

# Hermeticism: Rise and Fall of an Esoteric System: Part I

John F. Nash

---

## Summary

What we now know as Hermeticism was born when texts appeared, early in the Common Era, believed to contain revelation from the god Thoth/Hermes/Mercury and teachings of the ancient Egyptian priesthood.

Taking an historical approach, this article explores the growing interest in Hermeticism in the Middle Ages and even greater interest during the Renaissance. The Hermetic texts were thought to prophesy the coming of Christ—or possibly the renewal of Christianity by the incorporation of elements of Egyptian religion. For several centuries Hermeticism—with a strong basis in talismanic magic and significant emphasis on astrology and alchemy—was the dominant system of esotericism in Christian Europe.

Part I explores the evolution of Hermeticism from its origins in antiquity through its “golden age,” which came to a close with the execution of Giordano Bruno in 1600. Part II, which will appear in the next issue, continues the story by examining specific applications of Hermeticism, its decline in the mid-17th century, and the revival of interest in modern times.

## The Hermetic Texts

During the period from about 200 BCE to 300 CE, esoteric texts attracted attention in the Greco-Roman world. They found fertile ground in the cultural environment of late Platonism, which had already taken on a religious-mystical dimension that would play out over time in the Essene and rabbinic schools of Judaism; in pagan and Christian Gnosticism; and, by the end of the period, in Neoplatonism. Exotic ideas, beliefs, and religious practices were valued by the intelligentsia of the Roman Empire. Well-to-do Greeks and Romans made

pilgrimages to Egypt, and sometimes to other parts of the Middle East, to savor ancient wisdom and religious rituals.

Apocalyptic and “Wisdom” literature emerged in Hellenic Judaism and was incorporated into the Greek Septuagint—though not in the Hebrew Bible approved by the Sanhedrin. The *Books of Enoch* supposedly described mystical experiences of the biblical prophet Enoch, son of Jared and great-grandfather of Noah.<sup>1</sup> Kabbalistic texts were believed to preserve oral teachings from Moses or even Abraham.<sup>2</sup> The *Sibylline Oracles* presented a mixture of classical mythology and Judeo-Christian sacred stories. The *Chaldean Oracles* claimed to present the teachings of Zoroaster. Finally, and of concern to us here, the so-called Hermetic texts professed to communicate the secret wisdom of the ancient Egyptian priesthood.

That wisdom was attributed to the Egyptian god Thoth. Depicted in art as a man with the head of an ibis, he was the scribe of the gods, his long beak suggestive of a quill. Thoth allegedly gave his countrymen their laws and bestowed on humanity the gifts of language and writing. Writing clearly brought great benefits, but it was not universally welcomed. King Thamus complained to the god: “[T]his discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in

---

## About the Author

John F. Nash, Ph.D., is a long-time esoteric student, author, and teacher. Two of his books, *Quest for the Soul* and *The Soul and Its Destiny*, were reviewed in the Winter 2005 issue of the *Esoteric Quarterly*. His latest book, *Christianity: The One, the Many*, was reviewed in the Fall 2008 issue. Further information can be found in the advertisements in this issue and at <http://www.uriel.com/>.

the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories."<sup>3</sup> Then, in ancient Greece, the Olympian god Hermes, son of Zeus, became identified with Thoth. Upon the Hellenic conquest of Egypt, in the fourth century BCE, the Egyptian Thoth became Hermes. Eventually the Romans identified their messenger-god Mercury with Thoth/Hermes, and the three gods were conflated into a single multicultural deity.

Most important of the Hermetic texts were the *Corpus Hermeticum* and a companion book, the *Asclepius*. Less well-known was *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*. Authorship of all three was credited to "Hermes Trismegistus" ("Thrice-Great Hermes"). Much of the material was formatted as teacher-disciple dialog, typically between Hermes and his favored disciple Asclepius or his son Tat. Hermes Trismegistus was held in high regard; for instance, one student proclaimed: "[E]verything is possible to you as master of the universe."<sup>4</sup> For more than 1,500 years, Hermes was assumed to be the god Thoth/Hermes/Mercury or at least his incarnation in human form. Some accounts assert that Hermes was Moses' teacher, or even Abraham's, while others suggest that he lived at the time of Noah or Zoroaster. There may have been more than one Hermes. The *Asclepius* mentions a grandfather and grandson, both so-named, and asserts that the texts were written by the grandson.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps there was a triplicity of Hermeses, providing one explanation of "Trismegistus."<sup>6</sup> Asclepius has sometimes been identified with the Egyptian Imhotep.<sup>7</sup>

