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Hanegraaff, W.J.

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# Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival

edited by

Boaz Huss



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## Contents

Contributors	7
Preface	13
From Neo-Hasidism to Outreach Yeshivot: The Origins of the Movements of Renewal and Return to Tradition Yaakov Ariel	17
Performing Kabbalah in the Jewish Renewal Movement Chava Weissler	39
Self, Identity and Healing in the Ritual of Jewish Spiritual Renewal in Israel Rachel Werczberger	75
The Contemporary Renaissance of Braslov Hasidism: Ritual, <i>Tiqqun</i> and Messianism Zvi Mark	101
Towards the Study of the Spiritual-Mystical Renaissance in the Contemporary Ashkenazi Haredi World in Israel Jonathan Garb	117
Building a Sanctuary of the Heart: The Kabbalistic-Pietistic Teachings of Itamar Schwartz Elliot R. Wolfson	141
The Boundaries of the Kabbalah: R. Yaakov Moshe Hillel and the Kabbalah in Jerusalem Jonatan Meir	163
Kabbalah for the Gentiles: Diverse Souls and Universalism in Contemporary Kabbalah Jody Myers	181
Toward a Social Psychology of Spirituality Philip Wexler	213
Yoga and Kabbalah as World Religions? A Comparative Perspective on Globalization of Religious Resources Véronique Altglas	233

Kabbalah in <i>Gnosis</i> Magazine (1985-1999) Wouter J. Hanegraaff	251
Paganism: Negotiating between Esotericism and Animism under the Influence of Kabbalah Graham Harvey	267
Radical Religious Zionism from the Collective to the Individual Shlomo Fischer	285
Precursors to Postmodern Spirituality in Israeli Cultural Ethos Tamar Katriel	311
Between Universalism and Relativism: The Acquiring of a Continuously Liberating Self by Buddha-Dhamma Israeli Practitioners Joseph Loss	329
Contemporary Kabbalah and its Challenge to the Academic Study of Jewish Mysticism Boaz Huss	357

# Kabbalah in *Gnosis* Magazine (1985-1999)

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

## Religionism and Western Esotericism

In the autumn of 1985, a Californian non-profit organization called the Lumen Foundation published the first issue of a popular journal that would continue to exist for fifteen years, until its abrupt and unexpected discontinuation in 1999.<sup>1</sup> The Lumen Foundation had been founded one year earlier by Jay Kinney, a former underground cartoonist and anarchistic countercultural thinker born in 1950. In his opening editorial, Kinney explained that the magazine was born from the combined efforts of a “varied group of individuals scattered across North America”, most of whom had never met face-to-face, but who shared the belief that a periodical was needed for exploring what he called “the esoteric spiritual traditions of the West”:<sup>2</sup>

We discovered that, in essence, the same vital teachings and methods of growth and illumination that have been sought in distant cultures have been present, all along, in our own back yard. Because of persecution from orthodox religious authorities, the threads of these traditions have often been hidden, sometimes broken, but have invariably surfaced when social conditions have allowed.<sup>3</sup>

From the introductory lines just quoted, several basic assumptions shared by Kinney and his collaborators are immediately apparent. They would continue to dominate the journal during the fifteen years of its existence, and should therefore be spelled out explicitly here.

The first one is *universalism*: it is implied that the various spiritual

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1 The decision to discontinue the journal was taken not for lack of success, but as the result of an unfortunate combination of events on personal and financial levels, which coincided unexpectedly during the height of the “dotcom bubble” in the Bay Area (Jay Kinney, personal communication, March 2008).

2 Kinney, “Introducing Gnosis Magazine”, *Gnosis* 1 (1985): 1.

3 Ibid.

traditions of East and West may seem to be different at first sight, but actually participate in one universal wisdom tradition grounded in the quest for gnosis. This assumption naturally led to a second, namely *the primacy of the inner*: behind the merely external surface of religious institutions or dogmas, which create confusion, division and strife, there is an abiding esoteric or “inner” dimension based upon the unity and eternal validity of spiritual truth. For Kinney and most members of his network of authors, the terms “inner” and “esoteric” were synonyms from the outset, and hence the journal was very appropriately called *Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions*. The third basic assumption made by Kinney and his collaborators may be referred to here as *counter-culturalism*: the “inner traditions” of the West were understood as parts of what might be called a traditional “counterculture”, the representatives of which had always been at odds with dominant society, and had been persecuted by reigning orthodoxies. In other words, inner traditions were assumed to be almost inevitably heretical.

