

# ANCIENT DOCTRINES REDISCOVERED

*Christopher McIntosh, D. Phil.*

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**E** Christopher McIntosh (D. Phil., Oxon) is a course lecturer in Rosicrucianism in the Western Esotericism program at the University of Exeter (England) and is currently teaching at the University of Bremen, Germany. In this chapter from his book entitled, *The Rosicrucians*, he traces the history of the Rosicrucians, beginning with Egyptian-influenced Gnosticism to the Rosicrucian traditions of the seventeenth century.



The Rosicrucian movement is part of a way of thinking whose roots go far back into antiquity and which can be described as the Western esoteric tradition. This tradition, drawing on many sources, has run through European history exercising a strong influence, sometimes underground, at other times flourishing in the open. Although frequently in conflict with Christianity, Christian thinking was often influenced by it, and *vice versa*. This way of thinking amounts almost to a separate language and, without an understanding of it, much that is important in the history of Western thought cannot be grasped. The poetry of William Blake, for example, remained largely uncomprehended until recent research showed that he spoke the language of the esoteric tradition.

A great revival of this tradition began in Italy during the Renaissance and opened up

a new phase in the development of esoteric thought. From then on it had an assured, if still somewhat underground, place in Western thought. The Rosicrucian movement belongs to this phase of esotericism. In order to understand the esoteric tradition, we must follow it back to its origins and examine the different ingredients that went into it.

The philosophical milieu in which the tradition began is loosely known as Gnosticism, a movement beginning in the fourth century B.C., which had Egypt as its focal point of development. Egypt had been penetrated first by Persian mystical beliefs during the Persian conquest in 525 B.C. then by Greek and oriental influences following its occupation by Alexander the Great in 333–331 B.C. Out of this mixture came a religious outlook with the following main characteristics.

## **Gnostic Beliefs**

The Gnostics saw the universe as a duality between spirit and matter. They conceived of a supreme divine being who was immaterial, eternal, unreachable, and unknowable. In the Gnostic view, the spirit is a fragment of this universal being which has split off and become imprisoned in matter. The world of matter is not the creation of the supreme God but of a lower god, or demiurge, who has at his beck and call a number of minions, called archons (rulers), who have different spheres of influence in

the material world that correspond to the planetary spheres. The uppermost sphere, that of Saturn, forms the boundary between the lower and upper world governed by good spirits. Omar Khayyam expresses this in verse:

Up from Earths' Center through  
the Seventh Gate<sup>1</sup>  
I rose, and on the Throne of  
Saturn sate,  
And many Knots unravel'd by  
the Road;  
But not the Master-knot of  
Human Fate.

Human beings, according to this view, are composed of a body and a soul, both of which belong to the material world, and a divine spark, or *pneuma*, which is the godly element within. As long as humans are kept in ignorance of their true position, by the demiurge, they continue to be prisoners. But, sometimes, messages from beyond the spheres are received by certain individuals who then become aware of their imprisonment and are able to pass the knowledge onto others. Their knowledge, or *gnosis*, is the most important weapon in freeing the spirit from its bondage.

It is not enough, however, for Gnostics merely to know that they are imprisoned. They also need to know the workings of the world that surrounds them so that they can be better equipped to overcome it, or so that they can use it in a positive way—because not all Gnostic schools saw the world as absolute evil.

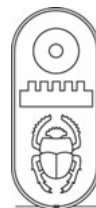
The Gnostic cosmology was taken to a large extent from the Stoic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, who saw the cosmos as a living organism, subject, like every other living thing, to the laws of birth and death. When the universe dies, according to Heraclitus, it leaves behind a seed from which a new cosmos grows. Everything in this cosmos derives from a single basic substance, which Heraclitus saw as a kind of fire. “For Fire all things are exchanged,” he

wrote “and Fire for all things, even as wares are exchanged for gold and gold for wares.”<sup>2</sup> Thus everything moves in a cyclical process, an idea often represented by the *ourobouros*, a snake biting its own tail. This symbol came to be very widely used and is frequently found in alchemical contexts.

The Gnostics furthermore conceived that, in order to initiate the process of growth, an act of sexual generation involving a universal male and female principle was required. The sexual analogy was also used to illustrate how a human being's “virgin” soul becomes implanted with the “seed” of God in a mystical union, or *hieros gamos*. Sexual symbolism featured prominently in Gnostic ceremonies.

