CHAPTER 9

The Early Christian Kabbalists and the Tetragrammaton

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

Most of what Pico has to say about the Tetragrammaton is found in the 900 Conclusiones, or theses, which he planned to debate in Rome in 1486. This extraordinarily daring and innovative programme blended Classical, Late Antique, and mediaeval philosophy; Christian Kabbalah; the Hermetic tradition; and Pythagorean mathematics into a syncretic system designed to expose the unity and power of Ancient Truth and its ability to work both reformation and miracles. We find in the theses reference to pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, Joachim of Fiore, and Ramon Lull. The antecedents of this bold project may lie in the highly syncretistic Neoplatonic systems developed in Late Antiquity after Plotinus—as in Proclus's Platonic Theology, for example. They find expression in the 15th and 16th centuries in the notion of the prisci theologi and with the contention that great minds of antiquity—Orpheus, Hermes Megistus, Pythagoras, and Plato—shared a secret tradition derived ultimately from Adam or Moses and expressive of Christian Truth. The conviction of the existence of this arcane Hermetic tradition is characteristic of many of our sources and is also, of course, characteristic of the Alchemists. The openness of Medici Florence to the generous integration of these diverse traditions no doubt provided a sympathetic context for the development of Christian Kabbalah. The details of the arrival of Greek material in the West after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 are well known, but the extraordinary effervescence in European culture in Florence was also stimulated by the first major synthesis of


Renaissance thought and Kabbalah. (The earlier writings of Maestro Alfonso da Valladolid (Abner of Burgos) in the late 13th and early 14th century, and those of the 15th-century Paulus de Heredia, both of whom we have already discussed, were not printed, nor were they apparently quoted by Pico.) We shall avoid the essentialist debate over the precise nature and definition of Christian Kabbalah, being content uncontroversially to consider as such those generally so considered.

The Church’s theologians took fright at several of Pico’s audacious proposals (Pico was condemned by Innocent VIII but later absolved of heresy by his successor Alexander VI), and the debate—surely the largest scholastic encounter ever envisaged—did not take place. This has had the inconvenient consequence that we do not really know how Pico would have conducted himself in that debate, nor is the underlying structure of this enormous number of theses—which he called his new philosophy—necessarily apparent to us. Moreover, the integrity of the text subsequently presented by his nephew Gian Francesco Pico has also been suspected.4

Nonetheless, Pico without ambiguity declares that Kabbalah is the key to understanding the marvelous power of Christ’s name, that the Tetragrammaton contained the secret of the second and third persons of the Trinity, and that the medial letter “shin” inserted into the Tetragrammaton concealed the mystery of God become man.5

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