

# Emanation & Ascent in Hermetic Kabbalah

Colin Low

cal@digital-brilliance.com

## **Emanation and Ascent in Hermetic Kabbalah**

This document consists of slides and notes for a public talk presented at the Spirit of Peace Conference III on Saturday 20th September 2003 at the Friends Meetings House, St. Giles, Oxford.

Copyright © Colin Low 2003, 2004. All rights reserved.

### **License to Copy**

This document is intended for personal use only. Paper copies may be made for personal use. With the above exception, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, without permission in writing from the author.

### **Summary**

The central unifying theme of Hermetic Kabbalah is the understanding that the phenomenal world and the human soul are products of a process of emanation within the divine. This leads to practical techniques designed to retrace the path of emanation in reverse, literally an ascent, or return back to the original condition of being. These mystical beliefs and practices were prevalent in the ancient world of the Hellenistic near East, and played an important (and sometimes underground) role in European culture until c. 1600 CE, when they began to be overshadowed by materialistic beliefs. Modern formulations of Hermetic Kabbalah still retain many of these ancient beliefs and practices in a remarkably pure form.

# What is Kabbalah?

- Origin in the 12 C. CE, seeded by older texts (e.g. *Sepher Yetzirah*, *Shiur Komah*, *Hekhalot* & *Merkavah* texts, *Bahir*)
- Textual interpretation is profoundly important in Judaism (e.g. Torah scholar)
- Kabbalah extends the interpretation of texts in radically new directions – theosophy, cosmogony, evil, the soul, worship, practical life, theurgy & magic
- Defining text: *Zohar* (late 13<sup>th</sup> C)

Jewish mysticism - theosophical, ecstatic and practical – predates Kabbalah by more than 1000 years, and generated a literature that included texts such as the *Sepher Yetzirah*, *Shiur Komah*, the *Hekhalot* and *Merkabah* texts, and most importantly for Kabbalah, the *Bahir*. The seminal Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem located the origins of Kabbalah in medieval Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. The earliest identifiable centres were in the Provence region in the south of France, and subsequently in Spain. Both were regions of high culture at that time, and were much stimulated by contact with the Arab world, both through Moorish Spain, and also because the first Crusades had caused large numbers of Europeans to visit Palestine.

Scholem attributes the emergence of specific Kabbalistic themes to the impact of the book *Bahir*, along with gnostic conceptions of unknown origin, within the circle of R. Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne, his son-in-law R. Abraham ben David, and his grandson R. Isaac the Blind (who is sometimes credited as being the 'father of Kabbalah').

The reading and explanation of sacred texts – primarily the *Tanakh* (*Bible*) – is profoundly important within Judaism. The *Torah* (first five books of the *Bible*) is not only the literal word of God, it is a prefiguration of all *that is* within the created universe. The language in which it is written is considered sacred, so that each letter in the *Torah* could be considered significant within the context of every other letter. The text was considered fathomless, beyond human comprehension, but with the benefit of divine grace, the inspired Torah scholar might unlock new insights and penetrate more deeply into God's intentions for the Jewish people. This led to a profusion of commentaries on sacred texts. Many were concerned with Jewish law, with the commandments, and with ritual observance, but some went off in an esoteric and mystical direction.

The re-reading and exegesis of an older stratum of mystical texts within the context of medieval European culture led to a prolific exploration in new directions – theosophy, cosmogony, the nature of evil, the human soul, reincarnation, the commandments in daily life, prophecy, theurgy, and magic.

The defining Kabbalistic text is the *Zohar*, a pseudoepigraphic commentary on the *Bible* that purports to originate from Palestine in the period following the destruction of the Second Temple. The dominant scholarly position is that it was written by the Spanish Kabbalist Moses of Leon more than a thousand years later than claimed, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Many orthodox Jews continue to support its supposed authorship.

## What is Hermetic Kabbalah?

- Various underground theosophic, philosophic & magical traditions surfaced during the Renaissance (e.g. *Corpus Hermeticum*)
- Continuation of pre-Christian beliefs from the Hellenistic Middle East
- Confluence with Jewish Kabbalah
- Defining text – Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (1531)
- Kabbalah connected both to speculative Christianity and to pre-Christian speculation

The re-discovery of Greek culture that stimulated the Italian Renaissance led to a far-reaching exploration of ideas, particularly in religion. The works of Plato, lost to the West for many centuries, were translated into Latin. The *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of theosophical documents that were believed to be the wisdom of ancient Egypt, were discovered and translated. The realisation that Judaism contained esoteric traditions and practices relating to the *Bible* was of intense interest to intellectuals all over Europe, particularly as the philosophy of Plato, the theosophy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and Jewish Kabbalah seemed to connect at many points, to the extent that they were thought to have derived from a common source.

It should come as no surprise that intellectuals, mystics and magicians should begin to take an interest in Kabbalah. Christianity is essentially a Hellenistic gloss over esoteric aspects of Judaism dating (obviously) from the time of Jesus. It embodies much that was current both within the Greek-speaking cultures of the Middle East, and within esoteric Judaism. Even today, Bible scholars learn

Greek for the New Testament, and Hebrew for the Old Testament. After 1000 years of Christianity, medieval Europe had a natural affinity for ideas whose outlines could be discerned in Christian doctrine.

The person who did most to draw the attention of European intellectuals to the Kabbalah, with his daring statement “no science can better convince us of the divinity of Jesus Christ than magic and the Kabbalah”, was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 1494), who made that claim as part of 900 famous theses posted for public debate in Rome. He commissioned the translation of many important Kabbalistic texts, and provided the stimulus for translations out of Hebrew into Latin that continued through the 16<sup>th</sup>. century and into the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Occult sciences were widely studied before and during the Renaissance. The cosmos was thought to be hierarchical, with God at the highest level, and various hierarchies of angelic powers, with the material world and the infernal regions at the outer limit of reality. It was believed that circumstances in the mundane world were consequences of processes happening at more subtle levels of reality. Physical things – plants, stones, perfumes, animals, parts of the body, and hours in the day – were believed to connect to spiritual energies by virtue of their abstract properties and associations. There was a widespread belief (even at the highest levels in society) in the reality of spirits who mediated various kinds of influence – benign and malign - through the creation. The goals of the occult sciences are familiar: knowledge, and the power to achieve ends that are today achieved using natural sciences and technology.

The most influential summation of the Renaissance occult worldview is Agrippa’s *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, a huge compendium of lore much of which can be traced back millennia. It contains a considerable amount of practical Kabbalah, and connects theurgic/magical techniques connected with Kabbalah to older pagan and Hermetic magic. Although Agrippa’s ideas were extremely influential, they eventually fell into disrepute because they seemed to value knowledge (gained by dubious and perhaps diabolical means) over the Christian acceptance of humanity’s place in the divine scheme of things. Agrippa’s magic was displaced by the beginnings of true science and the Age of Reason (the first draft of the *Three Books* was written in 1510, Newton’s *Principia* was published in 1687).

The essence of Kabbalah is comprehension of the divine, both intellectually and experientially, and as such it presupposes a God. The situation in Jewish Kabbalah is clear: the God of Kabbalah is the God of Judaism, and as such Kabbalah is an extension and elaboration of Judaism. To a large extent the same is true of Christian Kabbalah: Christian Kabbalah is an extension and elaboration of Christianity.

The notion of divinity in Hermetic Kabbalah is very different, and derives from the philosophic notions of the divine in Plato and Plotinus, and in the related theosophy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It is less connected with religious dogma and more with open and individual exploration. It is a continuation of the tradition of Neoplatonist priest-philosophers such as Iamblichus and Proclus, filtered through the understanding of a generation of Renaissance mages, who integrated the mysticism of the Hellenistic world with that of European Judaism.

# Emanation

- The sensible/phenomenal world is an endpoint of a process (emanation)
- Emanation bridges the distance between god & the world
- Described in terms of discrete stages or levels
- Hierarchy of being
- Elaboration of processes & personalities within & between levels

Emanation is an ancient way of explaining how a world that contains a chaotic diversity can have an underlying order and a connection with a single, unified source of all being. One of the most important developments of the concept of emanation as a theory to explain the nature of existence comes from the ancient Greek philosopher Plato and his followers, in particular Plotinus (c. 200 CE).

Emanation bridges the distance between the One (or the Good) and the diversity of existence by postulating intermediate levels of being. There are many different elaborations of this idea, too many to catalogue here. One of the most detailed and complete expositions of the Platonic view is *The Elements of Theology* by the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (411-485), and it is interesting to find it mirrored more than 1000 years later in the philosophy of Spinoza, an extremely influential philosophy which is believed to have Kabbalistic roots.

