



Celestial Intelligences: The Syncretic Angelology of Renaissance Philosopher Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola

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Celestial Intelligences:
The Syncretic Angelology of Renaissance Philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

Gregory Kaminsky

A Thesis in the Field of Medieval Studies
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

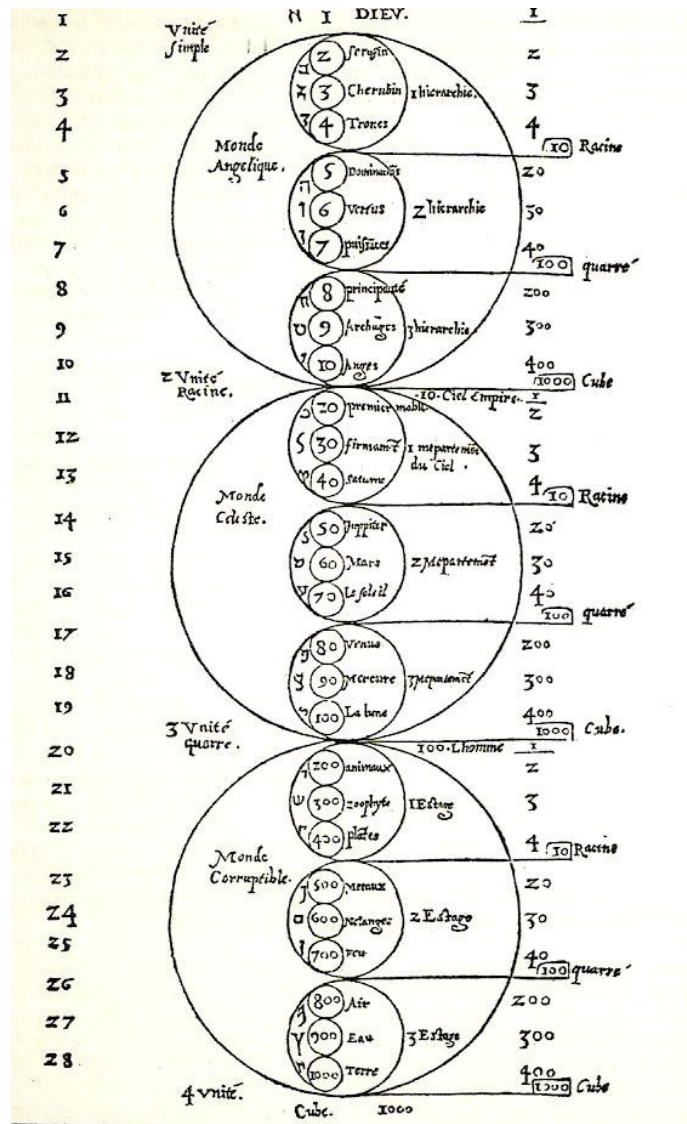
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Abstract

This thesis investigates the syncretic ideas of Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (“Pico” hereafter) (1463-1494) and his angelology in order to interpret the process of spiritual ascension that he prescribed in his *Oration* (1486). This process drew from philosophic and western wisdom traditions but primarily involved the emulation of angels. Central to Pico’s spiritual system was a philosophical analysis of specific characteristics of angelic orders and their hierarchy. Pico developed his own unique arrangement of traditional Jewish and Christian angelic orders to support his anthropology. He argued that humans have the potential to not only walk among the angels, but, in fact, fully to unite with the divine without human mediation even before death. Inextricably intertwined with Pico’s angelology was the biblical story of Jacob’s ladder and its symbolism, as well as the Jewish Kabbalistic Tree of Life, and the ancient tradition from which it originated. Pico’s conception of the Cherubim as the angelic order that could, by example, guide humanity to an individual gnosis, or even theosis (union with, or metamorphosis from human to divine), demonstrated his syncretic thinking, combining elements of both tradition and originality.

Frontispiece

1. Three Worlds diagram from Pico's *Heptaplus* (1489)

(Nota Bene: The diagram consists of a hierarchical organization of worlds (or spheres) and Hebrew letters are associated with each level of the hierarchy. The world of angels is the uppermost world. This diagram can be interpreted as a syncretic combination of Jewish and Christian mystical esoteric cartography.)

Author's Biographical Sketch

Greg Kaminsky is a scholar of Western esotericism, currently pursuing a graduate degree in Medieval Studies. Greg has been a lifelong student of history, religion, and esotericism since his upbringing near Annapolis, Maryland. In addition to pursuing these interests academically, Greg is the host and producer of a long-running podcast that explores the esoteric with authors and experts in the field. His desire to create the podcast in 2006 began with a life-long compulsion to learn more about ancient civilizations, world religions, symbolism, and the underlying hidden wisdom which they contain, but only convey to the initiated. With well over 180 episodes completed and tens of thousands of listeners every month, the podcast continues to grow in popularity and prestige. As part of the journey to learn about the esoteric while doing the podcast, he was initiated into several traditions including Freemasonry. Greg lives with his wife and children in northeastern Massachusetts.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my loving and supportive wife Olga and my lovely daughters Sophia and Seraphina. They all sacrificed a good deal to ensure that I was able to pursue a graduate degree and finish this thesis. I dedicate this labor of love to them. It is my desire that someday, my children will appreciate the sacrifices made in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, drawing inspiration in order to follow and realize their own dreams.

Acknowledgments

There are several who deserve recognition, all of whom were instrumental in the completion of this thesis. First and foremost, I want to thank and praise my thesis advisor Dr. Kimberley Patton (Harvard Divinity School) for her unwavering support and illuminating insights. She is perhaps the best instructor I've ever had and her light shines very brightly. It is partly because of her great encouragement and help that this paper is in your hands. She not only guided me through the process, but we had several changes of focus to contend with and she handled it all with absolute grace. She also helped me to deal with health issues with which I was forced to contend throughout the thesis process and worked with me to overcome these difficulties to a great extent. I enjoyed working with her tremendously and learned so much that it was a joy.

Second, I want to thank my research director Dr. Stephen Shoemaker (Faculty of Arts & Sciences, Harvard University) for guiding me to complete my first proposal. Dr. Shoemaker is a talented educator with a unique gift for bringing out the best in his students and I was no exception. It was a pleasure to have the opportunity to work with him again. I appreciate all the time and effort he spent to make sure I was able to move forward in the thesis process.

Third, I want to thank my friend and mentor David Chaim Smith. David is an extraordinarily talented artist and writer whose specialty is the Kabbalah. He has taught me for almost a decade and it is through his work that I've come to a great appreciation and love of mysticism, especially the Kabbalah. He was also instrumental in explaining arcane

points of Kabbalistic mythology and philosophy in a way that I was able to grasp. I've found his expertise and understanding of this tradition to be unmatched and I am forever grateful for his help.

I also want to thank my teacher and friend Traktung Rinpoche. While I've only known him for a relatively short amount of time, he has been instrumental at key moments to ensure the success of this project. His insights into the apophatic theology of St. Dionysius the Areopagite have been enlightening, inspiring, and eminently practical in understanding and applying the words from *The Mystical Theology* and *The Celestial Hierarchy*. It's a blessing to be his student and I continue to draw inspiration from t.k.'s teachings.

I want to thank my parents for their love and kindness. Always desiring the best for me to grow, my mother's and father's support has been important in my life. They continued to encourage me while I pursued an education at the expense of a more typical career path and always believed I would succeed, even when I was less certain.

I want to acknowledge the great deal of assistance received from the Brethren of St. John's Lodge, A.F. & A.M., the Grand Lodge of Masons of Massachusetts, A.F. & A.M. and the Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite, Valley of Boston. My completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the significant resources that they were able to graciously provide. I will be forever grateful to these brothers who answered my call. I hope that this thesis reflects an appreciation for tradition and ancient wisdom, not unlike that upon which Freemasonry is founded.

I'd also like to recognize Father John Brown, S.J. It is through meeting and talking with him that I decided to pursue a graduate degree. Father John's knowledge, because of

his Jesuit education, allowed me to understand the importance of studying a subject at the highest levels possible. Through our meeting, my educational fate was sealed.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge the philosopher himself, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. His genius, audacity, and recognition of the value of ancient wisdom traditions were crucial to the rebirth of esotericism in the West during modern times. While it may be difficult to appreciate this achievement, it is a massive contribution to the lives of innumerable spiritual aspirants over the centuries. Pico's work, while controversial, certainly helped to establish the Kabbalah outside of the Jewish religion and eventually made it accessible to seekers everywhere.

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Chapter I.

Introduction



2. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (De A. Theuet, Livre VI. Chapitre 99)

In his seminal works *900 Theses* and *Apologia*, the Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) (“Pico” hereafter, following scholars) sought to recreate and reanimate a cosmological system that unified all valid knowledge. In doing so, he drew from his study of traditional forms of mysticism including the Jewish Kabbalah, traditional Neoplatonic Christian cosmologies, medieval Scholasticism, and Patristic

theology including the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus.¹ Pico eschewed a one-to-one correspondence or unifying “key” between Jewish and Christian, however, and instead offered a syncretic metaphysical cartography that beheld creation as a unified entity.

Angelology was a prime locus for Pico’s methodology, and therefore it will be the central focus of this thesis. For example, in describing the angelic orders, he uses Hebrew terms for the ranks and qualities of his angelic hierarchy, but the traditional Christian numerological sequence codified by Dionysius the Areopagite (“pseudo-Dionysius”) in the sixth century CE.² He also re-orders certain traditionally known types of angels: the case of the Cherubim is the most notable, in that they are given a major celestial promotion in Pico’s schema. The Cherubim, the original supernatural beings in the Hebrew bible, one of whom protects the Garden of Eden against any attempted return by the exiled Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:24), and who appears later as the tetraform creatures who bear the

¹ S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses (1486)—The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophic Systems* (Tempe: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2016), 204-5. Based on the chapter listings for Pico’s *900 Theses*, it is clear that his influences were disparate. In the section termed “Historical Theses,” there are the “Latins (Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Myronnes, John [Duns] Scotus, Henry of Ghent, and Giles of Rome), the Arabs (Averroes, Avicenna, al-Farabi, “Isaac of Narbonne”, Abumaron (Avenzoar), Moses of Egypt (Maimonides), “Mohammed of Toledo,” and Avempace), the Greek Peripatetics (Theoprastus, Ammonius, Simplicius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Themistius), the Platonists (Plotinus, “Adeland the Arab,” Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus).” Also included are theses derived from “Pythagorean mathematics, Chaldean theology, Mercury Trismegistus the Egyptian, and the Hebrew Cabalist Wisemen.” While scholars have not historically been in agreement about which specific influence(s) predominate in Pico’s philosophy, all agree that these branches of learning contributed to Pico’s views. Considerable analysis of Pico’s Kabbalistic and Neoplatonic influences are provided by Farmer and several articles by Copenhaver, but specifically: Brian P. Copenhaver, “The Secret of Pico’s *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXVI, 2002. Also see Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, Paul Oskar Kristeller, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Also see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). **Nota Bene:** Pico’s numbering schema for his *900 Theses* includes decimal point separators (.) when enumerating “Theses According to the Opinion of Others” and “greater than” symbol separators (>) when enumerating “Theses According to His Own Opinion.”

² Pseudo-Dionysius (St. Dionysius the Areopagite), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

flying throne of God in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 10:4) are not explicitly recognized as angels; but it is clear they are of celestial origin. Perhaps growing out of their appearance in Ezekiel, where they are said each to have the faces of a bull, a man, a lion and an eagle, Jewish tradition often depicted them as having the visage of a young man (although, as in the Byzantine Christian tradition wherein angels are sometimes called *asomatoi*, "the bodiless ones," the Cherubim are also said in other rabbinical texts to be incorporeal). Pseudo-Dionysius places them second closest to God, after the ceaselessly-praising Seraphim; and much later in Jewish mysticism, they appear in *Yesod*, the ninth sphere of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life (13th century CE).³ However, Pico promoted the Cherubim into the first position in his angelic hierarchy. Why? What end does this radical change serve in Pico's cosmology?

In the course of this thesis, I will seek to illumine Pico's goal in listing the angelic orders as he does in the *900 Theses* and exegeting their nature and function in the *Apologia*, specifically in the *Oration*, a subordinate section that was posthumously extracted by his heirs in defense of a Renaissance humanism that was only a partial component of his philosophy. I will argue that Pico's vision, particularly his angelology, and even more specifically his promotion of the Cherubim with their often human faces, was intended to offer humanity a means of ascent to the divine; one with a heritage and resonance with similar texts, traditions, and techniques that extend back millennia in both

³ Daniel C. Matt, trans., *The Zohar I*, Pritzker Edition, 1:33a (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 201-205. In my opinion, this is best explicated in David Chaim Smith's *The Kabbalistic Mirror of Genesis: Commentary on Genesis 1-3* (Glasgow: Daat Press, 2010), 134-135: "The last verse of the Eden narrative describes the forces of the mind that separate the Edenic state from ordinary delusion . . . It consists of Cherubim, which are guardian energies of the yetziric realm (the realm of the ruach) . . . They are directly associated with yesod where the ruach and the nefesh are integrated as the brit . . . a 'circumcision of the mind.'"

Jewish and Christian mysticism, even finding a *locus classicus* in Paul's own religious experience.⁴

With its roots in Jacob's ladder and elaborated in biblical Jewish *merkavah* mysticism, the doctrine known later in Greek as *theosis*⁵ is found in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, and Symeon the New Theologian, as well as the Jewish Kabbalah as demonstrated by Joseph Karo, the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples.⁶ In other words, Pico intends his angelology in these two works to be understood by the learned classes throughout Europe as a prescription to achieve union with the divine.

⁴ Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1407. (2 Corinthians 12:2). Many believe that Paul may have been referring to his own experience of spiritual ascension when he stated, "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat."

⁵ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glen Wallis (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 6. Theosis as defined by Pico and his subsequent followers was not just ascending to God, but more like becoming one with God. "If you come upon a pure contemplator, ignorant of the body, banished to the innermost places of the mind, he is not an earthly, not a heavenly animal; he more superbly is a divinity clothed with human flesh." This would be necessarily be preceded by a state of enlightenment, self-realization, or gnosis, which is a hallmark of Renaissance and post-Renaissance western esotericism, whose origin Ehregott Daniel Colberg, ignoring the antiquity of the Kabbalah, located in the thought of Pythagoras, whose "entire philosophy was focused on the search for deification by means of self-knowledge or gnosis, purification from "filth of the body," and the "way inward," as described in his *Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum*, I, 1.2 (Leipzig: Wm. Berlag Johann Gleditsch and M. Georg Beidmanns, 1710), 4-7), translated and cited by Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 110. This same focus can be found within the Islamic tradition interpreted by Henry Corbin who sees the ancient wisdom tradition as being a primordial wholeness from which various sects and schools partook from (in this case Ismā'īlī and Sufi traditions). "The cosmogonic myth that returns with variants in all Gnoeses propounds an *interpretation mundi*—that is, a mode of comprehension, a fundamental and initial interpretation that goes beyond and precedes all external perceptions," Henri Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 17.

⁶ Kabbalistic examples of the propagation of this doctrine can be found amongst the writings of the Baal Shem Tov, excerpted within Aryeh Kaplan's *Meditation and Kabbalah* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1985), Rabbi Joseph Karo's *Maggid Mesharim* (also excerpted in Kaplan's *Meditation and Kabbalah*) and the seminal work of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan*, trans. Moshe Mykoff (Monsey, NY: Breslov Research Institute, 1993).

By “divine union,” what is meant? The final snapshot of this arduous and paradoxical, or perhaps even inconceivable journey is different in various traditions. Different from the ecstatic, fiery, yet agonizing transformation of the prophet Enoch into the archangel Metatron, called “a lesser YHVH” in 3 Enoch,⁷ or the graphic, luminous transformation of the mystical abbot of St. Mammars Monastery in Constantinople, Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), into the Body of Christ in the tenth century CE,⁸ Pico’s vision of theosis was more akin to sharing God’s “mind stream.” That is, instead of a merger of the corporeal human aspirant into the incorporeal infinitude of the godhead, theosis for Pico *was* a kind of gnosis and a point of view that was simultaneously individuated and collectively unified. This can be seen in his description of ultimate divine union as possible while the philosopher is incarnate, more akin to a supremely exalted state of consciousness. While achieving a state like this necessitated neglect of bodily cares and desires according to Pico, he also asserted that this prescriptive formula for divinization actually purified the body as a dwelling place for the divine presence.

However non-corporeal and rarified Pico’s vision of the *telos* of his ascension technique might seem, it remains in accord with his chronic affinity for the *coincidentia oppositorum*. The relationship between Pico’s angels and materiality, or incarnate being, was more complex than it may at first appear. In other words, he was no gnostic in the

⁷ R. Ishmael ben Elisha *3 Enoch, or The Hebrew Book of Enoch*, trans. Hugo Odeberg, 1928. <https://ia802606.us.archive.org/23/items/HebrewBookOfEnoch3/BookOfEnoch3.pdf>. Also see Moshe Idel, “Enoch is Metatron,” *Immanuel: A Journal of Religious Thought and Research in Israel*, No. 24/25, 1990, 220–40.

⁸ John Anthony McGuckin, “Symeon the New Theologian’s Hymns of Divine Eros: A Neglected Masterpiece of the Christian Mystical Tradition,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 5, 2 (2005): 182–202. Also see: I. Hausherr, ed., and P. G. Horn, trans., “Un grand mystique byzantin: Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (942–1022) par Nicetas Stethatos,” *Orientalia Christiana* 12 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1928).

traditional sense. Pico asserted that angels must have had some component or combination of corporeal elements in order to fully participate in material creation. In the *900 Theses*, Pico specifically came out in favor of the materiality of angels, stating in thesis 2.21 that “no multiplicity of angels exist in the same species.”⁹ In “Theses According to His Own Opinion – Philosophical Conclusions Dissenting From the Common Philosophy” in thesis 2>44 that “if Thomas says that according to Aristotle intelligences exist in genus, he contradicts himself no less than Aristotle.”¹⁰ S.A. Farmer argues that “Thomas insisted on the total immateriality of angels, and since matter in his system provided the principle of individuation, each angel was necessarily a unique species unto itself.”¹¹ These arcane statements are implying, perhaps not very clearly, that since angels are classifiable using the terminology used to classify material beings, they must have some aspect that is material. Therefore, Pico rejected Thomas’s position that angels were incorporeal, and held that angels were, in some sense, material.¹² They could not be *sui generis*, completely apart from the immanent world, immune to it, or hermetically sealed off from it. Pico believed that the theurgic vehicle was the potential for human beings to become angelic en route to gnosis and theosis. The admixture of the metaphysical and physical on which he insisted in his cosmology (as well as in his natural magic and overall philosophy) allowed for the possibility of this transgressive, and arguably heretical, change. But it also explains why the

⁹ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 225.

¹⁰ Ibid., 385.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 285.

Cherubim, the angelic order representing mind and intellect, had to be first in Pico's hierarchy of angelic orders.

Pico's organizing theory of theosis required not only the human faculty of devotion, not only righteous action and judgment, but primarily intellectual unity with the divine. "If intellectual, he will be an angel, and a son of God. And if he is not contented with the lot of any creature but takes himself up into the center of his own unity, then, made one spirit with God and settled in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, he will stand ahead of all things."¹³ Unlike the Seraphim, the Cherubim, with their recognizably human faces, are a reflection of the mind of the divine and are therefore are capable of mental function and the comprehension of knowledge. Hence Cherubim have the potential to learn devotion to the divine like the Seraphim. They also have the capability to learn about judgement like the Thrones and how to function with proper discernment in action.

The reflexive possibility to emulate Cherubim is therefore open to humans, whereas the ontological status of the Seraphim, with their purely devotional nature, cannot be attainable by us. Pico's re-ordering of the traditional angelic hierarchy to represent the order most exemplary for humans, since it placed the angels most traditionally like them, the Cherubim, closest to God, is crucial to understanding his views on the Kabbalah, spiritual ascension, and syncretic esoteric philosophy. By placing the Cherubim, who like us combine rational thought and inquiry as well as devotion, in a place of primacy, ahead of all the other angelic orders, Pico signals that his syncretic philosophy, one that combines Jewish and Christian esoteric cosmologies in a unitary field whose hallmark is syncretism

¹³ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 5.

rather than doctrinal “purity,” offers a spiritual map and manual to re-order our own potential place in the cosmic hierarchy.

Definition of Terms

- **Kabbalah** or **Cabala** — Refers to: (1) the Jewish esoteric tradition involving models of creation, meditative and contemplative techniques, mystical exegesis, divine names, and ciphers which has philosophical, mystical, and practical modes of study and application. The tradition has ancient antecedents; scholars date its public emergence to the twelfth century in Spain and southern France. The primary texts include *Sefer Yetzirah* (*Book of Creation*), *Sefer ha-Bahir* (*Book of the Brilliance*), and *Sefer ha-Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*). Often spelled as Kabbalah. (2) The Christian adaptation of the Jewish tradition for the purposes of validating the Christian faith, a vehicle for spiritual ascent, and as a weapon for conversion. Christian philosophers found Neoplatonic, gnostic, and Hermetic influences, interpreting this to mean that the Hebrew sages were the originators of the ancient wisdom that descended through Egypt, Greece, and Persia prior to the advent of Christianity. Often spelled as Cabala. (3) The Hermetic, post-Christian adaptation blending Cabala with astrology, ceremonial magic, alchemy, and the rites of fraternal orders. Often spelled as Qabalah.
- **Esotericism** — having to do with secret realms of knowledge, emanating from a spiritual center that can only be attained by following prescribed methods or techniques of various schools of initiatory traditions which teach them. This secret, or inner, knowledge is distinguished from exoteric or superficial religious study and practice.
- **Neoplatonism** — a Hellenistic philosophical tradition that posits that the entire cosmos emanates from a single One and centered primarily around the work of philosophical teachers Plotinus, Porphyry, Ammonias Saccas, Iamblichus, Proclus, and others.
- **Tree of Life** — a Kabbalistic concept derived from Genesis and symbolically represented by 10 spheres (*Sephiroth*) arranged systematically and connected by a number of paths (usually 22), although the Tree is dynamic so multiple iterations exist. It should be considered as a metaphorical metaphysical diagram, or device, symbolic of the creation of the cosmos from nothing to the physical world. The Tree is also used as a map for paths of spiritual ascension. The spheres correspond to divine qualities, hierarchies of angels, planets, alchemical metals, etc. The paths correspond to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Tree of Life symbolic diagram has become the most accepted and widely-used metaphysical diagram in western esotericism.
- **Western esotericism** — refers to a group of schools and disciplines that coalesced from the Platonic Orientalism of the late-medieval and early Renaissance periods. These include, but are not limited to: alchemy, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, ceremonial magic, Christian theosophy, neo-

Templarism, Illuminism, and various occult societies. In addition to philosophical foundations that identified with the traditions of Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Hermetism, the groups which can be categorized under this rubric made extensive use of the Kabbalah.

