

Moshe Idel

Ascensions

on High

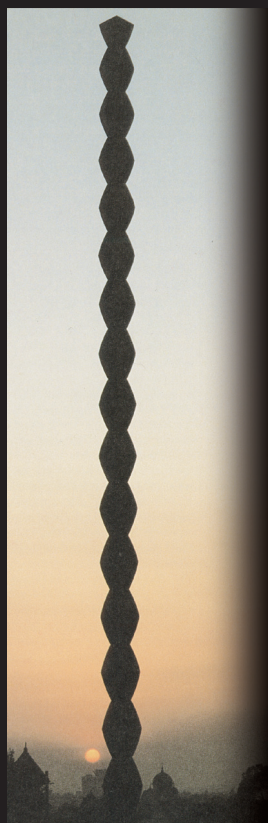
in Jewish

Mysticism

Pillars,

Lines,

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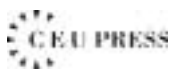
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Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders

Moshe Idel



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Preface

When Sorin Antohi kindly invited me to deliver the Ioan P. Culianu lectures at the Central European University in Budapest, the question was not whether or not to accept, but rather what would be the best subject matter. Psychanodia emerged naturally as a topic due to the centrality of this issue in Culianu's opus and because it remains on the margins of the study of Kabbalah and Hasidism. In fact, the first time I came across Culianu's name, I was writing a section of a book in which I addressed the ascent of the soul, and at the last moment, I read his *Psychanodia* and quoted it. In one of his last books, *Out of this World*, he referred to that section of mine, and this instance of inter-quotation prepared the ground for my choice of topic for the lecture series. In fact, chapter four of this book was delivered as a lecture at a conference organized in Paris in 1992 in Culianu's memory, appears here in an expanded version in English, and was translated, in a shorter form, into Romanian several years ago.

There is another dimension implicit in these lectures that goes beyond our common Moldavian background, our common interest in questions concerning experiences of ecstasy and psychanodia, about which we wrote in parallel in the late 1970s and 1980s, and our interest in the theories of Mircea Eliade, another scholar who contributed to some issues discussed in the following pages. The lectures I delivered represent for me a tribute to the memory of a good friend and of someone who dreamed of studying Kabbalah. I imagine that he would have written about these issues had the terror of history and the wickedness of man not forced him to pursue another scholarly and geographical direction. I tried to think in accordance with the categories of his thought and to highlight the potential contributions of his distinctions to a better understanding of some aspects of Jewish mysticism. In a way, I hope

that by rethinking some issues as though through his eyes or mind, I may introduce him to scholars who would otherwise miss his thought.

After Culianu's tragic death, I had the pleasure to meet his family in Bucharest: his mother Elena, his sister Tereza and his brother-in-law Dan Petrescu. For them Nene was much more than the academic star abroad, admired now by so many colleagues in Romania and worldwide; his was also and primarily an immense personal loss. I cherished very much the nocturnal discussions in their apartment, during which memories of Ioan mingled with my initiation to the intricacies of post-Ceaușescu Romania and the more recent cultural events in the country. Their hospitality and friendship meant very much to me.

I would like to thank Sorin Antohi for taking the initiative to establish this series of lectures, for arranging their publication, and for the warm friendship and hospitality that both he and Mona extended during my stay in Budapest for the lectures. Without his invitation, this book may never have been written, or alternatively, it would have been much longer and even less accessible than it is now.

Introduction

1. STUDYING RELIGION

There is no single method with which one can comprehensively approach “religion.”¹ All methods generate approximations based on insights, on implied psychologies, sometimes even on explicit theologies and ideologies. They assist us in understanding one or more aspects of a complex phenomenon that, in itself, cannot be explained by any single method. “Religion” is a conglomerate of ideas, cosmologies, beliefs, institutions, hierarchies, elites and rites that vary with time and place, even when one “single” religion is concerned. The methodologies available take one or two of these numerous aspects into consideration, reducing religion’s complexity to a rather simplistic unity.

The ensuing conclusion is a recommendation for methodological eclecticism. This recommendation is made not only due to the complexity of an evasive phenomenon (itself to a great extent the result of a certain definition) but also as a way to correct the mistakes and misunderstandings at which someone arrived using only one method. At least in principle, the inherent shortcomings of one method may be overcome by resorting to another. Since religion cannot be reified as an entity standing by itself, it would be wise not to subject it to analyses based on a single methodology.