As emanation begins with pure being and concludes with the real world, it usually postulates a hierarchy of being, with those beings closer to the source considered increasingly pure and undefiled by the world. These beings are considered to be real, and referred to as daemons, archons/governors, spirits, angels etc. There is much elaboration of roles, processes and relationships between the various levels of being, as these beings are considered to communicate and regulate the influence of the divine.

This is the basis for High Magic (*theurgia*), the belief that one can influence the processes behind the physical world by using occult knowledge to communicate with higher levels of being. Low Magic (thaumaturgy, or *goetia*) is the use of spirits from lower levels of being, or in dualistic schemes, diabolical powers. The use of spirits to attain knowledge and power has been a constant source of social friction in dualist-emanationist cultures (e.g. medieval and Renaissance Europe).

# Emanationist Schemes

- Heliopolitan Theogony (Egypt – 1000BC?)
- Platonism (400BC – 500CE)
- Jewish (Enoch literature, Hekhalot literature)
- Gnosticism (200CE)
- Hermeticism (200CE)
- Judeo-Christian (Celestial Hierarchies 600 CE)
- Medieval Kabbalah (Tree of Life, Four Worlds)

Emanation was the dominant model of the cosmos throughout Europe and the Middle East from the time of Ancient Egypt ~1000 BC until the beginnings of the Age of Reason at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>. C. It survives today in popular culture in an astonishing number of forms, from Christianity to many different New Age schemes.

One of the earliest forms of emanation described in any detail is the theogony of Heliopolis in ancient Egypt. In this a hierarchy of divine syzygies (god-goddess pairs) are emanated from a single source of Being (Nun).

Plato introduced the idea of emanation to the Greek-speaking world, and his ideas were developed continuously over the 1000-year duration of the Platonic Academy in Athens. One of the finest, most complete, and influential developments of Platonic emanation can be found in the works of Plotinus, who lived in Roman times. These were condensed and circulated within the Arab world during the European dark ages (so-called) as *The Theology of Aristotle* and reached Europe in medieval times, long before the original works of Plato.

Early Jewish mystical and proto-magical literature envisions a cosmos that is strongly hierarchical. In the Enoch literature the sage Enoch is taken on a series of visionary journeys, in which the inner workings of the creation are disclosed. According to this tradition Enoch was elevated to the angels and became the archangel of the presence, Metatron. The Enoch legend provides a model of the seer who, through a combination of sanctity and knowledge, is granted privileged access to the occult world of Being that underpins phenomenal reality.

The Hekhalot and Merkabah literature provides descriptions of those things the seer will encounter on such a journey. The approach to the inner sanctum of the divine is represented by a series of

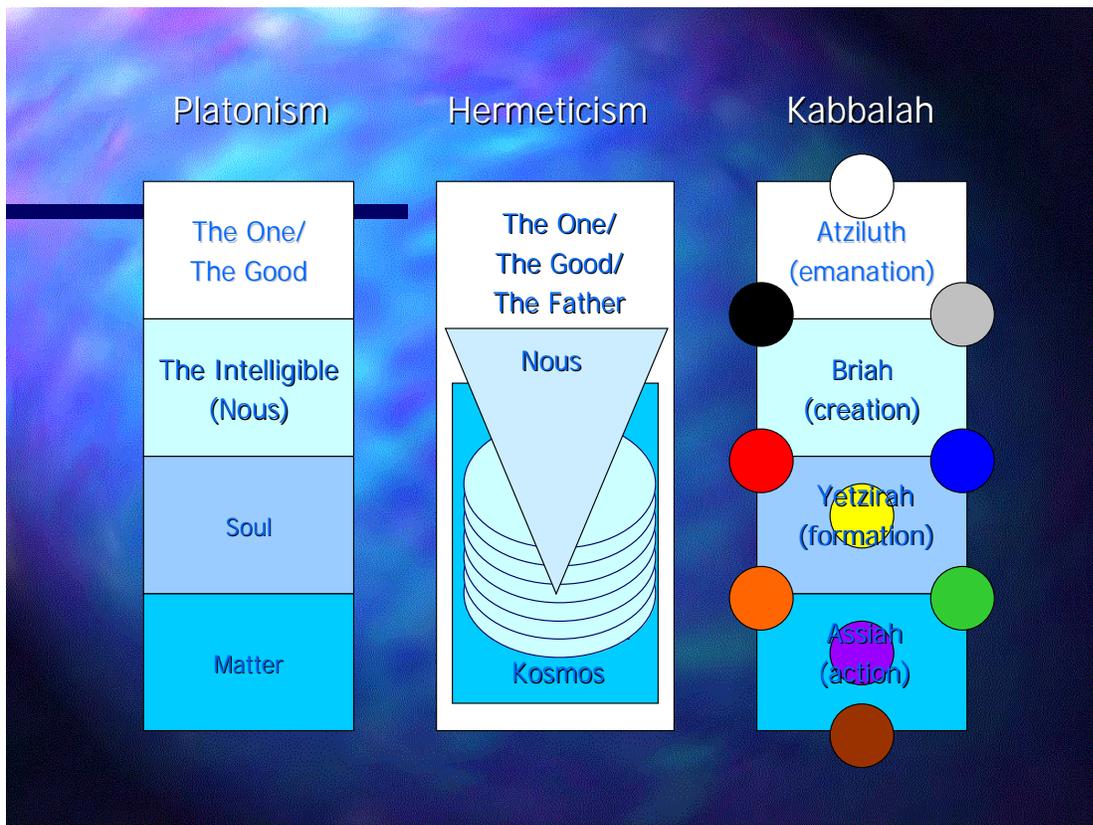
halls in the palace of a king (God) that must be traversed. The seer must be equipped with signs, sigils and magical formulae to pass the sentinels and guardians of each hall. It has been noted that the world of the divine is modelled on the royal court structure of the great empires that had begun to dominate the near East – Rome, Persia, and subsequently, Byzantium.

Gnosticism is dualist, and represents the physical world as a trap in which the soul is ensnared by the senses into perceiving a world created by deluded and/or evil powers (this is the underlying theme of *The Matrix*). The Gnostic can return to the divine by using techniques not dissimilar to those used by the Merkabah mystic.

Hermeticism shares something with Gnosticism and Platonism. This is unsurprising given that all three were current at the same time and place (e.g. Alexandria) during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

Christianity is dualist (there is conflict between powers of light and darkness, two opposed realms of being), and shares important parts of its worldview with Gnosticism, Neoplatonism and mystical Judaism. Its emanationism derives partly from Neoplatonism (the *Celestial Hierarchies* of pseudo-Dionysus – see below) and partly from Judaism.

Several key concepts in Kabbalah also owe a great deal to Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. The nature of Jewish textual exegesis and theological culture meant that new ideas were hallowed by grounding them in scripture, and from this point of view there is nothing in Kabbalah that is not Jewish. Nevertheless, the outlines of Gnostic and Platonic influences can be discerned and have been documented by scholars. Kabbalah is strongly emanationist.



Emanationism in Kabbalah is expressed primarily through two metaphors: four worlds, and ten sephiroth. The two schemes can be overlaid to produce a joint picture, a version of which is shown above.

The expression in terms of ten numbers or stages has some correspondences with Pythagoreanism, a correspondence noted during the Renaissance by Christian Kabbalist Johann Reuchlin. The expression in terms of four worlds has points of similarity with Platonism, and some Jewish Kabbalists thought that Plato must have learned his wisdom from a Hebrew source - the prophet Jeremiah was suggested as a possible teacher. Something similar was believed about Pythagoras, some concluding that Pythagoras must have learned his wisdom from the same common source as the ancient masters of Kabbalah (e.g. Egypt, source of the wisdom of Moses).

An explanation of the creative process in terms of ten numbers is attributed to Pythagoras, who lived c. 500 BC. Pythagoras is said to have travelled widely in Egypt and the Middle East, and was believed to be an initiate of many traditions, so the ultimate origin of his system is unknown. The Pythagorean tradition ran in parallel with the teachings of Plato, and often overlapped, so that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between Platonism and Pythagoreanism. Prominent Platonists such as Iamblichus regarded themselves as inheritors of the Pythagorean wisdom tradition, and believed that Plato had his teaching from Pythagorean sources.

The ten sephiroth of later Kabbalah derive ultimately from the ancient book of creation, the *Sepher Yetzirah*, where they appear simply as numbers. The *Sepher Yetzirah* has been dated to 200-400 CE, so it is much later than the original teachings of Pythagoras, and its content does not appear to intersect with Greek philosophy in any significant way.

The Kabbalistic scheme of emanation through four worlds of being has points of correspondence with Platonism, which also has four realms of being: the One, ultimate source of all being; the Intelligible, the divine prefiguration of all that is; Soul, that part of a human being capable of apprehending the Intelligible and capable of uniting with the One; and Matter, the substance in which all forms of existence become manifest. The correspondence with Kabbalah is similar in spirit, but not in detail; in particular, Kabbalists posit an ultimate, non-existent source of being beyond Atziluth, the first world of emanation.