Review of Scholarship

Because this review of scholarship deals with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's syncretic philosophy, most eloquently expressed in his [*Oration*] *On the Dignity of Man* (1486), and an investigation into the connections between this philosophy and Kabbalism, there are actually two separate, but intersecting areas of scholarship which must be considered. The first is Pico and his philosophy for which the relevant scholarship is voluminous. The second area, that of Kabbalism, but more specifically, the adoption and adaptation of the Jewish tradition by Christian intellectuals supported by Christian converts, is much more recent. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, serious exploration into this historical question began, but has only blossomed in the past thirty years. S.A. Farmer's *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)—The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*¹⁴ and Brian P. Copenhaver's "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy"¹⁵ are crucial to this thesis. Other relevant scholarship—those about Pico and those concerned with the Kabbalah—are both analyzed as part of this review.

¹⁴ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, op. cit.

¹⁵ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," op. cit.

Generally, the scholarship on Pico and his writings has focused on his extraordinary education and life as an important philosopher of Italian nobility and attempted to categorize him and his work. These categories are approximations, but can be described as (1) Neoplatonist, (2) Kabbalist, (3) original idealist philosopher (humanism and syncretism), and (4) scholastic.¹⁶ There is valid support for each of these positions as evidenced by the extant scholarship. Because of the vast corpus of work on Pico, which stretches back centuries, much of it not available in English translation, we will concern ourselves with the most significant modern scholarship, which was all written in English.

The first work of note in recent times is Avery Dulles's *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition*, the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Prize Essay for 1940.¹⁷ Dulles seriously challenged the prevailing trends in research at the time, declaring Pico to be a Medieval Scholastic and to have drawn most upon that tradition for his inspiration and ideas. While Dulles intended to "record the main lines of his philosophy as he saw them himself" and not to "[single] out those aspects of his philosophy which divide him from his predecessors or attach him to his successors,"¹⁸ his analysis seems less than completely objective. This study lacks nuance in appreciating the many strands of thought with which Pico dealt. However these criticisms are not a unique for scholars studying Pico and his works.

¹⁶ Avery Dulles, *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), xi.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

Charles Trinkaus's *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* brought Pico's metaphysical and Kabbalistic tendencies back into focus.¹⁹ Trinkaus interpreted Pico's ideas about humanity in the *Oration* through the lens of Pico's *Heptaplus*, commentary on Genesis I, and concluded that "Pico's vision of man has far more in common with the mythological-poetic tradition and with Hebrew, pagan and Christian mysticism than it does with the *vita active et operosa* of the Renaissance . . . again I say Pico's is a poetic vision."²⁰ Finally, in his conclusion, Trinkaus noted that the ideas which underlay the Renaissance—human dignity, freedom, and intellectual learning were the same that influenced the Reformation.

The next major scholarly work to consider is William G. Craven's *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age—Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher*.²¹ Craven was also of the opinion that previous scholars may be in error, but importantly, he identified this as a trend.

Such an examination . . . reveals a wide and sometimes startling disparity between most historical accounts of his thought and the texts on which they are supposedly based . . . meanings and intentions have been attributed to Pico which the texts will not sustain and sometimes clearly exclude. This constitutes a historiographical phenomenon of considerable interest, one deserving attention in its own right. These misinterpretations and misattributions are so prevalent and so consistent as to demand an explanation. In broad terms the answer seems to be that historians have found in Pico what they expected to find. As a symbol or representative of his age, he is expected to exhibit Renaissance characteristics. He wrote in praise of man, so he must have been proposing a new anthropology in radical contrast to medieval views. He was a religious thinker who fell foul of the Church, so his doctrines must have been subversive of medieval Catholic dogma. Even if he

¹⁹ Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 521.

²¹ William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age—Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1981).

himself was not quite a Pelagian or a pantheist, a gnostic or a deist, then he must at least have foreshadowed one or more, or show tendencies toward them. He wrote of human freedom and attacked astrology, so he must have been vindicating man's freedom from external determination, and the autonomy of the human spirit. With these expectations in mind, historians have searched the texts for confirmation, and likely passages have been lifted out of context and pressed into service. The result has been a quite mythical picture of Pico, which has obscured his real concerns and intentions.²²

Craven ultimately argued that Pico must be interpreted in light of his own words and intentions, not be cast by historians into a more restrictive role.²³

It would be almost thirty years until the next major breakthrough in Pico studies came in S. A. Farmer's *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)—The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*, mentioned above.²⁴ This study of the *900 Theses* must be considered the epitome of scholarship on Pico. Farmer spent years in Florence researching this dissertation which is a complete English translation of the *900 Theses* along with Farmer's introductions and commentaries. Through this expert analysis and translation, the subject of the *Oration* and Pico's planned disputation at the Vatican was revealed again to the world. Farmer focused on the syncretic nature of Pico's philosophy and diagnosed the methods by which Pico achieved this remarkable feat. Beyond that, Farmer's book is a treasure trove that contains analysis on every pertinent aspect of Pico's works including esoteric and mystical interpretations, exegetical methodologies, reconciling of Plato and Aristotle, analysis of natural magic and its precise definition, all the political machinations in which Pico was inevitably caught, Pico's

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ Ibid., 162.

²⁴ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, op. cit.

involvement with Savonarola, anti-Pico polemics, and even Pico's assassination. It would be virtually impossible to overvalue this monumental addition to the understanding of Pico and his work.

Brian P. Copenhaver's "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy," which I have already referenced,²⁵ is perhaps the most brilliant analysis of Pico's Kabbalistic influences in the *Oration* of the available scholarship to date, and is one of the few scholarly works that delves into Pico's sources to elucidate the hidden esoteric messages that Pico implanted in the *Oration*. For example, Copenhaver observes Pico's use of language in describing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—metaphorically placing the Hebrew patriarchs in different spheres of the Tree of Life. But this would only be decipherable to Pico's readers with prior Kabbalistic knowledge.²⁶ This article is crucial because it goes beyond accepting Pico's word that the Kabbalah contains the most sublime metaphysics and demonstrates the hidden aspects of this influence are pervasive in at least one of Pico's works, supporting the idea that this would be the case in his other writings.

Crofton Black's *Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics* is a crucial study of *Heptaplus*, Pico's commentary on the creation narrative of Genesis I.²⁷ Black focuses on Pico's esoteric hermeneutics, comparable to Kabbalistic exegesis, and allegorical theory of intellectual ascent. Black identifies ideas about the intellect as being crucial to the interpretation and concludes that Kabbalah fundamentally affected Pico's philosophy. Again, with additional evidence that Pico had demonstrated both overt and covert use of

²⁵ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*."

²⁶ Ibid., 68-9.

²⁷ Crofton Black, *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Boston: Brill, 2006).

Kabbalah in his *Heptaplus*, as Black reveals, it is logical to expect that Pico might have done so in his other works, specifically in the *900 Theses*.

Amos Edelheit's *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology, 1461/2-1498* provides a view of Pico's life and work through the lens of the spiritual and political crisis in Florence.²⁸ This crisis centered around "authority in the Dominican Order on the question of the reform, and on the nature of religious life towards much broader spiritual, political, and cultural dimension."²⁹ Edelheit argues that Pico's development of his Humanist philosophy was predicated upon what he perceived as differing opinions of the Church Fathers and Doctors on doctrines of faith versus various interpretations being doctrinal and lacking consistency.³⁰ This work importantly demonstrates that scholars are still able to focus on specific aspects of Pico's life and work and come away with a detailed analysis that is in no way comprehensive. Nevertheless, Edelheit demonstrates that the circumstances and context that prompted Pico to question, seek, and formulate philosophy were political instability, social confusion, and lack of clarity about theological questions within the community.

Pico della Mirandola: New Essays, edited by M.V. Dougherty, features nine articles on various aspects of Pico's work.³¹ Each article is worthwhile and contributes to the modern scholarship on Pico by allowing the reader to see the variety, nuance, breadth, and depth of Pico's philosophical wanderings. It would be difficult to encapsulate the book

²⁸ Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology, 1461/2-1498* (Boston: Brill, 2008).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 282-3.

³¹ M.V. Dougherty, ed., *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

without summarizing each article, but suffice it to say that Dougherty's collection continues the fine tradition of Pico scholarship and expands our understanding of the subject.

The second area of scholarship that impacts this research project is the relatively new and evolving study of western esotericism and more specifically, the phenomenon of Christian Cabalism—of which Pico is the first public exemplar. Pico and his devotion to the Kabbalah has come into sharper focus recently as scholars grapple with trying to understand the transition of a Jewish esoteric tradition into Christianity during a time of extreme religious intolerance. As Moshe Idel, whose *Kabbalah in Italy* is discussed later, has written,

Christian Kabbalah is, *prima facie*, an enigma. Until the end of the fifteenth century, Jewish Kabbalah was considered by Jews themselves to be an esoteric lore; conceived to be the core of Judaism, it was to be transmitted only to a few initiates both in manuscripts and orally. Yet it seems that in a very short time this closely guarded, peculiarly Jewish religious tradition found a place in Christian religious thought.³²

The adoption of the Jewish tradition by Christians was an intriguing and unusual occurrence in the history of religion. The context in which it occurred was one of “appropriation and supersession” as stated previously, indicating that the allure of this tradition was perhaps too tempting for esoterically inclined Christian philosophers to resist at that time.

Initially, the scholarship on this subject was from a Jewish perspective where the scholars addressed the Christian Cabala as an extension of the Jewish tradition, as well as an interaction between Jews and Christians. Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish*

³² Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 228-9.

Mysticism,³³ published in 1941, was the first scholarly work in this area, and his *Origins of the Kabbalah* dates to 1962. Scholem is recognized as the preeminent scholar of the Kabbalah and a study of the Christian adaptation of this tradition must include consideration of his works because all scholars in this area consider his opinion the most authoritative in the field. Scholem's work allows readers to grasp the philosophical influences on the tradition, which include Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. Scholem's intervention was crucial because it forms the foundation of later scholars' argument that the basis of the adaptation of the Kabbalah by Christians was specifically due to the recognition of familiar gnostic and Neoplatonic influences on Jewish esotericism.

The scholarship on the Christian Cabala began with Joseph Blau's *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance*,³⁴ but his work has been criticized by other scholars, most notably Moshe Idel, because it "did not address how Kabbalah was transposed into a Christian idiom, and how Christians came to accept such a peculiarly Jewish type of lore."³⁵ However, Blau's book is still important because of his early analysis of the work of Pico della Mirandola, who was the first to publicly proclaim that the Kabbalah provided proof of the veracity of the Christian faith.

Another major milestone in the study of the Kabbalah was written by Scholem's student Chaim Wirzubski, entitled *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*.³⁶ Idel notes, "Wirzubski described in great detail the penetration of kabbalistic

³³ Gershom Scholem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books), 1995.

³⁴ Joseph Leon Blau. *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1944.

³⁵ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, 229.

³⁶ Wirzubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*.

texts and concepts into the milieu of Christian Florentine intellectuals. He traced the precise Hebrew sources of most of Pico's kabbalistic discussions and showed what happened to the original texts when they were transferred into a Christian milieu.”³⁷ This type of detailed scholarship is invaluable to apprehending precisely how Jewish esotericism was translated into a Christian paradigm. Wirszubski's work has been criticized recently by Giulio Busi and Kocku von Stuckrad, both scholars of western esotericism, as being inaccurate based on incomplete bibliographic material that was available at the time.

In fact, Busi has begun publishing translations of some of the primary source material from Pico's library, including *The Great Parchment*—a Kabbalistic scroll that was a self-contained esoteric creation story with all the associated biblical verses and metaphysical diagrams.³⁸ The text is basically a retelling of the biblical tales but organized by Sephirot, as has been discussed, spheres on the Tree of Life corresponding to various divine qualities; each tale illustrative of one aspect. This scroll is just a single example of how Pico had access to a larger corpus of original Kabbalistic texts than just about anyone else at that place and time, providing a small glimpse into the depth of Pico's learning on the subject.

Moshe Idel, mentioned earlier, is another major scholar of the history of the Kabbalah. Idel's book, *The Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey*, aside from being fairly recent, is crucial because of his inclusion of a chapter in the book entitled “Jewish Kabbalah in Christian Garb” which discusses not only the phenomenon of the Christian Cabala in Italy, its birthplace, but also surveys much of the available scholarship on the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ *The Great Parchment : Flavius Mithridates' Latin translation, the Hebrew text, and an English version*, ed. Giulio Busi et al. (Torino : Nino Aragno editore, 2004).

subject.³⁹ Although brief, Idel's analysis touches all major components of the study of Christian Cabala including religious tension and conversion, overemphasis on Jewish exegetical devices, Neoplatonic and gnostic influences, theurgical practices developed by Christians, and wider dissemination. This chapter is useful primarily because of its summation of facets that scholars have previously researched.

By engaging with the approaches of history of religion, western esotericism, and those of other scholars, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the spread of the Kabbalah into Christendom. Pico was at the forefront of this movement that became known as Christian Cabala. By considering the work of all these scholars, some hostile to the notion, a clearer image of this philosopher emerges as a brilliant mind that was captivated by an esoteric system that emphasized intelligence as much as he did.

Angels represented and embodied that intelligence.

³⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*.

Biographical Sketch of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola



3. Portrait of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (16th century)

Born near Modena, Italy in 1463 to the noble family of the Counts of Mirandola and Concordia, Pico came of age during the Renaissance.⁴⁰ The scope of his work was so grand that it affected western culture, specifically philosophy and western esotericism. In 1477, at the age of 14, Pico entered the University of Bologna to study canon law. Shortly thereafter he moved to Ferrara, then to Padua and Pavia to study literature and philosophy.⁴¹ During his travels, Pico spent time in Florence where he made the acquaintance of prominent philosophers, including Marsilio Ficino, the leader of a group studying Neoplatonic philosophy now referred to as the Florentine Academy.⁴² This school

⁴⁰ Fabrizio Lelli, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 949.

⁴¹ Black, *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 5-6.

⁴² Ibid., 6.

was interested in, among other things, finding resonance between the works of Plato, the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and Neoplatonic writings—and all fit within Ficino’s conception of an esoteric Christianity. The connection to Ficino is crucial because it is attributed as Pico’s first exposure to the *philosophia perennis*—the ancient wisdom tradition narrative.⁴³ This ancient wisdom narrative has been termed “Platonic Orientalism” by modern scholars, and is crucial to understanding Pico’s work. Its genealogy has been outlined:

During the period of late antiquity, a range of influential church fathers—the so-called Christian apologists—had been trying to convince their pagan critics that the seemingly “new” religion of Christianity had in fact very ancient origins and therefore carried great traditional authority. Egyptians might claim that all true wisdom had originated with Hermes Trismegistus, Persians might point to Zoroaster (Zarathustra), and Greeks might look to legendary figures such as Orpheus or Pythagoras, but for Christian apologists the most ancient “wisdom teacher” had to be Moses. From this original source, the true wisdom was believed to have spread to the various pagan nations, eventually reaching Plato and the Platonic tradition, which made Christian theology intellectually possible. The result was a “genealogy of wisdom” leading from Moses through various pagan sages to Platonism and finally to Christianity. Pagan philosophers and Christian apologists all agreed that Platonism was the inheritor of the ancient wisdom from the East, hence the term “Platonic Orientalism”. Platonic Orientalism made a spectacular revival in the fifteenth century, largely as a result of political developments: in response to the conquests of the Ottoman armies, many ancient Greek manuscripts were moved from the Byzantine libraries to Italy, where they were translated into Latin for the first time and transformed the thinking of Christian intellectuals.⁴⁴

In the light of understanding Platonic Orientalism as Pico’s perspective, which he declares openly in the *Oration*, the struggle scholars have had in interpreting his works seem to dissolve. In “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Study in the History of

⁴³ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 53.

⁴⁴ Idem, *Infinite Fire Webinar IV: “The Revival of Platonic Orientalism”* (The Ritman Library, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica). Accessed on August 30, 2015, <http://www.ritmanlibrary.com/2013/02/infinite-fire-webinar-iv-the-revival-of-platonic-orientalism/>.

Renaissance Ideas (Part I),” historian Ernst Cassirer succinctly expresses the root of the problem.

In the intellectual panorama of the Italian Renaissance Giovanni Pico della Mirandola is one of the most notable and remarkable figures. For us he is once and for all a part of this panorama and inseparably bound up with it. But the more deeply we study his work, the clearer it becomes that the real significance and substance of his thought can only very incompletely and inadequately be described as belonging to “the Renaissance” in the sense which investigations of the last century in the history of philosophy and of ideas have led us to associate with that term. There is no doubt that Pico belongs among the great representative thinkers of his epoch; but at the same time he falls outside it in many of his characteristics. The intellectual ancestry of his philosophy is to be sought in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages, not in the *Quattrocento*. In many respects he seems to represent and announce a new way of thinking. But on the other hand we find him still completely bound up with and even restricted to a century-old tradition drawn from the most divergent sources. The frame of this tradition Pico never tried to burst asunder. If we understand by “originality” the individual’s ability to break through in his thinking and action the limits of what has already been achieved, we cannot in Pico’s case look for even the disposition of the will to attain such originality. His intention was to be neither “original” nor “unique”; such originality would have stood in sharpest contradiction to the idea of truth that pervades and inspires his philosophy. For Pico the criterion of philosophic truth consists in its constancy, in its uniformity and sameness. He understands philosophy as *philosophia perennis*—as the revelation of an enduring Truth, in its main features immutable. This Truth is handed down through the ages; but it is generated by no age, by no single epoch, because, as something which eternally is, it is beyond time and beyond becoming. Such a thinker we can hardly approach immediately with the question of what new trails he has blazed. To put the problem this way runs the danger of forcing us to apply standards inadmissible or at least inadequate for Pico’s system.⁴⁵

Prior to his return to Florence in the spring of 1486, Pico spent time in Paris learning the arts of philosophical disputation, scholastic theology, and Aristotelianism.⁴⁶

Sometime during Pico’s travels, he developed a strong interest in Hebrew and the Kabbalah, the esoteric tradition of Judaism. Pico had significant contact with Kabbalists

⁴⁵ Ernst Cassirer, “Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,” *Renaissance Essays*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller et al. (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1992-93), 11-2.

⁴⁶ Black, *Pico’s Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 6-7.

who acted as both translators and tutors beginning before he returned to Florence. Pico's primary teacher, known as Flavius Mithridates, was identified as a result of his participating in the translation of Kabbalist texts from Hebrew to Latin for the first time that is known.⁴⁷ Pico's great interest in and commitment to learning was significant. Recognized as a great intellect by his peers, he studied and wrote voluminously as evidenced by the contents of his library, his knowledge of languages, and his own works.

Once he returned to Florence in March of 1486, Pico embarked on a great endeavor to draft and arrange for a public disputation of his *Conclusions*—a collection of 900 theses.⁴⁸ These *Conclusions* (or *900 Theses*) are ultimately a syncretic work that attempts to consider all of creation as a single entity while still recognizing the multiplicity within the cosmos. Pico addressed a great many areas of philosophy and theology, including subjects that were even more taboo—pagan mystery cults, natural magic, and Kabbalism.

The following nine hundred dialectical, moral, physical, mathematical, metaphysical, theological, magical, and kabbalistic opinions, including his own and those of the wise Chaldeans, Arabs, Hebrews, Greeks, Egyptians, and Latins, will be disputed publicly by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the Count of Concord... The doctrines to be debated are proposed separately by nations and their heresiarchs, but in respect to the parts of philosophy they are intermingled as in a medley, everything mixed together.⁴⁹

Although it is not explicit what position Pico would have taken in the disputation of each thesis, the overall tenor of the document is implicitly in favor of an ancient wisdom

⁴⁷ Robert Wang, *The Rape of Jewish Mysticism by Christian Theologians: How the Modern Occult Movement Grew out of Renaissance Attempts to Convert the Jews* (Columbia, MD: Marcus Aurelius Press, 2001), 34-9.

⁴⁸ Black, *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 7.

⁴⁹ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 210-1.

narrative that viewed the history of religion as a continuous unfoldment of the Christian Revelation.

Sometime in November of 1486, Pico moved to Rome and had his theses published there the following month. His plan was to hold a public disputation at the Vatican in 1487 where he would debate his theses with any and all challengers. After review by church officials, thirteen of the theses were deemed either heretical or otherwise theologically problematic. Not surprisingly, the censored theses were those concerning Neoplatonism, magic, and Kabbalah.⁵⁰ Pico drafted an *Apologia* in defense of his work, a portion of the beginning of which was excerpted and adapted as the *Oration*, later entitled *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. This *Oration* has become the most well-known of Pico's works. In it he publicly declared the ancient wisdom narrative as truth and this is precisely the syncretic philosophy that Pico's detractors and the curators of his legacy were so dedicated to obscuring.

Pico was excommunicated by the Pope Innocent VIII and a papal bull was issued requiring the burning of all copies of the *900 Theses* and excommunication threatened for anyone who read or distributed it in any way.⁵¹ In *Ficino, Pico and Savanarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology, 1461/2-1498*, Edelheit quotes Garin's recitation from the "Denunciation of the Theses of Iohannes Pico Count of Concordia with a prohibition on printing and reading them, punishable by excommunication" in *De hominis dignitate, heptalus . . .* (287):

⁵⁰ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 16.

⁵¹ Ibid.

The above-mentioned professors of theology and experts of both the Roman and Canon Law, after a long and detailed discussion and a careful and valuable examination—sometimes in the presence of the above-mentioned prince and sometimes in his absence, an examination which was held many times also in our presence—of the aforementioned conclusions and their content, notified us unanimously that many of those conclusions—both those according to the opinion of the same prince and those according to the opinion of others—are heretical or smack of heresy; others are scandalous and offend the feelings of the believers; many of the conclusions restore the error of the pagan philosophers that long ago were abolished and have become obsolete; and others favor the faithlessness of the Jews, and there are also many conclusions which, by using the disguise of natural philosophy, try to dignify certain disciplines which are hostile to the Catholic faith and mankind; the propositions are most severely condemned by the authority both of their canons and of the doctrines of the Catholic teachers.⁵²

The papal bull censoring Pico's theses, combined with Pico's nephew's continued suppression of this specific text after Pico's death, meant that access to the *900 Theses* has been severely limited historically in contrast to all of Pico's other writings, markedly so.⁵³

The reasons for the severe restrictions only become clearer when reading the *900 Theses* in the context of the *Oration*, because it was essentially a bold call to recognize the value of pre-Christian traditions, while still acknowledging their inferiority. The *Oration* also elevated the concept of the individual above the collective and encouraged the use of intellect to ascend spiritually. But perhaps the most surprising idea declared by Pico's *Oration* was that the Kabbalah provided proof of the veracity of the Christian faith.⁵⁴ The *Oration* is also viewed as exemplary of Renaissance humanism because of its acknowledgement of ancient sources that validated contemporary theological positions and individual anthropomorphic perspective. Because it was editorially separated from the *900*

⁵² Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology, 1461/2-1498*. (Boston: Brill, 2008), 286-7.

⁵³ The only English language text on the subject, which includes a complete translation, is the previously noted *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* by S.A. Farmer.

⁵⁴ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 32.

Theses, the *Oration*, interpreted as full of youthful optimism and enthusiasm, was easier to distance from Pico's later works and thereby create the illusion of a reversal of thinking about esoteric subjects that came about with age and maturity. In fact, based on modern scholarship, the exact opposite is true—Pico held fast to his vision of the cosmos and humanity's ability to transcend throughout his life up until his premature death.