This does not mean that I propose the reduction of religion to disparate and unconnected “moments.” But, for example, by emphasizing the differences between elite and popular religion, it may be assumed that specific religious ideas are more dominant in one elite than in another, or than in the masses. Sociological tools—sociology of religion or of knowledge—might help identify the background of the exponents of a certain set of ideas, which then might be compared to the social background of another elite. In both cases, there is nevertheless the need to explore religious ideas, which may lose their original affinity with a certain elite and migrate socially and geographically to other elites in other

cultural centers. In such cases, theories on reception, the history of ideas, intellectual history or cultural history might be more helpful in accounting for these developments. Or, to take another example, the emergence of ideas, concepts or beliefs might be investigated as the result of experiences, calling for the use of psychological theories, but attempts to study individuals within their changing environmental circumstances also might help explain these processes. Additionally, cognitive approaches might elucidate the emergence of a particular set of religious ideas, beliefs and rituals from the range of human spiritual possibilities. Religion, however, is also a philosophical system that does not necessarily remain the patrimony of a small number of people or social group. Much of religion is connected to processes of transmission and reception, of adaptation, of inclusion and exclusion that take place within both homogenous and heterogeneous groups. This is the reason why, for example, methods related to oral and written culture, esotericism and exotericism, initiation and social regulation of behavior might be helpful in describing religion as a social phenomenon. Each approach may illumine a moment of religious life, while others remain beyond its scope.

This variety of problems and methods is more pertinent, to be sure, to some forms of religion than to others. Archaic religions, which developed within homogenous groups in isolated geographical and cultural areas, without the complexity introduced by interactions with other religions or cultures and without the specific problems introduced by written transmission and the importance of textuality, may require somewhat less complex tools. This is not because such religions are simpler: some are quite ample bodies of knowledge and deeds. However, fewer dynamic changes and interactions occur under stable circumstances; if limited to a certain geographical area, syncretistic processes that complicate analysis might be less pertinent. So, for example, the conceptual content, history and dissemination of Manichaenism—a world religion that flourished in diverse places, involving interaction and syncretism, and the texts of which are written in a dozen languages (Aramaic, Coptic, Chinese, Turkish, Persian, Greek, Latin, et cetera)—pose problems that are unknown to students of Puritan Protestantism, Mormonism or Quakerism. To put it in more general terms, cosmopolitan religions by the very nature of their expansion and reception are more variegated than and differ sociologically from the religions of specific tribes. The linguistic and historical skills necessary to understand a cosmopolitan religion dramatically diverge from those required for a particularistic

one, like Mormonism or the Amish. The complexity of cosmopolitan religions is so great that I wonder to what extent general terms like Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism, used to denote religions that spread to so many regions and interacted with so many cultures, are viable. I wonder if it would not be better to parcel them into smaller segments, like geographical regions, historical periods or specific trends.

These problems, however, touch upon just one set of questions. Others enter the study of religion due to the characteristics of the scholar rather than those of the phenomenon. To define this problem blatantly from the very beginning, scholarship on religion is rarely an innocent and detached enterprise. Individual scholars, and sometimes entire schools of scholars, are entities active in history, space and specific social and political circumstances that affect their approaches and sometimes dictate the direction of research and even its results. This is especially true in extreme cases, such as under communism or other forms of dictatorship. It suffices to compare Henry Corbin's interest in forms of religious syncretism evident in his studies on Sufism and Ismailiyah undertaken during the regime of the Iranian Shah to contemporary Iranian scholarship with its emphasis on puristic Shiite orthodoxy. Even in less extreme cases, scholars operate within a certain society, or tribe, in which taboos exist that do not necessarily depend upon the political regime. Any attempt to question the uniqueness of the Qur'an by a Muslim university scholar, even in a democratic society like Israel, will result in the sharp rejection of that scholar by his Muslim religious group, and this is by no means a theoretical example. Scholarship, especially historical and critical thought, depends upon societal developments that allow the emergence of inner critiques that touch upon even the most sacrosanct values of that society. As such, the evolution of scholarship on religion is strongly situated in freer forms of societies, regimes or religions.

Beyond the various circumstances in which the scholar of religion operates, individual and often idiosyncratic characteristics must also be taken into consideration. Scholars, even when totally free to select a topic and address it in a non-inhibitive environment, decide which part of the available material they will analyze and which data are most important, relevant or representative. Such selective and subjective decisions are crucial to the nature of the picture produced by scholarship. Even the greatest of scholars identifies a set of questions that reflects his or her basic concerns. The gamut of issues addressed hence is often quite

limited, and one can identify many scholars simply by paying attention to the overall agendas of their analyses of certain phenomena or texts.