Fourth, and finally, there was a further corollary to this approach, *anti-academicism*, which was expressed with great eloquence by Joscelyn Godwin in the next issue of *Gnosis*. His article was called “Priests, Professors, & Gurus: When the Academy is a Church the Hermetic Professor becomes a Heretic”, and had originated as a public address to a new organization called the “Hermetic Academy” at the 1984 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. Because I consider it a key text, I will discuss it here at some length. Godwin stated that “the medieval Church as it dominated European life for a thousand years until its power vanished in the Age of Reason” had “reappeared in America as the modern University”. This “Church of Academe”. as he called it, was addressing a superstitious audience that had been “brainwashed” by its own folk-religion, television; it had its own priesthood of professors, its own ordination ceremonies, its own confessions (in the form of examinations), and so on. But this New Church, as Godwin saw it, was actually a sorry parody of its original model: while it continued to function as an institution of domination and control, it had no true doctrine, theology or metaphysics, but only “a woolly humanism”: “like a spectre it lacks the higher principles of soul and spirit”. The Church of Academe knew only the “horizontal”

dimension of a stupid democratic egalitarianism, because it had lost the “vertical dimension” of metaphysical certainty.<sup>4</sup>

If such a vertical dimension were ever to be restored to academic studies, Godwin wrote, the natural sciences “would abandon the mechanistic and materialist dogmas”, the social sciences “could be transfigured if they granted Man a soul and Humanity a spiritual destiny”, and the Humanities would “stand guard over the treasures of archeology, language, philosophy, religion, and all the arts”; in short, “the whole University would become a Hermetic Academy”. But sadly, Godwin continued, it would of course be highly naïve to expect any such esoteric reform of the academy to actually take place. Still, he suggested that “If the Hermetic Academician can teach his subject with the vertical dimension always in mind ... he can help to undo the damage of his colleagues who are teaching as if it did not exist”. In other words, such a “hermetic academician” could work as a kind of undercover agent in the occupied territory of the modern academy, which without the vertical dimension, “deserves no more than to vanish, as ghosts do, with the coming of the dawn”.<sup>5</sup>

Godwin’s feelings of contempt for the modern academy could not possibly have been formulated more sharply; and his article is all the more remarkable because, in the decades to come, he would actually establish a well-deserved reputation for himself as one of the most knowledgeable and articulate scholars in the modern academic study of Western esotericism.<sup>6</sup> The question of to what extent he would still subscribe to his 1984 address today, twenty-four years later,<sup>7</sup> is less

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4 All quotations from Joscelyn Godwin, “Priests, Professors, & Gurus: When the Academy is a Church the Hermetic Professor becomes a Heretic”, *Gnosis* 2 (1986): 34-38.

5 Ibid.

6 See for example Joscelyn Godwin, *Arktos: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism, and Nazi Survival* (Grand Rapids, 1993); *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, 1994); *Music and the Occult: French Musical Philosophies 1750-1950* (Rochester, 1996); *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (London, 2002). All of these are academic studies of high quality, without much evidence of the characteristic “religionist” tone and perspective.

7 That Godwin has not essentially changed his mind is suggested by a recent collection of articles for the general market, originally published in *Lapis* magazine, and re-published by a theosophical rather than an academic publisher: Joscelyn Godwin, *The Golden Thread: The Ageless Wisdom of the Western*



important here than the observation that it perfectly represented a perspective on the study of Western esotericism that has been quite dominant in this field since the 1960s and has only gradually begun to decline – although it has by no means vanished – since the early 1990s, when the academic study of this field finally began to make serious headway.<sup>8</sup> I would argue that *Gnosis* was one of the most characteristic and influential manifestations of the previously dominant “religionist” and counter-culturalist perspective on Western esotericism as an academic field of research; and this is why it deserves to be studied as a historical and cultural phenomenon.