Due to the controversy surrounding his *900 Theses*, in late 1487 Pico fled Rome and was captured on his way to Paris, but he was released due to the grace of Lorenzo de Medici who welcomed him back to Florence.⁵⁵ This relationship to the powerful Medici would remain an important factor for the rest of Pico's relatively short life; it allowed him to escape prosecution, but also seemed designed to marginalize his independence, theological tendencies, and outspoken nature.

After his return to Florence, Pico focused on the bible—a seemingly safer subject of study and commentary. In the autumn of 1489, *Heptaplus*, Pico's analysis of the creation narrative of Genesis, was published and dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici. It would be the last work completed during Pico's lifetime. During the same period, Pico began a commentary on the Psalms of King David and also drafted a translation and commentary on a portion of the Book of Job. Despite confining his writings to normative religious texts, the pope was still displeased at the theological focus of Pico's work, yet Lorenzo continued to defend him.⁵⁶

In 1490, Pico published a short tract, *De ente et uno (On Being and the One)*, which was supposed to be part of a larger proposed *Concordia Platonis et Aristotelis* that

⁵⁵ Black, *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

was never completed.⁵⁷ In 1493, Innocent's successor, Pope Alexander VI, a family ally of Pico's, lifted the excommunication.⁵⁸ Also composed during this period was Pico's posthumously published text, *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology*. *Disputations* has provided the strongest evidence by scholars to support the argument that Pico reversed his youthful positions on magic and Kabbalah; however, a close reading of the text by S.A. Farmer indicates that Pico did feel divinatory arts were discredited, but that natural magic and Kabbalah were separate and not affected by these judgments and were thereby divine arts.⁵⁹

It is important to note that Pico's first, and thereby most influential biographer was his nephew, Gianfresco Pico.

Pico was famous and controversial within his own lifetime; and his nephew did not refrain from playing a role in these controversies after his death. Gianfresco's *Vita* emphasizes Pico's orthodoxy and holiness. The events of the Roman affair are dismissed as a youthful folly, equated with his early pursuit of women, from which he turned away to embrace a life of quiet sanctity and scholarship. Likewise, Pico's interest in kabbalah—one of the factors in the *Conclusiones* scandal—is largely overlooked.⁶⁰

Due to Gianfresco Pico's religious and political connections, not to mention other questionable motives with regard to his own role in relation to his famous uncle, both the narrative of Pico's later life and his works have been tampered with by his nephew Gianfresco Pico, the Dominican preacher Savonarola, and their associates to produce a

⁵⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

⁵⁸ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 137-8.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 138-151.

⁶⁰ Black, *Pico's Heptapplus and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 11.

biographical record that is disputed by Farmer's analysis of primary source texts.⁶¹ This issue is integral to not only the study of Pico's works, but also in uncovering the truth of whether or not Pico changed his theological positions. According to some historians, including Dulles, Pico was a brash, over-enthusiastic youth who embraced ancient pagan philosophies and even Kabbalism. However, as he matured, he became conservative and more traditionally Roman Catholic, ultimately falling under the influence of the Dominican Savonarola. Based on modern research, this view is now open to dispute. As S.A. Farmer writes,

An old historical tradition, drawing on Gianfresco Pico's spiritualized biography of his uncle, has pictured the apparent changes in Pico's later thought as evidence of a sudden religious conversion—most commonly said to have occurred “under the influence of Savonarola.” The fact that Gianfresco's *Vita* was transparently based on hagiographical models does not by itself invalidate that interpretation. The image of the precocious but worldly youth abandoning the world following a sudden religious experience was strong enough in the Renaissance to guarantee that life often imitated art. In the wake of his ongoing troubles with the church, the premature death of his two closest friends, Lorenzo de' Medici and Angelo Poliziano, and the rapidly deteriorating political climate in Florence, it would hardly be surprising at the end of his life to find in Pico a more pessimistic view of the world than the one he had held at the time of his planned Roman debate.

Nor can links to Savonarola be minimized. We know that it was Pico himself who persuaded Lorenzo de' Medici to recall the fiery Dominican preacher to Florence a final time in 1490, an event that ironically contributed heavily to the Medici's fall from power. Contemporary accounts show us Savonarola praising Pico as the only intellectual of the period equal to St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and other church fathers, debating with him over the value of pagan philosophy, and ultimately burying him in Savonarola's San Marco, wrapped in death, at least, in the habits of the Dominican order. Many of Pico's companions from the old Lorenzean circle—indeed, nearly all of them except Ficino—appear, moreover, after Pico's death in the Savonarolan vanguard, the so-called *piagnoni* or “weepers,” who drastically transformed Florence before Savonarola was finally executed in 1498.

The evidence we have of Pico's later religious views and his interactions with Savonarola is, however, far from unambiguous. The portraits of the later Pico

⁶¹ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 133-176.

drawn even by avid *piagnoni* like Giovanni Nesi and Pietro Crinito more often remind us of the bold magician-priest of the nine hundred theses—who was literally prepared to “marry the world”—than of the self-effacing Christian of his nephew’s *Vita*, where we find the humble (and even self-flagellating!) Pico vowing to wander barefoot preaching the simple word of Christ once his current literary projects were complete. Suggestions, in fact, exist of serious conflict between Pico and Savonarola, reflected in accusations by Giovanni Sinibaldi, one of Savonarola’s closest associates, that Pico had deceived Savonarola on his religious views at the end of his life. In publicly eulogizing Pico, moreover, Savonarola—unlike Ficino—placed the philosopher in purgatory and not in heaven for breaking a supposed vow to join Savonarola’s order before his death.”⁶²

It appears that not only did Pico never truly moderate his views, but as Black’s analysis of *Heptaplus* indicates, he became more refined and articulate in his belief about the intellectual ascent of man to heaven, the elegant mysteries of Kabbalism, and a syncretic philosophy that embraced the entire cosmos while appreciating its diversity.

Pico died on November 17, 1494, at the age of thirty-one. Coincidentally, this was the very same day that “Charles VIII entered Florence—ending in the fall of the Medici and Savonarola’s ascent to political power.”⁶³ Pico was poisoned by his secretary, Cristoforo da Calamaggiore at the order of Lorenzo’s son, Piero de’ Medici, due to the Pico’s connection to Savonarola.⁶⁴ Although tragic, it is not surprising that Pico, who was so brilliant, so controversial, and so brash, burned too brightly and was extinguished because of it. Others have tried to cast Pico and his works into a more acceptably Christian orthodox image, or

⁶² Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 150-1.

⁶³ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁴ Idem, 177-9. Also see Malcolm Moore, “Medici philosopher’s mystery death is solved,” *The Telegraph*, February 7, 2008. Farmer cites L. Dorez, “Lettres inedites de Jean Pic de la Mirandole (1482-1492),” *Gionale storico della letteratura italiana* 85 (1895), 352-61. Farmer remarks that Cristoforo’s confession was compelled by torture, noting that he still believes it is an open question whether Pico was murdered. Yet Farmer also acknowledges that Cristoforo had not only motive in covering up the literary fraud perpetrated by Gianfresco Pico, Savonarola, and their associates, but also means and opportunity. Despite the fact that the confession was obtained under duress, no known evidence supports the notion that the suspicion of poisoning is without merit.

press his ideas into their own service; but modern scholarship, such as Farmer's and Copenhaver's, along with a close reading of Pico's own words have unearthed his philosophy from centuries of obfuscation so it is visible once again.

More remains to be said about Pico and the Kabbalah, and while before the reader is a sufficient introduction to both of these subjects, it cannot be overemphasized that Pico's fascination with the Kabbalah was the genesis of its inclusion as the premier mode of esoteric expression in the Christian west. In analyzing Pico's works, there is a clear focus on arriving at a concordance regarding any given question from all the most learned opinions. Since the mysticism of the Kabbalah reinforced his faith in Christianity, it was in character for him to syncretize it with his own religious faith, creating Christian Cabala. He was, as argued earlier, a philosopher who sought an inclusive and universal harmony, a *coincidentia oppositorum*. Pico's Cabalism is of a very different nature than those who came after him. Pico embedded Kabbalistic structure and symbolism into his very philosophy, which is similar to what could be considered ancient Kabbalism (structure and symbolism embedded with ancient holy texts) versus what came after, which tended towards using Hebrew words and symbolism in ceremonial magic, alchemy, and astrology. But this desire for syncretization and concordance of religious faiths (under Christianity) remained a constant.

Pico, who was the originator and promulgator of this "new" tradition, also inspired followers. Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) traveled from his home in Germany to meet with Pico before returning to author two significant works on the subject and start a movement known as Christian Hebraism. Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico* (*The Wonder-Working Word*) was published in 1494 and *De Arte Cabbalistica* (*On the Art of Kabbalah*) in 1517.

Also in Germany, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, influenced by the work of Reuchlin, Pico, and Ficino, authored the (in)famous *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (1533), and as Michaela Valente notes, “the third book is largely Christian-kabbalistic, focusing on angelology and prophecy as relevant to the highest or intellectual world.”⁶⁵ Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) took up the torch in France, especially the concordance of religion under the rubric of the Christian Revelation. In England, the astrologer and magician to the court of Queen Elizabeth I, John Dee (1527-1609) published *Monas Hieroglyphicas* (*The Hieroglyphic Monad*) in 1564 describing how Kabbalistic techniques were not limited to Hebrew, but could be applied to geometry, astrological symbolism, and even other languages.⁶⁶ Later Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1631-1689) was responsible for the publishing the epic two-volume set *Kabbalah Denudata* (*Kabbalah Unveiled*) in 1684—at that time the single largest translated corpus of original Kabbalist texts. These prominent authors and teachers were heavily influenced by Pico and the context in which he presented the Kabbalah.

Pico’s reputation and authority as the originator and foremost proponent of Christian Cabalism was known far and wide. He devoted himself, perhaps more than he realized when he was 23, to a project that would not only consume the remainder of his short life, but inspire many others. Pico’s work set the standard for western esoteric philosophy and metaphysics to come including alchemy, Rosicrucian mysticism, and ceremonial magic. Pico risked his safety and reputation by publicly declaring that

⁶⁵ Michaela Valente, “Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa,” *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 7.

⁶⁶ Michael T. Walton, “John Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*: Geometrical Cabala,” *Ambix* 23, 2 (July 1976): 116.

Christianity was verified by the Kabbalah and including references to its authority in his works. Pico was also responsible for the translation of many Kabbalistic texts into Latin, making them accessible to the Christian world. But it is the manner in which the Kabbalah was hidden within his writing, both as symbolic occulted references, but more importantly as a template for his philosophy that shows Pico's true devotion to this tradition (addressed most thoroughly in Chapter VIII. Jacob's Ladder). As the next chapter will show, through a close reading of Pico's own words and applying knowledge of Kabbalistic symbolism, light is cast on the hidden aspects, revealing new dimensions of philosophical and religious syncretism that dared to challenge the status quo and hearkened back to a golden age lost in the mists of time.

Chapter II.

Pico and the Kabbalah

As I hope I have begun to show, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) was one of the most complex philosophers of the Renaissance era, both cynosure and ultimately, pariah. William Craven has written, “His contemporaries spoke of him as a phoenix, a miracle of nature, a hero, the marvel of the age. For centuries after his death writers continued to refer to him as a rare and exceptional phenomenon, a freak or prodigy in the intellectual sphere.”⁶⁷ Pico’s writings have been interpreted by scholars for centuries; his philosophy is generally accepted as part of the tradition of Renaissance humanism. However, his work was syncretic and despite many attempts to classify or categorize it, no single label suffices. Pico’s most widely known work, posthumously titled as *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), was an excerpt from the *Apologia* for his *900 Theses* (1486)—a treatise meant to be debated at the Vatican the following year. The debate never occurred because Pope Innocent VIII condemned this work, largely because Pico asserted that the Kabbalah proved that the Christian faith was true. Pico was one of the first to publicly express this idea, but he inspired legions of followers including Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522), Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), Paracelsus (1493-1541), and Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-1689)—some of the most prominent names in the history of western esotericism. The Kabbalah was crucial to each of their life’s work.

Pico’s enthusiasm for, and subsequent adoption of this Jewish esoteric tradition sparked a movement in Europe, and mystically-minded Christians followed suit beginning

⁶⁷ Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 1.

in the early sixteenth century. The phenomenon of Christian Cabalism was widespread within all esoteric, fraternal, chivalric, and mystical circles in Europe and was facilitated by Christian converts in an act of appropriation. In part, this was possible as a consequence of the Spanish Inquisition. Some who fled Spain because of religious persecution made their way to Italy, among them were teachers and translators of the Kabbalah. In Pico's case, his primary translator and teacher, known as Flavius Mithridates, was a Spanish convert who taught Hebrew, this new Christianized Cabala and, as stated previously, translated many texts from Hebrew to Latin.⁶⁸

Despite the fact that the disputation of the *900 Theses* never took place, the work behind it remains significant to the study of the history of western esotericism, largely because Pico was responsible for promoting the validity and veracity of the Kabbalah in a Christian milieu. It should also be recognized that the Christianity which Pico adhered to was by no means orthodox. His conception of Christianity was complex, nuanced, and decidedly heterodox. Suffice it to say that Pico saw his Christian faith as the evolution of a timeless wisdom tradition that encompassed all the ancient schools, though much of this knowledge was hidden by time or necessity. But the extent to which Kabbalism underlay Pico's own writing and thinking is still being uncovered. One avenue to approach this is his references to angels in the *Oration*. Pico's angelology, from this early point in his career, was marked by Kabbalistic influence, both superficially and in hidden ways, marking Pico as not only the first Christian Cabalist, but also advanced in that Kabbalistic concepts informed and influenced his own work conceptually and structurally.

⁶⁸ Wang, *The Rape of Jewish Mysticism by Christian Theologians*, 34-9.

In Pico's *Oration*, he repeatedly mentions angels as part of the order of creation as well as their relationship to humanity. He describes the angels as rational intelligences whose attitudes and behaviors could be emulated in order to raise oneself in a moral, philosophical, and spiritual sense.

Let us put in last place whatever is of the world; and let us fly beyond the chambers of the world to the chamber nearest the most lofty divinity. There, as the most sacred mysteries reveal, the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy the first places. Ignorant of how to yield to them and unable to endure the second places, let us compete with the angels in dignity and glory. When we have willed it, we shall be not at all below them. . . . If we too live that life—for we can—we shall equal their lot. The seraph burns with the fire of charity; the cherub shines with the radiance of intelligence; the throne stands in steadfastness of judgement.⁶⁹

Pico also writes of Jacob's ladder, the ascent and descent of the angels, and how one must learn to reason. That accomplished, one could then philosophize with intelligence like the Cherubim in order to finally rise to the top of the ladder with holy theology to love God as the Seraphim or to descend to the level of the Thrones and exercise judgement and morality in the world. While he had read Iamblichus and Pseudo-Dionysius, Pico also reveals the additional source of his knowledge of the angels and their metaphysics—the Kabbalah.

These are the books of the knowledge of Cabala. Esdras proclaimed at the beginning in a clear voice that in these books was rightly the heart of understanding, that is, an ineffable theology of supersubstantial deity, the fountain of wisdom, that is, an exact metaphysics of intelligible angels and forms, and the river of knowledge, that is, a most sure philosophy of natural things.⁷⁰

Pico's concern with angels here is primarily philosophical, using biblical references to support his argument, but its ultimate purpose is metaphysical. His concern is neither magical, nor theurgical, as he describes that the Kabbalah is of a higher natural order than

⁶⁹ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 31.

magic. From a Neoplatonic perspective, Pico's position here can be seen as unifying aspects of Iamblichus and pseudo-Dionysius, each with an extensive metaphysics of angels, with those of Plotinus (philosophical contemplation is required to ascend, not theurgical rites),⁷¹ which is consistent with Pico's syncretic views in every area of knowledge. The aspects of the Kabbalah that Pico employed are both readily apparent and deliberately occulted. More superficial were his references to the Kabbalistic texts and teachings as an authority on metaphysics and aspects of biblical interpretation, while more substantial instances were symbolically embedded within his writing. Once these hidden aspects are revealed through scholarly analysis presented in this thesis by myself and other scholars, Pico's deep study of Kabbalism can be more readily apprehended.

As described by Pico, philosophy and natural magic were the discipline and art by which one could understand the natural world and thereby humans, who were reflections of the natural world to a great extent. Referencing the inscription at the Oracle of Delphi, "Know thyself arouses us and urges us towards the knowledge of nature, of which man's nature is the medium and, as it were, the union. For he who knows himself, knows all things in himself."⁷² But in order to come to a higher understanding—that of the bible and the angels, a theology and metaphysics was required. According to Pico, the Kabbalah reinforced the Christian faith and was, for a variety of reasons, the esoteric tradition he exalted, and so became for him the ultimate authority in understanding cosmology, anthropogony, theology, angelology, and metaphysics generally. The Kabbalah held this authoritative position not only because it was believed that this tradition was received by

⁷¹ John F. Finamore, "Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy." *Dionysius*, Vol. XVII, Dec. 1999, 83.

⁷² Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 14-5.

Moses on Mount Sinai along with the Torah, but also because its techniques were used to decipher the hidden meaning in the New Testament and verify the status of Christ (according to Pico and his teacher).⁷³

The term *Kabbalah* is a Hebrew word meaning “reception.” The Kabbalah is a mystical Jewish tradition of metaphysics and religious philosophy concerned primarily with the creator God, the creation of the cosmos, humanity, and the relationships between them all. The history of Jewish mysticism is itself lengthy:

A millennium of Jewish mystical creativity preceded the Kabbalah. The first evidence of Jewish mystical trends dates to the period of the Tannaim (the Sages cited in the Mishnah), in second century CE Palestine. These first mystics contemplated a visionary experience devoted to the divine *heikhalot* (palaces) and the *merkavah* (the divine chariot). Though this movement can be traced to the circle of Rabbi Aqiba in the first half of the second century CE, the *heikhalot* and Merkavah texts that have reached us were written much later. . . . These early mystical works reflect in part a continuation of a literary and ideological trend first present in the Enoch literature of the Pseudepigrapha. . . . The works of this early period gave later Jewish mystics two basic elements that served as a foundation for their formulations down through history . . . a hierarchic description of the divine realm, one stratum above the other; they also provided for the possibility of ascending in mystical experience through these layered strata. . . . combined with an interior and mystical investigation into the nature of God. Medieval Kabbalah, though different in many respects . . . preserved and developed these two complementary elements.⁷⁴

From its earliest inception, Jewish mysticism had precisely the elements that Pico developed in his own program for spiritual ascension. The syncretic tendency that Pico also shared is clear through the way these elements of ascension through hierarchy and interior mysticism are combined.

⁷³ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 523. Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, “Theses According to His Own Opinions: Cabalistic Conclusions Confirming the Christian Religion,” 11>5 – 11>8.

⁷⁴ *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan, trans. Ronald C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 2-3.

It was during the Middle Ages that the Jewish Kabbalah, as we recognize it today, began to fully emerge into public view. As Moshe Idel has distilled it,

First discernible in documents stemming from Languedoc in the late 12th century, and in a mysterious and enigmatic book named *Sefer ha-Bahir*, it was disseminated in Catalonia from the early 13th century and reached its first peak in the last quarter of that century in Castile, with the emerging Kabbalistic literature known as the Zohar. Attributed to a 2nd-century paragon of rabbinic culture, Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai, the various Zoharic treatises—mostly written in an artificial Aramaic—became established as the most important Kabbalistic literature. Major Kabbalists who contributed to the late-13th-century Kabbalistic renaissance were Rabbi Moses de León and Joseph Gikatilla. From its initial stronghold in Spain, it spread towards the end of the 13th century to Italy, Germany, the Holy Land, the Byzantine Empire, and North Africa. The other golden age of this Kabbalistic school was seen in the literary products of the 16th-century Kabbalists in the Galilean town of Safed, where the most elaborated and authoritative expositions of Kabbalistic systems were written by Rabbi Moses Cordovero, Rabbi Isaac Luria, and their disciple Rabbi Hayyim Vital. A major emphasis in this Kabbalistic school is found in symbolic interpretations of the Jewish canonical writings, especially the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish liturgy, which attributed a significant affinity between each word and one of the divine powers.

Another important school is the ecstatic Kabbalah founded in the last third of the 13th century in traditions related to Barcelona, especially in the writings of Rabbi Abraham ben Shmuel Abulafia. Concerned with techniques to reach mystical experiences by means of recitations of letter-combinations and divine names, this school is associated with chambers of retreat, movements of head and hands, and some yogic forms of breathing. Abulafia conceived prophecy to be an ideal that should be attained in the present; he believed that he was both a prophet and a messiah, and behaved accordingly, disseminating his Kabbalah to Jews and Christians, and creating a group of students in Messina, Sicily, the most important of whom was Nathan ben Se'adya Harar.

Kabbalistic literature included a variety of elements from other types of thinking, especially rabbinic literature and its mystical satellite the *Heikhalot* literature, apocalyptic writings, different philosophical schools, mainly Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic, and magic. Since the 14th century, the concept of practical Kabbalah has been conceived of as an integral part of Kabbalah, which includes combinations of Kabbalistic elements and both linguistic magic from earlier strata of Judaism and astro-magic, stemming from hermetic literature.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Moshe Idel, "Kabbalah," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Robert E. Bjork, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

From this brief, but detailed historical description, one can discern some important elements, some of which appear to be in tension on the surface. The Kabbalists have always been concerned with tradition and using a similar set of primary sources, symbols, and terms despite varying interpretations. A strong tendency towards innovating new interpretations and methods that combine older techniques underlay the traditional veneer. The intention of Kabbalists has always been to investigate the hidden nature of reality whether it is through mysticism, magic, or prayerful devotion. All of these characteristics of Kabbalists are reflected in Pico's approach to philosophy and his adaptation of the Kabbalah.