The Gnostic belief in a graduation from coarse matter to pure spirit is reflected in the way their communities were organized. These were divided into three main groups. At the lowest level were those entirely preoccupied with material and mundane things. As long as they remained in this state, there was no possible redemption for them. Next came those not capable of direct perception of the godly, but who believed in a higher reality and were therefore capable of partial redemption. At the highest level came those who were possessed by the spirit of God, or *pneuma*. These were known as “pneumatics.” They acted as prophets and were capable of full redemption. Between these three groups, there were also many finer, intermediary grades. A system of ceremonies accompanied each level and, people who had been initiated to a particular grade had to remain silent about it to those of inferior grades. It will be seen from this description that most of the elements of the modern secret society were present in the Gnostic community.

Some of the early Church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, were influenced by Gnosticism, and a number of Christian Gnostic groups were formed



in the early years of the Christian era. The main body of the Church, however, opposed Gnosticism, both inside and outside its ranks. The struggle continued into the Middle Ages, during which Gnosticism still persisted in various parts of Europe. The Bogomils of Bulgaria, for example, were a Gnostic sect who ate no flesh apart from fish. They believed that fish were the only creatures that did not generate sexually. A similar Gnostic sect was the Albigenses of southern France who, like the Bogomils, advocated sexual continence and opposed the eating of meat. They were savagely wiped out in the 13th century in a crusade inspired by Pope Innocent III. After this, Gnosticism went underground, though, even in the later Middle Ages, its influence broke through here and there. In the Renaissance, as we shall see, it came back into its own.

### Gnosticism and Hermeticism

Gnosticism also produced the series of writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, which were to have an enormous influence on the esoteric thinking of the Renaissance and after. Hermes Trismegistos (the “Thrice-Great”) is an amalgam of the Greek messenger god and the Egyptian god of

wisdom, Thoth, though in the Renaissance he was considered by many to be an actual historical figure. He is the supposed author of a body of mystical lore composed around the beginning of the Christian era in Egypt.

The best known of the Hermetic treatises is the *Poimandres* (or *Pymander*), whose author describes how, during meditation, he conversed with the *Poimandres* or *Nous* (mind) of the supreme being, who unfolded to him a teaching that is basically Gnostic.<sup>3</sup> Human beings originate from God, but have fallen into a world of matter created by the demiurge, who is himself an offspring of the divine intellect. After death, those who have achieved *gnosis* rise up through the spheres to be reunited with the Godhead.

To say that the Hermetic writings taught a contempt for matter, however, would be misleading. Unlike the more extreme forms of Gnosticism, Hermeticism seems to see matter as a necessary part of creation which must be understood and mastered if the spirit is to rise above it. Hence, along with the Hermetic mystical doctrines go certain teachings about the workings and manipulation of matter. This part of the Hermetic writings became the



Hermes Trismegistus with Alchemical Sun and Moon.

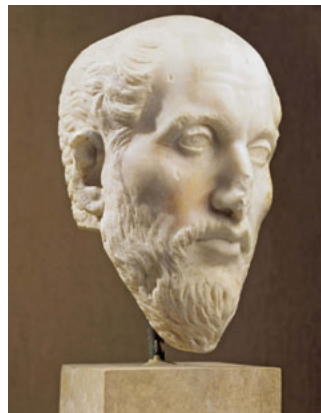
basis of alchemy, which is therefore often referred to as “the Hermetic Art.” Hermetic alchemy included theories about how to heal sickness. As this was supposedly one of the main activities of the original Rosicrucian brotherhood, it may be useful to examine some of the ingredients of Hermetic physiology and medicine.

In one of the Hermetic texts, the *Sermon of Isis to Horus*, a dialogue takes place in which Isis reveals to Horus that the human body is “a union and blend of the four elements; and from this blend and union a certain vapor arises, which is enveloped by the soul . . . its nature. And thus the differences of changes are effected both in soul and body.”<sup>4</sup>

For if there be in the corporeal make-up more of fire, thereon the soul, which is by nature hot, taking unto itself another thing that’s hot and [so] being made more fiery, makes life more energetic and passionate, and the body quick and active. . . . If [there be] more of air. . . life becomes light and springy and unsteady both in the soul and body.

Isis goes on to say that an excess of water makes the creature supple and “able easily to meet and join with others, through water’s power of union and communion with the rest of things.” If the earthly element is in excess, then “the creature’s soul is dull, for it has not its body texture loosely knit.” In this case, the body is also heavy and inert. “But there is a balanced state of all [the elements], then is the animal made hot for doing, light for moving, well-mixed for contact, and excellent for holding things together.”<sup>5</sup>

Different animals, the sermon explains, have different elements predominating—air in the case of birds, for example, and water for fish. Human beings, however, have a share of all the elements. When they are in their original state of balance, human beings are healthy. But if the equilibrium is impaired and there is a



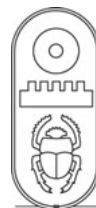
Plotinus.

predominance of one of more of the elements, then the vapor that links body and soul is upset and the body becomes ill.<sup>6</sup>

The parts of the Hermetic corpus dealing with alchemy, astrology, and magic formed one of the main pillars of later Western occultism.