In earlier publications I have explained why, for all its good intentions, precisely this “religionist”/counter-culturalist approach to the study of Western esotericism has been the main obstacle academic research in this field has needed to overcome. A perspective as represented by Godwin in 1986 is indeed incompatible with the critical and historical perspectives of the modern academy:

- 1) The modern study of Western esotericism emphasizes historical detail, specificity and difference against trans- or meta-historical claims of spiritual universality.
- 2) Its understanding of the term “esotericism” is not based upon – on the contrary, it explicitly demarcates itself from – the traditionalist notion of an “inner” spiritual dimension.

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*Mystery Tradition* (Wheaton and Chennai, 2007). This volume ends with the observation that “the transcendent philosophy” is nowadays more easily available than ever before: “Knowledge has been put into our hands that was once the closely guarded property of initiates, together with the freedom to discuss and follow it without fear of being executed for heresy. [But] the price we pay for this historically unique situation is living in the modern world, in which the lunatics quite obviously are running the asylum”. The philosopher, however, knows that there is also “the timeless, the secret place from which all this can be surveyed with mild amusement, as a flutter on the surface of the ocean”.

- 8 For the main outlines of this development, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Study of Western Esotericism: New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture”, *New Approaches to the Study of Religion I: Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches*, eds. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz & Randi R. Warne (Berlin and New York, 2004), 589-519. On “religionism” and its ambivalent role in the development of the study of Western esotericism, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity”, *Aries* 1:1 (2001): 5-37; idem, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge, 2012; forthcoming).

- 3) Over the years it has demonstrated again and again that the notion of a quasi-autonomous “esoteric counterculture” fails to do justice to the historical complexity of this domain, which does not really exist as some tradition “out there” but is understood much more helpfully as a theoretical construct that highlights important but previously neglected dimensions of Western culture.
- 4) Perhaps most importantly, the modern study of Western esotericism thoroughly accepts the critical methods of modern academic research and historiography, while rejecting any suggestion that scholars should be closet esotericists, concerned – like a kind of spiritual undercover agents – to use their external academic identity for helping restore a “vertical dimension” to the university. This does not mean that scholars in the field may not have sympathies for or allegiances with certain esoteric beliefs in their personal life: the fact is that many of them do. But the rule is that they try to keep this separate from their work as scholars.

One must therefore conclude that the essential perspective which inspired *Gnosis* represents the very antithesis of how most academics nowadays believe the field should be studied, and of how it has in fact come to be studied increasingly since the early 1990s. But none of this implies that *Gnosis* would deserve to be dismissed on its own terms, on the contrary: between 1985 and 1999 the journal quickly developed into a thoroughly enjoyable and often fascinating magazine full of valuable information and of remarkably high quality, actually taking a position halfway between the kind of uninformed superficiality commonly associated with the New Age on the one hand, and strict academic research on the other. The editors and contributors were explicit in distancing themselves from both extremes. In a particularly interesting editorial of 1993, editor Richard Smoley acknowledged that some readers seemed to wish for *Gnosis* to move more explicitly in an academic direction, and proceeded with some observations that make the ambivalent identity of his journal explicit:

This idea takes on more life as reputable scholars – particularly in Europe – are paying more attention to the esoteric, or, as the current jargon has it, “gnostic” sub-current in Western civilization. Personally I feel a strong ambivalence about the professors’

interest in esoteric spirituality. On the one hand ... scholarly inquiry does have a lot of light to shed on historical issues. On the other hand, it's also true that, like Rappaccini's daughter, the professors' touch can prove poisonous. I have a degree in philosophy myself, so I have firsthand experience of how academic hairsplitting and pettifogging disputes over the meanings of words have all but killed that discipline. ... So I'm not entirely sure that academic inquiry will really do justice to the spiritual traditions of the West, particularly since scholastics ... have been notoriously bad at distinguishing intellectual knowledge from the deeper, experiential understanding called "gnosis".<sup>9</sup>

What we see here is that even in the context of a journal for the general market, at least one of the editors felt a need to demarcate its identity against the apparent demand by some readers for a more "academic" approach.<sup>10</sup> The paradox of *Gnosis* is that in spite of its ultimately anti-academic background agenda, due to the quality of many of its authors it has actually contributed considerably to the setting of academic standards in a field where university chairs or curricula devoted to Western esotericism were still absent, and which at the time was still largely dominated by sensationalism and plain ignorance.