Though a scholar's repertoire is individually determined, it also may reflect the audience for which the studies are intended. To take a famous example, the Eranos conference organized under the aegis of Carl G. Jung in Ascona included a broad range of excellent scholars dealing with many religions and phenomena. Nevertheless, it would not be an exaggeration to speak of a certain problematic imposed on the participants: myths, symbols and archetypes are issues that appear more frequently in the proceedings than sociological or intellectual-historical topics.² This is also the case in the historical-critical school of research of Kabbalah founded by Gershom Scholem, in which problems related to apocalyptic Messianism are more evident than in earlier studies of this mystical lore. Mircea Eliade's school is characterized by its defined set of questions, as are the Cambridge and the Scandinavian schools of myth and ritual. The agendas of individuals and schools are matters not only of the nature of the material but also of specific predilections to certain types of questions.

2. EIGHT APPROACHES TO RELIGION

Here I will attempt to characterize not specific scholars or schools but rather the major concerns that define the particular styles of their scholarship. Or, to rephrase the issue at hand in a more poignant manner, can we identify the major problems that preoccupy scholars of religion? I propose that they may be grouped in eight main categories; for the sake of the discussion that follows, I briefly will enumerate them here.

The first is the theological approach, by which religious texts are analyzed primarily to illuminate the theological aspects upon which other characteristics of religion are organized. Religion is conceived by proponents of this approach to be the mirror by means of which one understands the supreme entity. Or, to put it in different terms, the material under investigation may reflect the idiosyncrasies of a certain religion, experience or group, but it nevertheless reveals something about the nature of the supernal source or sources. This is the approach taken, for example, by one of the towering figures of twentieth-century scholarship on religion, Rudolph Otto. Through analysis of a variety of religious texts, he draws the conclusion that two main theological elements are found in varying proportions in all religions: the rational and

what can be called the irrational. Human experiences, reactions to encounters with the transcendental or the immanent divinity, reflect something of the nature of the supreme being. Otto even judges the nature of a certain religion by the balance between the two.³ This type of theological orientation has had great impact not only on scholars like Friedrich Heiler, but also on perceptions of religion among non-Christian scholars like Scholem and some of his followers.⁴

Another theological orientation is discernible in the erudite studies on mysticism by the Oxford scholar Robert Zaehner. No doubt a great connoisseur of many forms of religion, Zaehner's approach is amazingly orthodox; he assumes that only a Christian type of theology—namely theism—is able to provide a framework for real mystical experiences. He criticizes pantheistic frameworks of Hinduism and Islam and the form of theism that he attributes to Judaism as being unable to provide the conditions for what he considers to be valid mystical experiences.⁵ On the opposite conceptual pole of Zaehner is Eliade, who does not subscribe to a theistic religion but rather emphasizes the importance of a cosmic, somehow pantheistic one. Nevertheless, like Zaehner, he passes judgment on religions according to their “cosmicity,” an issue to which I shall return later.⁶

A third type of theological orientation is based on the assumption that religious material is deeply concerned with theology, even if the scholar does not seek information about an external entity in religious texts. Thus, a secular scholar may belong to this theological approach due to the centrality of this topic attributed to the systems and texts analyzed. This subcategory shall be explored further later in this essay.

The second major approach is historical, which in its various forms understands religion, like any other type of human activity, as determined by and reflecting the historical circumstances of an individual or a group. Some anthropological and sociological approaches also might be placed in this category.

Next is the psychological approach, by which religious documents are analyzed as reflecting a specific form of psychology, such as psychoanalysis. A reverberation of this approach is feminism, which deals with male repressive psychology as an issue that informs religious discourses. These three major approaches overemphasize a few aspects of the study of religion while minimizing the importance of others.

Quite different is the fourth approach: textual-literary. Developed since the Renaissance to analyze ancient classical texts, it is important

to the study of religions that are text oriented. Its philological tools are quintessential for a serious approach to religious texts. The main emphasis is on the linguistic aspects of religious documents, their transmission and their status within the canon of a certain religious structure. Included in this approach are discussions concerning authorship and background, but unlike the historical approach, the resort to historical methods here does not mean that the scholars who adopt these tools are looking for the reflection of some form of external independent history within the texts. Other forms of the textual-literary approach are less historically oriented and emphasize the semantics of religious language or problems of translation.