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

Another important text was the *Emerald Tablet*, believed to have been inscribed on "emerald" by Hermes himself.<sup>8</sup> According to legend, Alexander the Great discovered the tablet

in the Great Pyramid of Gizeh, supposedly Hermes' tomb. But the earliest verifiable version, which dates from the eighth century, is on paper—in an Arabic work by the Islamic alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan. The text is short and cryptic:

It is true without lying, certain and most true. That which is Below is like that which is Above, and that which is Above is like that which is Below to do the miracles of the Only Thing. And as all things have been and arose from One by the mediation of One, so all things have their birth from this One Thing by adaptation. The Sun is its father; the Moon its mother; the Wind hath carried it in its belly; the Earth is its nurse. The father of all perfection in the whole world is here. Its force or power is entire if it be converted into Earth. Separate the Earth from the Fire, the subtle from the gross, sweetly with great industry. It ascends from the Earth to the Heavens and again it descends to the Earth and receives the force of things superior and inferior. By this means you shall have the glory of the whole world and thereby all obscurity shall fly from you. Its force is above all force, for it vanquishes every subtle thing and penetrates every solid thing. So was the world created. From this are and do come admirable adaptations, whereof the process is here in this. Hence am I called Hermes Trismegistus, having the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world. That which I have said of the operation of the Sun is accomplished and ended.<sup>9</sup>

The famous second sentence: "That which is below..." is usually abbreviated to "As above, so below."

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

are believed to have embraced beliefs similar to western Hermetism.

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

### Classical Hermetic Teachings

The literature of classical Hermetism offered a blend of philosophy, magic, and astrology; it also included some prayers and prophecies. These last, which became of interest to Christian apologists, will be discussed in due course. Magic was the most conspicuous feature in the texts, and considerable attention was paid to human potential.

In the *Asclepius*, Hermes made the bold statement: “Man is a great miracle, a being adored and honored.”<sup>10</sup> Man is partly mortal and partly immortal, occupying a position intermediate between God and nature. By raising his consciousness, man “passes into the nature of God as though he were God... [H]e is in the fortunate middle position: he loves those things that are below him and is beloved of the beings above.”<sup>11</sup> *The Definitions of Hermes* described three levels in the human constitution: body, soul, and *Nous* (Greek: “Mind”). “*Nous*,” it explained, “is the maker of soul, and soul the maker of the body.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, “The body increases and reaches perfection... Every man has a body and a soul, but not every soul has *Nous*.”<sup>13</sup> *Nous* spans the divide be-

tween God and his creation. People with the proper disposition and who committed to the proper training could acquire *Nous* and become effective magi. They could also achieve *gnosis*, or enlightenment.

Hermetism “saw the entire Cosmos as one great, interconnected Being, a system based on intricate harmony, sympathy, and correspondence, both spiritual and material.”<sup>14</sup> The teachings affirmed the divine nature of the planets and fixed stars and their influence on human affairs. The zodiac, the backdrop for both the planets and the stellar constellations, was divided not only into the familiar 12 signs but into 36 decans, each of 10° of arc. Every decan was the domain of a powerful spirit, some of which were benevolent and others malevolent. As the vault of the heavens rotated during the 12-hour day, and during the solar year, each resident spirit held sway in turn. The planetary deities exerted influence as the planets moved in relation to the zodiac. In contrast to the malevolent disposition of some decan spirits, all seven planetary deities—or “governors”—were benevolent, though the influence of, say, Mars or Saturn was very different from that of Venus or the Sun.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* presented a creation story that recalls the account in *Genesis*:

[I]n the abyss was infinite darkness, water, and fine intelligent spirit. By the power of God were these within the chaos. A holy light was sent forth, and the elements from the watery substance solidified under the Earth... [T]he light elements were then separated off and raised on high, and the heavy were founded firmly upon the watery sand. All was distinguished by fire, all was raised up to be supported by the breath of life. The vault of heaven appeared in seven circles, and the gods appeared in the form of stars with all their constellations; and heaven with the gods was complete in every detail. The universe was encompassed by air and sustained on its circular course by divine spirit.<sup>15</sup>

Animals, plants and people were created, whereupon “men began to live and understand the destiny assigned to them by the course of

the circling gods.”<sup>16</sup> “Destiny” might imply the kind of determinism implied by conventional astrology, but Hermetic astrology allowed for the manipulation of planetary and zodiacal influences through magic. Man’s divine potential gave him privileges, but it also incurred some responsibility for the world. Magic offered greater creative potential too: “[J]ust as the Father and Lord has made the eternal gods to be similar to Himself, so humanity has made... gods in the likeness of its own features.”<sup>17</sup>

Hermetic magic was based largely on the invocation and manipulation of celestial influences. Based on the premise that All is One, and All is interconnected, the influence of a god or spirit could be changed by the judicious use of plants, stones, colors, fragrances, sounds, gestures, or graphic symbols. An object or activity was needed whose vibratory frequency resonated with that of the celestial entity. According to the *Asclepius*, herbs, stones, and spices, which “have in themselves the power of divinity in Nature,”<sup>18</sup> could be used to produce changes in the celestial influences.