The emanationism of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is so similar to Platonism of the same period that some academics treat it as a popularisation of the same, but there is no direct evidence to show this is the case. An alternative view is that the essence may be authentically Egyptian, but it was expressed at a time and place where a Platonic influence and treatment was inevitable. The divine part of the human soul is seen as having descended through spheres of increasing materiality, so that it is beguiled by the senses and emotions into losing sight of its divine connection and nature.

Emanationism precedes Kabbalah by millennia. Neoplatonic and Gnostic influences can readily be discerned in Kabbalistic works. Some Jewish antagonists of Kabbalah regarded it as a foreign import to Judaism. This is going too far. So is the view that Kabbalah is entirely Jewish and uninfluenced by the European culture – Hellenistic Pagan, Christian and Muslim – in which it developed. The emanationist structure of Kabbalah has distinct features in its own right, and is not obviously inspired in a simple or direct way by Platonism, or Pythagoreanism, or Gnosticism, but it is instructive to note that emanationism was a common element in Muslim, Christian and Jewish mysticism during the medieval period, and Kabbalah developed at a place and time where all three cultures intersected.

# Celestial Hierarchies

Each of those who is allotted a place in the Divine Order finds his perfection in being uplifted, according to his capacity, towards the Divine Likeness; and what is still more divine, he becomes, as the Scriptures say, a fellow-worker with God, and shows forth the Divine Activity revealed as far as possible in himself. For the holy constitution of the Hierarchy ordains that some are purified, others purify; some are enlightened, others enlighten; some are perfected, others make perfect; for in this way the divine imitation will fit each one.

Dionysus 600 CE ???

|               |
|---------------|
| God           |
| Seraphim      |
| Cherubim      |
| Thrones       |
| Dominions     |
| Powers        |
| Authorities   |
| Principalties |
| Archangels    |
| Angels        |

“... a survey of Neoplatonism’s influence threatens to become little less than a cultural history of Europe down to the Renaissance, and on some points far beyond.”

*Neoplatonism*, R.T. Wallis

Platonism reached medieval Europe through many intermediaries and routes. Much of the material that survived the Dark Ages was late-Platonism; that is, what is often called Neoplatonism. It was the works of later Platonists such as Proclus and Plotinus that were read, rather than the original works of Plato, as most of these were not translated until the Renaissance. It was not only Christian Europe that was influenced; the major Hellenistic cities of the near-East (such as Alexandria) became part of the Muslim world, and Platonism went on to have a profound influence on medieval Sufism. One of the principle sources for Platonic ideas in Europe was via Arabic works translated into Latin.

A highly influential source for the medieval view of the godhead and the cosmos were writings attributed to Dionysus the Areopagite, St. Paul’s first convert and Bishop of Athens. These writings are the *Mystical Theology*, *Divine Names*, *Celestial Hierarchy*, and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. The provenance of these writings is unclear; some believe in the original attribution, but scholarly opinion dates them from late 5<sup>th</sup> - early 6<sup>th</sup>. century Athens, and so they are pseudoepigraphic – that is, deliberately and falsely attributed to another author, in this case Dionysus. The difficulty with pseudoepigraphic writings is that the authorship is often taken literally, and in this case, they were, and so a late Athenian Neoplatonist writer became accepted as one of the Church Fathers, with the authority that went with it<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> They puzzle me; the scholarly date for pseudo-Dionysus may be correct, but I suspect he marries Neoplatonic ideas with a hierarchy that comes in part from earlier Jewish sources .

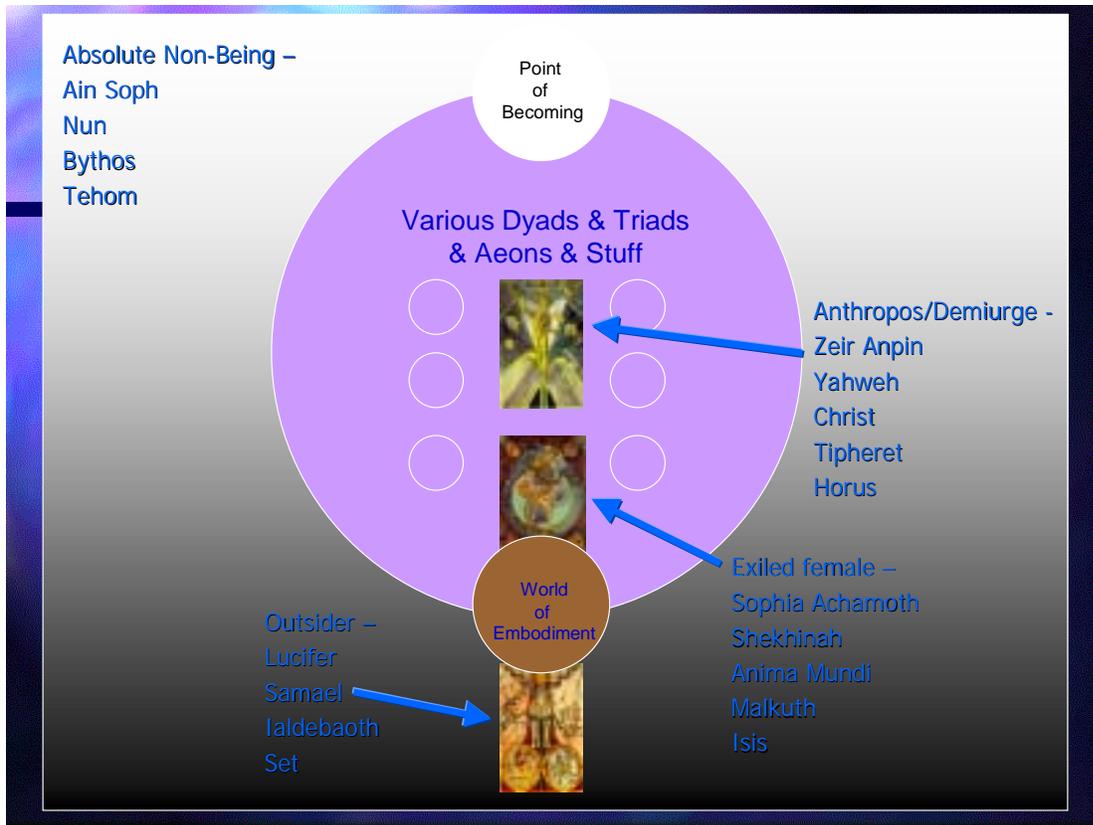
The diagram above shows a hierarchy, literally a celestial hierarchy, of ten powers stretching from the Godhead to the powers closest to human beings and physical manifestation, the angels. It was through the works of pseudo-Dionysus that Neoplatonic emanation became part of orthodox Christian thinking, and part of European culture, so that when Dante describes the ascent through the spheres of the divine in his *Divine Comedy*, it is the much older Hellenistic model of the universe that he uses (see below).

The quotation from *Celestial Hierarchies* contains the idea that human beings can manifest more and more of the divine likeness, and one's place in the hierarchy depends on one's degree of spiritual growth.

For the holy constitution of the Hierarchy  
ordains that some are purified,  
others purify; some are enlightened,  
others enlighten;  
some are perfected, others make perfect;  
for in this way the divine imitation will fit each one.

This idea is still preserved in detail in many Hermetic orders, where training and initiation by ritual, drama, and internal experience, enable an aspirant to ascend through the levels of emanation. The sephiroth on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life provide such a scheme, and it is usually overlaid with the historically older idea of the ascent through the planetary spheres. This dramatic and (sometimes) spiritual ascent is mirrored in Temple grades, which entitle the holder to positions of greater authority within an Hermetic order.

---



The *Seven Samurai* is set in feudal Japan. *The Magnificent Seven* is set in Mexico in the later part of 19<sup>th</sup>. century. In every superficial detail they are different films, but they share an underlying pattern.

One can make a similar observation about the many theosophical systems that one might loosely term Gnostic: they can differ in almost every detail, but they also share common patterns. These patterns occur with so much regularity they are easily conflated, blended, and homogenised. It is worthwhile to do this here deliberately to delineate the essential features of the pattern.

The essential features are:

- a condition of non-being
- a condition of being, populated by the archetypal figures of
  - an intermediary, redeemer, creator or demiurge
  - an exiled female
  - an outsider

The condition of non-being has no conceptual attributes. In origami, paper can be folded into many shapes. When a shape is complex and interesting, we see the shape not the paper. The paper is the ground of being for all the origami shapes, but it has no intrinsic shape of its own. This is a metaphor, but it captures aspects of what is designated by a word that points to something that has no conceptual form.