Many major scholars of religion have adopted a comparative approach, the goal of which, in my way of seeing it, is not to make sporadic references to parallel historical influences, but rather to engage in a sustained effort to compare comprehensive structures found in different forms of religion. This approach is evident in some writings by Otto and Zaehner. Well acquainted with the languages and the texts of more than one religion, both drew comparisons on the basis of philological analysis of texts. Some comparative efforts are found in the writings of Jung, Eliade and Corbin, but their assumptions were based on some form of homogeneity in the notion of religion. In most cases, comparisons are applied with some theological presuppositions in mind, and in one way or another, triumphalism may be discerned.

Quite different is the sixth approach: ritualistic-technical. While religions have important cognitive aspects (beliefs, cosmologies, symbolisms), some place greater emphasis on deeds as quintessential elements. Rituals, pilgrimages, magical practices and mystical techniques may play a more central role in one religion than in another. Religious experiences, therefore, may be induced in some cases by factors related to the cognitive aspects of religion, like an external entity or the impact of theological beliefs, or in other cases by resorting to the bodily exercises prescribed to attain such experiences. In his two main monographs, *Yōga* and *Shamanism*, Eliade contributed much to the analysis of two forms of religiosity that resort, in a dramatic manner, to such techniques. These works represent a major methodological breakthrough in the study of the history of religion by shifting the center of interest from theoretical views and beliefs to modes of achieving religious experiences. The importance of technique is also evident in Ioan P. Culianu's

Eros and Magic, in which the magical techniques are emphasized as central to Giordano Bruno's world view. Ritual also is the subject of studies in the anthropological domain on the one hand and in various forms of myth-and-ritual approaches on the other.⁷ Recently, scholars also are utilizing modern developments in medicine in attempts to measure the physiological effects of some deeds on the functioning of the body, especially the brain.⁸ From a more analytical point of view, Peter Moore contributed to our understanding of mystical experiences through his interesting observations on the importance of technique.⁹ Recently, I elaborated on the need for coherence among techniques, experiences induced by such techniques and theological visions found in certain systems. This is still a novel systemic approach that presupposes some form of organization of the performative, experiential and theological aspects of new structures in an attempt to eliminate discrepancies and allow a smooth relationship among these three elements.¹⁰

Phenomenological approaches consist of attempts to extrapolate from religious documents the specifically religious categories that organize major religious discourses. Derived to a certain extent from the philosophical approach of Edmund Husserl, particularly the need to bracket one's own presuppositions in order to allow an encounter with the phenomenon, these are the most non-reductionist of approaches, since they do not presuppose that a theological, historical or psychological structure is reflected in the religious documents. The main representative of this school is G. van der Leeuw. To a certain extent, the effort to isolate categories and introduce an approach specific to religion also is found in Eliade's studies. The effort to discern the main categories found in so many religious texts over the centuries might indeed provide a general picture of the evasive concept of religion, but simultaneously might confuse the understanding of any one specific religion. The problem unfolds when the scholar confronts a text, a school or a religion and has to decide what is present and what is absent, what is more important and what is less so, in an effort to define these main categories. Indeed, we may speak of basic forms of order or models found in one religion or another, of appropriations and adaptations, as reflecting the main characteristics of a certain religion, religious movement or school. Moreover, many of the classical phenomenologies of religion problematize deeper analyses of specific texts or phenomena by imposing general categories on the material, which is only rarely sub-

mitted to serious analysis. Some phenomenologies may be described as telescopic, since they take general pictures of religion or of some religions and reify what is understood to be their essence.

