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The Occult Philosophy in the Elisabethan Age by Frances A. Yates

Review by: Moshe Idel

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wear his deep (though anything but orthodox) faith on his sleeve. The big bad rational historico-philological scholar once confided “I simply can’t understand how anyone can doubt the reality of God”, and on another occasion he said “I don’t know what it was, but the ancient kabbalists knew something we don’t know”.

Scholem’s achievement is thus not merely a matter of professional interest to historians of religion. It was a vital contribution to the self-searchings and inner struggles of 20th century Jewry in one of its stormiest and most tragic periods. Hence the powerful impact of Scholem’s work which confronted post-emancipation Jewish culture with an alternative and absolutely novel “dialectical” view of the nature of Jewish history. Scholem and his researches thus became major factors in the shaping of a new and dialectical self-perception and self-understanding of Judaism.

It is this aspect of Scholem’s work and influence which is the subject of Dr Biale’s book. And whilst the preceding paragraphs were no “review” of Biale’s study, they at least tried to indicate what the book is about. It is a thorough, penetrating and very fine, though not uncontroversial, piece of work, of the utmost interest to anyone concerned with Scholem the Jew, the Zionist and the *engagé* student of Jewish History (as distinct from Scholem the historian of Judaism — area of concentration: history of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism).

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YATES, FRANCES A., *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* — London/Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul/Henley, 1979, pp. 217.*

The place where Jewish and Christian theologians usually met during the Middle Ages, was the arena of public religious debate; in the Renaissance it was the private study. This change is highly significant; Judaism was understood by certain humanists to be not only a rival religion, but also, in its innermost essence—i.e. the Kabbalah—an expression of an ancient theology, of which Christianity was the highest and best expression. The interest in the Kabbalah, which coincided with the flowering of Neoplatonism and Hermetism in Florence, was the most important opening of Christianity to Judaism since their separation. 16th century thought, literature and, to a lesser degree, art, were heavily influenced by the amalgam of Kabbalah and late-antiquity Hellenistic thought. The full significance of the contribution of this new vein of thought to the intellectual atmosphere of the Renaissance, began to be appreciated only in our generation, when a new evaluation of the role played by Kabbalah and Hermetism emerged from the works of D. P. Walker and Frances A.

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Yates. A new world, in which magic and the occult were central factors, became more and more significant for an understanding of Pico della Mirandola, G. Bruno or T. Campanella in Italy, or J. Reuchlin, G. Agrippa of Nettesheim and A. Dürer in Germany. Dame Yates' book on the *Occult Philosophy in the Elisabethan Age* is a pioneering attempt to show that this philosophy played an important role also in England.

The book is divided in three main parts: the first one is a resumé of her and other scholars' researches on the occult philosophy in Italy and Germany. Though this part serves as an introduction, the author made what seems to me to be a substantial contribution to an understanding of the way concepts found in Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* changed into pictures painted by A. Dürer; according to Yates, Dürer's *Melancolia I* and *St. Jerome in his Study* are artistic representations of two of Agrippa's three forms of melancholy, the first picture representing the inspired artistic melancholy and the second one, the inspired intellectual melancholy.

The aim of the second part of the book is to show "that the dominant philosophy of the Elisabethan age was precisely the occult philosophy" (p. 75). Here we find the central thesis of the book: the thought and literature of this age cannot be properly understood without taking into account the influence of the Christian Kabbalah, and especially its magic side, on authors like J. Dee, F. Bacon, E. Spenser and W. Shakespeare, and the reaction against this influence in Marlowe's works. It seems to me that this thesis was, at least partially, already adumbrated in an important study of J. Blau, from which one sentence at least should be quoted here:¹

"I maintain that some Knowledge of the Cabala was one factor in the background of a great many educated Englishmen of the later sixteenth and all through the seventeenth century".

But, whereas Blau mainly deals with minor authors who, since the end of the 16th century, overtly mentioned the Kabbalah in their works, Yates analyzes the infiltrations of magic themes in works wherein the Kabbalah was not mentioned at all and which became well-known classics. The main motif in Yates' discussions is the magician as the protagonist of Elisabethan thought; she convincingly shows the importance of this figure, but in my view, the kabbalistic influence is overestimated. Even John Dee, the only author Yates was ready to describe as a "Christian Kabbalist", seems to be influenced only by the magic side of the occult philosophy, whereas the speculative part of this philosophy, including, *inter alia*, specific kabbalistic concepts like the Sefirot, is lacking in Dee's works as

discussed by Yates. The same problem occurs in Yates' analysis of Spencer as influenced by Neoplatonic Kabbalah (p. 107, 179);² the Neoplatonic and magic elements are obvious, but no specific kabbalistic term can be traced in the *Fairie Queene* or in her discussions of Shakespeare's *Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The Renaissance *magus* influenced by the figure and work of Agrippa, and the reverberations of his concept of melancholy, as well as the universal harmony of F. Giorgio are discussed in masterly fashion, but statements like "the influence of Christian Cabala, and particularly the influence of Giorgi, begin to seem fundamental for the main Jewish-Christian themes of the play [i.e. the *Merchant*] and its imagery" (p. 131) attribute to the Kabbalah a role much more central than it really played.³