Magical intent was reinforced by the use of talismans. A talisman was constructed on parchment, wood, metal, stone, or other appropriate material, and was inscribed with a text or image—especially a celestial image—that established resonance with the power to be invoked. Efficacy was further enhanced by making the talisman at an astrologically auspicious time. It could also be enhanced by embedding in it gemstones of the appropriate vibration. The talisman might be worn as a ring or amulet; it could be set up in a sacred space, as the backdrop for an invocatory ritual, or it could be placed where the desired results were to be obtained. The medieval *Picatrix* offered detailed instructions for constructing and using talismans. For example, one for healing was described as follows:

Fashion an image of the purest silver in the hour of Venus, with the Moon being placed in the Ascendant, fourth, seventh or tenth house and aspecting Venus with a good aspect; and the lord of the sixth house should aspect a fortune with a trine or opposite aspect, and the lord of the 8th house should be in square aspect to Mer-

cury. And beware that Mercury not be retrograde nor combust, nor receiving any aspect from an infortune. And this image should be fashioned in the final hour of the lord of the day, and the lord of the hour should be placed in the tenth house from the Ascendant. And when this image has been fashioned in this manner, the aforesaid infirmities will be driven away.<sup>19</sup>

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

In some cases magical activity assumed larger proportions. The *Asclepius* explained that priests—presumably in the temples of ancient Egypt—fashioned statues and invoked divine energy to bring them to life. Those “terrestrial gods” were “delighted by frequent sacrifices, hymns, praises, and sweet sounds in tune with the celestial harmony.” In return, they “help[ed] us as though they were loving parents...or they fore[told] the future through lot and divination.”<sup>20</sup> Inspired by the divine force that flowed into them, the statues healed the sick and prophesied. It was no accident that Asclepius, Hermes’s closest disciple, was the grandson and namesake of the famous god of medicine in Greek mythology.<sup>21</sup>

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

Later commentators considered Hermes Trismegistus to be the father of alchemy.<sup>22</sup> Certainly the correspondence between the divine Mercury and the alchemical mercury was not lost on the ancients. In the words of a 17th-century writer, “Mercurius’ ...being the trans-

formative principle itself, may not only ‘fly’... between the two worlds, but also alchemically join them.”<sup>23</sup>

However, the classical Hermetic texts never discussed the subject; and the *Emerald Tablet* only addressed it obliquely: “Separate the Earth from the Fire, the subtle from the gross, sweetly with great industry... By this means you shall have the glory of the whole world and thereby all obscurity shall fly from you.”<sup>24</sup> Numerous alchemical texts appeared later; but their connection—even by attribution—with Hermes is unclear. A text of uncertain origin, the *Aureus*, or *Golden Tractate of Hermes*, was only published in the 19th century.<sup>25</sup> Alchemy should, perhaps, be considered part of Hermeticism but not of Hermetism.

The Hermetic teachings were believed to preserve the ancient Egyptian religion in its purest form. Judaic religion (which flowed through Moses) and Greek philosophy (through Pythagoras, Plato, and the Stoics) were both derivative. They had considerable intrinsic value, but they were imperfect forms of the original revelation. Perhaps Christianity was also a degenerate form of the pristine Egyptian religion.

### Hermeticism in Early and Medieval Christianity

The Hermetic teachings influenced both orthodox and gnostic Christianity. The second-century Clement of Alexandria, whose work bridged the two, was aware of the Hermetic texts and claimed that Hermes Trismegistus had written 42 books. Three Coptic texts, including parts of the *Asclepius*,<sup>26</sup> were found in the Nag Hammadi Library whose contents were buried in the fourth century CE. The devotional content of those particular texts suggests that they may have served liturgical as well as scholarly purposes among gnostic Christians. In orthodox Christianity, apologist Lucius Lactantius (c.260–340 CE) and church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430) both believed that Hermes Trismegistus—or “Mercurius” as they sometimes called him—was a contemporary of Moses. They believed that the Hermetic texts preserved Egyptian wisdom that was known to Moses and passed to Pythagoras and Plato and eventually to Christian-

ity. The teachings formed the foundation on which Judeo-Christian religion and western philosophy both rested.