In Kabbalah this condition of non-being is called *Ain Soph*, literally, “without limit”. In Greek myth it is called *Bythos*, in Hebrew *Tehom*, in Egyptian *Nun*, and each translates to “the deep”. This

metaphor contrasts the waves and foam of the sea surface with the underlying deep, implying that phenomenal reality is the froth on top of something that is not accessible to study or conceptualisation.

This concept of non-being appears in modern physics as the quantum vacuum, a ground state that is pregnant with every possible state of manifest being. The pregnant energy of the vacuum state has been observed in phenomena such as the Lamb shift and the Casimir effect, and measurements confirm theory with considerable precision.

The condition of Being is emanated from non-Being, usually in a number of steps involving dyads and triads. A dyad is usually depicted as a male-female pair, the triad as a male-female pair with a child as offspring. Some Gnostic systems contain a large number of dyadic emanations. In Kabbalah the first point of becoming/emanation is called Kether, and it emanates a dyad called Chokhmah and Binah, which are often known by the titles Father (*Abba*) and Mother (*Imma*). This primordial dyad is depicted as being in eternal conjugal coupling, and produce a child, the *Zeir Anpin*.

*Zeir Anpin* is the intermediary between Earth and Heaven. In Christianity he is the Christ. In Egyptian myth he is Horus. In Greek philosophy he is the Anthropos, the primordial archetype of Man, or the Platonic demiurge who crafts the Kosmos. In most systems there is a strong identification with the Sun (this is true also in Kabbalah – *Zeir Anpin* is centered in Tipheret, which associated with the sphere of the Sun). In the slide above I have chosen the Magician card to represent this figure – he is the manufacturer of objective reality, the one whose sleight of hand creates the illusions of existence, and who holds the secret of their dissolution. He can be a figure of redemption or a figure of deception, sometimes both – he is dual.

The exiled female can be depicted as being the partner of the male figure. In apocryphal Christianity she is Mary Magdalen. In Kabbalah she is *Nukva Zeir*, the *Shekhinah*, the spirit of God in creation. In many Gnostic systems she is Sophia Achamoth. In Egypt she was Isis, mourning her lost husband. In Kabbalah she was also the matriarch Rachel mourning her lost children, identified with the sephira Malkuth. The exiled female is strongly identified with the substance of existence, and she is the soul of the world, the *Anima Mundi*.

The outsider figure is often the twin of the intermediary, so that in some legends Lucifer is the twin of Jesus and also a son of God. In many Gnostic schemes the demiurge is evil – Ialdeaioth, Saklas, Samael – and creates the world in ignorance of true being. Christ is a messenger from a higher reality who enables the Gnostic to escape this world of illusion and error. In Egypt this outsider entity was Set, twin of Horus.

Many of these themes are played with in *The Matrix*. The world of the Matrix is a fabrication designed to enslave human beings, and the representative of the machine intelligences who plays the role of evil is Agent Smith. In the third film he is essentially a diabolic power, operating beyond constraint, transforming the world into his own image. Neo is the redeemer figure, whose polar relationship with Agent Smith becomes increasingly clear as the series progresses – the finale is essentially the merging of the two. Trinity is his partner, the one who grounds him in the reality of his mission.

The Gnostic content in Kabbalah is striking, and became stronger with the passing of time. In the later interpretation of R. Isaac Luria the Kosmos is in a fallen state, and the task of the Kabbalist is

to rectify this fallen condition by acts that unify elements which have become separated. Each Kabbalist becomes a redeemer.

## Distance from God

- Can we equate distance from God with proximity to Evil?
- Our existence is dual
- Is Nature/Matter/Hyle part of the Divine?

| Radical dualism                            | Mitigated Dualism                         | Monism        |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Manicheanism<br>Christianity<br>Gnosticism | Various forms of Platonism<br>Hermeticism | Me<br>Judaism |

Every emanationist system struggles to reconcile the belief that God is Good with the evident imperfections in the creation – war, disease, catastrophe and mortality. The process of emanation from a source suggests one principle underlying all phenomena – but the empirical existence of evil contradicts the idea that this principle is entirely Good.

One solution to this dilemma, radical dualism, proposes that God is opposed by an autonomous realm of evil, and the war between good and evil is played out in this world. This solution raises as many questions as it solves ... if evil is self-emanating, then perhaps it is fully the equal of good. Many systems of Gnosticism propose that the phenomenal world is the creation of a deluded creator demiurge (sometimes identified with the god Yahweh of the Bible), and hence innately evil. Each human being contains a divine spark that connects to a true realm of goodness and yearns to return to the source. To achieve this it must turn away from this world of the senses.

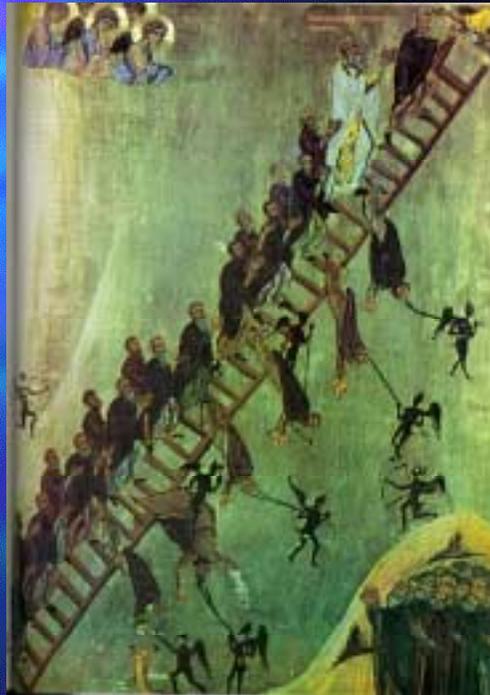
Christianity comes very close to radical dualism in the way it contrasts the Kingdom of Heaven, in its goodness and perfection, with the innate sinfulness and moral peril of incarnate existence. There are two realms, Heaven and Hell, and the powers of Hell contend with those of Heaven for possession of the human soul. The influence of the Apocalypse of John (*Revelation*), with its end-time war between good and evil, has been immense.

There are many intermediate positions which attempt to retain the goodness of God, and avoid the embarrassment of autonomous evil by proposing that evil is a consequence of embodiment – the stuff of embodiment (matter) brings us to grief. The ontological status of matter is hardly ever clear.

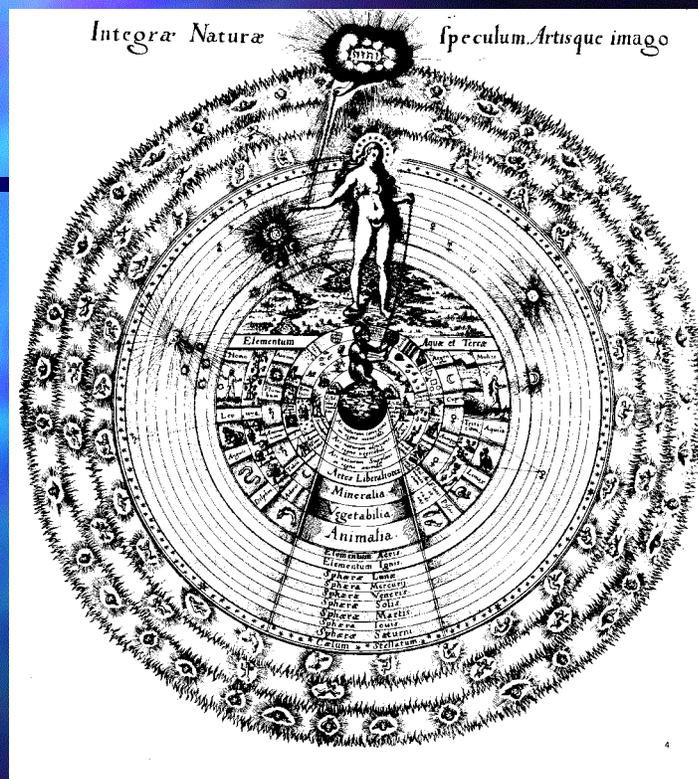
A solution that avoids the difficulty of autonomous, separately existent realms is to make all that is dependent on a single underlying principle or cause (Monism). From a personal perspective I find this view irresistible: no matter how carefully one attempts to brush dualism under the carpet (and many forms of Mitigated Dualism have been described), they cannot avoid the fundamental difficulty: if there are two independent sources of existence, how do they meet, and if they meet and interact, what unifying principle underlies that meeting. In other words, dualism always has to become monism.

There is a tendency for dualist systems to be life-denying – the world of spirit is valued more than the world of the flesh. There is an equivalent tendency for monist systems to be life-affirming, as every thing, evil as well as good, is seen to be rooted in the same ultimate source of being.