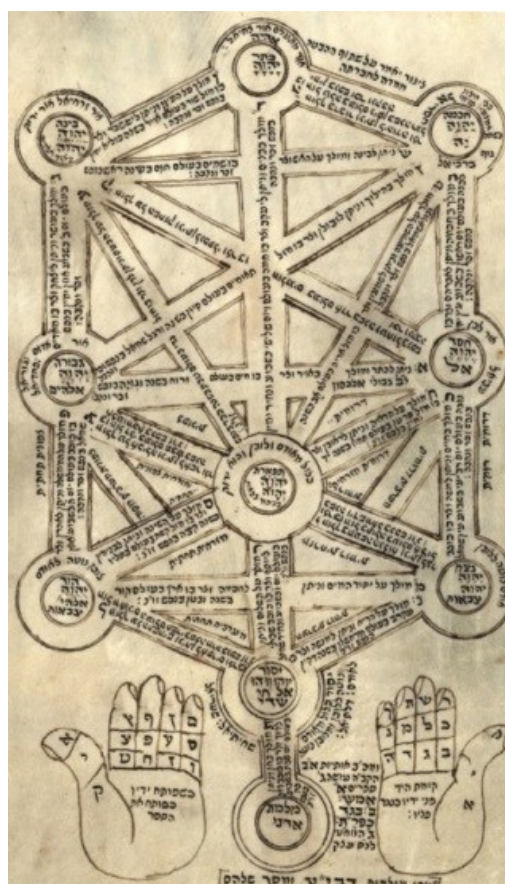
The teachings of the Kabbalah may even be more arcane than its history:

According to the kabbalistic tradition, the transcendent divine essence known as *ein sof* (the endless) or *ayyin* (the nothing) created the cosmos through a process of emanation in which a series of ten *sefirot* (luminosities) [known collectively as the Tree of Life] mediate the continuum of being that connects the physical universe to God. According to this model, the *sefirot*, which are described with strikingly paradoxical and apophatic language as the ten that are simultaneously one and infinite, channel the divine *shefa* (overflow) into the world, sustaining the fabric of being and bringing blessing to humanity. Due to the exile of the Jewish people from their land, as well as a history of Jewish violation of covenantal law, the interconnections between the *sefirot*, according to the kabbalists, are damaged, and the lowest *sefirah*, *Shekhinah* or the divine feminine presence, accompanies the Israelites in their exile, sharing and embodying their longing for reintegration into the Godhead. The kabbalists claim, however, that their esoteric teachings concerning this theosophy enable Jews to repair the damage to the *sefirot* by means of the performance of Jewish law and ritual as well as the study of Jewish texts through a kabbalistic lens. In short, the Kabbalah is a claim to secret knowledge that presents a bold and forceful reformulation of Judaism as the mechanism whereby the very being of the cosmos is maintained.⁷⁶

The primary metaphysical diagram of the Kabbalah is the Tree of Life, and throughout this thesis it presents itself in three forms: (1) the metaphorical Jacob's ladder

⁷⁶ Hartley Lachter, *Kabbalistic Revolution: Reimagining Judaism in Medieval Spain* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 1-3.

described in the bible and referred to in Pico's *Oration*, (2) the metaphysical diagram that is used to classify everything, including hierarchies of angels, and (3) a non-linear hierarchical design for interpreting reality at various levels. Pico's syncretic philosophy in *900 Theses* revealed a philosophical method that consciously emulated the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder, or Tree of Life, and therefore imbued his philosophy with a divine pattern. By doing so, Pico had devised a new syncretic, but in his view still Christian philosophical system that recognized the contributions of the Kabbalah as especially instructional to the philosopher in the use of that art as well as linguistics to ascend spiritually.



4. Tree of Life image from a type of scroll known as ilanot

Tree of Life from a scroll similar to The Great Parchment - one of the scrolls from Pico's library, now held by the Vatican (Cosmological Forests – Kabbalistic Divinity Maps, University of Haifa)

For a variety of reasons, Pico's engagement with the Kabbalah was fruitful. In order to properly understand the phenomenon of a Christian philosopher adopting a Jewish esoteric tradition during a time of extreme religious intolerance, the context is crucial. Pico adopted the Kabbalah not only because he found commonality with Neoplatonism and origins in a monotheistic faith tradition, but mainly because of the evidence of the veracity of the Christianity that he found therein, or was led to by his teacher. Pico believed that Jews were blind to these truths, and that the Kabbalah should be appropriated from its originators since they were ignorant of the value of their own tradition.

The strategy is clear: On the one hand, Pico wants to show that the Jewish mystical tradition proves the Christian truth (and thus, we could also argue that Pico's intention is to convert his Christian readers to Cabala!); on the other hand, he wants to use kabbalistic tradition to convince the Jews and convert them to Christianity. Not surprisingly, Klaus Reichert concludes, "These are not optional readings but decisive ones, and Christian Kabbalists to come knew how to proceed... Thus the entrance of Jewish thinking into the ken of Christianity was a double-edged affair: it opened up new continents of meaning and at the same time it was taken out of the hands of their originators in an act of appropriation and supersession."⁷⁷

Because of the scholarship on the subject, Pico's sources are known, including texts, translators, and teachers. Pico's extensive library of Kabbalistic texts and his relationship with Flavius Mithridates, a Christian convert who was one of the teachers of the Cabala detailed in Chaim Wizurbski's study, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, inform us that Pico took this subject very seriously. The number and diversity of his translated texts and the relatively short period of time in which he learned both the Hebrew language and the Kabbalah itself are remarkable. It is widely recognized that Pico was highly educated in philosophy, but it must be acknowledged that he strove to

⁷⁷ Kocku Von Stuckrad, "Christian Kabbalah and Anti-Jewish Polemics: Pico In Context." *Polemical encounters: esoteric discourse and its others*. Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad, eds. (Boston: Brill, 2007), 4.

become learned in this esoteric tradition. When assessing Pico's syncretic philosophy, contained in his *Oration* and *900 Theses*, the references to the Kabbalah and its metaphysics of angels are clear on the surface. But if we take Pico at his word that the Kabbalah was a "river of knowledge, a fountain of wisdom, and an ineffable theology,"⁷⁸ it must have had a profound impact on not only his faith in Christianity, but also on his philosophy. Kimberley Patton suggests that Pico, and by extension his teacher/translator Flavius Mithridates, was, in a sense, in the lineage of the 13th century Spanish Kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla. Is it possible that Pico, considered by his peers to be one of the greatest minds of his generation, from a once exclusively Jewish esoteric tradition theorized the use of Jacob's Ladder (Tree of Life) along with corresponding hierarchies of angels not only as an emulative model for spiritual ascension in his *Oration*, but also as an intellectual model in the *900 Theses* for interpreting reality at different levels to provide a structure in which the entirety of creation was seen as united in the mind of the philosopher?

Pico viewed angels not only as celestial intelligences which could influence and communicate, but more so as emulative models for human attitude and behavior.

Let us put in last place whatever is of the world; and let us fly beyond the chambers of the world to the chamber nearest the most lofty divinity. There, as the sacred mysteries reveal, the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy the first places. Ignorant of how to yield to them and unable to endure the second places, let us compete with the angels in dignity and glory. When we have willed it, we shall be not at all below them.

But by what method? Or by doing what? Let us see what they are doing, what life they are living. If we too live that life—for we can—we shall equal their lot.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 31.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 7.

To be clear, Pico's angelology was philosophical and metaphysical, not magical nor theurgical. Pico specifically mentions the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder in his *Oration*.

A ladder stretching from the lowness of earth to the heights of heaven and divided by the succession of many steps, with the Lord sitting at the top: the angels, contemplating, climb, by turns, up and down the steps. But if we who are in pursuit of an angelic life must try to do this same thing, I ask, who can touch the ladder of the Lord with dirty feet or unwashed hands?⁸⁰

Then in his *900 Theses*, he uses a variety of philosophical and linguistic devices to conceptualize aspects of creation and to view them from different levels, thereby reconciling polarities and apparent paradoxes—as if he himself were philosophically traversing Jacob's ladder (or Tree of Life). If we interpret the philosophy expounded in Pico's *Oration* in a systemic way, as a prescriptive method for the divinization of humans, it is required that our analysis be methodical in order to glimpse the underlying assumptions and ideas upon which this philosophy is constructed.

By analyzing his writings, it is clear that Pico developed a linguistic method that involved modifying descriptive terms to allow him to interpret something (such as the characteristic of beauty) from different levels or perspectives. When understood in the light of Pico's deep interest in the study of the Kabbalah and his profession of its significance to Christianity, his philosophical methods of considering a concept at various levels to ascertain the truth from the widest possible perspective can be seen as analogous to traversing a metaphorical Tree of Life, or Jacob's ladder. Pico's use of linguistics to create correlative structures in his *900 Theses*, specifically in the chapter "Paradoxical

⁸⁰ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 9.

Conclusions Introducing New Doctrines in Philosophy,” illustrates this very conclusion.⁸¹

Therefore, Pico’s philosophy might yet reveal a layer of meaning that has not yet been fully elucidated by scholars, or by Pico himself, remaining hidden in plain sight. It is long overdue that this aspect of Pico’s brilliance be recognized and appreciated. In so doing, the impact of the Kabbalah upon Pico’s philosophy and metaphysics becomes almost as great as the impact it had upon his Christian faith. His interest in embedding a Kabbalistic structure in his work can be interpreted as a manner of imposing a divine template upon it, so it were imbued with the highest purpose.

The Kabbalah approaches creation itself from a non-linear hierarchical perspective; its metaphysical model, known as the Tree of Life, influenced Pico’s work in two ways. First, in a superficial sense, is the manner that he appeals to the Kabbalah as the authority on metaphysics and theology about which he openly writes. The second is a more profound, fundamental, but hidden manner in which the very nature of his philosophy was predicated on the ability to move between hierarchies and levels of understanding so that all was unified – not only in a metaphysical sense, but intellectually and philosophically. Pico performed what he described humanity as capable of when assuming the attitude and behavior of the celestial intelligences by composing and attempting to publicly dispute his theses. In so doing, he elucidated an intellectual, philosophical, and contemplative approach to spirituality, not limited by approach and capable of apprehending multiple perspectives, where the faculty of intelligence, once mastered, provided the foundation for both moral judgement and loving devotion to God.

⁸¹ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 399-421.

It is important to consider Pico's views on the relationship between angels and intellect because it provides some insight into his program of ascension and why, as argued earlier, it is an intellectual and contemplative method rather than a theurgical or magical one, seeking to influence the cosmic structure. Rather, Pico's system seeks to enable the mind to navigate it. When interpreting the Pico's view on the intellect, the mind, or the faculty of intelligence, there are two assumptions that are crucial; one is explicit in his works, but the other is not. First, Pico makes explicit, numerous references to angels as "intelligences," a traditional term. In fact, the Cherubim, the middle order of angels mentioned in his *Oration*, are noted specifically for their intelligence.

Therefore with his own light the cherub in the middle makes us ready for the seraphic fire, and at the same time illuminates us for the judgment of the thrones. He is the bond of the first minds, the order of Pallas, the ruler over contemplative philosophy. We must rival him and embrace him and lay hold of him. Let us make ourselves one with him and be caught up to the heights of love. And let us descend to the duties of action, well instructed and prepared.⁸²

Pico also held the conviction, as Plotinus expounded in the Fifth Ennead,⁸³ that on some level all mind is united. He never explicitly stated this, but it must be considered.⁸⁴ The importance of this faculty, and its significance as the single named characteristic possessed by both humans and angels, should not be overlooked. In order to ascend from human to angelic to God-like in Pico's system required the willful application of intelligence by which one could gain access to not only the human and worldly realms of knowledge, but with esoteric keys to decipher the holy texts, those of the angels and beyond. Pico implied that

⁸² Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 8.

⁸³ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, Stephen MacKenna and B.S. Page, trans. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 228-35.

⁸⁴ Carl N. Still, "Pico's Quest for All Knowledge," in *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, ed. M.V. Dougherty (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 187.

the human intellect could ascend to angelic realms and beyond in a contemplative sense. His interpretation was certainly not a literal physical ascension, nor a theurgical one; it was the path of the scholar, philosopher, and contemplative mystic. The Kabbalah also lends itself to this type of hyper-intellectualization. In fact, of the three modes of Kabbalistic expression or practice, one is speculative which is considered philosophical (the type Pico used in his *Oration*), the other types include mystical or ecstatic, and practical or magical. Even today, this speculative Kabbalah is practiced through study, contemplation, and discussion.

While some scholars like Avery Dulles dispute Pico's Kabbalistic influences as dominant in his work, more modern research has uncovered the deep study of Hebrew and the Kabbalah undertaken by Pico in the years leading up to his planned disputation in 1487. To those who understood, Pico included various clues within his *Oration* before he even announced his interest in the Kabbalah. For example, Copenhaver's study, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," describes the deep knowledge of Kabbalism that Pico employed in his language, describing how Pico was alluding to the Tree of Life even with Jacob and the straight ascent to heaven via the ladder of the angels. This allusion by Pico is referencing *Gates of Light* by Jewish Kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1305).⁸⁵ This metaphysical device and the central symbolic glyph of the Kabbalah—The Tree of Life / Jacob's ladder, became an analogue for Pico in the development of a specific linguistic technique that would allow the philosopher to intellectually ascend or descend just like the angels.

⁸⁵ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," 68-70.

In *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics* (2006), Crofton Black convincingly demonstrates that Pico's Kabbalistic studies analogously had a great impact on his composition of *Heptaplus* (1489). Like the *900 Theses*, this influence in *Heptaplus* is hidden under the surface and not openly disclosed in the same way Pico discussed the Kabbalah in his *Oration*. *Heptaplus* is of particular significance to proving the hypothesis by demonstrating a continuation of Pico's capacity to adapt Kabbalistic ideas in an authoritative manner.

In his epic study, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)*, S. A. Farmer describes Pico's most used method for syncretizing various philosophies, wisdom traditions, mythologies, and more. This relied on Platonic metaphysics.

Hierarchical or correlative distinctions . . . these were Pico's most typical syncretic devices. While the standard scholastic distinction typically led to binary divisions of concepts—*substance* or *accident*, *real* or *intentional* existence, *speculative* or *practical* science, and so on—once organized in correlative series these could be multiplied in a nearly endless fashion, limited only by a commentator's ingenuity in inventing verbal modifiers for some base term. This method is beautifully illustrated in a thesis that contains one of the most extreme examples of hierarchical thinking known... The seven levels of reality distinguished in this thesis show up repeatedly in Pico's theses presented "according to his own opinion":

"5>26. Beauty exists in God as its cause, in the total intellectual truly essentially totally, in the particular intellect truly partially essentially, in the rational soul truly participationally, in the visible accidents of the heavens imagerially essentially totally, in subcelestial visible qualities imagerially partially essentially, in quantities imagerially participationally."

Pico most often invoked extreme correlative distinctions like these to unveil the secret concords of the ancients—his apparent object here was to harmonize ideas in the Platonic corpus with elements of this own system—but these methods could be used just as well to effect full or partial reconciliations of more recent traditions.⁸⁶

Platonic influence alone is insufficient to address the correlative structure being introduced in this example, which is why Pico's mention of the Kabbalah and Jacob's

⁸⁶ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 66-7.

ladder in his *Oration* become even more significant. The influence of the Kabbalah and its non-linear hierarchical models of creation and levels of intellect upon Pico were profound. The Kabbalistic Tree of Life was a symbolic metaphysical model that could encompass various aspects of intelligence, hierarchies of angels, classical planets of astrology, and much more within its spheres since it is a representation of all creation. Pico believed that humans could use their individual minds, through philosophical disputation, to ascend towards a union with the divine, similar to angels ascending the ladder, and eventually view all aspects of creation holistically as one may envision the Tree of Life.

In interpreting Pico's *Oration* and *900 Theses* as not only a description of the potential unification of creation within an intellectual, philosophical, and metaphysical framework, but the public disputation of it (philosophy in practice) in front of the pope and church hierarchy, one can begin to understand how this would have amounted to an attempt to ascend in a manner and place of supreme significance. This theory was explored by S.A. Farmer in the first chapter of his dissertation on Pico. Because Pico meant to undertake a philosophical disputation to syncretize all known systems of thought in the seat of spiritual power, namely, the Holy See of the Vatican, it would guarantee not only his own spiritual ascension, but his good works could merit a revelation of truth to the world. When seen in this light, "bold" and "audacious" do not even begin to describe the endeavor that Pico undertook—more like "grandiose," for in so doing he was putting into practice the exact formula he prescribed in the *Oration* for employing the angelic intelligences as emulative models.⁸⁷ This is Farmer's read of the possible apocalyptic and eschatological overtones to Pico's proposed disputation, an interpretation of his intent that

⁸⁷ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 1-58.

I cannot dismiss, and with which I find myself in agreement, at least as a likely possibility. Pico felt he had the intellectual capacity, the understanding of philosophy and theology, and the linguistic keys to create correlative structures in order to reveal a new way of intellectually approaching the world, enabling a harmonious reconciliation of all philosophical and religious conflicts and mystically uniting the philosopher with the divine.

Pico's strong affinity for the Kabbalah is partly illustrated by the use of a structurally similar hierarchy within his philosophy. Pico's syncretic philosophy endeavored to view the entirety of creation as a unified whole by traveling between levels of philosophical understanding using linguistic device. The Kabbalah models the entirety of creation within a non-linear hierarchical symbol whereby groups of angels reside at specific spheres, but man has the capability to travel between the spheres to experience the various expressions of the divine.

Circulating in Italy and Spain contemporaneously with Pico's adaptation of the Kabbalah was another, older ascent theology with angels: the Islamic mystical account of the Isra and Mi'raj, the mystical Night Journey when Allah took the prophet Muḥammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and then the Celestial Ascent to heaven.

Muḥammad's ascent to God and return to the world is known as the mi'raj (lit. ladder, stairway).. . . Gabriel came to Muḥammad at night, mounted him on a winged beast called Burāq (Alborak), and took him to Jerusalem, where Muḥammad led all the previous prophets in prayer. Gabriel then took him up through the seven heavens and introduced him to the angels and the prophet residing in each heaven, and then gave him a tour of hell and paradise. Finally Muḥammad went alone into the presence of God.. . . The *mi'raj*, then, was understood as the model of the path to God . . .⁸⁸

⁸⁸ William C. Chittick, "Mi'raj," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

There are clear correlations between the Celestial Ascent, Jacob's ladder, and Pico's conception of spiritual ascent—the inclusion of angels and purity of the aspirant being the most prominent. These themes were also featured prominently in another famous work more familiar to Christians. It was Miguel Asin Palacios, a Spanish scholar of al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi, who, in 1926, first noted in a systematic way the Islamic theological themes, especially those of the *mi' rāj*, in Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*.⁸⁹ Through the comparison of the traditions of spiritual and mystical ascent in the Abrahamic faiths, a remarkable congruency is discovered and inevitable cross-cultural and religious pollination. So it could be argued that it is not without precedence that Pico undertook the creation of the Christian Cabala.

The inevitable conclusion is that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's adoption of the Kabbalah was not only integral to his Christian faith, but also to his philosophy. Pico's intention when approaching the study of the Kabbalah and the manner in which this study affected his philosophy was precisely the sort of reintegration that the Kabbalah calls the “Path of Return”—the journey to ultimate reabsorption with En Sof (literally, the limitless, for practical purposes, the Kabalistic concept of God). As Simon Shokek wrote, “repentance in the classic medieval teachings of Kabbalah is the mystical path of return that signifies the Kabbalist's yearning to ascend to the exalted world of God, to return his soul to her origin, to the Womb of the “Supernal Mother,” and thus to experience *Devekut*.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, Pico's act in revealing his syncretic philosophy and its source, along with his

⁸⁹ Miguel Asin Palacios, *Islam and The Divine Comedy*, trans. Harold Sutherland (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁹⁰ Shimon Shokek, *Kabbalah and the Art of Being: The Smithsonian Lectures* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 137.

attempt to legitimize the Kabbalah with religious authorities, eventually paved the way for the Kabbalah to become integral to all subsequent forms of western esotericism.

This legitimization via blending with Kabbalah was an important milestone for the history of western esotericism, and arguably the history of religion. Effectively, a Christian philosophers appropriated an esoteric tradition and adapted it to his own purposes. It must be understood that at the time, it was commonly held that the Kabbalah was the original ancient wisdom tradition handed down by God to the first man, or at least to Moses, and all subsequent mystery cults and sages including Egyptian, Persian, and Greek were descended from the Hebrew tradition because of the primacy of the Hebrew bible. Today we know that these were parallel, interacting traditions, but this belief in the authenticity of the Kabbalah lent it an authority with mystics, seekers, and esotericists. Pico's role in the process of the adoption of the Kabbalah was remarkably significant and becoming ever more clear.

Clearly, the adaptation of Kabbalah was concerned not with formal religious doctrine and practice, but with a more personal understanding of the celestial hierarchies, biblical interpretation, exegetical techniques, and methods for practicing esoteric arts. In Pico's case, his understanding of the Kabbalistic tradition, texts, and philosophies engendered a greater concordance with his understanding of Christianity, resulting in a syncretism that in no way honored the Jewish tradition on its own terms. Instead, Pico's syncretism, with Kabbalism at its heart, was entirely in the service of a greater purpose—the transcendent union with the One, which he interpreted from a Christian, albeit Neoplatonic, perspective.

How did this appropriation and supersession of their esoteric tradition affected relations between Jews and Christians during this time? It is possible to recognize the double-edged nature of this phenomenon. On one hand, Christian intellectuals revered the teachers and translators of the Kabbalah whether Jew or Christian convert. Despite their respect for the teachings, the Kabbalah learned from the Jews was also to be used as a weapon against typical Jews for conversion and persecution as mentioned previously.⁹¹ The paradoxical nature of western esotericism's practioners' inherent anti-Judaism has never been reconciled with their love of Jewish mysticism and is a topic deserving further research. I follow Copenhaver in believing that Kabbalism underlay Pico's philosophy. This would imply that the Kabbalah had a much more significant influence upon intellectual life in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance eras than has been widely understood up to this point in time.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the adoption of an esoteric tradition created by Jews, a people who saw themselves as exiled from their homeland since the destruction of the Second Temple (circa 70 CE), and during a time of intolerance which facilitated the outsider nature of the philosophies promoted, including: (1) the importance of individual humans (as opposed to God, kings and bishops) in maintaining the balance of the cosmos through proper thought, word, and deed, (2) messianism that was interpreted as utopianism in a Christian milieu, (3) the dialectics of secrecy and revelation as central to esoteric theory and practice, and (4) an ambivalence towards established religious, political, and social authorities. Deeply embedding a foreign esoteric system, like the Kabbalah, that is ambivalent towards traditional institutions into mystical practice, magical arts, and fraternal

⁹¹ Von Stuckrad, "Christian Kabbalah and Anti-Jewish Polemics: Pico in Context," 4.

orders has inevitable effects on history, religion, and the development of society. European thought has been arguably affected, in many areas of knowledge (philosophy, religion, science, and more) by the introduction of Kabbalah into the thinking of some of the most prominent intellectuals of Europe between the late fifteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, such as Dr. John Dee,⁹² Francis Bacon,⁹³ and Sir Isaac Newton,⁹⁴ and we have Giovanni Pico della Mirandola to thank, and / or blame, for that.

⁹² Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge Classics, 2008), 278-93.

⁹³ Ibid., 156-69.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 245-61.



5. Posthumous portrait of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola by Cristofano dell'Altissimo (1525-1605),

Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Chapter III.

Angels as Celestial Intelligences



1. "The Last Judgement," Fra Angelico (Cathedral of San Marco, Florence, 1431)

In this chapter, I propose to begin an analysis of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's angelology, and the conception of spiritual ascent that is intertwined with it. While, as noted earlier, the overtones of Christian theology and Neoplatonism are present, along with Scholasticism and Aristotelianism, Pico's underlying foundational concepts are deeply Kabbalistic. Because of the ancient wisdom narrative of Platonic Orientalism, this was not some artificial contrivance, but an attempt to derive a whole truth from a variety of sources each of which contained a part. I will follow the Kabbalistic thread, while remembering that the intention is not to try to disentangle the knot, so to speak, but rather to trace the influence of the Kabbalah to show that Pico's contact with it shaped his thought to such a degree that he saw it as indispensable to his philosophy. Pico recognized the concordance of ideas between aspects of the Jewish Kabbalah and Neoplatonism, just as he did between

all related schools of thought. While many scholars are trapped into trying to argue for the influence of one school over the others, I share the opinion of those scholars who recognize Pico's syncretism and insist on the variety of his influences in exegesis of his thought.