Several aspects of the Hermetic teachings piqued the church fathers’ interest. One was the creation story, already mentioned.<sup>27</sup> Hermes also spoke of the decline of Egyptian religion and culture but prophesied a great reawakening; perhaps that could be associated with the coming of Christ. The *Corpus Hermeticum* contained a passage reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount:

O powers within me, sing to the One and All...Temperance, sing with me. Justice, through me praise what is just. Generosity, through me praise the All. Truth, sing of the Truth. Good, praise the Good. Life and Light, from you comes the praise and to you it returns.<sup>28</sup>

The *Corpus* and the *Asclepius* even referred to a “Son of God,” begotten by the Father.<sup>29</sup> Those references, coming from someone thought to have lived in early biblical times, earned Hermes the appellation “the Gentile prophet,” or “the Egyptian Moses.” To be sure, Hermes’ teachings were not all valued by Christian apologists,<sup>30</sup> and some gaps had to be filled to reconcile them with Christian teachings; for example, he did not speak of a third person of the Trinity.<sup>31</sup> Also, Hermes’ magic either had to be reconciled in some way with Christian religious practice or—a clever suggestion in later times<sup>32</sup>—had to be explained away as interpolations in the original texts.

Hermetic concepts found their way into the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius, the unknown Neoplatonic scholar who lived in the sixth century or thereabouts.<sup>33</sup> For example:

[O]f the many colored varieties of stones, the white represents that which is luminous, and the red corresponds to fire, yellow to gold, and green to youth and vigor. Thus corresponding to each figure you will find a mystical interpretation which relates these symbolical images to the things above.<sup>34</sup>

His most important contribution, included in the same work, was his angelic hierarchy di-

vided into nine “choirs.” The Pseudo-Dionysian choirs of angels would eventually be absorbed into a larger hierarchy that also included the seven planetary spirits.<sup>35</sup>

Hermetic concepts were known to other prominent western Christian personages, including Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Meister Eckhart, and Nicolas of Cusa.<sup>36</sup> Dominican friar Albertus Magnus (c.1200–1280) made important contributions to magic, and we know that he took an interest in alchemy. He criticized “demonic magic” but approved of celestial, or astrological, magic even when it was used for destructive purposes. Celestial magic “gets its powers from the arrangement of the Heavens; as if there was made an image for the destruction of a particular thing in a particular place.” Albertus proceeded to explain how a talismanic image should be used:

[W]hen the image has been made according to these and other conditions, it should be buried in the middle of the place from which you wish to expel the particular thing, placing earth from the four corners of the place in the belly of the image. If, on the other hand, you wish to make an image for joy and success, make it at a time contrary to what we have said; additionally the image should be made at a time that has been elected, and it will have its effects according to the powers of the Heavens by the command of God.<sup>37</sup>

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

Andromeda is the image of a girl turned sideways, seated upon [a rock], with straining hands. And this image, engraved upon gems that are by nature conciliating in love...brings about lasting love between man and wife; indeed it is said to reconcile even those who have been adulterous. Cassiopeia is a maiden sitting in an armchair, with her arms uplifted and bent; and this sort of engraving upon [gems] that bring sleep and restore the members is said to give rest after toil and to strengthen weakened bodies.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, Albertus Magnus’ interest in Hermeticism did not deter the Church of Rome from declaring him a saint and honoring him with numerous accolades.<sup>39</sup>

## Hermeticism in the Early Renaissance

The study of Hermeticism was limited during the Middle Ages. Although educated westerners were aware that the church fathers had discussed the classical Hermetic texts, few people had access to the texts; and, of those who did, few could decipher them. The ancient manuscripts were in Greek and other languages that, at the time, few people in the West could read. With the classical revival of the Renaissance, the impediments to serious study largely vanished. Greek and Hebrew were studied once again, “lost” texts were rediscovered, and the literature was translated into Latin. Aristotelian philosophy, whose ascendancy marked the scholastic era, was replaced by Neoplatonism as the guiding mindset of the age. Great interest was expressed in exotic religious and philosophical traditions. Emphasis on retrieving “lost” knowledge provided a natural environment in which belief in Hermeticism’s extreme antiquity could find favor.<sup>40</sup>

In Florence, where the Renaissance began in the early 15th century, Cosimo de’ Medici (1389–1464) established a library that became the largest in the world since the Ptolemaic library in Alexandria. Cosimo also founded the Florentine Academy, which attracted scholars from across Europe.<sup>41</sup> One of the foreign visitors was the Greek philosopher Georgius Gemistos, an authority on both Plato and Zoroaster. It will be remembered that the *Chaldean Oracles* were attributed to Zoroaster who vied with Hermes Trismegistus and Moses for the claim to be the first of the “ancient theologians” so revered in the Renaissance. A later visitor was the German Hebraic scholar and Kabbalist Johann Reuchlin who eventually taught at the University of Tübingen. Reuchlin is remembered, among much else, for developing the notion that the name “Jesus” could be related to the Jewish Tetragrammaton, thereby linking the invocatory power of the Judaic and Christian traditions.<sup>42</sup>