### Scope, Contents, Contributors

So what were the actual contents of *Gnosis*? The basic formula remained the same during the fifteen years of its existence. Apart from a highly interesting book review section and an often fascinating opening section with letters to the editors and responses from them, each issue was

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9 Smoley, "Are you serious?" *Gnosis* 28 (1993): 1.

10 I am grateful to Jay Kinney for calling my attention to an implied distinction between "scholarship" (which was always encouraged) and "academicism": "What we took issue with was an 'academic' approach where 'academic' is synonymous with only publishing that which is acceptable in the context of the Academy, where the only valid citations are those made to other academic sources" (personal communication, 14 October 2008). By means of the present footnote I hope to have demonstrated that my own understanding of "academicism" is more liberal.

focused on a specific theme, and most issues contained interviews with major authors or personalities, preferably connected to that theme. The editors began with some obvious candidates: the first issue was devoted to Gnosticism, the second to Magic and Tradition, and already the third one to Kabbalah. An overview of the themes for all the fifty-one issues in the life of the journal gives in impression of its scope:

1. Gnosticism	18. The Middle Ages	35. America
2. Magic & Tradition	19. The Trickster	36. The Inner Planes
3. Kabbalah	20. Gurdjieff & Fourth Way	37. 10 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue
4. Heresies & Heretics	21. Holy War	38. The Stars
5. Oracles & Channeling	22. Dreams	39. East & West
6. Secret Societies	23. Gnosticism Revisited	40. Hermeticism
7. Esoteric Spirituality	24. Saints & Scoundrels	41. Cosmic Joke
8. Alchemy	25. Groups & Communities	42. Death & the Afterlife
9. Northern Mysteries	26. Psychedelics	43. Love Sacred & Profane
10. Jung & the Unconscious	27. Sacred Art & Music	44. Freemasonry
11. Ritual	28. Polytheism	45. Esoteric Christianity
12. Sects & Schisms	29. The Body	46. Divination
13. The Goddess	30. Sufism	47. Prayer & Meditation
14. The Dark Side	31. Russia & Eastern Europe	48. Witchcraft & Paganism
15. Ancient Civilizations	32. Pop Culture & Esoteric	49. New Age
16. Orthodoxy	33. The Earth	50. Good & Evil
17. Sex & Spirituality	34. Healing	51. The Grail

To regular subscribers, the range of these themes alone would have made clear how large the domain of the “Western Inner Traditions” really was.

Although many authors contributed to *Gnosis* over the years, some of them have put a particularly strong stamp on it. The first who must be mentioned in that regard is Richard Smoley, who started out contributing to the journal as a reviewer of books on Kabbalah in the 3<sup>rd</sup> issue, became a regular author in the issues to follow, and finally became main editor next to Jay Kinney from 1991 on until the final issue. In the very year the magazine came to an end, Kinney and Smoley published a book together, which perfectly reflects the *Gnosis* perspective, as already indicated by the title: *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions*. The same characteristic perspective also informed Smoley’s 2002 volume *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition*.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the inner/outer concept has always remained central to them.

Next to Kinney and Smoley, we might note a few of the other key authors who helped define the *Gnosis* perspective over the years: David Fideler (an author particularly interested in Platonic and Pythagorean cosmology, editor of a separate series called *Alexandria* and founder of Phanes Press), Ya‘qub ibn Yusuf (a Jewish Sufi), Stephan Hoeller (a well-known Jungian neo-gnostic author), Chas Clifton (a neo-pagan writer who nowadays runs the academic journal *The Pomegranate*), and Adam McLean (a specialist of alchemy who runs a massive website on that field). Among the many contributors who were less centrally involved in the journal but clearly connected to its network and sympathetic to its perspectives we find such well-known academics in the field as Joscelyn Godwin (already discussed) and Arthur Versluis (another well-known and highly productive scholar with an explicit religionist agenda, founder of the American *Association for the Study of Esotericism* and editor of the online journal *Esoterica*). This list is far from exhaustive. My main point here is to show the overlap between the *Gnosis* network with its religionist/counter-culturalist agenda, and

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11 Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney, *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions* (Wheaton, 2006; orig. 1999); Richard Smoley, *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition* (Boston and London, 2002).

the development leading toward the current academic study of Western esotericism.