The last part of the book deals with the rise of Hebraic themes, specially in the messianic movement as represented by Milton, and its connection with former "kabbalistic" trends as found in Spencer. The continuity of the occult philosophy in English culture: Dee, Spencer, Milton and the Rosicrucians is discussed, and the return of the Jews to England is presented as "the culmination of the gradual movement of a new attitude towards the Jews and their religion" (p. 184). This movement took place, as Yate emphasises (p. 183) "without the presence of Jews being acknowledged in England". This "extraordinary fact" (*idem*) may be seen in a proper perspective if we remember that in the earlier phases of the Renaissance, the scholars' avidity to study Kabbalah from first-hand sources, did not change their basic attitude to the Jews themselves: no clear Philosemitism flourished from the kabbalistic studies of Pico or Reuchlin.⁴ Moreover, their critic, Jean Bodin, who—unlike Reuchlin—was no student of the Kabbalah at all, had a far more favourable attitude to the Jews than e.g. Pico. It seems that personal contacts with Jews, even when they were private teachers, exerted very little influence on the Christian scholars' view of non-kabbalistic Judaism. If so, the interest in Jewish, occasionally kabbalistic, themes, especially among 17th century English authors, despite the lack of Jews in England, is not so surprising as might appear at first sight; the Renaissance scholars in Italy Germany or England were interested in Jewish "secret lore" but not in the fate of its bearers. It is more plausible to assume that the return of the Jews to England was the result of the Puritan Revolution rather than of the cumulative influence of the occult philosophy.

To conclude: Yates' contribution to a better understanding of the importance of the Renaissance background of Elisabethan culture, and especially its magic factor, is impressive, whereas the importance of its

kabbalistic components, suggested by the author, still remains to be proven by further and more detailed researches.

Dept. of Jewish Thought,
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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* The Editors record with profound sorrow the passing away, in October 1981, of Dame Frances Yates at the ripe age of eighty, after a lifetime of original and fruitful scholarship.

¹ J. L. Blau, "The Diffusion of the Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in English Literature", *Review of Religion* VI (1941-1942), pp. 153-154. Cf. also *idem*, p. 185: "The highest point of Cabalistic influence upon the writers of England came during the seventeenth century". Blau's paper contains some interesting quotations from discussion on the Kabbalah in 16th and 17th English literature, and should be taken into account in every further investigation of the subject. See also Blau's "Browne's Interest in Cabalism", *PMLA*, XLIX (1934).

² On p. 167, Yates mentions "underlying Cabalist themes of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*". This thesis was already presented by Denis Saurat, and Blau, in the paper mentioned above n. 1, writes (p. 157) "Saurat has gone beyond the evidence".

³ Yates was influenced by Daniel Banes' commentary on *The Merchant*, though she has certain reservations on his method of interpreting various figures in the play with the help of Sefirotic symbolism (p. 129). See also D. Banes, *Shakespeare, Shylock and Kabbalah* (Maryland, 1978), where the author tries to trace the influence of the Kabbalah to F. Giorgio's *Harmony of the World*. Though it is possible that Shakespeare might have been influenced by Giorgio, the peculiar subjects Banes pointed out are not specifically kabbalistic. Not everything a Kabbalist writes, a fortiori a Christian Kabbalist, has to be considered as Kabbalah! The Christian Kabbalah differs substantially and in many different ways from its Jewish sources, see R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Milton and the Conjectura Cabbalistica", *JWCI* 18 (1955), pp. 91-92. Yates was fully aware that the lack of adequate definition of the nature of Christian Kabbalah and its history, may spoil further discussions of its influence (p. 189).

⁴ On this point see H. Oberman's lecture "Three Sixteenth-Century Attitudes to Judaism: Reuchlin, Erasmus and Luther" read at *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century—an international colloquium at Harvard University, January 1980*.

HALPERIN, DAVID J. J., *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature*, American Oriental Series Volume 62 — New Haven, Connecticut, American Oriental Society, 1980, x + 212 p.

The student of ancient Jewish mysticism, that is the type of Jewish mysticism that developed in what is generally referred to as the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods (roughly between 200 B.C.E. - 500 C.E.), can now benefit from an increasing number of scholarly publications which are devoted to the subject and which display awareness of its relevance to the study and understanding of the cultural and religious milieu of what is

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