Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation

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Historians of religion have long noted the intricate nexus of myth and ritual: The function of ritual is to instantiate a particular myth, which in turn provides the symbolic narrative that informs and organizes the practitioner's behavior in the world. Through ritual performance, therefore, the individual inscribes the mythic belief in the spatio-temporal world. One may challenge the universal application of this nexus to different religious societies, but it is beyond question that the relationship between myth and ritual as delineated above can be applied legitimately to the history of kabbalistic speculation in which the supreme importance accorded normative halakhic practice is upheld. Even the antinomian tendencies, latent in some early sources and actualized in the Sabbatian and Frankist heresies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are dialectically related to the normative impulse: Abrogation of the law was perceived as the ultimate means to fulfill it. As a number of scholars have pointed out in recent years, in the literature of theosophic kabbalah the traditional commandments

1 The point was well recognized by Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1969), pp. 132–133: “the Kabbalists strove from the very first to anchor the ritual of Rabbinical Judaism in myth by means of a mystical practice” (author's emphasis).

were seen as the principle way that the human being interacts with and is influenced by the divine. Viewed from this vantage point, it seems to me entirely apt to use the technical theological term “sacrament” to describe the kabbalistic understanding of ritual. That is, according to the mainstream approach adopted by theosophic kabbalists, the ritual served as the symbolic embodiment through which the divine permeates the social sphere of the practitioner at the same time that the practitioner gains phenomenal access to the realm of the divine. By participating in the rite with the proper mystical intentionality, the individual not only connects with God, but acts upon God. At the same time, however, the one who performs the rite symbolically embodies, or better signifies, the sacred secret of the divine power operating in the world. Sacramentality thus entails the mutual empowerment of God and human as the one is manifest through the other by virtue of the symbolizing function of the ritual.

But the scope of theurgic efficacy is not limited to the human relationship to God; it extends to the various potencies of the Godhead. Indeed, the anthropocentric and the theocentric perspectives are not easily distinguishable in the kabbalistic explanations of the commandments. Not only is it the case that the kabbalists presume that what God does effects humanity just as what humanity does effects God, but the very imaging of the one reflects the imaging of the other. The ritualization of myth and the mythicization of ritual are interweaving patterns of mystical piety.