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

Ficino also held the firm belief that Hermeticism—the work of the "Egyptian Moses"—could support and illuminate Christian theology. But his fascination for magic was equally strong, and he envisioned ways in which magical rites could be incorporated into religious practice. As historian Frances Yates observes, his magic was more refined, more elegant, and in many ways more "spiritual" than that of the Hermetic texts.<sup>43</sup> His talismans were not modeled on the crude imagery of medieval magic but were works of art based on classical themes, and his incantations were sung to the accompaniment of the musical instruments of the time. Importantly, he distinguished between what he termed "natural magic," which drew

its power from the divine order present in nature, from demonic magic which involved the conjuration of unwholesome entities. Through his rejection of any involvement of devils he hoped to allay fears that his magic would threaten the institutional church.

Ficino's most famous student was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). A precocious young nobleman, he boldly proclaimed: "I have ranged through all the masters of philosophy, examined all their works, become acquainted with all schools." Pico is regarded as the first Christian Kabbalist. He would leave it to Cornelius Agrippa, several decades later,

to integrate Kabbalistic doctrine into Hermeticism. But Pico focused on the contribution the Kabbalah could make to Hermetic magic. This new form of magic, which involved the invocation of divine names, would be more powerful and more ethical. Indeed, it represented "nothing else than the utter perfection of natural philosophy."<sup>44</sup> However his interest in magic was mainly theoretical; Pico was a philosopher and mystic, not a magus; and he denounced the use of astrology for purposes of divina-

---

**The Hermetic teachings were believed to preserve the ancient Egyptian religion in its purest form. Judaic religion, which flowed through Moses; and Greek philosophy, through Pythagoras, Plato and the Stoics; were both derivative. They had considerable intrinsic value, but they were imperfect forms of the original revelation. Perhaps Christianity was also a degenerate form of the pristine Egyptian religion.**

---

tion.<sup>45</sup>

Ecclesiastical authorities, who looked back with nostalgia to the power and glory of the medieval church, were cautious in their response to the Renaissance in general, and they regarded the Hermetic revival with particular suspicion. Pico was interrogated by the Inquisition on charges of heresy, but Pope Alexander VI, elected to office in 1492, not only exonerated him from suspicion but strongly supported to his work.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, Pico was nearing the end of his days; he died at the early

age of 31. Ficino outlived his student by another five years.

Encouraged by Ficino's and Pico's studies, Hermeticism attracted the attention of many Christian scholars and even churchmen during the 16th century; and efforts were made to incorporate it into the beliefs and practices of the Roman church. In some cases, to appease ecclesiastical sensitivities, the magical elements were played down, leaving Hermeticism primarily as a philosophical system and a source of prophecy. Among other things, that meant paying less attention to the *Asclepius*. The strategy was popular in France, and Philippe du Plessis Mornay (1549–1623) became a leading exponent.<sup>47</sup> Other individuals and groups presented the magical elements boldly, and that was easier outside France and Italy where the Inquisition was constantly inquiring into questionable activities.

## The Golden Age of Hermeticism

The most important contribution to Renaissance Hermeticism was made by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), a German government official, military strategist, and court physician. Agrippa authored numerous works on Hermeticism, the best-known being his *Three Books on Occult Philosophy*. The first was devoted to natural magic, the second to celestial magic, and the third to ceremonial magic. Written in about 1510 and published in a single volume 23 years later, the *Occult Philosophy* provided an encyclopedic reference source for Hermetic theory and practice. It offered a “host of names, associations, and uses of spirits, occult characters, and alphabets, sigils, herbs, stones, symbols, colors, fumes, numbers, prayers, stars, beasts and other elements employed magically.”<sup>48</sup>

The “names” were taken from multiple sources. Influenced by Giovanni Pico, Agrippa sought to integrate the Kabbalah into Hermeticism.<sup>49</sup> From his time onward, the two disciplines tended to be conflated into a single esoteric system in the eyes of Christian scholars—though not in the eyes of Jewish authorities

who were dismayed by the contamination of their sacred tradition.<sup>50</sup>

Yet astrology remained central to Agrippa's magic. The planets had distinctive characteristics, and invocation produced distinctive benefits. For example, he offered this description of the Sun:

It sits as king in the middle of other planets, excelling all in light, greatness, fairness, enlightening all, distributing virtue to them so dispose inferior bodies, and regulating and disposing of their motions.<sup>51</sup>