While he never offered a single concise definition of angels, among Pico's *900 Theses* there are a number of passages that allow a better understanding of Pico's conception of these heavenly beings. Pico's angels rested on these concepts: hierarchy, correspondence with entities from other traditions, intelligence and the capability of knowing and aiding inferior beings to understand what they might convey to provide illumination, and participation, to some extent, in materiality. In thesis 28.2, Pico enumerates his concept of the hierarchy of angelic orders so his belief is congruent with popular thought that angelic orders were composed in a hierarchical arrangement with those at the top being closest to the divine.⁹⁵ Pico also states in thesis 10>9 that angelic orders are the equivalent to entities defined in other traditions, "Guardians in Orpheus and Powers in Dionysius are the same."⁹⁶ Basically, Pico sees equivalence between traditions in the way non-human intelligences were defined. This was actually a key aspect of his syncretic philosophy and can be seen in the later development of western esotericism as derivative of Pico's influence. In his thesis 5.7, Pico posits that, "Angels understand through a knowing habit that is co-natural with them."⁹⁷ From this single postulate, the intellectual nature of angelic beings becomes clearer. Further, Pico states in thesis 6.7 that

⁹⁵ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 347.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 509.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

angels illuminate beings of a lower nature not by giving something of itself, but through “strengthening the intellect of the inferior.”⁹⁸ This further clarifies his position that angels illuminate through the power of the mind, providing greater understanding. Pico also held the opinion that angels could not be purely immaterial while still participating in material creation. Instead, he argued that angels were comprised, to some degree, of material form (thesis 2.21—which will be addressed in greater detail in a later section) making them more similar to humans than may have been realized by orthodox theologians. And if angels were more like humans than previously conceived, it provided the opening through which Pico’s syncretic philosophy of spiritual ascent through angelic emulation could become realized. When Pico’s concepts are examined in detail, it becomes clear that they are based on antecedent traditions and their philosophers. Yet it was his syncretism and public application of these philosophies within western Christianity that made Pico such a bold innovator of religious and philosophical thought.

In his *Oration*, Pico described the characteristic of man to become like other beings based on his attitude and behavior and linked the attribute of intelligence with angels. “At man’s birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him. . . If intellectual, he will be an angel, and a son of God . . . For the more secret Hebrew theology at one time reshapes holy Enoch into an angel of divinity, whom they call *malach hashechina* [sic], and at other times reshapes men into other divinities.”⁹⁹ He reinforces this point with metaphor: if a man appears human, this is merely the outer garment, similar to

⁹⁸ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 247.

⁹⁹ Idem, *On the Dignity of Man*, 5-6.

the rind of a plant, or hide of beast; similarly it is “not a separateness from the body but a spiritual intelligence which makes an angel.”¹⁰⁰ Pico also had a special place for the Cherubim—that order of angels he associates with the faculty of intelligence (“the cherub shines with the radiance of intelligence”¹⁰¹). As noted previously,

[W]ith his own light the cherub in the middle makes us ready for the seraphic fire, and at the same time illuminates us for the judgment of the thrones. He is the bond of the first minds, the order of Pallas, the ruler over contemplative philosophy. We must first rival him and embrace him and lay hold of him. Let us make ourselves one with him and be caught up to the heights of love. And let us descend to the duties of action, well instructed and prepared.”¹⁰²

From these passages in the *Oration*, it is clear that Pico saw intelligence as associated with angels, and the order of Cherubim specifically. The association of intelligences and angels has existed since ancient times. Scholastic philosophers of the medieval era were largely responding to earlier Greek and Arab ideas about intelligences.¹⁰³ From Plato and Aristotle to Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, this idea has a long pedigree.

Plato understood that certain governing aspects of human consciousness exist beyond the physical . . . Aristotle considered intelligences as “secondary movers” of the heavenly bodies . . . Intelligences are developed in the work of Plotinus, an Egyptian who taught in Rome in the third century C.E. and the first and most influential of the Neoplatonists. Plotinus used the term Divine Thought (in Greek *ho Nous*, variously translated Mind, Divine Mind, Intellect, or Intelligence) is a sort of mediation to human beings of the Unknowable One, and connotes the highest reality knowable. Universal Intelligence contains all particular intelligences, and the totality of the Divine Thoughts known in the language of Plato as Ideas or Ideals. “Intelligence” or “Intelligible” applies to various expressions of the Divine Thought (*Nous*)... Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth-sixth centuries C.E.) referred in *The Celestial Hierarchy* to angels as “heavenly and godlike intelligences” and said the sacred

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰² Ibid., 8.

¹⁰³ David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 71.

truth about them was hidden to the masses. His three-tiered hierarchy of nine orders of angels influenced Christian philosophy, including the works of St. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁰⁴

The idea that angels are intelligences permeated Christian philosophy. “Medieval angelologists took their clue about the character of this order of angels from the traditional translation of cherub, “fullness of knowledge.” The Cherubim “suggest the perfection of creaturely knowledge.”¹⁰⁵ Hugh of St. Victor proposed the following defined attributes of angels: “simplicity of essence; individuality of person; rationality . . . and freedom of choice.”¹⁰⁶ These ideas are, of course, supported in scripture.

As personal creatures and as rational creatures created in the image of the Trinity, angels also have, to follow Augustine’s *On the Trinity*, the rational functions of memory, intelligence, and will. 1 Peter 1:12 confirms that angels are entities capable of knowing, though this issue was never in doubt. As Bonaventure interprets and employs this passage, the angels represent creatures who seem to be pure thought and contemplation, able to appreciate ceaselessly the fount of all knowledge and goodness.¹⁰⁷

The supposition that angels were intelligent and separate entities was demonstrated to the philosophers’ satisfaction by the motion of the planets, acknowledging Aristotle’s claim that there is an intelligence evidenced in the movement these heavenly bodies.¹⁰⁸ Bonaventure commented that the angels’ purpose was not only to move the heavenly bodies, but more to appreciate the perfection of creation in which they participate.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Angels* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2004), 187.

¹⁰⁵ Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, 60.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

Another crucial difference was that the intelligences of the Greeks were purely rational, while the angels of Christian philosophy are capable of affection.¹¹⁰ From ancient Greek philosophy to Neoplatonism to Christianity, the idea of angels as intelligences is evident throughout the history of Western metaphysical thought. Pico was not only familiar with these traditions, but was also in the midst of learning the Kabbalah while composing his 900 Theses. The Kabbalah also makes this connection between angels and intelligences.

This link is explained brilliantly and in accord with Jewish Kabbalistic tradition by mystical rabbi and independent scholar Aryeh Kaplan in *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation in Theory and Practice* (1997).

The *Midrash* tells us, “One angel cannot have two missions. Neither can two angels share the same mission.”

Two angels therefore cannot share the same mission. It is only their different missions that make the two angels different entities. They cannot be separated by space like physical objects. Therefore, if they both had the same mission, there would be nothing to differentiate them, and they would be one. Similarly, one angel cannot have two missions. On a purely spiritual plane, two different concepts cannot exist in a single entity. If an angel had two missions, then it would be two angels.

We can understand this in terms of the human mind. In a sense, the mind is a pure spiritual entity, bound to man’s physical brain. Many thoughts and memories may be bound together by man’s physical brain, but the mind can only focus on one of them at a time. A thought is a spiritual entity, and as such, can only contain a single concept. Since both thought and an angel are basic spiritual entities, this is very closely related to the fact that an angel can only have a single mission.¹¹¹

This line of reasoning where thoughts and angels are so similar yields the very conclusion that Pico expressed in his philosophy; that man, while he may find himself at a lower station than angels initially, has the potential to rise even higher and closer to God

¹¹⁰ Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, 105.

¹¹¹ Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation—In Theory and Practice* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997), 60-1.

than any angel ever could by emulating them, utilizing the intellect, being devoted to the divine, and implementing judicious behavior. By following this prescription, Pico argued it was possible for living humans to scale the hierarchy of heaven, even to its highest level.

Divine Hierarchy

The concept of hierarchy is central not only to ideas about angels, but religion and theology, government and politics, and society and culture as well. During medieval and Renaissance times, this emphasis on hierarchy was very prominent as theologians explored the meanings and implications for humans based on the accepted divine hierarchy. The genealogy of the concept of angelic hierarchy can be traced directly from Dionysius the Areopagite (pseudo-Dionysius) to Augustine of Hippo and Bonaventure and then through the Dante's *Divine Comedy*.¹¹² The idea of hierarchy is easily transferable, and it seemed quite logical to assume that if the heavens were ordered hierarchically, this should be the model which humans follow to construct their own ideas and institutions. In his masterful study, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, David Keck describes the manner in which angelic hierarchies provided a model to medieval thinkers to explain creation. Extrapolating from God and the hierarchy of angels, men found hierarchy in the physical world of minerals, plants, and animals as well as their own creations of the church, in social classes and sovereignty, and in their governments. St. Bonaventure explored the relationship between the hierarchy of angels, which consists “of three sets of three orders within three hierarchies,” which he naturally interpreted as having “Trinitarian intimations.”¹¹³ This is just a single example of the use of the model of angelic hierarchy for application to many other readily apprehensible concepts.

¹¹² Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, 53.

¹¹³ Ibid., 54.

As mentioned, Pseudo-Dionysius provided great rationale for the hierarchical arrangement in heaven, but this was only the beginning.

One of Dionysius's principles, often applied to political power both civil and religious, maintains that God's gifts are bestowed from on high through intermediaries who can guide others to the extent that they themselves are enlightened. What is deemed to be the case with the celestial hierarchy is considered to have a counterpart in the structure of the Church. Supporters of a pontifical theocracy concluded, therefore, that the Pope held power over all. John of Paris and others thought that his was equally true in the temporal order, independently of spiritual power. Some of Dionysius's ideas thus served as a key to interpreting canon law, and traces of opposing explanations remained in political-religious disputes until recent times.¹¹⁴

Therefore it can be accepted that hierarchy, in its myriad forms, but adhering to a single basic formula, was seen as divinely ordained and worthy of reflection in human endeavors. Suffice it to say that angelic hierarchies were not only an accepted feature of Christianity, of which Pico was well aware, but also of Judaism and by extension, the Kabbalah.

In the *Oration*, Pico deals with only the Cherubim, Seraphim, and Thrones. Their hierarchy is of central importance to the model of spiritual ascension that Pico describes in his text. Seraphim are closest to God and thereby considered highest in a metaphysical sense. Next are Cherubim, and the Thrones are positioned below both in the hierarchy. As stated previously, Pico's prescription was to engage the intellect as it was the strength of the Cherubim, once that was accomplished one would engage in devotion to the divine which was seen as the specialty of the Seraphim, with intellect and proper devotion accomplished one would then be prepared to act in the world with proper judgment as do the Thrones. Hierarchy was central to Pico's scheme, just as it was to the medieval church doctors.

¹¹⁴ Jean Leclercq, "Influence and Noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages," *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 31.

In his *900 Theses*, Pico directly addresses the issue of angelic hierarchy. In “Theses According to the Opinions of Others—The Hebrew Cabalist Wise Men” 28.2, Pico wrote “There are nine hierarchies of angels, whose names are the Cherubim, Serafim, Hasmalim, Haiot, Aralim, Tarsisim, Ofanim, Tefsarim, Isim.”¹¹⁵ Farmer’s analysis indicates that Pico abbreviated the orders of angels to nine instead of ten “undoubtedly to correlate them with Pseudo-Dionysius’s nine orders of Christian angels.”¹¹⁶ In “Theses According to His Own Opinion—The Magic in the Orphic Hymns,” Pico wrote two statements that apply. “10>9. Guardians in Orpheus and powers in Dionysius are the same” and “10>10. Anyone who attempts the work of the preceding conclusion should add a work of Cabala according to those things ascribed to the fear of Isaac.”¹¹⁷ The first statement here, enumerated as 10>9, reveals a measure of Pico’s syncretism, equalizing portions of the Orphic system with that of Pseudo-Dionysius. The second, 10>10, indicates that the fifth Sephirah of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, known as *Gevurah*, Hebrew for severity, or *Deen*, awe, referred to cryptically as the “fear of Isaac” is equal with the guardians of the Orphic system and the powers of Pseudo-Dionysius.¹¹⁸ When these two theses are considered together, Pico’s scheme becomes clearer—the comparison and syncretism of mystery cult systems with Christianity and Kabbalism in an effort to promote what he perceives as the hidden truths which all of these conceal to some extent. As noted by Farmer, Pico interpreted these connections between seemingly disparate systems as “further proof that the ancients shared

¹¹⁵ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 347.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 509.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

a common revelation, concealed in diverse symbols to hide the deepest secrets from the uninitiated.”¹¹⁹ Additionally, there can be no doubt that for Pico, the one system that was worthy of study above all others was the Kabbalah because, as he wrote, the Kabbalah preceded and predicted the revelation of Christ as the messiah of the Jews which is enumerated fully in his section on the “Cabalist Wise Men.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 71.

¹²⁰ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 523.

The Question of Angelic Materiality



2. "Madonna the Magnificat," Sandro Botticelli, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1481

For much of the world that considered such things, angels, with their heavenly nature were not comprised of material elements. But Pico specifically addressed whether angels were material or immaterial in his *900 Theses*, deciding that they were material. In the section entitled “Theses According to the Opinion of Others—The Latins: Thomas Aquinas,” Pico stated in thesis 2.21 that “No multiplicity of angels exist in the same species”¹²¹ and in “Theses According to His Own Opinion—Philosophical Conclusions Dissenting From the Common Philosophy” in thesis 2>44 that “If Thomas says that according to Aristotle intelligences exist in genus, he contradicts himself no less than

¹²¹ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 225.

Aristotle.”¹²² Farmer argues that “Thomas insisted on the total immateriality of angels, and since matter in his system provided the principle of individuation, each angel was necessarily a unique species unto itself.”¹²³ Pico rejected Thomas’s position, and held that angels were, in some sense, material.¹²⁴

The crux of the problem here is that Pico saw Thomas’s opinions as inconsistent, specifically, if angels are immaterial, they can be neither part of a species nor genus. While this may be an arcane point, these taxonomic classifications of genus and species apply to living organisms as part of biological science. Pico planned to argue, based on the available evidence of his theses, that both Aquinas and Aristotle were inconsistent with their opinions. In order to fully reconcile them, it should be recognized that angels participate in beingness itself (which in modern times is defined materially), and therefore can be classified according to biological scientific hierarchy, hence angels were material in some way. This is an important distinction because Pico’s opinion on this matter differs significantly from two of the greatest minds of western intellectual history. His philosophy was internally consistent, providing logical means to understand that while angels may not physically partake of the world in the manner of humans, they are intelligent and serve functions in the physical realm—meaning that they had to have some relationship to matter itself. When considered in its full import, this position on the materiality of angels is quite astounding, illustrating Pico’s thinking on the subject which allowed him to transcend popular accepted beliefs and better understand the nature of the angels and their

¹²² Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 385.

¹²³ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 225.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

relationship to humans and the world. It is likely that this subject was considered by other philosophers, contemplatives, and mystics. For instance, St. Symeon the New Theologian (Tenth century) thought that each soul was incarnated for the purpose of a process of radical spiritualization and de-materialization.¹²⁵ Yet Pico's approach to the issue of angelic materiality demonstrated his brilliance in thinking about the subject in a new and logical manner, one that still allowed for the mystery of the divine.

¹²⁵ John Anthony McGuckin, "Symeon the New Theologian's Hymns of Divine Eros : A Neglected Masterpiece of the Christian Mystical Tradition," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 5, 2 (Fall 2005): 194.

Chapter IV.

The Angelic Order of the Cherubim



3. Tetramorph, fresco, Meteora (16th century)

When investigating the angelic order known as the Cherubim, the place to begin is in scripture. The Cherubim (K'ruvim in Hebrew) are explicitly mentioned in the Pentateuch as guardians against the return to the Garden. "He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned

every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”¹²⁶ (Genesis 3:24) The Cherubim also appeared in Ezekiel’s visions.

And this was their appearance: they had the form of men, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another; they went every one straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of man in front; the four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and four had the face of an eagle at the back . . .”¹²⁷ (Ezekiel 1.5-8a)

Both of these instances are part of the analysis in the classic Kabbalistic text known as *The Bahir*, Hebrew for illumination. According to Kabbalistic tradition, because the Cherubim guard the east of the Garden, when Ezekiel encounters these angels in his vision, it is understood that he is approaching the Tree of Life in a metaphysical sense.¹²⁸ As Louis Jacobs says, “In a Midrashic source the folk etymology is given according to which the singular form *keruv* means *ke-ravya*, ‘like a young child’, hence the depiction in art and literature of the cherubim as baby angels.”¹²⁹ According to Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), one of the foremost and prolific Jewish scholars and philosophers of all time, Cherubim were angelic hosts that participated in the function of the cosmos and were ninth out of ten angelic orders in his ranking scheme.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1000-1.

¹²⁸ Aryeh Kaplan, *The Bahir* (Boston: Weiser Books, 1979), 37, 161.

¹²⁹ Louis Jacobs, “Cherubim,” *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Cherubim are mentioned in Exodus 25: 18-20; two Cherubim, cast in gold, were facing one another with wings extended as part of the cover for the Ark of the Covenant.¹³¹ In his article “The Ark and the Cherubim: Their Symbolic Significance in Biblical Ritual,” M. Haran describes two avenues of investigation for scholars traditionally. (1) The Ark was container for the tablets of the law (or perhaps another revered object or objects) or (2) it was a Throne of God, also known as mercy seat, whereby “the Divine Holiness was concentrated not inside the ark but *on* it, above the wings of the cherubim.”¹³² Haran ultimately concludes that while the Cherubim may have had other functions based on scripture, from a solely ritualistic perspective, their only purpose was to form a throne for God.¹³³ This function defined by Haran also creates a sort of gateway from the Cherubim between man and the divine.

The Celestial Hierarchy of (pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite is another crucial source on the Cherubim as it is the basis for angelic speculations in the Christian tradition since at least the ninth century CE.¹³⁴ It is also important to bear in mind that Pico “praised him as the master of the true Christian *cabbala*; Dionysius he maintained, handed on the secret spiritual teachings of the Apostles, especially Paul, which for Pico coincided with the religious truths Plato had taught.”¹³⁵ St. Dionysius describes the angelic hierarchy as being

¹³¹ Jacobs, “Cherubim,” *Concise Companion*.

¹³² M. Haran, “The Ark and the Cherubim: Their Symbolic Significance in Biblical Ritual,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 9, 1 (1959): 30.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius (St. Dionysius the Areopagite), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 26-7.

¹³⁵ Karlfried Froelich, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century,” in *op. cit.*, 36.

divided into three triads; the first of these are the closest to God. He describes the Cherubim and Seraphim as “said to possess many eyes and many wings . . .”¹³⁶ In the next section, dealing specifically with the first triad (Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones—in that order), the author states that “the name ‘cherubim’ means ‘fullness of knowledge’ or ‘outpouring of wisdom’ . . . These names indicate their similarity to what God is.”¹³⁷

Furthermore,

The name cherubim signifies the power to know and to see God, to receive the greatest gifts of his light, to contemplate the divine splendor in primordial power, to be filled with the gifts that bring wisdom and to share these generously with subordinates as part of the beneficent outpouring of wisdom.¹³⁸

St. Dionysius enumerates the characteristics of the top three angelic orders: purity, contemplativeness, and perfection.¹³⁹ The paragraph describing their contemplative nature seems a clear elaboration on the meaning of the name Cherubim, as he parses it.

They are “contemplative” too, not because they contemplate symbols of the senses or the mind, or because they are uplifted to God by way of a composite contemplation of sacred writing, but, rather, because they are full of a superior light beyond any knowledge and because they are filled with a transcendent and triply luminous contemplation of the one who is the cause and the source of all beauty. They are contemplative also because they have been allowed to enter into communion with Jesus not by means of the holy images, reflecting the likeness of God’s working in forms, but by truly coming close to him in a primary participation in the knowledge of the divine lights working out of him. To be like God is their special gift and, to the extent that is allowed them, they share, with a primordial power, in his divine activities and his loving virtues.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 200D-201A, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 160.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 205B, 161-162.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 205C, 162.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 208C-209A, 163-164.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 208C, 164.

The author's theology is clear through his angelology: "The teaching, briefly, amounts to this. It is right and good that the revered Godhead, which in fact is beyond all acclamation and deserves all acclamation, is known and praised by those minds which receive God, as far as possible."¹⁴¹ This capability of knowing God is precisely what Pico seized upon in outlining his angelology and philosophy of spiritual ascension. To summarize, Dionysius the Areopagite (pseudo-Dionysius) described the angelology as accepted within the Christian faith tradition. The Cherubim were part of the top triad of angelic orders, being second to the Seraphim. This enumeration is vastly different than what is described in the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition.

Within the Kabbalah, the Cherubim are considered ninth in the rank of angelic orders (out of ten). One can find evidence of this hierarchical arrangement elliptically alluded to in that crucial Kabbalistic text, *Sefer Ha-Zohar*. In *Zohar* 1:33a, a quotation from Exodus 26:33 concerning the Cherubim of gold that cover the Ark of the Covenant is referred to. *Zohar* translator Daniel Matt's footnotes clarify that the Cherubim represent the union of Tiferet (the sixth and central sphere of the Tree of Life) and Shekinah (the feminine aspect of the divine) and were depicted in sexual embrace. There is also reference to the arousal of the cherub with the Shekinah, Tiferet fully revealing himself. These allusions are leading to the concept that the Cherubim represent the Sephira of Yesod—in between the Shekinah (also known as *Malkut*, the kingdom) and *Tiferet*

¹⁴¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 212C, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Lubheid, 166.

(YHVH, the tetragrammaton, in this case), implying that the Cherubim, even though ninth in rank order, represent the gateway to union with the divine.¹⁴²

Modern Kabbalist David Chaim Smith does a masterful job explaining this highly esoteric symbolism in his 2010 book *The Kabbalistic Mirror of Genesis*. In the following quotation, Smith provides the clearest explanation in print of this important correspondence between the Cherubim and Yesod—the ninth sphere on the Tree of Life.

The last verse of the Eden narrative describes the forces of the mind that separate the Edenic state from ordinary delusion. This illustrates what is encountered within spiritual practice as obscurations are faced. It consists of Cherubim, which are guardian energies of the yetziric realm (the realm of the ruach). The Cherubim are very special yetziric beings. They are directly associated with yesod where the ruach [breath or spirit] and the nefesh [material body and animalistic nature] are integrated as the brit (covenant or circumcision). The removal of the klipot [shells, but barriers or blockages are the implication] of conceptual fixation that reopens the gates of Eden is a “circumcision of the mind.”

The ruach’s realization of the unity of the upper and lower waters depends on the integration of its three central sefirot: daat, tiferet, and yesod. . . the gates of Eden include them all as a composite function. However, all of these functions depend on yesod, and in a sense, the unity of the whole Divine Image depends upon it as well. If yesod serves as a barrier between tiferet and malkut (Eden and Garden), then no unity can be realized whatsoever, but if yesod facilitates that union then the upper and lower waters join in the complete array of the whole of the Image [appearance of creation]. Therefore yesod is literally the gate itself, and its angelic guard has a most important function.