In this context it is relevant, finally, to mention the extensive interview with the undisputed Nestor of the academic study of Western esotericism Antoine Faivre, in the spring issue of 1994. In general, the number of academic scholars interviewed by *Gnosis* over the years always remained relatively small: the Gnosticism specialist Gilles Quispel appeared in the first issue,<sup>12</sup> followed by the investigator of New Religious Movements J. Gordon Melton in the fourth,<sup>13</sup> the philosopher and Gurdjieff specialist Jacob Needleman in the twentieth,<sup>14</sup> and the psychologist and pioneer of altered states of consciousness Charles Tart in issue twenty-eight.<sup>15</sup> The only two other academics apart from Faivre were Huston Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr: both vocal defenders of the perennialist or traditionalist view and therefore perfectly compatible with the journal's general orientation.

Faivre's appearance on the pages of *Gnosis* in 1994 had therefore a certain symbolic significance, as he represented the (at that time) new trend of academic research of Western esotericism, mainly among European scholars. He was interviewed by the two principal editors, Kinney and Smoley, and it is extremely interesting to see with how much skill and elegance Faivre parried their attempts to discover some "inner" side to the outer persona of the university professor. At their question of whether the academic study of Western esotericism might "pose a threat to its authenticity",<sup>16</sup> Faivre answered that in any case one has to know and study the sources first, and what one chooses to do with them in one's personal life is anyone's free choice; and when presented with a concept of esotericism as the "path inward" he flatly responded that the reverse is true, emphasizing instead that in esoteric contexts one learns to know oneself as the micro-cosmos by means of

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12 Christopher Farmer, "An Interview with Gilles Quispel", *Gnosis* 1 (1985): 27-29.

13 Jay Kinney, "The Gnosis Interview: J. Gordon Melton", *Gnosis* 4 (1987): 20-22.

14 Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney, "The Essence of the Work: An Interview with Jacob Needleman", *Gnosis* 20 (1991): 30-35.

15 Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney, "One Path or Many? The Gnosis Interview with Charles Tart", *Gnosis* 28 (1993): 31-37.

16 Smoley and Kinney, "What is Esotericism? The *Gnosis* Interview with Antoine Faivre", *Gnosis* 31 (1994): 62-68.

studying its correspondences in the external world, the macro-cosmos.<sup>17</sup> Generally speaking, what we see in this interview is the confrontation between Godwin's "Hermetic Academy" on the one hand, and the new surge of European academic scholarship on the other; a confrontation, by the way, that had been going on in the context of the American Academy of Religion as well, eventually resulting in a split between the traditionalists and the historians.<sup>18</sup>

### **Kabbalah in *Gnosis* Magazine**

From the specific perspective of "Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival", *Gnosis* is a good entrance point for exploring the question of how things kabbalistic – or perceived as such – are understood by a general audience which is primarily interested not so much in Judaism or Jewish kabbalah *per se*, but is attracted by the romantic notion that behind the façade of official religious institutions and theologies, which are no longer experienced as inspiring or authoritative, there is a "hidden truth" that may be capable of giving a deeper meaning to human existence. Such a quest is widespread in contemporary society and accounts for much of the attraction of esoteric ideas and traditions in the widest sense, including kabbalistic ones, and clearly found expression in *Gnosis*.

To some extent, what we find in the journal as far as the Jewish dimension is concerned looks like a 1980s/1990s continuation of the milieu described by Herbert Weiner in his well-known 1969 paperback *9 1/2 Mystics*.<sup>19</sup> Particularly in its earlier years, and largely under the influence of Ya'qub ibn Yusuf, there was a strong presence in *Gnosis* of the Ḥavurah and Jewish Renewal movements around the "outreach rabbis" Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Shlomo Carlebach, who were both interviewed at length. A second and relatively distinct influence came from what Christine Meilicke has referred to as the "counterculture kabbalists";<sup>20</sup> while this movement had flourished since the 1950s and

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17 Ibid., 64.