Last but not least are the cognitive approaches. In contrast to the assumption that religion is a special type of human experience to be analyzed by tools specific to this field, cognitive approaches assume that religion is one of many other human creations, and as such it should be incorporated into the study of human creativity. Though similar to psychoanalytical theories in principle, cognitive theories deal much more with the manner in which the human mind and imagination, or the human soul, operate, emphasizing the systemic nature of human creation. This is the major trend in scholarship related to structuralism, to *imaginaire* and to combinatory developments. The first is represented by the studies of Claude Levi-Strauss, and the second is apparent in the writings of Corbin, whose influence is discernible in the work of Gilbert Durand and his school, including historians like Jacques Le Goff, Jean-Claude Schmidt and Lucian Boia.¹¹ Most of these scholars are concerned less with ontological structures than with the manner in which humans construct their realities and sometimes their societies. Independent of the *imaginaire* approach and exhibiting some features of structuralism is Culianu's vision of religion—and, in principle, of human creativity—as being based upon different combinations of basic elements. In a way, some Neokantian approaches also may be envisioned as cognitive, as they assume that it is possible to identify categories found in the human mind that condition our understanding of experiences or revelations. Two examples of this category are Otto's famous book *Idea of the Holy* and the numerous studies of Ernst Cassirer and his followers. Both Neokantian thinkers assume that there are cognitive categories that are specific to religion. Last but not least, one of the most interesting controversies, in my opinion, of the last generation between the pure-consciousness approach and what has been called the "constructivist" approach belongs in the cognitive category.¹²

It should be pointed out that we rarely find a case in which a scholar will subscribe solely to one of these methods. With the exception of the founders of each method, other scholars, especially outstanding ones, are less inclined to reduce such complex phenomena to just one of their dimensions. A scholar must understand that adopting a single approach too rigorously may produce simplistic results. Rather, important scholars tend to utilize more than one method in various proportions.

By inspecting the temporal order in which these approaches emerged, we may speak of an evolution from transcendental to immanent forms of explanation. Originating with the theological approach, historical explanations then gave way to sociological and later psychological and cognitive approaches, the most recent being postmodern explanations that place priority on the text over the intentions of the human author. This development from transcendental to immanent, in my opinion, is neither progressive nor regressive.

As mentioned above, I propose a general, loose approach called methodological eclecticism, which resorts to different methodologies when dealing with the various aspects of religion. This proposal does not differ drastically from Wendy Doniger's view of the toolbox that a scholar should bring to his or her analysis of myth or from Culianu's proposal to apply many methodologies to the same phenomenon, given its multidimensional complexity.¹³ This is certainly not a new recommendation; many of the scholars mentioned above have utilized such an approach. However, even major scholars like Eliade and Scholem, who played complex games rather than subscribing to a single approach, still explicitly refused to adopt some of the methods described above. Neither, for example, was interested in psychological approaches. Eliade sought grand theories about religion as a universal; Scholem was unconcerned with such generalizations. Eliade underemphasized textual analysis, while Otto and Zaehner were interested in detailed textual analysis and the historical filiation of influences; as comparativists, they never avoided theological questions, but simultaneously were much less concerned with techniques and rituals. Given the fact that they subscribed to one main type of history and to a rather monolithic vision of phenomena, it was hard for them to accept diverse understandings of the same phenomena, which relativizes their history or phenomenology.¹⁴

Since I am inclined to accept the sensitive—almost postmodern—view of the illustrious historian Marc Bloch, who once asserted that “*Le vrai réalisme en histoire, c'est de savoir que la réalité humaine est multiple,*” I cannot work with a monolithic vision of religious phenomena. If this is true for history, it is dramatically more pertinent to the conglomerate of personal and public aspects of religious events and experiences. Given the fact that many Kabbalists operated with concepts of infinity concerning the nature of the Bible and of divinity, a multiplicity of methods would be a fair approach to inquiry into their views.¹⁵

Even the more modest Midrashic approach, which had a deep impact on subsequent Jewish thought, allowed Jewish mystics to bring together different and even conflicting views concerning the same topic in the same work. This fact invites theories of organization of knowledge that may account for the significance of this phenomenon.

Though I am less enthusiastic about the theological approach, religion deals with the divine, and the different concepts of God should be taken into consideration when offering a more general picture. Moreover, theology is a matter not only of belief but also, in some cases, of informing the nature of the religious experience. In some forms of religion, especially Christianity, the revelation of a certain type of deity is a matter of grace, which means that the technical aspects are less important. In other cases, techniques are used in order to induce such an experience, which can be interpreted as informed by the nature of both the technique and concepts about the divine realm. I propose for the latter example to speak of some forms of consonance or coherence between the details of the technique and the corresponding type of theology.¹⁶ Or, to describe another possible combination of approaches, the ritual-technical might be applied within the confines of a certain religion alone, but the comparative might supply important insights about the different structures of various religions.¹⁷

To conclude this section, I would say that the development of different approaches certainly is not a matter of evolution. Later approaches do not provide, in my opinion, a better way of understanding, since each method pays attention to an aspect that another ignores. However, accumulatively we may speak of positive development as different approaches unfold collectively or in combination with one another, providing more complex accounts of phenomena that earlier were described in much more simplistic manners.