One biblical correspondence between the Cherubim and yesod is in the Holy of Holies of the Temple. In that most sacred of spaces there was an “ark,” a container where the original Torah of Moses and other sacred items were kept. Over the ark, on its cover, were two winged figures of Cherubim made out of a single piece of gold. These two figures were male and female. When the state of the body of Israel was in perfect harmony and the Divine zivug [partnership or union] was being consummated, the Cherubim would be locked in sexual embrace. Conversely, when disharmony and tohu [confusion] manifested they would turn away from each other. Thus they represented the yesod of the entire human realm.

¹⁴² Matt, trans., *Zohar I*, 1:33a, 200-1.

The Cherubim are situated in the east of the garden, which is the aspect of tiferet. It is stated in Exodus that the Shechinah “speaks” through the two Cherubim in the Holy of Holies. Prophets who have the capacity to bind to the Shechinah were said to draw shefa directly from the point at which the Cherubim met. This is a metaphor for binding the mind to the heart . . . At the meeting point of the Cherubim, tiferet (east) becomes bound to malkut (the Garden). Concentrating on this point of union is literally a meditation on the union that draws the upper waters into manifestation.

This inner meaning is alluded to by Abraham Abulafia, the great thirteenth-century mystic. Here he quotes *Exodus* directly and adds commentary. Note that the ark cover is directly aligned with a “tree”:

The Shechinah that dwells on earth speaks to man “from above the ark cover from between the Cherubim” (*Exodus* 25:22). For the primordial matter of the ark’s cover is like the image of a rainbow. The two Cherubim allude to the Shechinah; they are its action and reaction, the male and female. They were forged as a single body with two forms. When they look at each other the Divine Name is between them. All of this was like a tree on the ark cover (*Life of the Future World*).

Some kabbalists place a single Cherub at the gate of Eden, and align this angel with the archangel Metatron. Metatron is the guardian of the Shechinah’s presence in the minds of beings, and is like a gatekeeper in the spiritual realm. This single figure does the job of two Cherubim locked in sexual embrace. In his most esoteric form, Metatron has both male and female aspects. As Metatron oversees the passage of spiritual practitioners into the inner mysteries of realization, many gates are protected or lifted; however, all of these gates are aspects of the gate of Eden. The name Metatron is numerically equivalent to the name of yesod: Shaddai (314). This alignment between the point of union with this angel is incredibly important to kabbalists, and certainly indicates the passage in or out of the Edenic state.¹⁴³

Smith’s explanation, while arcane, lengthy, and dense, is in my opinion, the valid esoteric interpretation of the *Zohar*’s elliptical references to the Cherubim based on Kabbalistic tradition. Smith himself was trained in a Chassidic school of the same lineage as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, so this explanation can be considered authoritative.

¹⁴³ David Chaim Smith, *The Kabbalistic Mirror of Genesis: Commentary on Genesis 1-3* (Glasgow: Daat Press, 2010), 134-135.

There are several key points to reiterate from Smith's narrative, itself a derivative of the oral tradition connected with *Zohar* 1:33a and the commentary by Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (1240-1291). First, the Cherubim are the angelic order depicted on the cover, cast in pure gold, of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:17-22). This leads to the conclusion that it was the Cherubim that not only were guarding the gates to the Garden of Eden according to Genesis 3:24, but also the very tablets given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19-24. Next, the Cherubim represent the sphere of Yesod on the Tree of Life as the "gate" between the spheres of Tiferet and Malkut (referenced here as corresponding with direction of east and the Garden of Eden, respectively). These two Sefirot also correspond with the Tetragrammaton, the divine name YHVH, and the Shekinah, so the "gate" between them can either block or facilitate the sacred marriage, or divine union. The state of this union also relates directly to the state of being of the Jewish people. Smith goes even further: this gate is also the metaphysical location where the mind begins to realize its own function (which could be considered as a stage of self-realization or enlightenment), symbolized and facilitated by the archangel Metatron. Yesod and Metatron are intimately connected through the *gematria* of their names having the same value, as Smith mentions. Further, one of Pico's "Five Conclusions According to Themistius" is 19.2 "I believe that the active intellect that is illuminating only in Themistius is the same as *Metatron* in the Cabala," confirming Pico's understanding of this correspondence.¹⁴⁴ In esoteric exegesis and commentary derived from scripture, the Cherubim have been connected with Yesod in the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition.

¹⁴⁴ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 295.

This same concept of a gate, or mediation, from the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition, was employed by later Christian writers when analyzing angelic appearances in scripture, as S. R. Bosquanet does in his 1871 book *The Successive Visions of the Cherubim Distinguished and Newly Interpreted*.¹⁴⁵ In this work, Bosquanet claims that the angels which appeared in Jacob's dream vision ascending and descending the ladder to heaven were Cherubim.

The angels of God are the blessings of mercy and forgiveness, earned for us and brought to us by the sacrifice and atonement of Christ, and the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit obtained for us thereby. . . The plurality of angels is nothing, in the hieroglyphical form of representation, as the fourfold distinction of the Cherubim afterwards revealed, still signify the one incarnate Saviour, diversely operating. So here they signify the manifold gifts and grace of the one Christ, or the one Spirit. They, as it were, gave to Jacob intelligence of the one angelic mediation. . . The whole hieroglyphic representation therefore signified—mediation between God and man, and the reconcilment of man to God . . . ”¹⁴⁶

Although from a different time, place, and faith tradition, Bosquanet's ideas about the Cherubim and mediation between man and the divine are consistent up to a point with the Kabbalistic tradition. Through the Cherubim's characteristics of mediation and intelligence, Bosquanet also connected them to Jacob's ladder. This is rather like what Pico did in his *Oration*, although he never explicitly stated that Jacob's angels were Cherubim. Bosquanet extends his analysis, discussing the Cherubim being connected with the visions of the prophets and *Revelations* making them remarkably prominent within both Judaism and Christianity compared with other angelic orders. Because of their prevalence in scripture and the associations they have with intelligence and serving as a gateway to the

¹⁴⁵ S.R. Bosquanet, *The Successive Visions of the Cherubim Distinguished, and Newly Interpreted: Showing the Progressive Revelation Through Them of the Doctrine of the Incarnation, and of the Gospel of Redemption and Sanctification* (London: Hatchards, 1871).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 29-30.

divine, the angelic order of the Cherubim were the perfect vehicle for Pico to construct a formula for spiritual ascension.



4. "The Ark Passes Over the Jordan," The Jewish Museum, NYC, James Tissot (1836-1902)

Emulation of Angels



5. "Angel in White," Meister von Mileseva, 1230 (Mileseva Monastery, Republic of Serbia)

In the *Oration*, Pico describes the specific attributes related to orders of angels and asserts that humanity, if it so wills, has the potential to compete with the angels to occupy those lofty places in heaven while still living. His prescription for doing so involves understanding the role of the angelic order and what its life entails and then emulating the attitude and behavior of the angels in order to adjust one's consciousness appropriately. Consideration of Pico's angelology must include the emulation of angels as a crucial aspect. The emulation of angels has a long and distinguished historical pedigree. Also, specific ascetic traditions can be compared and contrasted with Pico's ideas, providing additional insight. Finally, the foundation of Pico's claim that humans can ascend to angelic heights and beyond must be seen in the context of earlier mystical traditions which were concerned with gnostic ascent.

Pico begins his argument by asserting that wherever one's mind is directed, his consciousness follows allowing for a departure from the earthly by focusing first on the intellectual, philosophical, and contemplative aspects of existence. These assertions are the foundation of Pico's argument, intertwined with the scriptural reference to Jacob's Ladder, allowing for the ascension of humans to heights normally reserved for the angels and the divine while still living on earth.

At man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him. If he cultivates vegetable seeds, he will become a plant. If the seeds of sensation, he will grow into a brute. If rational he will come out a heavenly animal. If intellectual, he will be an angel, and a son of God. And if he is not contented with the lot of any creature but takes himself up into the center of his own unity, then, made one spirit with God and settled in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, he will stand ahead of all things. . . If you come upon a philosopher winnowing out all things by right reason, he is a heavenly not an earthly animal. If you come upon a pure contemplator, ignorant of the body, banished to the innermost places of the mind, he is not an earthly, not a heavenly animal; he more superbly is a divinity clothed with human flesh.¹⁴⁷

In the section of the *Oration* after Pico declares that humanity should "fly . . . to . . . the most lofty divinity," he asks, "By what method? Or by doing what? Let us see what they [angels] are doing, what life they are living."¹⁴⁸ He then states, "If we too live that life—for we can—we shall equal their lot."¹⁴⁹ Pico is clearly calling for humans to emulate the attitude and behavior of angels in order to attain the same (or higher) state of being.

Emulation of angels has a long history in Judaism and Christianity, as a way of becoming more pure and holy. Angels were portrayed as in constant praise of God and

¹⁴⁷ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 5-6.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

engaged in contemplation and prayer. Additionally, because angels had no earthly desires, asceticism, specifically avoiding sex, was seen as an angel-like virtue. Priestly virtue was analogous to angelic virtue and ascetic practices became important and seen as emulative of angels during the period of the Second Temple.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, there are Nazarite figures in scripture, such as Samson and Samuel, who did not cut their hair, eat meat, nor drink alcohol.¹⁵¹ In the New Testament, the emphasis on celibacy is pronounced. Examples include those 144,000 saved in the Revelation of John because they were undefiled or chaste.¹⁵² Within the tradition of Syriac Christian asceticism the term for living a life emulative of angels was *angelikos bios*. In addition to celibacy, singing hymns of praise to God and prayer were the central acts characteristic of angelic behavior.¹⁵³ Christian emulation of angels continued into the Middle Ages and spread to the British Isles.

Renewed appeals to use angels as models for a virtuous life on earth rang out with some frequency in the churches of early Anglo-Saxon England, and were a particular feature in the writings of the Northumbrian monk Bede. Those who listened to his sermons or read his biblical commentaries found themselves urged to have angels continually in view, and were reminded of the ways in which corruptible human beings could—and indeed, must—emulate these heavenly beings if they wished one day to join them after the resurrection.¹⁵⁴

This desire to imitate the attitudes and behaviors of angels in an effort to sacralize was widely accepted throughout Christianity, both historically and geographically. Based on

¹⁵⁰ Norman Ricklefs, “An Angelic Community: The Significance of Beliefs About Angels in the First Four Centuries of Christianity” (Sydney: Macquarie University, 2002), 170-1. Accessed August 12, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.14/289574>.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 171-2.

¹⁵² Ibid., 173.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 174-178.

¹⁵⁴ Richard Sowerby, *Angels in Early Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

scripture and writings of clergy, angels were known to praise God in hymns and be celibate and the emulation of angels conveyed a sense of holiness, even to those who may not be ordained.

Pico's focus was slightly different. Rather than a vague promise to ascend at some undetermined time in the future, Pico asserted that humans could actively learn by emulating the angels and thereby ascend to heavenly heights while still living—a clear distinction from the simpler expectations of prior advocates of angelic emulation. Pico specifically calls out the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones as those at the top of the angelic hierarchy that he wishes to emulate.¹⁵⁵ His prescription for angelic emulation is also more thoroughly poetic.

Hence, if, dedicated to an active life, we undertake the care of lower things with a right weighting of them, we shall be made steadfast in the fixed firmness of the thrones. If, being tired of actions and meditating on the workman in the work, on the work in the workman, we are busy with the leisure of contemplation, we shall flash on every side with cherubic light. If by charity we, with his devouring fire, burn for the Workman alone, we shall suddenly burst into flame in the likeness of a seraph. Upon the throne, that is, upon the just judge, sits God, the judge of the ages. He flies above the cherub, that is, the contemplator, and warms him, as if by brooding over him. The Spirit of the lord is borne above the waters—I mean those waters which are above the heavens, the waters which in Job praise the Lord with hymns before daybreak. He who is a seraph, that is, a lover, is in God; and more, God is in him, and God and he are one.¹⁵⁶

In this example, Pico is advocating for the emulation of the identifying characteristics of the angelic orders to eventually unite with the divine. Pico is also specific about the angelic order to be emulated—the Cherubim, because they are associated with the faculty of intelligence, the mind, and the art of philosophy. By emulating the Cherubim, the

¹⁵⁵ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 7-8.

philosopher would be transformed so that emulation of the Seraphim (love of the divine) and Thrones (judicious judgement) would be accomplished successfully and skillfully. Once intelligence is developed along with reason and philosophy, one would be better able to understand themselves and the cosmos. Then love for the divine and correct judgment would naturally flow without impediment bringing the philosopher into a state of unity.

Therefore with his own light the cherub in the middle makes us ready for the seraphic fire, and at the same time illuminates us for the judgement of the thrones. He is the bond of the first minds, the order of Pallas, the ruler over contemplative philosophy. We must first rival him and embrace him and lay hold of him. Let us make ourselves one with him and be caught up to the heights of love. And let us descend to the duties of action, well instructed and prepared.¹⁵⁷

Pico's emulation of angels is for the purpose of ascent while living, to participate in the heavenly realm prior to death as opposed to being pious and waiting until the afterlife. In this aspect, this angelology is akin to mystical and gnostic traditions. In fact, Pico invoked the Jewish *merkavah* (chariot) tradition in the *Oration* when he wrote, "For the more secret Hebrew theology at one time reshapes holy Enoch into an angel of divinity, whom they call *malach hashechina* [sic], and at other times reshapes other men into other divinities."¹⁵⁸ To those familiar with Enoch and the Metatron tradition, this is a clear indication that Pico intended to approach theosis in a philosophic and contemplative manner, not unlike Symeon the New Theologian from the Orthodox Christian tradition.¹⁵⁹ Although his intentions were based on established and traditional modes of religious and mystical expression, Pico's path was more intellectual and philosophical based upon his insights into

¹⁵⁷ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 8.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 5-6. Translator should have used "ha-Shechinah."

¹⁵⁹ McGuckin, "Symeon the New Theologian's Hymns of Divine," 194-7.

the order of the Cherubim, which matched his own innate talents as a philosopher.

Balancing his affinity for intellect, philosophy and transcendence was Pico's syncretic tendency with the stated belief in the materiality of angels.

Chapter V.

Mystical Approaches to Union with the Divine



6. "Virgin and Child," Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium, Jean Foquet, 1450

Pico's approach to divine union can be compared with several other traditions including Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Eastern Orthodox theosis, but since he professed publicly his belief in that the Kabbalah was the original root esoteric tradition, our focus is within Judaism, including *merkavah* (chariot) mysticism and the Kabbalistic *maggid* tradition. Pico names Enoch, who was raised to heaven without dying to become an

angel. “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him.”¹⁶⁰ (Genesis 5:24) Pico references the name *malach ha-shechinah*¹⁶¹—the angel of the dwelling place, or holy presence, reinforcing the idea of divinization or theosis. Although this Enoch tradition that arises from *merkavah* mysticism specifically posits that the mystic is to always maintain a degree of separation from the divine,¹⁶² theosis is an example of a mystical tradition with no such doctrine where union was more fully recognized. Several times, Pico referred to complete union as the ultimate, including when he wrote that a philosopher is an angel, but a pure contemplator is a “divinity clothed with human flesh.”¹⁶³ Or that “He who is a seraph, that is, a lover, is in God; and more, God is in him, and God and he are one.”¹⁶⁴ In these and other instances, it is clear that Pico viewed complete unification with the divine as the pinnacle, matching its perceived place in the hierarchy of all being. Although this specific aspect of Pico’s angelology is not completely congruent with *merkavah* mysticism and the Enoch tradition, the similarities are close and Pico was aware of that as evidenced by his reference.

The concept of the unity of the divine is common to monotheistic religions, and the idea of mystics learning about and trying to experience this unity is also found within religious faith traditions. Adam Afterman’s brilliant study of this subject in his book *“And They Shall Be One Flesh”: On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* explains the

¹⁶⁰ May and Metzger, *Bible RSV*, 7.

¹⁶¹ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 6.

¹⁶² Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 55.

¹⁶³ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

dimensions and subtleties in Jewish mysticism through the ages.¹⁶⁵ In the introduction, Afterman discusses the concept of metaphysical structures that connect man and God (the Tree of Life) and how these concepts allowed for the understanding that the process to attain union was a metaphysical ascent. “Reaching intimacy with God was thus understood in terms of spiritual or mental elevation, a process that leads to forms of communion and union with Him.”¹⁶⁶ In this one sentence, Pico’s approach is validated as having been in accord with Jewish mystical tradition.

Notably, Afterman makes clear that this impulse toward union with the divine originates with mysticism and is not present in biblical or rabbinic Judaism.¹⁶⁷ This tendency was influenced by “the synthesis of Judaism with Platonism and Aristotelianism—first in Philo’s Hellenistic Judaism, and then later developed especially in novel syntheses from the tenth century onwards.”¹⁶⁸ The concept of uniting with God not being originally central to the religion but being introduced into mystical philosophy and practice is a further reminder that no tradition exists in a vacuum and Pico’s syncretic tendencies were already a central part of the Kabbalistic tradition.

In his introduction, Afterman summarizes the very essence of Pico’s syncretic philosophy that united all branches of philosophy with ancient wisdom traditions. The quest was the same—to unite humans with God through a methodical process involving

¹⁶⁵ Adam Afterman, *“And They Shall Be One Flesh”: On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

angels and the interpretation of divine wisdom as inherently connected with the purified and consecrated human intellect.

In most Jewish medieval systems of religious transformation, man was first to unite with mediating beings, erecting the metaphysical ladder leading to the divine. Man must climb the ladder of metaphysical knowledge by transforming into each and every sub-divine mediating entity, usually associated with angels. The crucial final step was the integration into the divine thought or intellect associated many times with God's Wisdom. The Aristotelian classification of divine thought as a unity of "thought as subject" with "thought as object" determined the process of transformation required for such integration. Both Platonic and Aristotelian systems have a unified principle of oneness as their fundamental core; this fact shapes the entire human movement towards what truly exists as a movement from multiplicity to unity, at the apex of the pyramid of being. Religious perfection in medieval Judaism was transformed into a pursuit of God's perfection—his simplicity, his transcendence, and his oneness.¹⁶⁹

Another tradition that comes out of Jewish Kabbalism is that of the Maggid.

Interpreted as a celestial being, or angel, the Maggid served as a counselor or advisor, perhaps not dissimilar from the Christian concept of the guardian angel or the ancient Greek *dæmon*. One of the meditations used to evoke a Maggid is known as *Gerushin* and it was practiced by Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488-1575) of Safed who was a leading expert in Jewish law and author of the recognized Code of Jewish Law (*Sulchan Arukh* (*Set Table*)).¹⁷⁰ "It was on the festival of Shavuot (Pentecost), probably in 1535, that a Maggid first revealed itself to Caro, and the revelations of this Maggid are recorded in a most interesting book, *Maggid Mesharim*."¹⁷¹ In one portion of the text, the Maggid instructs Karo on the manner of practice required to unite with God. "This is what a person must

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷⁰ Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 175-7.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 175-6.

do: He must integrate all of his thoughts toward the fear of God and His worship.”¹⁷² While the object of thought may not be the same as Pico describes, the method is remarkably the same—focusing the mind and all thought away from one’s own body and mind to the heavens. Furthermore, the Maggid goes on to describe this unified state to Karo in the following way:

This is the mystery of Unity, through which a person literally unifies himself with the Creator. The soul attaches itself to Him, and becomes one with Him, so that the body literally becomes a dwelling place of the Divine Presence. This is what the Torah means when it says, “You shall fear God your Lord, and you shall serve Him and attach yourself to Him” (Deuteronomy 10:20). Therefore, my son, complete a perfect Unification. If you do so, then “I will give you a place to walk among those [angels] who stand here” I will make you worth to go to the Land of Israel . . .¹⁷³

These words are, again, remarkably similar in substance and essence to what Pico expressed in the *Oration*. The Maggid says that the “body literally becomes a dwelling place for the Divine Presence”¹⁷⁴ while Pico uses the expression *malach ha-shechina*—the angel of the divine presence and in other quotes he mentions pure contemplators as a divinity clothed in human flesh. This is the exact same concept in varied expression. Note that *Maggid Mesharim* is accepted as a celestial communication received by one of the most respected Jews of his age, written almost forty years after Pico’s murder. This is further evidence that Pico was truly knowledgeable about that which he claimed. These ancient wisdom traditions, Pico’s contemplative mystical philosophy, and Kabbalistic texts written afterward are all in agreement about the method and goal of contemplative mysticism as described in Pico’s writings. The continuity and consistency of ideas

¹⁷² Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 177-8.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 178.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

advocated by Pico was extraordinary, leading to the inevitable conclusion that his opinion on the subjects of philosophy, theology, and ancient wisdom was expert despite his youth and relative inexperience.

Natural Magic

Another aspect of esotericism about which Pico wrote, and bearing on our inquiry into the meaning of his angelology, was natural magic. While certainly to be expected, this presents problems of an interpretational nature because Pico's conception of magic was not operative in the manner normally associated with the subject. "... Renaissance writers . . . used the term magical 'works' to describe different ways of acquiring occult knowledge, sought for contemplative or prophetic reasons more often than for material ends."¹⁷⁵ This is the type of magic which concerned Pico—uncovering hidden knowledge, often in ancient texts as much as in nature, for contemplative ends. "Indeed, Pico apparently viewed any exegetical method that yielded secret wisdom as just as magical as the celestial magic discussed by [scholar Frances] Yates."¹⁷⁶ According to Pico, magic is dual-natured—one aspect is demonic and the other is, "when well explored, nothing but the absolute consummation of the philosophy of nature."¹⁷⁷ He goes on to distinguish his opinion:

Hence the first magic appears as monstrous and harmful as the second, divine and salutary. And especially because the first magic delivers man over to the enemies of God, calls him away from God, this second magic arouses that admiration at the works of God which so prepares that charity, faith, and hope most surely follow. For nothing impels more toward religion and worship of God than assiduous contemplation of the wonders of God.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 128-9.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷⁷ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 26.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

From this excerpted description, Pico's conception of natural magic was perfectly congruent with his advocacy of contemplative philosophy and emulation of angels. The magical aspect allows for the revelation of hidden wisdom in texts and nature that facilitate union with the divine. The magus is seen as the one who unites heaven and earth, a "minister" of nature, a "cosmic priest."¹⁷⁹

The operative side of Pico's magic is best interpreted in terms of the traditional concepts of cosmic fall and redemption . . . Just as the whole universe was corrupted by the fall of man . . . so following his mystical purification *homo magus* receives the power to raise fallen nature with himself . . . "to marry the world" . . . The suggestion is that the operative side of Pico's magic was linked to a general plan for cosmic salvation—a view fitting in perfectly with the eschatological goals of his Vatican debate.¹⁸⁰

It is essential to consider this point because Pico's work is often conflated with his most well-known contemporary in the field, Marsilio Ficino. While their works may have a variety of interstices, in fundamental ways Pico's ideas differ from Ficino's. Primarily in that Ficino's magic was derived from Hermetism, while Pico's was derived from Kabbalism.¹⁸¹ This distinction was and remains a significant aspect of the history of western esotericism.