18 Hanegraaff, "The Study of Western Esotericism", 505.

19 Herbert Weiner, *9 1/2 Mystics: The Kabbala Today* (New York, 1969).

20 Christine Meilicke, "Abulafianism among the Counterculture Kabbalists", *Reuchlin und seine Erben: Forscher, Denker, Ideologen und Spinner*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Irina Wandrey (Ostfildern, 2005), 319-336.

faded away in the mid-1970s, one of its central figures, David Meltzer, came to play a significant role in *Gnosis*, not least by calling the attention of its readership to the new school of Kabbalah research introduced by Moshe Idel. A third focus of Kabbalah in the journal circled around the work of Warren Kenton, a.k.a. Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, who is present particularly in the later 1990s period.<sup>21</sup> A fourth direction of kabbalistic interest – but not as prominent as one would perhaps expect in a magazine of this kind – was represented by the occultist Kabbalah in the tradition of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and similar currents. Finally a fifth approach, partly overlapping with the former, and represented most clearly by Edward Hoffman, was interested in Kabbalah mainly as a psychological and psychotherapeutic tool. Apart from these currents, one notes a steady interest, throughout the lifetime of *Gnosis*, for a variety of special topics such as Ḥasidism, the Shekhinah, devekut, Jewish oracles, Abraham Abulafia, and so on. Closer to the “fringe” side, there were also a few suggestions such as that the kabbalistic doctrine might shed some light on dark matter speculation in physics,<sup>22</sup> or that the “seven worlds” described in certain talmudic texts have something to do with extraterrestrial contact.<sup>23</sup>

To begin with my first category: the special Kabbalah issue of *Gnosis* (1986-1987) contained a long interview with Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, which, interestingly enough, breathes a 1960s atmosphere more strongly than almost anything else I have come across in the entire journal. The reader seems to be transported back to the time of the psychedelic revolution and the Summer of Love. The interviewer, Ya'qub ibn Yusuf, introduced Schachter as “the Rebbe behind the Rebbe – the Teacher who was the inspiration behind the many charismatic rabbis and teachers who had turned me on”; and

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21 Smoley had first met Kenton in a Kabbalah study group while studying philosophy at Oxford in the late 1970s: see Smoley, *The Dice Game of Shiva: How Consciousness Creates the Universe* (Novato, 2009), xxiii.

22 Dennis Stillings, “Invasion of the Archetypes”, *Gnosis* 10 (1989): 37-38.

23 Barry Chamish, “Did the Jewish Mystics Meet Space Brothers?”, *Gnosis* 39 (1996): 10-11. Another rather extreme opinion can be found in Timothy O'Neill, “Magic's Roots”, *Gnosis* 2 (1986): 9, which draws direct connections between Kabbalah and Shamanism.



continued by relating how at the time he first met him, Schachter “was taking LSD with Tim Leary and proclaiming that psychedelics and game theory were the two great challenges that modern Judaism had to address”.<sup>24</sup> The interview itself was a lengthy and rambling affair, in which the two men talked about everything, including the Age of Aquarius and the preceding ages, Ken Wilber’s transpersonal psychology, holistic and evolutionary theories, computer software, and the future of Hasidism. Applying the popular idea of the holographic paradigm, Schachter suggested that each part of the *sefirotic* tree contains the whole tree. Talking of the “trash” or “pop” Kabbalah coming out of the “head” bookshops, he said to have been surprised at how much he liked occultists such as Dion Fortune or William Gray, and concluded that perhaps “Anglo-Qabalah is not so bad”.