### Neoplatonism

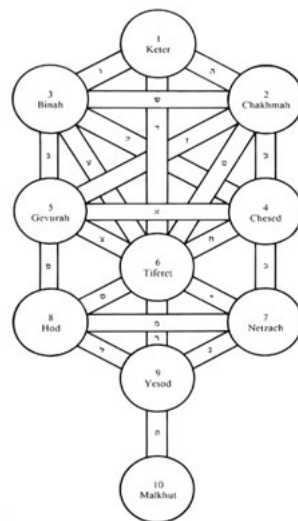
The intellectual and religious climate that produced Gnosticism and Hermeticism also produced a set of doctrines known as Neoplatonism, another movement of great importance in the esoteric tradition. This system of thought is based on Plato’s teachings of the immortality of the soul, of a transcendent principle of good, and of a dualistic state of affairs in which the world perceived by our senses is illusory and masks a real world accessible only to our minds. Neoplatonism, which emerged in Egypt between the third and sixth centuries A.D., combined Platonic philosophy with Aristotelian, Stoic, Pythagorean, and Gnostic teachings. Its founder is said to have been a somewhat shadowy figure called Saccas (c. 175–c. 242), but the best-known proponent of Neoplatonism was Plotinus (204–270). Born in Lycopolis in Egypt, Plotinus studied under Saccas at Alexandria and later taught his philosophy in Rome. His teachings were put together with a commentary by his pupil Porphyry (c. 232–304) and published under the title of the *Enneads*.<sup>7</sup>



Plotinus conceived of the world as coming into being through a process of emanation from the supreme cosmic unity inaccessible to human reason. This being gave rise to a World of Spirit which in turn generated a World Soul, which then branched out into individual souls. The soul, said Plotinus, “has given itself to each of the separate material masses. . . it makes them living beings not by merging into body but by giving forth, without any change in itself, images or likenesses of itself like one face caught by many mirrors.” In another passage, Plotinus brings in a simile reminiscent of alchemy: “Gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthly particles; if these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with gold alone. And so the Soul; let it be but cleared of the desires that came by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions. . . in that moment the ugliness that came only from the alien is stripped away.”<sup>8</sup>

It is important to mention the Pythagorean strain in Neoplatonism, since this was an aspect that greatly appealed to Renaissance scholars. Pythagoras (c. 580–c. 497 B.C.) was the founder of a school in the Greek colony of Croton in southern Italy that lasted for a century or more after his death. This organization was not only a philosophical school, but also a kind of religious brotherhood believing in the transmigration of souls and, therefore, in abstinence from the eating of meat, since animals were also held to have souls.

The most important contribution of the Pythagorean school was its work in the field of numbers and proportion. It was this school that discovered the numerical relations of musical intervals. They found that, if a piece of string at a given tension is sounded on half its length, the resulting tone is an octave above the tone resonating on the full string. If the length is reduced by two-thirds, the tone is a harmonic fifth higher.



The Kabbalistic Tree of Life.

Likewise, a reduction in length of three-quarters gives an interval of a perfect fourth. This discovery of musical harmony was developed by the Greeks into a notion of the whole cosmos as an orchestra, with each of the planets surrounding a different note and producing the “music of the spheres.”

## Qabalah

There remains one strain in the Western esoteric tradition to mention, possibly the most important of all: the Jewish Qabalah. This is a highly complex collection of mystical teachings whose exact origin is unknown but which emerged in two main phases. The first phase took place among the medieval Jews of Spain, who produced the *Sepher Yetzeriah* (Book of Formation) between the third and sixth centuries A.D. and the *Zohar* (Book of Splendor) in the 13th century. The latter purports to derive from a rabbi of the second century, but was probably written down by Rabbi Moses de Leon shortly before it came into circulation. The second phase is what is known as the Lurianic Qabalah, after Isaac Luria of Safed in Galilee (1534–1572). He and his followers developed the Zoharic Qabalah and introduced a number of new concepts.