My proposal is that it is best not to dismiss any of the above approaches out of hand, though one should be aware of the limitations of each. Scholars who are immersed in just one of these methods basically—and quite superficially—tend to dismiss all others. In most cases, the repeated critique of one or more approach stems from an unwillingness or inability to change by learning something new. There is great value in investigating the potential contributions of each approach and utilizing the careful application of such contributions rather than limiting oneself to subscribing to any single method *in toto*.

3. PERSPECTIVISM: AN ADDITIONAL APPROACH

Here I supplement the above proposal for methodological eclecticism with another concept: perspectivism. By this concept I designate the possibility of interrogating a certain religious literature from the perspective of acquaintance with another religious literature. This is neither a matter of comparison between religious figures and systems, as in the case of Otto's monograph on the individual ideas of Eckhart and Shankara, nor a case of historical filiation between two bodies of writing or thought. It is rather an attempt to better understand the logic of systems by comparing substantially different ones and learning about one from the other. Underlying this assumption is the principle that there are manifold scholarly readings of the same religion that may be fruitful—though not always equally so. For example, knowledge of rural religions might raise questions that can be applied to urban religions or vice versa, and religions in which literacy is dominant might be approached from the perspective of a religion dominated by orality. This method might also be applied to different phases of development within the same religion: one phase may be more urban, another more rural; one may be more literate, the other more oral. Or, from a global perspective, a certain religion is not only what its followers accept, believe and perform, but also the way in which it is perceived by outsiders. To adopt the theory of reception, a certain religion is differently understood—and from time to time even sharply misunderstood—from different perspectives. The history of misunderstandings is as important as theories of understanding. Numerous cases of religious anti-Semitism demonstrate that, without taking into account misunderstanding, it is difficult to comprehend fully not only the history of the Jews but also the history of Judaism, as both responded to accusations and adjusted under conditions created by various perspectival (mis)understandings. To take another example, debates about Spinozism shaped not only the history of pre-modern and modern European philosophy, but also the structure of some forms of Judaism, especially in Central Europe, which reacted to Spinozistic challenges. Spinozism encompasses the principles outlined in the specific writings of Barukh—or Benedict—Spinoza as well as the appropriations, misunderstandings and critiques provoked by them. If for Marxists and secular thinkers Spinoza was the precursor of secularism, for others, as we shall see later, he influenced the way in which Kabbalah was perceived, when it was described as expanded

Spinozism. These are rather conflicting views on Spinoza, but both are issued by informed readers of his writings, and both are part of the phenomenon of Spinozism as a whole.

In short, from a scholarly point of view, the complexity of a certain religion or one of its phases or schools is generated not just by the specific contents of its writings or the beliefs and practices of its adherents. Rather, the specificity of a religion is also the result of the particular manner in which it has been understood by outsiders, problematic and distorted as such perceptions may be. To be sure, outside perceptions do not have to be accepted or adopted by insiders; more often, the latter reject the former for good reasons. To be perfectly clear, I do not assume that the inner understanding of one's religion automatically should take into consideration the views of outsiders. However, in seeking a scholarly understanding, the situation is quite different. A serious scholar should be able to approach a topic from different angles, including negative ones, in order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon at hand, which includes its critiques and its distortions. Religion is a part of history in which many factors are active. In principle, each critique and distortion may illumine shadows found in a certain religious literature or structures ignored or suppressed by insiders; they must be examined in order to better understand a given religious phenomenon as it functioned on various historical levels.

Finally, perspectivism may be conceived as part of the need for distancing from the phenomenon under investigation, a distancing that is achieved, *inter alia*, by a serious acquaintance with other religious systems and the possibility to address it from the perspective of another culture. However, this distancing should not mean a total adherence to "alien" structures, as occurs in the application of various forms of psychology or of feminism to Kabbalah, but rather the use of a flexible approach that is capable of modifying both the analysis of Kabbalah and the "method" emerging from acquaintance with and analytical manner applied to different material. As we shall see below, investigating topics related to Jewish mystical literature by means of questions and structures evinced by a rural type of religiosity as analyzed by Eliade strives not to demonstrate that Jewish mysticism is also rural or archaic, but rather to show the differences between religious categories active in Jewish mysticism and Eliade's archaic religion as well as to suggest the need to revise the latter. Viewing a topic from a certain perspective relativizes the way in which the "object" is understood and the

very perspective itself. Methods—perspectivism included—are no more absolute than their objects or subjects.