¹⁷⁹ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 130-2.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 131.

¹⁸¹ Brian P. Copenhaver, "Number, Shape, and Meaning in Pico's Christian Cabala: The Upright *Tsade*, the Closed *Mem*, and the Gaping Jaws of Azazel," in Anthony Grafton, ed. *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 25-30. Also Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007), 84-116.

Chapter VI.

The Continuum of Wisdom and Tradition

Much of Pico's *Oration* is devoted to promulgating the concept of a continuous uninterrupted stream of wisdom that flowed through many traditions and lands, but that ultimately taught the same thing—a philosophy and practices for realizing union with the divine. This concept is often referred to as the *ancient wisdom narrative* or *Platonic Orientalism* by Wouter Hanegraaff, one of the foremost living scholars of western esotericism.¹⁸² Pico's prescription, while superficially different in language and form than any prior tradition because it was based in philosophy, was substantially the same. This becomes evident once later texts are examined in detail. This is especially clear when one considers the tradition which Pico exalted above all others—the Kabbalah.

The *Maggid Mesharim* of Rabbi Joseph Karo of Safed (1488-1575), already mentioned previously in the section on mystical union, is utterly consistent with Pico's philosophy. It must be recognized that the Maggid, or angel, indicated that if one followed the prescribed course—thinking only of God, fearing God, and devotion to the study of the divine law (Torah), that one would make the body a dwelling place of the divine presence, or Shekinah, as Pico espoused in his *Oration*. Additionally, Karo's Maggid told him that he would walk among the angels, or ascend to their level in the divine hierarchy and attain union with the divine, just as Pico described. This description from Karo mirrors Pico's thoughts on the subject without any deviation aside from the context of Judaism. In every

¹⁸² Hanegraaff, "The Revival of Platonic Orientalism."

other significant way, it is exactly the same. This shows a remarkable congruency despite the fact that these words were recorded almost half a century after Pico's death, in a land far from Pico's home, by an individual who was neither a Christian, a philosopher, nor a self-described esotericist, but simply a pious teacher of law and religion.

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760), known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, literally Master of the Good Name, was the founder of the Jewish revival movement known as Chassidut. He also described a similar mystical prescription for union with the divine.

Separate your soul from your body . . . You will then be able to perceive many universes on high . . . When an extraneous thought comes to you . . . you can use that thought itself to bind yourself to G-d all the more . . . When you understand the idea of the thought [that falls into your mind, you can elevate it]. If it involves desire and lust, it has fallen from the Universe of Love; if it is a debilitating phobia, it is from the Universe of Awe; and if it involves pride, it is from the Universe of Beauty. The same is true of all other such thoughts . . . When you bind these thoughts to G-d through love and awe of the Creator, you return them to their Root . . . Each thought can be elevated to the Attribute from which it fell.¹⁸³

In the Baal Shem Tov's description, one can perceive several similarities with Pico's philosophy. First, the concept of separation from the physical body in order to ascend spiritually is required. Of course, this is not referring to a literal separation, but a separation in the mind, divorcing oneself from bodily thoughts and concerns. Next, is the idea that thought itself can be used to connect with transcendent concepts and bind oneself to these higher realms. By elevating one's thoughts, it becomes possible to elevate oneself, precisely as Pico expressed in his *Oration* almost 300 years prior. The Baal Shem Tov was known to be a simple, pious man who was uneducated and it is therefore safe to assume that he not only never read the *Oration*, but likely never even heard of it. Again, this example, like Karo's Maggid, reinforces a spiritual prescription based on a metaphorical separation from

¹⁸³ Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 286.

the physical body and utilizing thoughts to achieve union with the divine. These similarities also point to the idea of a potential common origin point or continuous ancient wisdom tradition that could be interpreted as transcending religious faith traditions and philosophical systems, just as Pico described.

The Baal Shem Tov's grandson, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), was considered an enlightened sage and master of the Kabbalah who also taught and wrote about methods for attaining inner peace and enlightened states of consciousness. There are many sections of his magnum opus, *Likutey Moharan*, that are concerned with how one can use intelligence and thoughts to achieve spiritual purity and live a blessed life. In a notable passage Rebbe Nachman provides some context for his spiritual teachings: "The Jew is created to have *memshalah* (dominion) over the angels."¹⁸⁴ This sounds extraordinarily similar to Pico's assertion that humans had the potential to attain higher levels of heaven than the angels.

In the following example, Rebbe Nachman discussed the nature of the human mind and the importance of thought and intellect which, based on historical precedent, is considered equivalent, but not the same, as angels.

Eternal life belongs solely to the Holy One. For He lives forever. And someone who is encompassed in his root—i.e. in Him—he, too, lives forever. By virtue of his being encompassed in the One, and being one with God, he lives an eternal life like the Holy One. Similarly, perfection belongs solely to God. Other than Him, everything is lacking. But someone who is encompassed in Him [also] possesses perfection.

Now, the quintessence of encompassment, being incorporated in the One, is through knowing Him. As the wise man said: "Were I to know him, I would be him." For principally, man is the intellect. Therefore, wherever the mind is

¹⁸⁴ Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan II*, 1, Moshe Mykoff, trans. (Monsey, NY: Breslov Research Institute, 2008), 6-7.

focused, that is where man's entire being is. Thus when he knows and comprehends Godly knowledge, that is where he is, literally. The more he knows, the more he is encompassed in the root, i.e. in the Holy One.

Further, whatever a person lacks—be it livelihood, children, or health, or any of the other lacks—has entirely to do with a lack of knowledge. And even though there are those who are completely lacking in knowledge and yet possess the best of everything, in truth, whatever they have is nothing at all. The inverse is also true: The person with perfect knowledge who has some lack, in truth, this lack is nothing at all. As our Sages said, “[If] you have acquired knowledge, what are you lacking? But if you are lacking knowledge, what have you acquired?” For principally, lack and perfection are dependent upon knowledge.¹⁸⁵

The idea of controlling thought was explored in detail in Rebbe Nachman's writings so there can be no mistaking its significance; it is the very basis for attaining divine union, just as Pico urged his readers to emulate those angels that represented the faculty of thought—the Cherubim. By emulating the Cherubim, and subsequently the Seraphim and Thrones, one would not only be emulating, but embodying the angel, similar to what Rebbe Nachman described. In the following passage Nachman explains the importance of thought:

Guard your thoughts very carefully, because thought can literally create a living thing. The higher a faculty, the further it can reach. You can kick something with your foot, but you can throw it even higher with your hand. With your voice you can reach even further, calling to someone far away. Hearing reaches further still—you can hear sounds like gunfire from a very great distance. Vision reaches even further: you can see things high in the sky. The higher the faculty, the further it can reach. Highest of all is the mind, which can ascend to the loftiest heights. You must therefore guard your mind and thoughts to the utmost.¹⁸⁶

Nachman extended this idea into methods for avoiding bad thoughts:

¹⁸⁵ Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan*, 21: 11, 12, trans. Moshe Mykoff (Monsey, NY: Breslov Research Institute, 1990), 300-1.

¹⁸⁶ Idem., *Sichot Haran* 46, trans. Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum, accessed on August 12, 2017, <http://www.azamra.org/Essential/thought.htm>.

When a person is besieged by bad thoughts and fantasies, but remains steadfast and strengthens himself to overcome them, the Holy One has great pleasure from this. It is very precious in God's eyes.

This is analogous to kings at times, for a special occasion, would be entertained by allowing creatures to battle one another [for sport]. They would stand and watch, and would greatly enjoy the combat. Similarly, thoughts come from the aspect of *chayot* (creatures). Holy thoughts come from the aspects of pure creatures, while bad thoughts are the aspect of impure creatures. It is Divinely ordained that they be allowed to battle one another. And the Holy One has great pleasure when a person overpowers the impure creatures and defeats them.

The rule is that it is absolutely impossible for a person to have two simultaneous thoughts. Therefore, it is easy to drive away bad thoughts by sitting and doing nothing—i.e., by not thinking that thought, but thinking some other thought; [a thought] of Torah or Divine service or even business. For, no matter what, it is impossible for two thoughts to exist together. As has been explained elsewhere, it is unnecessary to struggle or shake one's head every which way in order to drive away bad thoughts, because this does not help at all. On the contrary, it makes them stronger. Rather, a person should pay no attention to them whatsoever, but continue to engage in what he was doing: Torah, prayer or business. He should not look over his shoulder, at all. In this way [the thought] will pass on its own.¹⁸⁷

Not only does Rebbe Nachman recommend avoiding evil thoughts and forcing oneself to think good thoughts, but he taught that by doing so, one would achieve union with the divine—exactly as Pico's Oration foretold. Rebbe Nachman also taught similar ideas about the body as Pico and the necessity of self-inquiry and correcting perceived faults which, if followed ardently, would allow one to attain union with the divine.

You must include yourself in God's unity, which is the imperative Existence. You cannot be worthy of this, however, unless you first nullify yourself. It is impossible to nullify yourself, however, without Hitbodedut-meditation.

When you meditate and express your spontaneous thoughts before God, you can be worthy of nullifying all desires and all evil traits. You will then be able to nullify your entire physical being, and become included in your Root.

¹⁸⁷ Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, *Likutey Moharan*, 233, trans. Moshe Mykoff (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 2000), 160-3.

The main time to meditate is at night. This is a time when the world is free from mundane concerns. Since people are involved in the mundane by day, you will be held back and confused, so that you will not be able to attach yourself to God and include yourself in Him. Even if you yourself are not so involved, since the world is concerned with worldly vanities, it is difficult for you to nullify yourself.

It is also necessary that you meditate in an isolated place. It should be outside the city, or on a lonely street, or some other place where other people are not found. For wherever people are found, they are involved in the mundane world. Even though they may not be in this place at that time, the very fact that they are usually there can confuse one's meditation, and then one cannot nullify himself and include himself in God.

You must therefore be alone, at night, on an isolated path, where people are not usually found. Go there and meditate, cleansing your heart and mind of all worldly affairs. You will then be worthy of a true aspect of self-nullification.

Meditating at night in an isolated place, you should make use of many prayers and thoughts, until you nullify one trait or desire. Then make use of much meditation to nullify another trait or desire. Continue in such a time and place, proceeding in this manner, until you have nullified all. If some ego remains, work to nullify that. Continue until nothing remains.

If you are truly worthy of such nullification, then your soul will be included in its Root, which is God, the Necessary Existence. All the world will then be included in this Root along with your soul.¹⁸⁸

Considering these formulas of *devkut* (clinging to the divine) from Rebbe

Nachman, one of the foremost exponents of the Kabbalah that ever lived, there can be no doubt that Pico's emphasis on the Cherubim as the crucial order of angels to be emulated before all others is based on the ancient wisdom of this tradition. But Pico laid his philosophy upon a foundation of authentic traditional mysticism, which has been promulgated long afterward and is still considered as the basis of practice for anyone attempting mystical attainment (albeit without Pico's specific focus on one angelic order). This self-purification is crucial to understanding not only Pico's perspective, but mysticism

¹⁸⁸ Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 309-10. Also *Likutey Moharan*, 52, 212-7.

generally. Without subduing the mind and purifying desires, there is little opportunity to rise above the typical human condition which is expressed in many wisdom traditions from antiquity through modern times. Whatever the practice or tradition—whether meditation, repetition of divine names or mantras, visualization exercises, the control of thought and discipline of the mind is required in order to progress beyond typical states of human consciousness.

Chapter VII.

Metatron and Azazel

In the Kabbalistic tradition, the great angels Metatron and Azazel have significant roles. Metatron, among his many titles, is known as “The Angel of the Countenance” and is often believed to be the angel into whom Enoch was transformed after he ascended to heaven without dying in the apocryphal book 3 Enoch. Therefore Metatron is thought to be an exemplar of the potential of humans to rise to the level of angels. Additionally, in Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia’s writings (1240-1291), Metatron was equated with human intelligence.

What takes our intellect from potency to act is an intellect separated from all matter and called by many different names in our language . . . For it is called *hu saro sel aholam* or “he is the prince of the world” and it is “Mattatron prince of the faces,” in Hebrew . . . *mattatron sar appanim* . . . And his real name is just like the name of his master, which is *sadai* . . . And the wise . . . call him . . . *sechel appoel* or “agent intellect” . . . , and he has many other names besides, . . . and he rules over the hierarchy of angels called *hisim* . . . Therefore the intellect or intelligence in our language is called . . . *malach* or “angel” or cherub . . . Therefore our wise men often call him . . . Henoah, and they say that Henoah is Mattatron.¹⁸⁹

In this quotation from Abulafia, it becomes clearer how Pico came to associate the Cherubim with the intellect and how emulating them before all other orders of angels prepared one for spiritual ascent, like Enoch, who became Metatron. This alone demonstrates a direct line of thought that influenced Pico’s statements in the *Oration*. Pico directly mentions Enoch’s transformation to Metatron as he discusses emulation of the

¹⁸⁹ Copenhaver, “The Secret of Pico’s *Oration*,” 78. Also see Copenhaver’s sources: Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 231; Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 88–9.

Cherubim. He makes an even more direct connection in *900 Theses*; as mentioned previously, one of Pico's "Five Conclusions According to Themistius" is 19.2, "I believe that the active intellect that is illuminating only in Themistius is the same as *Metatron* in the Cabala," reaffirming Abulafia's assertion.¹⁹⁰

When considering Metatron being called "agent intellect," the mythopoetic nature of these statements obscures whether this is a simple metaphor or a metaphor demonstrated by an actual being with a name and function. This goes to the heart of Pico's argument, illustrating that when one approaches the process of divine union, fully accurate factual descriptions become more and more difficult because they require a subject that knows and an object to be known. Yet mystical divine union is a unity—meaning that the subject-object dichotomy must collapse and only wisdom remains. Hence, Enoch walked with God and was no more, becoming known as Metatron and interpreted as the intellect which can assist one to recognize—once all understanding, devotion, and judgement is realized—the divine nature of the Self. Moreover, in the *900 Theses* section entitled "Cabalistic Conclusions Confirming the Christian Religion," in thesis 11>10, Pico wrote, "That which among the Cabalists is called Metatron is without a doubt that which is called Pallas by Orpheus, the paternal mind by Zoroaster, the son of God by Mercury, wisdom by Pythagoras, the intelligible sphere by Parmenides."¹⁹¹ This thesis further reinforces the metaphor of Metatron as intellect or mind, equating the concept to five ancient wisdom traditions. In thesis 11>11, we read, "The way in which rational souls are sacrificed by the archangel to God, which is not explained by the Cabalists, only occurs through the

¹⁹⁰ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 295.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 525.

separation of the soul from the body, not of the body from the soul except accidentally, as happens in the death of the kiss . . .”¹⁹² Here Pico expressed the idea that Metatron (the agent intellect) sacrificed rational souls, separating them from the body, similar to the manner expressed in the *Oration* for where he called for humans to abandon the body and the world in order to walk among the angels.

Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia was of the opinion, similarly expressed by Pico, that the mystic must abandon the body and the world in inhabited “in order to be saved from it.”¹⁹³ Abulafia’s mysticism was designed to allow humans to become deathless and thereby be transformed into angels.¹⁹⁴ Pico recognized the inherent dangers present for one who engaged with these heavenly forces, as in thesis 11>13: “Whoever operates in the Cabala without the mixture of anything extraneous, if he is long in the work, will die from *binsica* [the death of the kiss], and if he errs in the work or comes to it unpurified, he will be devoured by Azazel through the property of judgement.”¹⁹⁵ This thesis seems to primarily express the idea that without proper purification, required, as he had written, in the *Oration*, would result in calamity. However, due to the dual difficulty in understanding both the arcana of Kabbalism and the complex linguistics of Pico’s philosophy, this thesis seems to have been conflated with the speculative versus operative nature of working with the Kabbalah. As stated previously, Pico’s philosophical engagement with the Kabbalah was speculative and did not advocate, at least superficially, for any practical or magical

¹⁹² Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 525.

¹⁹³ Copenhaver, “The Secret of Pico’s *Oration*,” 77.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 525.

(thaumaturgical) work. Yet, a prominent scholar with expertise in this subject (Copenhaver) argues that is precisely what Pico was esoterically implying with this assertion when considered with Pico's other theses concerning magic and the Kabbalah. In his analysis of thesis 11>13, Copenhaver argues,

Frightful demons lurk where angels sing, which is why Pico needs the proper technique to protect his ascent to the One. A righteous theurgy, cleared of demonic snares, will summon the good angel Metatron to fight his fallen cousins, even the sinister Samael, the Cabalist counterpart of Satan. One use of practical Cabala, then, is for counter-magic against unclean spirits . . . In one way, then, practical Cabala was a defense, to invoke the mighty Metatron as protection against Azazel, the malign demon who invented magic and waited to devour any who used that art wrongly.¹⁹⁶

Additionally, Copenhaver argues, based on solid evidence, that Pico embedded esoteric symbolism within his work to allude to even deeper mysteries and meanings that would only be apprehensible to those who already knew the Kabbalah.

The secrets of the sacred letters shape the numerological architecture of Pico's *Conclusiones*, whose terse assertions are often obscure in themselves and connect with one another even more obscurely. To be worth reading, Pico believed that he had to write in riddles, and the *Oration* describes his Cabala in just such teasing terms, as "divine matters that are published and not published." Pico intended his account of Cabala to be enigmatic, requiring his hearers to make what they could of the puzzles set for them.¹⁹⁷

This is Copenhaver's justification for his argument that there were mysteries in Pico's *Oration* greater than readily apparent to the superficial reader—which does seem to be an accurate assessment. The possibility that Pico actually thought he would be performing a magical operation during the disputation of his *900 Theses*, one that required explicitly

¹⁹⁶ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," 77-8.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 77.

calling upon Metatron for protection from Azazel may be an overreach. Yet it seems to be Copenhaver's conclusion:

Like Ficino, he wished to base a learned and beneficial occultism on the remains of ancient wisdom, sacred and secular, so the threat of dying in the jaws of Azazel was a matter of special risk for him. The aid that he sought from Metatron, however, was not just to protect his life. What he wanted was the good ecstatic death, the death of the kiss, that frees the soul from the body for its angelic destiny and divine union. The great risk in Pico's project was not bodily death but loss of the soul from the theurgic excesses of the Cabalists, who dared not only to call spirits down from heaven and turn humans into angels but even to change the configuration of the Godhead by causing the Sefirot to rearrange themselves.¹⁹⁸

While it is likely, based on a close reading of Pico's *Oration* and *900 Theses*, that Pico intended spiritual ascent as a result of his public disputation, the proposition that he saw this as a magical operation requiring the explicit summoning of angelic forces is not in character with his presentation of a philosophy that regarded theurgy and speculative use of the Kabbalah as distinctly different from the operative Kabbalism that would have evoked angels and provided protection for the practitioner.

In fact, when addressing this very question, prompted directly by Copenhaver's assertion, Farmer is precise in his refutation: "Nothing in Pico's text suggests such a spectacular reading."¹⁹⁹ Copenhaver's argument hinges on the original number of theses in the section on Cabalism numbering seventy-two—the same number as the three-letter names of God used by Cabalists. But the final text only had seventy-one theses, which seems to present a challenge to any argument in favor of this specific section of the text being intended as a "talismán."²⁰⁰ Copenhaver is consistent in his assertions, which

¹⁹⁸ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," 78.

¹⁹⁹ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 516.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

admittedly seem accurate in some contexts, that Pico has hidden the secret meanings of his intention within his texts so that only those with expertise in the subject are able to decipher the deeper level(s) of meaning. Yet Farmer describes other examples, for instance in *Heptaplus*, where Pico denounces the use of talismans for angelic evocation.²⁰¹

Additionally, in Pico's *Apology* and *Oration*, Farmer notes that the only use of numbers and letters in a magical sense are related to *gematria* (the derivation of numerical values from Hebrew letter and word combinations) which is typically a more contemplative mode of Kabbalistic practice, as opposed to angelic evocation or theurgy.²⁰²

Finally, Pico's entire philosophy is based upon the use of intelligence and the use of one's mind to better understand the self, the world, the divine, and how to act. While there were very esoteric aspects to this tradition, the prescription for divinization of the individual is fairly straightforward as presented in Pico's *Oration*. This theurgic formula is entirely consistent with antecedent Jewish Kabbalism as well as that which came after Pico and would, if successful, result in the indwelling of the divine presence. But nowhere is there any indication, secret or otherwise, that Pico's intention was to literally evoke Metatron for this purpose, nor as a protection from Azazel. Despite Copenhaver's successful arguments in demonstrating hidden aspects in the *Oration*, the idea that Pico was theurgically evoking specific angels remains questionable. However, one can see how it might be a tempting line of inquiry. Pico's philosophy and his intention to dispute his *900 Theses* publicly could very well be perceived as philosophy in action. Since Pico's philosophical system attempted to unite all branches of philosophy, religion, and ancient wisdom traditions, it

²⁰¹ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 516.

²⁰² Ibid., 516-7.

would not be unreasonable to imagine that had his disputation taken place, he would have perceived it as a unification of these seemingly disparate areas of knowledge, as well as potential unification of the disputer and that which would typically be perceived as separate—all others, the world, and the divine.

Chapter VIII.

Jacob's Ladder

The original biblical verses that dealt with Jacob's dream of the angels ascending and descending differs only superficially from Pico's description in the *Oration*. First, from the biblical narrative, it is possible to see that the emphasis of the story is not so much the angels, but the Lord who speaks in Jacob's dream from above the ladder on which the angels are moving. Next, from Jacob's perspective, it seems his focus was also not the angels ascending and descending as the sanctification of the physical location where this dream vision occurred.

Jacob left Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place, and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the Good of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it." And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:10-17)²⁰³

According to some sources, these angels depicted in Jacob's dream vision are of the order of the Cherubim reconciling or mediating between God and man.²⁰⁴ In the dream, these

²⁰³ May and Metzger, *Bible RSV*, 34-5.

²⁰⁴ Bosquanet, *The Successive Visions of the Cherubim*, 29-31.

Cherubim are undefined and no physical description is provided allowing for later interpretation.²⁰⁵ Pico took advantage of this lack of definition in the biblical source text as demonstrated by his use of this passage in his *Oration*. After consulting a number of Christian sources regarding the Cherubim, including St. Dionysius and the Apostle St. Paul, Pico turns to the patriarch Jacob.²⁰⁶

And lest our Christians be insufficient for us, let us consult the patriarch Jacob, whose image flashes forth, carved in the seat of glory. That very wise father will give us advice by showing himself asleep in the lower world and awake in the upper. But his advice will be given figuratively; that is the way all things happen there. A ladder stretching from the lowness of earth to the heights of heaven and divided by the succession of many steps, with the Lord sitting at the top: the angels, contemplating, climb, by turns, up and down the steps. But if we who are in pursuit of an angelic life must try to do this same thing, I ask, who can touch the ladder of the Lord with dirty feet or unwashed hands? As the mysteries put it, it is sacrilegious for the impure to touch that which is pure. But what are these feet, and what are these hands? Naturally, the feet of the soul are that most despicable portion which alone rests upon matter as upon the earth, I mean the nutritive and the food-taking power, kindling-wood of lust and teacher of voluptuous softness. As for the hands of the soul, we might as well have spoken of anger, which struggles as a defender for appetite and, like a robber under the dust and sunshine, carries off the things which will be squandered by the appetite, which is dozing away in the shade. But, so as not to be hurled back from the ladder as profane and unclean, let us wash these hands and these feet in moral philosophy as in living water—that is, the whole sensual part wherein the allurements of the body reside, the allurements from which, they say, the soul gets a twisted neck, while being held back. But, if we want to be the companions of the angels moving up and down Jacob's ladder, this will not be enough, unless we have first been well trained and well taught to move forward duly from rung to rung, never to turn aside from the main direction of the ladder, and to make sallies up and down. When we have attained that by means of the speaking or reasoning art, then, besouled by a cherub's spirit, philosophizing along the rungs of the ladder of nature, and penetrating through everything from center to center, we shall at one time be descending, tearing apart, like Osiris, the one into many by a titanic force; and we shall at another time be ascending and gathering into one the many, like the members of Osiris, by an Apollonian force;

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 32.