# Ascent



- Ascent is an individual response to emanation
- Ascent follows the process of emanation in reverse
- The ascender moves up (or down) through the planes of existence, encountering the beings of each level



Emanationist schemes tend towards the belief that there are two poles of being: a realm of purity, labelled as 'The Divine', and a realm of impurity, which corresponds to the world of phenomenal existence. Even Kabbalah, which takes the position that all is God, struggles with this opposition. The commandments given to Moses specify many kinds of impurity that an orthodox Jew should avoid, and this creates the mindset that that the holiness that exists in the world is mixed and impure – there is much that should be avoided.

The later Kabbalah of Isaac Luria renders this in a dramatic form: sparks of the divine have fallen into a world of impurity and must be redeemed by ritual acts that free them. Human beings are participants in a grand scheme of cosmic purification, and theurgic acts to free the imprisoned sparks (*tikkun*) redeem the Creation from its fallen state.

It follows that purification is an important individual response to emanation. If this world is impure, and if there are levels of being which are more pure, one should attempt to gain access to progressively higher degrees of purity. In Christianity one is purified through acceptance of Jesus Christ, who took on all the sins and impurity of the world, and whose single act of redemption carries with him all who have faith. This belief is sufficient for many, but there have always been those who set more store by knowledge and divine grace than faith, and this Gnostic impulse (in the broadest possible sense of the word) leads to practices based around the metaphor of *ascent*.

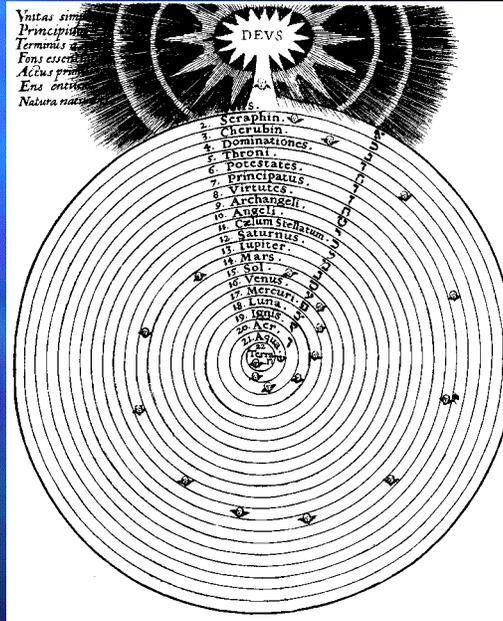
Ascent is a spiritual movement through the worlds or levels of emanation in which the coverings of impurity that create distance from the Divine are progressively removed. The descriptive framework of emanation provides many images, metaphors, concepts and entities which can be utilised to create a programme of ascent; that is, the process can be conceptualised in stages, and the spiritual aspirant attempts to work through these stages. Some details of these stages are outlined in what follows.

The diagram above was created by the Hermetic and Rosicrucian philosopher Robert Fludd (1574-1637). It displays the then prevailing belief as to the structure of the Kosmos, and purports to show that human art is the ape of nature. The human world is bounded by the spheres of the planets and the fixed stars, and beyond that, the realm of the Divine. With various elaborations, the model is essentially that of the ancient pagan world.

## Hermetic Ascent (~200 CE) "Zones of Heaven"

1. Increase & Decrease
2. Machinations of Evil Cunning
3. Lust, whereby Men are Deceived
4. Domineering Arrogance
5. Unholy Daring & Rash Audacity
6. Evil Strivings after Wealth
7. The Falsehood which lies in wait to work Harm

"And thereupon, having been stripped of all that was wrought upon him by the structure of the Heavens, he ascends to the substance of the eighth sphere ..."



The Hermetic view is that the divine part of the human soul is deceived by material senses so that it no longer knows what is real, and that it has descended into delusion from another realm of being that constitutes its true nature. As the poet (& Hermeticist) W. B. Yeats put it in *Sailing to Byzantium*:

"Consume my soul away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity."

The accretions of materiality that blind the soul were believed to come in stages, so that as the soul descended through the planetary spheres its vision would be increasingly constrained by the power of each planetary sphere – Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, the Moon, and finally physical incarnation in a body of clay. The process would be reversed at death, and the soul would ascend back to its original condition.

This is described in the ancient *Corpus Hermeticum* as follows:

"And thereupon, having been stripped of all that was wrought upon him by the structure of the Heavens, he ascends to the substance of the eighth sphere ..."

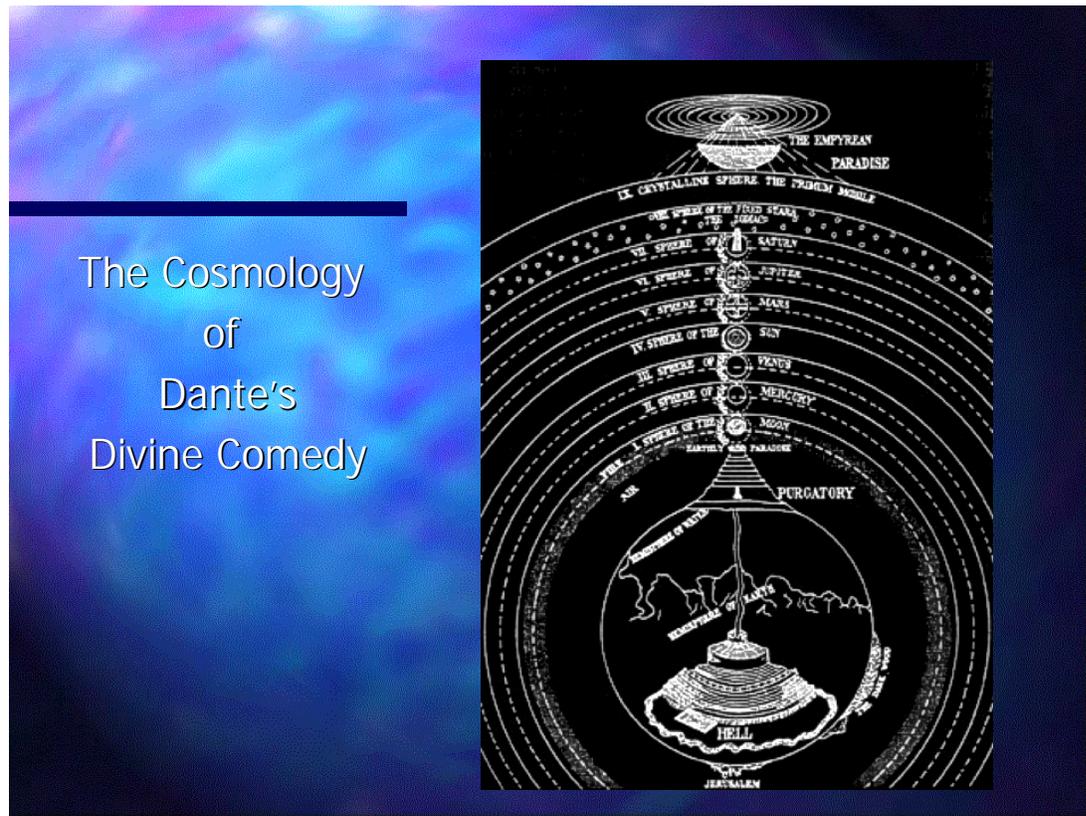
The spheres themselves are described as follows:

1. Increase & Decrease (Moon)

2. Machinations of Evil Cunning (Mercury)
3. Lust, whereby Men are Deceived (Venus)
4. Domineering Arrogance (Sun)
5. Unholy Daring & Rash Audacity (Mars)
6. Evil Strivings after Wealth (Jupiter)
7. The Falsehood which lies in wait to work Harm (Saturn)

Initiation has been described as a kind of death, and mystics have attempted to return back to the eighth sphere before physical death. This model of ascent through the planetary spheres is one of the primary methods of Hermetic mysticism and has been retained a recognisable form to the present day. The identification/correspondence of the planetary spheres with the sephiroth on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life unites Hermeticism and Kabbalah, and provides Hermetic Kabbalah with a distinctive praxis – ascent to the divine via contemplative, meditational and theurgic work involving the sephiroth.

The diagram above is again by the prolific Robert Fludd. It shows 22 spheres of emanation: the 10 divine angelic orders from the *Celestial Hierarchies*, the seven planets, the four elements, and the sphere of the fixed stars, aligned with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, a syncretic blending of Platonic, Hermetic and Jewish source material that is characteristic of Hermetic Kabbalah.



It is difficult to appreciate or exaggerate the extent to which Dante is important for dramatising the worldview of the ancients and bringing it into popular consciousness. He describes a super-natural world that is partly Christian, but contains a large number of older pre-Christian elements.

In particular he preserves the archaic notion of ascent through the spheres. This had become an accepted notion within the medieval Christianity he used as a basis for his worldview, but is a relic from the ancient pagan world.