Invoking the Sun brought “nobility of mind, perspicuity of imagination, the nature of knowledge and opinion, maturity, counsel, zeal, light of justice, reason and judgment distinguishing right from wrong, purging light from the darkness of ignorance, the glory of truth found out, and charity the queen of all virtues.”<sup>52</sup>

Invocation could include the use of minerals, talismanic images, letters, numbers, and musical tones and intervals. Recalling the depiction of the Sun as a king, cited above, Agrippa urged that it be represented on talismans by “a king crowned, sitting in a chair, having a raven in his bosom, and under his feet a globe; he is clothed in saffron colored clothes.”<sup>53</sup> Figure 1 shows some other talismanic data pertaining to the Sun, taken from Agrippa's work.<sup>54</sup> Note the seal written in an occult alphabet that Agrippa described as “divine letters.” Note also that he expressed the Magic Square of the Sun both in western (Arabic) and in Hebrew letter-numerals.<sup>55</sup> With regard to musical intervals, Agrippa related the Sun to the octave or double octave. By contrast, Mercury corresponded to the perfect fourth and Jupiter to the fifth.<sup>56</sup>

Agrippa left no doubt as to his high regard for magic:

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



perfection of all most excellent philosophy.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover he saw little difference between ceremonial magic and religious ritual. Both should begin with an attitude of adoration and humble supplication: “[I]n the first place implore God the Father... that thou also mayest be one worthy of his favor.” After warning worshippers to avoid “menstruous women” and “her who hath the hemorrhoids,” Agrippa instructed his readers: “Thou shalt wash and anoint, and perfume thyself, and shalt offer sacrifices.”<sup>58</sup> He went on to explain: “[P]erfumes, sacrifices, and unction penetrate all things, and open the gates of the elements and of the heavens, that through them a man can see the secrets of God, heavenly things, and those which descend from the heavens, as angels, and spirits of deep pits...”<sup>59</sup> Despite his religious piety, Agrippa was forced to move from place to place to escape persecution by the church; several times he only narrowly avoided arrest. Interestingly, one of his few loyal protectors was Hermann von Wied, archbishop of Cologne, and the *Occult Philosophy* was finally published in Hermann’s jurisdiction. Agrippa died of natural causes at age 49.

We have seen that Agrippa sought to integrate the Kabbalah into Hermeticism. Further synthesis was proposed by the English physician and astrologer Robert Fludd (1574–1637). Between them they offered a remarkable aggregation of the celestial entities of Hermetic astrology, the Hebrew divine names, and the Pseudo-Dionysian choirs of angels, providing a rich inventory of power-names for magical invocation. Furthermore, their cosmos had a threefold structure: the “elemental world;” the “celestial world;” and the “supercelestial,” “angelic,” or “intellectual world.” Magic involving the celestial world had always been suspect because of demons among the fixed stars, but now beneficent angelic influences from the outer supercelestial world would protect against demonic influence.<sup>60</sup>

Robert Fludd’s monumental *Utriusque Cosmi... Historia* (“Metaphysical, Physical, and Technical History”) recorded his thoughts on everything from mechanics to military sci-

ence to astrology. The broad range of topics spanned the microcosm and the macrocosm whose mutual interaction was the basis of Hermetic magic. Figure 2 shows three illustrations from the book.<sup>61</sup> The first is the elaborate cover design. The second shows a geocentric cosmos in which the Earth is surrounded by 22 concentric spheres. The outermost sphere (#1), labeled *Mens* (Latin: “Mind”), was regarded as the highest attribute comprehensible to man; God himself resided outside that sphere. Within the outer sphere lay the nine choirs of angels (#2-10). The dome of the fixed stars (#11) separated the angels from the planets (#12-18) and the four elements (#19-22). The choice of 22 as the total number of spheres suggests Kabbalistic influence; there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, each of which has a numerical equivalent. The third illustration shows the spheres with corresponding “divine numbers” from 1 to 10,000. One through nine, considered fundamental, are associated with God. The remaining numbers, in tens, hundreds, and thousands, are created from them—just as God created the spheres. Numbers provided a powerful way to access and influence the supercelestial world, the domain of the angelic hierarchies.

Fludd’s geocentric universe might raise some eyebrows, considering that Nicolaus Copernicus’ work on the heliocentric solar system had been published more than 70 years earlier. Perhaps Fludd lived in the past; however, we must bear in mind that his goal was not to calculate planetary orbits but to explore celestial influences on the Earth and humanity.