Oddly enough, this interview with a former Lubavitcher rabbi of Austrian descent who had survived the Holocaust, and which has “tradition” as its central theme, is perhaps the most untraditional contribution in the entire *Gnosis* issue devoted to Kabbalah. The 1990 interview with the other important “outreach rabbi”, Shlomo Carlebach did not touch on Kabbalah even once, and was far more down to earth – except for the sudden and unexpected closing sentences, which are so extremely formulated as to deserve quotation in full. The interviewer asked his opinion of the New Age, and Carlebach responded:

New Age is unbelievable. New Age is most people whose consciousness is so much higher, so much more refined, maybe because they have finally undertaken and understood a certain spiritual path, or maybe not – maybe from inside. There is something about them so sensitive, so deep. You know, it is clear to me that whatever my grandmother wanted of God, my children want more of God. And that “more”, there are not yeshivas for it yet. And we need it so badly.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Ya‘qub ibn Yusuf, “Transmitting the Software of Tradition: The Past, Present, and Future – and the Hi-Tech Metaphor. Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in conversation with Ya‘qub ibn Yusuf”, *Gnosis* 3 (1986-1987): 18-24, here 18.

25 Micha Odenheimer, “On Orthodoxy: An Interview with Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach”, *Gnosis* 16 (1990): 46-49, here 49.

Apart from the Schachter interview, the Kabbalah issue contained no such extreme statements. There were short and generally reliable introductions to Kabbalah by Jay Kinney<sup>26</sup> and Pinchas Giller (an Orthodox rabbi from Israel, then working on his doctorate in Berkeley, and now a professor of Kabbalah at the American Jewish University), another representative of the generation influenced by Carlebach. In his contribution he emphasized that modern scholarship dominated by historiography is “largely unsuccessful in portraying its inner nature”,<sup>27</sup> because it tends to overlook the meaning of its images and symbols. One article reproduced a long passage from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook,<sup>28</sup> and another reproduced and commented upon a story by Reb Nahman of Bratzlav.<sup>29</sup> David Fideler found connections with the Adam Kadmon in Greek sources,<sup>30</sup> and Jay Kinney introduced the numerical/mathematical theories of Stan Tenen and the Meru Foundation.<sup>31</sup> Most typical of the “Western tradition” context was an article by Stephan A. Hoeller on the evocation of “Tartarean spirits” by means of a Jungian/occultist brand of practical Kabbalah,<sup>32</sup> and a contribution by Edward Hoffman about Kabbalah as a psychological “doorway to the mind”.<sup>33</sup>

I have already mentioned David Meltzer as an ambassador for Moshe Idel’s work, which of course fitted the special interest of the “countercultural kabbalists” in Abraham Abulafia. I have also referred to the occultist Kabbalah associated with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and similar traditions. In contributions explicitly devoted

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- 26 Jay Kinney, “A Capsule History of Kabbalah”, *Gnosis* 3 (1986/1987): 6-7.  
 27 Pinchas Giller, “Kabbalah & Jewish Mysticism: An Overview”, *Gnosis* 3 (1986-1987): 10-12, here 10.  
 28 Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, “A Thirst for the Living God”, *Gnosis* 3 (1986-1987): 13-15.  
 29 Reb Nahman of Bratzlav and Ya‘qub ibn Yusuf, “The Portrait of the King”, *Gnosis* 2 (1986-1987): 26-29.  
 30 David Fideler, “The Celestial Man of Light”, *Gnosis* 2 (1986-1987): 25.  
 31 Jay Kinney, “A Higher Geometry: The Unique Kabbalistic Research of the Meru Foundation”, *Gnosis* 2 (1986-1987): 34-35.  
 32 Stephan A. Hoeller, “Evocation: An Example of Kabbalistic Magic”, *Gnosis* 2 (1986-1987): 30-33.  
 33 Edward Hoffman, “The Kabbalah: Doorway to the Mind”, and “The City of the Just: A Meditative Exercise”, *Gnosis* 2 (1986-1987): 16-17.

to Kabbalah its presence is less dominant than one might perhaps expect: generally, the editors and authors seemed well aware of the difference between Jewish Kabbalah and its non-Jewish interpretation. But references to “Kabbalah” do, of course, turn up in various contributions devoted to occultism specifically.

