The modern magical revival has been unfolding for over a century. As a spiritual movement committed to the resurgence of esoteric knowledge or *gnosis* in the West, it first began to gather momentum in the final decade of the 19th century and has since seeded itself around the world in fascinating ways, spawning divergent esoteric groups and organizations. In terms of actual historical beginnings, however, the story of the 20th century magical revival commences with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, arguably the most influential esoteric organisation in modern history. All modern occult perspectives—including Wicca, Goddess spirituality and the *Thelemic* magick of Aleister Crowley—owe a debt to the Golden Dawn for gathering together the threads of the Western esoteric tradition and initiating a transformative process that continues in the 21st century. This chapter explores the principal sources of the Western esoteric tradition that helped generate the revival of magical thought and practice in the modern era.

Established in England in 1888, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn drew on a range of ancient and medieval cosmologies and incorporated them into a body of ceremonial practices and ritual grades centred on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, an important motif within the Jewish mystical tradition which, as a unified but nevertheless complex symbol, represents the sacred ‘emanations’ of the Godhead.1 In addition to the Kabbalah, which occupied a central position in the cosmology of the Golden Dawn, the organisation also drew on the Hermetic tradition

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1 The Kabbalistic Tree of Life is referred to in the Jewish mystical tradition by its Hebrew name *Otz Chiim* and represents a process of sacred emanation from the Godhead. The Tree is a composite symbol consisting of ten spheres, or *sephirot*, through which the creation of the world—and indeed, all aspects of creation—have come about. The ten sephirot are aligned in three columns headed by the first three emanations, Kether (The Crown), Chokhmah (The Great Father/Wisdom) and Binah (The Great Mother/Understanding). Collectively the ten sephirot on the Tree of Life symbolise the process by which the Infinite Light and Formlessness of the Godhead (*Ain Soph Aur*) becomes manifest in the universe. The seven emanations beneath the supernal triad of Kether, Chokhmah and Binah (ie. the remaining sephirot Chesed, Geburah, Tiphareth, Netzach, Hod, Yesod and Netzach) represent the ‘seven days of Creation’.
which had its roots in Neoplatonism and underwent a revival during the Renaissance. Roscrucianism, Freemasonry and the medieval Tarot were also significant elements.

The Medieval Kabbalah

According to Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), widely regarded as one of the pre-eminent authorities on the origins and symbolism of the Kabbalah, the medieval Kabbalah belongs to an emanationist cosmological tradition that has its origins in Gnosticism. Indeed, Scholem

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2 See G.G. Scholem. *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition*, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York 1960: 1–3. Gnosticism focuses on the quest for gnosis [ancient Greek: ‘spiritual knowledge’]. The origins of Gnosticism remain a matter of debate, but there is broad consensus that Gnosticism as a historical movement parallels the rise of early Christianity. Some scholars, like Hans Jonas (author of *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston 1958) have seen in Gnosticism residues of pre-Christian Iranian dualism while others believe that it developed in response to the failure of Jewish apocalyptic expectations and have dated its origins to around 70 CE, coinciding with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple. Others regard Gnosticism as a response to the failure of Christian messianic expectations—where some early Christian devotees, feeling that the Messiah had not returned as soon as had been hoped, turned away from religious faith towards spiritual inner knowledge. Gnostic thought was certainly well established by the second century of the Christian era. The unearthing of a major Gnostic library near the town of Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt in 1945 provided a rich body of source material on the Gnostic philosophies. Until this time much of the existing Gnostic scholarship had been based on other surviving Gnostic commentaries written by Church Fathers like Irenaeus, Clement and Hippolytus, who were hostile to Gnostic tenets. The Nag Hammadi codices, a collection of texts written in Coptic, revealed the syncretistic nature of Gnosticism, demonstrating that as a movement Gnosticism incorporated elements from Christianity, Judaism, Neoplatonism and the Greek mystery religions as well as material from Egypt and Persia. Essentially Gnosticism was a call for transcendence, a movement seeking a return to the Spirit and a movement away from the constrictions of the material world which was regarded as a source of pervasive evil. James M. Robinson, editor of the English translation of the Nag Hammadi Library, has explained the Gnostic philosophy in the following terms: ‘In principle, though not in practice, the world is good. The evil that pervades history is a blight, ultimately alien to the world as such. But increasingly for some the outlook on life darkened; the very origin of the world was attributed to a terrible fault, and evil was given status as the ultimate ruler of the world, not just a usurpation of authority. Hence the only hope seemed to reside in escape... And for some a mystical inwardness undistracted by external factors came to be the only way to attain the repose, the overview, the merger into the All which is the destiny of one’s spark of the divine.’ (See J.M. Robinson, Introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1977: 4).

In the Gnostic conception there is a clear divide between the spiritual world which is good, and the physical world which is evil, that is to say, a clear demarcation between the cosmic and the divine on the one hand, and the physical, or material, on the