In contrast, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), who was a quarter-century older, was intrigued by heliocentrism. Frances Yates points out that the Italian philosopher and former Dominican friar viewed the Copernican theory not just as a physical model but as a truth of profound metaphysical significance. Heliocentrism, in his view, validated Hermetic notions of the sun as the source of all magical power. As far as the planets were concerned, Bruno believed that they were alive and moving under their own volition.

Whereas Ficino had sought to refine the theory and practice of magic and to integrate Her-

meticism into Christianity, Bruno promoted more primitive forms of magic, taken from the *Picatrix* and elsewhere. He also rejected key Christian doctrines. Bruno was fascinated by the *Corpus Hermeticum*'s prophecy that Egyptian religion would enjoy a resurrection. However, that resurrection, in his opinion, was not associated with the coming of Christ but would be accomplished in his own time. Indeed, as a Christian magus, he, Bruno, might well be equipped to play a leading role. The restoration of Egyptian religion would be the basis for a major reformation of Christianity. It was not the Reformation spearheaded by Martin Luther. Bruno was critical of Catholicism, but he believed that a reformed Catholicism offered greater potential than Protestantism.<sup>62</sup>

Unfortunately, Bruno's arrogance and his lack of diplomatic skills antagonized powerful individuals in almost every country he visited. A showdown with the church became inevitable. He was arrested and, after long interrogation by the Inquisition, culminating in a trial in Rome, he was burned at the stake in 1600.

[To be continued in Part II.]

---

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis* 5:18.

<sup>2</sup> Although the evidence is mounting, not everyone agrees that the Kabbalistic texts were written early in the Christian era. We do know that instructional materials in Jewish esoteric schools remained closely guarded until the 12th century.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. B. Jowett. Public domain.

<sup>4</sup> *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 325. This text is sometimes referred to as the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead*.

<sup>5</sup> *Asclepius*, chap. 37. Clement Salaman, *Asclepius* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 92.

<sup>6</sup> Another interpretation is that Hermes was master of three disciplines: magic, alchemy, and theurgy (i.e., the practice of magical ritual). A third interpretation is that "Trismegistus" is simply a superlative: "Very Blessed."

<sup>7</sup> Clement Salaman, Dorine van Ovin, and William D. Wharton, *The Way of Hermes* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000), 79.

---

<sup>8</sup> If a tablet ever existed, it was probably of green granite or jasper, not emerald as we know it.

<sup>9</sup> *The Emerald Tablet*, trans. Isaac Newton. Public domain.

<sup>10</sup> *Asclepius*, chap. 6. Salaman, *Asclepius*, 58. British spelling changed to American style.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, chap. 10, §3, trans. J-P. Mahé. Salaman et al, *The Way of Hermes*, 117.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 8, §4, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://www.renaissanceastrology.com/> (accessed September 21, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, bk. 3, §§1-2, trans. Salaman et al. Salaman et al., *The Way of Hermes*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, §3, 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Asclepius*, chap. 23, 77-78.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 38, 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Picatrix*, bk. 1, chap. 2, trans. R. Thomas.

Source: <http://www.renaissanceastrology.com/> (accessed September 5, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> *Asclepius*, chap. 38, 95.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 37, 94.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: Paracelsus, "Secrets of Alchemy," *The Archidoxis*, treatise II, chap. 1, trans. R. Turner (Paris: Ibis Press, 1656/1975), 21.

<sup>23</sup> Tobias Churton, *The Magus of Freemasonry* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2004), 126.

<sup>24</sup> See the complete text above.

<sup>25</sup> It was included in Mary A. Atwood, *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* (published in London in 1850).

<sup>26</sup> James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 321-338.

<sup>27</sup> Hermetism took a more positive attitude to the "fall" than did *Genesis*. The *Corpus Hermeticum* described man's very willing descent into matter, motivated by his love of Nature—a love that was eagerly reciprocated. See the *Corpus*, bk. 1, §§ 13-15.

<sup>28</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, bk. 13, §18, 69-70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 8, §2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Some Christian Hermeticists inserted the *Anima Mundi*, or World Soul, of the Neoplatonists.