More interesting for our concerns here is the strong presence, in the later issues of *Gnosis*, of Warren Kenton, a.k.a. Z’ev ben Shimon Halevi. What seems to have made his particular approach congenial to this readership is the fact that he combined Kabbalah with psychology, and thereby changed it into a system that could be given practical application by individuals in their personal life. In an article published in an issue of 1991, Halevi turned the *sefirotic* tree into a psychological system, and found close correspondences with the system of Gurdjieff. His conclusion said it all: Kabbalah and the Gurdjieff system “are part of a network that disseminates the perennial philosophy or Torah to any who wish to work upon their souls”.<sup>34</sup> In other contributions to *Gnosis* as well, Halevi emphasized this firm belief in the universality of “inner wisdom:” a foundational belief, as I pointed out above, basic to *Gnosis* as such. A perhaps even stronger emphasis on psychology – or rather, psychotherapy – is found, finally, in the many contributions by Edward Hoffman. In a highly typical contribution from 1995, he assigned a direct psychological content to each of the ten *sefirot*, and advised his readers to make a *sefirotic* checklist for keeping track of which qualities were over-respectively underrepresented in one’s personal life.<sup>35</sup>

This much for the main lines along which Kabbalah is present in *Gnosis*. Given the high profile of Madonna and the Kabbalah Center in current popular culture and academic scholarship, there is perhaps a risk of overlooking the broader context of popular American and

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34 Z’ev ben Shimon Halevi, “Gurdjieff & Kabbalah: How Gurdjieff’s System Relates to the Tree of Life”, *Gnosis* 20 (1991): 42-45, here 45. See also the interview with Halevi in 1997: “There is no higher religion than truth. There’s what’s called the perennial teaching. It turns up in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Zen, Hinduism, it’s exactly the same” (Frank Donnola, “Contemporary Kabbalah: An Interview with Z’ev ben Shimon Halevi”, *Gnosis* 43 [1997]: 60-63, here 63).

35 Edward Hoffman, “Light from Ten Spheres: A Kabbalistic Self-Inventory with the Tree of Life”, *Gnosis* 36 (1995): 40-43.

European interest in all things kabbalistic. The “inner traditions” perspective of *Gnosis* is representative of spiritual attitudes and milieus which have a very broad popular appeal and should be taken seriously as a domain of further research. In closing, it is relevant to refer here to an article by Richard Smoley of 1998, where the Kabbalah Center makes its first appearance on the pages of the journal. It begins as follows:

It’s a rainy January night, and I’m sitting in a penthouse lecture room in San Francisco’s fashionable Laurel Village district. ... We’re listening to a talk on the Kabbalah. The lecturer is young, probably younger than most of the people in the room, and he expounds certain themes of Isaac Luria’s kabbalah ... in a booming, self-assured voice. If not for his *yarmulke* and Israeli accent, I feel I could almost be listening to a sermon by a preacher in the Bible Belt.<sup>36</sup>

The lecture is, of course, one sponsored by the Kabbalah Center, and Smoley admits that he has “an impulse to snicker: how can mass culture do any justice to a mystical teaching renowned for its obscurity and remoteness?” At further reflection, however, he concludes that such an impulse might reflect an elitist and exclusivist attitude which wishes to reserve Kabbalah to Jews only, and deny it to the rest of the world. He continues by discussing such phenomena as Christian and occultist Kabbalah, and even the idea that the Kabbalah might have non-Jewish origins, and finally finds himself “fantasizing about a general Kabbalistic conference, in which all those who feel themselves to be part of the tradition, whether Jewish, Christian, Pagan, or none of the above, can meet and talk as human beings and adults”.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion

*Gnosis* intended to provide a podium for such discussion. Smoley’s ambiguity perfectly reflects the situation in which the journal found itself generally: too critical and well-informed for being satisfied with

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36 Richard Smoley, “The Kabbalah: Whom Is It For?”, *Gnosis* 47 (1998): 10-11, here 10.

37 Ibid, 11.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

an easy New Age “esotericism for the masses”, and yet far too universalist to accept any suggestion – whether by Jews, or academics, or both – that the wisdom of the “inner traditions” might not be readily accessible to every seeker. The magazine run by him and Jay Kinney remains an important source for historians of alternative spirituality, as a treasure-trove of materials that reflect the deep ambivalences of supposedly “hidden wisdom” now unveiled and brought to the masses in the media age.