4. KABBALAH AS SYMBOLIC THEOLOGY ACCORDING TO MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

Since the next chapter will deal mainly with topics found in a vast literature designated by the umbrella term “Kabbalah,” I will attempt to describe here an approach to Kabbalah adopted by many modern scholars: the theological. Though Scholem and his followers claim that their approach is basically historical, and this is indeed true, another more profound approach nevertheless underlies their investigations of Kabbalistic sources. We shall be concerned with the nature of modern scholarship that, though it does not present the contents of Kabbalah as theological truths, is inclined to emphasize the theological aspects of this lore.

I first turn to a more complex approach to Kabbalah that combines theological and semiotic methods. Johann Reuchlin’s widespread description of Kabbalah from the early sixteenth century notes that: “Kabbalah is simply (to use the Pythagorean vocabulary) symbolic theology, where words and letters are coded things, and such things are themselves codes for other things. This drew our attention to the fact that almost all of Pythagoras’s system is derived from the Kabbalists, and that similarly he brought to Greece the use of symbols as a means of communication.”¹⁸ Writing from the perspective of a theologian who believed that he unearthed an ancient theology found among the Jews, which was then adopted by Pythagoras and subsequently lost, Reuchlin emphasizes both theology and symbolism—an approach used previously by Pythagoreans in the different phases of this lore—which is understandable and consonant to the late fifteenth-century Florentine approach to religious knowledge known as *prisca theologia*. In *De Verbo Mirifico*, Reuchlin resorts to the syntagm *divinitatis symbola*, “the symbols of divinity.”¹⁹ Elsewhere he speaks about “the symbolic philosophy of Pythagoras and the wisdom of the Kabbalah.”²⁰ Symbolism is also evident in another important passage: “Kabbalah is a matter of divine revelation handed down to [further] the contemplation of God and the separated forms, contemplations bringing salvation. [Kabbalah] is a symbolic reception.”²¹

Eclectic and artificial as their discussions sometimes may be, we may assume that Christian Kabbalists did believe in them *de facto*. It is important to emphasize the centrality of contemplation in Reuchlin’s

description and the recurrence of this ideal in the manner in which Jewish scholars, especially Scholem and Isaiah Tishby, approached Kabbalah. As I have attempted to show elsewhere, the symbolic interpretation of Kabbalah has remained part and parcel of the modern scholarly approach to this lore under the impact of Reuchlin's book.²²

Reuchlin's stance had an impact on Scholem's approach before it became a unified scholarly perception of variegated lore. In a letter to Zalman Schocken written in 1937, Scholem wrote: "I arrived at the intention of writing not the history but the metaphysics of the Kabbalah."²³ How did he imagine the path to the "metaphysics of Kabbalah"? In the same letter he wrote that he wanted to decode Kabbalah in order to "penetrate through the symbolic plain and through the wall of history. For the mountain, the corpus of facts, needs no key at all; only the misty wall of history, which hangs around it, must be penetrated. To penetrate it was the task I set for myself."²⁴ The concept of the key, and of its superfluosity, points to the possibility of having a substantial, definite understanding of Kabbalah.²⁵

These plans were more than academic aspirations; it is hard to miss the experiential aspects of the program envisioned by the mature Scholem for his own academic research. Kabbalah is, according to the above discussion, more than a literature important to the understanding of Jewish religion, culture or history; it is a spiritual path for attaining reality by the scholar. It contains facts ("the mountain"), and it has metaphysics. Two main components emerge that are reminiscent of Reuchlin's stance in the above sentences from the epistle: symbolic and ontological. It is important to observe Scholem's resort to the double singular, "metaphysics of Kabbalah": it is not a diversified type of literature but one that consists of a certain type of symbolism that, when decoded correctly, opens the gate to a vision of a non-symbolic reality.