After traversing Hell with the shade of the Roman poet Virgil, Dante arrives at Purgatory, and is then accompanied by the spirit of Beatrice, who helps him traverse the spheres of the elements and planets to reach the earthly paradise. Dante then goes on to traverse the 10 spheres of Heaven (as in the *Celestial Hierarchies*). Dante's model is the same as that given by Robert Fludd (see previous slide) three hundred years later.

The presence of an ascent through the spheres shows how uncontroversial and deeply embedded this notion had become in medieval Christian European society.

There are ancient traditions of ascent within Judaism & Kabbalah – e.g. Jacob's Ladder



There are ancient traditions of ascent within Judaism, one of the best known being Jacob's Ladder. *Genesis 28:12* tells that Jacob settled down to sleep, rested his head on a stone and had a dream of "a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it."

The image is striking and contributed much to popular imagination of the relationship between Heaven and Earth.

The Tree of Life can be portrayed as Jacob's Ladder – the reverse process of emanation provides the path of return

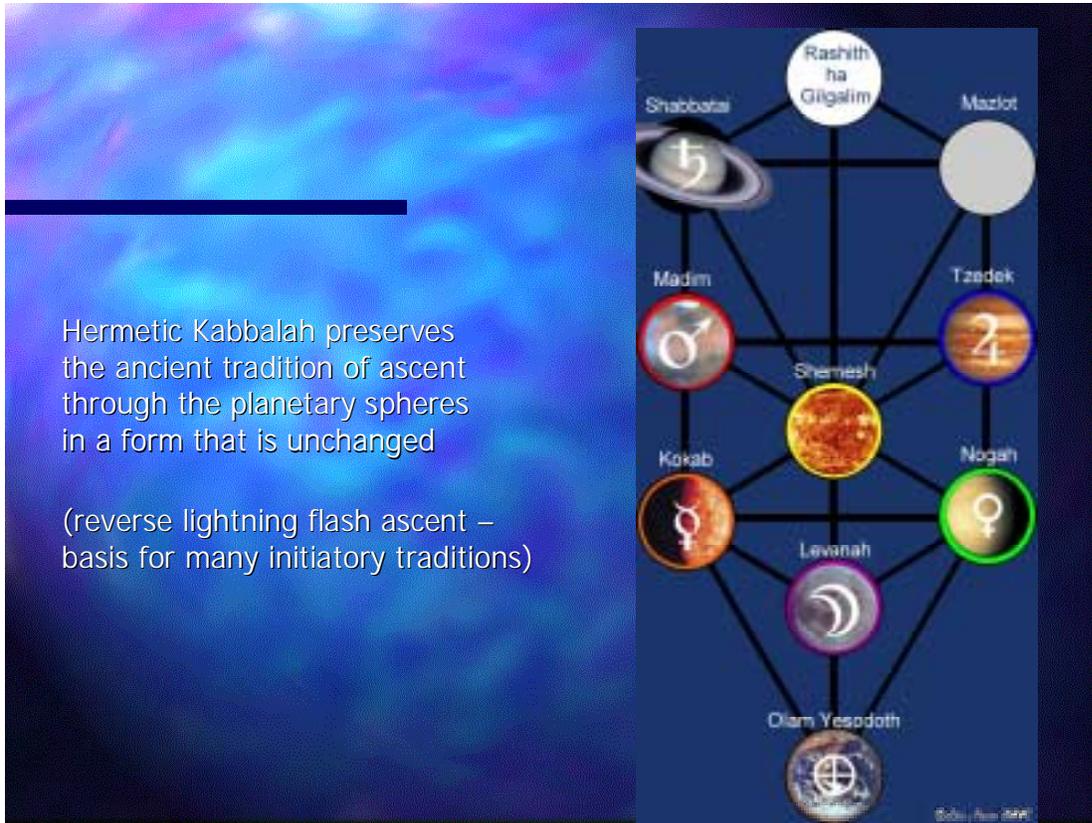


The Tree of Life has been explicitly identified with Jacob's Ladder. In their entry in the Llewellyn Encyclopedia (<http://www.llewellynencyclopedia.com>), Chic & Sandra Cicero state

The Qabalah has often been called the "Ladder of Lights" because it not only depicts cosmic generation, which is the descent of the Divine into the physical, but also defines how the individual may employ it for spiritual ascent by purifying both body and mind through ceremony, contemplation, and prayer, until at length one achieves that pristine state of consciousness that is necessary to attain union with the Higher Self—the emissary to the Divine Self represented by the first Sephirah of Kether.

The version of the Tree of Life shown in the picture above is a construction called the Extended Tree, and consists of four overlapping tree diagrams, which are intended to represent a Tree in each of the four worlds of Kabbalah. The Trees are overlapped so that the Malkuth of the next higher tree is overlaid with the Tipheret of the Tree below it. This construction has a ladder-like appearance with five horizontal rungs.

The identification of the Tree with Jacob's Ladder suggests that human beings have the power to ascend to the divine in the same manner as the angels.



Hermetic Kabbalah preserves the ancient tradition of ascent through the planetary spheres in a form that is unchanged  
 (reverse lightning flash ascent – basis for many initiatory traditions)

Hermetic Kabbalists associate many qualities, objects, concepts, etc. with the sephiroth on the Tree of Life, creating large tables called correspondences. Cornelius Agrippa compiled many lists of these correspondences during the Renaissance, and they can be found in his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*.

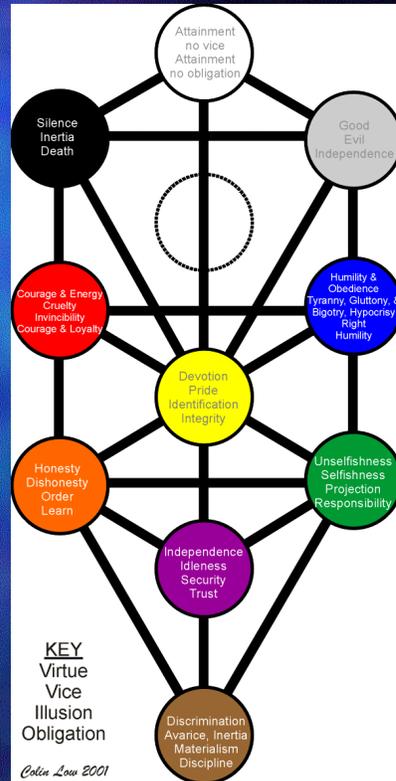
In Agrippa's *Scale of the Number Ten*, he associates the traditional and ancient ordering of the planets (based on proper motion) with the ten sephiroth, as shown in the diagram above. The ordering of the planets aligns with the traditional order of emanation of the sephiroth (the so-called "lightning flash" order).

This diagram shows how Hermeticism and Kabbalah have come together. Both share a view of the nature of reality that was pervasive throughout Europe for millennia, as previous slides have demonstrated. Although there are many cultural and religious differences between Hermeticism and Platonism on one hand, and Kabbalah on the other, there are sufficient broad similarities between them that in the syncretic and humanist atmosphere of the Renaissance, they appeared to come from the same source. They were seen as being different aspects of an ancient tradition that had found its way into both ancient Greece and Judaism.

And in some senses this is not too far from the truth; the Hellenistic culture of the ancient Near East was a pan-cultural mixing bowl in which many traditions and ideas were scrambled together. One of these was the Graeco-Judaic mixture that became Christianity – and it was one cult that outlived many less popular cults that are now known only to scholars.

'Withdraw into yourself and look;  
and if you do not find yourself beautiful as yet,  
do as does the sculptor of a statue ...  
cut away all that is excessive,  
straighten all that is crooked,  
bring light to all that is shadowed ...  
do not cease until there shall shine out on you  
the Godlike Splendour of Beauty;

(Plotinus, *Ennead*, I, 6, 9).



The *Corpus Hermeticum* describes the ascent on death as a stripping-away of the negative qualities of the spheres from the divine essence of a human being so that it can recognise once more the source from which it came. This idea has been preserved unaltered to the present day, and the diagram above presents moral qualities such as the virtue and vice associated with each sephira on the Tree, taken from the author's own tradition. A subset of these correspondences can be found in Dion Fortune's *The Mystical Qabalah*, published in 1935.

Not only are they similar in spirit to the qualities enumerated in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (see slide *Hermetic Ascent*), they are, minor differences in language aside, expressing the same idea: evil cunning is an exaggerated version of dishonesty, as is domineering arrogance an exaggerated version of pride. The essential idea, that the soul should be refined by stripping off the vices and illusions of the spheres, has not only been preserved, it has been developed in considerable detail.