The Qabalah fulfills a number of purposes. It is, first, a system of cosmology

and theology explaining the nature of God, the origin of the world, and the character of man's destiny. It is also a means of interpreting the scriptures by the application of certain rules which yield an "inner" meaning to the language of the Bible. Finally, it embodies certain mystical techniques whereby the individual learns to commune with higher realities.

The Qabalah conceives of creation as emanating outward from God in a series of ten basic forces or principles, called *Sephiroth*, which are normally arranged in a pattern known as the Tree of Life. These ten principles are held to run right through creation, from Universal being down to humankind—another form of the conception of macrocosm and microcosm. Another part of the Qabalistic scheme is the notion of the Four Worlds descending from the Godhead: *Atziluth*, The World of Emanation; *Briah*, The World of Creation; *Yetzirah*, The World of Formation; and *Assiah*, The World of Action, the world of matter in which we live.

One important part of Qabalistic doctrine concerns the Hebrew language, which is believed to be of divine origin. According to this doctrine, each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet



Marsilio Ficino.

represents an elemental force in creation. All this was eagerly taken up by the esotericists of the Renaissance and adapted to Christianity, so that, out of the Jewish Qabalah, there developed over time a Christian Qabalah. Later I shall give a fuller account of how Qabalistic teachings affected Rosicrucianism.

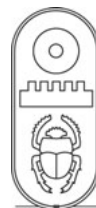
## The Renaissance

These, then, are the main esoteric traditions that were rediscovered by the Renaissance scholars. The most important center of this rediscovery was the Florentine court of Cosimo de Medici who conceived a passion for Hermetic and Neoplatonic literature after meeting a mysterious Greek scholar, Georgios Gemistos, who went by the name of Pletho (from the Greek *plethos*, meaning "the full"). Pletho gave a series of lectures in Florence in 1439 tinged with Gnostic and Neoplatonic ideas.

It is believed that these lectures inspired Cosimo de Medici to found his Platonic academy and to commission the best available scholars to gather and translate classical texts. The most prominent of these scholars was Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) who, besides works by Plato, translated the *Corpus Hermeticum* which he saw as containing a core of teachings handed down from very ancient times through Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Hermes himself, whom Ficino accepted as a real person. It appears to have been Ficino who introduced the vocabulary of special terms describing wisdom handed down from sage to sage. In time, the list of sages came to include Moses, Dionysius, the Areopagite, and even Saint Augustine.

Ficino's influence extended throughout Europe. This belief in an inherited core of secret wisdom captured many imaginations and reappeared prominently, as we shall see in the Rosicrucian writings.

Ficino's pupil, Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) was among these responsible for stimulating interest in the Qabalah. His





*Fama Fraternitatis*. From the archives of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC.

*Nine Hundred Conclusions* (1486), which used Qabalistic and Neoplatonic ideas in an attempt to find common ground between Christianity, Judaism and Islam, brought accusations of heresy against him. For some time Pico was plagued by Church authorities, until Pope Alexander VI absolved him of heresy in 1493.

Another advocate of Qabalism was the Franciscan Francesco di Giorgio di Venetas, whose *De Harmonia Mundi* combines Qabalism with a preoccupation with the ideas of universal harmony and the music of the spheres. Also important in the Qabalistic

revival was a Jewish refugee from Spain, Judah Arbanel, whose *Dialoghi d'Amore*, written under the name of Leone Ebreo, was brought out in 1535 and later achieved wide currency through being included in the collection of Johann Pistorius, *Artis Cabalisticae*, published at Basel in 1587.

By the early 16th century, these different elements had been successfully amalgamated to form a new language, a language which, when transplanted to German soil in the period leading up to the Rosicrucian manifestos, played a key role in shaping the movement.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edward Fitzgerald, *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm* (New York: Miller Graphics/Crown, 1979), verse 34, pp. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Heraclitus of Ephesus. "Fragment 22" in James Adams, *The Religious Teachers of Greece* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> W. Wynn Westcott edited a volume called *The Divine Pyramander, or the Pyramander of Hermes*, published in 1894 by the Theosophical Society in London.

<sup>4</sup> "Sermon of Isis and Horus" in the G. R. S. Mead,

*Thrice-Greatest Hermes*, Vol. 3 (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1992, reprint), p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> See "Sermon of Isis to Horus," pp. 124–125.

<sup>6</sup> "Sermon of Isis to Horus," pp. 125–126.

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*, Stephan Mackenna, trans. (London: Faber & Faber, 1966); reissued 1992, Burdette, NY: Larson Publications.

<sup>8</sup> See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, Ennead I, Tractate I, Section 8, and Tractate VI, Section 5, pp. 60–61.