²⁰⁶ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 8-10.

until finally we come to rest in the bosom of the Father, who is at the top of the ladder, and are consumed by a theological happiness.²⁰⁷

Pico's interpretation of Jacob's dream vision is purely from the perspective of the emulation of the angels on the ladder—the Cherubim. He sees humans as angels, capable of moving up and down this ladder to heaven while still living. This perspective, coupled with his knowledge of and admiration for the tradition of the Kabbalah evokes the correlation between Jacob's ladder and the central glyph of this tradition—the Tree of Life. In Kabbalistic tradition, the Tree of Life with its ten Sephirot, or spheres, connected by thirty-two paths by which the human consciousness can ascend to heights of wisdom is similar in concept to Jacob's ladder and has been interpreted as such by the likes of Maimonides. In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains that Jacob's ladder connects the “waters of ignorance” to the place of “higher beings”²⁰⁸ implying that the ascent is one of consciousness, hence the connection to the Tree of Life which is, in one form, a metaphysical map of human consciousness.

In his study of Pico's *Oration*, Copenhaver observes that the very language used by Pico in the quotation above secretly references two works, *Gates of Justice* and *Gates of Light*, by Joseph Gikatilla (1248-1305), mentioned earlier, a Spanish Kabbalist and student of Abraham Abulafia.²⁰⁹ In these works, Gikatilla connected the Hebrew patriarchs with spheres on the Tree of Life and Copenhaver makes the point that Pico had at least one of

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁰⁸ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, M. Friedlander, trans. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1919), 166.

²⁰⁹ Copenhaver, “The Secret of Pico's *Oration*,” 68-9.

these works translated for him by Flavius Mithradates.²¹⁰ Copenhaver goes further, and correctly points out that this metaphor of Jacob's ladder as the Tree of Life was no recent construction.

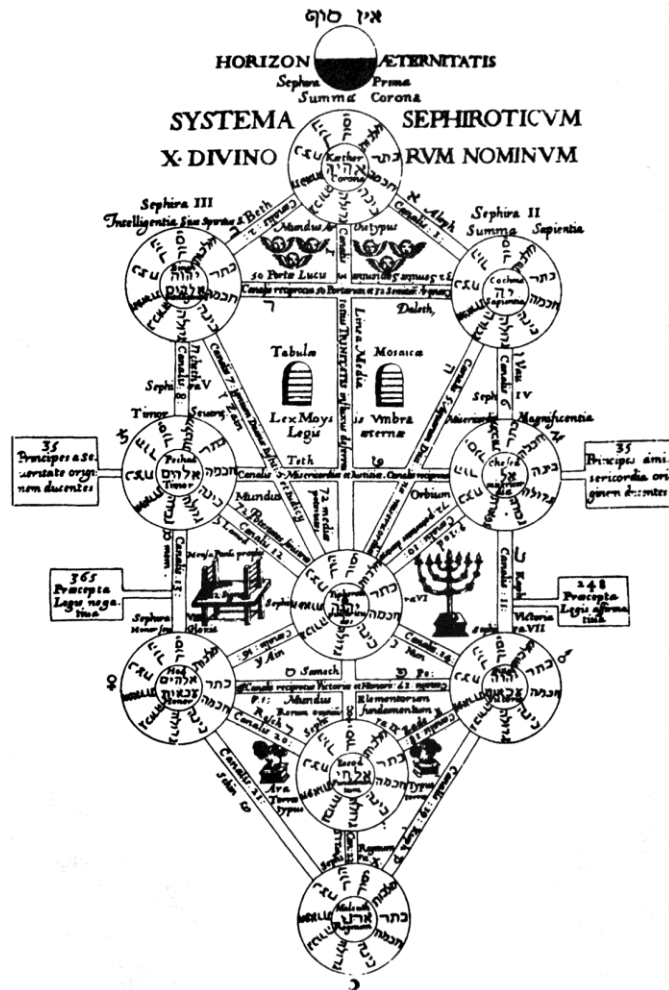
When Pico writes that Jacob's "image is carved in the seat of glory," he is using a Cabalist metaphor (*galaph*, carving) for the Sefirotic emanation of divinity out of its hidden depths, and he is describing the patriarch's privileged position among the *Sefirot*. Jacob's theosophic primacy gave Pico reason to put him first among the biblical elders who show the way to the Cherubic life. Since Pico's goal was to climb "to the top of the ladder in the bosom of the Father," the direct route from Jacob's central place to the Sefirotic summit—where a Cherub rides the chariot—was an attractive path. On these points, Pico could have learned from the earliest work of Cabala, called the *Bahir*, from earlier *midrashim*, as well as from Gikatilla and, directly or indirectly, from the *Zohar*.²¹¹

Essentially, what Pico is describing through his interpretation of the biblical verses through a Cabalistic lens is a pathway to ascend and descend the Tree of Life by emulating that order of angels which had the same capability—the Cherubim. Because the Cherubim were the order of angels that specifically correspond with the faculty of intelligence, it was a natural extension for Pico to formulate his philosophy to utilize the intellect as the key aspect of human nature by which to gain a foothold on the ladder, or tree. Additionally, by its nature of having a universal aspect, similar to beingness itself, meant that intellect was not just individuated, or confined to individual beings, but that all partook of it and thereby it was the most suitable aspect of human nature that would permit this ascension process that Pico described in his *Oration*.

²¹⁰ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," 68-70.

²¹¹ Ibid., 70.

Angelic Hierarchy in Relation to the Tree of Life



7. The Tree of Life, engraving, Athanasius Kircher (*Edipus Aegyptiacus*, 1652)

The question may arise, what is the traditional Christian arrangement of the hierarchy of orders of angels? Considering the hierarchy that Pico elaborated upon in his *Oration*, the Seraphim were first, Cherubim in the middle, and Thrones were third. This arrangement is standard from St. Dionysius throughout the Christian tradition. In the *900 Theses*, Pico lists the orders of angels using a combinatorial method that requires the reader to consider both Jewish and Christian traditions. In Judaism, the orders of angels are

inconsistent, but often the Cherubim are in the ninth position, such as in *Mishne Torah* by Moses Maimonides.²¹² In the *900 Theses*, the nine hierarchies of angels are given in thesis 28.2: “Cherubim, Serafim, Hasmalim, Haiot, Aralim, Tarsisim, Ofanim, Tefsarim, Isim.”²¹³ Farmer notes that Pico provides only nine orders of angels in order to correspond with Pseudo-Dionysius’ nine orders of Christian angels.²¹⁴ He also notes that the transliteration of the angelic order names from Hebrew don’t match the supposed source material in spelling or rank.

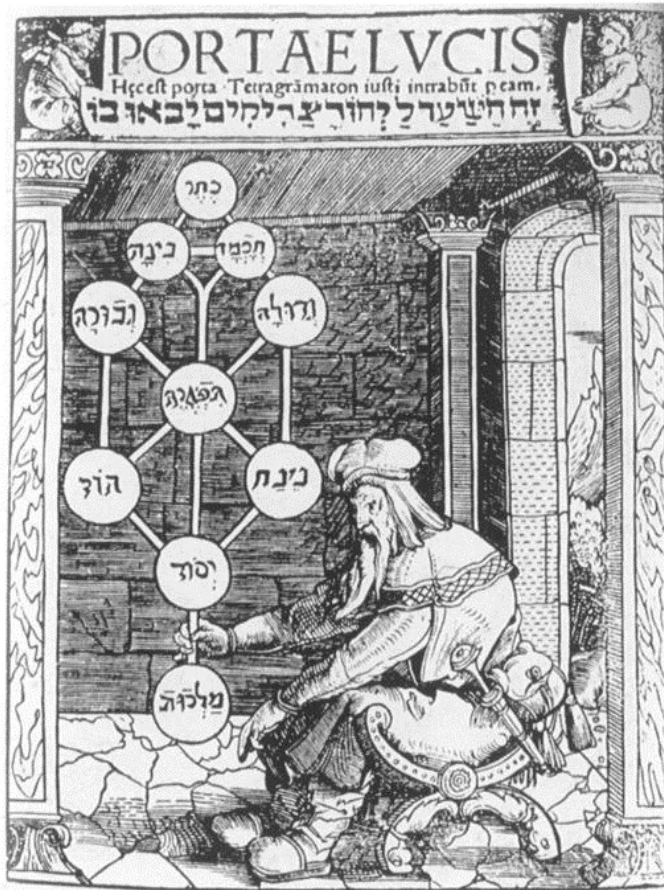
Two features of Pico’s angelic orders require further analysis. The first is inherent to one of the central foci of this thesis, namely, the replacement of Seraphim with Cherubim as the top level angelic hierarchy. Speculatively speaking, this change is symbolic of the capability of the Cherubim, interpreted as intellect by Pico, to reach any level—even higher than other angels, similar to the way in which he believed that humans could achieve a divine union by emulating the Cherubim as stated in his *Oration*. In addition, Pico combined the Hebrew and Christian angelic order hierarchies so as to represent both—Hebrew in name and Christian in numeration, with the modification of the Cherubim at the top. This, like all of Pico’s philosophy, sought to syncretize the two arrangements in order to unite religious, philosophical, and wisdom traditions.

²¹² Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), 336.

²¹³ Pico della Mirandola, *900 Theses*, 347.

²¹⁴ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 346.

Jacob's Ladder and the Tree of Life



8. Tree of Life image from the Latin edition of Joseph Gikatilla's *Gates of Light* (1516)

Another difficulty in reconciling the hierarchy of the angelic orders is that its location within the hierarchy or list determines the angelic order's correspondence to, or location at a particular *Sephira*, or sphere on the Tree of Life. It is normative in Kabbalah to have hierarchies correspond with spheres of the tree (and sometimes the paths between the spheres as well) and angelic orders are no exception. By naming and ordering the angelic hierarchy as thesis 28.2 of his *900 Theses*, Pico essentially declared the associative correspondences of angelic orders with the Sephiroth of the Tree of Life—at least one

conception of it. This assertion can be proven by the manner in which Kabbalistic tradition, both before and after Pico, supports associating angels and angelic orders with spheres of the Tree; additionally, scholars also see allusions to the Tree of Life within Pico's own writing, meaning that his proposed list of the hierarchy of angelic orders should be considered in a similar manner.

According to one set of correspondences, the Cherubim were thought to inhabit or correspond with the sphere of Chokmah,²¹⁵ or wisdom, which very much is in line with the idea that the cherubim represent human intellect of a universal nature. Just as thought is not restricted from rising to the heights of sublime glory and plunging to depths of inhuman depravity, these angels were likewise not restricted. This location for the Cherubim is also in accord with St. Dionysius' and Christian tradition's conception of the correct hierarchy of angelic orders. According to other sources, the third sphere, known as *Binah*, or understanding, is sometimes interpreted as intelligence,²¹⁶ which is also in accord with Pico's conception in the *Oration*, yet neither Pico, nor any other source seems to place the Cherubim in this sphere.

In the Jewish tradition, the Cherubim correspond with the ninth Sephira—Yesod, the foundation. When considering these two ordering schemes together—the Christian, where the Cherubim are second and the Jewish, where the Cherubim are ninth, along with Pico's notable modification—moving the Cherubim to the first position, the allusion to the upward movement is completely congruent with Pico's assertion in the *Oration*. The older

²¹⁵ Joscelyn Godwin, *The Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, Inc., 1992), 450.

²¹⁶ Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 532.

Jewish tradition has the Cherubim in the ninth sphere, one up from the bottom. The pre-Christian and Christian traditions have the Cherubim in the second sphere, one down from the top. When considered as a temporal progression from Judaism to Christianity, the Cherubim ascend from the ninth to the second sphere. Pico places the Cherubim in the first sphere, however, a clear vertical line from the ninth.

If religious and philosophical traditions were viewed as aspects of a continuum that evolves over time, as philosopher F.W.J. Schelling posits in his treatise on the deities of Samothrace,²¹⁷ then Pico's scheme is analogously an evolutionary progression whereby the Cherubim ascend from the bottom portion of the Tree of Life all the way to the top. This movement in temporal and metaphysical space corresponds exactly to Pico's explanation—the Cherubim are the angelic order that humans must emulate so that they can ascend metaphysically. While this is not stated explicitly in his *Oration*, the allusions to this scheme are observable and familiar in light of Pico's thesis on the hierarchy of angelic orders in his *900 Theses*.

Pico not only knew of the correlation between Jacob's ladder and the Tree of Life specifically via Joseph Gikatilla's *Gates of Light*,²¹⁸ but his entire philosophy of spiritual ascension was based upon this well-known Kabbalistic metaphor. To be sure, Pico's interpretation was singularly his own, yet it echoed ideas expressed by such renowned Kabbalists like Gikatilla who preceded Pico, as well as those who came after. Because this aspect of Pico's philosophy, which arguably was most important because it was highlighted

²¹⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, *Schelling's Treatise on "The Deities of Samothrace,"* trans. Robert F. Brown (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 23-4.

²¹⁸ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," 69.

so prominently in his *Oration*, was grounded in authentic tradition, there can be no doubt that Pico held the Kabbalah in the highest esteem and used it as a component of his philosophical system designed to raise humans to union with the divine.

Gikatilla's use of the Tree of Life to classify beings (in this case the patriarchs) in an elliptical manner is not uncommon, and provides real examples of hierarchical arrangements employing the Tree of Life from the thirteenth century. In Copenhaver's analysis, he notes that Gikatilla's *Gates of Light* arranged the Jewish patriarchs in "theosophical space" on the Tree of Life.²¹⁹ In the *The Great Parchment*, which may have immediately preceded Pico's era or perhaps been contemporary, the author assigned prominent archangels and angels to specific Sephirot.²²⁰ In eighteenth century Poland, the Maggid of Mezritch, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, described meditative states as corresponding to the Sephirot²²¹—which is a direct connection between the manner in which angelic orders may correspond with a Sephira. States of consciousness can simultaneously correspond to the same Sephira, thereby building a related, but heretofore unseen bridge between states of consciousness and angelic orders. This is a crucial point because, in a glancing backward manner, it now becomes possible to discern the logic underlying Pico's connection between angelic orders and aspects of human consciousness.

²¹⁹ Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*," 69.

²²⁰ *The Great Parchment*, ed. Giulio Busi et al., 28-9.

²²¹ Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 300-1.

Implications for Subsequent Angelologies



9. Illustration of Concentric Sephiroth and Corresponding Angelic Orders from *A Treatise on Angel Magic*, Mss6482, The British Library (circa late 17th century)²²²

With regard to Pico's syncretism of the Jewish and Christian angelic orders, his influence on the historical development of western esotericism must be considered. The discrepancies between the different names and numbering of the angelic orders according

²²² Adam McLean, ed., *A Treatise on Angel Magic: Being a Complete Transcription of Ms. Harley 6482 in the British Library* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1990), 24.

to either the Jewish or Christian faith tradition were never fully reconciled despite Pico's thesis. Instead, what developed was an even more curious syncretism whereby these orders were mixed and both Jewish and Christian would end up being considered by a practitioner simultaneously. This is illustrated in the image at the beginning of this section, where Cherubim are listed as corresponding with the sphere of Chokmah, or wisdom, second from the outside while simultaneously listed as being in the ninth sphere of the Yesod, second from the center.²²³ This arrangement was originally propagated in Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, perhaps the single most significant textual source of western esotericism. In book II, chapter XII, Agrippa mentions the Cherubim correspond with the Starry Heaven (Chokmah) and the cogitative faculty.²²⁴ In book III, chapter X, Agrippa expounds on the Sephirot in this chapter describing "Divine Emanations." His description of Chokmah is as follows:

The second name is *Iod* or *Tetragrammaton* joined with *Iod*; his numeration is *Hochma*, that is Wisdom, and signifies the Divinity full of Ideas, and the first begotten, and is attributed to the Son, and hath his influence by the order of the Cherubins, or that the Hebrews call *Orphanim*, that is Forms or Wheels; and from thence into the starry heaven, where he fabricateth so many figures as he hat Ideas in himself, and distinguisheth the very chaos of the creatures, by a particular intelligence called *Raziel*, who was the ruler of Adam.²²⁵

It is clear that Agrippa is syncretizing the Jewish and Christian angelic hierarchies by naming the cherubim as located in this sphere, but saying that the Hebrews call this order Ophanim instead. A similar, though reversed pattern occurs in the description of the ninth sphere, Yesod.

²²³ McLean, *A Treatise on Angel Magic*, 24.

²²⁴ Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, ed. Donald Tyson, trans. James Freake (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2006), 285.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 468.

The ninth name is called Sadai, that is Omnipotent, satisfying all, and Elhai, which is the Living God; his numeration is Iesod, that is Foundation, and signifieth a good understanding, a covenant, redemption and rest, and hath his influence through the order of Angels, whom the Hebrews name Cherubim, into the sphere of the Moon, causing the increase and decrease of all things, and taketh care of the genii, the keepers of men, and distributeth them; his intelligence is Gabriel, who was the keeper of Joseph, Joshua, and Daniel.²²⁶

Thus, while Pico's placement of the Cherubim at the top of the Tree of Life may be seen as idiosyncratic in the light of Christian angelology, in light of the methods used by Jewish Kabbalists it is not without rationale or a sort of logical internal consistency. While it might be argued that there is a general equivalency being proposed between Christian and Hebrew terms for angelic orders, it would be more logical to assume a situation where both are accounted for in the event that the Hebrew name may be accurate or more useful at any given time than the Christian, or vice-versa. This provided practitioners with a workable framework that accounted for most of the accepted parameters of angelic hierarchical arrangements.

The observable and remarkable combination of aspects of related, but separate faith traditions is characteristic of Pico's syncretic philosophy which allows one to appreciate the various aspects and levels of meaning both granularly and comprehensively, using linguistic keys. This tendency proliferated from Pico with regard to his treatment of the hierarchy of angelic orders, but more generally overall as a hallmark of western esotericism that developed both during and after the Renaissance.

Agrippa, author of perhaps the most influential occult text in the west, one who could rightly be called a disciple of Pico, adopted and spread the syncretic view. In chapter X of Book III, Agrippa begins by informing the reader that although God is one in

²²⁶ Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 469.

essence, “. . . in him are many divine powers . . . which the philosophers of the gentiles call gods, the Hebrew masters numerations, we name attributes.”²²⁷ Because of this syncretism, all systems of philosophy, religion, and magic can become accessible.

Therefore it is meet to know the sensible proprieties, and perfectly to intellectualize them by the way of more secret analogy; whosoever understandeth truly the Hymns of Orpheus and the old magicians, shall find that they differ not from the Cabalistical secrets and orthodox traditions; for whom Orpheus call Curetes and unpolluted gods, Dionysius names Powers; the Cabalists appropriate them to the numeration Pahad, that is to the divine fear: so that which is En Soph in the Cabala, Orpheus calleth Night; and Typhon is the same with Orpheus, as Zamael in the Cabala.²²⁸

This is precisely the same syncretism that Pico espoused in his *900 Theses* and *Oration* more than forty years earlier. Agrippa not only is furthering Pico’s philosophical doctrine, but fully fleshed it into a living magical system with Kabbalism at its core. In chapter XVII of book III, entitled “Of These According to the Opinion of the Theologians,” Agrippa goes into even greater detail about the angelic hierarchies and their names and numerations based on the Christian and Jewish traditions. The chapter begins with Agrippa declaring that the Christian theologians and St. Dionysius classified the supercelestial angels in the top hierarchy—Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones—“. . . the first in the goodness of God; the second in the essence of God, as the form; the third in the wisdom.”²²⁹ According to the Kabbalists, Agrippa states that the place of the Cherubim is “The ninth and lowest . . . by which God *Sadai* createth mankind.”²³⁰

²²⁷ Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 467.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid., 505.

²³⁰ Ibid., 506.

Despite a lack of clear and explicit reasoning for the significant discrepancies in the hierarchies of angelic orders in these two interrelated faith traditions, it seems that Pico is consciously calling our attention to it in an elliptical manner. Just as Enoch was transformed into “The Angel of the Presence,” filled with the spirit of God, Pico seems to be telling us that each one of us individually has the same capacity to storm heaven in order to disrupt and reconfigure what seems to be an established divine hierarchy.

Chapter IX.

Conclusion



10. Stained glass portrait, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Church of San Francesco, near Pisa, Italy

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's legacy as one of the most remarkable and intellectually vital philosophers of the Renaissance has long been well-established. Yet his knowledge and understanding of the Kabbalah, intimate to the point that his philosophy was supported by its structure and his arguments were modelled upon it, is a reality becoming ever clearer to scholars. Pico's angelology and prescription for gnosis and theosis

via emulation of angels, specifically the Cherubim, was fully aligned with the ancient wisdom narrative of Platonic Orientalism that he espoused, but more particularly the Jewish Kabbalah. Pico was also able to syncretize philosophical and religious systems in order to produce a holistic vision of all creation. With his syncretic angelology, he managed to combine Jewish and Christian systems of angels into a single coherent whole that directly mirrored his assertions about the potential for humanity to not only walk among the angels, but even to surpass them and rise to greater heights.

After years spent researching and writing about Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, I'm left with mixed thoughts about the great philosopher. On one hand, his desire to appreciate the particulars and paradoxes of creation while simultaneously viewing it in all its holistic unity was a worthy endeavor; however, the surety of his claims and the outlandish linguistics necessary to make his schema work do tax the imagination and demand a level of credulity that is often hard to sustain.

In the end, it is my belief that Pico must be remembered for his insistent and majestic *Oration*, in which he asserted the vital importance of the ancient wisdom traditions and their teachings. He demonstrated therein that humanity's desire to unite with the divine was not only possible, but had been the very purpose of ancient wisdom traditions and philosophies, regardless of time or place. Pico brought this recognition back into the public consciousness, thereby conceiving an entire movement devoted to esoteric study and practice known as Christian Cabalism. In turn, this movement gave birth to all of western esotericism in its myriad forms. Pico provided a path to transcendence and union that presaged not only the Reformation and the Age of Revolution, but arguably played a role in the development of alternative spirituality in the west more generally. This ignition of

philosophy and desire for gnosis has animated the lives of many spiritual aspirants and seekers in subsequent centuries, this author included.

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