

Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann. *Geschichte der christlichen Kabbala, Band 1: 15. und 16. Jahrhundert.*

Clavis Pansophiae 10.1. Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012. xiii + 700 pp. €128. ISBN: 978-3-7728-2569-9.

This volume is the beginning of a fulfillment for a pressing need in the study of European religious thought in early modern times: a systematic historical presentation of the authors and works representing the Christian Kabbalah from its beginnings in the second half of the fifteenth century to the second half of the eighteenth. The author has adopted the correct historical approach: in the first pages he denies the validity of identifying Christian Kabbalah with Hermeticism, gnosticism, magic, astrology, alchemy, or personal mystical experience in the traditional manner. It is an independent phenomenon that exerted meaningful influence on European culture for three centuries at least, and even though it derived ideas and concepts from other trends, it should be studied as a new venture in theological speculation. In the first chapter the author presents some of the main

ideas and concepts that are characteristic to most of the works in this category, especially the new attitude to the names of God and the name of Jesus; but most of the book is a description and analysis of the writers and works included in this category. Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to the two founders who shaped the movement — Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin. It is not an easy task to present major figures like these, who were the subject of scores of scholarly monographs, in sixty or seventy pages, but the author succeeds in presenting brief biographies and the essential contents of their works and outlines of their worldviews. He dedicates a separate chapter (chapter 5) to the works of the Jewish converts to Christianity and the controversies surrounding the beginning of the Christian Kabbalah. A brief section is dedicated to Flavius Mithridates (271–80), and one could expect a more detailed presentation of the vast library of translations of Kabbalistic texts prepared by Mithridates for Pico. The main figures of the following decades are discussed in subsequent chapters — Paulus Ricius (chapter 4), the cardinal Aegidius de Viterbo (chapter 6), Giorgio Veneto Zorzi (chapter 7), Aggripa von Netteshiem (chapter 8), and Arcangelo da Borgonovo (chapter 9). The most detailed presentation in this volume is that of the works of Guillaume Postel of France (chapter 10), whose numerous translations of Kabbalistic texts (including parts of the Zohar) and profound and innovative ideas gave a new dimension to the spiritual world of the Christian Kabbalah. Two brief discussions of the most important writers conclude this volume, Luis de Leon (chapter 11) and Johannes Pistorius, author of *Ars Cabalistica* (chapter 12).

Reading this detailed survey it becomes apparent how different is the Christian Kabbalah from its Hebrew counterpart. The Christian scholars rejected or marginalized some of the main ideas and conceptions of the Hebrew theologians and mystics, including the detailed system of the divine hypostases, the *sefirot*, and the erotic aspect resulting from the inclusion of a feminine divine power, the *shekhinah*, in the Godhead. They were not affected by the tendency of Hebrew Kabbalists to use the description of the divine world as a spiritual and mystical ladder of ascension towards union with God. On the other hand, most of the Kabbalah that they received from the Hebrew sources that they read and translated included methodological systems that belong to the Jewish midrashic tradition, homiletical methods (like the famous *gimatria*), that were part of Jewish religious culture as a whole, having no particular connection to the Kabbalah. They also included in this category writings of Jewish medieval rationalistic philosophers and commentators on the Hebrew bible. Most intriguing is the fact that the Christian Kabbalists ignored the dualistic conception that dominated many Hebrew Kabbalistic works, which described the earth and humanity as the battleground between divine powers and Satanic ones. This happened at the same time in which the Christian world became dominated by the dualistic teachings of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the resulting widespread witch hunts. It is evident that Christian Kabbalah represents one of the theological trends in early modern Europe, and whose teachings should be studied within the framework of the spiritual turmoil of the end of the Renaissance and the age of the Reformation. It is also the

irony of history that the first works of the Christian Kabbalah were written in the same decade in which the birthplace of the Hebrew Kabbalah was brutally destroyed by the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

This volume is a most promising beginning of a historical study of major phenomenon in Christian spirituality, and it is hoped that it will soon be followed by the next volumes.

JOSEPH DAN

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem