest that, while wonders may well be wrought by way of magic and *kabbalah*, Christ had no need of them, for he was divine and above such methods as would be plied by earthly means. Yet, even if not practiced or required by Christ, magic and *kabbalah* offer humankind the means of communion with him.

Following Ficino's speculation, Pico wanted thus to establish a beneficent magic based on ancient authorities, which might involve the celebration of special rituals for summoning angels; in this manner, the human soul could be united with higher entities, thus creating a path leading to Christ or directly to God. Read in this perspective, Kabbalah was a Gnostic-Hermetic doctrine, a poetic theology that intended to investigate a hidden God, one of those disciplines belonging to the so-called *prisca theologia* tradition which the humanists cherished so much, especially in the Florentine environment.³⁴



The course of progress through various philosophical modes is summarized in Pico's *Oration*, leading to the ultimate "answer."³⁵

At the start, if our man only asks a truce of the enemy, moral philosophy will quell the wild excesses of the beast with many forms, the wrangling, raging and passions of the lion. Then, if we

³³ Farmer's translation.

³⁴ Lelli, "Poetic Theology...", page 146.

³⁵ Copenhaver's translation, §§ 21-22.

think better of it and wish for ourselves the security of perpetual peace, moral philosophy will come with generous answers to our prayers, and, after both beasts have been killed like pigs at a sacrifice, moral philosophy will ratify an inviolable treaty of the holiest peace between flesh and spirit. Dialectic will calm the turmoil of reason as it swings agitated between the quarrels of oratory and the quibbles of argument. Natural philosophy will calm the disputes and disagreements of opinion that come from all sides to worry, distract and torment the restless soul. But it will calm us by compelling us to remember that nature is born of war, according to Heraclitus, which is why Homer calls it ‘contention.’

From philosophy, therefore, true rest and lasting peace are not to be had; they are the office and prerogative of its mistress, of most holy theology. Theology will show us the way and lead us there.

Pico went further than Ficino to integrate Hebrew elements into Man’s grandest endeavor, hence, his singular emphasis on *kabbalah*. Pico’s expansion and crystallization of the *philosophia perennis* in this particular direction has induced speculation concerning his being the inaugurator of modern syncretic occultism, paving the way for (1) Agrippa’s synthesis of medieval magic; (2) developments in esoteric Christianity, which would eventually yield the Hermetic *qabalah* which manifested most overtly in the late nineteenth-century occult scene in France and England; (3) and, on the less occult side, humanistic notions supporting the idea that individuals were at the helm of their own destinies which contributed to the Reformation movement.

On the first point, a conventional line of development has established itself in the easy formula PICO → REUCHLIN → AGRIPPA. Certainly, Reuchlin developed Pico, especially in his processing number, language, and symbols through a nexus of Pythagorean *kabbalah* (ref. Pico’s *Heptaplus* → Reuchlin’s *De arte cabalistica*). Agrippa and his followers, however, while often considered to have continued what Pico and Reuchlin had begun, strayed from their fundamental program. Scholem notes,

The natural magic of the 16th century, which was based primarily on the *Occulta Philosophia* of Agrippa of Nettesheim, is of course already far removed from Pico’s concept of magic. It instead absorbed medieval aspects of angelology, demonology, and necromancy. In his great work, which was intended to integrate all the occult sciences, Agrippa, influenced by Reuchlin’s two books on the subject of Kabbalah, identified Kabbalah largely with magic. He adopted certain elements of speculative Kabbalah that fit into his occult system, sometimes making highly incorrect associations...³⁶

On the second point, an alluring trend of thought regarding Pico had already established itself when, in 1964, Frances Yates wrote

The profound significance of Pico della Mirandola in the history of humanity can hardly be overestimated. He it was who first boldly formulated a new position for European man, man as Magus using both Magia and Cabala to act upon the world, to control his destiny by science.³⁷

Especially with the inclusion of “Magia and Cabala,” Yates’ comment echoes the agenda of the Western esoteric stream, of which the late nineteenth-century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn is the exemplar. Yet the Golden Dawn drew its *qabalah* not so much from Pico-Reuchlin but from Agrippa’s systematization of medieval magic on the one hand, and from Knorr von Rosenroth’s *Kabbala denudata* on the other. The latter marked a return to actual

³⁶ *Alchemy*, page 86.

³⁷ *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, page 116.

Jewish sources of *kabbalah*, which had its own “aspects of angelology [and] demonology,” as found in *Kabbala denudata*, TOMUS SECUNDUS, PARS TERTIA, TRACTATUS I: Doctrina Hebræorum de Spiritibus, namely, excerpts of Abraham Herrera’s *Casa de la divinidad* (Frankfort: 1684) and the figures and tables of TOME I, PARS QUARTA (Sulzbach: 1677).