This private plan of research with such a clear personal pursuit in 1937, expressed in a private letter printed more than forty years later, became an academic vision of Kabbalah in 1941: "In Kabbalah [Scholem argues], one is speaking of a reality which cannot be revealed or expressed at all save through the symbolic allusion. A hidden authentic reality, which cannot be expressed in itself and according to its own laws, finds expression in its symbol."²⁶ According to another revealing statement, "even the names of God are merely symbolic representations of an ultimate reality which is unformed, amorphous."²⁷ In these two statements, we find an approach to religion that is more consonant with

Otto's concept of numinosity and with other approaches, like that of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which see in religion the "inexpressible."²⁸ Elsewhere, Scholem describes the Kabbalists as symbolists, who express the ineffable.²⁹ Though indubitably there are elements in Kabbalistic texts that represent negative theology, like some—though not all—of the discussions regarding the nature of *'Ein Sof*, my assumption is that, by and large, Kabbalists were much less inclined toward negative theology than Scholem's school assumes. In some cases, negative theological language was considered an exoteric strategy hiding an esoteric anthropomorphic propensity, which may be viewed as a sort of positive theology.³⁰

To return to Scholem's passage, the assumption of a hidden reality and the importance of the symbol are strongly related. Again, the singular is quite evident: in "Kabbalah" and in "a reality." Similar is Scholem's later stance, celebrating symbolism not only as a very important issue in Kabbalah but also and in fact as the mode of accommodation of Kabbalah as a certain "living center" to various historical circumstances.³¹ Here some form of perennial stance is implied: Kabbalah, again in the singular, is altered in accordance with changing circumstances, but the center remains somehow constant.³² This monochromatic vision of Kabbalah as a spiritual phenomenon and of the ultimate reality as an ontological entity represented by symbols reverberates in the writings of Scholem's followers.³³ Especially pertinent for our point is the following passage, which elaborates a symbolic vision of mysticism as a whole:

[W]hat exactly is this "secret" or "hidden" dimension of language, about whose existence all mystics for all time feel unanimous agreement, from India and the mystics of Islam, right up to the Kabbalists and Jacob Boehme? The answer is, with virtually no trace of hesitation, the following: it is the symbolic nature of language, which defines this dimension. The linguistic theories of mystics frequently diverge when it comes to determining this symbolic nature. But all mystics in quest of the secret of language come to share a common basis, namely the fact that language is used to communicate something which goes way beyond the sphere which allows for expression and formation: the fact also that a certain inexpressible something, which only manifests itself in symbols, resonated in every manner of expression.³⁴

In short, the Kabbalists were—like “all mystics,” according to Scholem—symbolists. Elsewhere he declares that the Kabbalists were “the main symbolists of rabbinic Judaism. For Kabbalah, Judaism in all its aspects was a system of mystical symbols reflecting the mystery of God and the universe, and the Kabbalists’ aim was to discover and invent keys to the understanding of this symbolism.”³⁵

Again the term “Kabbalah” occurs in the singular, and “the Kabbalists” are described in an unqualified manner. Scholem expresses himself in these quotes as a historian of a specific type of literature reflecting “mysteries” dormant at the core of reality, and one should not confuse, in principle, such a description as being a personal conviction. However, it seems that in some confessions, Scholem reiterates the assumption of a mystery found in reality as part of his own world view.³⁶ But is not my intention to deal with Scholem’s personal theology, an issue that has been addressed elsewhere.³⁷

The basis of such an understanding of the affinity between symbols and the symbolized is, ultimately, not only the work of the post-Kantian German thinkers, but also and primarily the negative theology of Neoplatonism, which in addition to Gnosticism were conceived as the formative components of a peculiar blend of theosophy that was embraced by most of the Kabbalists.³⁸ In fact, Scholem and Tishby regarded the encounter between Neoplatonic negative theology and Gnostic pleroma that contributed the positive aspects of Kabbalistic theology as the very birth of the most dominant aspect of Kabbalah—its theosophy. Thus, not only theological speculations but also the specific Kabbalistic way of prayer have been conceived as the meeting of these two non-Jewish theologies. Dealing with the earliest Kabbalistic texts, Scholem notes that the “gnostic way of seeing things likewise penetrated their [the first historical Kabbalists, Rabbi Jacob ha-Nazir and Rabbi Abraham ben David] prayer mysticism without being able to overcome it entirely.”³⁹ This is an interesting example of the subordination of the performative component—in this case, prayer—to the theological, namely the allegedly Gnostic view of the sefirot. Indeed as Tishby claims, Scholem convincingly demonstrates that:

As far as the doctrine of the sefirot is concerned, it can be established without a doubt that there is some reflection here of a definite gnostic tendency, and that it did in fact emerge and develop from a historico-literary contact with the remnants of Gnosis, which were