The quotation from Plotinus shows how integral this idea is to the Western tradition, and he states it quite clearly:

'Withdraw into yourself and look;  
and if you do not find yourself beautiful as yet,  
do as does the sculptor of a statue ...  
cut away all that is excessive,  
straighten all that is crooked,  
bring light to all that is shadowed ...  
do not cease until there shall shine out on you  
the Godlike Splendour of Beauty;

until you see temperance surely established  
in the stainless shrine”

That he should explicitly mention Beauty, the central sephira on the Tree of Life, shows how closely the Jewish and Neoplatonic/Hermetic traditions are aligned.

## Theurgic Ritual (Iamblichus 240-325 CE)

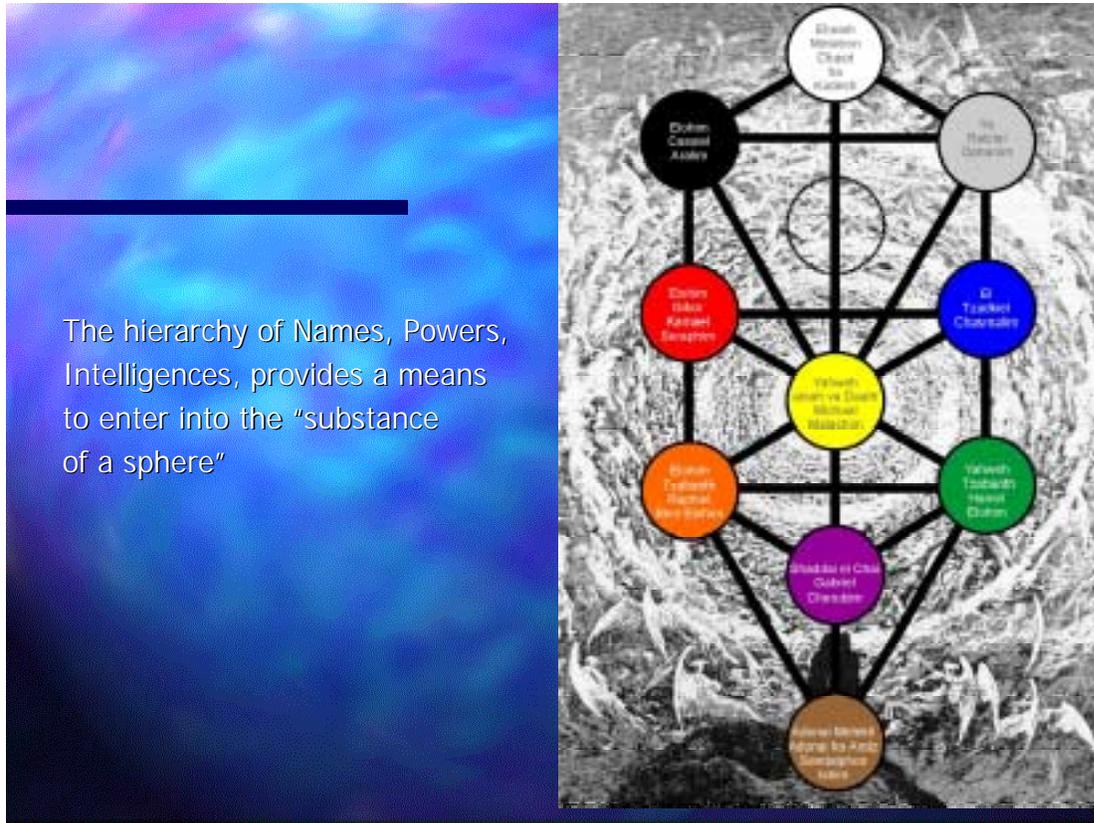
- Ritual is an adjunct to the experience of the descended soul, to being in the world
- Rituals assimilate oneself to the orders of the Kosmos
- (Me) Ritual moves attention from the *content* of life to the *context* of life

The Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus (240 – 325 CE) is central in combining philosophic mysticism with theurgic ritual into a system of practical mysticism that has many points of contact with the Hermetic schools that function to this day. It was partly due to his influence that the Roman Empire dropped Christianity as the state religion in favour of philosophic paganism under the Emperor Julian. This phase was short-lived, and ended with Julian’s early death, but it demonstrates the attraction of this system to the educated elite of the time.

The theurgic viewpoint of Iamblichus relates to a fine point of Neoplatonic doctrine: whether the soul is descended into the body. Plotinus believed that the soul, with its divine origin, never descended into matter. Iamblichus believed that it did.

If the soul is descended into the body, then for most people simple contemplation (as advocated by Plotinus) may be insufficient to awaken it, given the extent to which it is blinded by the senses and the passions. Ritual makes use of things – colours, odours, plants, artefacts – which have a relationship to the spheres of the Gods, and so the regular practice of ritual is a way for anyone to assimilate themselves to higher levels of being.

Another way to look at it is that almost all of the time we are occupied with the *content* of life – work, entertainment, sleep, sex – and almost none of the time is spent working with the *context* of life. Ritual is a suspension of normal life. It is a step into a larger space.



The operational basis for theurgic ritual is the belief that one can gain entry into higher levels of reality by summoning the entities associated with that level. This is an extension of an archaic magical praxis based on the understanding that every aspect of existence was dominated by spirits, and with the correct approach, protection and occult knowledge, one might win their assistance.

In modern Hermetic Kabbalah each sphere (sephira) can be approached at four levels, corresponding to the four worlds. In each world one can use (progressively) a God Name, the name of an Archangel, an Angel Order, and the powers of the sephira itself, to invoke the nature of the sphere, bringing the essence of the sephira down through progressively more tangible levels of manifestation in consciousness.

The nature of these beings is discussed later. The word “angel” is derived (from Hebrew, via Greek) from the word for a messenger. One can view them as a mediating function between levels of “reality”.

## Golden Dawn (late 19<sup>th</sup> C)

- Constant use of “higher” & “lower”
- Sensible world is darkness
- Initiation is an awakening into the light
- Occult knowledge brings light into darkness
- Startling similarity with Hermetic & Gnostic phraseology

“My soul is wandering in the Darkness seeking for the Light of Occult Knowledge, and I believe that in this Order the Knowledge of that Light may be obtained.” – *Golden Dawn initiation ritual*

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was founded in London in 1887. Its influences were Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Rosicrucianism, and Kabbalah. The intention of the Order was to “prosecute the Great Work”, an objective with many definitions, but in a loose sense, it meant the realisation of the divine nature and powers in each human being. The order began to disintegrate in ~1901, and by 1905 it was largely defunct, although a number of derivative organisations continued with some aspects of its system, and there are several organisations today claiming descent from the original Golden Dawn.

Its teaching operated through a series of grades which corresponded directly to an ascent through the sephirothic spheres, and for each grade there was a complex magical initiation ritual to induct the aspirant into the nature of the powers of that sphere. These rituals have been preserved. One thing that made the Golden Dawn unusual is that it explored many ancient techniques that were quite unambiguously magical; that is, techniques that involved communication and interaction with extra-human entities, characterised as gods or spirits or angels or demonic forces. This magical focus links the Golden Dawn directly with the pre-Christian world, and in spirit its rituals are most closely resonant with those of the priest-magician-philosophers of the late Roman Empire, such as Iamblichus.

A considerable body of magical ritual survives from the time of Iamblichus, mostly in the form of Greek and Coptic manuscripts from Egypt (i.e. the *Greek Magical Papyri*). These rituals range from what is often called “low magic” or *goetia*, the summoning of spirits to achieve material goals such

as love, wealth, invisibility etc, to summoning a guiding spirit or *daemon* (like Prospero's Ariel), to high magic rituals or *theourgia* intended to bring the practitioner into closer alignment with the divine realm. When viewed from some distance, the Golden Dawn appears to be an attempt to reinstitute the pagan mystery temples of the late Roman Empire, as seen through the rose-tinted glasses of Victorian romanticism.

The ascent model of the ancient world can be discerned clearly in the wording of the rituals. The words "higher" and "lower" occur frequently, with higher being closer to the divine, and lower being closer to the sensual and the material. "Light" and "dark" are also used. The sensible world is darkness, and initiation is an awakening into the light. This wording has a startling similarity to Gnostic and Hermetic literature.

Kabbalah played a major role in its teaching syllabus, and several of the more influential participants in the Order – Mathers, Wescott, Waite – devoted considerable energy to publishing material on Kabbalah. A significant proportion of the books on Hermetic Kabbalah (or Qabalah) published during the 20<sup>th</sup>. C can trace their teaching back to some offshoot of the Golden Dawn.