Regarding the third point—which bears closely upon the second—one can read Pico’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* and, after the first few passages, wonder where the dignity of man got to. Pico opens well enough by citing “that celebrated exclamation of Hermes Trismegistus, ‘What a great miracle is man, Asclepius,’” But then, in spite of the powerful tools he proposes elsewhere, Pico suggests that mankind is given no set course in finding a path to Christ or God. If not quite the assurance that “we *can* be what we *want* to be” (ref. Copenhaver: *Stanford Encyclopedia*, cited below), this does imply a certain *freedom*, albeit in a most anticlimactic form. An early passage of the *Oration* indicates all this by recounting God’s words to Adam.³⁸

No fixed seat, no special character, nor any gift of your own have I given you, Adam, so that what seat, what character, what gifts you choose for yourself, those you may have and hold as you wish, according to your purpose. For others, a limited nature is confined within laws that I have prescribed. With no strictures confining you, you will determine that nature by your own choice, which is the authority under which I have put you. I have set you at the center of the world so that you will be better placed to survey what the world contains. And I have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that on your own, as molder and maker, duly appointed to decide, you may shape yourself in the form that you prefer. You will be able to sink back into the lower forms that are beasts; from your own resolute spirit, you can be lifted again to the higher forms that are divine.

Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann remarks on Pico’s inclusion of this passage.³⁹

It is a peculiarly unspeculative attitude of Pico that he does not emphasize man’s love of virtue as his similarity to God. But there are two advantages to this attitude:

1. The soul is conceived individually and not cosmologically. Freedom is a hallmark of an individual soul, and the Averroistic implications of psychology are dismissed. This probably derives from Pico’s knowledge of Origen, and accords perfectly with his rejection of astrology.
2. In this conception the soul achieves a peculiar agility, by virtue of which it participates in all aspects of creation. Pico sees in this versatility the specific position of man in the cosmos. Beyond this participation, the soul of man can become united with the God of negative predicates...

Schmidt-Biggemann then quotes Pico’s *Oration* further (though here I replace Schmidt-Biggemann’s translation with that of Copenhaver, § 7):

O supreme liberality of God the Father, supreme and wondrous happiness of man, to whom it is given to have what he chooses, to be what he would be! From the moment of birth – from the mother’s womb, as Lucilius says – the beasts take what they will have. Either from the beginning or a little later, the spirits above have been what they will be for all eternity. In man at birth the Father has planted seeds of every kind and sprouts of every type of life, and if anyone cultivates them, they will grow and bear their fruit in him. If the seeds are the vegetal kind, the man will be a plant. If they are sensual, he will become a beast. If they are rational, he will turn into a heavenly animal. If they are intellectual, he will be an angel and a son of God. But if he is not content with the lot of any creature and draws himself into the center of his unity, becoming a spirit and one

³⁸ Copenhaver’s translation, § 6.

³⁹ *Philosophia Perennis*, page 170-171.

with God, this being who has been placed above all things will transcend them all in the lonely darkness of the Father.

Who would not wonder at this chameleon of ours? Or who would wonder more at anything else?

Yet, after these opening remarks, the bulk of Pico's *Oration* is an ornate explanation of his eclectic program for contemplating the heavens through *transcending* one's humanity. Brian P. Copenhaver writes⁴⁰

...*Oration on the Dignity of Man* became the speech that Pico never wrote, the one that now stands as the great renaissance charter of a heroic liberal ideal that Pico never promoted.

Pico's *Oration* is not about human dignity and freedom. What is it about? Meant to introduce nine hundred propositions that Pico never debated, it was his unpublished philosophical manifesto. It asserts his standing as a philosopher and exhorts his hearers to use philosophy for salvation of a special kind – mystical salvation. Moral philosophy, dialectic, natural philosophy and theology are four stages of a saving ascent that leads away from human nature, through angelic natures and toward union with the divine.

The conventional “mistake,” *On the Dignity of Man*, was attached to the *Oration* “in the pirated 1504 Strassburg edition of Pico's writings.”⁴¹ Stephen A. Farmer notes

...the posthumous 1496 Bologna edition of Pico's works, where the oration first appeared in print, carries a prominent running title on every double page that carries that text: *Oratio in coetu Romanorum* (Oration in the Roman Assembly). The title refers to the oration's original purpose as a speech to be delivered before the Roman debate of Pico's 900 theses, which were first published in late 1486...⁴²

In his article on Pico within the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Copenhaver writes,

The most conspicuous pages of the *Oration*, celebrated by [Eugenio] Garin and many others as the humanist charter of human freedom and dignity, are just the first few. Assured by them that we can be what we *want* to be, we are then told—contrary to the usual interpretation of the *Oration*—that what we *must* be is not human at all. We must become angels—bodiless, sexless and ultimately, that most unromantic of all conditions, *selfless* in the strict sense. ... Mystical union with God is Pico's final goal, and extinguishing the self is a necessary consequence of achieving it. “Let a *holy* ambition possess our spirit,” Pico writes.

Copenhaver further observes

...both the fame of the *Oration* and its attachment to this ideal [the “modern ideal of human dignity and freedom”] are products of the Kantian revolution that transformed philosophy and its historiography. Although the celebrity that Pico earned during his brief and dramatic life never waned, it had little to do with the *Oration* before the end of the eighteenth century. For three centuries after he died in 1494, the *Oration* was little more than an entry in the lists of Pico's books until post-Kantian historians invented the first elements of the interpretation now common in college textbooks.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Who Wrote Pico's *Oration*?” page 1.

⁴¹ Farmer, “On the Original Title....”

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “The Secret of Pico's *Oration*,” page 56.

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