That suggestion might have appeal, but it created difficulties with respect to coequality of the persons of the Trinity. The Neoplatonic view of the Trinity, as expressed by Plotinus, considered cascading emanations from the Godhead, placing the *Anima Mundi* at a lower level than the *Monad*. Plotinus was opposed by Augustine of

- Hippo whose assertion of coequality was endorsed by the Council of Nicaea.
- <sup>32</sup> One individual who made that suggestion was English naval hero Sir Walter Raleigh. See Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 403 footnote.
- <sup>33</sup> The Pseudo-Dionysius was long confused with the Areopagite mentioned in *Acts* and with St. Denis of Paris.
- <sup>34</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchies*, chap. 15, trans. unknown. Source: <http://www.esotericarchives.com/> (accessed September 26, 2008).
- <sup>35</sup> That development will be discussed later.
- <sup>36</sup> See the discussion in Salaman, *Asclepius*, 35-40.
- <sup>37</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Speculum Astronomiae* (“Instrument of Magic”), chap. 11, trans. unknown. Source: <http://www.renaissanceastrology.com/> (accessed September 26, 2008).
- <sup>38</sup> Albertus Magnus, *De Mineralibus* (“On Minerals”), chap. 5, trans. unknown. Source: <http://www.renaissanceastrology.com/> (accessed September 26, 2008).
- <sup>39</sup> Albertus was one of only a few individuals in history honored as “Doctor of the Universal Church.”
- <sup>40</sup> Churton, *The Magus of Freemasonry*, 111.
- <sup>41</sup> G. F. Young, *The Medici* (New York: Modern Library, 1910/1930).
- <sup>42</sup> Specifically, the Hebrew name of Jesus, *Yehoshuah*, consists of the Tetragrammaton, the unutterable Hebrew name of God (*yod, he, vav, he*), augmented at its midpoint by the letter *shin*. The original suggestion may have come from church father Jerome; it was reiterated by the Italian scholar Francesco Giorgi.
- <sup>43</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 78ff.
- <sup>44</sup> Giovanni Pico, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, §32, trans. E. L. Forbes. *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 246-247.
- <sup>45</sup> Giovanni Pico, *Disputations Against Divinatory Astrology*. The work was published in Bologna sometime after Pico’s death.
- <sup>46</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 113-116.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-178.
- <sup>48</sup> Donald Tyson, “Introduction to Henry Cornelius Agrippa” *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. J. Freake. (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 1993), xli.
- <sup>49</sup> Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, bk. 3, chaps. 10-12.
- <sup>50</sup> Increasing “contamination” by Hermeticism and Christian theology was one reason why the Kabbalah began to be shunned in Jewish circles.
- <sup>51</sup> Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, bk. 2, chap. 32, 365.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 3, chap. 37, 587.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 2, chap. 61, 386.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 1, chap. 33, 103; bk. 2, chap. 22, 324.
- <sup>55</sup> Magic squares have many mathematical properties, the most fundamental being that the sum of the numbers in each row, column and diagonal is the same, in this case 111. The four central elements in the Square of the Sun add up to 74. The sum of the numbers on the perimeter is 370, and the grand total is 666. In the Hebrew gematria that number—referred to disparagingly in *Revelation* as the “Number of the Beast”—is the value of *Sorath*, the Spirit of the Sun. Note that 74, 111, 370, and 666 are all divisible by 37.
- <sup>56</sup> Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, bk. 2, chap. 26, 339.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 1, chap. 2, 5.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 3, chap. 64, 672.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> See the discussion in Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (New York: Routledge, 1979), 52-56.
- <sup>61</sup> Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi, Maioris scilicet et Minoris, metaphysica, physica, atque technica Historia* (“The Metaphysical, Physical, and Technical History of the Two Worlds, Namely the Greater and the Lesser”), published in Germany, 1617–1621. Figure 1(b) is from tract II, §1, bk. 10, 219; (c) is from tract II, §1, bk. 12, 259.
- <sup>62</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, especially pp. 214, 239.

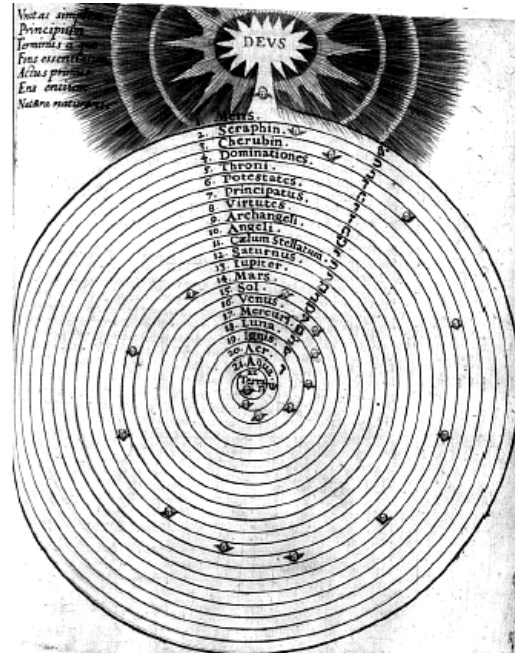


## Figure 2. Hermetic Cosmology (after Robert Fludd)

(a) Cover Page of Fludd's *Utriusque*



(b) Cosmos of Concentric Spheres



(c) The Spheres and Divine Numbers