## My Take

- Higher/far & lower/near are not spatial
- Near is like light seen through clear glass
- Far is light seen through dirty glass
- No displacement; it is the nature of cognition that creates distance
- In a sense, Heaven & Hell are contiguous & interpenetrating with here & now
- Ascent is a process of developing & refining cognition

Emanation has not fared well as an explanation of the Kosmos. It developed out of the rational exploration of *what-is*, and that legacy of rational investigation played no small part in the creation of the scientific revolution ... but it is now an historic backwater. Many involved in the occult cling to some form of emanationism, and that is unfortunate, as what began rationally continues irrationally; that is, in the light of continuing scientific progress, it has become utterly confused and incoherent as a worldview. This is not to say that it is without value – in fact, I will assert that an

emanationist worldview continues to be of value – but it is no longer what it originally was, the most complete and best explanation of *what-is*.

It would take too long to critique emanationism in depth, but I will outline some of what I see as major problems:

### **Implicit Dualism.**

Any rational explanation of the Kosmos will run into trouble with dualism. Dualism implies separate, disjoint categories of being (such as body and mind, or matter and spirit). Cartesian dualism brought matters to a head: it has created so many absurd debates and desperately malignant notions it has to be rejected. How can there be disjoint categories of being if they are observed to interact, as is the case with what we call body, and what we call mind? If they interact, they are not disjoint.

Emanationism is prone to implicit dualism. Platonism is saturated with it. Formless matter has to be there from the beginning, waiting for the imprint of the higher realms of being. What is this formless stuff? Why do we need it?

### **Projected Categories of Being**

A consistent belief within emanationist theories is the existence of other classes of intelligent beings – spirits, angels, daemons and so on. These beings typically mediate various processes within an emanationist system. We possess magical works (e.g. “grimoires”) going back millennia which detail the techniques used to summon and communicate with these beings. Indeed, the primary purpose of magic was the attainment of various goals through the agency of these beings.

If these beings are not embodied like human beings, then how are they embodied? This is not a new question, and one can find ancient speculations concerning beings composed of air, or fire, or divine substance (and also blood and semen).

Now that the nature of intelligence is increasingly defined by modern research in biology, evolutionary theory, neurophysiology and artificial intelligence, the idea of disembodied intelligence seems like an oxymoron. Intelligence is created and sustained by embodiment. We must consider intelligence and environment to be duals, each defining the other and reacting back upon the other. One could say that intelligence is an emergent property of a complex environment, a reactive capability that buffers an organism against changes in the environment. Every living organism so far studied exhibits some level of intelligence - even single-celled organisms and bacteria, where DNA and messenger proteins provide a biological computer of astonishing sophistication.

So what is the substance of these entities or spirits with whom magicians believe they are communicating? How are these spirits embodied? If there is a substance capable of embodying these intelligent beings, and we can communicate with them, then this substance must be detectable using modern sensors and detectors. How is it that we do not find it?

An obvious answer is that the categories of being posited in emanationist theories are not the result of any kind of consensus observation and have no meaningful objective existence. They may appear in visions in a culturally conditioned form, but their only physical embodiment is within the mind of the seer – that is, they are projected. The mind’s ability to synthesise aspects of reality in

convincing detail has been revealed in studies of lucid dreaming, psychosis, psychotropic drugs and organic brain lesions (e.g. strokes). This would appear to be all the explanation required.

I do not believe that this is necessarily *all* the explanation required, and that spirits should be explained away quite so glibly, but I do find a level of naïve spiritism is something that discourages rational people from investigating some of the more interesting parts of Hermetic Kabbalah. The question of embodiment cannot be brushed under the carpet – spirits cannot be placed beyond investigation.

## **Better Explanations**

The best possible reason for rejecting emanationism as an explanation of how reality has the shape it does is that there are now much better explanations. We now have a consistent, overlapping set of explanations that spans every scale from sub-atomic particles up to stars and galaxies, a viewpoint expounded with enormous erudition by the biologist E. O. Wilson in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. There is little room for emanation.

There is a small space for it however .... The physicist Eugene Wigner pinpointed it in his famous essay where he notes the “unreasonable effectiveness” of extremely elegant mathematics in guiding the formation of physical theories. This harks back to Plato, whose notion of the Intelligible was founded on the absolute, non-contingent nature of mathematical truth. Mathematicians are still debating the nature of mathematical objects and the admissibility of certain types of argument, so it is premature to say more about this, other than to observe that many physicists and mathematicians still share the sense of wonder at the power of mathematics that inspired Plato 2,500 years ago.

## **My Take**

From the arguments given above one might conclude that I have given up on emanationism, and all that goes with it. This is very much *not* the case.

The destructive criticism of emanation and all that goes with it – hierarchy, spirits and so on – is that it is a projection of the human imagination. It was a well-intended attempt to provide explanations for the nature of existence, but reason and imagination alone are not sufficient, and empirical investigation of the natural world is the key to producing better explanations.

So it is all in the mind, all projection. Mystics have spent millennia probing into the structure of the mind, believing they were learning objective truths about reality. But they *were* learning about the mind. The techniques devised to explore the world of emanation are advanced techniques for exploring the human psyche, they are methods to dismantle the structure of cognition and perception. The process of ascent is subjectively real, and to the extent that it disassembles the cognitive process, it is transformative and objectively valid.

The process of ascent, if undertaken with good mentoring and techniques, can act to reveal how the phenomenal, everyday world is assembled. The unconscious roots of behaviour are progressively disclosed. Autonomous portions of the psyche (spirits, archetypes) reveal themselves and can be progressively assimilated. Subjective reality is deconstructed, objective reality (to the extent that we can comprehend it at all) begins to reveal itself.

The metaphors of ascent are subjectively valid. One does seem to travel from a condition characterised by darkness to one characterised by light. It is like the sun dawning through morning

mist. The ephemeral shapes in the fog are burned away, and a richer landscape is revealed. The greatest paradox is that emanation appears to be a fabrication of the ancient world, but what the ascent reveals is an even greater fabrication: the moment-by-moment reality we construct for ourselves.

## Summary

- Hermetic Kabbalah has been passed down from late antiquity, & preserves older beliefs & practices (c1000 BC-500BC ??)
- Uneasy relationship with Jewish tradition
- Jewish & Hermetic traditions preserve complementary aspects of ancient mystical belief & practice

There are two complementary viewpoints that provide obstacles to communication about Kabbalah. The first is that Hermetic Kabbalah is “Kabbalah-lite”, a trivialised and misunderstood version of authentic Jewish Kabbalah. This view is compounded by fanciful and exotic treatments of Kabbalah in many modern books by non-Jewish authors. The second viewpoint is that Kabbalah is a foreign import to Judaism – a criticism that has been levelled by opponents of Kabbalah within Judaism since medieval times.

Neither viewpoint is constructive, and one purpose behind this lecture has been to demonstrate just how far from constructive these views are. Jewish Kabbalah is considerably more than an import of Neoplatonic or Neopythagorean ideas, and Hermetic Kabbalah is considerably more than Kabbalah-lite.

A better way to understand the situation is to understand that for much of its formative history, Kabbalah was not only a Jewish phenomenon; it was also a European phenomenon, and was created at the heart of European culture. The initial formative phase of Kabbalah was in Provence, at a time when the region was one of the most liberal and culturally advanced parts of Europe. A huge contribution to Kabbalah (including the *Zohar*) came from Spanish Jews, who had benefited greatly from the tolerant Muslim culture, and were in the forefront of reading and translating Arabic

literature, some of which was strongly influenced by Neoplatonism. Another centre was Italy during the Renaissance, the point at which free-thinking Christian intellectuals began to take note of Kabbalah, to the point of it becoming a fad amongst liberal thinkers.

Kabbalah is an aspect of Jewish religious thought and practice. It is a Jewish response to certain questions, such as how the unity of God is expressed in a multiplicity of forms, the origin of evil, and the purpose of human existence.

Jews were not the only people to ask these questions, but their answers have a uniquely Jewish perspective. Hermeticism comes at the same questions with a different mindset, and at a particular point in history - the Italian Renaissance - the Jewish perspective and the Hermetic/Platonic/Christian perspective began to overlap and fertilize each other.

There is ubiquity in many core ideas and practices. These were shared equally amongst Jews, Christians, Pagans and Muslims. In each case these ideas and practices were developed and justified within the context of a particular viewpoint, so that Muslims would justify certain aspects of emanationism or the embodiment of the soul using the *Koran*, Christians the *Bible*, Jews the *Tanakh*, and Pagans the works of Plato and the *Chaldean Oracles*. With the passage of centuries the sense of common ground has been lost behind a mass of particulars.

The situation today is that there is much teaching of the particulars, and the common ground behind the various traditions is no longer easy to see. Hermetic Kabbalah contains much Kabbalah, but its viewpoint is a gnostic Hermetic tradition that can be traced back to Hellenistic Egypt, and possibly earlier. Jewish Kabbalah has many roots in medieval Platonism and Gnosticism, but its viewpoint is that of orthodox Judaism. It is my hope that the contents of this lecture will provide some common ground for those with a genuine interest in the background to the many particulars.